

I Am Iron Man:  
Tony Stark as a Mythical and Modern Hero in Marvel Cinematic  
Universe

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Material	5
3. Theoretical Background	9
3.1. Raglan's hero	9
3.2. Campbell's journey of a hero	13
3.2.1. Departure	14
3.2.2. Initiation	16
3.2.3. Return	19
3.3. The Modern Hero	22
3.3.1. New Heroes	22
3.3.2. Changing Heroism	23
3.4. The Myth and the Modern	24
4. Findings	26
4.1. Tony Stark as Raglan's hero	26
4.2. The hero's journey	32
4.2.1. The hero's journey in Iron Man	32
4.2.2. The hero's journey in Iron Man 2	39
4.2.3. The hero's journey in Marvel's the Avengers	42
4.2.4. Summary: Tony's journey	46
4.3. The Modern Hero	47
4.3.1. The modern hero in Iron Man	47
4.3.2. The modern hero in Iron Man 2	57
4.3.3. The modern hero in Marvel's The Avengers	62
4.3.4. Summary: Tony as a modern hero	67
5. Conclusion	69
6. References	70
Appendices	

## 1. Introduction

In this study, I aim to analyze the character of Tony Stark as Iron Man in Phase 1 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, focusing on his role as a hero. I will study his character both as a mythical hero, using established patterns to evaluate whether his story resembles those of old myths, and as a modern contemporary hero, considering both general views and the themes of heroism presented in the movies.

The idea of heroes is present in various cultures around the world. As admired figures, heroes can be considered to represent the values of their time and place of origin. In my opinion, this makes heroes and heroism important subjects of study when considering culture.

In the present world, it could be argued that the closest we have to contemporary mythical heroes are the superhuman figures of comic books and associated media. Capable of extraordinary feats and grand adventures, these figures draw interest from the public even though they are clearly presented as fictional. The term "superhero" as used to describe this type of character is a registered trademark of Marvel Comics and DC Comics (United States Patent and Trademark Office), suggesting that the very idea of superhuman heroes is regarded as valuable. As such, they provide excellent subjects for studying heroes and heroism.

Comic books as an art form have a long history, which also makes it difficult to gain a comprehensive view of some of the oldest series. It was partly because of this that I chose to study the movie continuity instead of comic books. The movies offer a relatively small, contained set of data, and are also arguably the medium in which their characters are the best known nowadays. The popularity of Marvel's Cinematic Universe is evident in the fact that *Marvel's the Avengers* became the third highest-grossing film of all time with a box office total of one and a half billion worldwide (Box Office Mojo), which also indicates the cultural impact of it, further providing reasons to study the aspects of this phenomenon.

My hypothesis in this study is that the character of Tony Stark meets the definitions of both a mythical hero and a contemporary one, thus presenting old models in a new form.

## 2. Material

In this section, I aim to give a brief description about both the character in question and the movies I am going to consider in my analysis.

As a character, Anthony Edward Stark as Iron Man first appeared in *Tales of Suspense #39* in 1963 (Marvel.com: Iron Man). He was one of the founding members of the Avengers (Cowsill 2012: 82). His latest incarnation is in the movies set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Despite some similarities, the Tony Stark of the movies is rather different from his comics counterpart. Among other things, the comics version was wounded in Vietnam, while the more contemporary movie continuity places this event in Afghanistan.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of several movies which all take part in the same continuity. The six-movie sequence called "Phase One", now occasionally marketed as one package (<http://www.phase1avengersassembled.com/>), consists of *Iron Man*, released in 2008, followed by *The Incredible Hulk* in 2008, *Iron Man 2* in 2010, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* in 2011, and *Marvel's The Avengers* in 2012. While each movie is a self-contained story, the six movies in Phase One form a larger storyline, as the main characters of the first five movies form a team in the sixth. Each movie also contains references to others in the series, especially in the short sequences set after the credits. For example, in the scene after the credits of *The Incredible Hulk*, Tony Stark appears as a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D., a position he is offered at the end of *Iron Man 2*. There are also references in the actual films. For example, in *Iron Man 2*, Phil Coulson mentions having to go to New Mexico, and is later shown standing beside a crater there; these are both references to the events in *Thor*, in which the character of Coulson has a more significant role. Furthermore, the events of *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger* are all included in the official timeline, which is fleshed out in the promotional comic book *Fury's Big Week* (Marvel.com: Full Marvel Cinematic Universe Timeline).

Out of the major characters, Tony Stark has the most appearances in the series. Besides his appearance after the credits of *The Incredible Hulk*, he is the main character of both *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*, and plays a significant part in *Marvel's The Avengers*. For the purposes of this study, I am focusing on the three movies in which he has a plot-significant role. I am also considering *Captain America: The First Avenger* for certain details about his background, as it includes the character of his father, Howard Stark.

At the time of the writing, *Iron Man 3* has come out in theaters. However, it was not considered for the purposes of the study because of its late timing, the unavailability of a DVD at present making accurate references impossible, as well as it falling into Phase 2 and thus outside the contained storyline of Phase 1. Aside from the practical considerations, the addition of the movie would necessarily broaden the area beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, I have decided to study the readily available movies contained in the first story arc.

The first movie Tony Stark appears in, *Iron Man*, is also the beginning of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The movie starts as the military vehicle Tony is riding in is attacked in Afghanistan. As he seeks cover, a bomb with a Stark Industries logo falls nearby, injuring him. After a flashback sequence in which he fails to attend an award ceremony and seduces a reporter who confronts him about war profiteering, he wakes up in a cave. A doctor called Yinsen informs him that he still has shrapnel inside his body and an electromagnet installed into his chest to keep it from reaching his heart.

The terrorists who arranged the strike torture him until he agrees to build missiles for them. Instead he constructs a miniaturized arc reactor, a fictional piece of technology that allows for near endless energy production to keep the electromagnet in his chest working. After this he and Yinsen build a battle armor, ostensibly for the purpose of helping them both escape; however, Yinsen sacrifices himself to give Tony time to finish the plan and flee the terrorist camp.

After being found by American soldiers, Tony returns to the USA, where he announces the end of weapons manufacturing by Stark Industries. He then avoids publicity and focuses on building

a better version of his armor until he receives news that more weapons have been delivered to the terrorists. Having finished the armor, he flies over to Afghanistan and destroys the weapons, killing the terrorists he finds.

With the help of his personal assistant, Pepper Potts, he discovers the Stark Industries weapons were sold to the terrorist by his mentor Obadiah Stane. However, Stane paralyzes him and steals the arc reactor, leaving Tony to die and threatening to kill Pepper. Tony manages to make his way to an old version of the reactor and flies out to confront Stane. After a battle, Stane falls into a larger version of the reactor, which explodes, killing him. Afterward, Tony attends a press conference, in which he refuses to use his cover story and announces himself to be the superhero, Iron Man.

The second movie he has a major role in, *Iron Man 2*, takes place six months after the first one. Having discovered that the palladium used in his arc reactor is poisoning him, Tony prepares for death. He parties irresponsibly, makes Pepper the CEO of Stark Industries, and lets his friend Rhodes take an older version of the Iron Man armor to continue his work when he's gone. However, a Russian criminal Ivan Vanko and a rival industrialist Justin Hammer are both conspiring against him. After finding a clue in his father's old video recordings, Tony discovers a more stable core for his arc reactor, recovering from the poisoning in time to confront Vanko and his army of battle droids. Afterward, he and Pepper become involved, and Nick Fury offers him a position as a consultant for the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, S.H.I.E.L.D.

In the sixth movie of the series, *Marvel's The Avengers*, Tony is called in by S.H.I.E.L.D. to help defeat the alien god Loki, who has stolen a precious artifact. Working together with Captain America and Black Widow, he helps capture Loki, but afterward confronts Nick Fury as he discovers S.H.I.E.L.D. was using the artifact to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. After Loki escapes and takes over Tony's home to summon an invading alien army through a portal, Tony confronts him, barely surviving the experience by employing his new armor. After battling the aliens alongside the other Avengers, he leads an incoming nuclear missile into the portal,

apparently sacrificing himself to destroy the invaders and save New York from the explosion. However, he is caught mid-fall by the Hulk, and survives. At the end of the movie he is shown with Pepper, going over plans for repairing his tower, including quarters for the other Avengers.

Another movie that does not directly feature Tony Stark but is nevertheless important to his character is *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which features his father, Howard Stark. In the movie, Howard Stark is involved in the creation of Captain America, the first super soldier, later assisting him as a pilot and an inventor. As the films share the same continuity, I have considered this portrayal as background information on Howard Stark in the instances where he is relevant to the discussion.

My reasons for choosing to concentrate on the character of Tony Stark are twofold. First, he has the most appearances of all major characters in Phase One, and thus gives the most material for analysis. Furthermore, his story lines all heavily deal with the concept of heroes and heroism. In his first movie, he surpasses his father, called a hero for his involvement in the Manhattan Project, by choosing to destroy his weapons and those using them, gaining the title of a superhero. In the second *Iron Man* title, he again faces moral quandaries as he has to decide who gets to access his technology and for what purposes, and in *Marvel's The Avengers* he is directly called out by Captain America for not being a true hero. As his heroism and its nature are constantly questioned within the fictional universe, I wanted to address the issue in as detailed a way as possible within the scope of this study.



### 3. Theoretical Background

The idea of a hero and heroism has been studied by many people throughout time. Two of these people, Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell, have sought to establish patterns that various mythological heroes follow. These patterns are the tools I am using to evaluate my material in terms of mythical heroes and trying to establish whether the character of Iron Man fulfills the role of a hero of the myths. In the following section, I present a brief overview of both Raglan's and Campbell's patterns and what the various steps mean.

Furthermore, while I have not been able to find any such patterns for the modern hero, I have tried to find some definition of what constitutes a heroic figure in the present. For this, I will look at articles by Veijo Hietala as well as Ilona Kemppainen and Ulla-Maija Peltonen. This is what I will use in the analysis as basis for evaluating whether Iron Man fulfills the definition of a hero today, as defined by his actions and characteristics, not merely the somewhat more formulaic mold of the myth, which focuses more on the aspects of the story and the way it is presented.

#### 3.1. Raglan's hero

Baron Raglan studied the mythological hero in his book *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, first published in 1956 (Raglan 2003). In this book he compares various mythical heroes and their stories in an attempt to establish whether these stories were based on real historical figures or merely legends formed around certain cultural patterns. Most of his examples are from ancient Greek and Roman myths, but he also compares the ancient heroes to more recent figures such as Robin Hood, and includes several Biblical references as well. For the purpose of comparing the myths, as well as studying whether their similarities can be said to be coincidental, Raglan develops a pattern of twenty-two events that seem to take place in the lives of mythical heroes. These events, as he presents them in his book, are:

- (1) The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
  - (2) His father is a king, and
  - (3) Often a near relative of his mother, and
  - (4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
  - (5) He is also reputed to be the son of god.
  - (6) At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
  - (7) He is spirited away, and
  - (8) Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
  - (9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but
  - (10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
  - (11) After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
  - (12) He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
  - (13) Becomes king.
  - (14) For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
  - (15) Prescribes laws, but
  - (16) Later he loses favour with the gods and/or subjects, and
  - (17) Is driven from the throne and city, after which
  - (18) He meets with a mysterious death,
  - (19) Often at the top of a hill.
  - (20) His children, if any, do not succeed him.
  - (21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless
  - (22) He has one or more holy sepulchres.
- (Raglan 2003: 174-175.)

Having compiled this list by combining common points from various myths, Raglan (2003: 176-185) then applies the pattern to various mythical, Biblical, and historical figures to see how well they fit this model of an "archetypal" hero. This point-by-point evaluation is the method I am going to utilize to see whether Tony Stark fits Raglan's pattern of a typical hero.

Raglan does not expand on these points as he lists them but instead gives examples of various mythical heroes and how their stories fit the pattern. These examples make it clear that many parts of the pattern are open to interpretation. Joseph and Moses fulfill the requirements of royal parentage by being descendants of patriarchs and Levites instead. For Moses, Arthur, and Robin Hood, the reputation of divine parentage is substituted by the daughter of the Pharaoh, Uther Pendragon, and a nobleman respectively. Therefore, while the pattern is rather particular for the classical heroes, it is clear that Raglan himself adapts it according to the circumstances of the heroes. (Raglan 2003: 180, 183-184.)

Raglan then divides these incidents into three groups according to which part of the hero's life they concern, related to three rites of passage: birth, initiation, and death. He then starts by examining the circumstances of a mythical hero's birth, noting that a hero is of royal birth "whenever there are royalties available", further establishing that while literal royalty is common in the myths of classical heroes, it is not the only possible incarnation of this pattern (Raglan 2003: 186). He also notes that while this is not impossible as a feature of historical heroes, it is not typical of them and more common of the traditional hero. The story of an unknown hero of humble birth gaining power is, according to Raglan, most likely based on the middle part of the mythical heroic story, where the actual royal birth of the hero is often obscured. Therefore, he sees the high-ranking parents as an important element of the heroic myth. (Raglan 2003: 187.)

Likewise, Raglan notes that the unusual circumstances of a hero's birth are part of a ritual rather than true historical events. As evidence of this he offers the stories of heroes begotten by thunder storms or golden showers (Raglan 2003: 187). Given the varying ways in which the "unusual circumstances" appear in Raglan's examples, from virginal conceptions to the father always wearing armor, it seems more important to the myth to set the birth apart from the ordinary than to follow a set pattern (Raglan 2003: 176, 183).

Another important part of the birth of the hero in Raglan's pattern is the attempt on his life (Raglan 2003: 187-188). Raglan notes that while this is one of the most striking features of the pattern, in the stories there is often only a pretense of an attempt at killing the child, and often a

sacrificial animal is substituted. He further brings up various Biblical figures whose lives involved the sacrifice or remains of an animal at a pivotal moment in their adolescence, and suggests that this may be an echo of the same pattern of an attempt at the child's life. Raglan then notes that aside from the fact that they were taken and raised away from their parents, very little is known of the hero's childhood (Raglan 2003: 188-189). He argues that the reason for this is that the important parts of the myth, the birth and the initiation, are the ones connected to rituals, and compares this blank childhood to the lack of information between the hero's initiation and death.

Regarding the next part of the hero's triumph, Raglan brings attention to the circumstances of their victories (Raglan 2003: 189-192). The most important things in the hero's life appear to happen on their journey to the realm which they are going to rule, or shortly after they have arrived there. Furthermore, while they may have allies, the significant victory against the reigning king or a mythical beast is achieved by the hero alone. This battle may also be a test of magic or intelligence instead of mortal combat. Raglan sees the qualification for the throne as a twofold test: the hero must prove their worth in the test of intelligence, and then take their position by defeating the reigning monarch. While this is often followed by a marriage to a princess, Raglan argues that while the marriage may be linked to the ascension, the hero does not gain the throne simply by marrying the queen, but must show their worthiness for the throne through the tests.

Much like their childhood, the actual rule of the hero goes also largely without remark (Raglan 2003: 192-193). Their only achievement as a ruler is that of setting laws, which Raglan sees as a way of giving the laws a certain status or sacredness by attributing them to a legendary hero, rather than as actual deeds by the ruler. The next important part in the hero's life, Raglan argues, is that of their fall from glory. The mythical hero does not rule gloriously until a natural death, but is destined to lose his throne before suffering a mysterious death. Though the hero gained their throne through victory, they tend not to lose it to defeat. Rather, they fall out of favor with either their subjects or their gods, usually in a very sudden manner.

