



## Literary Formula in Novel *Mistborn: The Final Empire*

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**Abstract.** *This research explores the application of literary formulas in Brandon Sanderson's novel Mistborn: The Final Empire. The research aims to identify the specific narrative formulas employed within the novel's structure and to map the pattern by which these formulas are integrated to create its compelling narrative. Using a qualitative approach, the study applies Cawelti's literary formulas and Vogler's stages of the journey to analyze key scenes, dialogues, passages, and plot events. Data collection involved close reading and detailed note-taking. The findings show that Mistborn integrates three formulas: adventure, mystery, and romance, into the narrative. By mapping the protagonist's journey onto Vogler's twelve stages, the study shows a clear pattern where the adventure formula drives the main plot, the mystery intellectually engages the reader, and the romance provides emotional depth. These findings help explain the narrative appeal of the novel and offer a useful framework for understanding how fantasy stories are structurally composed. The study demonstrates how traditional storytelling formulas can be used to create rich and engaging narratives in modern fantasy literature.*

**Keywords:** Christopher Vogler; Hero's Journey; John G. Cawelti; Literary Formula; Mistborn: The Final Empire

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Fantasy fiction, characterized by its intricate world-building and exploration of supernatural elements, has long captivated readers with its ability to construct immersive, secondary universes (Manlove, 1975; Mendlesohn, 2008). Much of the genre's appeal comes from its use of familiar narrative patterns that help both writers and audiences understand the story's structure. The concept of the literary formula, as defined by John G. Cawelti (1976), offers a critical lens for understanding these recurring patterns. Cawelti posits that formula fiction consists of structured narrative models, such as adventure, romance, mystery, melodrama, and aliens or being states, that are repeatedly employed within specific genres to fulfill audience expectations and create cultural resonance.

Many researchers have successfully used this concept to study other popular genres. For example, studies have examined action story patterns in Japanese samurai legends (Arianto & Ambalegin, 2019), mystery structures in webtoons (Sari & Merawati, 2025), and romantic conventions in modern bestsellers (Miclea, 2023). These studies show that clearly recognizable formulas play an important role in popular appeal and commercial success (Trisna et al., 2021). However, a noticeable gap persists in the systematic application of this analytical framework to modern fantasy literature. While there's foundational work on fantasy, few studies have specifically examined how fantasy novels are built by deliberately combining multiple Cawelti-style formulas.

This gap is significant when considering the works of Brandon Sanderson, whose novels are known for their intricate plots, unique magic systems, and careful narrative design.

*Naskah Masuk: Agustus 21, 2025; Revisi: Agustus 30, 2025; Diterima: September 27, 2025;  
Tersedia: September 30, 2025*

*Mistborn: The Final Empire* (2006) is an example, blending a heroic rebellion, a mysterious magical system, and a growing romantic storyline. While previous research has explored aspects of *Mistborn's* world-building (Laszkiewicz, 2017) and other fantasy narratives (Agustin, 2019; Milbank, 2023), no study has yet provided a comprehensive analysis of the specific narrative formulas employed in *Mistborn* and the pattern of their integration.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by conducting a dual analysis of *Mistborn: The Final Empire*. Firstly, it employs Cawelti's (1976) theory of literary formulas to identify and examine the adventure, romance, mystery, melodrama, and aliens or being states formulas within the novel's narrative structure. Secondly, it utilizes Christopher Vogler's (2007) stages of the journey to map the protagonist's development and reveal the precise pattern by which these formulas are sequenced and interwoven throughout the story. By integrating these two frameworks, this research aims to clarify the narrative techniques behind Sanderson's acclaimed novel and offer a useful model for analyzing formulaic storytelling in fantasy literature. The findings will demonstrate how the strategic layering of formulas creates a multi-layered narrative that operates simultaneously as an action-packed adventure, an intellectual mystery, and an emotionally resonant character study.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study uses a combined theoretical approach to analyze the narrative structure of *Mistborn: The Final Empire*, integrating John G. Cawelti's (1976) literary formulas with Christopher Vogler's (2007) stages of the journey.

