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THE INFLUENCE OF SELF-HEALING ON THE CHARACTER ARC TRANSFORMATION OF TONY STARK (IRON MAN) IN AVENGERS: ENDGAME (2019) BY ANTHONY RUSSO & JOE RUSSO

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the influence of self-healing mechanisms on the character transformation of Tony Stark (Iron Man) in the film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) through the lens of psychological development. The focus is on how the recovery process from post-traumatic emotional wounds stimulates the character's personality transformation. The study adopts a psychological approach to literature by integrating Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (*Id, Ego, Superego*) to examine the personality structure, alongside Glenn R. Schiraldi's concept of self-healing to identify indicators of the character's internal recovery. The method employed is descriptive qualitative research, using a note-taking technique and supported by cinematographic analysis of visual data obtained from film screenshots. The results show that the five-year self-healing process, achieved through domestic isolation at a lake cabin, the practice of forgiveness, and the support of family as a healing agent, successfully restored Tony Stark's cognitive function and emotional stability. This successful recovery triggered a significant character arc transformation, allowing him to transition from an initially paranoid and defensive personality, a result of an ego breakdown following his defeat by Thanos, into an altruistic and mature character. Ultimately, the alignment among these three personality structures enabled his ego to undergo sublimation and achieve the highest spiritual catharsis through a heroic act of self-sacrifice for the salvation of the universe at the end of the story.

Keywords: *Psychology of literature, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, self-healing, character arc, Avengers: Endgame.*

INTRODUCTION

In literary and film studies, a character serves as a fundamental intrinsic element acting as the focal point of a narrative. Characters are not merely narrative performers, they represent human values, ideologies, and core emotional conflict designed by creators. According to Abrams (1999), characters possess specific moral and intellectual qualities that readers or viewers continuously interpret. Furthermore, Roberts (1983, as cited in Fauzi & Yuwita, 2022) emphasizes that characterization depicts human thoughts and actions across situations. Well develop protagonists are rarely static, instead they undergo dynamic character arcs shaped by external stressors and life experiences. Nurgiantoro (2013) notes that dynamic figures actively redefine their core personality traits while navigating complex plot movements.

Etymologically derived from Greek words "psyche" and "logos", psychology is literally defined as the scientific study of the mind (Colman, 2016). Scholars such as Clark, Miller, and Morgan describe psychology as a scientific discourse examining human behavior, thoughts, and inner processes. When individuals experience severe trauma, it impact their spiritual intergrity, damaging connections with themselves, others, and faith (Cherry, 2024). Herman (1992, as citted in Harefa, 2023) defines trauma as an overwhelming force that distrupts an individual's natural adaptive capacity. In positive psychology, self-healing focuses on active self-integration and optimal psychological well being rather than mere symptom removal (Ryff, 1989).

Bachtiar and Faletehan (2021) define healing as a comprehensive cure restoring nerve equilibrium and emotional balance post trauma. Widyastuti et al. (2022) emphasizes that humans possess inherent natural capabilities to calm themselves through targeted recovery practices. Studying self-healing is crucial as an independent preventative and curative instrument facing modern society's mounting psychology burdens. Self-healing serve as a vital bridge connecting the resolution of past psychology conflicts with an individual's present functionality. As beings vulnerable to environmental stressors, failure, and trauma, humans require self-healing as an adaptive strategy to build resilience.

Trianto (2013) notes that filming evolved from commercial entertainment into a powerful medium for cultural education and social critique. Through dialogue, music, lighting, and visual aesthetics, cinema exerts a strong influence on human thought, attitudes, and behaviors. Pertiwi et al. (2020) describe film as a structured system of symbols where costumes, colors, and expressions construct deeper meanings.

Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, Avengers: Endgame (2019) represents a cultural artifact reflecting complex post traumatic psychology. The Russo brothers brought rich storytelling expertise from independent projects and television series into major Marvel Studios productions. Their work on Captain America: The Winter Soldier, Avengers: Civil War and Avengers: Infinity War built the foundation for Endgame's massive narrative. Avengers: Endgame stands as a landmark cinematic achievement that blends commercial superhero action with profound character development. Consequently, analyzing film narrative structures offers a unique modern framework for exploring contemporary psychological theories visually.

