Performative Heroics

by

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B.A. & B.S.Ed., The University of Idaho, 2023

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Children's Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2026

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Performative Heroics

Submitted by Dakota K Brown in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Children's Literature.

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Abstract

This thesis explores heroics within the popular anime series *My Hero Academia* (MHA), giving attention to its depiction of heroism as a performative, pedagogical and institutional practice. Drawing on critical literacies and approaches to pedagogy, *Performative Heroics* interrogates how characters from this series are not only trained in combat and rescue but also in public image management and moral identity. This is similar to the expectations placed on contemporary youth who are navigating identity and civic responsibility in a media-saturated world. Young people are constantly facing a barrage of content that is influencing how they will be perceived by others, as well as telling them what values and expectations are placed on their interests.

Alongside narrative analysis within the chapters of this thesis, the author provides their experience in the form of vignettes. These vignettes parallel their interest in pursuing this media as a potential resource for teaching. They argue that *My Hero Academia* provides a compelling site for secondary students to engage in critical dialogue around selfhood, institutional trust and the performative nature of social roles. MHA is used as a case study of youth moral and identity development and this thesis aims to examine the pedagogical affordances of its story, in addition to making a case for similar texts to be analyzed in secondary English classrooms.

To support the use of anime and popular media in secondary English Language Arts classrooms, *Performative Heroics* also includes adaptable lesson plans and discussion prompts that demonstrate how *My Hero Academia* (MHA) can be used to meet learning objectives in secondary English Language Arts (ELA), Social Studies, and other media literacy curricula. These lessons are designed to be taken up and/or augmented by any educators interested in

integrating such texts into their practice; however, please note that the author draws their knowledge from experience as an American secondary teacher. These resources are designed to equip educators with methods for fostering critical thinking and culturally responsive conversations through the integration of popular culture that represents modern students' experience of moral conscription in a world heavily shaped through media perception.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines how *My Hero Academia* (MHA) presents heroism as a concept that is taught, performed, and regulated through institutions. Characters are trained in managing their public image and moral behavior, which are issues that many adolescents face while forming their own identities in a media-driven world. This thesis argues that the themes presented in MHA make it a positive resource for discussions surrounding ethics, selfhood and the inherent performative nature of social roles in secondary education environments. Alongside this analysis, the author includes personal vignettes that connect the show's themes to lived experiences. While MHA is a fictional story about superpowers, it reflects the same expectations and moral pressures encountered by youth. This thesis advocates for the inclusion of new media like anime in secondary classrooms, offering lesson plans that show how these stories can potentially boost engagement while supporting critical thinking surrounding identity, social responsibility and the continued development of media literacy.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Dakota Brown, and is a partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Arts in Children's Literature program at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Notice of Publication

The lesson plans that have been written for this thesis will also be published on an open-access educational resource site for teaching with popular culture in mid-2026.

Statement on the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

All core written work within this thesis, including the development of research questions, theoretical framing and close readings of *My Hero Academia* (narrative analysis, interpretations, arguments, etc.) has been conducted by me. Generative AI was not used to produce any data, generate citations or to substitute for my own written analysis. I do explicitly want to acknowledge that I maintained consistent usage of the platform Grammarly in the polishing and revision process of putting together this thesis, which does utilize integrated AI tools.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by offering my sincerest thanks to my committee members: Dr. Eric Meyers and Dr. Amber Moore, who have been incredibly kind and open-minded to the creation of my hybrid thesis. You have both been people that I have come to about this project and for learning more about the world of academia, and I am grateful to have been given time not only as your student, but as your mentee throughout the graduate school experience. Thank you for believing in me.

Next, I would like to thank all of the wonderful people I have been allowed to befriend and work alongside as a graduate student at UBC: Caroline Brown, Matt Clarke, Christal Rose Hazelton, Nicola Kirk, Jamie Leung, Megan Pruitt, and Sally White–-just to name a few. I have loved taking classes with all of you and participating in the communities that we developed. Thank you to Biz Nijdam, Director of UBC's Comics Studies and Pop Culture Clusters, for taking a chance on hiring me to the Pop Pedagogies Archive. I am grateful that I have been taken in by your community to help curate a collection of materials for educators. Your kindness in allowing me to hone my skills as a curriculum designer and researcher is most appreciated and helped toward the completion of this thesis.

Outside of academia, I would also like to extend warm thanks to those who have always been there for me: to my parents and grandparents–we did it! This accomplishment is as much yours as it is my own; I would not be where I am today without your continued support in my education and personal growth. I have been fortunate enough to be blessed with a family who loves and believes in me, even when I'm studying something a little out of the wheelhouse! To my friends back home who have also been a source of inspiration and reprieve over the years,

thank you for being nerds with me. We are bringing our geekiness into the mainstream with this one. I love you all.

And finally, to all of the educators in my life who nurtured my love of learning, thank you. A special shoutout to Jake Dyer at Lewiston High School, who has been a constant for the past ten years. This, too, is for you.

This thesis is dedicated to every child who has ever desired to be a hero for someone else, and every adult who has been afforded the privilege (and burden) of bearing that responsibility.

Chapter One: Introduction “Plus Ultra”

“All men are not created equal.” - Izuku Midoriya (*My Hero Academia*, Season 1, Episode 1)

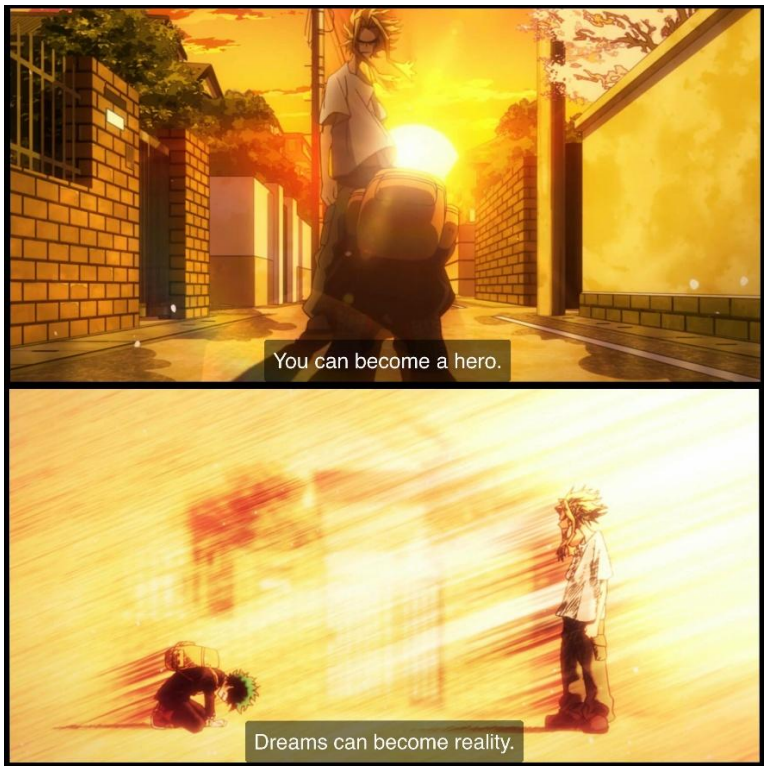

Figure 1: Screenshots from MHA, Season 1, Episode 2 “What It Takes to Be a Hero” sourced from r/BokuNoHeroAcademia reddit thread, posted by @viewsjay.

This project starts with a story. It begins with a girl inside a little old house, on the lap of her favorite storyteller. He wore oily overalls dusted with woodshop debris, a black leather jacket that held the smell of smoke mixed with Winterfresh mint, and a U.S. Army veteran's cap on the top of his head. The storyteller’s eyes were bright blue, like hers–-even though they weren’t blood-related. He was her Deedah, one of the people she loved most in the entire world…

And he was a hero.

The storyteller loved telling tall tales to the little girl about his time in the service. His stories were meant to make the truth more of a fantasy, a thing of make-believe that still held meaning. He spoke of thick jungles and men hiding in the long grasses of some faraway place, and when she looked at the scales on his legs, he told her they came from this chemical that fell from the sky and hurt a lot of people. She flakes the dead skin off his body while they are watching their favorite program together, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. They both think Buffy is a superhero. The little girl asks him if the chemical gave him any superpowers or magic, like in the shows they watched together.

He tells her it's a secret, but she'll learn the truth someday when she's older.

Vignette #1 "Heroes: The Origin Story"

You may be asking yourself, why is this the beginning for a project on heroics, education, and everything promised at the start of this thesis? This is not a thesis about the Vietnam War, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or the power of memory, but we are beginning here because each section of this project will feature a personal vignette that connects the conversations taking place within its corresponding chapter to some aspect of the real world. This is to demonstrate a tangible thread between myself as a storyteller and as an academic who is interested in analyzing and creating educational content. As expressed in vignette one, my childhood has influenced my growing obsession with superhero narratives, but it is not an interest that originated with *Marvel* or *DC*. It began with an ordinary man, someone who I saw as a hero because he had a heart that was full of love for others, despite the amount of harm he had seen in the world. He is someone I now search for inside everyone who is still living, and every story I read. My implicit measure of goodness, and subsequently, my view of heroism, is deeply embedded in the characteristics

exhibited by those who stepped up for me as a child. These modeled actions and behaviors influenced my expectations of society, and I realized an intrinsic part of myself: I never see people for who they are, but instead for who they could become.

In my perspective, the real world is full of untapped potential, and the entirety of adolescence could be summarized as a personal meditation on the practice of becoming. The concept of liminality experienced within adolescence borrows from scholarship in psychology, often tethered to transitional time periods. When applied to education, this term has been used to explore relationships between one's learning environment and the experience of the learner. Liminality in some cases, "appears to capture some of the complexities and contradictions…[and] to explain some of the daily realities of urban students" (Bettis, 1996, p. 115). While Bettis' study features an urban setting, this does not necessarily mark exclusivity. For the purposes of this thesis, we are viewing the liminality of adolescence as a transitional period marked by potential growth. As such, this phase must also be regarded as a time that is defined by change. I wanted to select a piece of media for this case study that acted as an example of the liminality that is found within the high school experience that I witnessed as a student and teacher: a piece of media that would represent a time when kids are learning what version of themselves they want to be as they reach adulthood. Adolescence involves making mistakes, taking risks, and learning about the people and institutions that have influenced a person during their development.

Children's literature scholars and those involved in education have several definitions of adolescence that can operate concurrently within this thesis. For instance, an explanation of adolescent literature by Roberta Seelinger Trites defines this time period as not only being about growth, but also in what context that growth develops in, "that growth always takes place in the

context of power—who has it, who doesn't, and what must be negotiated in order for the adolescent to gain power in his or her culture," (Trites, 2007, as cited in Coats, 2011, p. 317). Conceptions of adolescence are important to consider in this project because of it's emphasis on looking into the development of youth identity.

I knew I also wanted to design a case study that invites discussion on how the media presents acts of goodwill, crime, and current issues in everyday life. I wanted to choose something that I personally adored while I was a teenager and throughout my young adult experience. Thus, this led me to my selected media. *My Hero Academia* is a story that follows a group of high schoolers who are navigating a world where they are commodified by their heroic potential. It presents universal themes of growing up and doing whatever it takes to go beyond and reach your highest potential. This story is about a young boy who dreams of becoming the world's greatest hero. Kohei Horikoshi is the creator of this series, which recently concluded its nearly decade-long run in December 2025 (apart from the 10th anniversary episode, scheduled for May 2026). My thesis, *Performative Heroics,* engages with critical literacy perspectives to analyze this text, which has not been centered in academic discussions. I hope to take a commercially popular shōnen anime series seriously as a valuable text where questions of power, institutional trust and moral identity are staged for a youth audience. In doing so, I argue that hero training in *My Hero Academia* operates as a metaphor for meritocratic schooling environments: students are ranked, sorted, and celebrated not only for their abilities but for their capacity to perform the role of being a "hero" in ways that align with institutional expectations.

This thesis demonstrates how to address concepts such as performativity and the "hidden" curriculum that is already circulating in student's lives through its analysis of these behaviors and patterns which are on display through MHA. The definition of performativity that I draw

from emerges from Locke's (2015) article on its' impact in the field of education. She writes, "[it] is the quest for efficiency: the very best input/output equation," (Locke, 2015, np). Locke goes on to cite other scholars' (McKenzie and Lyotard, n.d.) perspectives on the concept of performance and how it is measured in education settings. McKenzie asserts that performance is a dominant form of social evaluation and is a cultural medium that serves as a support mechanism to capitalistic systems, whereas Lyotard speaks at length on the idea that institutions, including education, get organized around measurability within the market. While Locke goes more into depth about the ways these scholar's thoughts come together in conversation with educational environments (e.g. the performance reviews of educators, or academic success of students), I apply this notion of performance to the social capital that exists between peers in a student body through their engagement with accepted, and celebrated forms of their heroic identities. Identities which are built on this "quest" for the best form of selfhood, measured through their success as heroes.

When it comes to hidden curriculum, I am speaking about the correlation between what is subliminally valued, versus what is not within a society through its affinity and fringe groups, i.e. the acceptable versions of self that one may show to the world, and the depictions which are deemed less desirable by other members of the same institution or social group. Popular culture texts are not just tools for engagement, but complex sites where young people encounter and often negotiate ideological concepts surrounding who they are, and what they could become. Further, this thesis situates anime as a valuable object of study in a North American ELA context. Scholarship created by others within education, literacy and new media discusses the importance of multimodal literacies, such as DeJaynes (2022), Kerr (2013), Cheung and Sullivan (2017), etc., as well as discussion surrounding fandom and digital cultures from Gee (2018),

Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) in shaping young minds; my work builds on this by showing how a Japanese anime series can function as a powerful text for examining how adolescents understand success, failure, and potential.

My Hero Academia encourages audience interrogation of how institutions construct and circulate narratives of good citizenship or reaching an ideal. It also asks young people to grapple with inherited expectations and the emotional cost of constant performance. My work also examines the role of affinity spaces, from scholarship by Beasley et al. (2024) and Gee (2018) and how those operate within regulated systems that function to shape identity, like educational institutions. I will be drawing on research from scholars such as Alvermann, Heron-Hruby and Hagood (2001; 2010) who explore literacy identity work in secondary school settings. I hope to discuss the ways in which these spaces and practices, both fictional and real, are instrumental in the formation of one's beliefs and selfhood.

In essence, I am hoping to accomplish three goals through this thesis: (1) I want to approach the current situation of heroic texts that are currently in circulation in educational spaces. I am approaching this project with prior pedagogical experience through teaching canon texts, and the lived experience of witnessing how it can be difficult to engage adolescents in literary learning with them. Next, (2) I provide lesson plans that correspond with the larger thematic ideas explored in this thesis. I want to offer resources that not only provide a concrete way for educators to approach teaching MHA, but also provide ideas for how they can adapt this content to enhance their pre-existing ELA units of study for any content covering heroism as well as critiques of social systems. Thirdly, (3) all of this is an effort to help students develop their skills in media literacy. The arguments presented here are meant to open conversations about how topics in the secondary ELA classroom often connect to the real world, and how discussing

stories helps us to develop the capability for nuanced thought alongside greater empathy for others, and a better understanding of our experiences.

Positionality Statement

I identify as a white, cisgender, able-bodied American woman raised in Lewiston, Idaho–a rural town situated on the ancestral homelands of the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) tribe. My lived experience as someone born and raised in the Pacific Northwest has shaped my cultural lens and informs the way I approach both literature and pedagogy. As a monolingual English speaker, my access to global perspectives is limited by language, and this thesis relies exclusively on English-language materials, including the dubbed anime adaptation of *My Hero Academia* (MHA), a Japanese manga and animated series.

I come from a community heavily affected by teen mortality due to suicide, substance use, and accidental deaths. These early exposures to systemic issues–including educational inequities-led me to participating in outreach programs from a young age. As a high school student, I volunteered as a tutor for elementary students in low-income neighborhoods, served in local food programs, and took part in community clean-up efforts. I was raised in a single-parent, non-religious household that often functioned as a safe space for many children in our neighborhood. These early experiences influenced my undergraduate studies in English and Education, and later my work as a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) for the Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, a national network in the United States that connects volunteers with active cases in the juvenile court system to assist in advocacy for youth experiencing displacement and act in the best interest of children encountering abuse or neglect. I then pursued substitute teaching in my

hometown district, and eventually landed a position as an ELA teacher at Lewiston High School for ninth-grade and eleventh-grade students.

I love teaching; however, my time in the classroom showed a significant gap between the curriculum taught and the experiences of our student body. The content often failed to reflect the identities, struggles, and dreams of my students. I began to question how traditional literary texts could be complemented or expanded by contemporary, culturally relevant narratives–especially those that are found within popular media. This thesis comes from the desire to bridge the canon of educational texts typically found in the American education system with new media that resonate with the lived experiences of modern adolescents. I hope to create curriculum materials that speak to young people who may not see themselves in traditional literary heroes, and to leverage the power of popular culture, specifically within the case example of *My Hero Academia*, to inspire critical thinking and moral reflection in the classroom setting. While I recognize that MHA is a Japanese work, my engagement with the story is through the lens of an American educator working in predominantly white, working-class public-school systems. I approach this text not as an expert in Japanese culture, but as a teacher who is searching for texts and tools that could form more inclusive and emotionally resonant learning environments.

It must be noted that certain innate biases exist within the construction of this thesis. I selected the media for review not only because of its direct allusions to student life in secondary institutions, but also for its commentary on meritocratic societies, capitalism, and its lasting effects on both national and individual identities. Superhero media is often used to enact commentary on humanity and our roles with each other. I would like to acknowledge that the analysis portion of this thesis could be adapted to feature other works of popular media, and that although the lessons crafted in conjunction with my thesis feature *My Hero Academia*, they

could also be augmented for other hero stories (traditional or modern). While reading, please keep in mind that the supplementary educational content created for this thesis will be aimed at an 8-12 ELA classroom, because this is where I draw most of my personal familiarity with teaching.

Much of my identity is tied to the belief that all young people deserve love, support, and stories that validate their experiences, while also exposing them to new ideas that challenge their perceptions of the world. I want to acknowledge the limitations of my perspective due to my positionality, but I also believe that my work will offer a representation of how modern media from non-traditional settings, such as MHA, holds promise for secondary ELA classrooms. It is my desire that this thesis contributes meaningful resources to the field of secondary education by intentionally drawing from critical theoretical frameworks and pedagogical perspectives that promote more nuanced discussions of modern kids' media and its place in education.

Media Rationale

To make an argument for the use of MHA in an educational environment, I first need to provide a summary of the work. *My Hero Academia* (2016-2025) is an animated television series based on a manga of the same name, created by Kohei Horikoshi. At the beginning of this narrative, we are told that the world has evolved into a superhuman society in which 80% of the population now possesses some form of superpower or affinity. As a result of the rise in superpowers, which are known as "Quirks," the fastest-growing industry is a fusion between service and entertainment. It is the commercialized and government-sanctioned development of heroes. These people are revered and ranked in popularity by the public for their impact on their country's well-being. In Horikoshi's world, students do not aspire to attain usual professions.

Instead, many strive to attend the most prestigious hero academy in the nation, U.A. high school. This dream is no different for the show's protagonist, a teenage boy named Izuku Midoriya who was born Quirkless. MHA takes place in a futuristic Japan, a collectivist society, but the series has nods to more individualistic ideological concepts that are found in other cultures.

I am drawn to this series because of the parallels found in the character's narrative arcs throughout its run, and the lived experiences of different types of students. Horikoshi's story places emphasis on witnessing the growth of its' main cast of teens as they not only develop their identities as future pro-heroes, but deal with the very real consequences of hero society—ranging from issues with family legacy, stigmatism for having the "wrong" type of power, and this overarching critique of feeding into a system that is actively crumbling but sustaining itself through the aspirations of children who desire to save the world. Yet, for all its bad, there remains a constant thread of hope that is presented through our main character. There are a couple of key items I want to discuss; namely, the way power is presented, and how performance is demonstrated. This will be aligned with similar experiences found in the lives of modern students that I have experience interacting with as an educator and backed through education scholarship. I perceive MHA to be a good fit for the secondary ELA setting for teachers wishing to discuss the aforementioned topics, but it may not be the best for everyone.

Returning to some of the societal differences mentioned between MHA's setting and that of places found in North America, it is important to discuss what still draws interest across the globe for series consumers. What makes it work internationally? In a review of the show's success, one commentator expresses the hybridity and appeal of the show as follows:

> "Western countries favor individualism; [and] the pervasive "chosen one" storyline is an example of this mindset. Eastern countries like Japan, however, are collectivist, meaning the group is prioritized over the individual. [In MHA,] friends double as rivals and act as motivators for individual success…it's a Japanese show with primarily Japanese values, but it offers surprisingly strong undertones of American individualism" (Spector, 2017, np).

