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A Foe He Can't Fight: Tony Stark, Addiction, and PTSD

Matthew Wincherauk

Abstract: This article investigates the manifestation of the character Tony Stark's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how he attempts to cope with his traumatic past throughout the *Iron Man* film trilogy and *The Avengers* ensemble movie. I analyze how Tony's traditionally masculine superhero traits affect his PTSD, its management, and how his inability to cope with trauma develops into an addiction to his Iron Man suits. This article challenges traditional notions of masculinity and investigates how Tony's character refutes the stereotypes of the male American hero. In the end, the focus on trauma and addiction in the *Iron Man* movies proves to be helpful in beginning conversations about mental illness.

Keywords: Iron Man, PTSD, trauma, heroism, addiction

Debuting in 1963 under *Tales of Suspense*, Iron Man (Tony Stark) has become one of Marvel Comics' most popular superheroes. In 2008, *Iron Man* was the first movie set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). During his time as a comic book mainstay, Iron Man deals with addiction and mental illness, including his addiction to alcohol during the "Demon in a Bottle" arc and his various Iron Man suits.¹ Despite the many physical dangers that Tony faces as Iron Man, I argue that his greatest foe will always be self-doubts and sense of his own inadequacies. These doubts and supposed failures are amplified by Tony's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While Tony believes that his suits are what make him strong and valuable, he fails to recognize that his suits trigger his PTSD; thus, reinforcing that his value lies in his suits, rather than his own genius and heroic qualities. Tony's PTSD symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, invasive and violent memories, but he is successful at managing his symptoms when he is away from his suits. However, whenever there is an imminent threat, he convinces himself that the Iron Man suit is the only way to combat the threat, damaging the progress he has made. Unlike the villains that Tony can physically defeat, his PTSD represents a foe that he cannot out-manuever or out-think; his illness requires care that he is not capable of achieving as Iron Man.

While Tony Stark has appeared as a major part of seven MCU movies, my focus is on establishing the origins of Tony's trauma and his struggles with addiction in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010). I end this article with an exploration of Tony's PTSD symptoms throughout *Iron Man 3* (2013). In this way, I demonstrate how his addiction serves to exacerbate his condition. I locate how Tony's addiction to his suits triggers his PTSD, and how his decisions

to leave behind his suits and accept the support of his friends and family lead him to become successful in managing his trauma and addiction. The result concludes that through productions like the MCU *Iron Man* films, a more intricate investigation of how mental health affects superheroes can be achieved. By using the platform that Marvel has with the MCU films, the exploration of important subjects such as trauma and addiction can help end the stigmatization of mental illness and addiction by reaching large audiences. By using a traditionally masculine hero like Tony Stark and exploring his trauma and addiction as a means to deconstruct the masculine hero, Tony proves to be a positive example of the American military hero.

Authors such as Bradford W. Wright have explored superheroes in relation to American political history and specifically in the context of their roles in military conflicts.² Writers of characters like Iron Man have frequently positioned these superheroes in this context. Despite these writings that center significant comic book characters like Iron Man and Captain America in military and politically influenced conflicts like the Vietnam War,³ there has been a lack of exploration that considers the psychological trauma that has occurred in these characters; how this trauma is portrayed; or how trauma and healing is approached in a superhero comic book setting. Using Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, I examine Iron Man and PTSD in the MCU to determine the successfulness of Tony's healing process and investigate how popular culture productions engage with the complexities of understanding trauma and mental illness.

The relationship between having physical strength and a mental illness are at odds with one another because one is a toxic ideal that is seen as power and the latter, albeit ignorantly, is often viewed as a weakness. Giving Tony Stark both physical strength and a mental illness in a popular cultural phenomenon like *Iron Man*, highlights that mental illness is not necessarily a weakness. Tony Stark acts as a figure that brings awareness to PTSD and addiction to mainstream media, and as such starts a dialogue on the importance of recognizing the symptoms and effects of mental illness. However, it is important to note that while alcoholism is a large part of Tony Stark's character in the comic books, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the MCU's version of Tony Stark is also an alcoholic. Instead, I argue that Tony is addicted to his suits—which occasionally leads him to indulge in vices like alcohol—and his suits are the main trigger for his PTSD.

