

Questioning Heroism in Andy Weir's *the Martian*

E. Ngestirosa Endang Woro Kasih¹, Fajar Dani Julian Tama²

ngestirosa@teknokrat.ac.id¹, fajardani@teknokrat.ac.id²

Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia

Abstract

The concept of heroism has long been a recurring theme in literature, evolving within American novels to reflect the ever-changing societal values and dynamics. While American novels tend to focus on delineating heroism for multiple characters, the portrayal often feels forced and less authentic in the literary works showcased. This qualitative research aims to explore the evolving portrayal of heroism in contemporary American literature, employing Andy Weir's acclaimed novel, *The Martian*, as the primary data source. The study meticulously analyzes the depiction of heroism in the story and evaluates its alignment with Joseph Campbell's renowned three-stage theory of the hero's journey. Through the presentation of empowering narratives, the research seeks to encourage readers to recognize heroism in its diverse and multifaceted forms, thereby fostering empathy, understanding, and unity among individuals from varied backgrounds. Ultimately, the findings of the study indicate that heroism in *The Martian* may not have been presented in the appropriate context, suggesting a potential divergence from conventional portrayals of hero figures. This research opens up intriguing discussions about the portrayal of heroism in modern literature and its implications on our understanding of the human spirit and heroic ideals.

Keywords: American novels, hero, heroism, popular literature

Introduction

The aspiration to become a hero has become a prevailing theme for writers and readers in many novels (Julius & Satria, 2022; Nurdiana & Evyanto, 2019). The pursuit of heroism has given birth to diverse stories of valor. As a result, the concept of a hero embarking on a journey has become a common narrative pattern in literature. The depiction of heroism in American novels has evolved over time, mirroring shifts in societal values and dynamics (Dubois, 2019). While conventional hero figures, typically portrayed as white, strong, and self-reliant individuals, continue to feature in certain narratives, there is an emerging trend towards more varied and inclusive representations of heroism (Ase & Wendt, 2018). Authors now challenge the archaic form of heroism, breaking away from narrow criteria to explore relationships and interconnectedness, emphasizing the significance of allies, community, and support systems in shaping heroic actions.

Contemporary American novels introduce characters from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual orientation backgrounds, celebrating the uniqueness of hero figures and enriching readers' experiences with empowering narratives (Morgan, 2019). As the literary landscape evolves, the dynamic definition of heroism encourages exploration of new perspectives, challenging the status quo, and fostering a more inclusive and inspiring future. Hero and heroism refer to individuals or figures who display courage, determination, and extraordinary sacrifice (Quinn, 2023). A hero is someone who performs noble or courageous deeds, both in fiction and real life, that inspire others and become a symbol of hope and virtue. Heroism is a quality possessed by heroes, which indicates a willingness to

sacrifice oneself or face risks for the common good without thinking about personal rewards (Palfy, 2016). Acts of heroism can be physical, moral, or emotional sacrifices, and play an important role in creating positive change in society as well as facing difficult challenges.

The evolving portrayal of heroism in contemporary American novels exemplifies the power of literature to challenge conventional norms, opening doors to diverse identities and experiences (Gilman, 1967). These empowering narratives inspire readers to look beyond traditional hero archetypes and recognize heroism in all its forms, promoting empathy, understanding, and unity among individuals from different walks of life. As stories continue to unfold, the ever-changing definition of heroism will undoubtedly inspire generations to come, shaping a more compassionate and accepting world. One of novels explores the role of hero to promote empathy oh human may be seen in Andy Weir's *The Martian* novel.

The Martian by Andy Weir is a riveting science fiction novel that follows the story of astronaut Mark Watney, who is stranded alone on Mars after a dust storm forces his crew to evacuate, presuming him dead. Using his engineering and botany skills, Mark fights for survival by growing potatoes and establishing communication with Earth. On Earth, NASA discovers he's alive, and a daring rescue mission is planned. Facing multiple life-threatening challenges, Mark overcomes each obstacle, and the Ares 4 crew successfully brings him back home, showcasing the triumph of human resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity. The bravery of the character in this novel delineates the idea of hero within the story.

Heroism in stories that become dreams and loved by readers often makes the presence of a hero feel forced. Debate arises in several novels about the incorrect definition of heroism in the story. The presence of the hero and his heroism are deliberately raised and made the core of the story. This is actually often the case in popular literature or what is often referred to as mass literature because of its focus aimed at a wide audience. To that end, the study will explore heroism in Andy Weir's novel *The Martian* and question the presence of the hero and the heroism contained in it. The main character in the novel will be considered whether it is appropriate to display heroism which according to Campbell's theory (2004) is present in three stages of the hero's journey.

