

The Anvils On Which We Forge Our Fullmetal Hearts

An exploration of humanity through the arcs of heroic and antagonistic characters in the series “Fullmetal Alchemist”

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Declaration of Originality



This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A. J. Koneba

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Abstract



This thesis began with my deep adoration for the manga series *Fullmetal Alchemist* and its 2010 anime reboot, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. What I want to focus on with the following study is some aspects of the human experience that the author Hiromu Arakawa has explored through her fiction. Looking at how certain characters deal with death, loss and their own emotions, my goal is to better understand their perspectives and how those perspectives lend themselves to each of their roles within the story. Moreover, I want to analyse how well Arakawa manages to portray a character's rise and fall and what that gives us, not only in a fictional context, but also for conclusions we may apply to our reality. The main goal of the following text is to take a small selection of characters, observe them in relation to each other and conclude what they could possibly teach us.

For the purposes of this, there will be excerpts from both the manga and the anime used to analyse the text of the series. Along with this, I want to touch on how universal I find themes of grief, family, strength and so on, therefore I will be referring to other works that I believe share these elements and explore such themes. Notable mentions include *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *Mistborn* by Brandon Sanderson and Dante's *Inferno*.

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Introduction



The manga series *Fullmetal Alchemist* and the 2010 subsequent anime, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* have an extensive cast of characters that help tell the story. While the Elric brothers, Edward and Alphonse, are the protagonists whose journey we mainly follow, their companions and their adversaries share a substantial amount of pages and screen time, making for a narrative where an abundance of perspectives come together and shape a fascinating world.

Along with the Elrics, who, aside from their function of heroes, are also adolescents processing the vastly complex intricacies of grief, we have Colonel Roy Mustang and Scar. Both of the latter mentioned are men in the prime of their lives, but afflicted with the burdens and sins that can only come from fighting in a destructive war. Lastly, there is the father of Edward and Alphonse, Van Hohenheim and his twin in nothing but looks - Homunculus. The two of them have lived for so long that their goals initially seem to stretch beyond the scope of everybody else's; only upon closer look does it become clear that despite everything, behind all motives exists an inherently human drive towards action. The trouble is that Homunculus refuses to validate his own human origin, thus creating a problem for the rest.

All six carry the weight of irreversible deeds from their past, but due to their distinct viewpoints and philosophies, how they feel or don't feel in regards to those deeds shapes their unique characters and drives the conflict of *Fullmetal Alchemist* forward. What the author Hiromu Arakawa has to say and is able to show us about humanity and its complexities within this series is a point of particular interest.

Chapter One

Fullmetal-Hearted Grief

“If you’re really ready to die, you have nothing to lose by living.”

- Kazuma Kiryu, *Yakuza*, 2005

There is nothing that can bring a person back from the dead. Edward and Alphonse Elric learn that truth at a very young age in perhaps one of the most painful ways imaginable. Their mother’s passing turns out to be just the beginning of their story, as wanting to bring her back leads them down a road it becomes impossible to return from. It’s a human thing, after all, to wish for such a reversal of the fates. It is also human to believe you are capable of achieving the inconceivable. And as the brothers have such a fascination and talent for alchemy, the science that seems to be all about creation and equivalence at its core, what alternative is there?

If she comes back to their side, everything would be good again. Maybe, just maybe, they could prove to be an exception to the rule that says to never try such a thing. This idea blinds them just long enough, until they attempt *human transmutation* and everything changes. Instead of regaining the loved one who was lost, they are left half-themselves; one soul in armor, the other – limbs strewn beyond the notion of a physical existence. Every day of Ed and Al’s lives going forward would now be a reminder of the harshest lesson either of them has ever had to learn and the price they paid for daring to intervene with the natural laws (fig 1).

In the eyes of their country’s military, such actions are illegal and punishable. From the perspective of the Truth, Universe, God, whichever word one might use to describe it, human transmutation is simply another alchemical exchange with a high toll. Your punishment is your reward, so is being alive to receive it. It may have

been their childish naivete, arrogance, desperate love or even all three and more that culminated in the grief that pushed them so far, but whatever it all accomplished, it certainly did not return their mother. Alchemy could not undo something it was not responsible for and it never would have. Because of this transgression, however, the brothers learn and grow into people who endlessly try to do as much good as they can. They come to realize that life does not have to be spent shouldering hardships on your own, when instead you should know that people around you will care for you and help.

And perhaps one of the story's most prominent and encouraging messages, Edward and Alphonse show the audience that no matter how desperate things may seem, you stand up, you fight and you go forward. To live is always the bravest choice you can make.