Finally recognized by mainstream psychiatry in 1980,⁴ post-traumatic stress disorder is used to describe the impact that a traumatic event has on the person experiencing the incident. The American Psychiatric Association defines PTSD as “a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault.”⁵ Symptoms of PTSD can range from “shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis,” and can be within the context of “both human and natural catastrophes.”⁶ Because the experience of trauma is encountered and engaged with differently by each person, Cathy Caruth asserts, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic

symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as a repression of what once was wished.”⁷ That is, one’s own understanding of trauma is defined by their personal traumatic experiences, and the methods of coping with each particular traumatic event changes. When considering someone like Tony Stark who experiences multiple traumatic events, these events must be considered as separate events with distinct symptoms for each, with independent methods of coping. However, while these traumatic incidents are driven by different events, they all share the same trigger: the Iron Man suit. Although Tony associates being a superhero with the suit, the suit is also what triggers his traumatic memories. Tony’s suits represent his initial method of physical survival and means to making him a morally better person. This is complicated when attempting to understand Tony’s story, the traumatic moments that repeat in his head and the accompanying methods of coping (both positive and negative). However, the suits are also what cause the most psychological damage because they are a reminder of his physical fragility and mental anguish. Tony must learn how to fight his foes physically and also how to detach himself from the Iron Man suits, in order to understand his trauma and begin to heal the wounds that he re-opens every time he steps back into the armor.

Tony’s initial moment of trauma occurs immediately in the first *Iron Man* movie when he is taken hostage by a terrorist organization and is forced to build weapons for his captors. Before Tony is taken, we see how he interacts with other people and understand his sole motivation in life: to be popular and lauded for his genius. Tony is vain and thinks little of other people—living a carefree and reckless lifestyle. This is partially why his capture and subsequent realization of his legacy as a warmonger is so powerful. The trauma in this moment of capture has multiple layers of effects on Tony’s psyche. First, he is forced to realize that his legacy will never be his popularity or genius in engineering. Rather, it will be the people that are killed, and lives that are destroyed because of the weapons that his company (Stark Industries) has produced. Tony’s captors use the weapons that his company creates to terrorize and control local villages. Though he sees himself as a great engineer and machine-building demi-god, in reality he is a destructive force. Secondly, Tony will always associate his traumatic moment in being captured and with losing Ho Yinsen, the Afghani engineer who saved his life after being taken hostage. Yinsen was one of the few people that believed in Tony’s capability to do good. When Yinsen sacrifices himself to give Tony the time he needs to finish his first Iron Man suit, Tony is faced with the reality of what being a hero means to him: doing what is necessary regardless of the personal cost.⁷ Although this realization drives Tony to become a better person and see that his weapons are destroyed, it also exacerbates his already reckless and passionate personality to the point of obsession. Finally, Tony’s trauma is related to the moment of building and using the Iron Man suit for the first time. Tony associates power and responsibility with his use of the Iron Man suit, but fails to recognize that the trauma he went through is attached to the suit. This in turn feeds his reliance and obsession with it.

Just as Tony's Iron Man suits are associated with trauma, they also feed his addiction for technologically-gifted powers in the face of impending death in *Iron Man 2*. As Tony grows more accustomed to the suits and the power and fame they provide, Tony pushes his body and mind to a critical mass. Ironically, the technology—the arc reactor in his chest—that keeps Tony alive is also what is killing him by poisoning his blood, making him desperate for a cure.⁸ The arc reactor acts as a physical symbol of his addiction as it is keeping Tony alive, but is also killing him at the same time. Tony's addiction to his Iron Man suits is noticeable when he testifies before the United States Senate and makes a mockery of the proceedings by proving how far behind everyone else in the world is when compared to him. When asked why Tony is the only person capable of being Iron Man, he responds by saying, "Because I'm your nuclear deterrent. It's working. We're safe. America is secure. You want my property? You can't have it. But I did you a big favor. I've successfully privatized world peace! What more do you want?"⁹ Tony's arrogance exemplifies his level of addiction with his Iron Man suits; not only is he addicted to using them, despite their detrimental effect on his physical health, but his addiction also means that no one else can have what he has—superpowers. The impending loss of his superpowers due to his blood poisoning means that Tony's addiction to them will only grow more severe as he starts to lose control of his life.¹⁰

