



The Representation of *Cathexis* in the Emotional Relationships of Superhero Characters in *Gundala: Takdir* and *The Flash: Year One*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the representation of cathexis through the emotional relationships of Sancaka in *Gundala: Takdir* by Oyasujiwo and Hasmi and Barry Allen in *The Flash: Year One* by Joshua Williamson and Howard Porter, as well as to compare the similarities and differences in their representations. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method focusing on two superhero comics, namely *Gundala: Takdir* and *The Flash: Year One*. The research data consist of dialogues, narrations, facial expressions, gestures, actions, and visual elements in comic panels that represent the characters' emotional attachments. The research instrument is an analytical framework based on Connell's concept of cathexis within masculinity theory and a multimodal approach to examine the relationship between verbal and visual elements. Data analysis was conducted through data selection, categorization, interpretation, and comparison based on the forms of emotional attachment represented by the characters. The findings reveal that Sancaka's cathexis is primarily represented through family relationships, particularly his attachment to his father and mother, which appears through experiences of searching, caring, and memories of the past. Barry Allen's cathexis is represented through his romantic relationship with Iris and emotional experiences related to family loss. The comparison demonstrates that personal relationships contribute to the construction of superhero identities, although Sancaka is more oriented toward family attachment, while Barry Allen presents broader interpersonal and familial connections.

Keywords: cathexis, masculinity, emotional relationship, superhero, comic

INTRODUCTION

Superhero narratives are not only constructed through physical strength and heroic actions, but also through personal relationships that shape characters' experiences. Relationships with family, friends, romantic partners, and social environments become part of the journey through which superheroes develop their identities. Emotional experiences such as loss, affection, care, and attachment may exist alongside heroic actions performed by the characters. The representation of male superheroes in popular culture therefore involves not only physical abilities but also social relationships that influence their personal experiences. Comics as visual narratives present these

experiences through the interaction between verbal and visual elements. McCloud (1993: 9) explains that comics construct meaning through the relationship between images and words, allowing visual and textual elements to work together in producing narrative meaning. Kress & van Leeuwen (2021:15) state that visual elements function as representational systems that communicate meaning. Mukti & Kasmana (2024) demonstrate that facial expressions and gestures in comics contribute to the representation of emotional conditions and character development.

Emotional relationships represented in superhero narratives become relevant to examine

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because superhero characters are often associated with strength, independence, and heroism, while their personal relationships receive less attention. The relationship between heroic identity and emotional attachment can be examined through the concept of *cathexis* in masculinity studies. Connell (2005: 74) explains that masculinity is a configuration of practices within gender relations consisting of power relations, production relations, and *cathexis*. The concept of *cathexis* refers to emotional structures and individual attachments toward particular people or objects within social relationships. This perspective expands masculinity studies beyond domination and power by considering emotional experiences as part of male identity formation. Based on this background, this study formulates two research questions: (1) how is *cathexis* represented through the emotional relationships of Sancaka in *Gundala: Takdir* and Barry Allen in *The Flash: Year One?*; and (2) what are the similarities and differences in the representation of *cathexis* between the two characters through verbal and visual elements in comics?

This study aims to describe the representation of *cathexis* through the emotional relationships of Sancaka and Barry Allen and to compare the similarities and differences in their representations through verbal and visual elements in both comics. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of masculinity studies, particularly the application of *cathexis* in analyzing male characters in visual narratives. Practically, this study provides a reference for understanding emotional attachment and character construction in superhero comics.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Connell's concept of masculinity. Connell (2005:74) states that *cathexis* represents emotional relations that connect individuals with particular objects or subjects within social structures. Wedgwood (2009: 330) explains that *cathexis* is one of Connell's theoretical components that has received less attention compared with hegemonic

masculinity. Contemporary masculinity studies also emphasize that emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships are connected to masculine practices shaped by social and cultural contexts (de Boise & Hearn, 2019). The concept of *cathexis* in this study is used to analyze emotional attachment represented through family relationships, romantic relationships, memories, and personal experiences of superhero characters. Relevant studies have examined masculinity and character representation in visual culture through different perspectives. Roberts (2021) investigated the relationship between identification with superhero characters and the construction of gender beliefs and male masculinity. Inaba & Betsy (2024) discussed gender representation in popular culture by analyzing characters and social relations that contribute to identity formation. Ahmadi *et al* (2025) examined the representation of masculinity and emotional experiences in cultural texts, emphasizing that male identity is constructed through interactions between social relations, personal experiences, and emotional expressions. This study provides relevance for examining superhero characters through emotional attachment and relational experiences.

