

# *MY HERO ACADEMIA* AND DURKHEIM: A CASE STUDY OF BLOOD AND HAIR AS “SACRED” OBJECTS IN A JAPANESE ANIME TELEVISION SERIES

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## **Abstract**

The Japanese anime television series *My Hero Academia*, originally airing in Japan as *Boku no Hīrō Akademia*, revolves around superheroes and their superpowers. Often, these superpowers are associated with the blood and hair of the characters in the story. Characters increase their superpowers through the consumption of blood or hair. Likewise, characters lose their superpowers through the loss of blood or hair. How these substances are linked to power, and how they are portrayed are not idiosyncratic, but rather based on shared meanings across cultures. A sociological, theoretical framework for drawing meaning out of the use of hair and blood in the story can help illuminate the meaning of these actions in the television series.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Emile Durkheim analyzed religion sociologically. Durkheim stated that religions are defined by the way they classify the world into the categories of the sacred and the profane. In religion, people, places, and things can be designated as sacred. Anything that is sacred in religion is set apart from everything else in the world that is not sacred. Strict rules are put in place on how to treat anything or anyone

designated as sacred, and people regard the sacred with awe and respect. In religions, gods and spirits can be sacred, but also people, places, and things.

Durkheim noted that two substances of the human body conferred universally with sacredness are hair and blood. Both substances are associated with power. Thus, blood has been used in religious ceremonies as part of initiation rites or to mark a place or object as holy, even when blood is used symbolically through the use of the color red, for example. Religious injunctions against the consumption of blood are also a common feature across religions. Hair, too, is a universally sacred human substance, also associated with power and respect. Societies establish rules for how hair must be worn or handled. In sacred places, rules may exist about how hair must be either exposed or covered. The hair of sacred people in different religions is worn differently from the way hair is worn by ordinary people.

Durkheim’s observations can be extended to examine the way these substances are portrayed in *My Hero Academia*. In the series, blood, hair, and the characters associated with those substances are often portrayed as having powers above normal, or being outside of the realm of the

profane. The use of blood or hair as “sacred” substances by the characters in the animated series results in either the gain or loss of superpowers. How blood and hair are portrayed in the series is not random or idiosyncratic, but is based on shared meanings attached to these two substances.

### **Methodology and an Overview of *My Hero Academia***

*Boku no Hīrō Akademia* or *My Hero Academia* (its title in English) is an animated television series or anime airing since 2016, and based on the comic book or manga first published in 2014 (Hodgkins). The comic book and its television adaptation were created by Kōhei Horikoshi, and have been warmly received by fans of the genre and its industry. The story in either form has won awards in Japan and in the United States, including a Sugoī Japan Award and several Crunchyroll anime awards (Pineda; Loveridge).

This case study focuses on the animated version of the story. In viewing the shows, I conducted a content analysis of the episodes. Based on my viewing of the episodes, I began to notice a pattern of themes surrounding blood and hair, which theoretically I could connect to Durkheim’s sociology. This study does not concern itself with testing a hypothesis but in illuminating patterns of culture to show how the portrayal of hair and blood follows universal meanings across different societies. This study also does not concern itself with testing a theory, only in describing, interpreting, and illuminating observations of the series *My Hero Academia* from a

novel perspective. In so doing, I will extend and amplify observations Durkheim made about shared social meanings of hair and blood to the animated version of *My Hero Academia*.

The story of the series revolves around the premise that, for an unknown reason, people began to be born with superpowers. Soon after, nearly all people living have some kind of superpower, called “quirks” within the story. Quirks range from superpowers that are trivial to powerful superpowers that allow a few people to run superhero agencies, where they can earn a living as superheroes by fighting crime on behalf of their societies. The story centers on a young teenage boy by the name of Izuku Midoriya who idolizes All Might, the most famous superhero of the day. From an early age, Midoriya aspires to be like his hero All Might. Midoriya tragically learns he himself has no superpower. The story hinges around these two unlikely characters, Midoriya with no superpower of his own and All Might, a famous superhero with the most powerful superpower known as One for All. The two characters cross paths in a chance encounter where Midoriya attempts to rescue a classmate from a supervillain, placing himself in mortal danger. All Might recognizes Midoriya’s courage and reveals to him that he has been gravely injured in a fight with a supervillain: His days as a Superhero are numbered. He reveals that he can pass his superpower to a chosen successor, and that Midoriya has proven himself worthy to receive it.

