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## **The Philosophy of Love in Marvel Studio's *Spider-Man: No Way Home***

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### **Abstract:**

This research article analyses the philosophy of love depicted in Marvel Studios *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Though the film released in December 2021 deals with the fight for good against evil, the complexity of love and connection between the fictional character Spider-Man and others remains more relevant in the same. The film uses the emotion of love in the context of a multiverse and completes a trilogy of Spider-Man movies released by Marvel Studios, and this paper roots into the ancient Greek philosophy of love, analysing whether protagonist Peter Parker's aka Spider-Man's love can be classified as eros, philia or agape. A semiological analysis dissects the movie at both denotative and connotative levels.

**Keywords:** Spider-Man, Film, Love, Marvel Studios, Philosophy, Greek, Semiology.

*The deepest insights spring from love alone.*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

## 1. Introduction

*Spider-Man: No Way Home* was a Hollywood film released by Marvel Studios in December 2021 as a continuation to the *Spider-Man: Far from Home* storyline that came out in 2019. The film narrates the life of protagonist Peter Parker from the perspective of a teenager with special powers, and a sentiment analysis of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* reviews showed 94 positive and 65 negative reviews, ascertaining that reviewers and the audience alike have greatly enjoyed the film (Gunawan et al. 181). Similar to other Spider-Man films released before, Peter's complex relationships with other characters stand out in the film, and the nature of love Peter has for people associated with him determines the film's narrative plot. Moreover, Peter's love for others varies, as his relationship with other characters keeps changing from the film's beginning to end. Exploring the complexity of Peter's relationships or the nature of love he had for others thus becomes a matter of discussion.

While the English language conferred only one word to the multifaceted concept of "love," the Greeks invented three words for it: "eros," "philia," and "agape" (Perlman 1). The philosophical discussion regarding love logically begins with questions concerning its nature (Moseley).

Greek philosophy implies that love has a "nature", a proposition that some may oppose arguing that love is conceptually irrational in the sense that it cannot be described in rational or meaningful propositions. The word "love" was derived from Germanic forms of the Sanskrit word *lubh* (desire) in English. It is broadly defined and precise, generating first-order problems of definition and meaning, which are resolved to some extent by the reference to the Greek terms eros, philia and agape (Moseley).

Eros refers to that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something. It is often referred to as a sexual desire, hence the modern notion of "erotic" (Moseley). In Plato's writings, however, eros is a common desire that seeks transcendental beauty – the particular beauty reminds us of true beauty in the world of forms or ideas (Nygren viii). In contrast to eros's desiring and passionate yearning, philia entails a fondness and appreciation of the other (Moseley).

The term philia incorporated friendship and loyalties to family and polis – one's political community, job or discipline for the Greeks. Philia for another may be motivated, for the agent's sake or the other's own sake. The English concept of friendship roughly captures Aristotle's notion of philia, as he writes: "things that cause friendship are: doing kindness; doing them unmasked; and not proclaiming the fact when they are done (Moseley).

Agape refers to God's paternal love for man and man for God but is extended to include a brotherly love for humanity, arguably drawing on elements from eros and philia (Nygren ix). It also seeks a perfect kind of love that is at once a fondness - a transcending of the particular and a passion without the necessity of reciprocity (Nygren x). The love of God requires absolute devotion that is reminiscent of Plato's love of beauty, which involves an erotic passion, awe and desire that transcends earthly cares and obstacles (Moseley). Focusing on *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, this article takes a closer look at the nature of love in the latest release of Marvel Studios. It investigates whether Parker's affection can be delegated eros, philia or agape depending on its contextual nature.

## 2. Methodology

The semiological analysis of signs represents a symbolic interaction between the denotative and the connotative meanings (Barthes 33). French theorist Roland Barthes (1968) found that signs

hold significance that recipients can connote through their cultural and symbolic backgrounds (33). Denotation excludes all subjective meanings and refers to the literal meaning of the signs; connotation refers to culturally constructed ideas and meanings that the signs contain (Barthes 34). Here, the connotation is a system comprising signifiers, signified and the process which unites the former to the latter (signification) (Bouzida 1004).

According to Saussure-an analysis, this framework may be grounded in synchronic and diachronic analysis. In synchronic analysis, the events co-occur (Monaco). The research has to focus on a pattern of paired oppositions as a paradigmatic structure (Berger 35). While paradigmatic analysis requires searching for hidden patterns of opposition in the text, syntagmatic analysis requires a search for relations of signs with other signs preceding and following them (Berger 35). This study has employed a syntagmatic approach to search for signs' relations to analyse the love philosophy depicted in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

### **3. Observations**

#### **3.1. Denotative Level**

The character "Peter Parker" aka "Spider-Man", is portrayed as a teenager in all the movies released by Marvel Studios that feature him. Based on the comics by Stan Lee, Spider-Man always tries his best to deal with his problems as a teenager, simultaneously leading a heroic life in disguise. He wishes to utilise his unique abilities for the greater good without letting anyone know that he is the Spider-Man, except for a few people, including his girlfriend Michelle Jones, best friend Ned Leeds, Aunt May, Tony Stark and Happy Hogan. However, inevitable mishaps from his side in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* eventually led the entire world to know whom Spider-Man was, troubling Peter Parker and the people related to him.

