



The Symbol of Peace as a Myth: Deconstructing the Existential Problem in *One-Punch Man* and *My Hero Academia*

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ABSTRACT

My Hero Academia and *One-Punch Man* are popular manga series that have amassed a global fanbase. This paper, uses a post-structuralist reading to draw parallels between Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Japanese superhero manga, examining how these works deal with the existential question about the meaning of life. It observes that the superhero myth functions with the help of several signs that construct a superhero's identity and that these identity markers define their take on the existential problem. Furthermore, the paper examines the role played by the crowd—the in-text audience of the myth—in the process of mythologization, where they serve as a medium between the superheroes and the actual reader.

KEYWORDS

Manga, superhero, existentialism, semiotics, post-structuralism

Introduction

What is the point of living? In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus argues that this question lies at the heart of philosophy. In the past, human life was guided by traditional value systems, with questions of purpose answered by religion. With the advent of modernity, science and philosophy replaced religious dogma in defining the world, but the scientific method functions in a series of assumptions and hypotheses; there are no solid answers. Yet the question remains, creating a human nostalgia for an understanding of the meaning of life (Camus 11-23).

How, then, does the popular culture of the 21st century respond to this question in literature? We turn to hero manga, a Japanese literary genre that has taken the world by storm in recent years. *My Hero Academia*, written by Horikoshi Kouhei, and *One-Punch Man*, written by ONE and illustrated by Murata Yuusuke, are both manga series that started serialization in the 2010s. A semiotic reading of the superhero myth found in these series would reveal its parallels with Sisyphus in representing humanity's existential struggle through an allegory. By studying individual signs crucial to the idea of the hero from across *My Hero Academia* and *One-Punch Man*, we can further study how these relate to the existential problem of the myth of Sisyphus.

It is important to clarify some of the terms and methodologies behind such a semiotic reading. According to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is a link between a sound pattern (the signifier) and a concept (the signified) (Saussure 75-78). For example, the word "flag" refers to the physical object we take for a flag. Roland Barthes argues that any sign that implies an additional concept beyond the first signified could be regarded as a myth. These are not individual interpretations, but culturally agreed-upon conventions. For instance, he looks at a picture of a black soldier saluting the French flag. This sign implies that the allegations of colonialism against France are unfounded and that all subjects of France faithfully revere the nation. For a reader unfamiliar with the colonial history of Algeria, it would be difficult to grasp the rationale behind this piece of French imperial propaganda. The signification of a myth, in this view, therefore depends on an understanding of the socio-political factors surrounding it (Barthes 107-115).

Sisyphus and Superheroes

Now, we return to Camus' original question: what is the meaning of life? A child is assured that they would know when they are old enough, and like all other lies adults tell them, they believe in it until one day they realize that they have grown up and still have no answer. Camus uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus as an allegory for this. Sisyphus was a man infatuated with life and tricked the Olympian gods by escaping death. After a long life of playing catch with death, he was cursed in the underworld to push a boulder to the top of a mountain. But whenever

Sisyphus nears the peak, the boulder rolls down, thus making him repeat the action ad infinitum. After an average adult realizes the lack of inherent meaning in life, their existence becomes a loop of struggling throughout the work week and then getting a day off on the weekend. This day of rest is the time when existential questions emerge. Throughout the day, Sisyphus goes through enormous physical toil to push the boulder. It is only when it rolls off that he has a moment to think (Camus 107-111).

The narrative situations that emerge in *My Hero Academia* and *One-Punch Man* broadly revolve around physical confrontations; but this is not my object of inquiry. The fights themselves, like Sisyphus' boulder, serve an allegorical function. We should be concerned with Sisyphus' reaction to his ordeal, and likewise, how heroes respond to conflict. If Sisyphus is the stand-in for the everyman, the hero represents the ideal human. Although the Japanese word used in these works is "hero", it refers to the archetype more commonly called "superhero" in Western comics. This is a common phenomenon in Japanese, where katakana words (vocabulary loaned from foreign languages) are shortened and modified to suit the Japanese phonetic system. Both words share a link with the notion of the Greek hero (heros, literally meaning protector). This act of protection remains the dominant meaning in the contemporary usage of the word.