Theory

Positioning Hero

Heroes in fiction, be they individuals or groups, fearlessly confront danger, conquer obstacles, and achieve triumphant feats that make a lasting impact (Cawelti, 2014). Often united, they combat formidable foes, embarking on missions with world-shaping potential. Throughout their captivating journey, heroes face challenges and perils, showing unwavering determination, leading to a hard-earned triumph and bringing peace and salvation. Joseph Campbell's renowned theory of the hero's journey structures this profound odyssey into three transformative stages, each with derived steps (Campbell, 2004). The departure begins with the call to adventure, resistance, supernatural aid, and crossing the first threshold. The initiation includes trials, meeting the Goddess for guidance. The return presents new challenges, reluctance, rescue, and newfound freedom. This enduring framework offers profound insights, resonating with readers and storytellers. It guides audiences on an emotional odyssey, witnessing heroes' spirit, courage, and triumph. As literature evolves, the hero's journey remains a captivating template, exploring the human spirit and the boundless potential for heroism within us all.

Argument on Heroism

Numerous studies have explored the development of hero concepts, both in general and within literary works. Beardow (2018) argued that The First World War, linked to empires, challenged the traditional imperial hero and the notions of nationalism, patriotism,

and upper-class responsibility. While the war's horrors led to a decline in the traditional hero associated with the ruling class, certain attributes like virtuous behavior, self-reliance, and heroic isolation were still admired in society. Samwise Gamgee's portrayal in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* sparked debates (Shahan, 2021), revealing him as a selfless and restorative hero who inspired hope and beauty. Despite not receiving as much recognition as the main hero, Frodo, Sam challenges conventional hero concepts, emphasizing selflessness and compassion as true heroic traits, proving that love and service can make someone a genuine hero. Ase and Wendt (2018) proposed an alternative concept of hero. Contemporary media often portrays military heroes as strong, masculine symbols of the nation, intertwining family and national themes. Bowman (2007) clarifies heroism as someone who has to risk his life to put an end to the threat of violence and disorder to the whole community.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with the objective of exploring the concept of heroism in Andy Weir's *The Martian*. The qualitative approach facilitates a deeper understanding and description of the phenomenon (Kasih, 2020). By utilizing the descriptive qualitative method, the researcher can present data in the form of narrations and dialogues, allowing for a comprehensive portrayal of the topic. This research method involves describing and qualifying scientific data that are interconnected, leading to a scientific and objective conclusion. Its primary goal is to accurately depict and explain the investigated facts. The main data source for this study is *The Martian* novel, providing narrations and dialogues as the primary data. Additionally, the writer incorporates various sources, journals, and papers to support the ideas and gather information to achieve the research objective.

Findings and Discussion

In popular stories, the hero embarks on a heroic journey comprising three significant stages: departure, initiation, and return (Hermes, 2005). The hero experiences adventures, learns valuable lessons, achieves victories, and undergoes personal growth through newfound knowledge (Kasih, 2018). In Andy Weir's novel *The Martian*, heroism is exemplified through the characters of scientists, particularly Mark Watney. The hero, Mark Watney, is the central focus of heroism in the story. As the departure stage unfolds, Watney leaves his familiar world and faces the challenges of an unknown environment on Mars. During the initiation stage, he adapts and learns to survive in this new world, displaying heroism in the face of adversity. Finally, in the stage of the hero's return, Watney seeks to return to the familiar world with the transformed circumstances he has experienced and achieved. The depiction of heroism in *The Martian* centers on the character of Mark Watney, showcasing his resilience, courage, and determination throughout his journey on Mars.

The first stage of the hero's journey is the departure of Mark Watney to the Mars planet. However, the beginning of this novel is firstly started with a flashback of Mark Watney's death announcement because Mark is being left on Mars for such a long period of time. But later there is a signal from Mars and they find out that Mark is actually still alive and trying to communicate with Earth. The narration then leads to the beginning of the journey where all the astronauts started their study on Mars. Mark Watney is a botanist & mechanical engineer and is one of the researchers that would begin the mission on the planet.