The hero's death, while mysterious, does still have some common threads (Raglan 2003: 194). It

generally takes place outside the city in which they rule, after they have either been driven out or left on a quest. They also tend to face their death on a hilltop or a similar place. Furthermore, while not marked in his pattern, Raglan suggests that fire, lightning or similar forces were connected to the ritual deaths of kings. He is also never succeeded by his children; either he has none, or they are ignored in direct succession for other reasons, such as young age. They do, however, tend to leave behind a holy sepulcher or several.

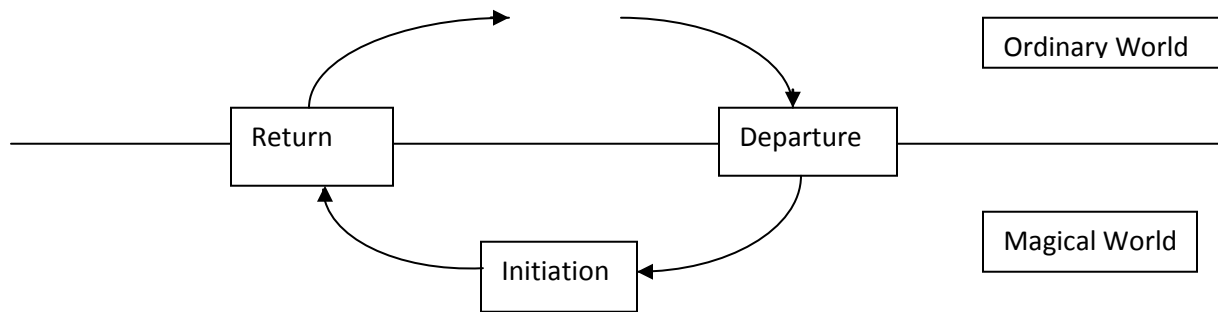
In conclusion, Raglan argues that this pattern tends to be in common with various mythical heroes because it holds some ritual element (Raglan 2003: 195). As such, the stories of mythical heroes do not reflect historical events or actual heroes. Rather than suggest that mythical heroes all led similar lives, Raglan's argument is that the stories tend to follow a pre-established pattern that follows the rituals and myths in place in the society.

### 3.2. Campbell's journey of a hero

Joseph Campbell also sought to establish a common pattern for heroic stories in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1973). To accomplish this, he studies various myths and fairytales from different cultures, using their similarities to establish the pattern of a typical heroic journey. These stories are also used as examples of the various parts of his pattern, illustrating the different forms each stage of the journey can take. He likewise sees the heroic story as a representation of the rites of passage; unlike Raglan, however, he focuses his pattern on the actual journey of the hero, without much attention to their background or the circumstances of their death. As such, Campbell's study of the hero concentrates on the second part of Raglan's three-part pattern, which Campbell again divides into three.

Campbell's basic pattern of the heroic journey (Figure 1) follows a sequence of separation, initiation, and return (Campbell 1973:30-35). The hero leaves the ordinary world for the fantastical, encounters supernatural foes and defeats them, and returns from the adventure with new powers and insights. Campbell further gives examples of various legends, such as that of the

Buddha, to show how this pattern takes form in the actual legend.

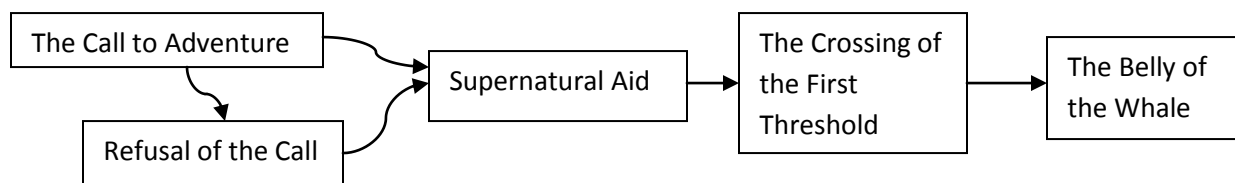


*Figure 1: Circle of the heroic journey*

Like Raglan, Campbell further divides this three-part pattern into smaller subsections, 17 in total (Campbell 1973: 36-37). He then goes on to expand on these subsections in the following chapters. Not all of these sections apply to all myths, and some of them appear to be contradictory with each other. As such, while they are all presented here, only those applicable to the circumstances are used in the actual analysis part.

### 3.2.1. Departure

The first stage of Campbell's pattern of the heroic journey is separation or departure (Campbell 1973: 36). In this stage, the hero leaves behind the ordinary, starting their journey into the world of adventure. According to Campbell, this stage of the prototypical journey can be divided into five parts: "The Call to Adventure", "Refusal of the Call", "Supernatural Aid", "The Crossing of the First Threshold", and "The Belly of the Whale" (Figure 2). These are explained further in the following.



*Figure 2: The stages of departure*

Campbell calls the first part of the departure stage of his pattern the "Call to Adventure" (Campbell 1973: 49-58). In this part, something calls the hero away from their ordinary life, revealing a new world with strange, unknown forces. This may happen seemingly by chance, as in a fairytale where a princess drops her golden ball, or be decreed by the gods, as happens to the future Buddha.

The revelation of the new world is often accompanied by the appearance of a herald, who may appear as an animal or a beast, or be otherwise remarkable enough to draw the hero's attention. This herald, Campbell suggests (Campbell 1973:53), is often dark or otherwise unappealing, contrasting with the glories promised for following it.

In some cases, Campbell argues, the call to adventure goes unanswered, a pattern which he names the Refusal of the Call (Campbell 1973: 59). When this happens, the hero either ignores the first signs of the supernatural world or refuses the herald's more direct call. According to Campbell, this forces the would-be-hero into the role of a victim instead. By not following the call to adventure, they give up the chance of achieving power.

According to Campbell, various myths present this refusal as an act of self-interest (Campbell 1973: 59-68). They refuse to let their circumstances change, instead preferring to stay in their present state. If this happens, they may be stuck in this state for an indefinite amount of time, often requiring someone to save them from it. This further supports the suggestion that while following the call makes one a hero, refusing it forces the person into the role of a victim, unable or unwilling to change their circumstances.

The following step of the pattern, Supernatural Aid, is different to those who have accepted the call and those who have refused it (Campbell 1973: 69-77). Those who accept the call meet a protective figure who provides them with aid against future encounters. This figure represents protection and reassurance against the trials ahead, and may present either advice or some form of amulets to repel destructive forces. They typically appear to those who have answered the call, preparing them for the journey ahead.

Those who have refused the call, though, may also receive this supernatural aid (Campbell 1973: 73-74). In this case, this aid is less about protection for the future journey and more a matter of rescuing them from the stagnation that has resulted from their refusal. Either way, the protective figure will prepare the hero for the adventure.

After receiving the call and the supernatural aid, the hero must leave the ordinary world to continue on their adventure, facing what Campbell calls the Crossing of the First Threshold (Campbell 1973: 77-89). This threshold in Campbell's pattern is often guarded by some kind of a beast or guardian standing between the everyday world and the darkness outside it. The hero must pass this guardian in order to continue their journey, often by passing some kind of a trial.

This guardian, often an ogre, is usually either violent or deceitful, even seductive (Campbell 1973:78). As an example of this, Campbell tells the story of an ogre who tricks a caravan leader into abandoning his water just as he is entering a desert, leading to the caravan becoming weakened and easily defeated by the ogres. If the hero wishes to continue the adventure, they must overcome this deceit, either by outwitting the guardian or using the advice or amulets provided by their earlier aid.

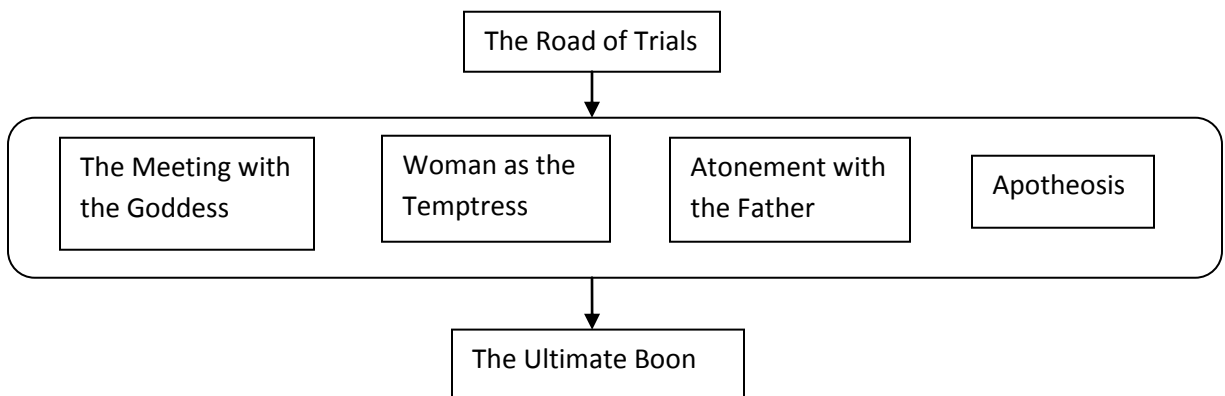
After crossing the threshold, the prototypical hero is then transferred into the supernatural world in a manner of symbolical rebirth, The Belly of the Whale (Campbell 1973: 90-94). This is presented in various myths of the hero being swallowed by various beasts, such as a whale or an elephant. According to Campbell, this emphasizes the passage of a threshold as a form of self-annihilation (1973:91-92). As such, the hero must be taken inside something else to be able to reach the other side.

### 3.2.2. Initiation

The second stage of Campbell's pattern is the initiation (Campbell 1973: 30, 36), which consists



of various trials and victories in the supernatural world. It is in this part where the hero gains victory over supernatural forces and gains their triumph. Again, Campbell divides this stage into six subsections: "The Road of Trials", "The Meeting with the Goddess", "Woman as the Temptress", "Atonement with the Father", "Apotheosis", and "The Ultimate boon" (Figure 3). These are not a continuity as much as they are different paths through which the triumph can be achieved, especially the second through fifth section; in a latter mention Campbell presents these as alternative methods of accomplishing the quest (Campbell 1973: 193). Nevertheless, they are all subcategories of the initiation stage, and are again further expanded in the following.



*Figure 3: The stages of initiation*

After the passage across the threshold, the mythical hero reaches a different land, in which they must pass various trials and ordeals on The Road of Trials (Campbell 1973: 97-109). In this part they are usually aided by their earlier helper's advice or amulets or by other benign powers. Sometimes this is the first time the hero realizes they are being helped by something beyond their own ability.

The trials presented to the hero vary, such as the ordeals given to Psyche by Venus (Campbell 1973: 97-98), but are often difficult or even impossible to accomplish without the supernatural aid. Campbell sees this as an extension of the first threshold, or rather the first threshold as a preamble to this journey: the first triumph is not enough, but the hero must slay the dragons again and again, motivated by mere glimpses of the glories beyond.

A common representation of the adventure is a joining of the hero with the Goddess (Campbell 1973: 109-120). The goddess, according to Campbell, symbolizes a mother in good and bad. If she is presented as desirable, this is a forbidden desire, like Diana who in legend causes the death of the man who saw her bathing. To succeed in his adventure, the hero has to understand her and accept her.

As a mother and a creator, the Goddess represents both life and death, and the ultimate knowledge (Campbell 1973: 114, 116, 118-120). Meeting her is presented as a final test to the hero. According to Campbell, the Goddess is present in every woman. As such, when the hero is female, her triumph is to become immortal herself.

In contrast with the life and triumph represented by the Goddess, Campbell also argues that the woman can also symbolize trial and defeat in the hero's trials in what he calls Woman as the Temptress (Campbell 1973: 120-126). He suggests that in this aspect of the myth the woman represents temptation and sin. This is, according to Campbell, an extension of the role of the Goddess as a symbol of life. In this case, life is presented in contrast with the soul, and is thus a danger to the hero's purity.

In further contrast with the protection of the Goddess, Campbell presents a father figure as another trial to be overcome on the hero's journey, the Atonement with the Father (Campbell 1973: 126-149). He gives several examples of this, from the wrathful Christian God to the Sun of the Navaho myth. According to Campbell, this ordeal is a matter of finding belief that the monstrous figure of the father is merciful, or else finding protection from the mother figure. Either way, the ultimate outcome is finding favor with the father, becoming one with him. Overcoming the terrifying figure of the father, Campbell argues (1973: 148), allows the hero to view the world in a new manner.

The fifth section of Campbell's pattern of the initiation is that of Apotheosis, deification (Campbell 1973: 149-171). According to him, this is "the release potential within us all"

(Campbell 1973:151), which is attained by overcoming terrors and becoming a hero. He further notes that this experience is neither markedly male or female, and often brings the two together, either in separate figures or one and the same. In this step, the hero finds the divine forces within, realizing that they are one with the protective forces, or even one with the entire world.

The final part of the initiation stage is that of The Ultimate Boon (Campbell 1973: 172-192). The first example Campbell gives of this is that of the inexhaustible feast, with food that does not run out. However, it can be expanded to encompass any significant gift or prize. As such, Campbell suggests that the anthropomorphic figures of the myth can be seen merely as guardians of this gift, whether it be liquor, food, fire, or even unending life.

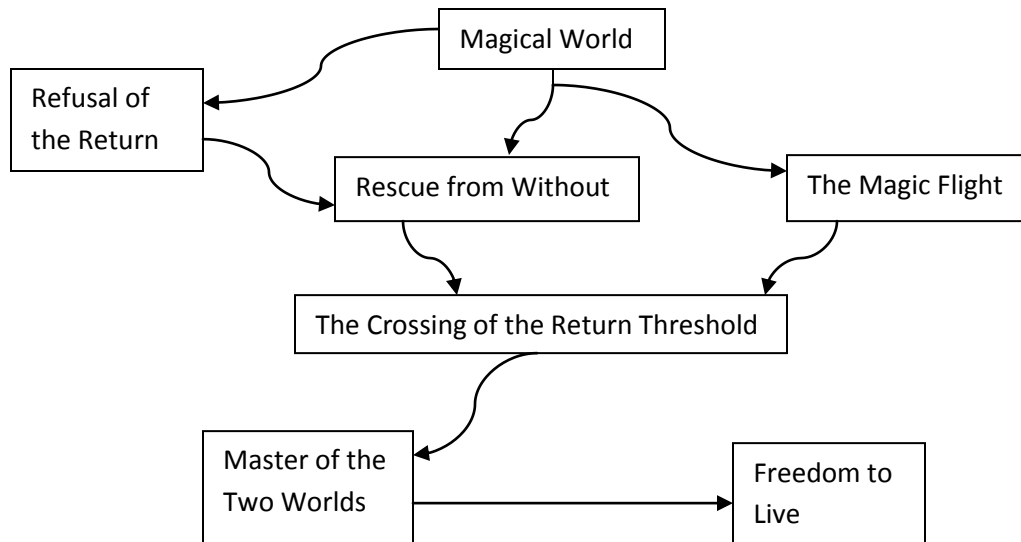
The main motif here, according to Campbell, is that of indestructibility (Campbell 1973: 176-177). However, he also brings up again the matter of knowledge, positing that the true way of achieving immortality is seeing it in the form it is already present (Campbell 1973: 189-190). A hero who does not understand the boon he is granted will merely suffer like Midas, whose gift of turning everything into gold made him unable to eat or drink and caused his daughter to perish.

### 3.2.3. Return

The return from the journey, Campbell argues, can be for the hero the most difficult part of the adventure. The prizes won through the trials or the enlightenment reached may make the hero uninterested in the ordinary world. A hero who has somehow cheated or otherwise not truly earned their boon may find opposition from higher powers as they do not deserve to return with their prize, and those changed by the adventure might find that the society cannot accept or understand their journey. (Campbell 1973: 36-37).