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Tony Stark is initially portrayed as a heroic, genius billionaire leading earth's protective forces. However, behind his confident exterior lies severe internal conflict stemming from his catastrophic failure to stop the villain Thanos. This defeat wiped out half of all universe populations, leaving Tony with overwhelming guilt, deep grief, and unresolved trauma. In Avengers: Endgame, Tony faces a painful dilemma between living a peaceful domestic life or risking everything to save the universe. His complex character transformation can be dissected using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic model alongside Glenn Schiraldi's self-healing theory. Choosing this film as a material object provides rich clinical material regarding personality disruption, neurotic anxiety, and ego recovery. This visual medium allows researchers to observe non verbal cues, camera angles, and atmospheric lighting representing inner mental states.

As a modern audio visual literary medium, cinema relies on an integrated framework of intrinsic elements to convey narrative meaning. Nurgiyantoro (2013) asserts that intrinsic elements comprise the internal building blocks of a literary work, including character and characterization, plot structure, setting, thematic framework, symbolism, conflict, and literary irony (Ramdan, Sudrajat & Kamaludin, 2020). According to Nurgiyantoro, 2013, characterization encompasses three fundamental dimensions: physiological (physical appearance, health, and biological state), psychological (internal emotional

states, cognitive motivations, and personality dynamics), and sociological (social background, relationships, and status).

Plot serves as the cause and effect chain binding narrative events in a coherent trajectory (Priyatni, 2010). Setting provides physical, temporal, and atmospheric grounding, frequently operating as a visual projection of a character's internal psychological state (Pramida, 2020). Irony categorized into verbal, situational, and dramatic dimensions serves as crucial literary device to highlight incongruities between expectation and reality, verbal statements and implicit meanings, or character awareness and audience knowledge (Nurfalah, 2021).

1. SIGMUND FREUD'S THEORY

Freud's classic psychoanalytic model posits that human personality is structural into three distinct yet deeply interconnected system, the Id, Ego, and Superego (Moesono, 2008). The Id represents the most primitive, innate component of personality, operating exclusively under the pleasure principle. It seeks immediate gratification, survival, and tension reduction without regard for societal ethics or physical reality. The Ego distinguishes between internal fantasy and external objective reality, delaying instinctual gratification and deploying defense mechanisms to protect the psyche from overwhelming anxiety (Moesono, 2008).

The Superego represents the moral conscience and internal values of an individual, evolving through the internalization of parental and societal standards. Comprising two subsystems the conscience which produces guilty feelings upon moral failure and the ego ideal which provides self esteem upon achieving moral perfection, the Superego relentlessly demand perfection and ethical alignment (Hall, 1959). In a healthy soul, the Ego maintains an harmonious balance among the instinctual demands of the Id, the moral imperatives of the superego, and the constraints of the objective reality. However, acute psychological trauma severely disrupts this equilibrium, causing an Ego breakdown where the Ego becomes overwhelmed by neurotic anxiety and intense guilt (Rowiyah et al., 2024).

2. SELF HEALING

Self-healing defined as an active, self directed process of emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, and psychological recovery following severe traumatic distress (Schiraldi, 2016). Schiraldi conceptualizes self-healing not as a passive escape from distress, but as a structured series of psychological adjustments that calm chronic hypervigilance, restore physiological balance, and re-establish self acceptance. A central component of Schiraldi's self-healing model is forgiveness specifically self forgiveness. Forgiveness involves processing and relinquishing chronic anger, resentment, and self blame associated with past failures or victimization (Rahmasari, 2020).

In literary psychology, Schiraldi's framework provides precise clinical indicators to trace a character's transition form acute neurotic distress to psychological well being. By engaging in domestic retreat, reparenting, and emotional reconciliation, an individual activates internal healing reserves without relying on external pharmacological intervention. This process calms the Id's alarm systems, relieves the Superego's punitive guilt, and restores the Ego's executive functionality (Schiraldi, 2016).

3. CHARACTER ARC

As defined by Weiland (2016), character arc transformation represents the psychological trajectory a protagonist undergoes throughout a story. While character arcs can be negative or flat, a positive transformation arc involves a protagonist confronting an internal lie, overcoming self defensive delusions, processing internal wounds and adopting a higher truth. This growth empowers the character

to achieve authentic self actualization and resolve primary thematic conflicts. In this study, Weiland's model is synthesized with Freud's psychoanalysis and Schiraldi's self-healing theory to map Tony Stark's evolution from paranoid defensive state into a altruistic mature persona.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in literary psychology (Abdussamad, 2021). Qualitative methodology allows for an in depth, contextual examination of narrative text and visual media without experimental manipulation (Harefa, 2023). The material object of this study is the feature film Avengers: Endgame (2019), directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. The formal object is the influence of self-healing mechanism on the character arc transformation of Tony Stark, analyzed through Freud's structural psychoanalysis and Schiraldi's self-healing theory.