Pranela (2023) examined Sancaka's character in the film *Gundala* (2019) through a *mise-en-scène* approach and Janet Saltzman Chafetz's masculinity theory, focusing on the visual construction of Sancaka's masculinity. Aziz (2020) analyzed family representation in films and explained that visual elements related to family can contribute to narratives of masculine identity. Mukti & Kasmana (2024) examined facial expressions and gestures as visual elements for interpreting emotional conditions in comic characters. These studies demonstrate that male characters in visual works can be analyzed through masculinity, gender representation, visual construction, and emotional aspects. However, previous studies have not specifically focused on *cathexis* as the primary analytical concept for comparing emotional attachment in superhero



comics. Therefore, this study focuses on the representation of *cathexis* in Sancaka from *Gundala: Takdir* and Barry Allen from *The Flash: Year One* through the relationship between verbal and visual elements.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a multimodal analysis approach. The qualitative method is used to interpret the meaning of data through identification, classification, and interpretation of textual and visual elements in the research objects (Creswell, 2022). The research focuses on the representation of *cathexis* through the emotional relationships of Sancaka in *Gundala: Takdir* by Oyasujiwo (2019) and Barry Allen in *The Flash: Year One* by (Williamson & Porter, 2019). The research objects consist of two superhero comics, while the research data include dialogues, narrations, facial expressions, gestures, actions, and panel compositions that represent emotional attachment between characters and certain individuals or experiences.

Data collection was conducted through reading and note-taking techniques. Both comics were examined comprehensively to identify textual and visual elements related to emotional attachment. The selection of data was carried out purposively based on three criteria: the presence of personal relationships between characters and attachment objects, the representation of emotional involvement through care, attention, closeness, or personal experiences, and the presence of verbal and visual elements that strengthen the representation of emotional relationships. The research instrument was an analytical guideline based on Connell's concept of *cathexis* and a multimodal analysis framework. Each selected data was coded based on the comic title, page or panel number, and sequence of appearance to facilitate the analysis process.

Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative analysis model proposed by (Miles et al., 2020), which consists of data condensation,

data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation was carried out by selecting and categorizing relevant data according to the forms of emotional relationships and objects of attachment represented by the characters. Data display was presented through analytical tables containing data codes, verbal excerpts, visual descriptions, categories of emotional relationships, and interpretations. Conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by examining the relationship between data, analytical categories, interpretations, and research questions.

The interpretation process applied Connell's concept of *cathexis* by focusing on characters' emotional attachment toward particular individuals or experiences. Categories such as family, friendship, romantic relationships, loss, and memory were used as analytical classifications based on the characteristics of the identified data. These categories were not considered official subcategories of *cathexis*, but functioned as analytical tools to organize patterns of emotional attachment represented in the comics. Comparative analysis was conducted by examining similarities and differences between Sancaka and Barry Allen based on the forms of emotional attachment, objects of attachment, and their representation through verbal and visual elements. The results of the analysis were presented descriptively and interpretatively through analytical explanations and comparative tables.

RESULT

The research findings were obtained through an examination of *Gundala: Takdir* by Oyasujiwo and Hasmi (2019) and *The Flash: Year One* by Joshua Williamson and Howard Porter (2019). The collected data consist of verbal and visual elements related to the representation of emotional attachment, including dialogues, narrations, facial expressions, gestures, actions, and panel compositions. The selected data were classified based on their relevance to the research focus and the representation of *cathexis*. The findings are presented according to two research

problems: the representation of *cathexis* in each character and the similarities and differences in the representation of *cathexis* between Sancaka and Barry Allen.

1. Representation of Cathexis in Sancaka (*Gundala: Takdir*)

The representation of *cathexis* in Sancaka was identified through his relationships with family members, particularly his father and mother. The research data show four findings related to Sancaka's emotional attachment, including calling his father, concern for his father's condition, communication with his mother, and memories related to his father.

Table-1
Data of cathexis representation in Sancaka (*Gundala: Takdir*)

Code	Page	Character/Relationship	Verbal Data	Analytical Category
GUN-C1	6	Sancaka–Father	“Bapaaak!”	Family attachment
GUN-C2	9	Sancaka–Father	“B... Ba... Bapak!”; “Kalian Mau Apakan Bapak?”	Concern toward family member
GUN-C3	22	Sancaka–Mother	“Cuma Sehari Kan, Bu?”	Family communication
GUN-C4	25	Sancaka–Father	“Seperti Saat Bapak Menemukan Aku...”	Memory of family relationship



Figure-1
Sancaka calling his father

Data GUN-C1 on page 6 presents Sancaka calling his father in a rainy atmosphere. The scene consists of six panels showing Sancaka's position and facial expressions. The first panel presents Sancaka's face through a close-up view accompanied by the expression “Bapaaak!”. The following panels show Sancaka standing in the rain with a building, curtains, and a silhouette appearing in the background. The final panel presents Sancaka with a larger text display of “BAPAAAK”.