Everyone on the mission had two specialties. I'm a botanist and mechanical engineer; basically, the mission's fix-it man who played with plants. Mechanical engineering might save my life if something breaks." (Weir, 2011, p. 10)

In this quotation, Mark Watney introduces himself as a botanist and mechanical engineer, showcasing his unique set of skills and knowledge, which undoubtedly make him a valuable asset on the mission. His self-proclaimed title as the "*fix-it man who played with plants*" speaks to his resourcefulness and ability to tackle a wide range of challenges that may arise during the mission. Moreover, his recognition that mechanical engineering could be crucial for his survival in critical situations demonstrates a practical and cautious approach to the mission's risks. This quote effectively establishes Watney as a competent and adaptable character, laying the foundation for his potential role as a hero who must rely on his expertise to overcome obstacles and thrive in challenging circumstances. However, as the hero's journey begins, challenges to Watney's heroism emerge, prompting questions about the ideal qualities of a true hero beyond his specialized skills as a botanist and mechanical engineer.

This novel presents the hero or the main character as a scientist. This hero journey is the key to the story development in the novel. Without the presence of this hero, the story in the novel cannot proceed. The story in *The Martian* continues with the hero conducting research on Mars with the struggle and challenge given. A hero in science fiction is a character that uses science, technology, and/or super-science to save the Earth (Shippey, 2016). The main point of science fiction is that science will save humans rather than destroy humans.

"Why bring a botanist to Mars? After all, it's famous for not having anything growing in Martian gravity, and see what, if anything we can do with Martian soil." (Weir, 2011, p. 12)

The second stage of the hero's journey is stated as initiation. It happens when there is an accident. Mark Watney and the crew members are told to abort the mission because a sandstorm is about to blast onto them. The mission is actually not in danger because of the sturdy design of the Hab that can handle the blast. The problem is on the MAV that has a lot of delicate parts when the sandstorm hits 175 kph. The MAV cannot stand long enough. If MAV is wrecked, all the crew members would be stranded on Mars until the next mission which will be conducted four years later.

"The mission is designed to handle sandstorm gusts up to 150 kph. So, Houston got understandably nervous when we got whacked with 175 kph winds. The MAV is a spaceship. It has a lot of delicate parts. It can put up with storms to a certain extent, but it can't just get sandblasted forever. After an hour and a half-sustained wind, NASA gave the order to abort. If the MAV took any more punishment, we'd all have gotten stranded down there." (Weir, 2011, p. 3-4)

Everyone on the mission makes it to get out in the storm to get from the Hab to the MAV except Watney. All of the crew's main communication system dish which relayed signals from the Hab to Hermes got torn from its foundation and carried with the torrent and crashed through the antenna array. That long thin antenna slammed into Watney and ripped open his space suit. Watney passed out because he was constantly losing the pressure in his suit, the rest of the crew members hopelessly trying to help him but in the end they abort the mission and leave with the MAV.

The contra of heroism in this scenario lies in the difficult choice the crew must make to prioritize the safety of the majority over the life of one individual. While the crew displays heroism in their determination to complete the mission and save themselves, they are confronted with the tragic reality of leaving Watney behind due to the severity of his injuries. The hero's journey often glorifies acts of bravery and sacrifice for the greater good, but this situation presents a moral dilemma that challenges the conventional notions of heroism. The crew's decision to abandon a crew member is a stark reminder that heroism doesn't always

involve a straightforward and virtuous path, but rather complex decisions with potential devastating consequences. The contra here highlights the difficult choices and moral gray areas heroes may face, questioning the notion of "ideal" heroism and offering a more nuanced perspective on the challenges heroes encounter in their journeys.

The story continues with the main character miraculously surviving due to the fortuitous sealing of the gaps in his suit by the antenna and gunky blood residue. However, as the hero finds himself alone on Mars, he begins to question the conventional notion of heroism. Mark Watney, the protagonist, embraces his intellect and resourcefulness to figure out a way to survive on the desolate planet. Being a botanist and mechanical engineer, he sees an opportunity to leverage his skills and knowledge to extend his lifespan. *"I'm starting to come up with an idea for food. My botanist background may come in useful after all,"* Mark ponders with a glimmer of hope (p. 12).

Despite the dire circumstances, Mark doesn't succumb to despair. Through the use of the Hab advanced facility, he manages to cultivate a small crop that becomes his lifeline for sustenance. Additionally, he ingeniously creates a communication system to establish a link between Mars and Earth, a chance to reach out for help and let others know he is still alive. The narration reveals Mark's tenacity, *"I've been thinking about how to survive this. It's not completely hopeless,"* portraying his determination and refusal to be defeated (Weir, 2011, p. 10).