Data analysis was executed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure scientific rigor in analyzing visual frames, the study integrates Pratista (2017) cinematographic framework, evaluating three primary visual parameters.

1. Shot size: Extreme long shot and Medium long shot to Close up and Extreme Close up, utilized to decode emotional intimacy, psychological isolation, or vulnerability.
2. Camera Angle: High angle (signifying powerlessness, depression, and ego diminishment), Eye level angle (representing equality, emotional stability, and psychological reconciliation), Low angle (conveying heroic majesty, dominance, or ultimate sacrifice).
3. Lightning System: Low key lightning (dominated by heavy shadow and cool color palettes, symbolizing neurotic anxiety and supressed trauma) versus High key natural lighting (warm, luminous daylight representing self-healing success and emotional restoration).

RESULTS

The results of this study demonstrate a direct causal relationship between the self-healing process undergone by Tony Stark during his five year domestic retreat and his profound character arc transformation. The analysis is structured chronologically and thematic to map his trajectory from acute psychological breakdown to ultimate altruistic sublimation.

At the opening of Avengers: Endgame, Tony Stark is presented in a state of severe physiological exhaustion and profound Ego breakdown following his catastrophic defeat on planet Titan. Marooned aboard the spacecraft Benatar alongside Nebula, Stark's psychological state is heavily distorted by trauma.



Tony in a state of absolute physical exhaustion and Ego breakdown aboard the Benatar

(Russo & Russo, 2019, 0:03:45).

As visual evidence shows, the upper panel utilizes a medium long shot framed from a low camera angle. The high visually diminishes Tony's posture, underscoring his physical helplessness and psychological isolation within the vast space cockpit. The low key cyan teal lighting scheme generates a cold, monochrome atmosphere, symbolizing internal emptiness and hopelessness. Stark sits hunched on the floor, gazing blankly at his deactivated Iron Man helmet. His body language signifies complete defeat a visual representation of ego breakdown under Freudian theory.

In the panel, a close up shot captures Tony recording a final farewell audio message to Pepper Potts using the remaining power of his helmet. The dialogue demonstrates his psychological state:

> *"Hey, Miss Potts. Pep. If you find this recording, don't feel bad about this. Part of journey is the end. Just for record, being adrift in space with zero promise of rescue is more fun than it looks. Food and water unprecedentedly ran out four days ago. Oxygen will run out tomorrow morning and that'll be it. When I drift off, I will think of you. It's always you."*

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the phrase "Part of journey is the end" indicate a forced, fatalistic resignation of the Ego under overwhelming situational distress. His use oh self deprecating humor regarding his starvation serves as defense mechanism of intellectualization and humor, shielding his conscious mind from the terror of imminent death by the Id. Furthermore, his closing statement "It's always you" identifies Pepper as his primary emotional anchor, signaling a shift away from narcissistic ambition toward a desperate need for interpersonal attachment.

Following his rescue by Captain Marvel and return to the Avengers compound on Earth, Tony's fragile psychological state collapses further. Fragile and emaciated, he is assisted by Steve Rogers.

Tony: "I couldn't stop him"

Steve: "Neither could we"

Tony: "I lost the kid"

The statement "I lost the kid" refers directly to Peter Parker (Spider Man), whom Tony had adopted as his pupil and surrogate son. The visual memory of Peter disintegrating into dust in Tony's arms on Titan Planet inflicts a severe wound upon Tony's superego. His superego relentlessly punishes his ego with guilt, insisting that as a mentor, he failed his primary moral duty to protect the youth. This severe guilt, combined with the Id's traumatic dread, leaves Tony in a state of acute psychological injury.

The narrative structure shifts radically through a black title card displaying 'FIVE YEARS LATER'. This five year time jump establishes a major structural transition. While the rest of the world remains mired in grief and apathy, Tony chooses a path domestic isolation.



Tony engaging in domestic self-healing with his daughter, Morgan Stark, at the lakeside cabin (Russo & Russo, 2019, 0:33:59).