For example, when we first meet Saitama, the protagonist of *One-Punch Man*, he is a suited job seeker walking down the street. He comes across a tall humanoid crab monster who introduces himself as Crablante. While the surrounding people scam, Saitama couldn't be bothered to escape. He just got rejected from a job, so he doesn't care about what happens to him. Crablante, out of sympathy, lets him off, and Saitama heads on with his life. Later, when Crablante attacks a child in a playground (someone Saitama has never seen before and has no reason to care for), he jumps to the rescue without a thought. Herein lies his origin story (ONE Ch 2: 2-16).

Similarly, in *My Hero Academia*, when a sludge villain tries to take control of Bakugo's body, Midoriya jumps to the rescue on an impulse, although he is weaker than Bakugo himself, and bullied by Bakugo throughout his entire childhood for his weakness (Horikoshi Ch 2: 40-48). This action of jumping to the rescue lies at the core of both these origin stories, and therefore the act of protection remains dominant. Peter Coogan argues that the three most important components of the superhero are their mission, powers, and identity (Coogan 6). To protect others, as we have discussed, broadly serves as the mission. Both Midoriya and Saitama lack powers and identity in their origin story.

In *My Hero Academia*, a genetic mutation occurred a few generations ago, and now a majority of humans develop supernatural quirks by the age of four. While some use these for nefarious means and others to stop them from doing so, most treat it like any other accidental

feature in their bodies and move on with their lives. Midoriya is one of the few who isn't born with a power.

A combination of multiple elements makes up the identity of a superhero, but in this section, we can examine the role played by their name and their costume. Bakugo bullied Midoriya throughout his childhood, calling him Deku, which signifies meanings such as useless. Midoriya later appropriates this as his hero name. Meanwhile, Saitama is assigned the hero name "Caped Baldy".

In terms of costume in their origin stories, these characters are defined by uniforms: Deku is a schoolboy in a uniform, while Saitama is a job seeker in a suit. It is only later that they acquire their hero jumpsuits. The three components of the superhero (their mission, powers, and identity) spell out the specifics of their individual parallels to the myth of Sisyphus. Their mission is to push the boulder, their powers define how much they struggle to reach the top of the hill, and their identity defines how they react to the struggle. The third is the component we are most concerned with. How do we define the identity of the hero in superhero manga?

In the world of *My Hero Academia*, All Might is not simply a protector, but a symbol of peace.

Nietzsche's idea of the *ubermensch*, often translated as superman, is an ideal being—above the grasp of man, yet an object of pursuit (Nietzsche "Zarathustra's Prologue"). All Might functions as an *ubermensch* when we look at him through the gaze of other characters such as Deku, Bakugo, and Endeavor—all of whom strive to become as strong as him but fall short. However, he is not literally invincible, and therefore, we can relate only his social identity to that of *ubermensch*. All Might's Sisyphian struggle is to protect this identity so that he can maintain the symbol of peace—something that is instrumental in keeping down crime rates in his world.

Saitama, much like All Might, is the strongest being in his universe. As the title suggests, he can defeat any enemy with a single punch, leaving him bored because of the lack of an actual challenge. His Sisyphian task thus becomes to find purpose in life. *One-Punch Man's* interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus is unique. Although the curse remains the same, here we find a Sisyphus who has become so strong through daily toil that the task has become too easy to fulfill. In Camus' interpretation, the journey uphill is one of physical toil, while the descent makes Sisyphus reflect on the purpose. Here, we find Sisyphus plagued by ennui throughout the day.

Ryan Johnson reads *One-Punch Man* as a critique of the concept of *ubermensch*. Saitama reaches the status of what Nietzsche deems beyond humanity, and is still unhappy. He reaches this through a simple training regimen: a hundred push-ups, sit-ups, and squats, along with a ten-kilometer jog, every single day of the week. Although this is not an easy routine, it is certainly one that professional athletes can perform (Johnson 151).

However, Saitama is not literally comparable to the *ubermensch*, because although he possesses superhuman strength, that is not a sufficient condition for him to be considered *ubermensch*. Because of his strength, he struggles with a sense of meaninglessness, thus bringing him closer to the same existential crisis as Sisyphus.

Smiles and Catchphrases

Now that we have seen how the myth of Sisyphus and that of the *ubermensch* relate to the hero myth on a broader level, we must investigate individual signs that play a part in the process of signification to substantiate this link. To do so, I will explore two signs that can be related to the identity of the hero, since, as we have discussed, this can help us understand their reaction to the Sisyphian struggle.