The stage of return, willingly or not, can in Campbell's pattern be divided into six sections: "Refusal of the Return", "The Magic Flight", "Rescue from Without", "The Crossing of the Return Threshold", "Master of the Two Worlds", and "Freedom to Live" (Campbell 1973: 37).

As in the initiation section, most of these sections are alternatives of each other rather than following one another in succession on the journey (Figure 4).



*Figure 4: The stages of return*

To bring the cycle of the hero's journey to a close, Campbell states, the hero is expected to return to the ordinary world to share the boon won from the supernatural forces. However, in many cases, the hero refuses to fulfill this responsibility, instead choosing to stay behind in the supernatural realm in what Campbell calls the Refusal of Return (Campbell 1973: 193-196). Campbell then gives an example in the legend of King Muchukunda, who was given the boon of eternal sleep. When he was eventually woken from his rest, he noticed that people had changed during his slumber, and decided to move even further from them, thus refusing to return even as he had lost his prize.

The second section of this stage in Campbell's pattern, the Magic Flight, applies to the heroes who have not succeeded in their trials in the approved manner but rather won their prize through deceit (Campbell 1973: 196-207). In this case the guardians of the prize may resist the hero's return, and they have to make their escape from the supernatural realm. This may be complicated by a chase or various obstacles, which the hero must overcome to reach their goal.

This can be seen, according to Campbell, as a symbol of the divide between the ordinary world of that and the supernatural, when the other realm is the underworld (Campbell 1973: 206). His examples of this illustrate a pattern where the return of a lover from death is only made impossible by a small error, suggesting that if some detail were different, it might be possible to bring a deceased lover back to life. However, as the mistake has been made, it is instead necessary to flee instead of being able to leave freely.

In cases where the hero cannot or will not leave on their own, escaping or not, they may require rescuer from the ordinary world, or Rescue from Without (Campbell 1973: 207-216). This may be necessary because the hero is unwilling to return, like King Muchukunda, in which case whoever disturbs them will suffer for it. On the other hand, if the hero is trapped in the supernatural realm, or has merely found it too enthralling, the rescue may be welcome. Regardless of whether the hero escapes on their own, though, or guided by an external aid, both ways lead to the next step in the journey.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold signifies the hero's return from the supernatural to the ordinary world (Campbell 1973: 217-228). The challenge here, Campbell argues, is finding a way of reconciling what has been found in the other realm with the reality of the old world. Even if the hero resists the urge to stay in the supernatural world and chooses to return, the world may have changed too much for them to reintegrate. As an example of this Campbell gives the story of Rip van Winkle, who cannot understand or know the ways the world has changed while he slept. Thus the return from the adventure is the final trial of the hero, who has to find a way to bring the two worlds together.

The heroes who succeed in this return may reach the step of the Master of the Two Worlds (Campbell 1973: 229-237). These heroes reach the freedom to traverse between the two worlds at will, not having to submit to the same guardians and trials each time. They may even, as Jesus does in Campbell's example, be able to give a vision of the other world to other people. On another level, this may be the hero letting go of their own limitations through their understanding of the world.

The final result of the hero's journey is what Campbell calls the Freedom to Live (Campbell 1973: 238-243). The hero, having mastered the two worlds and passed the trials, reaches a state in which they do not fear death or change. This comes from the realization that nothing remains the same forever, and change is not something to be feared. This reflects the call to adventure and its refusal (Campbell 1973: 59), where those who forgo the chance to start the journey and change their circumstances become victims, unable to reach greater heights.

### 3.3. The modern hero

Views on what is or is not heroic often change over time. In the previous section, I have addressed two theories on what kind of patterns the stories of mythical heroes follow. In the following, I aim to find some indication as to how modern heroes differ from them, if at all.

#### 3.3.1. New heroes

In his book *Media ja suuret tunteet*, "The Media and large feelings", Veijo Hietala addresses the way the image of a hero has changed over time (Hietala 2007: 182). While he admits that the modern heroes have their roots in old myths, he argues that many mythical heroes would not be seen as such in the contemporary culture, as actual heroism is different from one era to another.

Hietala further suggests that the modern hero can be divided into three subcategories (Hietala 2007: 184-185). On one hand there is the ordinary man who does heroic things as a result of circumstances, while on the other hand there are also figures who have extraordinary abilities, such as Sherlock Holmes and his intelligence. A third category is that of a "hybrid hero", a person who appears to be ordinary, but is revealed to have hidden secret abilities. According to Hietala (2007: 185), this category covers both surprisingly capable heroes, such as the character of Miss Marple, and heroes with actual hidden identities, such as Superman and Batman.

We can see a connection between the theory of this hybrid hero and the mythical hero of Raglan's theory. While Raglan's hero may be of royal birth, they are raised away from their family, and may even personally be unaware of their background, like the figure of Oedipus. This also resembles Campbell's idea of the successful hero as a messenger from the world of the supernatural, someone who has mastered mysterious forces and is able to bestow this knowledge and power upon others. However, a fundamental difference here is in the definition of a hero. While Raglan does touch on the background of the hero, the most important part of their story is that of their victory; in some of Raglan's own examples, we know nothing of the hero aside from their deeds, yet they still fit Raglan's definition. Campbell, on the other hand, focuses entirely on the journey the hero goes through, and the trials they pass. This is in clear contrast with Hietala's approach, where he divides heroes into subcategories based on who and what they are instead of what they do. As such, in Hietala's hero the most important aspect is that of the person of the hero, not their story.

### 3.3.2. Changing heroism

In their article *Muuttuva sankaruus*, "The Changing Heroism", Ilona Kemppainen and Ulla-Maija Peltonen (2010: 1-3) argue that while the forms of heroism may change over time, certain features are still common for all heroes. According to them the Western idea of a hero can be seen to return to the story of Jesus, which presents self-sacrifice as an essential feature of heroism.

Kemppainen and Peltonen (2010: 24-25) further argue that one of the fundamental examples of this kind of heroism is the image of a war hero. They also suggest that the person of the hero is of similar importance as their deeds, and the hero is not only someone who accomplishes heroic deeds but also someone who represents an ideal person, someone to imitate. Here the hero is defined through their person rather than their story. The important part is not that the hero sacrifices himself, but that they are the type of person who would make that sacrifice.

They further state that fulfilling duties may not be seen as heroism by everyone (Kemppainen & Peltonen 2010: 33). Their study suggests that people may not see for example a doctor or a firefighter as heroic for doing what is expected of them in their position. A true hero is thus someone who is not duty-bound to help another, but does it nevertheless. Here again the heroism is not solely dependent on the actions but rather the person of the hero: their circumstances decide whether a certain action is heroic or not.

The hero, Kemppainen and Peltonen argue (2010: 35), represents the ideals and values of those telling the story. What is seen as heroic reflects the values of the society. This ties back to their suggestion of Jesus being the archetype of self-sacrifice; given the importance of Christianity in the history of the Western civilization, it seems only natural that the greatest achievement of the deity would be seen as the ideal.

### 3.4. The myth and the modern

From these looks into heroism, we can see a certain pattern emerging. The mythical hero is largely defined by what they do and accomplish, with a certain story they have to fulfill. As these patterns have been formed as a descriptive summation of analysis and comparison of myths, this suggests that for a character to become a mythical hero, they have to fit a particular story to be remembered. As such, heroism in myths is defined by what is accomplished and how.

The modern definition of a hero, on the other hand, seems to arise from who and what they are. The same action by one person may be seen as more or less heroic as the same action performed by another person of a different background or in different circumstances. Ultimately heroism arises from the character of the hero, from their motivations and thoughts. The modern hero does not seek eternal life or steal fire from the gods, instead risking themselves for the sake of others. As such, the image of the hero has become less about the journey and adventure and more about what they do when faced with certain circumstances. The modern hero is not defined by what



they do, but by what they are. Their actions are a consequence of their heroism, not the cause.

Of course, these two views are not mutually exclusive. A thoroughly modern hero may well fulfill the story familiar from myths. As such, my aim in the analysis part of this study is not to make one view prevail of the other, but rather weigh them both in turn and see whether one, both, or neither requirement are met in the character of Iron Man. Furthermore, I am going to look at the questions and definitions of heroism raised within the movies themselves, as appropriate.

## 4. Findings

In the following, I aim to compare the character of Tony Stark as Iron Man to the theories presented earlier. I will use Raglan's and Campbell's patterns on the lives and adventures of mythical heroes to see if he could be seen as a modern version of the mythical hero. I am also going to consider his role in the movies from the point of view of a modern, self-sacrificing hero. Finally, I am going to consider the addressing of heroes and heroism in the movies themselves, and consider how Tony Stark reflects the image of a hero inside the story.

Where appropriate, I have used direct quotations from the movies to illustrate the point. Where this is used, the text of the quotations is that employed in the English subtitles on the Area 2 DVDs, this being the official text form presented for the dialog to the viewer.

### 4.1. Tony Stark as Raglan's hero

Tony Stark's parents were Howard and Maria Stark. Nothing is known about his mother, except that the Maria Stark Foundation carries her name. Howard Stark, on the other hand, is referenced briefly in the movies, as well as having a proper role in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. As the founder and owner of Stark Industries, as well as a successful inventor, Howard was a wealthy man with numerous contacts and financial influence; as such, he appears to fill a similar role of royalty analogue as the high-class parents of Raglan's Biblical examples (Raglan 2003: 180).

Besides his wealth and influence, Howard Stark is elevated to a nearly legendary status by the people who knew him. In the introduction of the awards ceremony in *Iron Man* he is called a Titan, invoking mythological imagery. In mythology, the Titans were either older gods (Oxford 1961: 913) or merely immortal creatures. The most well-known of them, Prometheus, brought fire to humans, forming parallels between the myth and the brilliant inventor (Parker 2009: 74).

The link to Howard is also clearly significant to the character of Tony: in several instances during the movies he is compared to his father, especially in his role as an inventor and a weapons manufacturer, and one of the antagonists of *Iron Man 2*, Ivan Vanko, specifically targets him because Howard Stark had wronged his father.

In Raglan's pattern, there is often something unusual about the hero's conception. While Tony Stark was not conceived through supernatural means like some of the examples in Raglan's book, his birth is still somewhat outside society's standards. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which is set during the second World War, his father Howard Stark was not only clearly an adult but also well established enough in his career as an engineer and an inventor to work on secret government projects. As such, while no exact age for Howard is given, it seems safe to assume he is at the very least in his twenties during the events of the movie. While the movies never offer an exact time for Tony's birth, there is some on-screen information during a presentation in the beginning of *Iron Man* that presents some time frame for his birth. One element in the presentation is a newspaper article about his parents' death, dated in December, 1991, which appears for a brief moment during the presentation. As the overlaying narration indicates this happened between his graduation from Massachusetts Institute of Technology at age 17 and his taking over the Stark Industries at age 21, he would have been born sometime between 1971 and 1974. As such, his father was at earliest in his fifties when Tony was born. While not an impossible event, it could be said this is likely older than is average for a first-time parent, thus making his conception unusual in timing.

The same narration reveals a few of his achievements as a child, but does not elaborate on them. These few sentences, along with the magazine covers that appear at the same time, are the only information we are given about the character's childhood during the first movie. As the sequence lasts less than half a minute of on-screen time, very little about his childhood is actually revealed. It can therefore be argued that this reflects Raglan's claim of the hero's childhood being left blank.

In *Iron Man 2*, in a dialog between Tony Stark and Nick Fury, it is revealed that Tony's father

sent him to a boarding school as a child. This reflects Raglan's pattern, in which the hero is raised away from his parents (Raglan 2003: 188). Contrary to Raglan's pattern, this is not in reaction to an attempt at his life. However, as the murder attempt in the myths was often perpetrated by a male relative, often the father (Raglan 2003: 187-188), and according to Tony it was his father who sent him away, being sent to study elsewhere can be seen as an amalgamation of the two points: not wanting to have the child in his vicinity, but unwilling to resort to murder, the father sends him away to be raised by others.

As Tony's parents are of high status in the society due to their wealth, and as his father's special status comes from his achievements as an engineer, it is easy to argue that Stark Industries represents the kingdom Howard Stark rules and Tony later returns to reclaim. After his parent's death some time after his graduation at seventeen, the narration reveals nothing of Tony's life until he returns to take charge of the company at the age of twenty-one. However, unknown to him, he has not actually gained true control of the company; his predecessor, Obadiah Stane, is double-dealing behind his back, selling weapons to terrorists. This continues even after Tony has announced an end to weapons manufacturing, demonstrating that the true control of the company lies still elsewhere.

Tony defeats Stane in a combat that tests both the fighting ability of their suits and, ultimately, their intelligence, especially as he is the one who designed the suits, proving the superiority of his design over Stane's imitation. It is not until his predecessor Stane has been defeated that he can truly turn the company into the new direction he wants, thus becoming the "king" of Stark Industries.

As was the case with the royal parentage in Raglan's pattern, there is no actual princess available for Tony to marry. However, his main love interest in the movies, Pepper Potts, fits this role in a continuation of the analogy of Stark Industries as a kingdom. Starting as his personal assistant in *Iron Man*, she is promoted to CEO in *Iron Man 2*. While Tony makes his interest clear in the first movie, asking her to dance with him at a party and setting a hypothetical scenario where she would be his girlfriend, it is not until the end of *Iron Man 2* that they actually become a couple,

after Pepper has already taken Stark Industries into her hands. As such, Tony does not achieve romance with her until she has already reached this "royal" status, running the company in his stead.

After defeating Stane, Tony regains control of his company. However, aside from setting new rules for the functioning of the company, he is never shown actually doing anything with it. The company is only brought up when he is avoiding his responsibilities, such as in *Iron Man 2* when Pepper asks him to do his job, or when his new direction of ceasing weapons manufacturing is important to the story. Even in *Iron Man*, before he ousts Stane, he is shown announcing the end of weapons manufacturing, yet failing to make sure this is carried out, instead hiding from the public eye. As such, we can see a reflection of Raglan's pattern (Raglan 2003: 192-193), in which the new king's only actions as a ruler are new laws, in this case new guidelines, without any new significant victories or conquests with his company.

The next step in Raglan's pattern is the hero losing favor with the gods or his subjects (Raglan 2003: 175, 193). This can be seen in *Iron Man 2*, which follows the defeat of the predecessor in *Iron Man*. While the public is still in Iron Man's favor, he is facing significant political pressure to give up his suit, with his rival, Justin Hammer, gaining favor with his imitation drones. Even those closest to him, Pepper Potts and James Rhodes, make their disapproval of Tony's behavior clear. Rhodes even confronts him at his own birthday party, leading to an armed conflict between the two. As a result, Rhodes leaves with a copy of the Iron Man suit, which is the secret of Tony's current fame and his defeat of Stane. Pepper's disapproval in turn leads to Tony making her CEO in his stead, essentially signing his "kingdom" of Stark Industries over to her.

Raglan's pattern of the hero's life includes several points concerning the hero's death, which presents a problem in the case of Iron Man. Being part of a continuing story, the character of Tony Stark is still alive. However, in each of the movies he has had close brushes with death. Two times he has appeared to die, even feared to be so by other characters, and once he was suffering of a presumably fatal poisoning that was cured barely in time. As these instances were presented as apparent deaths even inside the story, I am going to consider them here in the ways

they fit Raglan's pattern.

In the first *Iron Man* movie, Tony lies on the roof of the Stark Industries building after his battle against Stane. As he lies there, the light of his arc reactor flickers, going out for a moment. Earlier in the movie it has been established that without the arc reactor, he will die. Stane himself attempts to use this as a way of killing him. If this had actually been his death, the actual method of his death would likely not have been published. In the movie, Stane's death as he falls into an older version of the arc reactor is hidden from the public, his disappearance linked to a fake boating accident. Furthermore, Tony is instructed to keep his involvement in the battle a secret, using a fake alibi and a cover story about an armored bodyguard as an explanation instead; it is only Tony himself who decides to break to cover story and admit to being Iron Man. As both sides of the battle were thus supposed to be kept out of the public eye, it is unlikely that the circumstances of Tony's death would have been made public if he had not survived.