As visually depicted in this figure, Tony has established a new life in a secluded lakeside cabin alongside Pepper Potts and their young daughter, Morgan Stark. In terms of cinematographic visual design, the scene contracts sharply with the opening sequences. Framed in a medium long shot under high key natural daylight, the visual space is filled with vibrant green foliage, calm waters, and warm sunlight. Tony is shown carrying Morgan playfully through the yard. The natural lighting and serene environment visually symbolize emotional recovery, mental clarity, and psychological integration.

Under Schiraldi's (2016) self-healing framework, this five year domestic retreat function as a therapeutic sanctuary. Morgan Stark acts as a powerful healing agent. Interacting with his daughter enables Tony to engage in reparenting and emotional regulation, soothing the Id's chronic anxiety and repairing the superego's wounds. By focusing on familial nurture, Tony's ego successfully restructures itself under a peaceful reality principle. This environment restores his psychological well-being and cognitive functions.

However, this domestic peace is disrupted when Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanoff, and Scott Lang arrive at the cabin to present the 'Time Heist' hypothesis a quantum time travel plan to retrieve the Infinity Stones from the past.

> *"Scott, I'm gonna be honest with you. At first, I thought this was… a sick joke… Quantum fluctuation messes with plank scale, which then triggers the Deutsch Proposition. Can we agree on that? In layman's terms, it means we are not coming home… I got a kid… I got a life here. I can't trip on that again. I'm sorry, I'm not gonna do it. I have to protect what I've found."*

Psychologically, Tony's refusal represents his ego operating under a protective defensive state. Restored by self-healing, his ego prioritizes protecting his existing family over speculative global missions. His statement, "I can't trip on that again" indicates his Id's residual fear of re experiencing traumatic failure. Rather than acting out of paranoid panic, Tony's Ego uses logical risk assessment to shield his recovered sanity.



the scene where Tony remembers Peter (Russo & Russo, 2019, 0:39:31)

Later that evening, while washing dishes in his kitchen, Tony accidentally turns over a framed photograph of himself and Peter Parker holding a novelty Stark Industries certificate. The camera zooms into a close up of the photograph. Looking at Peter's smiling face acts as a potent external trigger, instantly breaking through Tony's defensive repression. His Id's suppressed grief ang his Superego's moral demand for restitution reactivate. The restored stability achieved through five years of self-healing now provides his ego with the psychological strength to confront his trauma rather than hide from it.

Driven by this internal shift, Tony enters his home laboratory late at night to run a quantum simulation. Framed in a wide shot under low key practical lighting dominated by a glowing blue holographic projection, Tony models a Mobius strip configuration. When the simulation computer announces "Model Successful" Tony gasps "Shit!" this technical breakthrough demonstrates that his self-healing process has fully restored his cognitive clarity, allowing his genius intellect to operate at peak capacity.

Tony's return to the Avengers compound marks the active execution phase of his transformation. His first action upon arrival is seeking out Steve Rogers, resolving the interpersonal rift that had broken their alliance five years earlier.



Tony returning Captain America's vibranium shield to Steve Rogers, symbolizing complete Ego reconciliation (Russo & Russo, 2019, 0:47:21).

Framed in an eye level two shot under bright, clear daylight, Tony approaches Rogers outside the compound. He hands the Time Space GPS units and openly acknowledges his internal transformation.

"Turns out, resentment is corrosive and I hate it"

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this statement signals that Tony's Ego has fully processed and discarded chronic resentment a key indicator of successful self-healing under Schiraldi's (2016) theory. Stark then reaches into his car trunk and retrieves Captain America's vibranium shield, which he had kept since their Civil War conflict. Handing it to Rogers, the dialogue reflects his mature humor:

Steve: "Tony, I don't know.."

Tony: "Why? He made it for you. Plus, honestly, I have to get it out before Morgan uses it as a sledding hill."

Steve: "Thank you, Tony"

The phrase "He made it for you" refers to Howard Stark. By retrieving and returning the shield made by his father. Tony demonstrates that he has transcended his paternal trauma and personal animosity. His Ego successfully aligns with the collective Superego demands of the team.

During the Time Heist mission, when an unexpected complication in 2012 New York results in Loki escaping with the Tesseract, Tony demonstrates cognitive resilience under pressure. He formulates a bold backup plan, traveling further back to 1970 Camp Lehigh in New Jersey to retrieve an earlier iteration of the Tesseract and additional Pym Particles. This detour leads to a profound psychological resolution.