Within Horikoshi's narrative, ethical questions about identity are brought into the fold through a large cast of characters. The high school setting of U.A. features a formal sorting system that places students into distinct tracks: hero, support, general, and business. Each of these routes carries different expectations and levels of prestige. This system shapes students' identities before the school year even begins, positioning their role in society as something that is closely tied to institutional judgment. In relevant discussion surrounding the process of sorting in education, "Schools force students to compete for categorical distinctions that mark their merit and worth. These categorical distinctions are at the heart of educational meritocracy," (Domina, et. al., 2023, pp. 15-16). This is a social structure that grants educational systems power that influences the perception of merit within a society, which remains true for MHA's arcs involving how U.A. shapes their students enrolled in their highly-publicized and widely-admired hero courses into products for their society.

In MHA, placement is largely determined by the nature and the strength of a student's Quirk, meaning that one's sense of self becomes inseparable from perceived power and potential. Later on in this thesis, I will discuss the concrete methods of sorting at the fictional institution of U.A. and how similar measurements of power are often important in shōnen media, typically noted for its focus on action and defeating evil. This fictional sorting system is akin to real-world educational tracking practices, though they are labeled and enacted differently across cultural

contexts. In Japan, entrance exams often determine whether students follow academic or vocational pathways. There is also the concept of Naishinten (academic records) which evaluate students not only on their exam results, but their overall performance in junior high. The culture of education in Japan situates their youth within a merit-based system, with students taking rounds of entrance exams at different stages in their adolescence (Naruge, 2025, np). Japan has compulsory secondary education which is for students below the age of fifteen. Public institutions do not require these entrance exams. However, after compulsory education ends, the majority of students continue onward to high school. High school is not considered compulsory, thus, both public and private hold entrance exams (Sakurai, 2024, np).

To compare against my own educational context of rural America (specifically, northern Idaho), students may choose Career-Technical Education (CTE) courses or alternative versions of core classes designed for non-college bound routes. While these systems share an overlap between differentiated career trajectories, they split access and agency. U.A. students are assigned their track prior to enrollment, reinforcing the idea that opportunity is predetermined by innate ability. Reading this allegorically offers a reflection of tensions that exist in education systems which frame students as “academic” versus “non-academic,” and reveals how institutional structures can influence the way young people view themselves and their future. The social factors that are responsible for developing identity are important in both narrative study and in analyzing the real world, because they hold impact over not only individual sense of self, but one’s purpose in the institutions and communities they are actively engaged with. In Marc Labelle’s scholarship, he explores the liminality of adulthood and the impact of youth programming on identity. He discusses experiential education and is concerned with how liminal experience may facilitate the development of self- identity:

> "Identity serves as a context within which worldviews are constructed, communicated and defended. Through active participation in the social world (relationships, learning and enactment), people construct a set of knowledge about the world and themselves; thus, their identity is built from social and psychological influences." (Labelle, 2006, p. 11).

The construction of self, and the active participation within an environment that helps to curate this identity are crucial in understanding the development of young people. While Labelle's study centered on adult participants, it discussed multiple facets of liminality in areas of psychology, sociology, organizational systems, business, and youth development. It can be argued then that identity is not only critically connected to the transitional period typical of a high school experience but also carries over in liminal spaces found within adulthood.

While I was teaching, I found a plethora of similarities in my student's interests for professional roles they wanted to pursue as adults. These often correlated to their individual backgrounds and the perception of education within our community. It was also apparent that interests changed over time as students aged, becoming less oriented toward "dreams" and more influenced by access or perceived security. Many of my younger students expressed interest in careers involving sports, entertainment, or the arts, whereas my older students were more inclined to favor positions affiliated with the trades, military, and what could be considered stable sectors of society. This phenomenon is also present in MHA through the fictional student's career interest in heroics, as well as pro-hero and civilian attitudes toward heroes' responsibility to maintain peace.

I also find it important to discuss the overarching conflict of heroes versus villains in this world. I intend to make an additional argument for the influence that access and public opinion

have on outcomes for people's perception of self and their purpose. Horikoshi's story places adequate emphasis on the backgrounds of its villainous characters being representative of anti-institutional extremism and resulting from ideological collapse regarding heroes. Additionally, there is a liminal space between the presentation of heroism and villainy through heroic characters that work in the shadows or as undercover operatives within this world; willing to get their hands dirty if it is for the sake of "the greater good" which contrasts against their counterparts who present a very different form of heroic work to the media and public world. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be looking into the liminalities associated with adolescence, as well as the ones at play within the moral presentation of heroism as it is performed and executed within the series. I will not extend too far into the evaluation of masks of heroics, but briefly discuss the faces shown to the public, compared to what their society doesn't see but MHA's audience remains privy to.

In the fictional universe of *My Hero Academia*, the audience is primarily exposed to two parallel institutions working within the framework of the heroic era. U.A. high school is a pipeline school with national recognition in the creation of some of the top-ranking pros on Japan's Hero Billboard Chart. The adult institution that exists alongside U.A. is the Hero Public Safety Commission, which is responsible for managing interactions between professional heroes and the rest of Japan. This institutional set-up is intriguing because the setting mimics social and professional expectations in real life meritocratic societies which value measurable actions of good will or success. Additionally, there is discourse to consider surrounding the industry of heroes and who is "responsible" for maintaining a good world. This acts alongside a growing critique of how systems can negatively and positively affect those within them.

When the U.A. setting comes into play within MHA's narrative, the audience is given explicit insight into the backgrounds and goals of the students who are a part of the hero academia. This is done through conversations with peers, flashback sequences, and the expression of characters' implicit values as they enter their first year of high school. Some students arrive from a privileged background with deeply embedded heroic legacies, while others have experiences with financial or social burdens that they hope to rectify by becoming a pro hero. The primary protagonist, Izuku Midoriya, is situated as an idealistic, hopeful boy who desires to become a hero because he believes it is the best way to save people. I will speak more about the pedagogical importance of this later in this thesis, but to begin, being oriented within a student body in a public setting exposes one to a range of beliefs and struggles that are experienced by peers. Seeing these expressed in the media they are consuming demonstrates to students that while they are all a part of the same community, each comes from their own unique background that shapes the way they engage with the world. *My Hero Academia* also shows how these initial subsets of values exhibited by teens can be changed over time and exposes problematic flaws within the institutions they are subscribed to. This is a world where, from a young age, kids are conditioned and trained to be fighters against evil. There are school events, like the U.A. Sports Festival, that act as a spectacle for the public and prospective hero agencies to scout future heroes for their companies. National pride is deeply entwined with the industry of heroes, and how easily a student will gain public favor upon graduation. This favor is gained through spectacle, demonstrating competency through athletics and marketability. Beyond school settings, the general public shares a fascination with ranking these kids for their prospective contribution to their country, and this carries over into the popularity system they are subjugated to in adulthood.

I am interested in evaluating the narrative MHA presents around students' desire and perception of heroism, and what their responsibility is for safeguarding the future from present-day threats. Likewise, I am interested in the educational value of reviewing the ethical considerations of this type of system and showing students what aspects of fictional settings are actually acting as reflections of their everyday interpersonal, communal, and national environments. Within popular discourse that exists on *My Hero Academia*, there are a few points of contention that are of value to consider. For instance, the concept of the "legacy hero" found within popular American comics, i.e. "a hero who takes on the powers, and sometimes the costume of an older hero, as a means of extending a heroic identity into the next generation." (Waller, 2020, p. 14). There are several characters within this universe who, like in other Superhero media such as Marvel or D.C., become extensions of others that represent broader ideals or hopes beyond their individual identity. As Tim Hanley writes in his conclusion of *Not All Supermen*, "At their best, superheroes represent our highest ideals, in their own fantastical ways. They use their abilities for the good of others, stand up for the downtrodden and the forgotten, and choose hope over fear," (Hanley, 2022, p. 187). This comes from a critique of toxic masculinity throughout the history of superhero media across generations but is echoed here in the characters who take inspiration from past comic book heroes. While having characters that represent these ideals of society is not innately bad, when the foundation is shaky or if the general populous comes to be too reliant on an ideal, that's where things can get dicey. Many students within the hero track deal with this concept of "reaching the unattainable" or "going beyond" as a primary pressure valve in the development of their own identities. Other conversations being had within the scholarly and popular discourse communities surrounding MHA deal with areas of masculinity, depictions of gender, and the series' prevalence in

fanfiction spaces. While I will touch on these lightly, they are not the main areas of interest for this thesis.

I bring together a few particular frameworks and theories in my analysis of and pedagogical design for MHA, including the Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2021) which is an educational concept focused on how social and economic factors affect rates of success, as well as multiple scholars interested in literary, popular media and identity (Alvermann, Heron-Heruby and 2001; and Hagood 2010), education and meritocracy (Batruch, 2022; Domina et al. 2023; Wiederkehr et al., 2015), and the area of superhero studies (Hanley, 2022; Peretti, 2017, etc.). Since I am developing lessons for this text based on its relatability to students, I believe that it is important to specifically investigate the institution of education (UA) presented within the series and its relationship to those involved in cultivation of the hero academia, paying special attention to students in class 1-A, who represent aspirations and goals of real adolescents.

Focus of Study and Research Questions

My focus of study positions *My Hero Academia* in conversation with the above scholars, as well as Apple (2012) who is interested in critical literacy, Tschannen-Moran (2020) on trust in educational institutions, and Locke (2015) on performance in education settings. This approach to evaluating the text is intentional to frame the animated series' hero training system as a metaphor for real-life educational and social institutions as spaces that define selfhood and morality through hierarchical structures of power. I will discuss how MHA's concept of inherited Quirks (superpowers) reflects the way privilege and obligation are passed through generations– shaping one's perception of worth and their ethical responsibility. Additionally, I will be examining how young heroes internalize this moral weight and share how it parallels the societal

narratives students encounter surrounding success and failure. Through this, the case study example can demonstrate how education and culture construct selfhood; how individuals learn not only to "use" power but understand or misunderstand the systems which grant and regulate it.

When looking at the construction of the hero, scholar Igor Prusa's (2016 have much to say on the shared and differing traits of heroic archetypes between mythos in Japan and the west. He implores the following regarding public responsibility and the symbolic role of the hero:

> "The heroic "beyond good and evil," [...] is the invisible force that maintains socially-integrative, consumerist attitudes in a system that assimilates resistance by appropriating its symbols and mediating them back to society in the form of a commodity" (Prusa, 2016).

The concept of a hero is impacted by public opinion, and in MHA, the definition is challenged through interactions with villain characters and heroes who work underground without recognition, compared to those who actively seek the spotlight—aiming for the top of the charts by gaining media attention. Heroes are often trained in this world not only to act ethically, but to be seen acting ethically. They perform morality for a public that validates and legitimizes their role. This mirrors the dynamic I have seen in real educational and professional environments, where ethical behavior and achievement are often evaluated through visibility and compliance rather than authentic engagement or reflection. In response to this, many educators and schools in North America are turning toward educational approaches that are student-centered and hyperfixated on what it means to show engagement, "features of the school environment provide the opportunities and resources for engagement to occur, and students' skills, attributes, needs, and values determine how they engage in those opportunities," (Wang and Hofkins, 2019, para. 1). The fictitious, nationally ranked U.A. is a place that curates their educational environment to

produce the “best” of each track of enrollment. While visibility is crucial for hero student’s ranks in this series, their actual success in the future is more predominantly imp acted by their personal goals and desires. Thus, another important real-world consideration to discuss is how students in school are most successful when they are able to produce their own motivation in some form or another.

Connecting the study of heroics to teaching, the institution of education is closely implicated in the politics of culture, and thus, media crafted by these cultures can be utilized as tools for understanding relevant issues. Constructing curriculum that engages in discussion with media that investigates larger issues contributes to the development of critical literacy. Apple calls for the curriculum to explain itself, to not be presented as “objective” to the audience, but “rather, it must constantly subjectify itself. That is, it must “acknowledge its own roots” in the culture, history and social interests out of which it arose” (Apple, 2012, p. 203). MHA is an excellent text for literary exploration because it can allow students to reach typical curricular outcomes, such as studying literary devices, as well as an avenue for investigating important issues such as individual and community identities.

The development of oneself can be linked to the concept of affinity groups (Alvermann and Heron, 2001; Beasley et al. 2024) in school settings, and how this contributes to identity work that is acting in relation to systems that exist in society. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use affinity groups in conversation with how students are sorted in MHA, and how this impacts their social development as well as sense of self. Affinity groups are communities or networks of peers who identify as like-minded or share a particular interest/talent. I examine how affinities are relational to power and perception within this series. As a result, I will also discuss the concept of affinities and their connection to a student’s access to power in an effort to strengthen

arguments presented within both MHA and real-life about educational systems and their influence on student identity.

I extend this analysis into the realm of performance and institutional trust through a conversation on how heroism in MHA is simultaneously celebrated and commodified. For the purposes of this thesis, I define institutional trust as being the relationship between people who interact within a social structure, e.g., in the sphere of secondary education, this would be the dynamics that exist between educators, administration, parents and students. This trust is evaluated through the institution's performance in acting in the best interest of its participants.

Within both the anime and real-world contexts, institutional trust is portrayed as something fragile; it is built upon spectacle and often can be eroded through hypocrisy, exploitation, and inauthenticity. Students interact with an institution that is designed to prepare them for how to be a productive member of the post-industrial society, and this does not always align with the idealization of education being a place that reveres learning for the sake of learning, or to achieve one's personal dreams. Students' connection to trust within educational institutions and by extension, through educators, is impacted by several factors, such as the existence and use of benevolence, "in order for trust to develop, people look to their interdependent partner to evidence an abiding sense of care for them as a person, for the relationship, and for the shared project." (Tschannen-Moran, 2020, np). This perceived benevolence between peers, student-teacher dynamics, as well as teacher to administration in secondary settings is then a vital contributor to the development of trust.

Another point of contention to discuss from MHA about the educational set-up of U.A. high school compared to real-world institutions of learning in North America, is that U.A. is

outwardly designed as a place where kids who dream of becoming heroes can work toward accomplishing that achievement. On a more sinister level, U.A. secondarily acts as a training ground for creating child soldiers who will assist the government during times of crisis. Schools in the real world that promote individualized education focused on student interest are often privatized and access-limited through economic barriers. The way trust can be defined in educational environments is as a collaboration between faculty, staff, students, and parents, "they all shape the meaning of trust based on the nature of that interdependence" (Tschannen-Moran, 2020, np). This is shown in MHA through the interactions between classes and the characters of UA. It is a coalescence of backgrounds coming together for the purpose of upholding the standards of hero society, which aligns with how public schools in North America function to bring all students to graduation with the basic knowledge of how to be a contributing member of adulthood. The research questions that guide this thesis are the following:

What are the educational affordances of teaching texts such as MHA to high school students?

How is identity shaped within systems and institutions in this media?

And the question that plagued my students during their grumbling through *The Odyssey*….

What does it mean to be a hero?

Synopsis of Purpose

In this chapter, I introduced *My Hero Academia* as a popular media text through which English Language Arts (ELA) students can engage contemporary social issues within a multicultural society. I provide background on the series, position it in relation to other texts and traditions, and argue that *MHA* functions as a powerful text for study—one that can help ELA

classrooms engage with deeper questions about what it means to be a good citizen and how we might live together in a good society. In the chapters that follow, I will go deeper into some of the thematic topics within the series that are rich for analysis. Chapter Two situates *MHA* within shōnen and literacy scholarship to establish why it matters as a classroom text; Chapter Three examines power and inheritance; and Chapter Four explores public persona, ranking, and spectacle. Chapter Five then pulls together my findings, while acknowledging limitations, and aims to offer a hopeful vision for the possibilities of further developing engaging curriculum content in ELA classrooms.

Taken together, these are some of the central reasons why studying *My Hero Academia* is both a core interest of this thesis and valuable across multiple contexts. The series engages with themes that align with what is already commonly taught in secondary ELA classrooms, while also offering social commentary that invites students to discuss and compare the experiences of characters on screen with those in their own lives. In doing so, it demonstrates the liminality of adolescence and offers insight into how institutions, access to opportunity, and affinity groups all shape identity, making it a good resource for supporting critical literacy.

Chapter Two: Media Review

"Whether you win or lose, looking back and learning from your experience is a part of life."

- All Might (*My Hero Academia*, Season 6, Episode 3).

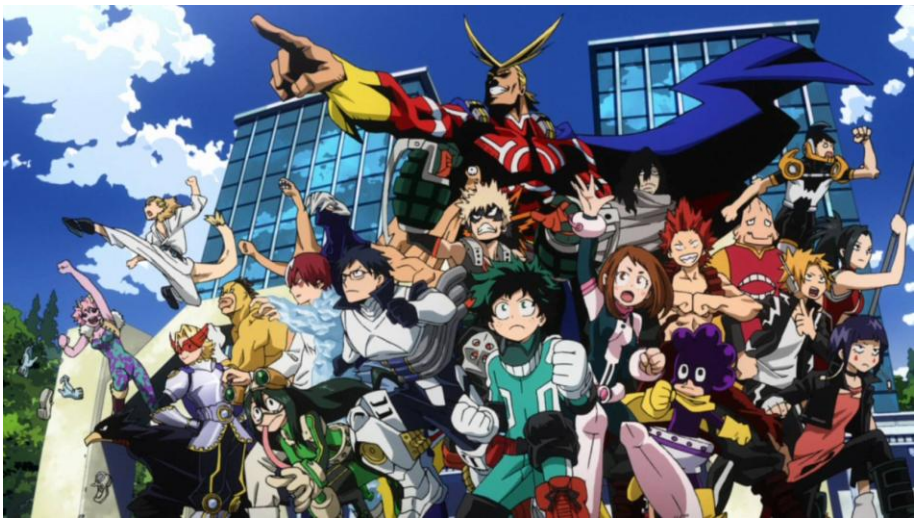

Figure 2: Image of Class 1-A students and teacher, All Might. Taken from Oluwatokiloba Folami's post on GameRant, discussing U.A. high school.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" the young girl asks her friend. The two of them are lying on the roof of her mama's house, staring out across the night sky; they have spent their entire lives sharing the same stars. In the orchards, it's easy to see every constellation arrive clearly. It is the dead of summer, and they can smell a storm on the horizon; dark clouds are bleeding beyond their view, hiding any falling wishes from sight.

He turns toward her, exasperation lining his features. His friend always does this; she can't sit in silence for too long before the questions begin turning into hypotheticals, and then into spirals and stories. Just this spring, she had yanked him into the house with a half dozen other

neighborhood kids to perform a play she had written. He had been one of the leads, of course, because he was always a main character in her stories. Her mama had videotaped the entire thing for them to watch someday in the future, when they were older.

"Well, I dunno. I suppose I want to be a good guy, I guess. I'd like to be a hero."

Vignette #2 "When I Grow Up"

Throughout this chapter, I situate *My Hero Academia* within the traditions and conventions of shōnen manga and anime in order to explain what kind of story it is, how it works on its audience and why it has become such a popular series for adolescents and young adults. I discuss key genre features (e.g. mentorship, rivalry, moral testing, etc.) and connect these elements to the series' relationship with Western superhero narratives. I also evaluate existing scholarship on manga/anime in educational contexts and its importance in the development of literacy to argue that student engagement with popular media is not a distraction from learning, but something that offers meaningful opportunity for both identity-making and civic imagination. Finally, I preview the thematic concepts that will be explored in later chapters and provide my first lesson plan for introducing MHA to the classroom.

Shōnen Manga & Anime

The story of *My Hero Academia* is situated within the broader tradition of shōnen manga and anime, which are defined as popular Japanese narratives primarily marketed toward adolescent boys ages 10+, and often focused on themes of heroism and bravery (Rudes, 2022, np). However, this category is widely consumed across both age and gender. Youth fanbases for manga and anime are projected to substantially increase over the next few years as "the US

market is projected to grow at the fastest compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16% between 2025 and 2030, signaling a broader global shift in media consumption and cultural influence," (Păun and Stănculescu, 2025, Introduction). MHA is a mainstream shōnen series across North America and in Japan. Its sustained popularity stems from both cross-cultural appeal and interest in superhero media. Typically, these stories feature training arcs and rivalries that prove to be instrumental in the development of the main protagonist, in addition to some form of mentorship. They also look into themes that provide moral inquiries, consider personal growth, and dynamics of power at the individual and systemic level.

Shōnen story conventions are not only present but explicitly embedded within educational and institutional frameworks of MHA and are a meaningful resource for use in secondary ELA classroom analysis due to the series' emphasis on the structure of hero society. It utilizes the traditional arcs not only as narrative check points, but as opportunities for criticisms against its design through seeing how it impacts a wide net of characters. Shōnen series as a whole are a medium of storytelling where young people learn essential life lessons, portraying characters that rise to the occasion and persevere, "by immersing themselves in these stories and empathizing with the characters, readers come to deeply understand and feel the significance of these values," (Ota, Kuwataka, Iba, 2024, p. 2). Having students engage with these texts holds the possibility for considering and developing their "moral" coding, or to view opposing perspectives.