To understand the relevance of the smile of a hero, let us first examine a character who lacks it. While Deku and Bakugo are young students, Endeavor is a grown adult at the peak of his career, and although he is the number two hero, he pales compared to All Might. Despite all of his endeavors, the general populace doesn't view him as a symbol of peace like All Might. This is not a result of his relative weakness. While none of the top heroes match up to All Might's strength, the public adores them simply because of their individual contributions. Why is this not the case for the number two hero? Yoarashi Inasa was a fan of Endeavor as a child, impressed by his flames. In "Chapter 111", we see a flashback, in which Inasa tries to get an autograph from Endeavor. But Endeavor shoves him aside and walks forward with hatred in his eyes. Since then, the former fan of Endeavor started hating him. The reason behind Endeavor's eyes, however, is not hatred. It signifies his ambition of surpassing All Might and becoming the number one hero. He is frustrated because even after spending his entire life trying to get stronger, he cannot grasp All Might's position. In the following chapter, Inasa further describes Endeavor's eyes as fixated on something far into the distance, and cites them as his reason for hating him. In other words, his eyes reflect his obsession with moving forward, and his endeavor to get stronger, a characteristic that gives him his hero name.

Camus describes a Sisyphus who descends in sorrow as such: "I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end" (Camus 108). This matches the description of Endeavor after he wins a battle. Like Sisyphus, he is tormented by the fate of pushing the boulder without hope of success. Thus, we have an unhappy hero.

Lawrence Frolov claims that Endeavor's lack of happiness comes from the spirit of *eudaimonia*, and the incompatibility of the *eudaimonic* view of happiness with human nature. *Eudaimonism* seeks to find happiness in the greater good, while *hedonism* seeks to maximize

gross pleasure. For eudaimonia to fulfill self-actualization, Endeavor would have to uphold the three pillars that support this system: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Frolov points out how, by inflicting his dreams on his family and thereby abusing them, Endeavor hampers his relatedness. Similarly, by not acknowledging public sentiment, Endeavor hampers his relatedness with the public. Other than hurting his family, he hurts his own chance at finding happiness by isolating himself in a solitary pursuit. Endeavor is competent as a hero, being ranked number two, but it is his lack of autonomy that makes him disbelieve his competence. Endeavor lives in All Might's shadow, and since he constantly compares himself to him, he perceives himself as weak (Frolov 32-38).

However, this reading of Endeavor's pursuit comes with a flaw: he doesn't strive for the greater good but seeks the prestige of being the number one hero. Frolov argues that Endeavor isn't hedonistic because he doesn't take a moment to celebrate his victories, while many other heroes do. However, many heroes who do rejoice in their victories do so because they were able to save lives, something that reflects the greater good. Although these heroes receive immediate gratification, it would be odd to label them hedonistic. Meanwhile, Endeavor doesn't save lives simply because he wants to, but as a means to an end. And since this end is not that of the greater good, but personal gain, we cannot see eudaimonia as the driving force behind Endeavor.

I would like to argue that Endeavor's failure lies in his misunderstanding of the myth of the hero. He has always seen the symbol of peace as simply the strongest hero and hoped that by becoming the strongest hero, he could become that symbol. However, even after All Might retires, leaving Endeavor the new number one hero, he fails to embody the symbol of peace. In "Chapter 164", he remarks that crime rates have risen since the time All Might retired, although Endeavor has resolved more incidents than anyone. It is not a matter of strength or competence, since, for all his might, All Might isn't omnipresent. He couldn't have been responsible for single-handedly stopping crime on such a massive scale. The reason crime rates were so low during his time was that All Might functioned as a myth, a symbol holding back villains.

How, then, does the symbol of peace function? We turn to the sign of a smile. A four-year-old Deku sits at his computer and re-watches a video obsessively: it is All Might's debut as a hero, in the wake of a major disaster. We see images of victims in tears and the figure of a single muscular man carrying them all on his back with a smile on his face. This highlights that the hero not only saves lives but also assures them that there is nothing to fear. The symbol of peace is a myth, that of a hero who smiles in the face of crisis. This myth holds immense power in the world of *My Hero Academia*. Even after Deku finds out that he will never develop a quirk, he is obsessed with the video clip. He is in awe looking at how All Might saves people with a smile no matter what kind of trouble they are in. When he tells his mother that he wants to be that

kind of a hero, his eyes are full of tears, but he maintains a smile on his face (Horikoshi, Ch 1: 18-21).