## Durkheim and Definitions of the “Sacred” and the “Profane”

Durkheim’s sociology offers a framework for examining how hair and blood are treated as substances that are out of the ordinary. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim discusses hair and blood, as well as their broader social meanings, based in the context of religion as an eminently social experience. Durkheim saw religion across cultures, despite the infinite varieties of differences, as belonging to a category in itself (22).

Durkheim defined religion universally as a system that divided the world of social ideas into two categories: Those which a society considers sacred and those which are considered profane. Accordingly, profane and sacred things could be anything, so long as prohibitions and practices were in place separating one from the other:

Sacred things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred ([Durkheim 38).

Anything that is sacred to a group is regarded with respect and awe, and is protected from coming into contact, or being despoiled, by things which are profane.

The distinction between those things which are sacred and profane is a primary criterion for identifying religious beliefs, according to Durkheim (38). Other features that can be recognized in religion are not defining features, such as the idea of an

afterlife, the belief in a supreme being or supreme beings, the belief in a soul, the presence of an organized body of priests or ministers, or a central religious text. These ideas are not always present in religions, generally speaking. Religions can and do exist where there is no idea of an afterlife or where there is no dogmatic belief in a supreme being.

What then can a system of religious ideas, or a religion, hold as sacred? Virtually anything can be designated as sacred including people, places, things, and times. A place may be designated as a sacred site, such as Mecca for Muslims, resulting in the pilgrimage of millions of people annually. Within Catholicism, the lives of certain people can be socially designated as sacred, resulting in people being officially recognized as saints but only after they have died. Religions have times of the week and times throughout the year that are considered sacred and require changes in the daily life of believers, such as by requiring attendance at religious services or observing religious customs in the home.

Specifically related to *My Hero Academia*, Durkheim notes that two bodily substances, namely hair and blood, are considered sacred (136). Blood is especially regarded as sacred:

To begin with, human blood is such a holy thing that, among the tribes of central Australia, it is very often used to consecrate the most respected instruments of the cult. In some cases, for example, the nurtunja [a sacred object] is

religiously anointed from top to bottom with human blood (136).

Blood in religious ceremonies among the indigenous Australians that Durkheim wrote about was used to consecrate people, places, and things (136). When blood is not used in an actual way, blood is used symbolically through the use of ochre:

The religious nature of blood also explains why red ochre has a religious role and is frequently used in ceremonies... This is because ochre is regarded as a substance akin to blood, by virtue of its color (136).

Hence, blood, the color red, and power are associated with each other, not just in indigenous Australian religions, but in other religions as well. In the Catholic Church, for example, the symbolic use of blood – and its association with power – can be seen in the red vestments worn by cardinals. In Tibetan Buddhism, monks – most famously the Dalai Lama – wear dark red robes. Even outside of religion, red is associated with power, for instance in that powerful individuals in various fields walk on red carpets at public events. Walking on the red carpet is restricted to members of the public. An early reference to walking on a red surface comes from the play *Agamemnon*, in which the returning, victorious king is invited to walk on a crimson path (Page). Interestingly, *Agamemnon* refuses the invitation, stating that such arrogant behavior would surely incur the wrath of the gods (Page).

In addition to blood, Durkheim describes hair as being imbued with the quality of sacredness:

Hair has similar properties. The natives of central Australia wear sashes made of human hair. The religious function of those narrow bands, as already noted, is to wrap certain cult objects... Accordingly, the operation of hair cutting is a ritual act that is accompanied by special ceremonies. The individual having his hair cut must crouch on the ground with his face turned in the direction of the place where mythical ancestors from his mother's side are thought to have camped (138).

Like blood, hair too is associated with power. Across religions, hair is considered sacred and is protected against the things in the world that are profane. Different rules exist on how and when hair can be displayed. Women in various religious faiths, for example, show religious devotion by covering their hair: Muslim women wear hijab to cover their hair, Sikh women may wear turbans, and Catholic nuns cover their hair with coifs or veils. Religious men also follow rules on the sacred quality of hair: Medieval Christian monks would wear their hair in distinctive tonsures to set them apart from other men, and present day Buddhist monks shave their heads as a sign of piety.