### **Literary Formulas**

Cawelti's identifies five literary formulas, that shape stories (1976, pp. 39–44). The adventure formula centers on a hero who faces and overcomes challenges to complete an important moral mission, fulfilling the desire to triumph over injustice. In contrast, the romance formula focuses on the development of a love relationship, embodying the fantasy that love can conquer all obstacles. The mystery formula drives the plot through uncovering hidden secrets and solving puzzles, engaging the audience's intellect through reasoning and deduction. Additionally, Cawelti describes the melodrama formula, which combines multiple storylines and characters to create heightened emotional impact and ultimately affirm a moral order, sometimes sacrificing complex character development. Lastly, the alien beings or states includes stories about strange, incomprehensible creatures or conditions (like horror), which give a recognizable form to terror and allow the audience to feel a sense of control over the unknown.

### Stages of the Journey

Christopher Vogler (2007) adapts Joseph Campbell's monomyth into a practical twelve-stage framework that maps the protagonist's transformative journey (2007, pp. 81–227). The story begins in the Ordinary World, where the hero's regular life is shown before being disrupted by a Call to Adventure that introduces a new challenge. The hero often Refuses the Call due to fear or hesitation. Guidance is then provided by a Meeting with the Mentor, who offers guidance, wisdom, and tools needed for the journey. With this support, the hero consciously decides to Cross the First Threshold, fully committing to the adventure and entering the Special World. Here, they face Tests, Allies, and Enemies, learning the new rules and forming key relationships. The story then moves toward the Approach to the Inmost Cave, where the hero prepares for the crucial crisis known as the Ordeal. In this climactic moment, the hero experiences a symbolic death and rebirth, emerging transformed and claiming a Reward. The journey continues with The Road Back, where the hero returns toward the ordinary world, often pursued by danger. This leads to the final Resurrection, a last test and purification of the hero's transformation, before the hero Returns with the Elixir, bringing healing or new wisdom back to their community.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method. The analysis and findings of this study are presented descriptively. The research method consists of three parts: data sources, data collection methods and techniques, and data analysis methods and techniques.

The primary data source was the novel *Mistborn: The Final Empire* itself (Sanderson, 2006). The novel was selected as a single, representative case study using purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic technique. *Mistborn* was chosen due to its popularity, complex storyline, and rich narrative, making it an ideal subject for analyzing formulaic storytelling.

Data collection involved close reading and detailed note-taking. The novel was read multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of its narrative development. Relevant textual elements, including dialogue, narrative descriptions, and key plot events that illustrated the theoretical frameworks, were identified, highlighted, and carefully extracted. These data were then organized according to the two main research questions: one focused on identifying John G. Cawelti's (1976) literary formulas, and the other on mapping the protagonist's journey according to Christopher Vogler's (2007) stages of the hero's journey.

The data analysis involved a two-phase process. The first phase focused on identifying literary formulas by using Cawelti's (1976) formulas, including adventure, mystery, romance,

melodrama, and alien or beings states, to determine which ones were significantly used in the novel. The second phase involved mapping Vin's development onto Vogler's (2007) twelve-stage of the journey starting from Ordinary World to Return with the Elixir, aiming to uncover how the identified formulas are arranged and emphasized throughout the plot.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study examines how Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire* is constructed as a story. It uses two theories: John G. Cawelti's literary formulas (1976) and Christopher Vogler's stages of the journey (2007). The findings show that the novel's effectiveness comes from its deliberate combination of three formulas—adventure, mystery, and romance—that are carefully integrated throughout the protagonist's transformative journey.

##### **Literary Formula in *Mistborn: The Final Empire***

Cawelti (1976) identifies five formulas, including adventure, romance, mystery, melodrama, and alien beings or states. However, upon close examination, *Mistborn: The Final Empire* employs three formulas: adventure, romance, and mystery. The other formulas such as melodrama and aliens or beings state, are not significant enough to constitute a narrative structure in this novel.

##### ***Adventure Formula***

The adventure formula involves a hero facing and overcoming challenges to complete a moral mission (Cawelti, 1976, p. 39). This forms the main plot of the novel: the crew's goal to defeat the oppressive Lord Ruler.

##### **Data [3-1] Chapter 13**

“Overthrow the Final Empire... that is something that skaa rebels have been working toward for a thousand years! What makes you think that we can achieve anything where those men have failed?”

Kelsier smiled. “We'll succeed because we have vision, Breeze. That's something the rebellion has always lacked.”

This conversation establishes the central adventure—a moral struggle against great odds. Kelsier's statement, “We'll succeed because we have vision,” is a key example of how an adventure hero is characterized. This statement positions him and his crew not as superhuman figures, but as ordinary individuals whose primary strength derives from their innovative strategy and intellectual foresight. This makes them different from earlier rebels who did not have such clear goals. Their victory is achieved through intelligence and strong

will, not just physical strength, which makes them more relatable as underdogs. In this way, the passage captures the core appeal of the adventure formula: the triumph over long-standing injustice through wit and resolve.