Deku embodies both the sign of a victim and that of a hero. He is Quirkless (born without superpowers), and thus a victim of fate: something that denies him his dreams. But this is not enough to kill his dreams of becoming a hero. Such is the power of the symbol of peace. Deku forces himself to smile, seizing an essential signifier of the hero's identity even when he lacks the strength to be one.

Camus argues that Sisyphus' descent should take place in joy, as a revolt against the cruel fate that has subjected him to such a curse. The smile on the face of a hero in the middle of a disaster reflects the joy of Sisyphus. This is the myth that All Might tries to protect, and Deku tries to embody. Faced with a curse that one cannot remove, the only way to show defiance is to smile at the ordeal.

We now turn to the second sign intrinsic to the hero's identity: a catchphrase. This is a line that the hero shouts out loud when they arrive at the scene, inspiring hope in the distressed. All Might's catchphrase has been iconic ever since his debut: "Fear not! Why, you ask? (Because...) I am here!!" (Horikoshi Ch 1: 18). And since he delivers upon the promise of safety, he becomes the symbol of peace in his world.

But what would the reassuring catchphrase be worth if the concerned character cannot live up to the promise? Let us turn to *One-Punch Man* for an example. A creature of superhuman strength from the ocean, the Deep Sea King attacks City J, and when many of the strongest heroes are dispatched to defend the city, he decimates them. Hundreds of civilians hide at a shelter, and the only person remaining to protect them is Mumen rider, a hero several classes below those who lie fallen at the Deep Sea King's feet. He takes up a fighting stance and repeats his catchphrase: "I am the bicyclist for justice known as Mumen Rider!" (ONE Ch 26: 13). The crowd is in a state of despair after seeing so many stronger heroes fall, so they don't believe he can save them. Mumen Rider jumps into the fight and is immediately beaten. He is fully aware of his weakness, but his idea of being a hero is not to win but simply stand and protect, regardless of whether he is capable of defeating the enemy. And as soon as he stands back up to face the Deep Sea King again, the crowd erupts in a burst of hope, cheering for him till the moment he falls unconscious (ONE Ch 26: 10-26).

Mumen Rider is the perfect example of a hero who successfully gives hope to the public, even when he lacks the competence to save them physically. Perhaps more than any other element of the hero's identity, it is the catchphrase that directly appeals to the audience, both textual and real. Herein lies its power.

Mythologization and the Collective

As Barthes stresses in *Mythologies*, the signification of a myth is not an individual interpretation of it but something generally understood. The myth of the hero, therefore, depends on the people within the crowd, the textual audience. This makes it important to inspect the role played by the crowd in the reception of the myth.

The crowd, in hero manga, functions as a parallel to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, regards the chorus as one of the actors, citing Sophocles as an example (Aristotle 30).

Let us examine a couple of sections where the chorus plays a role in *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, suspecting that Creon has conspired against him, has decided to have him executed, but Creon pleads innocent. At this point, the chorus pleads with Oedipus to see reason for the sake of the city. Here, the chorus acts as a voice of reason, commenting upon the irrationality of the tragic hero's behavior while also impacting the actions that unfold in the scene, since Oedipus responds to their pleas (Sophocles 197-199).

For a parallel to this function of the chorus within *My Hero Academia*, let us look at the Provisional License Test, an examination all hero aspirants must pass to act as a hero legally. During the test, Deku is tasked with saving a crowd of set-up victims. When he finds a hurt child, his empathy kicks in. He forgets that it is a simulation and exclaims that it looks bad. The child, a member of the evaluation process, takes points off Deku for not considering the panicked situation of the crowd. Paralyzed by terror, if they see the hero panic, their hopes would be crushed. It is in this moment that Deku fully comprehends the importance of All Might's smile and catchphrase in the middle of a tragedy. The symbol of peace is a myth that must be protected for the sake of the public, to reassure the ones suffering. Deku snaps out of his panic, puts up a smile, and announces that it will be okay, finally embodying the myth of the hero (Horikoshi Ch 109: 10-17).

The child, here a member of the crowd, has a voice to speak to the hero. Without this interaction with the child, Deku's understanding of what it means to be a hero would be limited, and he would only focus on training to become stronger, thus taking the same road as heroes like Endeavor and losing sight of the true symbol of peace. This section also reveals the crowd's vested interest in the maintenance of the hero myth, since here we have the child directly describing the rationale behind it.