This thesis is in conversation with scholars who have an interest in exploring manga and anime in educational settings, such as Cheung and O'Sullivan (2017) who discuss teacher attitudes to media culture in secondary ELA settings, or Rudes (2022), who discusses integrating these texts into scholastic environments through school library collections. The activities presented within the lesson plans of this thesis take inspiration from activities conducted with

adolescents, like fanfiction writing–discussed at length by Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) in their article on multiliteracies inspired by anime, as well as DeJaynes (2022) in their piece on multimodal authorship, citing scholars such as Kristine Kerr (2013), known for writing educational content on the cultivation of self for students. These are just a few of the people who are mentioned that have a vested interest in the usage and importance of these texts as valid sources for investigation in the landscape of education.

The primary educational institution shown within MHA is U.A. high school. UA's curriculum showcases events like the Sports Festival, where student development is measured through competition. This reinforces the idea that growth must be *seen* to be validated. The concept of mentorship can be found in relationships such as All Might and the series' protagonist, Izuku Midoriya, where power is inherited alongside moral expectation. As the series progresses, moral stakes escalate beyond individual success toward upholding society. Throughout MHA, the idea of power is framed not merely as physical ability but as identity itself: a Quirk determines social positioning, opportunity, and for many, a sense of self-worth. Much of the shōnen genre is in conversation with the implications of power, and the concept of heroism. On a broader scale, heroic figures, like the ones found within this genre, are considered to be a staple within popular culture and represent "an extended symbolic network of various shared myths […] heroes and idols relate to the social system and to its power structure since they create socially understood meanings of identity." (Prusa, 2016, para. 3). Together, all of these notions place *My Hero Academia* as a shōnen narrative acting as a sustained meditation on the construction of moral identity, and as an appropriate model for exploring that symbolic relationship to the system of education centered on creating moral agents—the next generation of heroes.

By framing MHA as a shōnen text, this section also establishes a key argument for my thesis: the genre's obsession with becoming: becoming stronger, becoming worthy, becoming recognized, and it demonstrates the developmental pressures students experience in school systems that reward performance and visible achievement. In other words, shōnen is not "just fights"; it is a narrative style for looking into how young people learn to perform identity within institutional expectations, making it a useful bridge between pop culture literacy and critical classroom conversations. Rudes (2022) also brings into discussion how manga can also act as a support system for social-emotional development of audiences, allowing for reflection. The areas of manga and anime are less studied when it comes to adolescent impact, and there are areas of concern to address, such as the depiction of violence often found in these series. Aggression is often demonstrated in these shows, but evidence suggests a range of narrative framing of these actions—from glamorization to moral questioning and character development. This suggests that contextualization of these visuals is important for consideration in analysis (Păun and Stănculescu, 2025, np). Violence is not uncommon in today's media, but the way we talk about and approach it in educational environments varies. The usage of anime in the classroom is valuable because it provides another form of storytelling, which helps students to become culturally responsive and build their literacy toolkits, but is not without potential for harm which should be evaluated by the educator for an appropriate community fit to their classroom environment.

In the secondary ELA classroom, there are many pathways for meaningful literacy learning, including through engagement with multimodal texts. It is appropriate to include multimodal texts, like anime and manga within this setting, because "literacy is an ever-evolving communication phenomenon," (Cheung and O'Sullivan, 2017, p. 4) and thus, the texts being

consumed and evaluated in the classroom should accurately reflect aspects of these student's lived experiences as they are also evolving with the times. Inclusivity of these other sources of media ensures students are receiving access to content that provides parallelisms, as well as opportunities for analyzing other perspectives through the lens of another culture or social group.

What is so special about *My Hero Academia*?

What strikes me as being most valuable while approaching this case study through an educator's perspective is the series' split in focus between the lives of students who are seeking to become future heroes and the overarching tension within the narrative that surrounds a collapse in societal belief in heroism. The primary protagonist of *My Hero Academia* is Izuku Midoriya, a child who was born Quirkless (without superpowers) in a world where most of the population has some form of a superhuman ability. During the initial development of Quirks, the world plunged into chaos and a system needed to be developed. The current hero system and Quirk laws used in Horikoshi's fictional version of Japan are drawn from initial regulations in the U.S., making America the pioneer of modern Quirk laws followed within this universe (Nasir, 2024, para. 4). With the rise in supernatural abilities, a new profession began dominating the globe–professional heroes employed by the government and various agency corporations to suppress the threat of villainy.

MHA opens with the audience meeting Izuku Midoriya in middle school, before the start of his journey as a hero student at U.A. high school–the most prestigious academy for heroics in the country of Japan. The audience is also introduced to the deuteragonist of the series, Katsuki Bakugo, a volatile young boy and childhood rival of the protagonist. Bakugo serves the narrative as both an arc of redemption, and a counter ideal against Midoriya's concept of heroism. One

boy represents the pursuit of victory and the other, inspiring hope. What progresses the story away from these initial scenes at the middle school is the appearance of a villain who captures the attention of Bakugo and Midoriya's heroic idol—All Might: the world's number one hero and "Symbol of Peace." According to popular fan discourse, this character is a depiction of idealized American comic heroes from the Golden Age of comic books and fulfills an almost parody role of heroes such as Captain America and Superman (Vargas, 2017, np). In *Superman In Myth and Folklore*, folklorist Daniel Peretti speaks about the cultural impact of superhero narratives, focusing on the myth of Superman and how it has permeated the collective consciousness of people's lives across the world. He writes, "Superman [exists as] a paradigm for how things ought to be. In these thoughts, we can see a perspective that places Superman not in the "as if" mode but the "ought." It's the difference between living as if the story is true and living in order to make it come true" (Peretti, 2017, p. 61). All Might, as a stand-in for Superman follows the same cultural responsibility within the universe of MHA, he is their ideal—the way superheroes ought to be.

Unbeknownst to the masses, All Might is in possession of a Quirk known as "One For All" (OFA) that is transferable to another individual. This is something that is unheard of in this world where you are born with power. Due to an encounter with his archnemesis, All For One, five-years prior to the events of the series, All Might's body is no longer able to sustain his heroic or "ideal" form. Thus, the "Symbol of Peace" is secretly searching for a successor. Through a series of events that unfold within the pre-high school arc of the first season, that successor becomes Izuku Midoriya, who has to train his body to withhold the power gifted to him by All Might. The audience then learns the number one hero is going to be one of Midoriya's new teachers at U.A. high school.

Their shared Quirk acts as a symbolic motif throughout the series for hope and selflessness. OFA is an ability that stockpiles power and when transferred from one person to another, it exponentially increases its strength. Described by a series analysis duo online, “Imagine the power One For All as a fire. Every time a user trained a Quirk and passed it on, the flames of the fire got bigger and stronger…[for Midoriya, this power compounds]...not only are the flames getting stronger, but so is the source of the flames,” (The LunchTime Crew, 2021, 5:38). In this context, the duo is referencing the previous power vestiges that exist within his consciousness acting as a collective resource for accessing his new abilities. The Quirk is designed to improve as it is passed along but has lasting implications for its user. Past holders of OFA are more heavily featured later on in the story, when Midoriya’s first-year classmates become more involved with rising tensions between heroes and villains, and ultimately, war.

In the series opening, Midoriya shares that the entire story is centered on how he becomes the world’s greatest hero. This set-up also situates *My Hero Academia* within the traditional story cycle known as the Hero’s Journey, “the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero,” (Campbell, 2004, p. 28), making it a suitable pairing for most canonical texts that already follow this formatting or make use of teaching the model in the classroom. Horikoshi also imbued the show with many of his own childhood experiences, giving a human element to the characters and making them relatable to teen audiences, even though they have superpowers (Kells, 2024, np). Not only does MHA fuse together different ideological stances within Eastern and Western media, but it acts as both an homage and criticism of what is shown in heroic stories, while offering the nuances found in the modern world of teenagers.

Chapter Summaries

Power and Inheritance

In this chapter I will examine how *My Hero Academia* conceptualizes power as something inherited, regulated, and socially interpreted. In the series, Quirks are passed down biologically, situating power within family lineage. This exposes how privilege, expectation, and obligation travel across generations. For instance, characters who are born with powerful or prestigious Quirks inherit not only ability, but a predetermined narrative about who they are supposed to become. This is explored through the inclusion of the Todoroki family, whose youngest son, Shoto, is enrolled as a classmate alongside Midoriya at U.A. high school. Shoto Todoroki is the son of the #2 pro hero in Japan, and his major character arc is learning to accept his power as his own, and not as an extension of his father. To compare, the character of Izuku Midoriya begins Quirkless and shows how a lack of power produces social marginalization.

MHA uses inheritance to critique meritocratic myths: while hero society claims to reward effort and virtue, success is heavily shaped by what one is born with or given. All Might's transfer of One For All complicates this even further, framing inheritance as both gift and burden. Midoriya receives immense power, but also the moral weight of preserving a legacy and sustaining a fragile social order. The chapter parallels these dynamics with real-world educational systems, where students inherit socioeconomic status, cultural capital, trauma, and expectation long before they ever enter a classroom. The chapter presents power in MHA as a lens through which students can interrogate questions of fairness, agency, and responsibility: Who is allowed to be powerful? Who decides what power is for? And how do inherited narratives shape one's sense of worth?

Sacrifice and Spectacle

This chapter focuses on how heroism in *My Hero Academia* is defined not only by selflessness, but by visibility. The hero society in MHA relies on spectacle: televised battles, public rankings, school festivals, and symbolic figures like All Might whose smile functions as a performance meant to suppress fear. Sacrifice becomes meaningful only when it is witnessed and consumed. Heroes are expected to never allow their doubt or pain to destabilize the image of safety they represent. Students at U.A. are inducted into this system early, trained to perform heroism before they are emotionally equipped to understand its cost. Events like the Sports Festival transform adolescent bodies into commodities, evaluated for marketability by hero agencies and the public alike. Villain arcs, particularly the storylines that are rooted in abandonment and neglect, further expose what happens when sacrifice is demanded without care. In other words, what happens when individuals are expected to give everything to systems that ultimately fail to protect them.

I will connect this spectacle-driven heroism to conversations surrounding how students in real classrooms are often rewarded for visible productivity and "ranked" results, such as standardized testing and grades, while background considerations may go unacknowledged. I will also address real-life examples of how the media influences people to perform in a certain capacity, both in a positive and negative lighting. This portion of the thesis considers how media landscapes and education, like hero society in MHA, sometimes values performance over wellbeing. By interrogating sacrifice as something that can be both noble and exploitative, this chapter places *My Hero Academia* as a text that helps students question when sacrifice is ethical, who benefits from it, and when "being a hero" becomes a role that costs too much to sustain.

Pedagogical Overview

Identity is central to many of the arguments being brought into this thesis. Something else that would be beneficial as a key focus in a pedagogical design for teaching MHA is the concept of affinity-identity, and its connection to popular media. Members of affinity groups "participate in constructing and conveying "who they are" through sets of distinctive shared experiences" (Alvermann and Heron, 2001, p. 3). Within *My Hero Academia*, U.A. functions as an institutional space where students are socialized and evaluated in ways that teach them who they are allowed to be. For instance, hero-course students are granted prestige, visibility, and access, while others are regarded as peripheral. Even between the first-year hero courses, a running commentary exists between classes 1-A and 1-B being unequal because of the events in the series that lead to more public recognition of Midoriya's 1-A class. Within this structure, students form tight affinity groups. Class 1-A's identity is continuously constructed through shared trials and crisis events. These become the distinctive shared experiences that Alvermann and Heron describe. Students learn to narrate themselves as certain kinds of people through peer recognition and institutional framing. MHA also shows that these identities are performed for multiple audiences (teachers, agencies, and the public) so students are taught to convey who they are not only inwardly to the group, but outwardly as a brand of heroism. This dynamic is worth attending pedagogically because it is how real students use popular media communities as affinity groups where they test identities, borrow language for selfhood, and establish their sense of belonging.

A particularly fascinating quality of affinity spaces is the tendency for these groups to be structured in a way that mimics a club environment, particularly in a mental health context

affiliated with an educational setting. Beasley (2024) discusses this in their article on affinity groups and mental health services. Participants leaned toward wanting affinity groups being affiliated with different connections, often tied to identity markers like race, gender, or sexuality. Affinity groups for teens are also found in fandom spaces and online social platforms, connected to concepts like participatory culture and friendship. Gee (2018) speaks about how affinity spaces often have a "homebase" where participants have access to engage with other peers. For instance, they use the example of video games and the different interfaces of communication (websites, face-to-face, personal forums, etc.) that occupy this affinity space. The tether between affinity and identity-making is tied to the interests of the engaged members of the group, hence its innate potential for connection with popular culture. I argue that this makes MHA an ideal text for exploring identity work in educational and other institutional contexts because it features an organized group of students who are all pursuing their united interest in becoming heroes.

These scholars, alongside literacy professor, Maragaret Hagood in their book *Bring It To Class* discuss how students and educators engage with popular culture texts. They state, "We negotiate the producer's assigned meanings, and our own accepted meaning, at a given point in time and place. In this way, we construct meaning and determine how we are going to use a text in a given context and what the text means," (Hagood, Alvermann and Heron-Hruby, 2010, p. 8). Using popular culture in secondary settings allows for the opportunity for shared meaning-making, and this process is also vital in the construction of identity. After all, a sense of self is also developed over time through the practice of meaning-making and engagement with products of the society one is navigating throughout adolescence.

This thesis also attends to the significance of supporting opportunities for multimodality in the classroom. Engaging with multimodal texts offers the advantage of "distributing meaning

across [several] modes simultaneously" (Hagood, Alvermann and Heron-Hruby, 2010, p. 19). Its importance is attested to by several other cited authors throughout this thesis such as DeJaynes (2022), Kerr, (2013) Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003), and Cheung and O'Sullivan (2017), who champion methods of instruction or opportunities for curricular development by giving students the chance to learn through multiple means and literacies. In the lessons provided for this thesis, you will find inspiration drawn from these authors' thoughts on using fanfiction as well as thought exercises for students to develop new literacy skills, as well as the benefits of integrating alternative texts in the classroom. Literacy instruction is a prime position for inclusion of multimodal texts because it "focuses on the interplay among the different modalities as students receive information, make meaning, represent ideas, and express their thinking." (Government of Ontario, Instructional Approaches in English). By using popular media such as MHA, students are given a chance to expand their engagement and interaction through the development of paratextual resources, which help to contribute to the process of immersion within story worlds. These story worlds are considered to be elastic and can be manipulated by students and educators to serve different purposes (DeJaynes, 2022, p. 3). It is easier to create these with content that is relatable by design, because they are often crafted in fandom or affinity spaces.

Critical literacy in context with learning through play asks for students to be able to examine and express multiple points of view. Educators are not tasked with forcing students to adopt others' beliefs, but rather act as a guide for allowing discussion and a process of questioning, "by allowing youth's ways of constructing meaning and identity to inform academic practices, play becomes a fruitful endeavor both in and outside classrooms," (Alvermann and Heron, 2001, p. 12). Expanding to considerations of culturally responsive education, using Anime as a tool also

allows us to think about current issues facing Japan while appreciating that any culture contains diverse opinions, viewpoints and values (Ruble and Lysne, 2010). MHA has the added benefit of being engaging across audiences due to its cross-cultural appeal to the West, and directly connecting to the everyday, albeit fantastical, experiences of high school students. Furthermore, I include insight from developers of models in education such as Milner (2021) and the Opportunity Gap Framework, which marks the way that social or economic factors can affect life aspirations of students, "educators must deeply understand both the broader and the more localized social contexts that shape their teaching…educators need to be deliberate in their efforts to locate the "good" in social contexts that others have written off as hopeless," (Milner, 2021, pp. 77-78). The media selected for analysis in this thesis features a cast of characters demonstrating these factors and their implications both inside the walls of UA, a prestigious school for aspiring heroes, as well as to those who exist on the fringes of hero society.

The following section details a lesson plan for use within a secondary ELA education setting (target range grade 9-10) and uses multimodal literacy practices, such as fanfiction writing, noted for its ability to allow students to develop their own paratexts, as well as collaboratively engage with the series through the creation of their own inserts. DeJaynes (2022) cites Kerr (2013) in their findings surrounding these types of writing opportunities with, "avatars are surprising reliable substitutes for our own bodies. Living out the characters in a shared story world and inhabiting a dialogic space enables the writers to talk through and work through ideas about their own lives in a text," (Kerr, 2013, p. 6). Other scholars, drawing on a multiliteracies framework, see fanfiction as a viable classroom opportunity for students to grow as writers (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar, 2003, p. 1). This lesson plan also presents several questions for discussion in small

and large group settings, in addition to charts that are meant to facilitate critical evaluation of scenes from the selected media source.

Lesson #1 (90-minutes, designed for 1-2 class periods)

The Heroic Ideal

This lesson plan could be pulled and adapted for different classrooms and goals in mind. It aims to help secondary students (target, grade 9/10) identify how texts teach audiences what heroism looks like, and how that ideal shapes identity. Keep in mind that this lesson is utilizing MHA as the anchor text, but many of the questions and activities could easily be used to teach other media texts that center on the ethics of heroes and institutions of power.

This lesson could be applied to other media, for instance, the Percy Jackson television series, where institutions include the pantheon, camps, and godly domains; performance appears in divine acts like "claiming" a child. Power is demonstrated through the actions of both gods and campers.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Define the "heroic ideal" as a set of traits shaped by culture, genre and institutions.
- Analyze how MHA constructs heroism through performance, not only ethics.
- Compare hero construction in MHA to another text or to real-world expectations for "good" students/citizens.

Essential Questions:

- *What does it mean to be a hero?*
- *How do institutions teach individuals to embody social roles?*
- *How are identity and moral agency shaped within this media?*
- *Where is this applicable in other texts/within the real-world?*
- *In what ways do you embody heroism; how is this expressed?*

Materials:

- Video clips from *My Hero Academia*
    - The series is currently available for streaming on Crunchyroll, Apple TV, Netflix (Seasons 1-4) and YouTube. Rakuten Viki has listed episodes available to watch for free, but may require more research.
- "Heroic Ideal" organizer (digital/print)
- Sticky notes or mini whiteboards

Accessibility Issues:

There are different streaming services that offer access to MHA, but they are for the most part, paid accounts. Some of these scenes can be found for free on YouTube, but there remains the possibility that these free clips could be removed in the future. As mentioned above, this lesson does not have to revolve around this series and can be adjusted for others. The educator would be responsible for modifying this lesson to suit their needs.

Introduction
Prompt: *Write three traits you believe that a hero must have* (give students some time to answer this question before adding the second one). *Where did you learn that?*

Complete a quick share-out, the teacher should record traits provided by the students on a board or visible surface. Begin circling patterns or keeping a tally of the repeated traits being shared by students, as well as where these traits originate. The goal is to show students that heroism is something that is taught.

The "Hero" as a Construct
What is a heroic ideal? A cultural blueprint (set of expectations) that is influenced by community, background and institutions.

Activity #1: Hero Construction in MHA - Evidence Hunt & Synthesis
Students will watch the selected MHA moment(s).

- (OPTIONAL, but recommended) **Season 1, Episode 1: Izuku Midoriya: Origin** (Full Episode, 24:33) Content Warning: bullying, mild sexual humor, mention of suicide, and violence. Recommended 14+.
    - Watching the first episode of the show will help students gain an overall sense of the main character, as well as the universe of *My Hero Academia*–including overt examples of hero society.
- **Season 1, Episode 4: Start Line** (Entrance Exam Opening 0:00-3:55, skipping intro) & (Sacrifice Scene, 08:25-10:17) & (Acceptance Scene, 18:02-22:05)
    - These sequences of scenes from episode four introduce us to the entrance exam of U.A. high school, opinions of peers competing for placements within the hero course and offers us insight to how U.A. scores the exam. All of these metrics align with the tensions in activities #1-2.
- **Season 2, Episode 16: In Their Own Quirky Ways** (Obstacle Course Scene, 14:02-17:27, Rankings Overview 19:25-21:52)
    - These scenes explicitly show the three primary characters that are followed throughout MHA as they're competing for top placement in the first event of the U.A. Sports Festival, without going too much into character backstory. It gives an overview of how victory is important to the world of heroics, as are class ranking systems.

These scenes were selected because they demonstrate how this media teaches heroism through institutional evaluation, public performance, and moral expectation. I opted for the first episode, alongside short scenes for the students to consider.

While viewing, they will be completing an organizer with the following lenses: identity/power, and spectacle/public. These are some questions for students to keep in mind while watching the clips, to help with generating evidence and corresponding explanations.

- *What asserts hero competency to institutions of power (educational, national, etc.)?*
- *How do Quirks (superpowers) shape status or self-worth?*
- *What values are being taught, and by who?*
- *How does being watched change what "counts" as heroic?*

Students will collect at least three pieces of evidence per lens (quote, action, camera framing, dialogue, etc.) and provide an explanation for why their selection works for each category. On the following pages, I have provided templates with a filled example that models the exercise for students.