Fig. 1

When the brothers try to reverse what should not be undone, the repercussions are even worse than the initial loss itself. In their attempt to bypass grief and return to a normalcy they knew, they find themselves opening doors to places neither of them anticipated going (fig 2). Following their recovery from the catastrophe they suffered, they acquire a new goal: restoring their physical selves. Regardless of how the overall plot expands and unravels, that goal remains a constant in the Elrics' narrative. Exactly because of this shared desire, Benjamin Chandler describes them with the term "dual-hero"¹. The term fits because they are focused on the same objective and serve the function of the *hero* equally in the story. Both Edward and Alphonse are trying to find the philosopher's stone so they can get their original bodies back and both of them share the subject of their grief. Thus, because of a mutual fate, they are united with a mutual goal. Chandler also notes that they are each written as characteristically distinct people and it's what makes their dynamic even more intriguing, since they manage to have individual arcs while sharing the protagonist's storyline together.



Fig. 2 "Give him back! He's my brother. Take my leg, take my arm. Take my heart, anything, you can have it!"

¹ Josef Steiff and Tristan Tamplin, *Anime and Philosophy: Wide Eyed Wonder*, Chapter 13, Open Court, 2010. *ProQuest Ebook Central*

Looking at the manga as the expansive piece of literature that it is, we could objectively point out that what the Elric brothers go on is in fact, a Hero's Journey. This term and analysis, originated by Joseph Campbell, can be the basis for not only stories in the Western canon, but quite often in Japanese manga as well². Elements present in the structure of the Hero's Journey, such as Meeting With The Mentor, Initiation, Approach To The Inmost Cave can all be noticed in *Fullmetal Alchemist* if one were to take the series and break it down piece by piece to see where every element aligns. Hiromu Arakawa, however, has not written a work that follows the aforementioned structure rigidly. She introduces characters in later acts and makes us care for them as if they were present from the start, explores character redemption and corruption in nuanced ways and treats antagonists as equally complex as the protagonists they oppose.

It is Christopher Vogler who says: "*The Hero's Journey is a skeletal framework that should be fleshed out with the details and surprises of the individual story. The structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely. [...] The Hero's Journey is infinitely flexible, capable of endless variation without sacrificing any of its magic, and it will outlive us all.*"³ *Fullmetal Alchemist* can easily be exemplary of the Journey, while simultaneously existing on its own, having merit even without purposefully intending to fit within this framework. With that in mind, referring to our two main protagonists as heroes feels only natural, because in the fictional world they inhabit, the mere act of their perseverance is heroic.

One very important aspect of what makes Edward a hero, not just in the literary sense but also within the universe of the series, is his unwavering belief in the

² *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010, pg. 70-72

³ Christopher Vogler, *A Practical Guide, The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*, 3rd Edition, Michael Viese Productions, 2007

importance of human life. He never turns his back on how valuable he believes people to be, regardless of who they currently are or once were. There is a solid and unbreakable dedication to the preservation of people, both on an individual and communal level that Edward never abandons, now matter how many times it's put to the test. It is a quality which Homunculi such as Pride and Envy mock constantly, but nonetheless Edward extends grace towards them, too. What they ultimately fail to understand is the *reverence* he holds for living and how he would never want to take away anybody's choice so cruelly (fig 3).



Fig. 3 “Hurry up and destroy us.” “No, I’m not a murderer.”

His character arc is about applying that same courtesy of faith onto himself and learning that to lean on others in dire situations won't always mean that you are endangering them, but that maybe you can work together and find a solution. It's about trust and how to allow yourself to give it to people, to know that your grief and pain do not make you unworthy of support and love.

Edward takes on the burden of responsibility for the state of affairs the brothers end up in, regardless of the fact that it took both of them to perform the taboo ritual. It's clear at the start of the series that there's immense guilt weighing on him for how the entire situation has played out. The older brother's grief is not just for their mother, but the parts of his brother that were lost. He feels as though it was entirely his fault that things ended with Alphonse's soul bound to a suit of armor and it is perhaps the thing he is most conscious of. His own pain and physical state almost don't seem to matter, because he feels as though he had the task to protect his younger brother and he failed to do so.

This is taken further to the extreme in a work such as *The Book Thief*, where the character of Michael Holtzapfel struggles so prominently with survivor's guilt after the death of his brother that he ends up committing suicide when living with that guilt becomes unbearable⁴. Michael is not even a primary character in the story, but nonetheless, it's a very blunt blow to the reader when the worst possible outcome for this traumatized man becomes real. Edward Elric, however, remains alive and strives to do so throughout the entirety of *Fullmetal Alchemist*. In the most desperate times, he reiterates that "*There's too many people I'd let down by dying here.*"⁵ His way of dealing with that weight on his shoulders is to always keep moving forward, especially because there's others counting on him to make things right.