### ***Romance Formula***

The romance formula focuses on the growth of a love relationship that deepens through shared struggles (Cawelti, 1976, p. 41). The relationship between Vin, a skaa thief, and Elend Venture, a nobleman, provides the emotional heart of the story.

#### **Data [3-2] Chapter 82**

Elend took a step forward... “I think I’m going to kiss you.”

Vin shivered slightly. “I don’t think you want to do that, Elend.”

“Why?”

“How much do you really know about me?”

This moment highlights the personal and social barriers, Vin’s secretive life and their different social statuses, that create classic romantic tension. The obstacle here is not physical but internal and social, rooted in Vin’s guarded past—a point she emphasizes by asking Elend, “How much do you really know about me?” This tension reflects a common feature of romance narratives, where personal secrets and external barriers heighten emotional stakes and ultimately deepen the relationship.

### ***Mystery Formula***

The mystery formula moves the story forward by having characters investigate and logically solve hidden secrets (Cawelti, 1976, p. 43). In *Mistborn*, the world’s history and the true nature of the Lord Ruler’s power are the central puzzles.

#### **Data [3-3] Chapter 112**

“The only thing I can conclude, Master Marsh,” Sazed said, “is that the Lord Ruler was both a Feruchemist and an Allomancer.”... He used one of the attributes only available to Feruchemy—that of changing his age—but fueled it with Allomancy instead. By burning a Feruchemical storage that he himself had made, he effectively made a new Allomantic metal for himself—one that made him younger when he burned it.

This passage exemplifies the intellectual discovery central to the mystery genre. Sazed acts as the investigator, and his logical deduction reveals a key secret. His conclusion “is that the Lord Ruler was both a Feruchemist and an Allomancer.” is a key moment of discovery, a classic element of mystery stories. This mystery supports the adventure by providing the heroes with crucial knowledge to defeat their enemy. The intellectual puzzle of the metallic arts is not

the final goal but a tool that empowers the adventure's protagonists, thereby enriching the main narrative by integrating intellectual suspense with physical conflict.

### **Stages of the Journey in *Mistborn: The Final Empire***

To understand how the narrative formulas are structured and interwoven, this study employs Christopher Vogler's (2007) stages of the journey. Mapping Vin's progression through these twelve stages reveals the pattern by which the adventure, romance, and mystery formulas are systematically integrated into the novel's plot, each dominating specific phases of the protagonist's development.

#### ***Early Stages: Ordinary World, Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting with the Mentor, and Crossing the First Threshold***

The Ordinary World (Vogler, 2007, p. 83) is a harsh, dystopian setting that introduces the central mysteries of the Lord Ruler's power and the adventure of rebellion.

##### **Data [3-4] Chapter 1**

Kelsier had heard stories. He had heard whispers of times when once, long ago, the sun had not been red. Times when the sky hadn't been clogged by smoke and ash, when plants hadn't struggled to grow, and when skaa hadn't been slaves. Times before the Lord Ruler.

This description efficiently sets the mood, introduces key conflicts, and foreshadows the central mysteries (the past) and adventure (the rebellion) that will drive the plot.

The Call to Adventure (Vogler, 2007, p. 99) occurs when Kelsier discovers Vin's hidden magical ability and invites her to join the rebellion.

##### **Data [3-5] Chapter 11**

Kelsier smiled. "It means that you, Vin, are a very special person. You have a power that most high noblemen envy."

This call mixes adventure (joining the fight) with mystery (uncovering the truth about herself).

Vin's Refusal of the Call is not a simple rejection but a deep-seated skepticism born from a life of survival and betrayal. This stage is primarily driven by the mystery formula, as Vin acts like a detective trying to uncover Kelsier's true motives.

##### **Data [3-6] Chapter 13**

The room grew quiet again... What is your game, Kelsier? His words about overthrowing the Final Empire were obviously a front.

This internal monologue showcases her calculative distrust, making her hesitation relatable and adding realistic tension to the narrative.

This refusal is overcome during the Meeting with the Mentor (Vogler, 2007, p. 117). Kelsier fulfills this role by not only training Vin but also providing her with crucial knowledge that serves as protection.