Template with example

This scene demonstrates aspects of identity or power	**This scene demonstrates aspects of spectacle or public perception**
Evidence: (What scene? What happens in this scene?) 1. 2. 3.	Evidence: (What scene? What happens in this scene?) **Example:** *When the character Shoto Todoroki refuses to activate his father's Quirk (Fire) during the initial round of the Sports Festival, choosing instead to rely only on his mother's Quirk (Ice) - Season 2, Ep. 16.* 1. 2. 3.
Explanation: (This moment functions as evidence because it does what/shows what to the audience?) 1. 2. 3.	Explanation: (This moment functions as evidence because it does what/shows what to the audience?) **Example:** *This moment functions as evidence because it is signaling to the audience that this character, the No. 2 Pro-Hero's (Endeavor) prodigal son, refuses to acknowledge half of his lineage to become a hero. This shows the public that Endeavor's son rejects him, and that he wants to be known as different to his father. It is a deliberate omission of power in an act of defiance to parental wishes.* 1. 2. 3.

Students will select one piece of evidence they have found for each of the two categories: *Heroism as ethics* (responsibility, protection, sacrifice) / *Heroism as performance* (image, popularity, branding). This evidence should further build on the commentary provided above by responding to the definitions provided under each category. After completing this exercise, they will write a claim about where this line is blurred within the media, and what that implies about the profession of heroics.

Heroism as ethics	**Heroism as performance**
Based on the provided examples within this media, the idea of heroism as ethics could be summarized as…[student definition]	Based on the provided examples within this media, the idea of heroism as performance could be summarized as…[student definition] **Example: (using spectacle instead of performance)** *The idea of heroism as spectacle could be summarized as actions and/or decisions made by a figure in a position of power, or from one who is in a position of gaining power, for the sake of garnering public approval such as victory or recognition. It can also be a means of demonstrating defiance or rejection of a negatively perceived status quo.*
This is true because of…[students place their evidence here] Considering the definition you have written, how does this piece of evidence engage with the concept of heroism as ethics?	This is true because of…[students place their evidence here]. **Example:** *Without being introduced to the full introduction to the Todoroki family arc (which takes place in the next few episodes) the moment where Shoto refuses to use his full powers in the Sports Festival competition with the knowledge of who his father is already being known to the audience demonstrates a deliberate choice being made by the character. In a public setting, he is showing the world that he rejects his father's power, but he is also inadvertently showing his competition that he believes himself to be able to win at half power.* Considering the definition you have written, how does this piece of evidence engage with the concept of heroism as performance? **Example (using spectacle):** *Heroism (in this moment), as demonstrated through Shoto Todoroki, is rooted in self-perception and public denouncement. His idea of being a hero is not connected to his father's image–he distinctly*

	chooses to rely on his opposite power to demonstrate to himself, Endeavor (who is in the audience) and the public that he is not the same as his dad. He is implicitly showing through spectacle that he does not see the No. 2 ranked hero as being heroic at all. Heroism as spectacle then means making a statement about what you represent through displays of power or withholding part of yourself to prove a point.
Claim: *How are these two categories functioning together? What does this imply?*	

Class Discussion
Based on what we've watched and analyzed, complete this sentence on a sticky note:
"In MHA, being a hero means _____."

Students will respond individually on notes, and the teacher will move around scanning responses to informally categorize them as ethics-based or performance-based, or perhaps a blended category.

After a few minutes, students will share aloud and the teacher may place a sectioned off area of a whiteboard or on a large piece of paper the categories of ethics / performance / both. Students will place their sticky notes in these sections and will discuss which section seemed to be more heavily favored with the clips shown in class.

Mini Group Questions: (Can use ones above if inclined!)
- What behaviors does U.A. reward as "heroic"? What behaviors does it ignore or punish?
- How does being watched (by teachers, crowds, or media) affect how characters act?
- Which characters benefit most from heroism being treated as performance? Who is harmed?
- Where do ethics and performance clearly overlap in MHA?

Whole Group Questions:
LAUNCH QUESTION
- Based on our evidence–does MHA suggest that heroism is more about ethics or more about performance?

FOLLOW UPS (focuses)
- Institutional Power: Who gets to decide what counts as heroic in this world?
- Identity and Self-Worth: How do rankings and exams affect how characters see themselves?
- Real-World Connection: Where do we see this same kind of performance-based evaluation in real-life?

- Moral Agency: If heroism is something you are trained and graded on, how much moral freedom do heroes actually have?

Activity #2 Create Your Own Hero Identity! (Hero Notebook)

Now that we have seen how heroism is constructed and performed in MHA, students are going to design their own hero identity, and subsequently, their heroic ideals. The key question to think about while creating a character is this:

Who is your hero for–and what do you want them to represent?

Students will need to put together the following for their heroic self:

- Their hero code name
- Their Quirk (superpower)
    - *Consider how this Quirk functions and how it is perceived by others. Why have you chosen this ability for yourself? In the world of MHA, people do not generally get to pick their powers. In this assignment it is allowed, but I want you to think about your reasoning behind the Quirk you possess. Why does it fit who you are and what you represent?*
- Their costume design
- Their interests in heroics (desire for fame, combat, rescue, money, etc.)

Optional: Have students create an actual visual representation of their heroic self through drawing. This can ease into conversations surrounding important concepts like symbolism! *Potential avenues that can be used to accomplish this task include creation by hand or with the assistance of digital sites that have easy-to-use design tools like Canva.*

Activity #3: Fanfiction for the Sports Festival!

Students will write about their performance in round #1 of the Sports Festival.

- *This should be a short, narrative response between 100-150 words expressing how you would go about competing in the first Sports Festival competition. What do you believe would happen? Why? How would you perform?*
- *For additional flavor in classroom conversation or to adjust the written response, teachers could choose to have their students engage with the heroic selves created by their peers (or) the ones shown in MHA.*
- *For furthering engagement, students could be asked to work together and collaborate on a piece of writing that showcases their characters interacting during the festival.*

In this chapter, I first began with a story about two kids sitting on a roof, asking the classic childhood question *what you want to be when you grow up?* Following this, I launched into an overview of the selected media for study, *My Hero Academia* and gave background on the

typical conventions often found within shōnen anime series. I then provided summaries on the thematic inquiries that I will be addressing in subsequent chapters, revolving around power and notions of performance, as well as offered insight into the pedagogical affordances of implementing popular culture into the classroom; supported by scholarship from educators who are interested in meaning-making and identity work within school environments. Finally, I provided the first lesson plan which heavily features developing foundational understanding of heroics through discussion with students, then leads them into activities which center their own hero identities, i.e., who they would want to be if they grew up in this world.

Chapter Three: Power & Inheritance

"Have you finally accepted your purpose? That's it, very good. This is the dawn of a new era for us. With my blood in your veins you'll surpass me. You will live up to the reason I created you!" – Endeavor (*My Hero Academia,* Season 2, Episode 10)

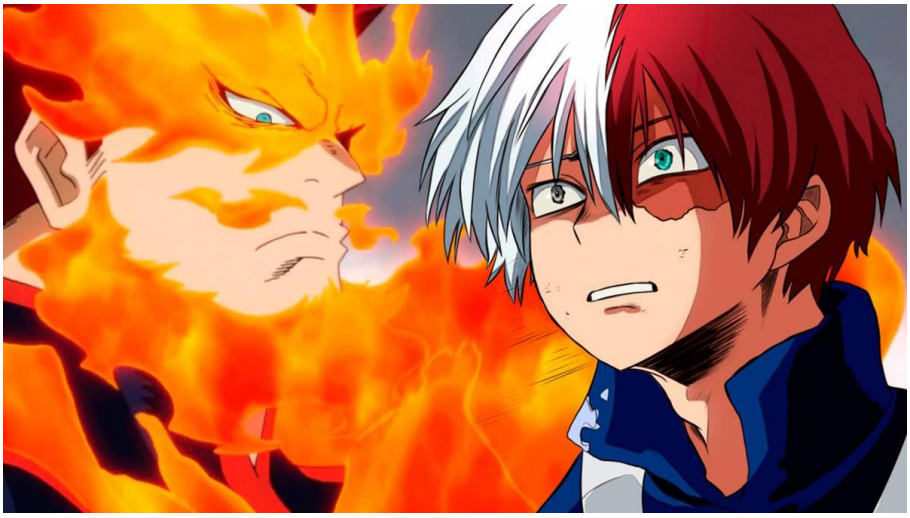

Figure 3: Image of *My Hero Academia* tertiary character, Shoto Todoroki alongside his father, the #2 Pro-Hero, Endeavor. Source: CBR article, "MHA's Todoroki Family History and Endeavor's Hellflame Quirk, Explained.

"If there's anything wrong with you, it came from your father." Her mom says. The duo is driving along the highway toward Spokane; miles of rolling hills pass them by in either direction. This is how most of their conversations involving inheritance have gone since her childhood. Bad knees? Dad. Poor sleep? Dad. Nose bleeds? Dad. It was comical at this point. An inside joke between them. "Well, except for that temper. You got that from both of us."

The young woman tells her mom about this kid in her class that just got off parole. He's been her favorite student this year, and reminds her of her friend who passed away not that long ago. The boy isn't a particularly great student, in fact, many of her coworkers have expressed

outright agitation at his behavior in their classes. His grades are abysmal, even for first year standards in their district. Often, the freshman success teacher calls her in the middle of the day while she is teaching her junior sections with the following script: "Hey Brown, the kid wants to know if he can come work in your room today. You have the space for him?" She would always say yes, and the boy would shuffle into the back of the class with his work. Sometimes doing it, sometimes not; but always visiting when she wasn't with another student.

"Brown, be honest with me, is the extra credit enough to get me to pass?" He asks one day, before leaving. Right now, the freshmen are completing a three-part tournament while reading The Princess Bride. It's a battle of agility, wits and strength with pool-noodle swords, trivia and arm wrestling.

"If you do well with your team during the tournament, you'll be just fine. I believe in you." He looks at the tournament list, then at his teacher. She'd met with his grandmother at conferences not long ago and had been the only one who had shared how much she enjoyed having the boy in her class. His grandmother had said to the young woman that his dad was getting out of prison soon, and he was having a hard time adjusting. Their family situation was uncanny in its similarity to her childhood friend, who was also a student that struggled with finding the meaning in his classes.

The boy pulls his backpack strap tighter on his shoulder, turns toward the door and looks back once before going to lunch "Just so you know, I'm going to win the entire thing."

Back on the highway, her mom smiles at her from the driver's seat. She knows this student just as well as her daughter through the stories she shares. He reminds her of the youngster that used to stroll into their house without knocking, rummaging through their refrigerator like he

lived there too. "That kid sounds an awful lot like someone we used to know." She says to her daughter, "I hope he makes it."

Vignette #3 "The Favorite Student"

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which *My Hero Academia* frames power not as a neutral ability but as something that is inherited, interpreted and managed by institutions. These dynamics mirror the way schools and social systems often identify and sort young people. I focus on Quirks as a metaphor for perceived potential and social value, discussing how lineage, and privilege shape students' trajectories. Through close attention to characters like Shoto Todoroki and Izuku Midoriya, and the transfer of One For All as being both a gift and a burden—I also discuss how heroism becomes tied to meritocracy: who gets access to opportunity, who is depicted as being "exceptional" and what kinds of performance are recognized as being legitimate. I place these arguments alongside real examples of educational evaluation as well as labelling. This section gives emphasis to the fact that the series offers students a way to interrogate how identity is created under pressure. A method of showing how the act of "becoming" is something that happens because of overlapping factors in the experience of adolescence.

Quirks and the Manifestation of Heroic Potential

In *My Hero Academia*, the power that is inherited from your family is often used as a trajectory point for your future. Endeavor, the number #2 pro-hero tells his son that his blood ensures that one day he will surpass his father and finally beat his ongoing rivalry with All Might. His desire frames his son's inherited ability as a project of control rather than one of care. To offer a bit of a comparison, my favorite student arrived at school carrying so much more

weight behind him than what could be shown on the surface. Instead of dealing with expectations of a heroic legacy like Endeavor's son, Shoto Todoroki, my student was dealing with an already embedded identity of being a problem child. Even with their difference in storyline, both the fictitious experience of Shoto Todoroki and my student in the real-world experienced crises of identity as the result of the figures that guided them. Shoto's legacy follows him to the scholastic setting of U.A. high school, and my student's conception of self also carried over into our school through his relationships with the institution's disciplinary system, staff and his own struggles with what was happening with his family.

In both worlds, the idea of Quirks can function as early signals adults use to judge a young person's potential—whether those are literal superpowers or aspects of labeling of a child's traits and experiences. In the brief story at the beginning of this section, many of my colleagues read this student's "quirks" as evidence of deficiency, while his grandmother's hope and my own belief in him drastically impacted his behavior in my classroom setting. This could be seen as a more similar pairing to All Might's trust in the protagonist, Izuku Midoriya, rather than the more volatile connection between Endeavor and his son. The provided contrast between guiding figures shows that heroic potential is not simply inherited but interpreted: the same markers for what to expect of a child can be read differently depending on the observer, and the relationship resulting from that connection can influence their experience in the classroom.

When comparing this with other situations in education, there is plenty to be said about the way teachers can sometimes overlook or encourage students' individual assets or "quirks" they have inherited through their lived experiences. According to H. Richard Milner, past educator and developer of the Opportunity Gap Framework, "students need and deserve educators who believe in them and refuse to allow them to give up. These educators see education as a

developmental process that helps to cultivate growth and learning over time" (Milner, 2021, p. 70). In MHA, this is fulfilled through the educators at U.A. who are there to support the development of their students, and it is shown in the real world with teachers who show up for their students to celebrate their own special abilities. These special abilities, or rather, Quirks in *My Hero Academia* are named and seen as a guideline for potential within both the hero track of education, and to the public who construct societal ideas of what powers are innately heroic. Schools participate in an interpretive process, deciding which students are allowed to become "heroes" based on their qualifying results in the entrance exam to their institution. This is later reaffirmed by public opinion through open events that showcase the student's powers, and later on in life, their positions on the Hero Billboard Chart.

In the real-world, student ability is often marked in some public manner, especially within North American school systems where a plethora of labels exist for the student body, e.g. honor roll, academic probation, student athlete, gifted and talented, etc. Many schools even feed into the concept of differentiation between institutions via school colors and mascots, inspiring a sense of camaraderie between students and rivalry against other institutions. These are all special markers, forms of affinities, or "quirks" that operate on a systemic level to curate identity and generate social capital. Emerging research on affinity groups supports that the shared experiences, validation of self and networks of supportive relationships built within these groups helps to form strong bonds and promote critical consciousness, as well as cultural competence (Beasley, Leva and Steen, 2024, para. 5). When compared to the individualized affinities presented in MHA through superpowers and tracks of education, similar things can be found within the shown classes of U.A. and in other groups followed within the series, like the Hero Public Safety Commission and League of Villains. Some of the Quirks that are seen in MHA are

viewed as innately villainous, and this impacts student interactions with each other. It also affects life trajectories for young adults who have been ostracized in their society, demonstrated in the narrative through showing how some characters are drawn toward more extremist groups because they are seeking a place of acceptance—an affinity group of their own; a home. Students in the real world also seek these spaces to belong.

Teaching students with popular culture materials like MHA has multiple benefits. Youth are the primary consumers of this media and often, the target of corporate interests. Using new media offers teachers "the perfect opportunity for incorporating students' interests in popular culture while simultaneously developing their critical awareness of mass marketing strategies," (Alvermann and Heron, 2001, p. 9). However, Alvermann and Heron are quick to point out how caution is still necessary when selecting materials for classroom discussion. Alongside Hagood (2010) they bring up other challenges educators may face, like school policies and regulations regarding text activities which vary between educational settings. They also speak about connecting popular culture to standards and quote an 8th-grade teacher named Chandler Dabit on the risks involved with that, "You have to make pop culture valid. If you're going to use it, you are going to take a risk. Because students are rated on their test scores, and everything can hinge on that" (Hagood, Alvermann and Heron-Hruby, citing Dabit, 2010, p. 26). They note the importance of educators being aware of the meaning these stories may hold for their students, and while they may be excellent examples for critical review, they could also be closely tied to their audience's perception of self and their hopes for the future.

When considering the manifestation of heroic potential and its implications regarding power, one might find themselves evaluating systems in place within Horikoshi's world that quantify those qualities. They might also look into the language that is presented around those in positions

of power or authority and those who are striving to live up to what they represent. Izuku Midoriya idolizes All Might. When he initially meets his idol, Midoriya, who at this point is still a Quirkless boy, asks the man if he believes he can one day be a hero. All Might douses his dreams, telling him that without a Quirk, it would not be possible. Not long after this moment, during a dangerous villain attack on his classmate, Katsuki Bakugo, Midoriya chooses to rush past pro-heroes and civilians to save him from the villain, stating, "My body moved on its own," (Season 1, Episode 2, *My Hero Academia*). It is not long after this point that All Might chooses him as his successor, because his heroic spirit is that of what he would want in a future wielder of his hidden ability. From additional discourse online regarding this choice, he saw himself in the young man and realized that he was now in the same position as his former mentor to find the next symbol for the world to follow (Applegate, 2023, np). This transition of power between All Might and Midoriya is a secret, because the public could not handle the knowledge that the Symbol of Peace is getting weaker in each battle. Effectively, this choice also transfers the burden of responsibility and care to a child, who is now expected to one day fill the void of this universe's unsustainable ideal of peace.

The Myth of Meritocracy: Access and Agency

The concept of educational meritocracy itself is not a myth. It is something that has been around in learning institutions for a while. However, the *myth* of educational meritocracy rests on a belief that schools fairly reward individual talent and effort, allowing the "best" students to rise to the top regardless of their starting point, when in actuality, "it produces and encourages the maintenance of inequalities" (Batruch et al. 2022, np.). In North American public schools, this ideal appears in common slogans presented by districts and their scholastic bodies about working

hard and “earning” success through grades, test scores, or good behavior. However, these institutions may “fail to fulfill their meritocratic objectives, and rather ironically, they may even contribute to the reproduction of social inequality,” (Batruch et al., 2022, np). Even with the knowledge and understanding that students are coming from all different backgrounds, varying levels of access due to social or socioeconomic barriers can act as barriers before one even reaches the educational starting line, essentially, “regardless of how merit--based categories are allocated, they inevitably create not only winners but also losers” (Domina et al., 2023, p. 16). In *My Hero Academia*, U.A. high school offers a stylized version of the same story: an elite school that selects and ranks students purely based on perceived heroic potential, student exam performance and visible displays of power. On the same token, U.A. also privileges those with strong Quirks, prior training, or powerful connections—as shown through the admission of students to the hero track via letters of recommendation.

Educational meritocracy functions less as a descriptor of how schools work, and more as a myth that appears to justify unequal outcomes, for real students and for aspiring heroes enrolled at U.A. high school. The experiences had in educational environments help to shape youth’s understand of themselves not only as learners, but also as individuals who have rights and responsibilities, “schools cultivate passions, skills, and career interests that shape children’s understanding of their individual identity, build their solidarity with peers, and guide them into adult roles” (Domina et al, 2023, p. 13). Additionally, this myth resurfaces in Milner’s (2021) work, in conversation with Opportunity-Centered Teaching (OCT) which is supported through four interrelated features:

> “(1) OCT is about relationships, (2) OCT is about building community knowledge to inform practices, (3) OCT bridges students’ outside-of-school practices with in-school practices, and

(4) it addresses psychological, mental health, and social needs…work[ing] to disrupt gaps in opportunity." (pp. 33).

Milner discusses the distinctions between teaching in different environments (urban, suburban, rural) as well as between different social groups that have access to varying levels of resources. He writes, "OCT rejects the myth of meritocracy. Educators see students' learning and development as a consequence of multiple factors, including but not limited to "hard work."" (Milner, 2021, p. 291). This means that Opportunity-Centered Teaching methods are focused on the whole picture and not just cut-and-dry evaluative criterion from standards or rankings. This differs from the set-up of UA's hero track of education which has systems in place that reinforces societies' notions for what it takes to one day be the best,

"The meritocratic methods within educational institutions promotes a system-justifying ideology; keeping the status quo and preserving social hierarchies that can be unfair to its populace…" This ideology functionally leads to "...both low and high status group members..[that] positively associated [belief] with internal explanations of social positions." (Wiederkehr et al. 2015, p. 11).

This connects to the concept of student identity and self-expectations based on perceived ranking. To be clear, I am not presenting an argument that the institutional approach to heroics in MHA is innately bad or evil in any capacity; I am more interested in opening a discussion on the ways it is nuanced and mirrors some of the expectations we place on students in the real world. U.A. attempts to be a school that produces strong heroes while also fulfilling its student's sense of heroic identity. For instance, they have whole lectures devoted to curating the perfect hero's name and the "design" of this aspect of self which is reliant on their power and its social

perception. There is so much rich material within the narrative to discuss with students the reality of unequal access and how institutions and social groups can reinforce concepts that contribute to deeper cultural or personal values, as well as issues. In other words, there is a darker side to educational institutes and their role in creating hierarchies (Batruch et al., 2022, np).

In the next section, I provide excerpts from student conversations that take place within the introductory U.A. arc of the series and provide some additional analysis for how this demonstrates the myths and realities in action at this institution.