Alphonse's perception of the ordeal, while tainted by guilt and shame in a similar way to his older brother, tends to come off as the slightly more hopeful outlook. In comparison to Edward, Al has had years' worth of sleepless nights to ponder over everything that's happened, because his current body does not allow him to get tired or have his mind rest. Instead of that, he simply thinks. And while he does

⁴ Sarah K. Johnson, "*Pain, Death, and Nazis: The Surprisingly Beautiful Function Death Plays as Narrator in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief*", BYU Scholars Archive, 2015

⁵ *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, Episode 25

mourn his mother's passing, there's this grief of the self that he has to bear throughout the years of living in a metal suit. As a result of this time to reflect, he sees the advantages of his physical state whilst simultaneously being able to anticipate the day he won't be this way anymore. It culminates in the selfless act of leaving his real body behind in the Portal of Truth. He sees that frail frame and knows that right now, in the penultimate chapters of this journey, he will do more for others if he stays with the armour just a little longer. Not only that, but he places full trust in his brother to come back for him.

Alphonse plays with the hand he was dealt, patient and resolute. He uses his advantageous build to not only rescue others by fitting them inside the metal, but also directly entrap himself with the enemy so that he buys time for everybody else⁶. This consideration for physical necessities such as air, food and light is a detail of Arakawa's storytelling that appears to be overlooked by some. Hal Shipman, for example, is incorrect by including *Fullmetal Alchemist* amidst series where he claims the young protagonists seem to need no supervision or never address basic needs⁷. It's a point made by adult characters like Pinako Rockbell, Riza Hawkeye and Alex Louis Armstrong that despite all he is able to withstand, Alphonse is still very young and they advocate for his protection. He's also recognized for his inability to eat food by his close friend Winry, the Hughes family, Briggs soldiers, etc. There is no ignorance for convenience of plot; in fact, there's no ignorance of the matter at all.

When asked what comes after restoring his original body, Alphonse says that he's kept a list of meals he wants to taste. It may be a small detail, but it goes a long way to show his optimistic view of the future. As well, it allows the audience to solidify

⁶ *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 49

⁷ *Anime and Philosophy: Wide Eyed Wonder*, Chapter 15

the knowledge that the soul in that armor belongs to a person with feelings, ambitions and thoughts. That is a sentiment repeated by Edward towards other suit-bound souls, as well as by the chimera Heikel, whom Alphonse refuses to leave behind to die. It does not matter what shape or form a person takes, whether they are held together by a blood seal, they're alchemically changed to be half-animal or even have their essence trapped in a small red stone - they are human beings. And if there's anything that *Fullmetal Alchemist* definitively says about human beings, it's that they will always matter, they will always continue forward and fight. That is what our dual-heroes have done and continue to do, for the sake of themselves and the world.

Shipman's second point of error concerning the lack of caretakers for adolescent characters in anime series can also be disputed. Pinako, also known as Granny, and her granddaughter Winry have such a strong bond with the brothers that their safety is used as leverage by the Homunculi and Kimblee (fig 4).



Fig. 4

And then there is Izumi Curtis, who is not only their mentor in the study of alchemy, but to some degree can also align with the role of a mother figure in their story. It only seems fitting that the one person who would guide two orphan boys also be someone that has lost a child of her own. What's more, she's someone who understands first-hand the aching grief that one must have succumbed to in order to go through with human transmutation.

It's this shared pain of loss that, while it's not spelled out and dictated to the audience by the characters, is recognized to be a bonding force in the relationship between Izumi and the Elric brothers. A similar dynamic is seen in a work like Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy, where the orphaned Vin finds a mentor and father-like figure in Kelsier, a rebel leader who never got to experience parenthood before losing his wife⁸. Vin and Kelsier understand each other's motives for fighting; they share a perspective of grief on the lives they didn't get to have and how they individually carry weights that have become unbearable. When Izumi finds out what the brothers have done, she is furious at them exactly because she once went down the same path, too. In the end, all these characters fill roles in each other's lives without ever intending to. Daughters and fathers, mothers and sons; to whatever extent and capacity the story allows, they fit together by their jagged puzzle ends.

No one will ever *replace* Izumi's child, but she allows herself to love Ed and Al like sons regardless. Likewise, they don't treat her like a substitute mother; their reverence towards her stems from witnessing her strength and wisdom. They recognize her to be someone who can teach them better than anyone else. By chance or providence, the three are brought together by grief and build a bond, like us humans tend to do.

⁸ Brandon Sanderson, *The Final Empire (Mistborn #1)*, "Part One: The Survivor of Hathsins", Tom Doherty Associates, 25 Jul 2006

This all ties together with the full arcs of both brothers; through all their errors and suffering, they have formed their family amongst people they know and love, and in doing so, develop trust and respect that will flourish and last. It is possible to lose, grieve and come out of it with renewed strength and purpose. It's a tedious process and no result is perfect, but then again, to be human requires accepting the innate imperfection. Edward knows there is nothing gained without some sort of sacrifice and this last one comes to him with the biggest ease. After all, as he says himself:

*“Who even needs alchemy when I’ve got **them**?”*⁹



Fig. 5

⁹ *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 63

Chapter Two

War and Her Sons

“God exists, death will certainly come. I should be thinking of my soul.”