#### **Data [3-7] Chapter 10**

Kelsier held up a finger. “There are a lot of things you’re going to have to learn... One lesson, however, cannot wait. Never use emotional Allomancy on an obligator.”

This stage combines the adventure and mystery formulas. The adventure progresses through the classic training sequence, while the lesson itself deepens the mystery of the world by introducing its hidden rules and dangers.

The stage of Crossing the First Threshold (Vogler, 2007, p. 127) represents Vin’s definitive, conscious commitment to the adventure. This is a pivotal moment where she transitions from a passive participant to an active member of the crew.

#### **Data [3-8] Chapter 43**

“Because I want to help,” Vin said quietly... “I’m not going to sit back and let everyone else do dangerous work while I sit, eat dinner, and watch people dance.”

This declaration is driven by the adventure formula. She rejects a safe, passive role and willingly chooses to embrace the risks and uncertainties of the frontline mission, marking her point of no return.

#### ***Middle Stages: Tests, Allies, and Enemies, and Approach to the Inmost Cave***

The Tests, Allies, and Enemies stage (Vogler, 2007, p. 138) marks Vin’s full entry into the new reality of the Special World. This phase is defined by the hero facing a succession of trials, forging critical relationships with allies, and identifying formidable enemies. The narrative develops this three-part structure systematically.

Tests: Vin’s training extends beyond Allomancy to include the subtle art of social manipulation, a test of her psychological and emotional skills.

#### **Data [3-9] Chapter 34**

Breeze shook his head. “It’s all about understanding people,” he continued. “You have to read how someone is feeling, change that feeling by nudging it in the proper direction, then channel their newfound emotional state to your advantage. That, my dear, is the challenge in what we do! It is difficult, but for those who can do it well...”

This conversation frames Vin’s training as a clear test. Breeze’s emphasis on “the challenge” presents a difficult obstacle she must overcome, essential for her survival in the noble society she must infiltrate.

Allies: A key relationship is formalized with Sazed, who becomes her protector and a secondary mentor figure.

**Data [3-10] Chapter 33**

Kelsier nodded. “Protect her, Saze. She might be a powerful Allomancer, but she’s inexperienced...”

“I will protect her with my life, Master Kelsier. I promise you this.”

Sazed’s vow, “I will protect her with my life,” is a powerful moment of alliance. This relationship provides Vin with safety, knowledge, and emotional support, becoming fundamental to her journey and illustrating the importance of allies in the hero’s path.

Enemies: Vin’s understanding evolves from a general fear of the regime to a specific identification of its institutional enforcers.

**Data [3-11] Chapter 40**

The Garrison watches the skaa, Vin thought. Apparently, the obligators perform a similar function for the nobility.

This internal thought represents a critical discovery. Vin identifies the obligators not just as religious figures but as a police force for the nobility—a defined, institutional enemy. This clarifies the social and political landscape, making the threat more concrete and personal.

This stage masterfully combines all three narrative formulas. The adventure is present in the various tests Vin must face. The mystery emerges as she learns to distinguish allies from enemies and decipher the Lord Ruler’s power structure. Furthermore, her growing bond with Sazed introduces elements of the romance formula in the broader sense of loyalty and found family, which becomes a central emotional theme. This stage provides the essential structure that prepares Vin for the greater challenges ahead.

The Approach to the Inmost Cave (Vogler, 2007, p. 143) marks the hero’s final movement into the most dangerous part of their journey. In Chapter 44, this is shown as Vin and Kelsier approach the Lord Ruler’s fortress, Kredik Shaw:

**Data [3-12] Chapter 44**

Kredik Shaw lay before them. The peaked spires and sheer towers rose like dark talons in the night... The spikes and towers had a foreboding cast in the damp, misty night—like the ash blackened bones of a long-weathered carcass. Looking at them, Vin thought she felt something...a depression, as if simply being close to the building was enough to suck away her hope.

“Our target is a tunnel complex at the base of one of the far right spires,” Kelsier said... “We’re heading for a room at the very center of that complex.”

This passage represents both the physical and symbolic meaning of the Inmost Cave. Descriptions like “dark talons” and “suck away her hope” create an atmosphere of supreme wonder and terror. Kelsier’s dialogue, outlining the plan to head for the “very center,” emphasizes that this is the moment for final preparation. This stage is primarily driven by the adventure formula, focused on the execution of the heist, but is blended with a sense of supernatural mystery regarding the depths of the Lord Ruler’s power, raising the stakes for the ordeal to come.