Excerpts from *My Hero Academia*, English Dub

Season 1, Episode 9, "Yeah, Just Do Your Best Iida!" *Lunchroom cafeteria scene between Izuku Midoriya, Ochaco Uraraka and Tenya Iida, students of class 1-A's hero track of education discussing the impending decision surrounding the appointment of their class representative and Iida's family.*

"Wanting a job and being suited to it are quite different things. Observing the Iida family's hero agency has taught me that much." - Iida

"Agency!?" - Uraraka and Midoriya

"Hold on, what does your family do?" - Midoriya

"Uh–oh, it's nothing." - Iida

"Y'know, I've been wondering something about you. Admit it, Iida. You're filthy rich!" - Uraraka

"Uh–I was afraid people would treat me differently if they knew about my family." *Ooohs from the table*. You see, the Iida's have been pro heroes for generations. It runs in our blood." - Iida

"What? That's awesome!" - Uraraka and Midoriya

"Are the two of you familiar with the Turbo Hero, Ingenium?" - Iida

"I know all about him! He's a super-popular pro with 65 sidekicks working alongside him at his Tokyo agency! Don't tell me…" - Midoriya

"He's my elder brother!" - Iida

"Your family is famous!" - Uraraka

"I can't believe it!" - Midoriya

"Ingenium is an unmatched commander who honors the hero code. As the second oldest Iida son, I strive to be just like him." – Iida

Scene Analysis: This scene from season one of MHA shows the advantage of legacy in an educational meritocracy. He reveals that his family has run a pro-hero agency for generations and that his brother is a famous hero. This gives him economic capital (he is "filthy rich") as well as social and cultural capital, being from a respected hero family and growing up observing how hero work as well as agencies operate. U.A. vocalizes that they measure individual merit in the form of who works the hardest and who has the strongest Quirk, but Iida's path to the hero course was laid out before he even approached the entrance exam. He is a pedigree hero, with a structural head start through family status and access to resources. Therefore, his character appears to the audience as being naturally suited for roles in leadership, his privilege is easy to misread as personal merit.

Beyond The Scene: Alongside his privilege, the character of Iida is also a young man with incredibly strong principles regarding the duty of heroes. He internalizes what it means to be a good person through one's commitment to upholding societal standards and has an entire story arc within the series where he is forced to confront the morally grey areas of heroism, and for the first time in his life, experiences feelings of vengeance against a villain who hurts his family.

Season 2, Episode 14, “That’s the Idea, Ochaco” *School hallway scene with Izuku Midoriya, Ochaco Uraraka and Tenya Iida, discussing Uraraka’s motivations for becoming a hero.*

“Why did you decide to come to UA? What made you want to be a pro hero?”
- Midoriya

“Oh, well…because…” *answers off screen* - Uraraka

“Uh–for the money? You wanna be a hero so you can get rich?” - Midoriya

“If we’re cutting to the chase, then, yeah. I’m sorry if it sounds greedy. You two have such admirable motivations. I hope you don’t think less of me now.” - Uraraka

“Not at all! Your goal is to support your wellbeing, which is a perfectly admirable ambition to have.” - Iida

“Mhm. It’s just kinda surprising.” - Midoriya

“Hm. Well, you see, my family owns a construction company but we haven’t gotten any work lately, so we’re flat broke. Anyway, this isn’t really something I usually tell other people but…” - Uraraka

“Construction eh?’ - Iida

“If she got licensed, I bet she could use her Quirk to bring costs down a lot.” - Midoriya

“And they could sell their heavy-lifting equipment. She could float everything!” - Iida

“I KNOW RIGHT?! I’ve been telling Dad that since I was a kid! But…” - Ochaco

Flashback sequence to little Ochaco Uraraka speaking with her parents.

“You want to work for us?” - Uraraka’s Dad

“When I grow up all big and strong, I’ll help you and Mommy out any way that I can.” - Uraraka. *Her dad chuckles.*

"I really appreciate the thought, Ochaco. But as your dad, I would be even happier if you achieved your own dream. That's the way to make us happy. And if you do make money, you can take us to Hawaii or something!" - Uraraka's Dad

"Daddy…" - Uraraka

Flashback sequence ends, returning to the present moment with Midoriya and Iida.

"I'm going to become a pro. I'll sign with a good agency and make plenty of money.
Then I'll be able to let my parents have an easy life!" – Uraraka

Scene Analysis: In comparison to the prior scene that gives background context to the Iida family's status and Tenya Iida's reason for becoming a pro-hero, Uraraka's story offers another side of this meritocracy fiasco. Her family is broke, and she wants to become a hero so that she can earn money to give her parents an easier life. Here, U.A. is functioning like an elite school in a poor kid narrative, it is one of the only ways to escape economic hardship. We can also see in this conversation between peers that she worries about how this will land with her friends, because her reasoning for becoming a hero is not solely rooted in the dominant idea of wanting to "save others" or being entirely selfless. She is not afforded the same opportunities as some of her classmates. To pull from the real-world for a moment, "students…from a lower socioeconomic status generally do not start their educational or life experiences in a fair or equitable position…in wealthier families, inherited wealth may afford opportunities that are not directly "earned."" (Milner, 2021, p. 62). Her working-class background and love for her parents is her motive, which contrasts against Iida's duty-bound ideals inherited from his family legacy and against the primary protagonist, Midoriya, whose motive appears rooted in altruism.

Beyond The Scene: While limited by economic factors, Uraraka still placed third overall in the U.A. entrance exams (Score breakdown: 28 villain pts, 45 rescue pts), just behind the characters of Katsuki Bakugo (77 villain pts) and Eijiro Kirishima (39 villain pts, 35 rescue pts). Tenya Iida also placed within the top ten (Rank #6). To pass the exam and gain entrance into U.A., students needed to reach a certain threshold of points. They were not made aware of the secondary scoring tactics surrounding rescuing other students, only being told that they would be marked by the number of villains taken out in combat, and level of difficulty of those threats that they took out. Izuku Midoriya saved Uraraka from getting severely injured during the exams, and as a result, he lost out on time for fighting villains to gain combat points. She offered to give up some of her own points to ensure he passed the exam, without knowing Midoriya gained enough by saving her. So, even though Uraraka is monetarily motivated in the series, this is not something that outweighs her compassion for others.

Moving back into the realm of meritocracy in education and its implications for success and identity formation, Wiederkehr et al. (2015) have much to say on the topic:

> "...school grades, ranks, and diplomas are considered "merit certificates" that largely determine one's future position in society. Pupils with higher degrees are usually oriented toward high status positions while pupils with lower degrees (or no degrees), to lower status positions. [...] the perceived fairness of society directly depends on the perceived fairness of the school system itself […] in such a system, individuals have to believe [...] that degrees, ranks, and grades are the pure product of their efforts and merit." (p. 11)

Many students enrolled in the public school system across North America subscribe to the above ideology. It is reaffirmed through Milner's (2021) position regarding the U.S. and our obsession

with obtaining the "American Dream" which he describes as being meritocratic at its core. The myth of this structure rests in the unchallenged belief of its fairness, when it creates a caste system. Milner positions that gaps in opportunity are innate to the institutional structure of education in this context, and that meritocracy does not appropriately consider resources, advantages and privileges of some students (Milner, 2021) i.e. not everyone is starting from the same place, and this dramatically impacts their educational and social experiences. The badges of merit or "ranks" associated within a school system are also often associated with belonging. Social capital resulting from obtaining said merits affects status, with some groups being seen as more or less valuable than others–impacting social order (Wiederkehr et al., 2015).

As an example from the selected text, U.A. imposes innate status between its accepted students not only through the tracks of education, but through the sorting of these courses into different sections. Midoriya is a part of class 1-A, composed of half the incoming first-year heroes. 1-B is the other section, which, due to the events of the series, receives far less recognition from the public. Narratively, this is because 1-A is attacked by villains and thrust into the spotlight, but the consequences of this feed into the social cogs of educational meritocracy in this society that thrives on visibility and performance. The rival tension between courses increased due to one receiving far more attention than the other, even though both groups hail from an elite hero academy. Essentially, because 1-A is placed into harm more frequently, they are given more recognition and favored for future hero internships. However, first-year students in both hero courses at U.A. are all tapped for assistance in the war effort, and are often put into scenarios where even before obtaining their official hero licenses, they must act.

Hero licenses are another form of merit in this universe. They signify to students in the hero track that they are now legally able to give aid in the event of an emergency. This also

demonstrates to the audience that regulation is part of the hero world, and vigilantism is not overtly commodified off or celebrated, at least not in the beginning. The standard expectation of a student prior to moving forward in the hero academia is to obtain this license, much like how in the real world, students have milestones in education that they are expected to have fulfilled before moving on to the next grade or subject.

"It's Yours!" Lineage and Legacy: Expectations of Succession

In *My Hero Academia*, two students are admitted to the hero course through Letters of Recommendation: Shoto Todoroki, and Momo Yaoyorozu, two students that achieved entry through a special entrance exam in lieu of the standard one other applicants face. Both come from wealthy families, and one is regarded as the tritagonist or tertiary character following Katsuki Bakugo (deuteragonist) and Izuku Midoriya (protagonist) in the series: Shoto Todoroki. His character is rich for narrative analysis in a classroom setting, particularly surrounding questions of identity and power. He is born into a family that treats power like a bloodline investment. His Quirk is not just a perfect combination of ice and fire, it is the physical representation of his father, Endeavor, and his lifelong ambition to surpass the number one hero.

Todoroki's identity appears to be pre-written, carrying a legacy that he didn't choose. Early on in the series, the scar-faced boy refuses to use half of his power in competition. He rejects his fire, i.e. his father's inheritance. This lineage becomes a public spectacle in the Sports Festival arc of MHA. Throughout his matches, the viewer is purview to flashbacks of his childhood, where he was isolated from his other siblings and mercilessly trained to become the perfect hero. It is explained that his mother entered a relationship with Endeavor as part of a "Quirk Marriage," an outdated practice where families would come together to breed children with

stronger Quirks. The flashback sequence during the festival arc reveals that his mother is the one who accidentally scarred his face, because of her declining mental health and his visual resemblance to Endeavor, who she feared.

Excerpts from *My Hero Academia*, English Dub

Season 2, Episode 10, "Shoto Todoroki: Origin"

During a match with Midoriya in Season 2, Episode 10 (Shoto Todoroki: Origin), the audience is exposed to Torodoki's reception by the public. Even with relying solely on his mother's ice power and refusing his father's fire, the audience already has plenty to say about him in competition.

"That kid's already better than the average pro" - Audience 23C

"Guess that's what you can expect from the son of the number two hero." - Audience 23D

Todoroki's body becomes covered by a layer of frost from overusing his power and not regulating it with his fire. This directly mirror's his father's issue with overheating due to not having a cool-down ability. Midoriya sees this while they are fighting, and proceeds to break his own body while fending off attacks, attempting to get his classmate to fight using his full potential–facing himself. This fight is intersplayed with Todoroki's flashbacks to his mother and childhood, as well as snippets from the television set of All Might addressing young future heroes.

Izuku Midoriya calls from the audience, noticing Shoto Todoroki's reluctance to use his Quirk to its full potential.
"It's yours! Your Quirk, not his!" - Izuku Midoriya

Flashback sequence begins.

"Yes, that's right. Children often do inherit Quirks from their parents or develop similar power sets. But the most important thing to remember is that a Quirk is what you make of it, regardless of your history. You decide how you use it. That's what I mean when I say, "I am here," Only you can decide to become a hero. No one else. Take this to heart, kids. You've got it!" - All Might (television screen)

"Honey, you still want to be a hero, don't you? Just remember, stay true to yourself." - Shoto's mom, Rei Todoroki

Flashback ends. Frame moves to the present day in the competition.

"I didn't realize how much I'd forgotten." - Shoto Todoroki

As the flashback concludes, his mother's words echo in the present-day competition.

"You are not a prisoner of your lineage. It's okay to use your power to become who you want to be." - Rei Todoroki

Shoto Todoroki erupts in fire in front of the entire arena to fight Izuku Midoriya at full power. Upon seeing this, his father steps down from the stairs of the arena and shouts to his son.

"Have you finally accepted your purpose? That's it, very good. This is the dawn of a new era for us. With my blood in your veins you'll surpass me. You will live up to the reason I created you!" – Endeavor

The match is officially stopped by teachers supervising the event because of the level of power being outputted by the two students. They fear they might accidentally kill each other. Rubble and smoke cover the arena. When it clears, Midoriya is out of bounds.

Todoroki advances to the finals.

Children inherit a lot from their parents. Shoto Todoroki is the cleanest example of inherited power having the potential for inheriting identity. His father figure treats Quirks like a project–an embodiment of ambition and perceived perfection. Todoroki's refusal to use his father's power pushes back symbolically against a role he didn't initially choose, though his desire remains aligned with the idea of becoming a hero. He offers a grey area of examining destiny as-written versus choice within the narrative of MHA, and the excerpt above additionally paints a clear picture of how the public interprets his identity from his performance in the Sports Festival. Before even using his father's abilities in the arena, the audience is purview to conversations being held by people in the stands who are observing the competition. They draw immediate comparisons between Endeavor and his youngest child, even as he explicitly relies on his mother's Quirk to undermine his connection to the pro-hero. He is an argument for the

institutions of family and school being intertwined with the media and public persona, and how these can function together to commodify or brand a person. His power arrives to us as being bundled with expectations, trauma, and the watchful eye of the public world.

The Todoroki family begs the question of what it costs to be made into an ideal, which echoes in other characters who have legacies or symbols attached to their identities within this series. Take for example, U.A. teacher and No. 1 pro-hero, All Might. His is a manifestation of the people's hope for a better future, and as previously mentioned, a stand-in for the common myth of Superman. Roberson, in Peretti's (2017) book, has much to say on the responsibility that follows the myth of Superman, "[He] exists to motivate us to do better. Not to save us, because he doesn't exist! […] We have Superman there as an example to lead us" (pp. 44-45). All Might's purpose is similar, though, the people often lean on him to act as their savior. He is seen as someone strong enough to always win against evil with a smile. Referred frequently as the symbol of peace, his hero persona influences his willingness to keep his private, "small-might" self a secret; maintaining the illusion of the heroic ideal. As shown later on in the series with arcs criticizing the performativity of hero culture, other heroes often fail to measure up to the standard that has been set by All Might. This is expressed by villains who demand a cleansing of the hero world, an increase in villain attack and the subsequent fall of public trust in heroes.

As a fictional representation of the systems we occupy that reinforce separations of self (the public versus personal), Todoroki begs the question of how what we inherit influences who we are. His father operates on this mindset that his son will one day surpass his rival, becoming the number one hero title that Endeavor desperately chased on the billboard charts. His son is desperate to achieve his goal of becoming a hero without becoming like his father, yet, some of the first statements brought up in the introduction of this young man is that he is the son of the

number two hero, he made it in on recommendations, and he is (in his own words) “playing on another level” compared to his peers in one of the top hero programs in the country. The systems in place favor his success because of his lineage which grants status, and an innate formidable power. Comparing this to effects on identity, we can look to the concepts of youth social norms and the ways institutions like schools (U.A. in this example) reinforce roles already assigned to their student body. Lesko (1996) is a scholar interested in the policies surrounding youth identities. In the way it is described, this could be rephrased to the particular ‘branding’ that is applied to youth through their teachers and policies enacted by their schools,

> “For example, a conception of youth-as-deviant implies policies that aim to get them back on track [...] a conception of youth as victim highlights their vulnerability and need for self-esteem […] secondary teachers formulate views amid multiple conflicting and highly invested views of youth and their implied policies,” (p. 454).

Comparatively, UA’s conception of youth follows not only its track-based education methods, but implicitly slots students into different types of symbolic heroes–argued within popular discourse among fandom spaces and vocalized within the show. For instance, Todoroki is explicitly given entrance to U.A. via letter of recommendation, placing him into the youth concept of being “gifted” or having a Quirk that makes him a strong candidate for hero work.

Characters like Katsuki Bakugo and Izuku Midoriya represent other youth concepts: we have the youth-as-deviant, aggressor variant applied to Bakugo. He did not receive many offers from hero agencies, despite his victory because of his aggressive, villain-like attitude. Bakugo does not perform in a manner that the public accepts as being heroic, and yet, never wavers in the pursuit of becoming the best. There is an interesting conversation to be had surrounding the

conversation of meritocracy in UA's Sports Festival arc. Typically, "the effect of belief in school meritocracy is stronger for "the winners" of this supposed meritocracy" (Batruch, et. al. 2022, np). While Batruch's (2022) study is also discussing the impact of socioeconomics on the hierarchy in education, this phrase is also applicable in the context of how the public responds to young heroes-in-training during their debuts in competition. Often, the winners of these competitions gain public exposure and recognition that helps them on their path to becoming a professional hero. This imaging is a version of social capital for their society, which favors and supports a ranked system. This social dichotomy of winners and losers is also brought up by Apple (2012) regarding the implications of culture on education and the question of a national curriculum. In his conclusion, he writes,

> "In speaking of a common culture, [...] what we should be asking is "precisely, for that free, contributive and common process of participation in the creation of meanings and values." [...] Instead of people who participate in the struggle to build and rebuild our educational, cultural, political, and economic relations, we are defined as consumers [...] we live in a society with identifiable winners and losers. In the future, we may say that the losers made poor "consumer choices" and, well, that's the way markets operate after all. But is this society really only one vast market?" (pp. 208-209).

While Apple (2012) is offering this in the context of his discussions surrounding economics, school and the mindset of education being innately political because of its connections to culture, it is a perfect expression of some of the narrative details at play in MHA regarding the institution of UA, consumerism of heroics and the real-world counterpart of fan interpretation and interaction with some of the characters.

For instance, Bakugo is consistently rated as one of the most popular characters in the show, despite starting off as a bully and combative teen. He scores the highest on the entrance exams to UA, purely based on his combat prowess, and goes on to win the first-year Sports Festival event in front of thousands of people. He is obsessed with becoming number one, and being the best because in his mind, being a hero is the pinnacle of success. He is written as a gifted kid with an extraordinary power, and being at U.A. is the first time he encounters others who are also just as gifted as he is, with their own resources at their disposal for reaching the top (e.g. the Todoroki lineage or All Might and his mentorship of Midoriya) and his growth arc is one of the more popular conversations in fan discourse.

Apple is adamant that curriculum is political because of its inherent connection to culture. This is true for the students of U.A. high school, because their curriculum is split into the interests of society. Those enrolled in the hero course are being taught the cultural capital of their world, that their meaning is attached to their potential as heroes–their ability to sell themselves and successful align with the consumers of the profession, everyday citizens who idolize the heroes and effectively place a large amount of pressure on them to save society from collapse under the threat of villainy. Bakugo captures the attention of villains after his public display of aggression upon winning the festival. He does not perform heroism in the sense that the audience is accustomed to receiving from students of UA. His arc, alongside the ethics of the Todoroki lineage and Midoriya's development of becoming All Might's successor are all common topics of discussion among fans, and representative of the ways heroic behavior is quantified in Horikoshi's universe.

When Midoriya tells Todoroki "It's Yours!" He's giving a sense of selfhood back to his classmate, encouraging him to claim his power as not an extension of his father, but instead

something new that will make him a greater hero. When Bakugo reaches the stage in front of all his peers at the beginning of the competition as the highest scorer on the entrance exam and thus, a representative of young heroes-in-training, he tells everyone watching, “I just wanted to say, I’m going to win.” (*My Hero Academia*, Season 2, Episode 3). His belief in himself is absolute, and his ultimate desire is to prove without a doubt that he belongs at the top as number one, where Bakugo has been for most of his life because he was born with a strong Quirk and pedestalized for it, like many talented or gifted students are often praised for their affinities that align with public perceptions of usefulness such as natural intelligence, charisma, strength, so on and so forth.

Fandom spaces have dubbed Katsuki Bakugo’s character symbolism to be intertwined with the fate of the protagonist, Izuku Midoriya. Each character supposedly represents one half of heroism within this universe: Bakugo as the symbol of victory, and Midoriya as the symbol of hope. Each student felt inspired to become heroes through their love of All Might, the in-series quoted, “Symbol of Peace.” Inadvertently, the fanbase is participating in youth-as concepts, marking these children as symbols that are greater than their personhood. They are consequentially participating in meaning-making and identity work through the developed connections with these narrative figures, while simultaneously placing a foothold in the very system being critiqued by MHA surrounding seeing people as not who they are, but what they could represent. It is their power, their identity, but co-written by those around them to suit the needs of the narrative. It is ranked, commodified and configured to suit the ideal, not just the person.