- Sophia Lvovna, *The Two Volodyas* by Anton Chekhov, 1984

A very prominent theme in *Fullmetal Alchemist* is war, showing how it's the common people who suffer the most from the consequences of imperialism. With occasional graphic depictions of bloodshed and carnage, the text is clear to strongly read as antithetical to the justification of such violence (fig 6). The Civil War between Ishval and Amestris does not exist in a vacuum, either as a historical catalyst in the world of the series or the context of Japan's military past¹⁰. If we consider that art imitates life, then we can see how maybe people become inspired to write characters who resemble what we wish we saw in reality. With that in mind, maybe Roy Mustang and Scar make certain choices and grow from mistakes so that we don't have to.



Fig. 6

¹⁰ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003

Set off by the grand conspiracy created by Father and the Homunculi, where the goal is to carve a “crest of blood” in focal geographic points, the end result is this: destruction. The conflict within the country of Amestris is instigated with the death of a single Ishvalan child, shot by the homunculus Envy posing as a blue-coated officer. As an outcome, the people of Ishval and the Amestrian military are now made to be opposing forces in a ruthless clash. It all takes a turn for the worst when the special human weapons, State Alchemists, are deployed to use their unique abilities in a war of extermination.

Colonel Roy Mustang, the Flame Alchemist, is one such weapon. A young and ambitious soldier, he joins the military because he believes it’s possible to change the system from within. Moreso, he is certain that he’s the one best suited to do it¹¹. Climbing the ladder and becoming the Fuhrer in order to protect everybody is always Roy’s large-scale goal, just like how returning to their real bodies is Edward and Alphonse’s. Once he loses his best friend, however, Colonel Mustang skews his path and blurs his vision to sense. While there is no giving up on the collectively beneficial cause of making Amestris a better country, on a personally moral level, Roy becomes corrupted with the idea of avenging Maes Hughes’ murder. The very man who supported him in his dreams of restoration and seeing to a brighter future has now become the source for his fugue states of enraged torture.

Granted, such volatile scorching is only reserved for those Roy knows to be involved in Hughes’ death, such as Lust and Envy. He does not hurt 2nd Lieutenant Maria Ross when lies of her being the culprit emerge; in fact, he helps her escape while leading Edward and Alphonse to believe he’s taken his revenge. Unfortunately for himself, he is much kinder and smarter than the antagonistic forces would like for him to be (fig 7).

¹¹ *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 8



Fig. 7

On the opposite side of the conflict lies Scar, whose kin and homeland are destroyed right before his eyes for the sake of a cause he is yet to fully understand. Before the beginning of the War, we see that Scar has no intention to meddle with alchemy or particularly engage with Amestrians beyond simply acknowledging them. Once he comes face to face with the violent and merciless Kimblee, also referred to as the Crimson Alchemist, there is no going back to things as he once knew them.

The loss of his brother is perhaps the tipping point, the moment Scar realizes that truly everything was taken from him. At this stage is where the scorned Ishvalan man abandons his given name, symbolically turning his back on who he once was, because now he has become a vessel for enacting vengeance upon those that decimated his home - the State Alchemists. He continues to be nameless, only ever referred to as Scar by the people who encounter him and are lucky enough to survive and eventually, for some, become his allies.

The way the text puts these two characters together in the story may very well be a deliberate choice to show us, with the fulfilment of their character arcs, that not only is it possible for you to find camaraderie in the unlikeliest of places, but just as well, violence enacted in the name of a holy cause will never bring you the solace you seek. Everything that they suffer for, every pain caused to them is a result of a war neither would have ever chosen, if they had the chance to make that choice. Because they didn't and because they are human, they are instead inflicted with the birthmarks of warfare: anguish, loss and grief; only the best for the children of bloodshed.

If there had to be a literary identification of Scar's archetype in *Fullmetal Alchemist*, he would be neither Hero nor Villain. To use either in description would simply not fit with his character progression. Instead, the more fitting term might be Anti-Villain, eventually even Anti-Hero, because never is he anything less than the morally grey man who acts the way he does out of necessity rather than for the simple pleasure of it¹². His arc's progression follows a very intriguing line where it starts with him being a bringer of destructive justice and concludes with the prospect of rebuilding what was once lost out of the rubble. For a considerable portion of his appearances at the start, Scar's desire to avenge his countrymen by murdering State Alchemists makes him antagonistic to the Elric brothers, Roy and even Fuhrer King Bradley. After suffering near-fatal injuries and being cared for by Ishvalan survivors in the slums of Amestris, however, he is advised to broaden his perspective.