### ***Climatic Stages: Ordeal, Reward, The Road Back, and Resurrection***

The Ordeal (Vogler, 2007, p. 155) sees Vin physically defeated and falling from the spires of Kredik Shaw, a symbolic death that is the peak of the adventure formula’s physical conflict:

#### **Data [3-13] Chapter 46**

Vin hit a spire, holding it by one hand, limply hanging in the night. Her strength was nearly gone. I...have to get away... hide....

Her hands were numb, and her mind felt nearly the same. Her fingers slipped from the cold, wet metal of the spire, and she felt herself drop free into the darkness. She fell with the rain.

Her survival leads to the Reward (Vogler, 2007, p. 175): not a physical treasure, but the discovery of the Lord Ruler’s journal. This stage is pure mystery, providing crucial intellectual revelation that solves key plot puzzles:

#### **Data [3-14] Chapter 50**

“It is a journal, Master Dockson,” Sazed said. “A record that appears to have been penned by the Lord Ruler himself— or, rather, the man who became the Lord Ruler. Even Ministry teachings agree that before the Ascension, he was a mortal man.

“This book tells of his life just prior to his final battle at the Well of Ascension a thousand years ago.

Following the reward, the Road Back (Vogler, 2007, p. 187) marks the hero’s decision to return to the main conflict. For Vin, this is a conscious choice to re-engage with the dangerous mission after a period of recovery, demonstrating her renewed commitment.

#### **Data [3-15] Chapter 50**

“I can go back to work,” Vin said quickly. “I’m mostly healed, now.” ...“I’m going insane... I can’t just sit around... I have to prove that I can still be useful to this crew.” ...“I’ll go.”

This stage is driven by the adventure formula. Vin's declaration shows her urge to return to action, and the new mission (a ball) represents a classic adventure trope of infiltration. However, this return is now informed by the mystery of the Lord Ruler's journal, making their mission more strategic.

The Resurrection (Vogler, 2007, p. 197), the final climax, masterfully combines both adventure and mystery. Vin uses the knowledge gained from the journal (mystery) to identify and destroy the source of the Lord Ruler's power in a final, decisive action (adventure):

**Data [3-16] Chapter 112**

The Lord Ruler stood where he had been before, his eyes widening with terror, his arms bloodied. He dropped Marsh to the ground, rushing toward her and the mangled bracelets. However, with her last bit of strength—pewter gone—Vin Pushed on the bracelets, shooting them past the Lord Ruler. He spun in horror, watching the bracelets fly out the broken wall window.

In the distance, the sun broke the horizon. The bracelets dropped in front of its red light, sparkling for a moment before plunging down into the city.

“No!” the Lord Ruler screamed, stepping toward the window.

***Final Stage: Return with the Elixir***

The journey concludes with the Return with the Elixir (Vogler, 2007, p. 215). For Vin, the elixir is not an object but an emotional realization, fulfilling the romance formula.

**Data [3-17] Chapter 114**

He smiled, throwing back his chair and grabbing her in a firm embrace... And realized that was all she had ever really wanted.

This moment provides emotional closure, demonstrating that her ultimate reward is love, belonging, and self-awareness—the triumph of the romance fantasy (Cawelti, 1976).

## **5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study shows that Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire* achieves its narrative depth by strategically combining three main literary formulas. The analysis, guided by John G. Cawelti's theory, confirms that the adventure, mystery, and romance formulas are central to the novel's structure, while others, like melodrama, are not. The adventure formula provides the foundational plot, driving the rebellion against the oppressive Final Empire. The mystery formula intellectually engages readers by slowly revealing the secrets of the Lord Ruler's power and the world's history. The romance formula adds emotional depth through Vin's personal relationships and internal growth. By mapping these formulas onto Christopher

Vogler's stages of the hero's journey, this study finds a clear and intentional pattern: adventure dominates the action-driven stages, mystery guides the early and middle phases of discovery, and romance reaches its peak in the final emotional resolution. This layered approach allows the novel to work as an exciting adventure, an engaging puzzle, and a compelling character study all at once, demonstrating how traditional narrative structures can be innovatively combined to create a satisfying modern fantasy. This layered approach allows the novel to work as an exciting adventure, an engaging puzzle, and a compelling character study all at once, demonstrating how traditional narrative structures can be innovatively combined to create a satisfying modern fantasy.

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