A final note must be appended to the discussion on hair and blood as sacred objects. Durkheim states that hair and blood are collective representations. Collective representations are ideas held by a group,

and these ideas can be superimposed onto phenomena in the physical world (Durkheim 230). Hair and blood are biological phenomena, but they have social meaning attached to them by different groups of people, making them into collective representations. Hair and blood do not just exist – people infer meaning from those bodily substances. Durkheim noted about collective representations:

We can understand now how it happens that the totemic principle and, more generally, how any religious force comes to be external to the things in which it resides: because the idea of it is not at all constructed from the impression the thing makes directly on our senses and minds. Religious force is none other than the feeling that the collectivity [a group or society] inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified.... The sacredness exhibited by a thing is not implicated in the intrinsic properties of the thing: It is added to them. The world of religion is not a special aspect of empirical nature: It is superimposed upon nature (230).

In other words, phenomena such as hair, blood, death, or disease may be biological in nature, but they have social meaning attached to them: What is the appropriate way to wear hair at work, who is qualified to handle blood, how long should the deceased be mourned, and what diseases should be considered more serious than others? All

these are questions that touch on phenomena as collective representations.

The religious nature of collective representations is important to establish, even when speaking of things outside of an explicitly religious context. Within the context of *My Hero Academia*, the bodily substances of hair and blood are treated similarly to sacred objects, with power attached to them and with rules about how they must be handled and by whom.

### **Portrayals of Hair and Blood in *My Hero Academia***

Throughout the first two seasons and into the third season of *My Hero Academia*, portrayals of hair and blood as representations have been central to the story. Hair and blood are often associated with superpowers. The loss of hair or blood is often associated with a character becoming weaker, while consuming hair or blood makes a character stronger. Blood, too, is often used as a story-telling device to advance the plot.

Early in the story, there is a key moment when Midoriya, the teenage boy without superpowers, proves himself worthy to inherit All Might's power. Midoriya, despite having no superpowers of his own, puts his life in danger when he attempts to save a classmate from a supervillain. In episode 3 of the first season ("Roaring Muscles"), All Might explains to Midoriya that the superpower One for All can be passed down, and that he himself received it from his mentor. All Might even says the phrase "my quirk was passed to me like a *sacred torch*" (my emphasis). All Might prepares Midoriya

to receive his power by having Midoriya first become physically fit. Midoriya accepts All Might's order to clean a beach front of the flotsam and jetsam that have accumulated there over the years. Midoriya accomplishes this task, which can be seen as a purification ritual in anticipation of a rite of passage. With his preparation complete, All Might pulls a hair out of his head and tells Midoriya to eat it – consuming the DNA in his hair will transmit the superpower to him. This is a communion of the hair, and that by eating the hair, All Might's power will be transferred to Midoriya.

Another portrayal of hair can be seen in the character Minoru Mineta, who first appears in Episode 5 of Season 1 “What I Can Do for Now.” Mineta is soon established as a lecherous teenage boy, harboring an unhealthy preoccupation with sex. Mineta's superpower is that he can pull clumps of hair off his head and use them as super-sticky weapons that can bind an opponent in place. However, Mineta can hurt himself and start to bleed if he pulls too many clumps of hair off his head.

At first glance, the dual characteristics of superpowered hair and the perverted fixations of Mineta may seem contradictory. However, as established above, hair and power (including virility and sexuality) are associated with each other. Hence, characters in different stories who have some association with hair also have an association with virility and sexuality. A prominent example is the biblical story of Samson, who has superhuman strength and loses it when a seductress cuts his hair. A man who handles women's hair or expresses

too much interest in women's hair, such as hairdressers, are culturally at risk of being socially emasculated: If they claim a heterosexual orientation, it will come under challenge.

The association between hair, power, and virility, can cause tremendous anxiety among the public consumers of a story, which also creates the possibility for the associations to be used to comic effect. In opera, for example, the protagonist in *The Barber of Seville*, by Gioachino Rossini, is a barber who plays the role of helping a young man and woman meet in clandestine ways against the wish of the young lady's father. In more recent times, the comedy *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (directed by Dennis Dugan, Columbia Pictures) portrays a man who wants to become a hairdresser. The comedy results from the tension created by the story of a man who desires a stereotypically not masculine career choice while simultaneously being a ruthless trained commando. In this context, the tension between a male superhero, Mineta, with hair and his exaggerated sense of masculinity creates the opportunity for comedy.