However, as we delve deeper into the story, the concept of heroism itself starts to face scrutiny. Mark's survival is not driven by some grand heroic quest but rather his clever problem-solving and adaptability. This novel challenged the traditional image of a hero as a larger-than-life figure with extraordinary abilities and explores the heroism found in ordinary individuals faced with extraordinary challenges. Moreover, the story presents a stark contrast between the physical and psychological struggles of the hero. While Mark battles the harsh Martian environment, his mind also undergoes a transformation. He grapples with loneliness, fear, and the weight of his isolation. This sheds light on the often-over-looked psychological toll that heroism can take, as heroes confront not just external foes but also their own internal demons.

Furthermore, the story explores the ethical complexities that arise from Mark's survival. As he continues to push the boundaries of his ingenuity, the question of whether he is justified in using available resources solely for his own survival emerges. The novel prompts readers to contemplate the ethical implications of heroism, blurring the lines between self-preservation and altruism. The story of Mark Watney on Mars introduces a compelling counter-narrative to heroism. It challenges the conventional notions of heroics and showcases the strength of the human intellect and adaptability in the face of overwhelming odds. Moreover, it delves into the psychological and ethical dimensions of heroism, making readers question the true meaning of being a hero in the vastness of space.

In *the Martian*, the hero, Mark Watney faces some difficulties to solve the problem. Before the hero starts his mission to gather the tools for communication, Mark with his botanist background figured out that his new mission will take months or even years so he needs extra supplies as much as he can. The intelligence from the hero in the novel using the advantage from the Hab and his major in botanism leads him into a rational way of thinking to keep him alive before he proceeds to the next objective. *"So that's my mission now. Find a way to communicate with Earth. If I can't manage that, find a way to communicate with Hermes when it returns in four years with the Ares 4 crew."* (Weir, 2011, p. 11). Because of this event, Mark can be said as the first farmer on Mars because he has successfully figured out how to grow a plant on another planet and it could make a big contribution for science especially for the next Ares 4 mission in the future. Campbell states that *"through experiencing death a hero can be reborn experiencing even greater powers to see the journey*

to the end" (Campbell, 2004, p. 231). Mark Watney experiences 'death' after leaving alone on Mars. He struggles to live by planting crops and the crops save him until the end of journey on Mars.

The third stage journey of the hero is return and in this study is the return of Mark Watney to the earth. The narration below is when Mark finally back together with his team. During his ascent mission back to Hermes, Mark had struggled to docking the MAV to Hermes and his body drifted around inside the MAV. After Mark and team successfully dock the MAV, Mark's body is full of bruises and he is also dirty. Mark celebrates the reunion after being stranded on Mars for 18 months.

"Then came the painful high-fives, followed by people staying as far away from my stench as possible. We had a few minutes of reunion before Beck shuttled everyone out. He gave me painkillers and told me to shower as soon as I could freely move my arms. So now I'm waiting for the drugs to kick in. My ribs hurt like hell, my vision is still blurry from acceleration sickness, I'm really hungry, it'll be another 211 days before I'm back on Earth, and apparently I smell like a skunk took a shit on some sweat socks. This is the happiest day of my life." (Weir, 2011, p. 368-369)

Despite Mark Watney's triumphant return to Earth and the celebration of his reunion with the team, the quotation also highlights some contrasting aspects that challenge the traditional portrayal of heroism. Mark's return is marked by the physical and emotional toll his journey has taken on him. He is in excruciating pain, with bruises, a dirty body, and blurry vision from acceleration sickness, revealing that heroism can come at a great cost. The reception upon his return is far from the usual hero's welcome, as his team members keep their distance due to his stench, emphasizing the harsh realities and sacrifices of his journey. The aftermath of heroism is portrayed as mundane, with Mark's immediate concerns being physical relief in the form of painkillers and a shower. This highlights that heroism often entails focusing on basic human needs rather than grand ceremonies or rewards. His return does not mark the end of his hardships, as he still faces hunger and another 211 days before fully returning to Earth, showing that heroism does not guarantee immediate resolution to all problems. Finally, Mark's unflattering self-description subverts the typical image of a heroic figure, reminding us that heroism is not always associated with perfection or pleasantness. The quotation presents a contra of heroism, challenging idealized notions and underlining the gritty realities that heroes may face, requiring perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity.

In the return stage of his hero's journey, Mark Watney faces a new set of activities as he transitions back to the ordinary world. Despite defeating major obstacles on Mars and being hailed as a hero, Mark's journey is far from over. He takes on the responsibility of sharing his experiences and knowledge with others, becoming a mentor and guide for those who seek to follow in his footsteps.

"Next week would be busy. He would be meeting the Ares-6 Engineer. He had read her file, but had never met her in person. He wouldn't get much time to relax after that. The following six weeks would be filled with constant training as he tried to impart as much knowledge as he could" (Weir, 2011, p. 369).