Consider this, a core statement offered by the protagonist Izuku Midoriya when recounting his time at U.A. to the watcher is sharing that this is the story of how he became the world’s

"Greatest" hero, not the world's "Number One" hero. His power is in impact, not just raw ability, and the distinction between greatness and metric or quantifiable terms is intentional by design, offering further proof of criticism. After the conclusion of All Might's showdown with All For One in season three, he points to the camera that has been watching the fight and gives a message to the audience—namely Midoriya, his successor. He says, "Now it's your turn." (*My Hero Academia*, Season 3, Episode 11), signifying his retirement from heroics, having used up the last embers of his abilities to fend off against All For One. This chapter is titled with a quote about power, and agency over one's self. We finish off with a similar statement from All Might that reconstructs this in another way for the young heroes of the future—taking the power one inherits and making it yours, while reinforcing the responsibility of what it means to be someone that others look up to for guidance or hope. This is the concept in practice of passing on the torch to the next generation in the hopes that they will continue to improve their world.

I return to a sentiment expressed by Peretti (2017) when it comes to the value of symbols within popular culture, particularly characters like Superman, or in our case, All Might, "our highest ideals come from the fictions (not always stories but often enough) we create," (p. 41). The pervasiveness of superhero myths across the globe comes from "the desire to pass along cultural values around empowerment and responsibility to their young," (Jenkins, 2020, p. 39). The students in MHA are responsible for carrying on the ideals of heroic symbols that came before them. While they have agency over the choices they make, they are impacted by the environments that shaped their upbringing. This is similar to real-world adolescents during the liminality of the high school experience. While the students of 1-A are all actively choosing to become heroes, they are also choosing the responsibility that comes with embodying that identity. For both the adolescents in MHA and in the real world, it is their life and the path they

choose to follow within it. What one represents and how they interact with others can hold power over the future. In other words, the potential for greatness you possess may be impacted by your experiences, but no matter what—it is always yours.

Lesson #2 (90-minutes, designed for 1-2 class periods)

Power and Systems

This lesson plan pairs with the third chapter of this thesis but could be pulled and adapted for different classrooms and goals in mind. It aims to help secondary students (target, grade 9/10) put into practice merit systems and their understanding of rankings in the hero academia. Keep in mind that this lesson is utilizing MHA as the anchor text, but many of the questions and activities could easily be used to teach other media texts that center on similar topics.

This lesson could be applied to other media, for instance, the Disney movie Sky High (2005), where students are enrolled to be the future heroes of planet Earth and sorted into hero and sidekick tracks of education. This process is done through an evaluation of a student's superpowers, including how flashy they are and how well they align with this society's view of power through the perception of an educator who sorts the teens into heroes and sidekicks.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Define meritocracy and explain why societies want to believe in it.
- Identify how power works in MHA (quirks, institutions, reputations, laws, etc.)
- Evaluate whether success is mainly due to effort/skill or advantages/structures.
- Support claims with evidence from the story and real-world parallels.

Essential Questions:

- *Who gets to be called a hero, and who gets left out? Why?*
- *How do institutions (UA, licensing, rankings) decide what merit looks like?*
- *Does this media critique or does it reinforce the myth of meritocracy?*
- *Is being a hero more about ability or virtue?*

Materials:

- Video clips from *My Hero Academia*
    - The series is currently available for streaming on Crunchyroll, Apple TV, Netflix (Seasons 1-4) and YouTube. Rakuten Viki has listed episodes available to watch for free, but may require more research.
- Power Pyramid Chart(s)
- Paper and writing materials (or digital equivalent)

Accessibility Issues: There are different streaming services that offer access to MHA, but they are for the most-part, paid accounts. Some of these scenes can be found for free on YouTube, but there remains the possibility that these free clips could be removed in the future. As mentioned above, this lesson does not have to revolve around this series, and can be adjusted for others. The educator would be responsible for modifying this lesson to suit their needs.

Introduction

Prompt(s): *What do you believe is the most powerful Quirk (superpower) that has been shown to you in class or brought up in discussion, and why? / Who do you believe holds the most power within the story?*

Have students respond to one or both of the questions above prior to beginning the activities for today's lessons. Engage in a quick share-out and transition.

Activity #1: Power Play

MHA is a society built on unevenly distributed superpowers, making it a rich resource for fostering discussion. Watching the following clips, students will be placed into groups and asked to search for specific types of power being demonstrated.

Group A: Natural Power (Quirks, superpowers)
Group B: Social Power (status, popularity, reputation)
Group C: Institutional Power (laws, licensing, regulations, rules)
Group D: Economic Power (support items, training, resources)
Group E: Informational Power (knowledge, strategy, insider-access/details)
Group F: (Options) if you want a more abstract category for students interested in literary analysis, **Narrative Power** (point of view, perspective, plot armor, etc.) If you want an alternative category, elect to have them evaluate clips for **Ideological Power** (belief, values, ideals, moral conviction)

Options for clips to show class, mix and match as desired, each is marked for types of power on display (Natural–NTP, Social–SP, Institutional–ISP, Economical–EP, Informational–IFP, Narrative–NRP, Ideological–IDP). **If familiar with the program, there are plenty more options throughout the series! These are just some that could work well for this exercise.**

- Season 1, Episode 1: Izuku Midoriya: Origin. (2:55-7:04) **NTP, SP, ISP, NRP**
    - If you have already watched S1, EP1 with your students, returning here to the opening scenes presents all kinds of power at play. We see the main protagonist, witness a villain being subdued by heroes who are being watched by the public.

- Season 1, Episode 8: Bakugo's Start Line (6:55-9:50) **NTP, SP, EP, IFP**
    - This scene shows class 1-A in action at one of UA's training grounds. They've been split into hero/villain teams and are going against each other. In this

episode, we see Todoroki take down his classmates with little assistance from his partner, demonstrating a gap in power.

- Season 2, Episode 6: The Boy Born with Everything (4:32-8:00) **NTP, SP, NRP, IDP**
  - Conversation between No. 1 Pro-Hero All Might and No. 2 Pro-Hero Endeavor, discussing his son's performance in the Sports Festival. The concept of Quirk marriages is brought up between Midoriya and Todoroki, and we get insight into the different ideologies and reasons for becoming a hero.

- Season 2, Episode 12: Todoroki vs. Bakugo (00:00-1:01, 4:50-10:44), **NTP, SP, EP**
  - Final battle of the U.A. Sports Festival. Public display in an arena with announcers and commentary from teachers at U.A. high school. We get to see the structure of these fights, are given some insight to the combatants ultimate goals and how they're received by the audience.

- Season 2, Episode 15: Midoriya and Shigaraki (14:35-17:19) **ISP, EP, IFP, NRP, IDP**
  - We see Tenya on the lookout for the Hero Killer, who has hurt his brother. We are given ideological and institutional insight for the expected role of a hero, and Tenya is given a warning about personal pursuits/revenge. The scene transitions to a discussion between the Hero Killer, and villain Shigaraki.

- Season 2, Episode 24: Katsuki Bakugo: Origin (14:14-19:16) **NTP, SP, EP, IDP**
  - Bakugo and Midoriya are partnered for their practical exam. In this scene, we witness them fighting against their teacher, All Might. To pass, they need to subdue or escape him.

- Season 3, Episode 9: All For One (4:20-7:39) **SP, NRP, IFP, IDP**
  - Bakugo is kidnapped by the League of Villains, who are hoping to recruit him into their group. We see a cameo of All For One, All Might's rival who is mentoring the leader of the league, Shigaraki. Meanwhile, his classmates are in disguise and looking for him.

- Season 3, Episode 11: One For All (6:44-10:24) **SP, IFP, NRP, IDP**
  - Live-streamed battle between All For One and One For All, revealing All Might's secret to the world. Flashbacks to his mentor (Nana) telling him what it means to be a hero, and present-day insight to his rival's protege being her grandson.

- Season 3, Episode 16: Shiketsu High Lurking (06:24-10:31) **NTP, ISP, EP, INP**
  - The provisional licensing exam has started, and every school is after the students of Class 1-A at U.A. high school. Turns out, being famed has a downside because all the other schools have been studying the students of 1-A in preparation for this exam, where only so many can get licensed as heroes.

Overarching question to possibly have students consider: *Who is allowed to act in each of these clips/episodes? (Allowed by strength, by popularity, by the rules, by money/tech, by*

knowing more, by the camera, by belief…etc.) Another thing for students to potentially consider is what powers are absent or not shown. For instance, they may see snippets of villains who have social power with one another, but its capital works against them in a society that does not accept them–therefore, in MHA they lack social power. Why?
Students in their groups should write down the powers they're finding as they watch.

After each clip (or set of clips), keep the discussion structured with the same formatting:

- Step A: Ask, "What did we literally see happen?" have students describe the scenes. *If needed, prior to watching the clips provide a brief overview of context surrounding characters and the current storyline (ex. If showing the Tenya scene, explain his brother was hurt by a villain).* By asking students this type of question, it keeps them grounded in evidence.

After reviewing all of the clips:

- Step B: Allow for time for students to organize their thoughts and assemble their power categories. By the end, this may look crowded and messy. That is alright, there are several elements of power on display in each clip. I've labelled a few to the side, but your class might bring up details that I missed.
- Step C: Tension Talk, have students explore one recurring question while reviewing these moments and working on their pyramids. "What type of power mattered most in this specific moment, why?" It's okay if groups disagree. Encourage them to look at the scenes. This trains them to argue from text.

Activity #2: Power Pyramid

After reviewing the given clips and having students search for specific types of power, transition from the *Power Play* activity to *Power Pyramid*. In this portion of class, students will be asked to evaluate the different types of power that they've been exposed to, and rank how well these concepts work with or against each other. Ultimately, they will construct a ranked list of which powers appear to dominate in this society.

Each group will create their own pyramid of the given powers and present an argument in class discussion against the other groups as to why their choice is the most accurate. Next to their positions on the pyramid, groups should give a brief explanation for why they have placed that power in its given position.

Pyramid Structure

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">A [explanation here]</td></tr>
<tr><td>B [explanation here]</td><td>C [explanation here]</td></tr>
</table>

D [explanation here]	E [explanation here]	F [explanation here]

Please note, that there is not a given "correct" answer for these categories. That is part of the discussion to have with students surrounding how their implicit biases and perhaps their interpretation of the show have influenced their choices. The goal is not to come to a definitive ranking for the entire class, but rather to inspire conversation about how we see and rank things continuously and implicitly in our day-to-day lives.

A line of questioning that may occur, "Notice how Group A put Natural Power on top of their pyramid, versus Group C put Institutional Power? What does that say about how we read the same scenes differently?" This is where some students might begin to notice that the process of ranking and assigning merit is itself, an ideological act.

Part II: (Optional) Students will now be asked to construct a pyramid evaluating power sources in their own environment. First, new definitions will need to be created for each of the groups. For instance, Natural Power focuses on Quirks for MHA, but in the real world, might instead be tied to affinities or natural abilities and talents.

BONUS if keeping the **Narrative Power** section, this can easily be modified for commentary on media bias and connected to the real world avenues of narrative control.

You may notice that this is deliberately feeding into the topic of meritocracy as well and might find it valuable to encourage a discussion after rankings.

Potential Closing Statement: We like meritocracy because it feels fair. Stories like this let us test whether it actually is, and what that means.

In this chapter, I began with a story that featured a discussion between myself and my mother, which paralleled our thoughts on inheritance to what I saw in one of my students while teaching. I included this story to frame my analysis of one of MHA's main characters and their relationship to power and inheritance. I then went on to speak on the ways that power operates through the narrative choices made in *My Hero Academia* as well as through the innate structures of social and educational institutions. By reading Quirks as both inherited ability and a metaphor for perceived potential, one can see that lineage, privilege, resources and public perception all shape who is who has access to opportunity and how easily advantages can be misread as merit.

Through examining the different experiences of students at U.A. alongside real-world practices of evaluation and labeling, I attempt to address that student identity is not simply something that is discovered during the liminal period of adolescence but produced under overlapping expectations, i.e. family, school systems, and the social narratives students absorb about their worth. To bring these ideas into the classroom, I then provided a lesson plan with activities educators can use to help students identify and debate different kinds of power and to reflect on how those forces shape status and self-concept in their own environments. This chapter argues that while students may inherit circumstances, labels or abilities that shape the path in front of them, different "powers' becomes meaningful through interpretation. The work of "becoming" requires us to name those forces and question the stories attached to them. It also requires for us to practice seeing ourselves and each other as more than what we have been told we represent.

Chapter Four: Spectacle & Sacrifice

"The word "hero" has lost all meaning in this society. The world is overrun by fakes and criminals like you who chase pretty dreams. You must all be purged. […] These streets must run with the blood of hypocrites. Hero! I will reclaim that word! Come on! Just try and stop me, you fakes! There is only one man I'll let kill me. He is a true hero. All Might is worthy."

- Hero Killer, Stain (*My Hero Academia*, Season 2, Episode 17)

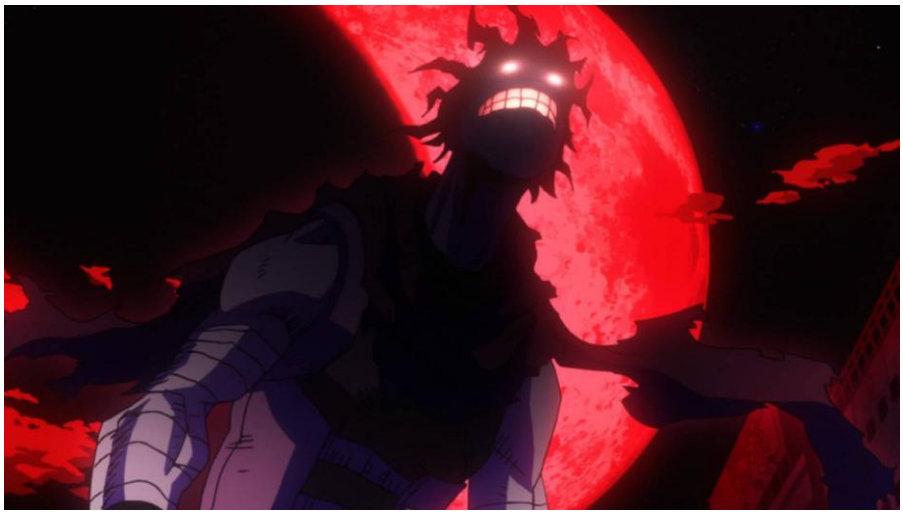

Figure 4: An image depicting Hero Killer, Stain, a villain from My Hero Academia who went after pro-heroes he deemed unworthy of the title. Taken from Matthew Magnus Lundeen's article on GameRant, "My Hero Academia: The Stain Effect"

It was November. They gathered all of the girls downstairs in the sorority house and handed out keychain alarms. It hadn't been that long, maybe a few days after the murders. Four students were stabbed to death. There hadn't been a murder here in over seven years, and now there were four in one night, just a few blocks away from their home. Classes were cancelled. Everyone left early for Thanksgiving break. People were afraid.

The girl was afraid.

All the while, others began flooding into the area to conduct their own "investigations." Social media sleuths fled to their platforms to discuss theories on an active case in a small-town they weren't even a part of to get a modicum of attention. It didn't matter what the truth was, it only mattered what words would gather the most likes from an online video.

As the story goes, the villain was caught, the trial went live, and the girl hopes the victim's families found some semblance of peace. The villain took a plea deal to escape a straight shot to hell, and the scene of the crime was torn down. Demolished.

The internet kept on spewing garbage, and they even made movies out of it.

Vignette #4 "University of Idaho, Fall 2022"

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the notion of performance as it is presented through *My Hero Academia*. I will be speaking on specific choices Horikoshi made through the creation of the Hero Public Safety Commission, the Billboard Hero Chart and the overt symbolism that steeped into the story surrounding society's obsession with superheroes. Through evaluating each of these establishments as they are crafted and brought into the protagonist's journey, I will investigate how the educational environment of U.A. reflects not only a societal indulgence in demonstrations of power, but the "right" kind of power as well as persona for public consumption. This will be compared against scholarship investigating performance in secondary school settings, and the impact this has on identity. I will also discuss the way media holds responsibility and narrative control, and how educators may choose to open conversations with their students surrounding the barrage of content they consume.

Rankings, Public Persona and The Billboard Chart

There is a constant negotiation at play between who we are, and the version of ourselves that we allow to be on display for others. Interaction is inherently a performance which is "shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with "impressions" that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor," (Barnhart, n.d., citing Goffman, np). In the case of MHA, the actors or "performers" being those who are pursuing top ranks on the Hero Billboard Chart—and by extension—students enrolled in the hero track of education at U.A. high school. The charts are a method of establishing social identity and trust with the public. They help heroes legitimize their role in keeping everyone safe. This development of the public persona which acts as a symbol for civilians to place their faith behind not only constructs social identity, it is also, "closely allied to the concept of the "front," [or] "part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe," (Barnhart, n.d., citing Goffman, para. 2-3). Crafting the perfect role to play not only defines the relationship one hero has with the public, but it also reinforces the system's entire working mechanism of trust. In other words, the personas put on by heroes continually affect the entire world's relationship with the industry.

A social contract is initiated when it comes to the concept of performing the superhero identity. This same behavior can be found in professions that exist in the real world—especially within industries of service or rescue (i.e. firefighters, police officers, educators, military, etc.). These "roles" or performances are often symbolically connected to communities based on their value systems. When it comes to heroic identity, people often "assemble their own armored costumes, articulate their own social missions, and form alliances via social networking sites, all

actions they believe will make their cities a better place to live," (Jenkins, 2020. p. 37). All the while, maintaining the trust that is placed in them through the social systems they are tasked to sustain. Let me provide an example, as an educator, it is our responsibility or performed "role" to teach others. We are expected to perform the role of teacher in ways that build trust with administration, parents, colleagues and students. Adolescences, likewise, navigate multiple social roles shaped by group affiliation and identities. Within school, however, they are primarily expected to perform the role of "student" and that role is evaluated through their academic participation, social behavior as well as their conformity to institutional expectations. Essentially, In school, both teachers and students are judged not only as individuals, but by how well they are able to perform the roles the institution assigns to them.

Earlier in this thesis, I mentioned the concepts of performativity and performance being taken from Locke (2015). Her work evaluates how performativity functions as a quest for efficiency that desires a measurable output for educational spaces, and it operates operating alongside performance, which creates tension because performance does not prioritize the same equation. She shares insight into how performance is not only an equation we seek to understand, but also a facet of structuring power. Locke has claimed in her research, "taking into consideration performativity and performance as constructs of power and knowledge, has reconfigured what *counts* as knowledge, and what 'rules' knowledge will follow," (Locke, 2015, np.). She goes on to discuss how in capitalistic societies, where performance and justice become "embroiled in the economic rule of exchange," there are inherent power inequalities (Locke, referencing McKenzie, 2015, np.). What this suggests is that dominant social groups often shape the standards by which value is defined. In education, the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student becomes a mechanism for passing those values on, and this raises the question:

what forms of student performance (academic, social, behavior, etc.) are treated as evidence of the values that schools want young people to emulate?

Milner (2021) addresses in his work with the Opportunity Gap Framework the idea of expanding lenses of what could be considered a part of curriculum. He expresses a need to build stronger synergy between formal curriculum practices of schools and student's practices as well as engagements beyond the regular school day (Milner, 2021, pp. 276-277). Not long after this section, he states that in opportunity-centered teaching, understanding educators and students psychological and emotional health are both important aspects which are essential to performance. So, we have some tension at work with the notion of performance in education being a war of input and output exchanges. It requires a prioritization of efficiency, and yet, in today's age and student population, requires a slew of additional considerations: student's emotional well-being, their lives beyond the school day, the relationship between curriculum and student's lived experiences. If performance is understood only as this exchange, it is missing the human and social conditions that also shape important aspects of learning. Therefore, performance in education cannot be reduced to efficiency alone, it must also account for the above elements which have a hand in students' opportunities to learn.

MHA considers the ways in which the hero education properly teaches its students in a coherent model about what is valued within their world; it also demonstrates some of the more popular topics in education discourse surrounding teacher burnout, gifted and talented programs, and different styles of classroom management. This is most apparent in the roles or "performances" put on by the cast of adult characters who operate as teachers at U.A. high school, or as models for the students during their hero internships. A short comparison that can be offered is the explicit contrast between staff members All Might and Eraserhead (Shota

Aizawa) in how they approach the students of 1-A. These educators hold different styles of educating the next generation heroes, each rooted in their own beliefs surrounding what it means to be successful in this industry.