"Your vengeance will only sow the seeds of further violence. What you're doing is senseless revenge and it's feeding a fruitless cycle of death. You must end this cycle once and for all." - Ishvalan elder, FMA: Brotherhood, Ep. 13

¹² 'Anti-Villain / Analysis', *TV Tropes*, Web

In David Carl Atherton's lengthy research on morality in Edo-era vendetta fiction, he makes a point about attempting to find examples in which forgiveness becomes the conclusion, not revenge¹³. While the writings he analyses could be influenced by the complexities of the social pressures and hierarchy experienced by their authors, the idea itself is still worth looking into. Where that concerns *Fullmetal Alchemist* and Scar is right about the moment he first meets the person that will drastically change his trajectory: Winry Rockbell.

We could see Scar akin to a warrior like Achilles in his brutality and desire to wreak carnage upon those he considers enemies, especially with the heightened brutality he uses to deliver the blows¹⁴ (fig 8). Achilles was not written to be the victim of genocide, though. Much the opposite, he was a ruthless warrior to use in battle.



Fig. 8

¹³ David Carl Atherton, *Valences of Vengeance: The Moral Imagination of Early Modern Japanese Vendetta Fiction*, Columbia University, 2013, pg. 76-82

¹⁴ Christopher Coker, *Men at War: What Fiction Tells Us about Conflict, from the Iliad to Catch-22*, Cary, USA. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014, pg. 23-27

And while it might be near-Achillean to destroy in a fit of grieving rage, the thing truly worth demolishing is the cycle of destruction itself. That action which brings a new wave of progress to Scar's arc is not even instigated by him. Beautifully enough, it's done by Winry, the daughter of two Amestrian doctors who were murdered in cold blood because they made the choice to save the life of an Ishvalan man. That is the same man who at one point stands above Edward, claiming to be an actor of God's will as he reaches to strike him down. Winry has the opportunity to take *her* revenge by shooting him and in Scar's words, she is justified in doing so, but she would also be his enemy the second she pulls the trigger¹⁵. Yet, Winry does not shoot. Edward takes the gun away and tells her not to.

In later chapters and episodes, when a huge portion of the character cast is at Fort Briggs and Winry sees Scar again, he believes that in that moment, she will act in malevolence. Instead, the young girl performs a small gesture of goodwill; she takes a cloth and cares for his wounds. The truth is that she *could* perpetuate the cycle of violence the same way Scar did. More than once, she is given the choice. Maybe she had the revelation inside her all along, or maybe it was being friends with the likes of Edward Elric and his stubborn dedication, but Winry has seen the immense damage it does to a person when they let violence overtake, and she actively chooses not to contribute to it.

That which has taken Scar all this time to see is something she already knows: it is futile to spend your days consumed by your hatred (fig 9). All it will ever do is eat you from the inside out. You must endure and you must carry on forward, building towards something better rather than turning things to dust. So then, in the story's end, when he is given the choice to help Miles spread the teachings of Ishvala and better the lives of his remaining brethren, Scar sees his new and greater purpose.

¹⁵ *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 22



Fig. 9

While the Survivor of Ishval is definitely no innocent man, the so-called “Hero of Ishval” is even less so. Certainly, there is no doubt that Roy Mustang is a murderer of many; many more than Scar, at least. He himself has no delusions as to what his role in the Civil War truly was. The “victory” of Amestris over Ishval came at the cost of thousands of lives, brutally and pointlessly taken, not to mention any sense of trust between the civilians was severed by propagated lies and systemic violence. Due to this bitter reality and because he knows nothing he ever does will be truer repentance, Roy does not look away when the time comes to take responsibility. In

fact, his idealistic dreams of change include a system of government where the people responsible for the genocide of Ishvalans would stand trial. Those trials would likely result in condemnation and eventually - execution, which is an outcome the colonel accepts. Unlike the Elrics, who are young and have cemented their morality in defiance of taking human lives, Roy knows that he is beyond hope for salvation (fig 10). Similar to Scar, he's aware that the past is cruel and unmovable, so he decides to embrace his damnation.



Fig. 10 *"The only thing worse than death is to avert your eyes from it. Look straight at the people you kill, don't look away for a second."*

What he is capable of doing *now* is making sure nobody else gets unnecessarily hurt. That task becomes more difficult to manage when Hughes is murdered by the Homunculi. In a way, it's almost like Roy truly believes finding his killer and making them repent by torturing them will somehow alleviate the pain of going forward without him. As Scar loses a blood brother, Roy loses a brother in arms. And for a time, both sow destruction around them on their paths to vengeance.

But the Amestrian soldier, much like the war he took part in, is not without consequence towards those around him. His personal vendetta against the one who took Hughes' life leads him down a dark, dangerous path of self-destruction that he must abandon in the same way Scar had to. The promise that he asks Riza to make to him, where she would watch his back and also shoot him if he were ever to stray from his ultimate objective, comes full circle.