When faced with adversity, Tony's addiction makes him selfish, reckless, and impulsive. When James Rhodes (AKA War Machine) confronts Tony and tells him that he is not the only person who can use this kind of technology and that he is mentally unfit to be using a weapon as dangerous as the Iron Man suit, Tony violently lashes out at him.¹¹ As Tony and Rhodes fight throughout Tony's house in their suits, the two become increasingly frustrated. Tony is angry at Rhodes because he took the War Machine suit without permission, and Rhodes is frustrated with Tony over his lack of responsibility and recklessness. Eventually, the fight culminates with Tony goading Rhodes into firing directly at him and asking him, "You wanna be the *war machine*, take your shot!"¹² The result is catastrophic as nearly all of Tony's home is destroyed. Tony's belief that he can do whatever he wants with the Iron Man suit leads Rhodes to take responsibility by taking away the suit from Tony. As Tony regains consciousness, he watches Rhodes leave with the suit. In this moment, Tony is physically confronted by what triggers him most—one of his suits—and he is unable to confront this repetition of his traumatic past. For Tony, losing the Iron Man suit to Rhodes means that he is no longer capable of holding the responsibility that the suit entails, and that the legacy he worked so hard to re-adjust has been stripped away. The drive to correct his legacy is a primary motivating factor for Tony in *Iron Man*, and the fear that his new legacy is in jeopardy causes Tony to spiral out of control, turning to excessive alcohol consumption and adulation from his fans. Tony's intoxicated state at his party seems to be a reference to the "Demon in a Bottle" story arc, but not an adaptation of it. As stated earlier, Tony's addiction is with his suits, and the state of his mental health is worsened when he turns to alcohol as a means to cope with his fragile physical health. Tony's

spiraling in this scene shows that while he has taken several positive steps in becoming a better person since being taken hostage, he has not eliminated underlying anxieties from his life. Tony needs to continue to work on re-writing his legacy and boosting his quality of life, rather than just refining his suits. In order to boost his quality of life, Tony has to identify what his triggers are in order to better understand his mental illness. However, *Iron Man 3* makes it abundantly clear that Tony has not been able to manage his trauma or identify his triggers, as his obsession with his suits becomes worse.

The opening of *Iron Man 3* sees Tony Stark doing what he does best: tinkering. The audience learns that Tony has spent the majority of his time improving his Iron Man suits, while he continues to ruminate on the traumatic moment at the end of the Battle of New York that occurred in *The Avengers* (2012).¹³ This scene sees Tony lift the nuclear missile through the wormhole above New York City. As he travels further into space, his call to his girlfriend Pepper Potts is cut off, and eventually his suit's systems begin to fail—with the voice of J.A.R.V.I.S., his personal artificial intelligence system also cutting out—leaving Tony alone in space. As Tony lets go of the missile, he sees it destroy the alien ship successfully ending the battle. While Tony is fortunate enough to fall through the wormhole before it is permanently closed, he falls unconscious before passing through, unaware of what his fate will be or if he will wake up again. This act of selflessness reflects a heroic desire that Tony has been seeking ever since he created the Iron Man suit to combat people that wanted to incite war. Tony sees his value as being the person that can defend his friends, family, and the world from those that seek to harm them. What he fails to improve are his own feelings of inadequacy. As we see later in the movie, Tony feels panicked and anxious as people crowd his dinner table, demanding his autograph for saving the world from the missile. When Tony is asked to autograph a child's drawing, he panics when Rhodes recounts the events that happened during the Battle of New York. In his panic, Tony breaks the crayon he was using to sign the picture. As Tony's anxiety levels rise, the small boy beside him asks, "How did you get out of the wormhole?"¹⁴ causing Tony to abruptly leave the table and go to his Iron Man suit stationed outside. Upon reaching his Iron Man suit, Tony exasperatedly asks J.A.R.V.I.S. what happened, and is notified that he is in fact experiencing an anxiety attack. In retort, Tony can only respond in an alarmed tone, "Me?"¹⁵ Tony's bewildered reaction to his anxiety attack is an indicator that Tony's mental illness has not yet been diagnosed and that he has neglected his mental health in favour of being a superhero. When Tony seeks out his Iron Man suit parked outside, he retreats to his safe space, a place where he feels comfortable and secure from the rest of the world. Although Tony sees his Iron Man suits as a safe space, he unknowingly returns to the source of his PTSD and his addiction. This retreat into his suit serves to suggest that Tony uses the suit as a form of self-medication—he feels good in the suit—so he does not recognize that it is a part of the problem. Therefore, this self-medication strengthens his ingrained belief that the Iron Man suit is the only means of attaining

his desired goal: to be a hero. Additionally, this belief about the suit correlates with Tony's status as a physically strong male character baffled at the idea that his mental illness is what ails him.