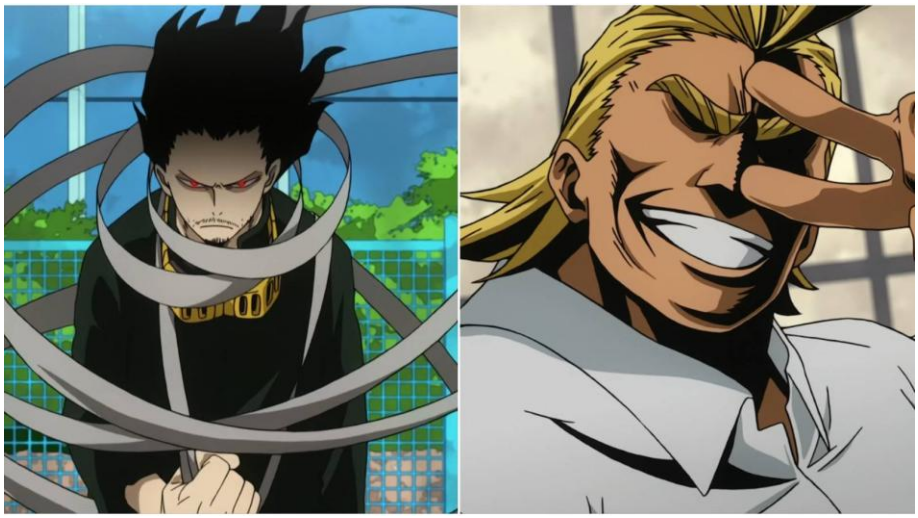

Figure 5: Comparison image showing Shota Aizawa, “Eraserhead” (left) and Toshinori Yagi, “All Might” (right), two teachers involved in the first-year hero courses at U.A. high school. Retrieved from Sam Hutchinson’s 2020 article, “My Hero Academia: Most Powerful Teachers, Ranked” on ScreenRant.

Aizawa functions as the homeroom teacher for 1-A and is shown as being a man with harsh expectations for his students, he is even infamous among incoming classes for his expulsion rate. Aizawa often comes across as being a strict teacher with a logical, and somewhat cold approach to his position, but he does actively push back against UA’s choices for examination in the process of preparing and selecting aspiring heroes. Despite his demeanor, he cares deeply for all of his students, and nearly everything that he does is in service to teach them that their role as heroes is not a fantasy, it is dangerous work with real consequences. He has a vocal disdain against the side of heroics which focuses on the media attention and ranking systems, choosing instead to operate as an underground hero while he is not teaching. I also find

it interesting to bring up that his Quirk is an ability that is not inherently performative like other superpowers. Aizawa, or "Eraserhead's" ability is cancelling other people's Quirks temporarily, for as long as he can keep his eyes on them. There is something to be said on a thematic level about a character who not only despises the standard concept of performance but has the ability to nullify a defining trait in this world which is so closely correlated with one's personal and branded identity.

Comparatively, the students also have exposure to All Might, who teaches Foundational Hero Studies, i.e., practical hero training for students. At the start of the series, he is number one on the charts and well-known on a global scale. His trademark smile and classic superhero behavior which emulates the golden age of comics offers an immediate divergence in approaching educating future heroes. He is much more focused on teaching what one symbolizes to the public and encourages the students to consider what it means to bear that responsibility. He is constantly engaging with fans and is sometimes even late to work because of his need to always be available in assisting civilians. In reviewing some popular discourse surrounding the educational styles of All Might and Eraserhead, the following conclusion has been drawn by fans: One focuses on giving students the tools needed to survive, while the other acts as an inspiration for achieving their greatest potential.

Excerpted comments from educators discussing the portrayal of teachers in MHA. r/BokuNoHeroAcademia subreddit post, "This show means a lot to me, as a teacher."
'Anyhow, the point at hand- I see myself in All Might, not in his Plus Ultra sense, but in the sense of his relationship with Deku. This show is adorable and wonderful and hilarious and intriguing and all that, but the most amazing thing to me is the portrayal of this guy who was once this big thing, who has now devoted his life to teaching. It's silly, and sometimes he's shown to be quite ridiculous (I loved the book in his back pocket in the latest episode, that was great), and he's inexperienced, but he's got this passion to help these kids that just means a lot.

I can really relate. He teaches them how to be superheroes, and I teach them to play the violin- but we both started because of a loss of our own ability, and continued because it actually meant a lot." – @deleted user, original post

"I was a teacher for about eight years before I got devastatingly sick. I'm still not really recovered yet (having a pretty bad day as I type this, honestly), but I miss the job a lot--and I'm really grateful for stories that portray teachers in a positive, realistic way. It's what drew me to BNHA initially. The U.A. teachers care so much about their students; they'd literally give anything to help these kids succeed, up to and including their own lives. So many stories for teens depict teachers as lazy, stupid, or downright evil--and I know there are a lot of terrible teachers out there who do make kids' lives hell. But many more care deeply about the job, many more love their children. And it's obvious that All Might and Aizawa et al truly care so deeply for all the kids. Gives me the warm fuzzies!!" – @runehallow

"Aizawa is my absolute favourite character though, maybe because I share his disdain for the everyday minutia of school work and his desire to climb into a sleeping bag whenever something not too interesting is happening. But also because despite all of this, he's a great teacher who genuinely cares about his students and will risk his life for them without hesitation. I love everything about his relationship to Class A, and having read the manga over the weekend, it's only going to get better in future seasons. (I also love everything about his character design, but that's a different discussion.) Seeing his character also gives me hope that someday I might find the necessary balance in my life that would allow me to take up and actually enjoy teaching again." - @pokemonmacaroni

"As someone who's currently training to be a teacher, this is one of the big reasons why I love BnHA so much. Especially seeing All Might with the teaching guide in his back-pocket, because it sometimes feels exactly like that during our Teaching Experience periods." - @AVerySneakyWalrus

These excerpts not only demonstrate the cult following that surrounds this show in the sphere of popular media, but also explicitly shows how the portrayal or "performance" of the teaching role in MHA directly impacts educators in the real world. The same can be said for the students of 1-A who are beloved by real-life adolescents and young adults across the globe.

Moving into discussing another important facet of performance in the realm of MHA, I must also initiate an investigative analysis of The Hero Billboard Chart, which monitors the public approval rankings of active pro-heroes. The way it works is as follows:

> "Roughly twice a year, hero rankings are released, based on "incident resolutions, contributing to society, approval ratings" with rankings being recorded to at least triple digits. This ranking, like those used for sports athletes or musicians demonstrates how integrated the concept of superheroes is […] For the average citizen, a Pro-Hero is a real concept even if they have never met one." (Waller, citing Horikoshi, Ch. 184, 2020, p. 20).

These rankings affect not only audience perception of worth when it comes to their heroes but set a foundational example for students in the hero academia who dream of one day making the charts. This is quite in sync with the current popularity of adolescents that desire to pursue careers in the entertainment industry, hoping to be the shining star in a sea of thousands with the same dream. This fictional ranking system is interesting to position against real-world student aspirations because of its innate fusion with service. I had mentioned before that while I was teaching, the older students that I had in my classroom tended to drift toward more secure positions or "roles" they had deemed as stable sectors of society, whereas the younger students were more likely to have a strong desire toward "dream-forward" positions. I find the concept of heroics as a profession to be quite fascinating, particularly within MHA because of how this profession is valued and integrated into the everyday experiences of citizens. Heroes are simultaneously a career that is within grasp, while also placed on a pedestal for scrutiny. In an essence, this role in society is so highly publicized and admired that it shapes the labor market for the world.

When it comes to the Hero Public Safety Commission, this adds another layer to the performance of heroics in the world of MHA. They act as governmental oversight for professional heroes and monitor the backend of this world directly as a connection to the legality and ethics of hero work. This could be defined as a generalized checks and balances type of

relationship, however, the Commission is not above engaging with or supporting the darker sides of this profession (espionage, deals/payouts, cultivating child soldiers, etc.) to sustain "peace" and the status quo surrounding this universe's belief in its heroes. There are entire arcs of the show that go into detail about the underground operations of heroes who are not publicly ranked on the charts, and others who function as double agents that engage directly with villain organizations in an effort to prevail with the greater good. These agents are another form of performance in play within the narrative, which breeds engaging discussion surrounding how some versions of heroes are more accepted than others, and the ones that exist in the dark, do so because the public cannot face the reality of what happens in the shadows to ensure their safety—effectively curating a fantasy environment.

When positioning alongside student identity and classroom analysis opportunities, one might take into consideration the following information presented by Locke in her comments on the quest for efficiency, "time, performance, and justice become embroiled in the economic rule of exchange, which has inherent power inequalities within the capitalist structure," (Locke, 2015, Performance Capitalism). Now, here she is talking about Lyotard's understanding of the linkage of phrases in how these are a matter of the exchange of values. This is relevant to the Hero Public Safety Commission and Billboard Chart because it reiterates the concept of how power in these organizations and social structures is innately inequal, while introducing another element that remains important for the input-output of performance in education—the element of time. Within MHA, this is the narrative time to run the series' completion and its individualized arcs, but it is also affiliated with the time taken by the characters to achieve perfection in their roles. In their education, U.A. students negotiate their identities through their affinities and affirm their ideological understanding of society through the time spent learning how to become top-ranked

heroes. They are not spending their school days learning how to become underground supports for society because these "roles" are not championed by the public; even though those operating in the dark are important to preventing the collapse of MHA's social, as well as economical ecosystem. Time is seen as being most valuable when it is spent in this educational institution by fulfilling the preconceived expectations surrounding heroes and during opportunities where the public being able to *see* them act ethically sound—even as students who are still learning. They are held to a higher standard than the common child based on their aspirations and access. It marks a precursor for what to expect from them as adults who will one day be overseeing civilians safety. This is easily demonstrated in the arcs of the series where we see the public engaging with students of UA, class 1-A, particularly after the villain attacks on campus and during sporting events. Returning to the earlier argument that presents adolescence as a liminal space, time becomes an even more valuable thing to be measured in this period.

I will briefly restate one of the key spaces in MHA that was discussed in the previous chapter, the Sports Festival, which has innately capitalistic undertones, "in capitalist systems, all events submit to the rule of capital by reducing that event or performance to the representation of value within a system of exchange," (Locke, 2015, The Event). Students in a classroom setting might find it interesting not only to critique or evaluate the characters within this story, but also because of the minor mirrorwork at play in how the environment is created to mimic experiences we see every day. All countries have some form of oversight, many have laws and regulations that correspond to the beliefs and values of its people, or in some instances—just their leadership. Many places around the world have events that are meant to capitalize on the performance of the best and the brightest.

The performance of heroics appears beyond the scope of MHA. There is something to be said about the nature of performance in pursuit of resolution verses for attention or relevancy. A conversation that I wanted to begin with this chapter, as it is focused on both spectacle and sacrifice, is how some "roles" or positions can reflect this existing duality, particularly in highly polarizing roles. Many concepts are relevant to this in education, including identity formation and its thread line to public and personal performance that is put on by educators and students within their classrooms. This is also connective to the way in which groups of people stand to gain various forms of capital—ranging from social to monetary from what is shown to the public, but how this also may result in something else that is greater to lose.

The Symbol of Peace, Hero Killer and Ideological Collapse of Heroism

All Might acts as an ideal for the world of MHA, but he also becomes a crutch that the public falls back on in times of crisis because of his portrayal as a savior to humanity. Peretti (2017) includes a similar notion in his work on Superman, "[He] is the equivalent of a god, at least in the popular imagination," (p. 115) in a section of his book that discusses the limitations of Superman's power as it is depicted in different comics. For instance, Superman often saves us from natural disasters or external threats, not ourselves. All Might fulfils a similar role within the popular imagination of his universe. He is the standard that draws what it means to be a hero and the morality attached with that role. This is most clearly expressed in his costume design that echoes heroes like Superman or Captain America, who act as similar beacons of hope for their audiences. It is also shown through his catchphrases, such as, "Don't worry, because I am here!" or "Go beyond!" which are meant to sooth and inspire those watching. The struggle with the Symbol of Peace is that he is so far ahead of everyone else, no other heroes compare. Often, this

leads to overreliance on his character to save the day. It is shown in how the students at U.A. high school view their new teacher, and it also shows up in how the public perceives All Might versus how they view Endeavor, the number 2 hero.

Where All Might strives to be the best for the greater good, Endeavor is driven by an ambition to be number one. He is consistently ranked behind All Might through the Billboard Charts until his retirement and perceives himself as being weaker than the Symbol of Peace because of how he eventually obtains the number one spot on the charts. He never "officially" surpasses him, instead becoming the top pro by default when All Might was no longer able to perform the role, due to extensive injuries that reduced his power. Even as the new number one hero, Endeavor is unable to uphold the symbolic status that was afforded to his rival. He is not seen as a symbol of peace, and this impacts public safety and crime rates within the narrative. As perfectly summarized by Das (2022) in criticizing the idea of the Symbol of Peace,

> "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." (p. 54).

Sinfield (1992) offers another important manner of dissecting the intersectionality of multiple identity markers, like class, race, sexuality, etc. which correspond and negotiate "faultlines" within media narratives. He positions that these markers within narratives are never perfectly seamless; they are instead held together over real social tensions (Sinfield, 1992, np). These tensions provide natural stressors within the story, which offer openings for differing readings. He is cited in Later (2020), who explores Captain America and subversion of national narratives,

through a queer reading of the existing media. Later (2020) goes on to argue, "[it] is a collaborative, ongoing, and unreliable work. Making sense of the enormous […] canon requires a complex process of selective, critical, and subjective reading that renders impossible any monolithic narrative for the character" (p. 217). Engagement with media is a process, not something that is fixed. Teaching with students should also reflect this. When we are working with popular media, we are examining perspectives and multiple avenues of meaning making.

While my thesis is not concerned with this approach of evaluating the narrative of MHA, I do find the theory interesting for examining pressure points like the differing social classes and upbringings of students within UA. Additionally, evaluating the corresponding adult storylines of heroes involved with the Commission and ranking charts continues housing these faultlines. All Might, sharing some qualities with Captain America reiterates some of the contentions brought up in Marvel's concept of the super soldier through the educational institution he serves and his role as a public defender. After all, U.A. high school is effectively training a new generation of youth soldiers through the hero program. There is much to be excavated regarding gender presentation and the different ways power is demonstrated through male versus female superheroes, even down to their costume designs. For the sake of this chapter, the focus will be narrowed to the spectacle and manipulation of personal identity and national ideology, but I Tim Hanley's (2022) ideas are applicable here with this examination of MHA, even as it criticizes strictly western superhero media: "men were drawn to be powerful and women were drawn to be sexy, and those were two extremely different intentions. There was no equality there, and it's only recently that fans and creators have started to reckon with this skewed dynamic," (p. 95). The way women are depicted in this series offers even more in terms of criticism of media and how people are made to market themselves.

The superhero as a brand is explicitly taught to the students of UA, having an entire episode dedicated to the process of choosing a hero name. Students have a say in designing their costumes, many of which reflect aspects of their Quirks and providing a mask for public consumption. The way students represent themselves is often impacted by factors such as family legacy or personal desire to go beyond expectations. Tenya Iida takes on the inherited role of Ingenium, his older brother's hero name after his encounter with the Hero Killer. He does this because his brother is no longer able to pursue hero work. Thus, Iida is not just performing the role of any hero, but one deeply connected to his family and already established in the public conscience. Similarly, the protagonist of the series, Izuku Midoriya, exists as the successor to All Might. He is to be the one who surpasses him to become the world's greatest hero.

Something that I found extremely intriguing within my research of superhero narratives and their implications on the real world were Iouchkov and McGuire's (2020) ideas. They investigated criminological comparisons of crime control between the narratives of heroes like Superman, Batman and Captain America against the activities of "real-life" superheroes. Namely, the RLSH (Real-Life Superheroes) movement, which exists as "a global community who create original superhero-inspired identities and utilize them for prosocial action, primarily in the forms of crime prevention patrols and social outreach initiatives," (Iouchkov and McGuire, 2020, p. 190). Part of what drew me to MHA as a focal point of study is its emphasis on youth and their education experience. I love the idea of a school that is built with the explicit intention to teach students what it means to be a good person, and yet, this concept is deeply intwined with the relational supports that exists in one's individual, communal and national identity groups. Finding out that there are activist groups that were born from the love of superhero narratives

further proved already existing ideas in my head about heroics and the way children are taught about their purpose in the world.

As previously seeded, one of the students in class 1-A who experiences a massive personal arc is that of the class president, duty-bound leader, Tenya Iida. This is during the Hero Killer arc of the second season, where a villain named Stain gains national recognition for the slaying of heroes he deems unworthy of the title. Iida's arc is one that many students in real life likely can relate to, because the audience witnesses this boy who perfectly subscribes to the social ideology of heroism as it is employed by his family ideals and supported through the public. However, upon his brother being attacked and seriously hurt by the Hero Killer, Iida experiences feelings of rage and a need for revenge which contrasts against his normal rigidity and faith in hero society. He isolates from his peers and pursues the villain---leading to a confrontation where Stain actively calls him out for not acting heroically. Iida is joined by his peers, Izuku Midoriya and Shoto Todoroki who noticed something was wrong. This is taking place at the same time as an attack on the city orchestrated by the League of Villains (LOV), an organization that operates independently of Stain which has at this point been trying to recruit the man into their folds because of his media notoriety.

Todoroki and Midoriya are able to save Iida from being killed by Stain, and in a turn of events after their battle when Stain is subdued and pro-heroes finally make it onto the scene, Midoriya is attacked by a flying Nomu, which is a genetically altered creature full of Quirks created by the LOV for their scheme to upend hero society. The Nomu carries Midoriya off, and before the on-scene heroes can even respond, Stain escapes his hold and saves Midoriya from capture. During their earlier fight, he recognized the boy as embodying that of a true hero like All Might, and because of this he deems him worthy of life. Shortly after, Stain vows to rid the

streets of all false heroes, screaming at the ones who failed to act right in front of him. In his monologue, fear visibly sinks into the appearance of everyone present---both students and professionals. He then freezes in place, and it is later revealed Stain lost consciousness due to a punctured rib. The fear he created due to his actions prior to capture set the ball in motion for the collapse of hero society, and later events for the final war arc of the series.

Many comic and superhero media scholars have written at length on the morality of heroes. Barringer (2009) even goes as far as to mention how since the dawn of the hero media, many people assume that super-beings are not just powerful, but morally superior.

> "In comic books, just as in real life, people come in all shapes, sizes, and motivations. More often than not, super-folk are simply ordinary people with extraordinary genetics. Like ordinary people, it is not always easy to peg these characters down as strictly good or bad. They're flawed. They make mistakes. Sometimes, even acting with the best intentions, their dealings have terrible consequences." (pg. 91)

This idea is further explored in darker, more-adult leaning superhero programs aimed at 18+ audiences, such as *The Boys* (2019—) television series, but it is also something keen to teen media like MHA, where the world is now occupied mostly by super-abled humans. Not everyone with a superpower is a superhero, and not all superheroes are capable of being good all the time—even the ones that do reach this mythical status of godhood in the eyes of the public are responsible in some ways for the downfall of heroism. While All Might functioned as a symbol who actively kept crime rates low by simply existing, he also curated the expectation to the public through his image that he could carry all that weight on his shoulders—which no one can do forever.

During my time in undergrad, I attended the University of Idaho. While living on campus, a horrible event took place in my junior year that completely rocked the way in which I interacted with and viewed the media. At the beginning of this chapter, there is a short vignette that mentions the UI murders and criticizes the way in which people chose to handle that case while it was actively being investigated. I remember my social media feed being completely taken over by true crime commentators and people from across the nation making their own speculative claims as the events transpired, going as far as to name drop people in this small town that they believed either committed the murders or helped the perpetrator to get away. At the time, a strange mixture of feelings was spinning in my gut. I was terrified because our school was a small town in the middle of nowhere, and rather than seeing a social feed full of people extending their support for the families affected by the tragedy, I was getting video after video of whodunit and gossip column material that hurt my stomach. I realized we do not just suffer from a literacy crisis with adolescents, but on a whole, in the new landscape of social media, people collectively struggle greatly with empathy and what roles we are meant to play for each other in times of need. We sometimes perform in a manner that is heroic to the brand, rather than to the person; meaning that too often, people are performing in ways that protect their public image rather than genuinely responding to the needs of a community or person.

In education, there's always a tug-of-war over what teachers should and shouldn't be "allowed" to do. Some of the phrases I heard during my teacher education followed a script like this: *English class is for reading, keep your personal opinions away from the children, stick to the basics.* But there's no such thing as a perfectly neutral classroom. Every text is written from a point of view, every curriculum makes choices about which voices "count," and even treating reading as a purely technical skill—separate from culture, identity, and other factors is its own

kind of bias. I believe that a healthy classroom and community is dependent on students encountering many kinds of stories to build their ability to think critically and understand experiences beyond their own. And English class is not just about books anymore; that's another reason why I opted to select an anime for study. The ELA classroom is one of the most important places for learning media literacy; how meaning is made and changed across formats. Students need practice analyzing not only poems and essays, but many other types of media content that exist in their day-to-day lives. Not only should they be engaging with different forms of media, but they should be learning how the stories they circulate in their free time serve as mirrors and access points for other perspectives.

Lesson #3 (90-minutes, designed for 1-2 class periods)

Social Issues and Symbols

This lesson plan pairs with the fourth chapter of this thesis but could be pulled and adapted for different classrooms and goals in mind. It aims to help secondary students (target, grade 9/10) put into practice merit systems and their understanding of rankings in the hero academia. Keep in mind that this lesson utilizes MHA as the anchor text, but many of the questions and activities could easily be used to teach other media texts that center on related topics.

This lesson could be applied to other media, for instance, if you wanted to elevate this content to suit a more mature audience (not recommended for secondary settings due to graphic depictions of violence and sexual content), there is plenty of similar commentary being made in television shows like "The Boys" or its spin-off series, "Gen V" on Amazon Prime.