The first time around, when he faces Lust, there is nothing really stopping him as he burns her over and over again. Alphonse and Riza are helpless against her, while Jean Havoc, another trustee of Roy's, is paralyzed due to Lust's inflictions on him. That alone is justifiable grounds for the colonel to be a merciless executioner. It's his first step into the role of this avenging, brutal madman that has the potential to destroy everything he claims to want to preserve (fig 11). This time, he is made to extinguish this flame of violence before it has a chance to take full control of his wounded soul. In the final altercation with Envy, once it's revealed they were the long-sought culprit Roy became obsessed with discovering, the colonel needs to be talked down from incinerating the homunculus in an act of hateful revenge.



Fig. 11

As always, Riza Hawkeye is the steady compass that leads him out of the strayed path¹⁶. She does point a gun to his back, even though her hands shake. A promise is a promise. Envy tries to instigate fighting between everyone present - Edward, Scar, Roy and Riza, urging them to kill each other for the things each of them has done, but to no avail. It's the actions of Scar that take everyone, especially Envy, by surprise. He of all people has the most reason to encourage Roy in burning Envy to death; after all, not only did the homunculus kill Hughes, they also murdered countless Ishvalans. Yet, he tells Roy that it's his own choice if he wishes to seek destruction, but as someone who got lost in the emptiness of that unfulfilling misery, he knows from experience that nothing good will come of it¹⁷. It shows Scar's growth from someone who was once perceived to be an enemy for his actions to a man that's no longer letting such hatred define him.

It's truly ironic, then, that Roy follows to be punished for the one atrocious act he did not willingly commit - human transmutation. After all his growth and being pulled from the darkness of his ugly contempt, he is forcefully pushed into a bright Portal of Truth in order to become a human sacrifice for the Homunculi's plans. Since a toll must be paid when one dares to observe that which no mortal should be allowed to see, Roy has his sight taken from him. Almost poetically it resembles the Fifth Hymn by Callimachus, which says:

*“Whosoever gazes upon an immortal without the God choosing
This man pays a terrible price for seeing the God”¹⁸*

¹⁶ Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, Vol. 23, Chapter 94 “The Flames of Vengeance”, Square Enix Japan, 1 December 2009, pg. 132

¹⁷ *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 58

¹⁸ A.W. Bulloch, *Callimachus. The Fifth Hymn*. Edited with Introduction and Commentary, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985

Once Roy leaves the Portal and finds his way to the depths of Father's lair, he is mocked for his lack of sight (fig 12). As inspected by Ariadni Tatti-Gartzou, to use blindness as punishment is present across many Ancient Greek works, where there is a symbolic meaning behind taking one's sight¹⁹. Indeed, it is suitable that this be Roy's toll. The most brutal part of it all is that he never dared to open the portal of his own volition, so it leads us to think if, while being fitting, it was ever *fair*.



Fig. 12

¹⁹ Menelaos Christopoulos et al, *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, Lanham, MD, USA. Lexington Books, 2010, pg. 200-205

Alas, war never is fair, is it? What it can do is show us the depths of men's souls and their deepest despicable potential, as well as the best of what their torn hearts are capable of fighting for²⁰. Hiromu Arakawa has created not only the world for it, but two characters of exemplary complexity to explore war with, while simultaneously opposing its existence. Using both Roy and Scar to shed light on how cruel such violence is, we get shown how advantageous people's love and beliefs can be to those in power who aim to exploit such passion. And with both, we also see the conclusions of violent cycles that persist when war is also allowed to ravage men's hearts. As so poignantly worded by Zusak's narrator, Death:

*"The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time. The consequence of this is that I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both."*²¹

²⁰ *Men at War: What Fiction Tells Us about Conflict*, pg. 297-300

²¹ Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007

Chapter Three

Consumption of Souls

“A Small Fact: You are going to die”

- Death, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, 2007

With great heroes who grow and evolve from their worst moments, come those whose downfall is enabled by their refusal to acknowledge their own humanity. There must be some sort of balance, as the Law of Equivalent Exchange proclaims²² and so, we have the original Homunculus. What is known to Edward and Alphonse as the figure of Father, the creator of the seven Homunculi and the destroyer of the Xerxes civilization, was at his initial stage nothing more than a mass of consciousness inside a glass flask. So strong was the overwhelming desire to achieve freedom beyond his container that it led him to forsake all of his own possible empathy and plunge the world into darkness. And then, just when he believes to have reached his goal, to be the ultimate being and consume God, the power he sought breaks Homunculus back into dust. When you reject yourself and abandon humanity, how do you expect to stay a *being* at all?