There is no such presumed death scene in *Iron Man 2*. In *Marvel's The Avengers*, however, Tony is faced with the task of averting a nuclear missile from Manhattan into a magical portal leading into an unknown area of space. This is clearly presented in the film as a suicide mission. As they have to close the portal to thwart an alien invasion, Tony is warned by other characters that he will have no way of returning from his mission. Once he has guided the missile through the portal, his armor's systems start rapidly failing, and he closes his eyes after seeing the missile detonate, appearing to lose his consciousness while the portal closes in the background. Though he barely makes it through the portal, despite the fears to the contrary, he then falls from the sky and is only barely caught by the Hulk. As he is brought down to the ground, he is still unresponsive, again momentarily appearing dead not only to the viewer but also to the other characters as well.

Both of these scenarios reflect well Raglan's pattern for a hero's death. In both cases, had he perished, the cause of death would have been mysterious. In *Iron Man*, he would have met his end in a battle the details of which were never made public, and it is questionable whether his death would have been linked to the incident in the public at all. In *Avengers*, the method itself

would have been rather unusual, and the matter of secrecy is again a concern: in a scene late in the film Nick Fury threatens the World Security Council with making the exact nature of Tony's mission public, meaning that if he had died on the mission, the reasons for his death would have been unknown to most of the world. Furthermore, had he been trapped on the other side of the portal, not even those aware of his task would have been able to ascertain his time or method of death. There also would not have been anything left to bury, which responds to another point of Raglan's pattern.

In either of these scenarios the matter of succession is only touched upon indirectly, in that he has no children who could inherit his position, which alone would be enough to fulfill that condition in the pattern. However, inheritance is dealt with in more detail in *Iron Man 2*. While he has no apparent death scene in the movie, Tony is suffering of a poisoning and believes he is going to die; as such, he addresses the matter himself. At the time, his main concerns regarding inheritance are Stark Industries and the Iron Man armor and its peacekeeping duties. He promotes his assistant Pepper to CEO of Stark Industries and allows his friend, James Rhodes, to fly off in an older version of the armor. As he makes these decision assuming that he is going to die shortly, it is clear that if he were to die, his position would not be succeeded by anyone in direct relation to him.

In conclusion, out of the twenty-two points in Raglan's pattern, the character of Tony Stark matches the great majority. While little is known about his mother, his father was the wealthy founder of an important company (2), revered as a titan of his field and a national hero decades after his death (5). His father had him at a relatively old age (4), and sent him off to be raised in a boarding school (7, 8). Very little is known about his childhood (9), but he returns to take over his father's company once he turns 21 (10). However, he does not gain true control of his kingdom until he defeats his predecessor, the monster who had been ruling from the shadows (11), after which he replaces him at the head of the company (13). He does very little in his position (14) aside from setting new regulations and directions for the company (15), but the opinion of the public and those running his company turns against him (16). He gives up his company (17) into the hands of his love interest, making her a princess (12). Twice he almost

meets a mysterious death (18) in an elevated place (19). He has no children, and when choosing his successor both at the head of his company and as the Iron Man has to turn to his friends as replacements (20). Furthermore, had he not narrowly escaped death and instead perished during his last confrontation in *Avengers*, not only would the circumstances have been mysterious but he also would have not left a body behind (21).

Disregarding the part of the pattern addressing the hero's death, as he is still alive, Tony Stark matches fourteen out of the seventeen points before the death, fifteen if his arrangements about matters of inheritance are taken into account. If we also count his close brushes with death, the aspects of those incidents bring his total up to eighteen out of twenty-two. To compare him with Raglan's own examples, both Romulus and Perseus score eighteen points on the pattern (Raglan 2003: 176, 177). Even his partial score of fourteen almost matches the fifteen Raglan attributes to Zeus, and makes him more fitting of the pattern than Robin Hood at thirteen points. Based on this, we can state that Tony Stark is well deserving of the title of a mythical hero by Lord Raglan's definition.

## 4.2. The hero's journey

Unlike Raglan, who considered the mythical hero's life as a whole, Campbell's pattern focused on the structure of the hero's adventure. Due to this and the cyclical nature of the pattern, we can see Campbell's cycle reflected several times in the story of Tony Stark across the three movies. In the following, I have broken them down into sections by movie. Each interpretation of the cycle has also been represented as a simplified chart in the appendices.

### 4.2.1. The hero's journey in *Iron Man*

The first *Iron Man* movie features two examples of this cycle which can be seen to exist inside each other. A larger cycle is visible in the structure of the entire movie, while in a smaller cycle



the kidnapping in Afghanistan can be seen to encompass the journey in itself. As both reflect Campbell's pattern well, I have here presented both possibilities.

In the smaller interpretation of the heroic cycle (Appendix 1) the Call to Adventure is represented by the attack on the military convoy Tony is traveling in. Shown in the very beginning of the movie, this event is what tears him out of his ordinary life, forcing him to face the reality hiding behind the scenes. In this new world his weapons are not used by those he intended them for, protecting American soldiers. Instead he finds them in the hands of terrorists, who demand him to build even more, thus wanting to draw him further into the world.

Initially Tony refuses the call, not wanting to aid the terrorists. After being tortured he is shown to be immobile, unable to act to change his situation. This reflects Campbell's observations, in which the hero who refuses the call is forced to stagnate (Campbell 1973: 59). He is stuck in his current circumstances, unable to escape.

Fortunately for Tony, he is helped by Doctor Ho Yinsen, who takes the role of what Campbell calls Supernatural Aid (Campbell 1973: 69). While never presented as anything but human, Yinsen has already saved Tony's life once through an experimental procedure after shrapnel from the attack almost killed him, thus making him a protective figure. His words are what force Tony out of his stagnation and into action: When Tony points out he only has a week to live, Yinsen encourages him to do his best with the week he has.

Having been brought out of his stagnation by Yinsen's aid, the first trial Tony must overcome is the problem of shrapnel in his chest, left there by the very event that forced him on the journey. He overcomes this by building an arc reactor, an energy generator that powers the electromagnet inside his chest, keeping the shrapnel from his heart. Furthermore, he accomplishes this by outwitting his captors, who try using deceit to force him to work for them. Both Yinsen and Tony know they will not be allowed to survive even if they meet the demands, whatever the promises made. However, by being more knowledgeable than their captors, they are able to fulfill their own plans even while under constant surveillance. This reflects well Campbell's pattern, in which

the violent or deceitful ogre is outwitted by the hero, aided by his protector.

Though otherwise following the first steps of the pattern flawlessly, the story of *Iron Man* does not involve the Belly of the Whale in its direct form. However, following Campbell's observations that this is a symbol of rebirth (Campbell 1973: 90), incomplete reflections of this step can also be seen in the creation of the arc reactor. This invention gives Tony a new extension on life. Furthermore, instead of him entering a symbolic womb, this new life is embedded in his body. As such, instead of accepting rebirth from the outside, he generates it from within himself.

The second stage, initiation, is less rigid in Campbell's pattern, with various parts that may or may not be represented in the myths. The one part of it that Campbell finds to be present in most if not all myths, the Road of Trials (Campbell 1973: 97), can still be seen in *Iron Man*. Given a task that would result in his death if followed to the end, Tony instead chooses to take on the nigh impossible ordeal of escaping from the well-guarded terrorist camp. He builds an armored suit without any prior plans and with sub-par equipment, the impossibility of which is emphasized later in the movie by Obadiah Stane:

Stane: Tony Stark was able to build this in a cave! With a box of scraps!

(*Iron Man*, 1:31:50)

By overcoming his trial, Tony attains the Ultimate Boon, which in this case is the knowledge required to build the Iron Man suit and the power it carries. This is a significant prize, being the basis for his character and the rest of his story. It is also a matter of knowledge rather than material: even though his suit is destroyed in his later escape, he is able to rebuild it after his return, carrying the secret within himself.

When it comes the time for Tony to return to the ordinary world, he is presented with the challenge of escaping. Having outwitted his enemies, they are now unwilling to let him go. This leads to the Magic Flight, in which he fights his way out of the compound, using his newfound knowledge and its results to fight his enemies. He also has to face the sacrifice of Yinsen, who

dies in front of him, reminding him to make the most of his new chance at life. After this loss, Tony escapes from the camp, using fire and explosions to destroy everything in his wake.

The final trial of the hero, Crossing of the Return Threshold, is seen after he escapes. Even after he has made his way back home, he has to reconcile his newfound knowledge and the world he has now returned to. As he announces the end of weapons manufacturing by his company, not wanting them to fall to the wrong hands again, he is met with disbelief. His own friends question his motives and his mental health, and his board of directors tries to have him removed from his position.

Rhodes: What you need is time to get your mind right.

*(Iron Man, 52:05)*

Despite the questioning, he employs his newfound knowledge to destroy the weapons remaining in terrorist hands, as well as to expose the corruption within his company. As such, he shows himself to be a Master of the Two Worlds, able to travel from his ordinary world to that of terror, deceit and weapons in the wrong hands. This is reflected in comments by those around him as the change is already evident, even before his role as the Iron Man is made public:

Stane: Now I realise, well, Tony never really did come home, did he?

*(Iron Man, 1:29:30)*

The experience in the cave, the journey, has indeed changed Tony. While he has returned, he has also taken on another role — that of Iron Man.

In the larger form of the cycle in the movie (Appendix 2), The Call to Adventure comes in the form of Christine Everhart, the reporter addressing Tony after the awards ceremony he failed to attend. She acts as a herald, questioning his methods and morals, thus threatening his way of life by casting doubt on his beliefs. At this point, Tony faces her with disdain and even mockery, pointing out that his father, the founder of the Stark Industries, was widely regarded as a hero for

his involvement in the Manhattan Project. As such, he refuses to accept this side of his world, again showing the Refusal of the Call. Instead of taking her accusations seriously, he prefers to continue the life he is accustomed to, heading off to a weapons demonstration after spending the night with her.

The protective figure offering advice in the larger cycle is twofold. One part of the role falls on James Rhodes. On their way to the weapons presentation in Afghanistan, he tells Tony he is more than he thinks, encouraging him to do better and scolding him for his irresponsibility. Likely due to this, Tony refuses to drive in the same vehicle with him. This decision likely saves Rhodes' life, as none of the soldiers who shared a vehicle with Tony are seen to survive the attack.

The advice is also given by Doctor Yinsen, who makes Tony question his way of thinking. While Rhodes simply encouraged Tony to do better, Yinsen is the one who makes him truly consider his attitudes. Instead of scolding him for his irresponsibility in vague terms, Yinsen forces him to face the consequences of his earlier blindness. This forces Tony to take action. Yinsen's words also call to question his values, suggesting that the life he leads is not everything he needs or wants.

Yinsen: Look, what you just saw — that is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark? Or are you going to do something about it?

*(Iron Man, 21:42)*

Yinsen: So you're a man who has everything and nothing.

*(Iron Man, 26:43)*

The guardian of the threshold, the force preventing Tony from truly embarking on his adventure, are the terrorists who are not planning to let him live, as Tony and Yinsen have both concluded. With Yinsen's help, he overcomes this trial by outwitting them, building the armor under their surveillance. The procedure of closing him into the armor creates tension as he is stuck into a rig

while the armor charges, unable to act as guards come to check on them. This armor, the bulkiest of the prototypes seen during the movie, functions as the Belly of the Whale, marking his symbolical rebirth: this experience, and the battle he overcomes while in it, have irrevocably removed him from the attitudes and circumstances he was trapped in earlier. It also marks his first steps into the world of supernatural experiences, a reality where he is capable of superhuman feats and heroics.

The first step of Tony's Road of Trials after making the transition is surviving the desert he is stranded in. It seems worthy of mention that one of the people rescuing him is Rhodes, the one who offered him his first piece of advice, and now helps him with the following trials. While the main part of the trials, the reconstruction and adjustment of the Iron Man suit, is something Tony has to overcome by himself, Rhodes again comes to his aid later while he is targeted by military planes in foreign airspace. He attempts to call off the pursuit, which later leads to Tony asking for his help before his final confrontation.

The Meeting with the Goddess brings back Christine Everhart, the herald from his earlier call to adventure, the journalist who first questioned him at the beginning of the movie. This time she brings Tony's attention to the fact that his company is still selling weapons. While her desirability is not in question, given her earlier encounter with Tony, it is here contrasted with Pepper who Tony had been dancing with moments earlier. Instead of getting intimate with either woman, Tony finally accepts Christine's criticisms, understanding and agreeing with her viewpoint. This gives him a purpose for his newly redesigned Iron Man suit, while earlier he had only been shown laughing as he took to the sky. With this newfound purpose, he takes on his first mission, destroying the weapons Christine told him about, defeating the terrorists using them.

Woman as the Temptress, on the other hand, takes the form of Pepper, who threatens to quit if Tony insists on continuing with his battles, refusing to help him on his quest. This threat is made especially poignant by the fact that Tony earlier confessed, likely reflecting on Yinsen's comments about how he has nothing due to his lack of family, and Pepper is the only one he can turn to in this matter:

Tony: I don't have anyone but you.  
(Iron Man, 50:02)

Not giving in to her demands, however, Tony instead convinces her of his way of thinking, asking her why she would stand by him for so long only to leave when he has finally found a purpose. Convincing her to aid him, he thus overcomes another trial.

As according to Campbell (1973: 118), the Goddess is present in every woman, Pepper can also be seen as another incarnation of the Goddess. In this view, Tony's trial regarding her is likely in accepting and admitting that he needs her, and ultimately risks his life to protect her.

The last and final confrontation Tony faces is Obadiah Stane. As a mentor figure and a close friend of his father, Stane represents a paternal figure, bringing us to Atonement with the Father. Throughout the movie he appears to be giving Tony advice and support, until it turns out he is not only involved in selling weapons to the terrorist but also the one who paid to have Tony captured and murdered. This comes to a climax when Stane openly betrays Tony, paralyzing him and removing the arc reactor, leaving him to die. Tony struggles to overcome this in order to protect Pepper, whom Stane threatens before taking his leave. It is also with Pepper's help that he finally defeats Stane, as she undoes the safety procedures on the large arc reactor in the Stark Industries facility, causing it to explode and defeat Stane.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold is apparent in the press conference at the end of the movie. Tony has defeated his enemy, destroyed the weapons in wrong hands, and thus overcome the reason he was first called into action by Christine at the beginning of the movie. He is even offered help, the Rescue from Without, in the form of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, who have arranged for an alibi and a cover story to explain the incident as well as an explanation for Stane's demise. Tony seems reluctant to accept this help, and talks to Pepper about being an Iron Man in a manner reminiscent of a Refusal of the Return. He wants to keep things as they are, with himself as Iron Man, but finally takes the

offered cue cards, appearing at the press conference.

As Tony is giving his own statement, following the official explanation offering the Rescue from Without, he is once again questioned by Christine Everhart, the very person who acted as a herald for his Call of Adventure. After this interference, he makes some comments about his heroic capabilities or lack thereof, until finally coming to a decision:

Tony: I am Iron Man.  
(*Iron Man*, 1:52:40)

As such, he has joined the image of Tony Stark, inventor and CEO, with the fantastical, superhuman Iron Man, capable of heroic feats he could never accomplish on his own. By doing this, he has made himself able to freely traverse between the two images, becoming a Master of the Two Worlds and completing the cycle.