Tony embracing his father, Howard Stark, resolving his lifelong paternal Oedipal trauma (Russo & Russo, 2019, 1:46:12).

At Camp Lehigh, Stark unexpectedly encounters his young father, Howard Stark. Tony engages in an intimate conversation with his father regarding prospective fatherhood, anxiety, and paternal love. Howard admits his own fears about his unborn son, Tony. Listening to his father express deep love and vulnerability dismantles Tony's lifelong perception of Howard as a cold, unloving figure. As they part outside, Tony impulse embraces Howard in a warm hug.

"Thank you… for everything,"

Under Freud psychoanalysis, this embrace marks the complete resolution of Stark's long standing Oedipal paternal trauma and father issue guilt. The repressed grief and inferiority feelings stored in his unconscious mind undergo total catharsis. This emotional release completes his self-healing process, granting his Ego complete internal serenity.

Upon returning to 2023 with all six Infinity Stones, Tony engineers the nano Gauntlent to house the cosmic artifacts. After Bruce Banner successfully executes the snap to restore the vanished population, Thanos's warship from 2014 launches a surprise bombardment, destroying the Avengers compound. Out of the rubble, Thanos emerges to reclaim the stones.



Tony met Peter and hugged him. (Russo & Russo, 2019, 2:20:03)

Shortly after, the returned heroes arrive through Doctor Strange's Portals, initiating a massive clash. During the chaotic battle, Tony encounters the newly restored Peter Parker.

As peter babble enthusiastically about his return, Tony cuts him off by pulling peter into an affectionate, silent embrace. Framed in a tight close up, Tony closes his eyes in profound relief. This reunion represents pure emotional catharsis. Seeing Peter alive wipe away the primary guilt haunting his Superego, proving that his five year struggle was not in vain.

As the battle reaches its climax, Thanos gains control of the Nano Gauntlet and repels the Avengers. Desperate, Tony looks across the battlefield toward Doctor Strange.

"You said one out of 14 million we win, right? Tell me this is it."

Doctor Strange refrains from verbal confirmation, raising a single index finger to signal that this is the sole winning timeline. This non verbal gesture acts as a decisive psychological catalyst. Tony's Ego instantly understands the implied outcome, victory requires his own mortal sacrifice.



Tony's heroic scene and his sacrifice (Russo & Russo, 2019, 2:30:29)

Tony lunges at Thanos, Though knocked aside, Tony uses his armor's nanothechnology to siphon all six Infinity Stones onto his own right glove. As Thanos snaps his empty gauntlet and proclaims "I am inevitable" Tony raises his glowing, stone laden hand. Looking directly at Thanos, Tony utters his iconic declaration:

"And I.. am.. Iron Man."

Tony snaps his fingers. The cosmic surge obliterates Thanos and his entire invading army, securing universe wide salvation at the cost of Tony's mortal body.

Psychoanalytically, this snap represents ultimate Ego transcendence and altruistic sublimation. In contrast to his 2008 origin where phrase 'I am Iron Man' was an expression of narcissistic Ego vanity here it signifies complete Superego alignment and ultimate self-actualization. His Ego knowingly surrenders its biological survival (Id instinct) to fulfill a supreme moral imperative.

"Tony, look at me. We're gonna be okay. You can rest now." Pepper's words release Tony's Superego from its lifelong compulsion to safeguard the words. As the Arc Reactor on his chest dims and extinguishes, Tony closes his eyes in absolute serenity. His self-healing journey reaches total completion, transforming his character arc from a traumatized, paranoid individual into a mature, altruistic martyr.

CONCLUSION

This study conclusively demonstrates that the five year self-healing process experienced by Tony in Avengers: Endgame (2019) acts as the primary catalyst for his character arc transformation. By engaging in domestic retreat, reparenting, emotional self-forgiveness, and interpersonal reconciliation, Tony successfully resolves his acute neurotic anxiety and restores his Ego's executive functionality. This psychological rehabilitation enables his personality structure to transition from an initial paranoid defensive state into an altruistic mature persona.

Furthermore, the application of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic model reveals that Tony's ultimate act of heroic self-sacrifice snapping his fingers with the nano Gauntlet, represents complete Ego transcendence and high level sublimation. Supported by cinematographic visual markers, his journey proves that internal self-healing is essential for resolving deep seated psychological trauma and achieving self actualization. This paper establishes a theorical framework for analyzing psychological recovery in modern cinematic literature.

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