In their article "Gender and Mental Health: Do Men and Women Have Different Amounts or Types of Problems?" Sarah Rosenfield and Dena Smith note that, "men more frequently exhibit externalizing problems of substance abuse and antisocial behaviour... Men are more stoic and less expressive in their response to stressors... They more often try to control the problem, accept the problem, not think about the situation, and engage in problem-solving efforts."¹⁶ While Tony's reliance on alcohol is minimal in the movie adaptations, his substance abuse becomes the Iron Man suits, and his reaction to having an anxiety attack is one of bewilderment. He views himself as a traditionally strong male figure and cannot accept that he has been affected in such an incapacitating way. Tony's PTSD is out of his control, therefore he is unable to grasp the importance of an ongoing process of managing his triggers. Rather, he would prefer to not think about his situation, hoping that it will resolve itself. Too often does Tony conflate heroism with being strong in all aspects of his life, including his mental health. He has created a persona that is outwardly mentally strong and therefore would be unaffected by something like an anxiety attack. Tony does not admit that he grapples with PTSD because he views that acknowledgement as a weakness. This belief about mental illness reflects the stigma that surrounds traditionally hypermasculine characters like Tony Stark. Recognition of the conditions that affect mental health do not reflect weakness; rather, they provide an understanding of one's self and when help is necessary. In their article "Social Support and Mental Health," R. Jay Turner and Robyn Lewis Brown note that "social support may provide a basis for identifying behaviours and circumstances as promising targets for intervention efforts to prevent or ameliorate mental health problems."¹⁷ Recognition of the stressors and triggers that exacerbate mental health conditions like PTSD are essential, and ideally, identifying and getting help in recognizing and treating these conditions is done through a social support system. When Tony makes these recognitions and gets help from his friends and family, he is capable of his greatest acts of heroism and is able to do the most good for his world. Tony's reaction to his trauma also suggests a sense of invulnerability to non-physical threats. If Tony cannot physically fight someone or something, then he feels especially vulnerable and unwilling to face it.

In *Iron Man*, Tony's moment of trauma is made immediately aware to him by a threat of imminent death, which is significantly different from how he re-lives his traumatic moment from *The Avengers*. Caruth notes that in a traumatic moment, "[t]he pathology consists . . . solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or event."¹⁸ Tony is haunted by the memory of going into space and releasing the missile. He fears that once he passes out, he will die. In the moment of his trauma, Tony finds himself completely isolated and alone, which is why he isolates himself in his lab to tinker with his Iron Man suits rather than spend time with friends and

family. Unknown to him for months, Tony has repressed the memory of his trauma, but in this moment at the restaurant recalls it in vivid detail. The traumatic repetition forces him to come to terms with an unrecognizable powerlessness after his anxiety attack begins, as well as an uncharacteristic selflessness. As Captain America notes during *The Avengers*: “The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.”¹⁹ Captain America's commitment to sacrifice has been seen multiple times in the MCU, such as when he sacrificed himself to stop a Hydra terrorist attack on the United States in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). On the other hand, Tony's level of commitment to his role as a protector is not as clearly defined through his actions. Tony fights because it is what is expected of him, not because it is what he should inherently do as a person of great mental, moral, and physical ability. When Tony is faced with making that sacrificial move with the missile, he makes an uncharacteristic decision to do a selfless act, taking hold of the missile and launching it through the wormhole.

In *Iron Man 3*, Tony faces his solitary moment in space from the Battle of New York where he nearly dies, which propels him to continue to live as a superhero, someone that is willing to make the threats of the world his prerogative and sacrifice himself. His superheroism is what allows Tony to feel like he has accomplished something meaningful, which is a feeling that was absent in the first two *Iron Man* movies. This feeling is communicated to the viewer through Tony's persistent will in enacting positive change as Iron Man and taking on the responsibility of protecting everyone that he can. However, in continuing his heroic endeavors, Tony is stuck in a cycle of traumatic repetitions. As Caruth states,

In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide. . . traumatic repetition therefore, is not only an attempt or an imperative to know what cannot be grasped that is repeated unconsciously in the survivor's life, it is also an imperative to live that still remains not fully understood.²⁰

Although Tony has survived his encounters with death, he continually relives them, and is reminded that he should have died, which leaves him in a cycle of traumatic repetitions.