In this phase, Mark is called upon to impart the wisdom he gained during his time on Mars to others. This aligns with Campbell's assertion that in the return, a hero should gain more wisdom (Campbell, 2004). Mark's journey has not only transformed him into a hero but also provided him with valuable insights that can benefit humanity's future endeavors in space exploration. As Mark shares his stories of transformation and survival with many

people around him, he fulfills the role of a true hero in both the scientific and human sense. Campbell emphasizes that these acts of sharing and passing on knowledge are fundamental aspects of the human experience (p. 240). Mark's growth as a person and his willingness to contribute to the betterment of others demonstrate his heroic qualities.

The narration questions if heroism is real. Mark Watney is considered a hero for his achievements on Mars and his mentoring after returning. However, heroism can be viewed differently by people. During his return, Mark takes on new responsibilities, sharing his experiences with others. But does this alone make him a hero? While his journey has transformed him and given him wisdom, heroism isn't just about achievements or sharing knowledge.

Campbell's idea that a hero gains wisdom in the return stage doesn't prove heroism's existence but shows personal growth from experiences. The narration highlights Mark's willingness to help others, making him seem like a true hero. However, heroism is complex and subjective, depending on cultural and social beliefs. While sharing knowledge is admirable, it may not be the only measure of heroism. Heroism can also mean bravery, sacrifice, and doing what's right in difficult situations. Mark's journey aligns with heroic tales, but heroism can take many forms and isn't universally agreed upon. Mark's story may be heroic to some, but others may wonder if heroism is inherent or a label society gives.

Conclusion

The narration explores the concept of heroism and questions its reality. Mark Watney, regarded as a hero for his accomplishments on Mars and his mentoring upon returning, demonstrates heroic qualities through his dedication to the betterment of others. However, the perception of heroism varies among individuals, and while Mark's willingness to share his experiences and help others is commendable, it alone may not fully define heroism. Campbell's idea of a hero gaining wisdom through experiences indicates personal growth but doesn't conclusively prove heroism's existence. Heroism is multifaceted and subjective, influenced by cultural and social beliefs, encompassing bravery, sacrifice, and doing what's right in challenging circumstances. Mark's journey aligns with the heroic archetype, but heroism takes diverse forms and lacks universal consensus, leaving some to ponder its inherent nature or societal attribution.

References

- Åse, C., & Wendt, M. 2018. Gendering the new hero narratives: Military death in Denmark and Sweden. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(1), 23-41.
- Beardow, T. 2018. The Empire Hero. *Studies in Popular Culture*, 41(1), 66-93.
- Bowman, J. 2007. Heroism, modernism, and the utopian impulse. *The New Atlantis*, 17, 70-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152898>.
- Campbell, J. 1972. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton UP.
- Cawelti, J. 2014. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance, Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Carroll, John. 2001. *The Western Dreaming*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Dubois, Lydia. 2019. Superheroes and "the American way": Popular culture, national identity, and American notions of heroism and leadership. *A Thesis*, University of Richmond.

- Gilman, William H. 1967. The Hero and the Heroic in American Literature: An Essay in Definition. *Patterns of Commitment in American Literature*, edited by Marston LaFrance, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1-18.
- Hermes, Joke. 2005. *Re-Reading Popular Culture*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Julius, & Satria, R. 2022. Analysis of Hero's Journey in Jack London's "The Call of The Wild". *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 5(4), 613-618.
- Kasih, E.N.E.W. 2018. Formulating Western fiction in Garrett Touch of Texas. *Arab Word English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 2(2), 142-155.
- Kasih, E.N. & Strid, J.E. 2020. Reconstructing the border: Social integration in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us*. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 14(9), 702-715.
- Morgan, S. 2019. Heroes in the Age of Celebrity: Lafayette, Kossuth, and John Bright in 19th-Century America. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement*, 32, 165-185.
- Nurdiana, Nurdiana & Evyanto, Winda. 2019. The hero journey of Alice in "Alice's Adventure in Wonderland" By Lewis Carrol: Archetypal approach. *Scientia Journal*, 1(2), 1-10.
- Palfy, C. 2016. Anti-hero worship: The emergence of the "Byronic hero" archetype in the Nineteenth Century. *Indiana Theory Review*, 32(1-2), 161-198.
- Quinn, Edward. 2023. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms, Second Edition*. New York: Fact on File.
- Shahan, S. 2021. The service of Samwise: Heroism, imagination, and restoration. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, 62, 17-25.