#### 4.2.2. The hero's journey in *Iron Man 2*

Where *Iron Man* could be seen to contain two concurrent iterations of Campbell's cycle, *Iron Man 2* has only one readily apparent form of the journey (Appendix 3). In this journey, the travel between the two worlds is less obvious. While in *Iron Man* the terrorist camp in Afghanistan and the Iron Man armor itself could be seen as the separate worlds of their respective iterations, one as a separate physical location and the other marked by the capability for superhuman achievements and battles, the distinction is less clear in the sequel. This could be seen as a result of Tony's decision at the end of *Iron Man*, when he publicly declared his identity and thus joined the two worlds, which according to Campbell frees him from having to pass the trials and guardians to return to the supernatural. While in the first movie he has to face a world where superhuman abilities are possible, in the second he is forced to accept that he is not the only one in possession of them.

In *Iron Man 2*, the first indication that Tony's life is about to change is delivered by a marshal in the form of a subpoena, his new Call to Adventure. In the following senate hearing, he is confronted by Senator Stern and a rival industrialist Justin Hammer, who both claim he is incapable of protecting America by himself and should thus let others access his armor, using evidence of attempted other armors as proof. This is the first time the audience is given any indication of the existence of such technology that has not been developed by Tony or based on his work.

The true Guardian of the First Threshold in the story is Vanko in his confrontation with Tony on a racetrack. He is the first true opponent Tony has to face, and the first to ever employ arc reactor technology without stealing it from Tony. This coincides with the first appearance of the armor since Tony's first appearance in the movie as he employs the mobile form of the armor. Furthermore, unlike at the beginning sequence, we see the armor actually closing around him, invoking the imagery of the Belly of the Whale transition.

Though Tony appears victorious, this event marks the true change in the storyline. Vanko implies that his defeat was deliberate, and his true aim was to damage Tony's image:

Vanko: If you can make God bleed, the people will cease to believe in him.

(*Iron Man 2*, 39:21)

In this view, showing the world that Tony is not unique in his abilities is enough of an achievement for Vanko, as it establishes Tony's vulnerability in the eyes of the public. The effects of this can be seen in a scene soon after this: Pepper and Tony's new personal assistant, Natalie Rushman, are fielding various calls addressing the encounter with Vanko in Monaco. In the background, a woman on TV questions whether Tony is still capable of protecting everyone. This is the first time there are indications of the general opinion turning against Tony. He has arrived in a world where he is not a unique hero, but rather something that invites equally powerful aggression.



After this point, Tony's physical symptoms are starting to get clearer. Instead of merely having discolored veins, he is stumbling and having difficulty speaking. The poisoning later proves to be the greatest trial Tony has to face, as it is slowly killing him, yet without the palladium he would die of the shrapnel inside him. His first actual trial, however, is his battle against Rhodes with both of them wearing versions of the armor. This marks a change, as later interactions reveal Tony knowingly allowed Rhodes to take the armor, indicating that even Tony himself does not think one Iron Man is enough for the world.

The role of the Supernatural Helper for Tony in this cycle is filled by S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives. Their presence is apparent even before the first battle with Vanko in the form of Natalie, but they do not actually interfere until after Tony's battle with Rhodes. At this point, they offer him both advice and an amulet against danger, as Fury not only advises Tony to look for another solution but also offers him the medicine to abate the symptoms while he keeps looking.

Fury's words, describing the arc reactor as an unfinished project and Tony as the only one able to bring it to its conclusion, bring Tony to the stage of the Atonement with the Father. Throughout the movie, he is compared to his father Howard, whose values he rejected in the form of Stane in the first movie. In *Iron Man*, he received help from Pepper to reject the father figure represented by Stane; this time, he utilizes the other possibility Campbell suggests for clearing this trial, trusting his father to be a merciful figure. Despite his apparent conviction that his father did not care for him, Tony nevertheless acquires and studies Howard's old prototype, believing it to hold some kind of a message for him. As he realizes, the prototype represents an element Howard discovered but was unable to reproduce, but which Tony with his superior technology is able to synthesize. Using this new element as a core for his arc reactor, he is able to reverse the effects of the poisoning. Trusting his father despite his doubts thus literally saves his life. It is also notable that this involves Tony admitting that his arc reactor is not perfect, and his father's ideas are superior — the heart of the Iron Man's technology developed further by others.

The discovery of the vibranium core can also be seen to symbolize the step of Apotheosis, releasing divine potential. When Tony first takes it into use, the new core releases a bright glow

that almost takes over the entire screen. It not only stops the poisoning from spreading but also immediately reverses all visible symptoms, causing Tony to shout in apparent pleasure. Given the superior abilities of the new element compared with the old palladium cores, this could also be viewed as a form of the Ultimate Boon, a prize Tony receives through trusting his father. With boundless energy and apparent healing powers, it is reminiscent of various mythical boons, such as the fountain of youth.

Tony still has to overcome various trials, starting with the revelation that Vanko is alive. He then discovers Vanko plans to cause chaos at the Stark Expo, which would ruin his reputation. While he battles Hammer's drones that Vanko has taken over, he again receives aid from S.H.I.E.L.D. in the form of Natalie, who enables Rhodes to come to his help on the field. As such, the end sequence has elements of both the Magic Flight, in which he is chased by the agents of his enemies and overcomes them, and the Rescue from Without, where outside help is necessary for him to escape. The final guardian of the Return Threshold is again Vanko, the very man who marked the change in the way Tony is viewed by the public, and the first one to build an entire suit without relying on Tony's designs. Tony still cannot defeat him alone, and must be aided by Rhodes to overcome the final obstacle. As such, the power of Iron Man is not enough to overcome his rival; instead, two are necessary to overcome the challenge.

With Vanko defeated, Tony could return to his old world, where no comparable technology exists outside his own hands. Instead, he allows Rhodes to leave with the War Machine suit, ensuring that he will not be left as the solitary hero again. As such, Tony has refused to return, preferring the world he has discovered through the events of the movie.

#### 4.2.3. The hero's journey in *Marvel's The Avengers*

While in *Iron Man 2* Tony's revelation was that the world has more than one technological hero, in *Marvel's The Avengers*, he has to enter a world where besides technology, he also finds heroes of various superhuman abilities (Appendix 4). The herald of this new adventure is Agent

Coulson, arriving at the newly finished Stark Tower with files for Tony to look over. Tony tries to refuse before he even hears the message, consistently pretending not to be home. However, overwriting the security protocols, Coulson manages to get in to deliver his message. As Tony again refuses him, Pepper convinces him to look at the files. The information contained in the file, detailing the other members of the Avengers Initiative, offers Tony his first glance at a reality where he is not the only hero. This is particularly apparent as the only visible files are those concerning Thor, Captain America, and the Hulk. Though Hawkeye later joins the group, and Black Widow is involved in bringing in the Hulk and thus connected, only the members with actual superhuman abilities are visible at this first glimpse. Through her encouragement, Pepper fills in the role of the Supernatural Aid, convincing Tony to take the call to adventure.

After receiving the call, Tony is next seen in the first battle against Loki, who serves as the guardian of the First Threshold on this journey. This is the first time Tony has to work with his new team, arriving at the scene just in time to help Captain America, who is lying on the ground with Loki approaching. The trial is quickly over, as getting captured is part of Loki's plan. However, not only does Tony come to the captain's aid but also announces his arrival to the Black Widow, showing a willingness for cooperation though he has always acted alone before. On his first mission, he did not even notify Rhodes that he was going to be inside a military no fly zone. The contrast between his old attitudes and the volunteering of information here is in itself a threshold for him to cross.

The Belly of the Whale takes the form of a plane as they transport Loki back to the helicarrier. While this may not seem remarkable, this is the only time in the movie Tony is seen to fly without the aid of his suit, even as they later head to battle. Tony's suit would clearly be capable of the flight, as he was last seen in New York. The symbolism of the womb-like nature of this stage can thus be seen in the scene as Tony has his first proper interaction with another Avenger aside from Black Widow, speaking with Captain America in the small, dark, enclosed space as they travel toward their destination.

As is usual of the hero's journey, the actual trials are only beginning. They begin as Tony and

Captain have to face Thor, who wishes to make his brother return to Asgard. When this happens, Tony jumps out of the plane on his own, likely as he is used to solitary action. However, it takes both Tony and Steve to stop Thor and convince him of the necessity of capturing Loki.

All the trials of this movie force Tony to work with others. In the confrontation with Thor, the result is found by talking, not fighting. When Loki's agents attack the helicarrier, Tony has to trust Steve, who moments before was threatening to get into a physical fight with him, to support him while he gets one of the turbines working again, when any failure on Steve's part could result in his death. His approach to confronting Loki involves discussion rather than brute force, and his talk of vengeance appears to be motivated mainly by the loss of Agent Coulson, indicating that he had more of an attachment to the agent than he previously indicated. Used to working alone and not relying on anyone, Tony has to have faith in his team and rely on his social skills rather than brute force.

There is a certain parallel between *Avengers* and the first *Iron Man* movie. In *Iron Man*, Christine Everhart acted both as the herald of the adventure and later as Tony's motivation to leave on his first mission against the terrorists. In *Marvel's The Avengers*, the same role is filled by Agent Coulson. He acts as a herald not only for Tony but also for several of the others: he is the one who calls Black Widow and sends her to retrieve the Hulk, as well as the one who brings the Captain to the helicarrier. His death is subsequently the event that convinces them to work as a team. Its significance as motivation to Tony in particular is clear in his interaction with Loki. Tony lists the people Loki has angered, first while they are both in the Stark Tower, finishing when he reaches Loki again in his new armor:

Tony: Your brother, the demigod, a super soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend. A man with breathtaking anger-management issues, a couple of master assassins, and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them.

(*Avengers*, 1:35:45)

Tony: And there's one other person you pissed off. His name was Phil.

(*Avengers*, 1:37:41)

Given the parallel with Thor's two-part description, it can be assumed that the "living legend" is another descriptor for Captain America. The intonation appears to support this interpretation. Following this conclusion, it can be noted that Tony never mentions himself. This could be argued to indicate that he is, in essence, setting his desire to avenge Coulson's death before any anger he might be feeling over matters such as Loki taking over his tower to summon the alien army. Therefore, he is fighting for the sake of others, rather than for selfish reasons.

This pronouncement also marks the first time during the movie when he uses his weapons in aggression. In his clash with Thor, Tony initially tackles him, not using his repulsors until he has to defend himself from Thor. Even during the attack on the helicarrier, his only moment of combat is tackling an attacker about to shoot the Captain. This is notable, as in the earlier movies Tony has demonstrated he is not averse to using even lethal force when he considers the opponent deserving of it. Thus, like Catherine, Coulson not only heralds the beginning of the adventure but also marks its turning point into serious battle.

Tony's last trial on this journey is that of handling the incoming nuclear missile. He is informed of the danger by Fury, who reflects the situation in *Iron Man* with Stane. Like Stane, Fury is an authority figure who knew Tony's father well, and then betrayed Tony's trust by seeking to create and use new kinds of weapons in secret. Therefore, Tony's dilemma can be seen as another variation of Atonement with the Father, particularly as Fury's advice and his connection to Howard are the reason Tony survived his palladium poisoning. Trusting Fury's word that the missile would destroy the city, he flies the missile into the wormhole, a heroic gesture of self-sacrifice as he knows he might not return. Passing through into the space, he witnesses the missile detonating the alien spaceship before closing his eyes and falling back, his position vaguely resembling a crucifixion. The imagery combined with his apparent sacrifice — willing to give his own life to save everyone else — along with literally reaching another world could be seen as a form of Apotheosis as he overcomes his fears, letting go of all his bonds including the chance to speak to his lover one last time, becoming a protective force in his own right.

After he barely passes the closing portal and is rescued from falling, Tony suggests that the entire team go out to eat, indicating his changed attitudes about working with others. After sending Loki back to Asgard, the Avengers all go their separate ways, and it appears Tony has returned to his old life as a solitary hero. However, a scene at the very end reveals him making plans for renovations to the Stark Tower that include quarters for his team mates, even renaming the building "Avengers Tower" in the plans. This indicates that, instead of returning, Tony has done what he did at the end of *Iron Man*: finding a way to join the two worlds together, he has once again reached the status of a Master of the Two Worlds.

#### 4.2.4. Summary: Tony's journey

From these examples, we can see that Campbell's pattern can be applied to all three movies. It is the clearest and most concrete in *Iron Man*, but its shape can certainly be seen in *Iron Man 2* and *Marvel's The Avengers* as well. In each movie, Tony has to change his view of the world around him. In the first movie, this can quite literally be seen as entering the world of the supernatural as he discovers for the first time the true potential of his inventions and has to accept a world where heroes are a reality. In the second movie, this view is expanded to include other people exploiting advanced technology, while *Avengers* again brings Tony into a whole new world of monsters, gods, and aliens.

Each time, he has a chance to bring back the old world. In the first movie, he is provided with an alibi and a cover story to distance himself from the Iron Man, having destroyed the weapons and defeated the one responsible for both arming the terrorists and attempting to kill him. Instead, he chooses to identify himself as Iron Man, irrevocably tying himself to the image. In the second movie, instead of demanding Rhodes to return his suit or revoking his access to it, he allows his friend to leave with only a token protest and soon stands right beside him to receive medals. Finally, in *Avengers*, Tony is given the perfect chance to forget the team as everyone leaves. Rather than do this, he is last seen actively working on plans to bring the rest of the Avengers back not only into his life but also his home. He therefore consistently either brings the two

worlds together or refuses to return to the past.

Given the resemblance of the pattern, as well as the extension of the superhuman domain into the ordinary world, with each adventure, it can be stated that Tony Stark's adventures follow Campbell's pattern for mythical journeys rather faithfully. He leaves his world in favor of something more mysterious and powerful, overcomes difficult trials, and returns with incredible boons. Thus, at least according to Campbell's observations, he fits the role of a mythical hero.

### 4.3. The modern Hero

Having addressed Tony Stark in the context of a mythical hero, in the following section I aim to take a more contemporary look at his heroism. While I have taken some indications of what defines a modern hero from the articles presented in the Theoretical background, I have also given careful consideration to the indications of what is viewed as heroic in the world of the movies themselves, as they are all set in a modern day setting and can thus be expected to reflect contemporary values.

Furthermore, I have brought up certain themes that appear central to the character arc in each movie, even where their direct link to heroism may be limited. As the movies present the change of the character from a playboy into a hero, I have found it reasonable to assume that recurring themes of characterization or discussion would ultimately be relevant to the theme of heroism, especially in so far as they tie to changes in Tony and his attitudes.

#### 4.3.1. The modern hero in *Iron Man*

Our first view of Tony Stark in *Iron Man* is sitting in a military vehicle driving through desert, holding a drink. This simple aspect of his character, enjoying an alcoholic drink in an apparently unsuitable environment, sets up certain expectations about his habits and priorities. At the same

time, the soldiers act openly admiring toward him; one of them comments that her colleagues are too intimidated to speak, while another asks to take a picture with him. They also question him about rumors concerning his love affairs, which he casually confirms. Tony takes this admiration without much of a visible reaction, apparently used to such attitudes.

The initial view of the character is exemplified in the awards ceremony at the beginning of *Iron Man*. The narration emphasizes his genius and patriotism, while the magazine covers that accompany it consistently present him surrounded by technology and weapons, the headline "Tony Stark Wants to Save the World" fading into the stars and stripes before revealing Tony surrounded by planes, the narration describing his efforts in "ensuring freedom and protecting America". Here, Tony is clearly set up as an admirable figure concerned with protecting and defending his country through the creation of offensive weapons technology.