In other sections of *Oedipus the King*, such as the last chorus of the tragedy, there is no element of interaction with other characters. Here, the chorus addresses the audience directly and asks them to look upon Oedipus as an example of a great man who lived a remarkable life but had tragedy befall him unexpectedly. This is the role played by the chorus in mediating a

message for the audience to take away from the tragedy (Sophocles 251).

Therefore, the chorus acts as an intermediary, on one hand responding to the situation and interacting with the actors, and on the other influencing the real audience's reactions to what happens on the page.

The interface of the crowd with the reader can be found in many of the sections we have previously examined. The reactions of awe or hope evoked in the crowd when a hero like All Might appears, influences the reader's perception of these characters.

For an example of a section where interactions with the crowd influence the audience's engagement with the hero myth, let us turn to Chapter 27 of *One-Punch Man*. Because of Mumen Rider's perseverance, the Deep Sea King couldn't deliver the final blow to kill many of the heroes present at the scene, and Saitama arrives to defeat him in a single punch. The crowd is in awe. A member questions the ability of the heroes who fell before the Deep Sea King. Saitama paints himself as a fraud, pretending that the others had already weakened the enemy and that he only delivered the final blow.

Joe Yang picks this scene to claim that Saitama embodies "salaryman masculinity". In other words, Saitama discredits himself so that he could preserve the image of the Hero Association, a company that he serves, thus reflecting upon the corporate-driven ethos of Japan (Yang 67-77).

I would like to argue that this scene better represents Saitama as a protector of the hero myth and not that of corporatism. The question raised within the crowd was primarily concerning the myth of the hero, not the institution administering said heroes. The venom was aimed, not at an institution, but at the signification of the hero, since all the heroes before Saitama promised to defeat the Deep Sea King and failed. It is only when another member of the crowd holds this man by the collar that he shifts his focus to the Hero Association. His expression in this panel makes it clear that he uses this as an excuse. This is a member of the crowd, therefore questioning the ideology behind the myth of the hero. Saitama's selfless act, along with a montage of pictures of heroes who have collapsed saving the crowd, incites the reader to further believe in the myth.

Yet we must listen to the voice of the skeptic. What is the point of a myth founded upon irrational reassurance? After all, that the hero can arrive at any moment to save everyone is simply an overestimation of their capabilities. This issue is grave in *My Hero Academia*. The first time Deku meets All Might, he witnesses his true form, a shriveled-up man with a bony frame. The superman physique that he puts up in front of the public is a front he can only maintain for a few hours a day. He has grown weak ever since an enemy injured him five years ago, but he held this from the public to maintain the symbol of peace (Horikoshi Ch 1: 32-34). Unlike in *One-Punch Man*, where Saitama can ultimately defeat any threat to humanity, the symbol of peace in

My Hero Academia is a hero whose strength is diminishing by the day. What, then, is the purpose of such a myth?

Conclusion

The answer lies in the original subjects of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, not the allegorical Sisyphus, but the average human in their daily lives. We noted that the child is constantly reassured that one day they would find out the meaning of life and that it was only when they grew older that they realized that there was none. The adults telling the child that they would find out, in other words, know that this is a lie. They too were children who were lied to, grew up, and faced the full weight of Sisyphus' existential boulder.

The purpose of the hero myth thus serves a similar purpose of reassurance, one no doubt founded upon a lie, but one that gives the crowd hope to live on. Oedipus, raised by foster parents, unknowingly killed his biological father and wed his biological mother, because fate cursed him to do so. And yet, after he finds out, he defies fate by blinding himself and announcing that all is well. Oedipus' proclamation is sacred because it empowers humanity: "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men. All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him" (Camus 110).

If the symbol of peace was abandoned, it would not put an end to the villains threatening human life. Were Sisyphus to frown, the boulder wouldn't get any lighter. In all the battles we have explored, physical danger is only half the picture. What lies at stake is the myth of the hero: the only weapon humanity possesses to fight back against fate. The hero uses signs such as the smile and the catchphrase to signify that the danger has passed, in many cases, not believing in the myth but fully aware of their weakness. Yet, by upholding the myth, they defy fate, like Sisyphus smiling during his descent.

Hero manga, much like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finds purpose in simply pushing the boulder for one more day. This is reflected in characters like Mumen Rider and Deku in terms of external conflict, where they cannot cope physically with the weight of the boulder but muster the courage to keep pushing it, while Saitama's boulder is the loneliness back home awaiting him after a long day of saving lives. But as Camus says about Sisyphus, and because the crowd teaches us to do so, one must imagine the hero happy.

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BIO

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