In addition to portrayals of hair within the story, *My Hero Academia* also uses portrayals of blood as central features to the storyline. In Episode 11 of Season 2, “Fight on, Lida,” the story introduces a supervillain by the name of Chizome Akaguro who goes by the name Hero Killer: Stain or simply Stain. Stain's quirk is the ability to paralyze others by tasting their blood, essentially robbing superheroes of their ability to move for short periods of time. Stain's superpower, which is essentially vampirism,

associates blood with power. The ability to paralyze victims is greater when the affected superhero has type B blood, reflecting a Japanese cultural bias against individuals with type B blood. In Japan, discrimination by blood, or burahara, exists against people with type B or AB blood (Adelstein and Yamamoto). Any blood with type B in has the Japanese collective representation of being impulsive and opinionated, making them less desirable for friendships, romantic relationships, and even employment (Adelstein and Yamamoto).

Another portrayal of blood and power in *My Hero Academia* involves a supervillain character by the name of Himiko Toga, also known as Blood Girl. Introduced in episode 18 of season 2, “The Aftermath of Hero Killer: Stain,” Blood Girl’s superpower is also a type of vampirism. Drawn with vampire-like teeth, Blood Girl is able to assume the form of her victims by drinking their blood. The more blood she consumes, the longer she can take the form of that person, and she has the ability to take the form of multiple victims. Like hair, blood is also associated with power and virility. In drawing blood from her victims, either male or female, Blood Girl demonstrates a sexual interest in them.

Most of the characters in *My Hero Academia* whose superpowers involve blood are supervillains. An exception is that a superhero, Sekijiro Kan, who goes by the name of Blood Hero: Vlad King, has superpowers rooted in the manipulation of blood. Introduced in episode 13 of season 1, “In Each of Our Hearts,” Vlad King is able to manipulate his own blood outside of his body by turning it into weapons or restraints.

Again, blood and power are associated in this superpower. Here it is interesting to note that in other anime, *Beyond the Boundary* or *Kyōkai no Kanata*, created by Nagomu Torii, features a character with a similar ability. In *Beyond the Boundary*, a young girl hunts demons with a sword she is able to fashion out of her own blood.

In addition to the portrayal of blood as a superpower, blood in *My Hero Academia* is used as a storytelling device. There are two examples of blood as a storytelling device in episode 2 of season 1, “What It Takes to Be a Hero.” A key moment in the episode is when All Might loses his superhuman form and reverts to his true form: An emaciated, sickly individual. All Might is portrayed as a sickly, thin figure with loosely fitting clothes, and with blood dripping out of his mouth. Unlike western animated cartoons, Japanese anime is characterized by attention to detail and continuity. If a character bleeds, the blood will normally be drawn pooling at the ground or staining clothes. There are few continuity errors such as a character bleeding in one scene and the blood not being present in another. Since All Might bleeds and his blood is not drawn pooling on the ground below him, the viewer can assume that it was drawn as to place emphasis in some part of the story, specifically, that All Might is ill. In fact, All Might reveals to Midoriya that he was seriously wounded in a fight and since then is limited in the length of time he can assume his superhuman form. This establishes the need in the story for All Might to pass on his quirk to a worthy successor.

Beginning in “What It Takes to Be a Hero,” and continuing throughout subsequent episodes, blood also is used a storytelling device to convey powerful bouts of emotion. When All Might loses his temper with Midoriya, he often yells and this is comically drawn with a cone of blood spraying out of his mouth. Again, the blood is not shown to pool on the ground or splatter objects or people nearby. Since anime has few continuity errors, the viewer can assume that the blood was drawn as a visual metaphor for the exasperation felt by All Might. In episode 23 of season 2, “Stripping the Varnish,” Mineta faces defeat in an important exam at the hands of Midnight, the teacher testing him. Mineta begins to weep, which is drawn not as tears leaving his eyes but as blood. However, the blood does not stain his clothing, pool on the ground, and no character comments about blood coming out of his eyes, leading viewers to accept blood as a metaphorical storytelling device for Mineta’s extreme fear and sadness.

### Conclusion

Hair and blood are portrayed in the anime series *My Hero Academia* similar to “sacred” objects. Often, hair and blood are associated with super powers, and hence are substances that are beyond ordinary, normal, or every day – in other words not profane and therefore sacred. Often, hair and blood are substances that certain characters can consume, and by doing so affect the superpowers of other characters within the story. Characters who consume hair or blood typically are shown gaining superpowers, or control over other characters. Characters

whose hair or blood is consumed are typically shown as losing superpowers or surrendering their autonomy to other characters.

In *My Hero Academia*, the substances of hair and blood are not portrayed in idiosyncratic ways. Instead, the two substances are treated in ways that follow shared, universal meaning across societies as described by Durkheim.

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