In the beginning, Peter Parker's relationship with his girlfriend Michelle Jones is romantic. They both got related after many years of being friends, and that too after Michelle knew about Peter's unique abilities. Similarly, as a 'superhero', Peter's best friend Ned Leeds was a trustworthy partner for him, though Ned learned about Peter's ability many years late in their friendship. Ned supported and helped Peter as a friend and a superhero even before Peter's aunt knew that Peter was Spider-Man. Peter also adored Michelle and Ned for their personalities. While the world tried to misuse the new identity uncovered before them, Peter's acquaintances stood by him, and the depth of their relationships did not change a bit. However, Peter realises that it would not be safe for his acquaintances to be known as someone related to Spider-Man.

Peter's care for others eventually led him to Dr Stephen Strange, an avenger known for his skills and abilities with magic and sorcery. Dr Strange was also a wizard used to be known for keeping the 'time stone' that determined the flow of time. Peter approached Dr Strange to cast a spell that would make everyone forget who Spider-Man was. Though Dr Strange tries his best, the spell he casts opens up a portal to other universes, inviting certain 'visitors' to his universe<sup>1</sup>. The spell brought some evil<sup>2</sup> characters and two different Spider-Man(s)<sup>3</sup> from other universes to Peter Parker's universe. Though the film identifies the visitors as people from other universes, they were, in fact, characters from other Spider-Man films released before. Dr Strange then perceives the risk of having outsiders from other universes in his, putting the onus on himself to send the visitors back to their universes. However, Dr Strange, Peter Parker and the evil characters realise that most evil characters must confront death while battling Spider-Man in their respective universes. Peter was also new to the evil ones like Dr Octavio Octopus and Dr Osborne and did not know why they were considered evil, thereby attempting to settle things calmly before defending their assaults.

Upset that the evil people in front of him have to die in their universes, Peter traps Dr Strange in an alternate reality called 'the mirror world' after stealing a tool that casts spells to send the villains<sup>4</sup> back to their universes. With Aunt May's support, Peter then tries to use a piece of machinery developed by Tony Stark's "Stark Industries" to create anti-serums that will help the evil characters regain their lost consciousness. Peter successfully fixes Dr Octavio Octopus's mind in that way, which was under the control of a mechanical arm set until then. However, the influence of Green Goblin on the subconscious mind of another evil character Dr Osborne at that moment creates a tragedy, scattering all the villains to different parts of the world. Moreover, Osborne's attack kills Aunt May, leaving Peter Parker in utmost agony and anger. Aunt May assures Peter before her death that Peter was right with his actions and that "with great power comes great responsibility". Though Peter's actions cost him his only aunt, he still tries his best to revive the lost consciousness of the evil characters, remembering Aunt May's words.

The final part of the movie eventually witnesses Peter Parker fighting all the villains with the help of other 'Spider-Men', who also came to his universe from the other universes of the villains. Peter wanted the other two Spider-Men to team up with him to help the evil characters turn good. The battle ended with the three Spider-Men helping the villains regain their consciousness to attain self-realisation. Be that as it may, the contention does not end as Dr Strange notices more beings from different universes attempting to enter his universe. As a result, Peter Parker convinced Dr Strange to make everyone in his universe forget that he was Spider-Man, so that more outsiders may not enter his universe. Peter's girlfriend Mitchell made Peter promise to her that he would try to make her remember who he was when everything returned to normalcy after Dr Strange casts his spell.

Trying to keep the promise, Peter later approaches his girlfriend at the coffee shop where she works. He sees his girlfriend and best friend together at the shop, both of whom had forgotten who Peter was. Peter realises how happy Mitchell and Ned were in his absence and understands that they would remain safer if not associated or related with Spider-Man. He refrains from introducing himself to them and decides to remain anonymous as a 'friendly' 'neighbourhood' Spider-Man for the rest of his life. He did not want Michelle, Ned or anyone else to know who he was, deciding to spend the rest of his life with a dual personality like before. His act thus cost him the Iron Suit that Tony Stark gifted him, the love from his girlfriend, his best friend's friendship, and even the care and support of Tony Stark's companion Happy Hogan.

### 3.2. Connotative Level

The Platonic theory of eros implies that ideal beauty, reflected in the particular images of beauty we find, becomes interchangeable across people, things, ideas, and art (Moseley). Peter Parker's love for Michelle and Ned could be classified as eros in such a context.

To love is to love the Platonic form of beauty-not a particular individual, but the element they possess of true (ideal) beauty. Reciprocity is not necessary to Plato's view of love. The desire is for the object (of beauty) rather than the company of another and shared values and pursuits (Moseley).