Figure-2
Sancaka and his father in a crowd

Data GUN-C2 on page 9 presents Sancaka in a crowd situation involving his father. Several figures appear surrounding a character, while another figure carrying a torch is visible in the lower left area. Sancaka is presented through a smaller body size compared with other figures and a close-up depiction of his facial expression. The statement “Kalian Mau Apakan Bapak?” appears together with Sancaka's facial expression in the scene.

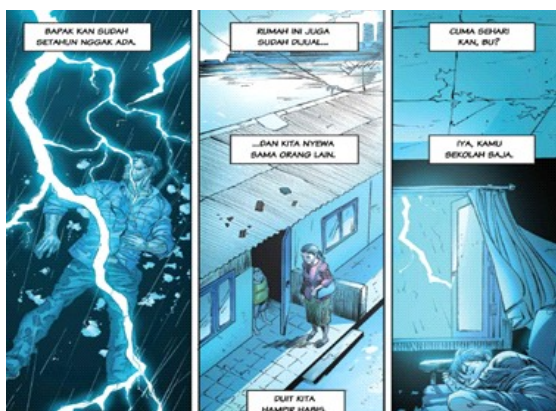


Figure-3
Sancaka and his mother at home

Data GUN-C3 on page 22 presents a conversation between Sancaka and his mother. The scene begins with Sancaka in a rainy environment and continues with a home setting related to family conditions. The conversation includes discussion about the absence of Sancaka's father, living conditions, and family circumstances. Sancaka asks "Cuma Sehari Kan, Bu?" during the interaction with his mother.



Figure-4
Sancaka and his father discussing their meeting

Data GUN-C4 on page 25 presents a conversation between Sancaka and his father regarding their past experience. The scene begins with a close-up view accompanied by the statement "Seperti Saat Bapak Menemukan Aku...". The following panels present several figures related to the conversation. The transition between close-up and wider panels provides visual information regarding the situation discussed by the characters.

2. Representation of cathexis through Barry Allen's emotional relationships in The Flash: Year One

The representation of *cathexis* in Barry Allen was identified through his relationship with Iris and family experiences related to loss. The findings show four forms of emotional attachment represented through interpersonal interest, romantic interaction, emotional conversation, and memories related to his parents.

Table-2
Data of cathexis representation in Barry Allen (The Flash: Year One)

Code	Page	Character/Relationship	Verbal Data	Category
FLASH-C1	13	Barry-Iris	"Iris... Why is someone like her interested in some like me"	Interpersonal attachment
FLASH-C2	60	Barry-Iris	"No work talk on dates."	Romantic relationship
FLASH-C3	85	Barry-Iris	Do you want to talk about what happened?	Emotional conversation
FLASH-C4	124	Barry-Mother/Father	"I'm still haunted by the past. By the mother's death. My father unjustly behind bars."	Loss and memory



Figure-5
Barry thinking about Iris

Data FLASH-C1 on page 13 presents Barry in several sequential scenes. The first panel shows Barry in his workplace. The following panel presents Barry conducting activities with equipment in the room. Barry then holds a phone and focuses his attention on the device. The final panel shows Iris's name appearing on the phone screen. Barry's thought balloon contains the statement "*Iris... Why is someone like her interested in someone like me?*"



Figure-6
Barry and Iris during a date

Data FLASH-C2 on page 60 presents Barry and Iris standing opposite each other during a date. Iris raises her hand while holding an object, while Barry holds his jacket. The conversation involves their agreement not to discuss work during their date. The statement "*No work talk on dates*" appears as part of their interaction.



Figure-7
Barry and Iris discussing Barry's mother's death

Data FLASH-C3 on page 85 presents a conversation between Barry and Iris related to Barry's mother's death. A photograph of a woman appears in Iris's hand during the conversation. Iris asks about the relationship between the photograph and Barry's mother's death. Barry responds with the statement "Do you want to talk about what happened?".



Figure-8
Barry remembering his mother's death and his father's imprisonment

Data FLASH-C4 on page 124 presents Barry's memories related to his family experiences. Several panels show Barry alone, while other panels present a funeral scene and Barry's father behind bars. Barry's facial expression appears serious when recalling these events. Barry's thought balloon contains the statement "I'm still haunted by the past. By the mother's death. My father unjustly behind bars."

Comparison of cathexis representation between Sancaka and Barry Allen

The comparison of findings shows that Sancaka and Barry Allen represent *cathexis* through personal relationships with different forms of attachment. Sancaka's emotional attachment is mainly represented through family relationships involving his father and mother, while Barry Allen's attachment appears through both romantic relationships with Iris and family experiences related to his mother and father. Both characters show representations through verbal and visual elements, including dialogue, narration, facial expressions, gestures, actions, and panel composition. The comparison of the findings is presented in Table-3.