While the narration and the speech praise him for his great achievements, what the audience sees is his conspicuous absence. The explanation given for this behavior, being busy with work, is sharply contrasted with the immediate cut to a casino where he is playing, not even aware that the awards ceremony has already taken place. When scolded by his friend James Rhodes for failing to uphold his promise to accept the award, Tony gives assurances about how sorry he is. Shortly after this, however, he is seen giving the award away to a passer-by without as much as another glance. He promises Rhodes not to be late for their meeting the following morning, failing to uphold this later as he arrives at the airport several hours late.

Upon leaving the casino, he is confronted by Christine Everhart, a journalist criticizing his attitudes and methods. This is when we are first confronted with the idea of what constitutes a hero in the world of the story. Christine accuses him of war profiteering, and asks him his opinion about his nickname "Merchant of Death", which he calls "not bad". He also brings up his father and the approval he gained in his time by first involving the Stark family in the weapons industry:

Tony: My father helped defeat the Nazis. He worked on the Manhattan Project. A lot of



people, including your professors at Brown, would call that being a hero.

*(Iron Man, 08:40)*

Then, after presenting his father as an example of an admirable figure, he goes on to point out that his company has also made medical and biological advancements thanks to military funding. This is suggestive of his motives, that the grandiose pronouncement of saving the world may actually have some basis in truth.

Despite her sharp comments and his dismissal of them, they ultimately spend the night together, implying that even someone highly critical of his ethics and methods is not immune to his charm. In the morning, Tony is nowhere to be found, preferring to work in his garage while his personal assistant Pepper Potts shows the journalist out. Pepper questions Tony about being late for his plane and reminds him about his various responsibilities and commitments, a conversation during which it is revealed he has forgotten her birthday, a behavior that appears to be common as she has already purchased a gift for herself in his stead. He is then three hours late for his meeting with Rhodes, who scolds him for the delay, receiving only excuses in return.

On the plane across the Atlantic, Tony convinces the initially reluctant Rhodes to drink while stewardesses in revealing uniforms dance around a pole, despite his friend's protests that they should be working. The conversation Tony and Rhodes have in the plane shortly before this, however, gives an indication of not only how Rhodes views him but also how Tony views himself:

Rhodes: You don't respect yourself, so I know you don't respect me.

Tony: I respect you.

*(Iron Man, 13:29)*

It should be noted here that Tony never disagrees with Rhodes' comment about his lack of self-respect. The Tony Stark we see before his capture in Afghanistan is someone admired by people, apparently uncaring about how he is viewed by others, and willing to let matters such as

gambling, drinking and women take precedence over his duties. He gives little consideration to the feelings of others, shirking his responsibilities and forgetting social commitments. However, when confronted about this behavior, he only denies his lack of concern for his friends, not for himself. At the beginning of his story, it seems the one who holds the least admiration for Tony Stark is the man himself.

All this is turned around when Tony gets captured by terrorists. He is held captive in a cave, given worn-out clothes to wear, and tortured for his lack of cooperation. In stark contrast to the earlier admiration about the protection he offers through his technology, the terrorists call him "the most famous mass murderer in the history of America" (*Iron Man*, 19:11). Here he also meets Doctor Ho Yinsen, who questions his lifestyle and attitudes. Yinsen is the one to suggest that Tony, despite his wealth and fame, essentially has nothing because he does not have a family.

In the story, Yinsen is undeniably a heroic figure. While it could be argued that he saves Tony's life and works as his interpreter only to ensure his own continued survival, his actions at the climax of Tony's escape suggest otherwise. Earlier during their captivity, Yinsen tells Tony that he has family and plans to see them when he leaves the terrorist camp. When they require more time for Tony's prototype suit to be ready, he grabs a gun and rushes off, firing blindly to slow down the guards. When Tony finds him, demanding that they both escape, Yinsen reveals that his family is already dead and he never planned to leave, preferring to join them. As such we see that his entire encouragement of and cooperation with Tony was done with the sole purpose of helping Tony escape. Even when faced with threat of torture, he never betrayed the plan, and chose to face almost certain death against a camp full of enemies in order to buy Tony a little more time. Furthermore, it is later revealed that his hometown, Gulmira, was destroyed by the terrorists wielding Stark Industries weapons. Instead of blaming him for his part in this, Yinsen instead chooses to sacrifice himself to enable Tony to leave, in a selfless choice that reflects what Kemppainen and Peltonen (2010: 11) consider to be the true form of modern heroism. He never asks for revenge or even lets Tony know about the involvement of his weapons in the destruction of Gulmira; all he wants is for Tony to live.

Yinsen: Don't waste it. Don't waste your life.

*(Iron Man, 36:53)*

After he makes his escape and returns home, Tony has two requests: cheeseburgers and a press conference. As the media await his comments, he mentions wanting to question his deceased father about the company and its direction, contrasting the way he earlier used his father and his supposed heroism as a defense against criticism. He then addresses his own motivations for creating weapons, and how his views have been changed by his ordeal:

Tony: I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I had become part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability.

*(Iron Man, 43:52)*

These words indicate that his motivations for creating weapons are in fact unselfish in so far as he does believe he was acting in America's best interests. This statement, as well as the announcement that he is shutting down the weapons manufacturing of Stark Industries, mark a change of character for Tony. At the beginning of the movie, he showed very little concern for either social or professional responsibilities, responding with sarcasm and disdain when criticized, and showing little reaction to praise and accolades despite being clearly aware of how he is viewed, given how easily he responds to Christine's comments — only to claim to have practiced beforehand. This kind of detachment is missing when he faces the press conference and talks about his doubts and questions, showing vulnerability as he not only concedes points made by his critics but also admits to being wrong and needing to change. His discussion afterward, as he discusses the inevitable stock drop with Stane, makes it clear that he is well aware of the consequences this action will have on the public perception of him.

While the criticism against his decision gets more intense, he promises Stane to lay low. After creating a new arc reactor and giving the initial one to Pepper for disposal, he talks to Rhodes,

hoping to interest him in his new project. However, when Rhodes hears Tony is not going to be developing weapons for the military any more, he refuses to get involved, demanding Tony to "get his mind right". After the rejection, Tony goes home, starting work on a new version of the Iron Man armor. While discussing security with JARVIS, his artificial intelligence system, he makes the following statement about his intentions for the Iron Man:

Tony: I don't want this winding up in the wrong hands. Maybe in mine, it can actually do some good.

*(Iron Man, 52:49)*

This echoes his earlier conversation with Rhodes. Rejected by his friend, he does not know who to trust; however, even when faced by disapproval, he refuses to let the military or similar parties get involved with his project. Having seen his weapons in terrorist hands, even his friend's approval is less important than keeping the technology from ending up in malicious hands.

Stane arrives to inform Tony that the board of directors is filing an injunction, claiming that Tony is suffering from post-traumatic stress. Even with this, Tony refuses to either let Stane analyze his arc reactor or see what he is currently working on. As he voluntarily offered to involve Rhodes in the project, yet turns Stane down even when asked about his new developments, it can be seen that the number of people he trusts with his secrets is very limited.

After a test flight, Tony decides to solve the problem of icing in high altitudes by switching to a gold-titanium alloy as a material. While working on the armor, he hears on the news about a charity event hosted by himself. As this is called the third such event, it is apparent Tony is involved in charity work, though the fact that he was not expected to attend suggests that this is largely organized by others. Furthermore, the party is to benefit the Firefighters' Family Fund, demonstrating interest in and respect for a traditional "heroic" vocation. Unlike the medicinal applications he mentioned to Christine earlier in the movie, this also has nothing to do with the military, suggesting that at least the choice of the target of charity reflects his own values, adding no apparent benefit for business.

At the party, Tony is confronted by Christine. As she shows him evidence of Stark weapons still ending up in terrorist hands, mentioning Gulmira in particular, he immediately confronts Stane. Christine's presence in the background during the scene proves that he did not wait to confront his mentor. Stane calls him naive, with Tony questioning their business practices. As Stane reveals he was the one to file an injunction against Tony, claiming it was to protect him, Tony is left standing staring after him.

Back in his workshop, Tony is shown working on the final adjustments with his suit while watching news from Gulmira. As the reporter in the news questions who will be able to help the refugees in the area, Tony looks at his reflection in a glass wall, only to shatter the glass moments later. Though he is likely testing the repulsor systems he just finished adjusting, the choice of target and unnecessary destruction suggests aggression aimed not only at the terrorists but also at himself for not knowing about the shipments until Christine confronted him — for being naive, as Stane said.

Tony flies overseas just in time to intercept terrorists attacking a village, killing civilians. After killing the rest of the terrorists, he captures their leader and gives him over to the villagers. This marks him as seeking vengeance rather than strictly justice. Rather than taking the terrorist leader to court to answer for his crimes, or even to the authorities, he lets the man's fate be decided by the people he was trying to kill mere moments earlier. Killing enemy combatants during battle is not outside the norm, but this action after he already had control of the situation suggests ruthlessness in Tony's character. He is prepared to confront and distance himself from even those closest to him if he suspects their motivations are not pure, as seen in his conversation with Rhodes, while those he considers immoral are undeserving of mercy. There is also an element of personal vengeance present, as the leader is the same man who had Tony tortured during his captivity.

After he has destroyed all the weapons his systems can find and defeated those using them, Tony becomes the target of two American planes. He only employs evasive maneuvers, unwilling to

use his weapons despite having earlier demonstrated the capability to easily destroy a tank. When a collision destroys one of the planes and the pilot's chute fails to deploy, Tony dives after him despite the other pilot still targeting him, refusing to use evasion even as his AI recommends it to avoid the incoming attack, leaving himself open in order to employ the pilot's chute. This contrasts with his earlier ruthlessness, as he is willing to risk his life to help those he does not view as enemies, even when they are taking hostile action against him.

After his return, Tony asks Pepper to get certain files from Stark Industries to help him figure out his next target. Pepper initially refuses, unwilling to help Tony in what she sees as a suicide mission, even threatening to quit rather than aid him. Tony pleads with her, asking her why she would stand by him for so long only to abandon him when he is trying to undo the harm he has caused. He then establishes his motivation for his actions:

Tony: I shouldn't be alive, unless it was for a reason. I'm not crazy, Pepper. I just finally know what I have to do. And I know in my heart that it's right.

*(Iron Man, 1:26:29)*

Here, he echoes Yinsen's words back in the cave. Not wanting to waste his life or leave the weapons as his only legacy, Tony is trying to undo the harm he has done by designing the weapons technology. He feels he has found his purpose, that of protecting people. Faced with this, Pepper ultimately agrees to help him, only to remind Tony she does not have anyone else, either.

While at the Stark Industries, Pepper is confronted by Stane, who talks to him about Tony, claiming that a part of Tony was "left behind" during his captivity. This suggests that he views the new Tony and his views as something less than his former attitudes. Stane then goes to Tony's house, paralyzing him and taking out his arc reactor. Talking to the unresponsive Tony, he brings up the subject of Howard Stark:

Stane: Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now, what kind of world would it

be today if he was as selfish as you?

*(Iron Man, 1:33:24)*

This reflects Tony's comment to Christine about how his father was considered a hero for his involvement in the Manhattan Project. Here, stated by the person responsible for both the arms dealing and Tony's kidnapping and attempted murder, it contrasts with Tony's new goal of keeping his technology out of the wrong hands. At his time, Howard may have been considered a hero; now, his views are echoed by the man willing not only to have his protégé killed to regain control of his company but also threatening to kill Pepper for discovering his plans. At this threat, Tony's eyes widen, the first true reaction he has shown to Stane's words.

Yinsen originally stated that the arc reactor is keeping Tony from dying of the shrapnel around his heart, and later, an error on Pepper's part demonstrated that tampering with it leads Tony to cardiac arrest. Given these facts, Stane effectively leaves Tony for dead as he leaves with the reactor. Nevertheless, Tony is next seen stumbling and crawling toward his workshop, clearly in pain, trying to reach the older version of the arc reactor that Pepper gave him as a trophy, labeled "Proof that Tony Stark has a heart". Help from his robot allows him to reach it, surviving.

Helped by Rhodes who arrives to see how he is, Tony puts on his armor, hoping to protect Pepper from Stane. He reaches them just as Stane is trying to shoot her, turning his attention to himself. During the ensuing battle, Tony repeatedly ignores his AI's warnings of dropping power levels, even as he leaves himself at the risk of falling from a high altitude. He also tries to convince Stane to avoid civilian casualties, unwilling to involve innocents, while Stane does not hesitate to use civilian cars as weapons, again reflecting their opposing attitudes.

The final confrontation between the two happens on the roof of the Stark Industries facility, the place where Stane built his own version of the armor. When Tony is unable to clear the roof before Pepper is able to use the larger arc reactor to destroy Stane, Tony orders her to do it nevertheless, putting himself at risk rather than let Stane win. Pepper complies despite pointing out that Tony himself might die in the process. As Stane falls down into the facility, he triggers

an explosion that destroys the old arc reactor, which powered the facility. Developed by Howard and powering the manufacturing of weapons, the destruction of the large arc reactor can be seen as a symbol of change: Stane, wishing to use Tony's invention for destruction, perishes, while the only surviving reactor is the small version Tony developed to escape, unwilling to use it for anything but protecting people.

The movie ends at the press conference where Tony is supposed to give his cover story, that of the armor, called Iron Man by the media, being a bodyguard. This is likely a reference to the old comic books, in which Iron Man was supposedly Tony Stark's personal bodyguard before Tony revealed his identity (Marvel.com). However, as the first public explanation for the armor, it also establishes the public image of Iron Man as a protecting figure.

At the press conference Christine confronts Tony again, questioning Tony's statement. Tony gets defensive, pointing out it is unreasonable to claim he is "some kind of a superhero", which Christine responds to by noting she never suggested that directly. Tony says that such a statement would be "outlandish and fantastic", and sighs, which makes Christine appear surprised. Tony then adds:

Tony: I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public.

*(Iron Man, 1:52:10)*

At this point, Rhodes interrupts him. This echoes their conversation on the plane to Afghanistan near the beginning of the movie, where Tony never disagreed with Rhodes' statement about his lack of self-respect. This time, however, Rhodes is the one who ends Tony's self-deprecation, rather than being the one to inspire it. While this may merely be a concern for public appearances, it could also be seen as a reflection of Rhodes' changing view of Tony and his actions during the movie. It should be noted that since Tony's return from Afghanistan, he is never seen gambling, drinking alcohol, or flirting with a woman other than Pepper. Even as he went to get Pepper and himself drinks at the party, he was interrupted by Christine before he had the chance



to receive them. He has also not been shown missing any appointments, rather appearing at the party even though he was not expected to do so. As such, all the signs of his questionable behavior before his capture have disappeared, replaced by his new values and priorities.

After Rhodes' interruption, Tony hesitates before abandoning the cover story and revealing himself to be Iron Man. This statement, following closely his self-deprecating comments, appears to show his changing view of himself: while he may have made mistakes, he is now working to make up for them, and is thus deserving of being called a hero — not the kind of hero his father was, using destruction and weapons to inspire fear, but one who protects those deserving of his aid.

#### 4.3.2. The modern hero in *Iron Man 2*

Even before we first see Tony in person in *Iron Man 2*, we are offered glimpses at his achievements through the newspaper clippings pinned to the walls of Ivan Vanko, one of the movie's antagonists. The first ones visible are magazine covers familiar from the award ceremony at the beginning of *Iron Man*, along with headlines about Tony's rescue from Afghanistan and the revelation of him as Iron Man. These are then joined by indications of his newfound role, with headlines such as "Mom of 3 pulled out of fire" (*Iron Man 2*, 03:56) and "Iron Man stabilizes East-West Relations" (*Iron Man 2*, 04:19). This establishes his new image as a protective figure.