Peter respected Dr Strange for his age, profession and ability to deal with magic. In contrast to eros's desiring and passionate yearning, *philia* entails a fondness and appreciation of the other (Moseley). The term *philia* incorporated friendship and loyalties to family and polis - one's political community, job or discipline for the Greeks (Moseley). Peter Parker's relationship with Dr Strange can be thus described as *philia*. Peter's intention to talk with Dr Octavio Octopus before battling



him on the bridge shows his respect for Octavio, an aged stranger. It is also the case with his desire to give all the evil characters a second chance with the support of Aunt May. Peter's actions were based on sympathy and respect for the evil characters - aged, brilliant and trapped under the influence of their subconscious minds. Moreover, his dead aunt May's words kept him going, making his love and respect for Aunt May another reason to help the evil characters. The nature of Peter Parker's love for the evil characters and Aunt May, in the beginning, can be hence classified as *philia*.

In *The Road Less Travelled*, Scott Peck (1978) states that *agape* is the highest form of love as its purpose is to foster the spiritual growth of oneself and their beloved (81). Whereas the erotic lover is possessive, the *agapeic* lover does not ask his beloved for anything in return (Perlman 3).

A person in a romantic relationship, whose love may be swayed by earthly elements such as lust or idealisation, may 'love' his partner because the partner has something he desires. His erotic love is selfishly obsessed with possessing that quality of his significant other, not necessarily nurturing his partner. On the other hand, a mother may pour *agapeic* love into her child by constantly minding his well-being and growth, regardless of the mother's gain (Perlman 3).

Peter's selfless service to the welfare of the evil characters shows how his love got transformed into *agape*. Peter was doing something for the benefit of others, regardless of his gains. The people he was trying to help included Dr Osborne, who killed his aunt May. Peter's decision to team up with the two other Spider-Men expresses his *agape* towards the evil characters and shows his sense of responsibility. His realisation that his girlfriend Michelle, best friend Ned and many others were safe if they did not know Spider-Man also shows his *agape* at the peak point. Peter's love had reached its 'purest form', becoming unconditional, as *agape* transcends any perfectionist or

aristocratic notions that some are (or should be) more loveable than others (Moseley). It asserts the moral importance of imparting respect or love to another person or human being in the abstract (Moseley), as evident in Peter's actions as Spider-Man.

Peter Parker's journey through eros, philia, and agape showcases a progression toward selfless love, but it also reflects the ethical dilemmas inherent in moral responsibility. His struggle with the decision to erase his existence from the memories of his loved ones represents the ultimate sacrifice, one that aligns with existentialist notions of duty and loss. By choosing to bear the weight of solitude to protect those he cherishes, Peter embodies a form of love that transcends personal desire and attachment. His actions illustrate that true love, at its highest form, is not about possession or even reciprocity, but about the willingness to endure suffering for the sake of others. In this way, Peter's journey can be read as a modern enactment of moral philosophy, demonstrating how love, in its purest sense, demands both courage and sacrifice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Peter Parker was a teenager who got bestowed with superpowers instantaneously, leaving him in a perennial dilemma. While one could see in other Marvel movies that characters like Tony Stark made efforts to impart wisdom to Peter Parker, a constant rise of maturity levels in Peter's character was seen only in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

As a teenager, Peter developed a romantic relationship or eros with his girlfriend Michelle Jones and had a philia-tic love for Ned Leeds and Aunt May. He respected "The Avengers", such as Dr Strange and the evil characters with a philia-tic love for their inhuman abilities. It was also the case with his respect towards the evil characters who showed up from other universes. His love of eros and philia transformed into agape towards the movie's end. However, Dr Strange and the evil

characters like Dr Octavio and Dr Osborne were older than Peter, making Peter's age one of the primary reasons for the philia-tic love he had for them. Aunt May's death and her words opened Peter's eyes, sensing the vast responsibilities he had as Spider-Man. The two other Spider-Men from the other universes also helped Peter realise the ignorance of his duties. Peter felt that the universe, the people associated with him, and his personal life were in turmoil because of the immaturity that arose from his young age. The death of his beloved and the life experience of his variants bestowed wisdom onto Peter, transforming his love into agape. Thus, *as a fantasy movie*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* puts forward two reasons for love to transform: age and the sense of responsibility. While Peter Parker's age was one of the primary reasons his love got transformed from one form to another, the transformation is also a result of Peter's wisdom, signifying his maturity.

**Notes:**

1. The universe where the story of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* was based, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe.
2. John Edwards Le Bosquet (1912) defines 'The Evil One' in *The Evil One: A Development* as the champion and fosterer of chaos and discord and calamity, harm and wickedness in general (p. 371). This article uses the same definition.
3. The two Spider-Man characters from previous Spider-Man movies – played by American actors Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man* (2002) and Andrew Garfield in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012).
4. The same characters who were addressed as "evil characters".

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