Table-3

Comparison of cathexis representation between Sancaka and Barry Allen

Aspect	Sancaka (Gundala: Takdir)	Barry Allen (The Flash: Year One)	Aspect	Sancaka (Gundala: Takdir)
Attachment object	Father and mother	Iris, mother, and father	Attachment object	Father and mother
Relationship	Family relationship	Romantic and family relationship	Relationship form	Family relationship

DISCUSSION

The representation of *cathexis* in *Gundala: Takdir* and *The Flash: Year One* demonstrates that emotional attachment functions as an important aspect in the construction of superhero characters. The findings indicate that Sancaka and Barry Allen are not only represented through physical abilities and

heroic actions, but also through relationships with individuals and experiences that have personal significance. From the perspective of masculinity studies, these findings extend the understanding of male superhero characters beyond strength, independence, and heroic identity. Connell (2005) explains that *cathexis* represents emotional relations within gender practices, allowing emotional attachment to be examined as part of masculine identity formation. The representation of Sancaka and Barry Allen shows that emotional relationships become part of the social experiences that shape how male characters respond to their environments.

Sancaka's representation in *Gundala: Takdir* shows that family relationships become the dominant form of emotional attachment. The relationship with his father and mother is represented through memories, concern, communication, and experiences connected to family conditions. From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Connell's concept of *cathexis*, which positions emotional attachment as part of social relations rather than merely personal feelings. The attachment between Sancaka and his family is represented through verbal elements, such as dialogue, and visual elements, such as facial expressions, body positions, and panel arrangements. This finding expands Pranela (2023) study of Sancaka's masculinity in *Gundala* (2019), which focuses on visual construction through *mise-en-scène*. While Pranela emphasizes the visual formation of masculinity, this study highlights emotional attachment as another dimension in understanding Sancaka's character. The role of visual elements in representing emotional conditions is also consistent with Mukti & Kasmana (2024), who emphasize facial expressions and gestures as important elements in interpreting emotions in comics.

Allen's representation in *The Flash: Year One* presents a broader form of *cathexis* through interpersonal relationships and experiences of loss. The relationship between Barry and Iris is represented through communication, attention, and

emotional interaction, while family experiences related to his mother and father appear through memories of loss and personal history. From the perspective of contemporary masculinity studies, these findings indicate that male characters can be represented through emotional openness and interpersonal relationships. de Boise & Hearn (2019) explain that emotions are connected with masculine practices and social relations, showing that emotional experiences are part of how masculinity is negotiated within social contexts. The representation of Barry Allen therefore provides a perspective that superhero identity is not separated from personal relationships and emotional experiences. This finding also strengthens the discussion of superhero masculinity by showing that emotional dimensions exist alongside heroic actions.

The comparison between Sancaka and Barry Allen reveals similarities and differences in the representation of *cathexis*. Both characters demonstrate emotional attachment through personal relationships that influence their experiences as superheroes. However, the direction of attachment differs between the two characters. Sancaka's attachment is primarily centered on family relationships, particularly his connection with his father and mother. Barry Allen presents a wider range of attachment through romantic relationships with Iris and family experiences related to loss. These differences demonstrate that *cathexis* may appear through various forms of social relationships depending on the character's background and narrative context. The findings contribute to superhero studies by positioning emotional attachment as an analytical perspective alongside discussions of power, conflict, and heroic identity. This study provides several contributions to the analysis of superhero characters. First, the study places *cathexis* as the main analytical concept rather than treating emotional relationships only as supporting elements of character development. Second, the use of multimodal analysis allows the research to examine the connection between verbal elements,



such as dialogue and narration, and visual elements, such as facial expressions, gestures, actions, and panel composition.

This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of emotional representation in comics compared with analyses that focus only on textual aspects. However, this study also has limitations. The analysis is limited to two superhero comics, namely *Gundala: Takdir* and *The Flash: Year One*, so the findings represent the emotional representation of the selected characters and cannot represent all superhero narratives. Further research may examine more comic works or compare different cultural contexts to expand the understanding of *cathexis* representation in superhero characters.

CONCLUSION

The representation of *cathexis* in *Gundala: Takdir* and *The Flash: Year One* demonstrates that emotional attachment becomes part of superhero character construction through personal relationships represented in verbal and visual elements of comics. Sancaka shows a dominant representation of *cathexis* through family relationships, particularly with his father and mother, which appear through searching, caring, communication, and memories of past experiences. Barry Allen represents *cathexis* through more diverse emotional attachments, particularly through his romantic relationship with Iris and experiences of loss related to his family. The similarities between the two characters are reflected in the presence of individuals and experiences that become the center of emotional attachment, while the differences appear in the direction of their relationships. Sancaka is more oriented toward family relationships, whereas Barry Allen demonstrates attachment through romantic relationships and family experiences. This study shows that *cathexis* can be used as an analytical perspective to understand the emotional dimensions of superhero characters through social relationships that shape their personal experiences.

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