A contrast to this is none other than Hohenheim, the very human whose likeness the Dwarf in the Flask takes on after escaping his container. He is the first person to speak to Homunculus and begin to treat him like an individual with their own feelings and ambitions, which is what the Dwarf does in return by giving the human a name, Van Hohenheim, detaching him from the restrictions of Slave #23. It could be due to Homunculus being created with a small bit of Hohenheim's blood, or perhaps this connection between them would have been achieved by any other person who acknowledged the Dwarf's existence beyond his usefulness, but for the

²² *FMA: Brotherhood*, Episode 1

duration of their companionship, they really do seem to help each other. One has so much knowledge about the world and wishes to explore it in order to discover more, whilst the other is avidly human - compassionate, curious and in some ways, foolish (fig 13).



Fig. 13

They go their separate ways after the destruction of Xerxes, once Homunculus has obtained a new flask of sorts - a human body. This extermination of an entire country provides two philosopher's stones, which are split between the only two survivors of the sacrifice. When they are confronted with each other again, Hohenheim's place in the story is the role of an estranged father to the Elric brothers, having left them in searching for his own way to help the world. Simultaneously, Homunculus has become "Father" - a powerful and cruel being who would sacrifice his own "children" in pursuit of his goals, and is now even more detached from his humanity than ever.

But no matter the facade he puts on, no matter how much he looks down on people because of what he considers to be their weaknesses, all his actions towards them stem from his envy of humans - their perseverance, their sense of compassion and their friendships with each other. All of these qualities he lacks and has denied himself throughout all his life.

Instead, he sought ways to rise above it because he believed he *had* to be better than humans, to reach a God state of being. It is this hubris, his first and original sin, that also begets his downfall. Everything about his behaviour boils down to the actions of someone who is, at their core, self-denying and consumed by a feeling of inferiority²³. Homunculus so strongly feels the need to prove himself that it leads him to believe all the characteristics that make up humankind must be eradicated and left behind. And so, led by his ignorance and misplaced hurt, he works towards a goal that will benefit no one but himself, literally sacrificing everybody around him to make it possible.

“For *pride and avarice and envy are three fierce sparks that set all hearts ablaze*”, says Dante’s leader Virgil as they traverse the Circles of Hell²⁴. It aligns so appropriately with the personifications of sin in *Fullmetal Alchemist* - the Homunculi Envy, Pride and Greed, who are the most resilient of the seven, as they all survive until the final few chapters of the story. Greed is what drives Homunculus to seek all knowledge about the universe and obtain it for himself. Pride is what makes him forsake his human origins and aim to stand tall above the rest. Finally, it is Envy that pushes him to seclusion and self-reliance, for he lacks the ability to form connections which would help him gain the community he can’t admit to wanting most. It’s no wonder out of all Homunculi, the death of Envy in the series seems the most tragic.

²³ T.P. Thenady and L.S. Limanta, *The Inferiority Complex of Homunculus in Hiromu Arakawa’s Fullmetal Alchemist*, English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Indonesia

²⁴ Dante Alighieri, *Canto VI: The Gluttonous, Circles of Hell*, Translated by Robin Kirkpatrick, Penguin Classics, 2015, pg. 13

Greed dies last, dealing one final blow to his so-called Father and extinguishing himself right after receiving the one thing he's always longed for, "*the chance to have friends like these*"²⁵. The avaricious homunculus is the only one which dies content, fulfilled in his personal journey. Envy, on the other hand, prefers to take their own life than to live with their weakness and shame so exposed to humans. To them, it was the greatest humiliation to be perceived as needing just as much validation and support as regular people, especially knowing that it's something they could never obtain for themselves (fig 14).



Fig. 14

²⁵ FMA: Brotherhood, Episode 62

In a twist of cruel irony, Homunculus' undoing was caused by every deficiency he thought he saw in humans, but did not conceive might exist within himself. When he completes his transmutation circle and puts all his sacrifices in place, he opens the door to God and tries to pull that being downwards into his own form (fig 15).



Fig. 15

Much like in Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire*, where the Lord Ruler destroys the order of the universe, Homunculus breaks open his world's very core and is ready to betray its contents. However, the Lord Ruler turns out to have been just a man who did atrocious and ugly things out of necessity, to save the world²⁶. If it meant becoming the villain for millions, then so be it; at least that way, life could go on in some form. No such sentiment exists for the once-contained Dwarf. He swallows the power in his sight and then returns back down to destroy those who opposed him. But such insolence on his part cannot go too long without suffering consequences. His own ambitions and conclusions of the Truth turn against him.

²⁶ *The Final Empire (Mistborn #1)*, "Part Five: Believers In A Forgotten World"

Ignorance of one's own limits can be quite humbling. Despite the insurmountable power within Hohenheim's grasp, he never reaches the mental state of superiority present in his old companion. Instead, he spends the borrowed time he is given to individually recognize and speak to every person locked into the philosopher's stone inside him. Just like his sons, Hohenheim validates people's existence on the grounds of more than just their current state of being; whether or not they are dead, alive, half-metal, blood seals or specks of energy does not matter. His view is humane, because it can't really be anything else. He was born a human and no matter how many years of his life pass, he doesn't let himself be corrupted by aspirations of distinction.