Another option for younger students would be programs like Winx or W.I.T.C.H. which feature characters in magical scholastic settings dealing with the issues prevalent to their worlds.

Learning Objectives:
Students will be able to:

- Define symbolism through the selected media.
- Conduct external comparison to real-world counterparts.
- Identity social issues within a narrative.
- Evaluate and provide solutions.

Essential Questions:

- *What are the events that lead to society's lack in trust toward their heroes?*
- *Who is responsible for the wellbeing of the world?*
- *What preventative measures could have been taken to avoid this outcome? Was it avoidable at all?*
- *How does the media affect our perception of others?*
- *Is all information biased?*
- *What does it mean to be a symbol?*

Materials:

- Video clips
- Sticky notes
- Posters/large paper
- String/thread (multiple colors)

Accessibility Issues:
There are different streaming services that offer access to MHA, but they are for the most-part, paid accounts. Some of these scenes can be found for free on YouTube, but there remains the possibility that these free clips could be removed in the future. As mentioned above, this lesson does not have to revolve around this series, and can be adjusted for others. The educator would be responsible for modifying this lesson to suit their needs.

Introduction
Prompt(s): *What is an example of someone or something whose meaning has grown beyond what it originally was?* (take it one step further) *What exists in the world that has become more of an idea/concept than a thing?*

Note: The secondary question can be used to converse about how symbols are a fixed part of cultures. They consider stories and absorb things like ideology and identity. It is almost human nature to turn things into something grand; or to mythologize what we hold dearest.

Have students respond to one or both questions above before moving to the activities. After completing their responses, facilitate a brief discussion of key concepts (like symbolism) then transition.

Activity #1: Error Exhibit

Students will pull together evidence from clips that they believe demonstrate issues or "errors" that are commonplace in the society of MHA. *Through these short scenes, what is shown as being normal or acceptable behavior?*

It is the student's goal to write down 5-7 pieces of information that demonstrates a few different problems they see within this world. For this activity, they will want to do this on sticky notes or small pieces of paper that can be taped around the room. Upon finding these pieces of information, they are tasked with attaching that evidence to one of the corresponding social issues that has been labelled on posters and placed around the room.

Clips: (Keep in mind, these don't all have to be used. Scenes from earlier lessons could also likely be applicable to this activity. Feel free to mix and match as your heart wishes!)

- Season 2, Episode 2: Roaring Sports Festival (4:28-7:16), this episode introduces the Sports Festival Arc and takes place right after the USJ villain attack against U.A. hero students. Other sections of the school are coming to see class 1-A, first-year students who helped fend off the attackers until pro-heroes arrived to the scene. They are also scouting out their competition for the festival. A general studies student (Hitoshi Shinso) approaches, sharing that he is gunning for a spot in the hero course—which is only achievable through transferring someone out. *Error: Hero society turns kids into competitors instead of just students. Scenes from this arc beyond this student exchange also work for demonstrating this. Additionally, this scene takes place right after an attack on UA, trauma is brushed aside so performance can continue.*

- Season 2, Episode 7: Victory or Defeat (11:28-12:24) This short snippet shows Hitoshi Shinso's brief backstory with his Quirk, Brainwashing. Having this ability has made it so everyone already has preconceived ideas surrounding Shinso's personality and role in the world, deeming it a "villainous" Quirk. *Error: Society bases heroic nature not only on character, but on traits. If you do not fit the mold, you are cast aside or labelled a villain.*

- Season 2, Episode 16: Hero Killer: Stain vs U.A. Students (6:46-10:10), **Warning: violence and blood.** This scene depicts Tenya Iida going after the Hero Killer for revenge. We are given a monologue interspersed with flashbacks for Tenya's affections toward his older brother. It shows how the villain is sorting between "worthy" and "unworthy" heroes and gives a realistic impression of how a child would react to their family being hurt. Opens conversation surrounding the role of revenge and if this negates one's ability to be a true hero. *Error: Hero society asks people to be morally perfect while giving them very little support. Hero society expects heroes to isolate their emotions and put on a brave face, or a mask for performance. Stain's ideology works because it is reflecting a truth already found within society—people are constantly judged by whether or not they are real heroes, or valuable. Moral worth becomes flattened with reputation and other contributing factors.*

- Season 4, Episode 22: School Festival Start!! (13:27-17:12) Izuku Midoriya is fighting Gentle Criminal, a villain who is attempting to reach U.A. during their school festival. We are shown flashback scenes that show Gentle Criminal's original passion was to become a hero, and the events that lead to him being rejected in that role. *Error: Failure is punished more than people are supported. One failed attempt to help ruins his future and pushes him toward social rejection. Little room for mistakes.*

- Season 5, Episode 24: Tomura Shigaraki: Origin (0:00-7:11, skip intro).**Warning:: violence and blood.** This clip gives the origin story of the League of Villain's figurehead, Tomura Shigaraki, who is the protégée of All For One. It is revealed that after the tragic events that lead to him killing his family through touching them, not a

single civilian or hero came to help the lost child. Instead, he was found and raised by All For One. *Error: Civilians rely too heavily on heroes instead of helping one another. People see a lost, distressed child and assume someone else will take care of it. Hero society has created public passivity. Vulnerable people fall through the cracks in plain sight. The system neglects people.*

- Season 6, Episode 16: The Hellish Todoroki Family, Part 2 (2:22-7:39) We receive Pro-Hero, Hawks backstory for how he was saved by Endeavor as a child, then groomed by the Commission to become their perfect hero. **Warning: Family abuse.** *Error: Institutions exploit people in the name of the greater good. Society also excuses harm when it comes from successful people (if class has seen past lessons with Todoroki details).*

Social Issues: Neglect, Exploitation, Abuse, Trauma, Competition, Gatekeeping, Revenge, Inequality, Corruption, Passivity, Alienation, Stigmatization, Surveillance, Pressure, Dehumanization.

Note: You do not need to address all the social issues mentioned above, you can choose a handful that best work for the classroom conversation you wish to curate. The easiest way to go about completing this activity would be to select four issues (one for each wall in the room) to use as cornerstones for the activity.

The next course of action is to have them partner into groups to choose the best pieces of evidence they want placed around the room for the corresponding issues. Once placed, each group will be given a bundle of thread or string. For added fun, use different colors for each group so you can distinguish between their trains of thought on how evidence is connected.

Students will then use the string to build physical connections between the posters and their collections of evidence. The goal is to have them learn how to extrapolate and then apply details in their arguments. The issues are connectable, and evidence found within each clip can be used to support multiple problems in hero society,

Activity #2: Split Symbolism

After identifying these issues, students will be asked to visually construct two-fold symbols that represent their findings. They will use a piece of paper (or digital equivalent) to have one side of the visual symbol reflect the problem, and the other side either the solution OR a positive affiliation that remains even though the issue is present.

This is to see how students can synthesize data into a clear idea, recognize duality and nuance in systems and ultimately evaluate a problem through its impact. Then, this lesson aims to help students with practicing to create effective responses. Essentially moving them from “I noticed this,” to “I can articulate what it means, why it matters and what could change.”

I emphasized in this chapter how heroes are flawed and capable of causing harm even when they mean well. Through *My Hero Academia*, I examined how a society saturated with superpowers also becomes saturated with expectation. Not everyone with a Quirk is heroic and even celebrated icons like All Might reveal how the public's hunger for symbols can demand an impossible kind of strength. The chapter also connected performance in superhero media to performance in real life, especially in education and within today's social-media landscape. I considered how tragedy can be transformed into content, with speculation and attention economy often outpacing empathy and responsibility. This led into a broader argument about literacy and English education. I believe that neutrality is a myth, texts always carry perspectives and ELA must expand beyond print to include media literacy. By studying stories like *My Hero Academia* and other popular media, students can practice critical analysis across the formats they encounter daily and better understand how narratives shape identity, ethics and the difference between performing heroism for an audience and acting with care for others.

Chapter Five: Conclusion "The World's Greatest Hero"

"Hey Izuku…can I still catch up to you?"

- Katsuki Bakugo (*My Hero Academia*, Season 7, Episode 11)

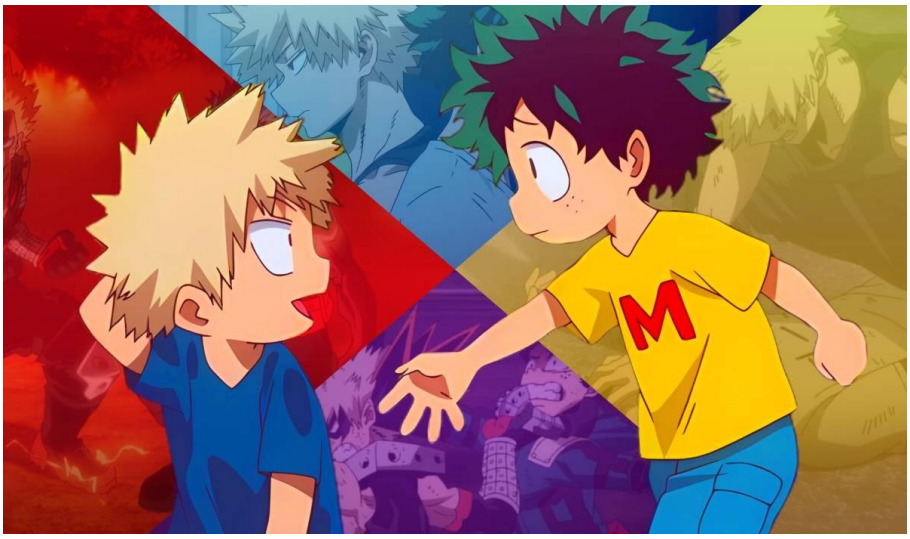

Figure 6: A collage image of protagonist Izuku Midoriya and deuteragonist Katsuki Bakugo, demonstrating the parallels of their characters throughout the show. Image sourced from the banner for Rodrigo Sandoval Lahut's article, "My Hero Academia's Ending Proves …" located on ScreenRant.

They are sitting together in his classroom, waiting for the bell to ring and lunch to begin. She's conducting her complaint ceremony to her favorite teacher. It's a ritual at this point. "Dyer, I don't know what I want to do next. There are just so many things that I love, and not enough time to finish all of them." The girl is looking up at all the graduation pictures of the students he has collected along his wall; hers is the very first photo.

"Anywhere would be lucky to have you, Brown. It's okay to not know, I didn't end up here until I was thirty." Her favorite teacher has alleviated countless bouts of anxiety over the years

about the future. He's seen her through the loss of friends, her time as a student and in the near future, as a colleague. Sometimes, she catches herself thinking of him like another version of her Deedah or her grandpa.

No, not enough wrinkles yet.

Dyer has always encouraged her love of stories and has read everything she's ever put together. In fact, she's been lucky enough to be surrounded by people that have always supported her in this way, even if they didn't always understand. Her mama, her grandparents, her dad and stepdads and friends…they've all been subjected to the new storytellers' ideas at some point or another. Every horrible and happy ending.

"Did you watch the finale for Game of Thrones?" She asks him. The man groans and his hand covers most of his face while he turns, facing the opposite direction. He'd been entirely invested in that show and from the looks of it, was disappointed beyond measure.

"Don't remind me, it's the worst ending in the history of all endings. I refuse to accept it."

"That's why I always read the last line of a book before I start it." The girl would be headed off to college soon, double majoring in English and Secondary Education just like Dyer. She was thinking of becoming a teacher. Helping others find stories they love too.

"That's cheating, Dakota. You're spoiling the ending for yourself." Her favorite teacher begins wiping off his whiteboard scribbles, avoiding the drawings left by students throughout the months. He doesn't say this, but she knows that somewhere inside his heart he loves them.

"But I want to see how it all comes together." The girl argues with him further. In a few years she'd be down the hall, and then after that she would be in a new country for her masters, and then after that, wandering off to another adventure.

"I want to see if it means anything."

Vignette #5 "The Storyteller"

We are told at the beginning of this series that it is the story of how one boy becomes the world's greatest hero. Over the span of a single year, this teenager transforms into not only a hero student, but a symbol of hope for the world. There simply is not enough room in this thesis to expand on the entire final arc, but there are a few core thematic elements that make it exceptional fodder for the sphere of education, particularly for anyone interested in how a narrative's scope can widen over time. The story begins by centering on the school lives of adolescents who occasionally fight villains and it gradually expands into something larger, where those same students become implicated in the deeper issues within their society. The last arc follows the war, where children fight alongside pro heroes to stop All For One. This culminates in the inevitable face-off between Izuku Midoriya and his inherited nemesis, but we are also given the aftermath of the war arc and a glimpse of their lives post-graduation, eight years into the future.

A primary tension that exists from the beginning of the show is between Katsuki Bakugo and Izuku Midoriya. As I mentioned previously, these two characters operate together within the narrative, twisting around each other to express a bandwidth of heroic ideals, stemming from the same origin of interest in one day surpassing their idol, All Might. It takes several seasons of the series for their tension to fully resolve, but it becomes clear that much of Bakugo's animosity

stems from insecurity—specifically, insecurity about the qualities a hero truly possesses. Something interesting to note from popular discourse regarding the show is the consistent ranking of Bakugo as a fan-favorite character, even prior to the resolution of their friendship. One of the most gloriously animated sequences in the final arc shows the two of them working together to take down AFO. This sequence is visually rich for analysis, both in production quality and for what it means to have this level of understanding and combined effort between characters who initially stood as oppositional standpoints of heroism. This scene reinforces the earlier idea that these two teens each represent a different piece of heroism, and both are necessary. It is their differences working together that helps everyone, which the same sentiment can be shared for how we have students in the real world with different qualities and interests who will one day move to the work force to contribute their own greatness.

Ultimately, Midoriya loses his Quirk, and this devastates Bakugo, who always believed they would be chasing one another forever. In the flash-forward, Midoriya works as a teacher at UA. High School while his former classmates each do their part as heroes, some already breaking into the top ten on the ranking charts. Their gift to him in the future is a suit that mimics the powers he had as a teenager, allowing him to resume hero work alongside teaching. The story comes around full circle with a classic passing of the torch: students become the heroes and the educators who shape the next generation. So much of what happens in MHA is true for the way in which young people are desperately trying to figure out who they are and their purpose.

This excerpt comes from an enthusiastic fan that summarizes some of the main messaging behind the series:

Excerpt of a fan Analysis of Izuku Midoriya, TikTok, 11-24-2025 @justxfitz.afterdark

"Nah see, cause I'm going to need you to actually understand how Deku saves people. Right, because it's a lot deeper than just taking them out of harm's way. It's a lot deeper than just taking the harm away from them. What Deku saves people from is what's on the inside […] In the first couple of seconds of the anime what are we told about the world of MHA? Nobody in it is born equal. And that's because of Quirks! […] this creates a struggle in a lot of the characters in this show. This is the struggle that we face too, right? The struggle of defining ourselves simply by what we are good at doing. By what comes natural to us. But in the world of MHA this is a huge problem, right because what if you got the same Quirk as your abusive pops? What if you got a Quirk that people are willing to abuse you for? What if you got a Quirk that kills hopes and dreams and destroys everything? You're going to think that's all you are! You're going to think that's all you can be, but it's not all you can be. You can *Plus Ultra*, you can go beyond that. **And so that's where *My Hero Academia* presents a choice, right? *Plus Ultra* and become a real hero or let that consume you and become everybody else's problem.**

But imma be for real, that's not an easy choice to make. Cause on one hand right, you got something in you that's calling you to be something more, but on the other hand, you got the world that is literally structured into telling you that's all you are and that's all you can be. And so that leads to a lot of the characters in the show being confused [and] suffering because they have never gotten the chance to separate. They don't know who they are, they don't know how to cross that line because their Quirk has defined them their whole life. But you know who does give them the chance to separate? […] IZUKU MIDORIYA! Over and over again, Deku reminds people that their Quirk doesn't define them. That instead, they define their Quirk. […] He saves them is by letting them see that for themselves.

Superhero narratives over the years have shown us figures to aspire to, but ones that would always be out of the reach because of their status as a god-like symbol. Across the globe, people reference images of these characters in times of need—to inspire people to come together or to become the person who chooses to step in and take on the responsibility of helping those who simply need someone to extend their hand. This series takes all of that and compresses it into the liminal space of adolescence, showing kids that being a hero is a role that you can learn and teach others. Being a hero is using the Quirks or affinities you possess to go beyond and do what you can to change someone's life for the better, and to grow into who you are meant to become.

Contributions

This thesis makes pedagogical, empirical and theoretical contributions by arguing that *My Hero Academia* (MHA) acts as a meaningful classroom text. *Performative Heroics* offers a model for bringing popular culture into secondary classrooms, giving educators permission to innovate beyond canon texts and use media that many students already gravitate toward to bridge their lived experiences with the high-level goals of literacy education. In doing so, it creates space for conversations about identity and performativity, as well as a wider net of social issues. It also includes adaptable lesson plans which can help educators with placing these ideas into practice. This thesis expands existing scholarship on the series, which has often centered on individual characters. With this addition, we are now also able to exam the institutions, systems, rankings and the professional expectations which shape heroism and determine what counts as "heroic," thereby placing superheroes in a more humanistic frame rather than only treating them as exceptional individuals for study. Finally, *Performative Heroics* speaks back to broader superhero studies by showing how heroism in MHA is produced collectively and it is regulated socially. This furthers conversations about how structures are responsible for our understanding of heroics and how popular media can function as a site that both develops youth literacy and encourages students to engage in critical reflection.

Limitations

At the same time, I want to acknowledge that there are existing concerns about using MHA in educational contexts. While this series offers potential for rich classroom discussion, it may not be an appropriate fit for every secondary ELA classroom or school community. Some educators, or even parents and administrators may view the text as being insufficiently rigorous

for study, while others may raise concerns about elements within the series such as violence, e.g. the framing of youth as child soldiers within hero institutions or may find objection with the sexualization of female characters, which could create discomfort or invite pushback. These objections should not be dismissed, instead, they point to the need for careful teacher judgement and thoughtful curriculum framing when selecting and teaching portions of this series or when putting together other supplemental materials from popular media. For that reason, this thesis does not argue that *My Hero Academia* should be adopted universally, rather, it presents the series as an example of how new stories can be used to support conversations which are relevant to today's youth.

Discussion

This thesis was created by a former educator, and the content found within it is meant to contribute to the field of teaching through showing how popular media, like anime, can and should be integrated into secondary education. *My Hero Academia* already presents themes that are relevant to the canon literature often examined in high school settings across North America, while featuring a cast of characters that are reflective of students coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds and interests for becoming heroes. Heroic figures have long held an important place in literature and curriculum because they help us stage constructive conversations about the kind of societies we wish to build. We return to heroes and heroic action not simply because extraordinary people are inspiring, but because these types of stories give us a way to think about change—specifically, what happens when someone steps forward in moments of crisis and what that reveals about our collective values. Classrooms have often used hero narratives as a way of exploring character as well as civic responsibility with young people,

but the value of these texts is less aligned with encouraging students to idolize heroes and rather concerns itself with creating space to question them and examine what counts as heroism, who gets recognized as heroic, what institutions shape these definitions and what social costs occur alongside them. The real educational benefit then is using stories like MHA to think more carefully about the world that students are being asked to inherit and change.

Over the course of this work, I have threaded together insight from scholars in pop culture and media studies, those involved in youth psychology, social sciences and education, as well as personal stories and narrative analysis of *My Hero Academia*. I have done so to answer the following questions:

What are the educational affordances of teaching texts such as MHA to high school students?

MHA specifically engages students in topics of identity, morality and institutional expectations because of how the series presents heroism as something that is to be learned and performed. The series also supports critical and media literacy through allowing students the opportunity to critique and compare fictional systems (like hero rankings) to real-world institutions. In short, because MHA is a popular and multimodal media, it has the capability to increase engagement while still addressing core ELA themes. It represents just one of many existing pieces of modern media which could be integrated into classrooms to better connect with the experiences of everyday teens.

How is identity shaped within systems and institutions in this media?

Identity is shaped through institutions like U.A. high school and the Hero Public Safety Commission, which rank and evaluate people based on their Quirks and their visible

performance, tying one's value to their power and potential. As a result, characters internalize societal expectations and labeling, which influences the way they see themselves and the type of hero they believe they should become. To connect this to life, school and other institutions that people are part of have a strong hand in shaping one's selfhood and role in the world.

What does it mean to be a hero?

Being a hero means using one's abilities to help others while navigating expectations, public perception and institutional pressures. The role of a hero is something that is both ethical and performative. A hero helps others with the intention to do good, but at the same time, they are recognized as doing good within a system that defines and measures what "goodness" looks like. This is similar to existing professions that are tied to public trust. The real-world "heroes" are those whose work is moral in purpose, but this is something that is constantly evaluated through institutions and social groups. So, it is subjective and this is valuable for discussion with students. What is a hero in the context of their life?

Being a hero may just mean what it meant to that little girl watching Buffy with her Deedah—being someone who inspires hope in others.

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