The first time Tony himself appears, he is landing at a conference center in his armor to give the opening speech for Stark Expo. With dancing women and the US flag in the background, he is cheered by the audience. After making remarks about the peace he has achieved, Tony then voices for the first time one of the main themes of the movie:

Tony: It's not even about us. It's about legacy.

(*Iron Man 2*, 07:55)

Following this pronouncement, he calls for a video recording of his father's welcome to the initial Stark Expo. While the audience watches Howard talking about how technology can help achieve peace, Tony is shown in the backstage testing his blood toxicity levels. He then makes his way out, autographing pictures and talking to people. We also see the first piece of Iron Man merchandise in the movie's universe, a replica helmet worn by a child. This and the portraits Tony signs indicate his role as an admired figure in the form of Iron Man.

After receiving a subpoena from a female marshal he tries to flirt with, Tony appears before the Senate Armed Services Committee to defend his decision not to give the armor over to the authorities. Tony claims that instead of a weapon, it is a high quality prosthesis. When the senator insists that Iron Man should be given to the people of the United States, Tony states that he and the armor are one, likening the demand to indentured servitude or even prostitution. This attitude follows his decision in *Iron Man* not to let his technology fall into the wrong hands or be used for offensive purposes.

As the senator then calls on Justin Hammer, the current main weapons contractor, likely after the end of weapons manufacturing by Stark Industries, Tony questions his expertise. Hammer brings up Howard Stark and his contributions to the military industry, contrasting his works with Tony's current views. He then points out that Tony cannot foresee all possible threats, and thus should not ask them to trust him to keep them safe. The next one to be called to testify is Rhodes, who despite his protests is only called to read a single paragraph that presents the Iron Man as a threat. As they next present pictures of experimental armors from around the world, Tony takes over the screen to show the failures of the experiments, including one by Justin Hammer. He then goes on to describe himself as a nuclear deterrent that is keeping America safe and states, to the applauding audience:

Tony: I have successfully privatised world peace.

(*Iron Man 2*, 16:34)

The reaction of the audience both at the Stark Expo and the senate hearing makes it apparent that

while certain people disagree with his decision to keep the technology to himself, most people do view Tony and Iron Man as heroic figures worthy of admiration.

It is revealed that the blood toxicity levels are due to Tony having acquired palladium poisoning from the arc reactor cores. Before he can comment on this, however, Pepper arrives, criticizing him for his recent decisions. Tony finally interrupts her to tell her that he is appointing her as CEO of Stark Industries, stating that he has been thinking about the matter of a successor for a while. This again ties to the theme of legacy in the movie, becoming even clearer as he repeatedly speaks of a successor instead of a replacement, indicating that he has no plans to take the position back at a later date. This turns from a mere promise into reality as he soon signs off the company to her.

Tony and Pepper head over to Monaco, where they run into Justin Hammer and Christine Everhart. After testing his blood toxicity and seeing the rising levels, Tony decides to drive his own car in the race. Though this is not directly connected to Christine, heading to the race track after meeting her at a restaurant echoes the way Tony left the charity event in *Iron Man* after talking with her to fly overseas. The rashness of this decision is evident in Pepper's surprise at the situation, with Natalie confirming their lack of prior plans. Here, Tony takes on the role of a sports celebrity, another kind of a modern ideal figure.

On the race track Tony is confronted by Ivan Vanko, who interrupts the race with his arc reactor powered whips, causing several cars to crash and the audience to panic. At first Tony merely evades his attacks. However, when Pepper and Happy arrive in a car and Vanko does not appear to be easily subdued, he puts on a new version of his suit. The first thing he does is move the car out of the way. At first, he appears to be rendered helpless by Vanko's whips wrapped around him, getting thrown around. However, as Vanko tosses him at Pepper and Happy's car, Tony forces his way closer to Vanko, defeating him.

When Tony confronts Vanko about his methods, Vanko turns the discussion to Tony's family:

Vanko: You come from a family of thieves and butchers. And now, like all guilty men, you try to rewrite your own history.

*(Iron Man 2, 38:40)*

Vanko thus not only turns the discussion to Howard but also Tony's own acts of penance and again the themes of legacy. He then implies his motivation was to show Tony's vulnerability rather than killing him, as he is aware of Tony's poisoning. This ties to the idea of heroes as figures of admiration; rather than merely kill Tony, Vanko wants to bring him down.

As Tony and Pepper return home, the public opinion is starting to shift. We see here the importance of Tony's role as a defender: the question is not about whether his decisions are ill-advised or not, but rather whether he is still capable of protecting everyone. People's view of him as a hero thus appears to be diminishing, based on his abilities to keep them safe.

This is followed by the first scene in which Tony shows actual weakness around others. Rhodes interrupts him as he is looking up information on Vanko, and Tony visibly stumbles and leans on Rhodes to make his way to his desk, also allowing him to see the depleted palladium core and the symptoms of the poisoning.

When Tony is shown wearing his armor in an apparently drunken state at his birthday party, this appears to be a highly risky situation. He crashes to the floor on one occasion, acting irresponsibly enough that Pepper calls him out of control, trying to finish the party. After this the danger escalates as Tony shoots objects with his repulsors right above the audience's heads. However, his aim is perfect, and as Rhodes challenges him to a fight, he keeps his balance and stays in control of his actions even when Rhodes hits him, despite earlier appearing to have trouble with just walking. Due to this it could be argued that some of his drunkenness was merely an act designed to provoke a fight. This would be in line with his earlier characterization, where far from endangering others, he consistently risks himself to keep bystanders away from harm's way. This appears to be supported by the revelation that Tony arranged for Rhodes to have access to the suit, essentially allowing him to steal it. He even taunts Rhodes by asking if he is worthy of

wearing the suit. In light of these facts, the birthday party, which on the surface seems like a highly irresponsible decision, appears to rather be an elaborate scheme to provoke Rhodes into acquiring the suit, allowing the character of Iron Man to persist even if Tony himself dies of the poisoning.

Tony's discussion with Nick Fury the following morning again brings up the theme of legacy, as Fury mentions Howard Stark had trusted Tony to bring his work with the arc reactor to its conclusion. Tony questions this, not believing his distant father would have given him such a responsibility. However, with the help of old records and a model city left behind by Howard, he is able to solve the problem of his arc reactor's poisonous core. Thus Howard, who Tony claims never showed him any affection, indirectly saves his son's life. This ties back to the idea of legacy and inheritance present throughout the movie, suggesting that Tony is not only tied to his father in the perception of people who knew Howard but also that his father is an actual part of Tony's person. However, even as Howard in his video calls Tony his greatest creation, the key to deciphering his message and making use of the information is Tony's intellect and his abilities, affirming Howard's statement that Tony would be the only one capable of finishing his work. Thus, while the achievement is in his rediscovery of the element, it is only made possible by Tony's personal characteristics.

As Tony discovers Vanko's plan, his first concern is getting the audience out of harm's way, flying away to draw them after him. He is also shown to save a child targeted by a drone because of his helmet and repulsor toy replicas, an echo of the beginning of the movie. While facing Vanko, Tony convinces Rhodes to combine their attack by asking if he wants to be a hero and become his sidekick, indicating that he views himself as one. Even after Vanko's defeat, his main concern is not escaping the explosions himself, but making sure Pepper is all right.

At the end of the movie, we are given the most direct assessment of Tony's abilities as a hero so far as Nick Fury informs him about their opinion on his suitability for the Avengers Initiative. The final report considers Iron Man acceptable, while Tony Stark's involvement is not recommended. This highlights the duality of Tony's character, where his public persona is

admired and respected, while in his personal life he is self-destructive and has various qualities unfitting for a hero. Nevertheless, as the two are essentially one and the same, at the end of the movie Tony is presented with a medal, showing a peace sign in response to a photographer — clearly indicating his goal throughout the story.

#### 4.3.3. The modern hero in *Marvel's the Avengers*

Our first look at Iron Man in the *Avengers* is an underwater scene, appearing to work on some kind of repairs. When he resurfaces and starts a conversation with Pepper, it is revealed he has actually removed the Stark Tower from the electric grid, anticipating their move to clean energy as an example, utilizing new arc reactor technology. This establishes from his first appearance how far he has removed the company from its roots of weapons manufacturing, indicating that the change in attitudes has persisted despite the protests of the board of directors in the first movie and the public outcry in the second. The conversation and the following scene also show that, true to his word from the end of *Iron Man 2*, Tony has managed to stand by Pepper during the time period between the two movies, and they appear to still be a couple, even as it has been long enough since the events of *Iron Man 2* that they have both designed and constructed the Stark Tower. This is in direct contrast with his earlier manner of numerous sex partners and lack of attachments.

When Agent Coulson arrives, Pepper brings up the matter of the Avengers Initiative, which leads to the first comment in the movie about Tony's suitability for a hero. Tony not only mentions that he was not accepted for the initiative but also describes why this was:

Tony: Apparently I'm volatile, self-obsessed, don't play well with others.  
(*Avengers*, 24:50)

In response to this, Coulson states that personalities do not matter anymore. Tony exhibits his limited social attachments by questioning how Pepper knows Coulson's first name, apparently

surprised by the knowledge. Pepper's familiarity with Coulson and her easy interaction with him make it apparent he has at least been in contact with her, which makes Tony's ignorance on the matter more poignant. Though he is still close to Pepper, it is evident he has few other attachments.

When Loki is found in Germany, Tony arrives just in time to stop him from attacking Captain America while the Captain has been knocked down to the ground. As usual, he makes a flashy appearance: in a manner reminiscent of the opening of the Stark Expo in *Iron Man 2*, he takes over the public announcement system of Black Widow's plane, playing music to accompany his arrival. This indicates his role as a public figure, someone who is used to attention and even seeks it out.

When Thor takes the captured Loki, Tony jumps after them without hesitation, stating that this is necessary for them to capture the Tesseract. While he fights with Thor, however, ultimately the situation is resolved through talking as they convince Thor to let them take Loki to the helicarrier. Once there, we see Tony in civilian clothes, talking with Agent Coulson about the lover he heard Coulson and Pepper talking about, offering to help him see her. Tony then joins the conversation about the technological details of Loki's plan while mixing in idle chatter, distracting everyone from the fact he plants a small device on one of the computers. When the others question his expertise, he simply explains he has familiarized himself with the offered material. This is in clear contrast with Tony before Iron Man, preferring drinking and partying to going over even the smallest details of his next commitment.

Though he claimed to have been found too antisocial for the team, and indeed displays attachment to very few people, Tony's treatment of Dr. Banner contrasts with that of the rest of the team. The others avoid bringing up the Hulk. For example, even when Banner asks the Captain if he has heard about anything but his research abilities, Captain claims nothing else matters. Tony, on the other hand, broaches the subject immediately after their initial greeting:

Tony: And I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green

rage-monster.

*(Avengers, 51:21)*

The rest of Tony's behavior around Dr. Banner is as insensitive as this comment. Not content with merely talking, he actually uses an electrified stick to prod Banner, knowing that anger and stress run a risk of turning him into the Hulk. At the same time, though, he casually offers Banner access to the Stark Industries research and development facilities, acting as though the risk is trivial. The Captain, seeing this, accuses Tony of threatening the safety of everyone on the ship, which contradicts his earlier statement that Banner's other characteristics are of no consequence to him. Contrasted with this, Tony's careless treatment takes the form of trust and acceptance, while it seems apparent the others avoid the subject out of fear more than respect.

As the conversation turns to Fury's motivations and secrets, Tony makes an offhand comment about being the only name in green energy at the moment, further confirming the way he has distanced himself from weapons. Though Captain openly disapproves of Tony's methods of breaking into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files, claiming that they should follow orders, shortly after heading out of the laboratory he breaks into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s archives, proving that Tony's suspicions affected him. They then confront the Director together with Banner as they both get their respective pieces of evidence, the conversation soon devolving into an argument between everyone present.

This argument leads into perhaps the most direct discussion about the nature of heroism in the movie. As the Captain and Tony start arguing, Captain asks what Tony would be without his armor. However, Tony's answer does not satisfy him:

Tony: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

Steve: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.

*(Avengers, 1:05:16)*

He goes on to claim that Tony only ever fights for himself, and would never sacrifice himself for



the sake of another. Because of this, he argues, Tony should stop "pretending to be a hero". This makes it clear that Steve's view of a hero matches that presented in Kemppainen and Peltonen's article (2010: 35), one who sacrifices themselves for the sake of others. Tony responds by criticizing Captain's origin as the result of an experiment. This seems almost hypocritical, as Tony's own abilities are dependent on technology, and his father actually had a big part in granting the Captain his powers (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). However, this can be explained if one looks at their personal achievements; Tony designed and built all his own equipment, while Captain's powers were granted through other people's experiments. This suggests that Tony's own view of a hero is not tied solely to the person's abilities but rather their own achievements and efforts, a view that well reflects Tony's own path into becoming Iron Man.

When the fight is broken by an attack on the helicarrier, though, Tony and the Captain are immediately ready to cooperate. Focusing on getting one of the turbines to spin, Tony has to trust the Captain to pull a certain lever at the right time to save him from getting crushed. Despite the fact that moments earlier they were both threatening physical violence against each other, he shares his plan with no hesitation, trusting the Captain with his life. This willingness to rely on a virtual stranger for his survival continues the theme already established in his treatment of Banner: despite his rash words and actions, Tony trusts his proposed team immensely, even those he has only met moments before.

After the battle Director Fury informs them that Agent Coulson is dead. He appeals to them by presenting Coulson's Captain America trading cards, now stained with blood, and stating that Coulson died believing in heroes, particularly in the form of the idea of Avengers. Here the idea of heroes is tied into protecting others, as was the proposed purpose of the Avengers. This falls into line with the earlier suggestion that willingness for sacrifice is the ultimate sign of a hero; after all, sacrificing oneself for another is the farthest one can take an act of protection.

When Steve questions Tony's strong reaction to Coulson's death, Tony points out that they are not soldiers. This simple statement is in fact a significant aspect of Tony's character: as suggested by Kemppainen and Peltonen (2010: 33), those acting out of a professional duty may not be seen

as equally heroic as those who perform similar acts simply because it is the right thing. Unlike the Captain, the rest of the Avengers are not soldiers. Tony in particular has already stated his motivation back in *Iron Man*: he wants to do what is right to give his life purpose.

Tony's confrontation with Loki stands in contrast with his argument with the Captain. Rather than only fighting for himself, Tony does not even mention himself as he lists the people Loki has angered. His reasons for fighting are other people — including Coulson, whom he calls by his first name for the first time. There is also another layer to his statement that Loki had angered Coulson: Loki's tactics relied on the Avengers starting to fight, whereas Coulson's belief in heroes required the Avengers to act as a team. By trying to break them apart before they could even unite in protection of Earth, Loki came close to destroying Coulson's dream of heroes.

Tony's trust and belief in his team, in their ability to become the group of heroes needed, becomes again apparent as he asks for Banner, even though the others do not expect him to arrive. Again, his trust is not unfounded, as Banner appears in time to aid them in the battle. All this seems to indicate that he actually shares Coulson's beliefs, however much he may claim not to play well with others.

Tony's ultimate chance to prove his heroism comes as a nuclear missile is sent toward the city. In a gesture that echoes the Captain's own decision to crash a plane into the sea rather than let its bombs reach their target, he chooses to carry the missile into the wormhole, regardless of his teammates warning him about being unable to return. Taking on an apparent suicide mission to save the city, he proves that the Captain was wrong about him: not only is he willing to make a sacrifice but also does not even hesitate before making the decision.

In the end, Tony's faith in his team saves him, as the Hulk saves him when he falls. The news coverage following the incident questions them and calls them heroes in turns, with the World Security Council concerned that they will turn out to be a danger. In the end, Fury summarizes just why the Avengers will return if heroes are called for again:

Fury: Because we'll need them to.