If anything, for a while he attempts to live a simple life, just like he dreamt of in his youth. He falls in love with Trisha Elric and together, they have two children who are more important to him than anything else. At that same time, Homunculus builds the foundations for something much more grand in scale and execution and in doing so, causes Van Hohenheim to have to leave his home. The trajectories of their lives are so defined by each other, yet are so distinct from one another.

It follows to see how the end comes for each of them. Hohenheim returns to his wife's grave, nearly crumbling as what remains of his stone is spent. He kneels down and talks, saying how proud he is of their sons, how they both succeeded in saving the world with their many friends, as well as getting their bodies back. It brings him such serenity in these last moments of his life. Later, he is found by Pinako, white-haired and still, a smile on his crumbling face as he takes his final rest alongside his beloved Trisha. There is *no one* waiting for Homunculus with open arms on the other side. With every effort, he made sure that there would not be a single creature to wish him well or miss him in the event of his death. He did not even consider that as a possibility in his plans.

No, there truly is no solace designated for the Dwarf in the Flask. Just like those doomed to Limbo in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he is made to be consumed into oblivion by the very thing he so achingly strived to attain²⁷. Blinded by his own pride, Homunculus cannot see beyond the supposed purity of his ambition and fails to recognize how conceited it has made him (fig 16). For this transgression, there is an equivalent punishment, akin to that reserved for the souls in Purgatory:

"For them, beatitude in Heaven was not some sort of great, but unspecified state of bliss: it consisted in the perfection of the intellect through seeing God and knowing all things in him. [They] are doomed to spend eternity spurred on by the very desire for the truth which dominated their mortal lives." - Marenborn, pg. 90



Fig. 16

²⁷ John Marenbon, 'Virtuous Pagans, Hopeless Desire and Unjust Justice', in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb, Volume 1, 1st edn (Open Book Publishers, 2015), pg. 77–96

Hiromu Arakawa illustrates perfectly how much one can suffer without the help of others throughout their life, not just physically, but spiritually as well. She opposes Homunculus to Hohenheim, the Elrics and their friends in the story because they are his unrealized potential, the version of himself he could never be due to his own delusions. He believed he needed no one, yet “played house” with the Homunculi²⁸ and condescended to humans for their ability to build relationships in a way he’d never understand. Hohenheim lived as a human, suffered pain and loss and grieved the way a human does, felt joy and pride and love the way a human does, and fought and fell and got up again the way a human does. He was forced to live in a body born from the consumption of souls, yet he did not let despair and pride consume *him*. He saw all those sacrificed for him as people and did what people are so good at doing: lived alongside them.

After all, why do we live with each other if not *for* each other?

²⁸ *The Inferiority Complex of Homunculus in Hiromu Arakawa’s Fullmetal Alchemist*, pg. 106

Conclusion



Over and over, we tell stories like that of the Elric brothers - ones of perseverance and stubborn hope, which keep our souls alive. We observe the spiritual pitfalls and the extinguished flames of hatred in Roy and Scar, just like how the warriors of ancient times and their anguish have remained of interest to us to this day. And we watch how two diverging paths can still meet each other, such as Hohenheim and Homunculus, when separate beliefs of what is Great and what is Good endure a clash that affects the world. Deathly narrators, myths and powers beyond just our physical prowess - a hero's journey can truly have an endless amount of variation.

We have explored the characters individually and how their roles in the story intertwine with each other, for better or worse. We have seen how differently grief and pain affect them, but at the same time acknowledge their growth from those things and their ability to remain and withstand. We have also noted the corruption that can consume and erode one from the inside when they denounce those things which make human beings human. Things such as our innate reliance on other people and our attachment to those we choose to love, our desire for support and companionship, our refusal to give up on each other even when all things seem hopeless, are all part of our great collective strengths. True weakness is allowing conceit to make one believe themselves superior to the rest and as such, it's a weakness that loses all the fights that actually *matter*.

There are many more things we can take away from Hiromu Arakawa's work; forgiveness of the self, compassion towards others and the value of our lives are all shown to be important, but so are violence, and war, and waste. The latter three are important not because they're positive things, but because the series helps us to

recognize every subtle way in which they harm us, even long after they are over and we have stopped consciously addressing their effects. *Fullmetal Alchemist* teaches us not to let ourselves be consumed with that which destroys us. Demolition may be the easier solution, but to build upon a stable structure is far more rewarding. It may be a difficult path to walk, but if we have people we love beside us, that burden can ease and the unknown will not seem so frightening. Nothing is quite that scary once we see our friends leave their footprints next to ours.

Taking account of all the painful lessons and all our losses and knowing that in the future, we will have survived to have triumphs and joys, we as people can forge for ourselves unbreakable spirits. We can come out on the other side of anything, handle anything, with hearts made fullmetal.

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