Trauma in a story is “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”²¹ Tony constantly faces the crisis of death through re-experiencing events in his flashbacks, nightmares, and in the protection of his world. However, the crisis of life is a two-fold issue that is not as well-defined as Tony's crisis of death. While Tony must live with the decision that he made in *The Avengers*, to better himself and strengthen the relationships that mean most to him, he must also live with the version of himself that was created from his heroic act. Tony's most notable crisis of life is continuing to live with his status as a hero, and that self-sacrifice and responsibility for his family, friends and the public defines his life more than ever

before. Tony's commitment to living the life of a superhero is confirmed shortly after the moment of Tony's anxiety attack when he challenges supervillain The Mandarin on national television. However, when Tony commits himself to a singular focus without contemplation, reflection, and time for self-care, he recklessly pushes ahead without consideration for the consequences that may occur. Furthermore, the threat of The Mandarin triggers Tony's PTSD, making Tony retaliate physically with the embodiment of his PTSD: his Iron Man suit. However, as Tony distances himself from the suits, he begins to understand the negative effects that they have on him. As a result, when Tony uses his suits for the final time in *Iron Man 3*, he only uses them out of necessity and destroys them afterwards. This destruction of the suits symbolizes his recognition and removal of the source of his addiction and primary PTSD trigger. It is not that his trigger is destroyed, but the physical embodiment of the trigger is now gone.

Tony's most well-thought out actions come when he is free from the suit. As much as the suit supports Tony physically, it detracts from him emotionally and mentally. Much like the end of *Iron Man 2*, Tony comes to a profound recognition of his purpose in life by the end of *Iron Man 3*; he does not need the Iron Man suit to be special. In fact, he has the arc reactor removed from his chest, and the shrapnel taken out of his heart, an act signifying healing and positive management of his PTSD and addiction. Tony's addiction to the Iron Man suit prevented him from truly healing physically or mentally. This procedure could have been done years ago when Tony returned to New York, but his desire to continue to be Iron Man and be a superhero prevented him from doing so. The shift that Tony makes is not only due in part to his own personal strength but is also reliant on his friendship with Rhodes and his relationship with Pepper, illustrating the importance of a support system. The conflict with The Mandarin; the realization that Tony is capable of effecting great change without his Iron Man suit; and that his friends and family support him leads him to make this life-altering decision. While Tony's PTSD and addiction cannot be eradicated, it is clear that he makes the necessary steps to heal and to grow as a person and a hero. As we leave Tony in *Iron Man 3*, he calls back to the brash moment at the end of *Iron Man* stating, "My armor was never a distraction or a hobby, it was a cocoon, and now I'm a changed man. You can take away my house, all my tricks and toys, but one thing you can't take away—I am Iron Man."²² Tony's armor physically made him Iron Man, but his intellect and capabilities as a leader are what truly make him valuable to the world and the people he protects. Tony's PTSD and struggle with addiction will remain a part of him forever; however, he learns to live with them in a way that is healthy for him and his friends and family. In seeing a superhero, a character that has traditionally embodied physical strength brought to such a low point because of his mental illness, but also capable of committing to bettering himself through healthy coping mechanisms and the support of friends and family, the general audience of these movies can see how to successfully manage mental health issues through this representation.