(*Avengers*, 2:09:42)

This brings a conclusion to the view on heroes in the world of the movies. Heroes are those who overcome their differences, protect others, those who sacrifice themselves, not for selfish reasons or even vengeance, but for a simple reason: they are needed.

This definition of a hero Tony Stark certainly meets.

#### 4.3.4. Summary: Tony as a modern hero

In regards to his persona as a modern heroic figure, we can see the evolution of the character of Tony Stark through the three movies. In the beginning, he is publicly admired and respected, yet he is shown to have several vices and little sense of duty or responsibility. Furthermore, though he engages in charity and various beneficial projects, Tony directly does nothing to help anyone, and has only a few attachments. Based on these observations, at the beginning of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark does not meet the common definitions of a hero; indeed, inside the world of the movies, no one who knows him personally shows any actual admiration for him.

During *Iron Man*, Tony gains a sense of duty and accountability. Determined to atone for the destruction his weapons have caused, he also ceases to indulge in his various vices, focusing instead on what he believes to be the right thing to do. From someone who sought to create fear and destruction to keep enemies at bay from a distance, he develops into a man who wishes to protect others, not viewing even his own life as too high a price to pay. Through these convictions, he grows into a heroic figure by the end of the movie, truly becoming Iron Man.

In *Iron Man 2*, Tony is already admired and celebrated as a hero and a protector. However, faced with apparently imminent threat, he has to consider his priorities and values, becoming more concerned with the matter of legacy. Instead of taking Iron Man with him, he takes measures to

ensure that there will be another protector. This heroism and his declarations of standing in defense of others appear to be contrasted by his irresponsible behavior as his approaching death makes him more impulsive. However, the only situation where he appears to be genuinely endangering others is the birthday party, and even there it is unclear how much control he actually has over the situation. By the end of the movie, he has apparently come to a conclusion not only about what he wants to leave behind but also where he comes from. Whereas in the first movie his heroism rose from defying his father's views, in the sequel he manages to incorporate Howard's ideas into his own, turning them to good instead of leaving them as past mistakes. Therefore, the idea of heroes is tied to a sense of continuity: a true hero makes sure the light will not go out with them, and seeks to turn even the darkest ideas to serve good.

In *Avengers*, Tony is not concerned with continuity as much as he is with cooperation. Faced with a threat no hero can take on alone, he has to learn to work with others. Furthermore, it is in this movie that the storyline directly addresses the matter of sacrifice as a measure of heroism through Captain America. One of the reasons Tony had been denied entry into the Avengers earlier was his inability to work with others, while the Captain denies him the title of a hero as he does not believe Tony would ever sacrifice himself for others. Tony, however, proves all doubts untrue. He both shows incredible amounts of trust in his team members and knowingly flies into almost certain death to save everyone else. Therefore he earns not only the title of an Avenger, but also that of a hero — even in the eyes of Captain America himself.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, I have analyzed the character of Tony Stark as both a mythical and modern heroic figure in the movies *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2* and *Marvel's the Avengers*. Based on my findings, I have come to the conclusion that Tony Stark's life in general and his various adventures in particular reflect quite well the patterns apparent in the stories of various mythical heroes. Furthermore, while he is not a particularly heroic figure at the beginning of the series, his character and worldview develop over time, until by the end of Phase 1 he can be called a hero without any doubt. This makes it apparent that the old, formulaic stories of warriors and kings are not incompatible with the modern view of a heroic figure, and certain aspects of the traditional heroic story still appeal to audiences today.

The actual medium of an ongoing storyline presented some problems in the analysis. A still living character with future adventures made it difficult to consider patterns related to the death of mythical characters. To counter this, I considered various moments where he appears to be dead, and presented them with their potential interpretation of the moment of the character's death.

As a study on a continuous story, this work is by definition incomplete. Further study into future movies may reveal patterns not apparent in this selection of material, and future installments might even change the character drastically, changing the interpretation of the currently available material. At present, I have worked with the material readily available and studied it as its own, self-contained unit.

In conclusion, I believe the study has, in light of currently available material, proved the hypothesis true. Despite his flaws, Tony Stark in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is represented as a hero, reflecting both the patterns of the myths and the ideals of the modern world, with the movies themselves providing commentary on what is and what is not, essentially, heroic in the modern culture.

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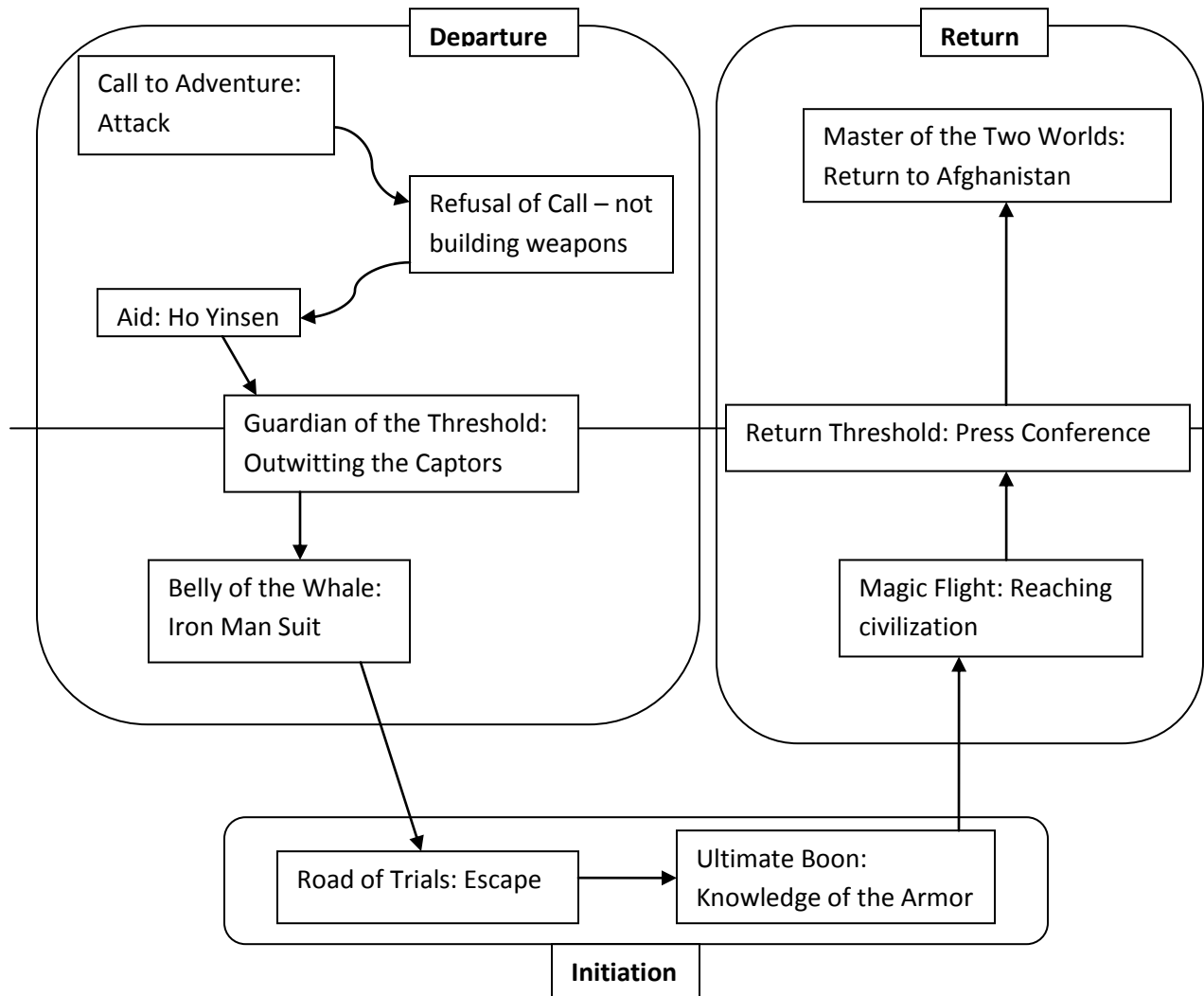
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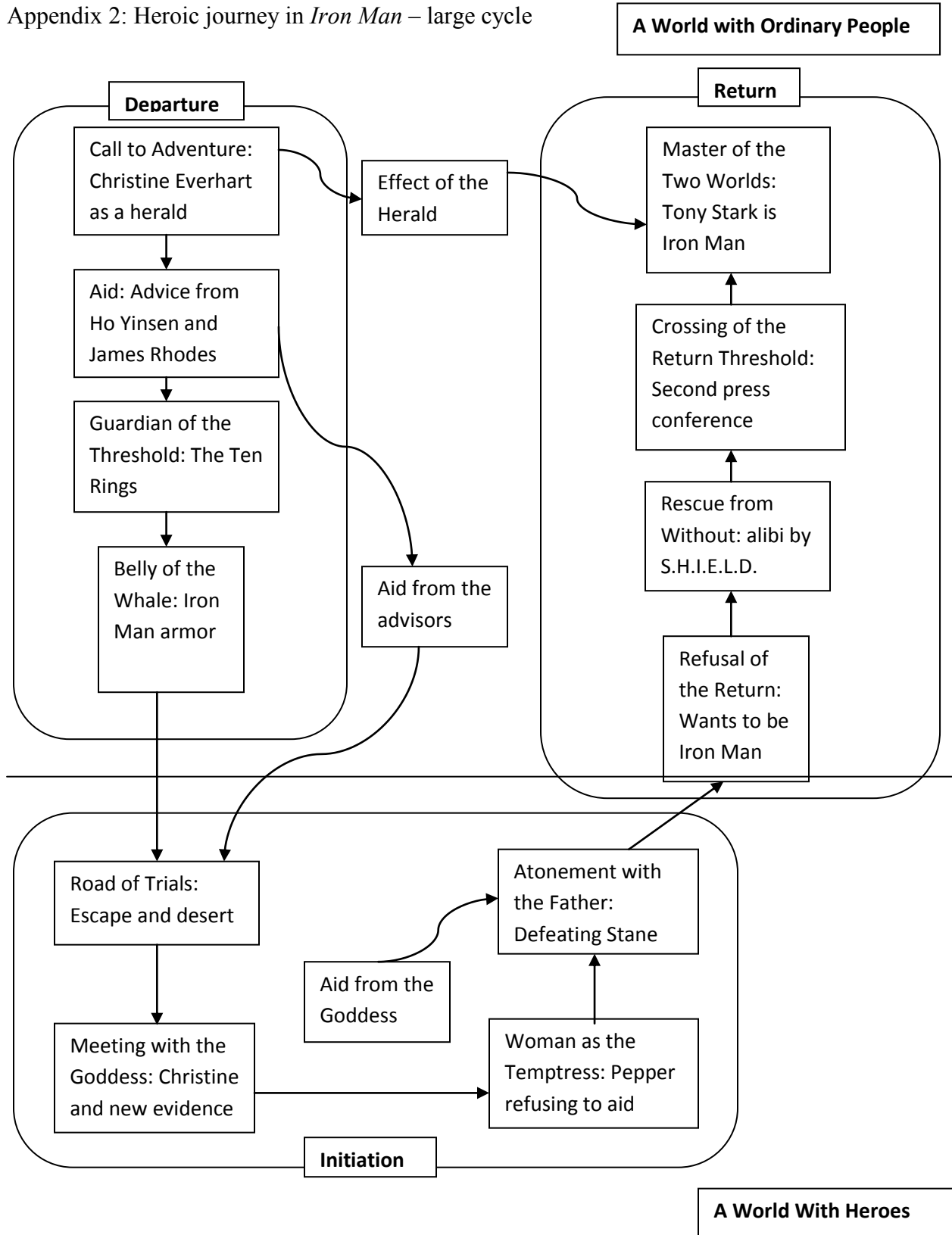
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Appendix 1: Heroic journey in *Iron Man* – small cycle

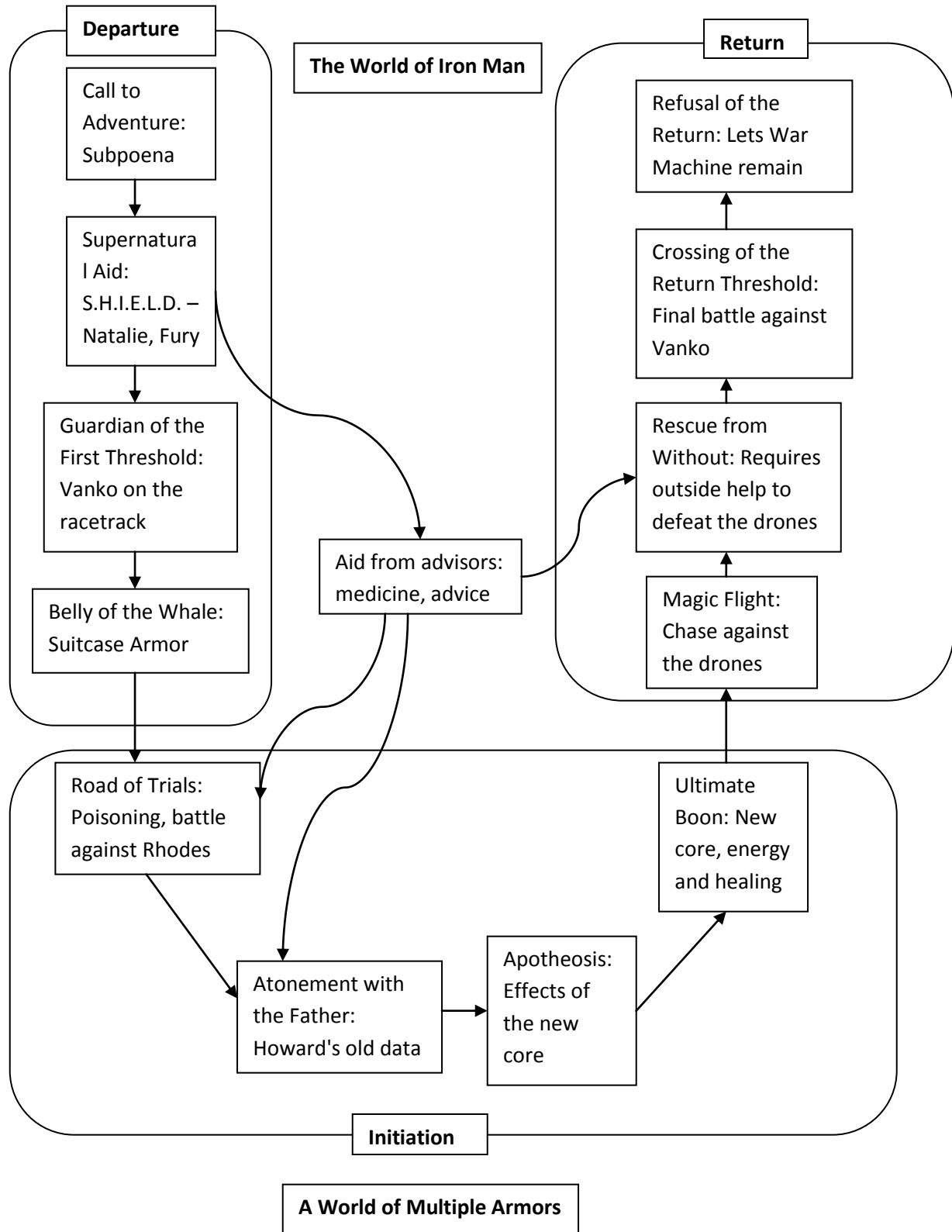




Appendix 2: Heroic journey in *Iron Man* – large cycle



Appendix 3: Heroic Journey in *Iron Man 2*



Appendix 4: Heroic Journey in *Avengers*