Tony's experience and subsequent understanding and development of coping methods for his PTSD are significant to the character. Perhaps the most important thing to come out of these films is a concrete understanding of how trauma and addiction can function within popular media, and especially in superhero films that have such a wide-reaching audience. This medium provides the opportunity to push against the stigma of mental illness by showing it onscreen. When illustrating the effects of mental illness on a popular superhero like Tony Stark in a major motion picture, it becomes a part of the conversation of hoping for cultural change surrounding the stigmas of mental illness. While the events of *Iron Man* may seem like a unique case, the methods of coping with a traumatic incident, assessing the elements that exacerbate the sufferer's PTSD, and coming to terms with the sufferer's trauma is a universal message. The *Iron Man* trilogy serves as an example of how PTSD is experienced and how it can be managed in a healthy and positive manner. It is significant that the *Iron Man* trilogy not only deals with trauma openly, but trauma is a central focus throughout the story because it is a part of many people's real lives. Considering the success that Marvel had in exploring PTSD through Iron Man, it is no surprise that future MCU characters like *Guardians of the Galaxy's* (2014) Peter Quill/Star-Lord, and *The Punisher's* (2016-2017) Frank Castle have dealt with trauma and loss in different, but equally interesting, unique and powerful ways. Peter Quill refuses to embrace the trauma of losing his mother by burying her final gift to him until he is finally emotionally capable of accepting his place in a new family. In *The Punisher* television series, Frank Castle engages with the traumatic loss of his wife and children by channeling the violence of war that had driven him during his service as a United States marine into a vigilante persona that refuses to accept responsibility for any act of criminality. Frank is unfortunately unable to find a healthy manner of coping with his trauma and believes that he is forced to continue his war on crime at the expense of future happiness. Both of these characters have unique ways of dealing with trauma. Frank Castle is not as successful in finding a healthy coping mechanism and therefore believes that he has to embrace the "Punisher" mentality to continue in his mission. Characters like Frank Castle are important in representing people that continue to struggle with PTSD and trauma and do not have access to healthy methods of coping or support systems like close friends or family.²³ The successes of the superhero cinematic genre allows for creators to experiment with how mental health conditions affect and influence our most popular and historically relevant comic book characters as well as allow for a space to talk about the influence of mental illness and ways to approach talking about mental health.

Notes

¹ David Michelinie and Bob Layton, *Iron Man: Demon in a Bottle* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008).

² Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 9th rev. ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

³ Recent incarnations of the character, including the re-launched Marvel Comics Universe, have positioned many wartime characters like Iron Man and The Punisher as being involved in the Afghanistan or Iraq wars for spectator relationality because of their contemporary relevance.

⁴ National Institute of Mental Health, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Research Portfolio Online Reporting Tools*, June 2018, <https://report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/ViewFactSheet.aspx?csid=58>.

⁵ Ranna Parekj, "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?" *American Psychiatric Association*, January 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4-5.

⁸ In *Iron Man 2*, in the process of preventing the shrapnel from reaching his heart, Tony's use of the Arc Reactor and its palladium core was ultimately killing him by poisoning his blood. The drive to cure this blood poisoning is what leads Tony to create a new element to power his Arc Reactor, which is currently unnamed.

⁹ *Iron Man 2*, directed by Jon Favreau (Hollywood: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

¹⁰ According to the American Psychiatric Association, addiction is a "complex condition, a brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequence." Addiction is known to cause changes to the areas of the brain that relate to "judgment, decision making, learning, memory and behavior control," distorting "thinking, behaviour and body functions" (Ranna Parekh, "What is Addiction?" *American Psychiatric Association*, January 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction>).

¹¹ In *Iron Man 2*, believing that his blood poisoning is incurable, Tony consumes excessive amounts of alcohol at his birthday party. This reckless behaviour leads to Tony putting on his Iron Man suit while intoxicated and putting civilians attending his party in danger. This is when Rhodes dons the War Machine armour to stop Tony from accidentally hurting anyone.

¹² *Iron Man 2* (2010).

¹³ The Battle of New York refers to the alien invasion in *The Avengers* led by Loki. This battle brought the central characters of the MCU (Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow, and Hawkeye) together to form the Avengers team.

¹⁴ *Iron Man 3*, directed by Shane Black, (Burbank: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sara Rosenfield and Dena Smith, "Gender and Mental Health: Do Men and Women Have Different Amounts or Types of Problems?" in *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, eds. Teresa L. Scheid and Eric R. Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 260, 264.

¹⁷ Jay R. Turner and Robyn Lewis Brown, "Social Support and Mental Health," in *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, eds. Teresa L. Scheid and Eric R. Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 204.

¹⁸ Caruth, *Trauma*, 4-5.

¹⁹ *The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon (Burbank: Marvel Studios, 2012), DVD.

²⁰ Caruth, *Trauma*, 4-5.

²¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 7. Emphasis in original.

²² *The Avengers* (2012).

²³ Although this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is topic that should be explored in future works.