

## Rocky Balboa's journey of self-concept: A study of real self and ideal self in *Rocky* (1976)

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### Abstract

*This study aims to analyze Rocky Balboa's journey of self-concept by Carl Rogers theory, focusing of his real self and ideal self in the film Rocky (1976). The film portrays Rocky Balboa as an underdog boxer who lives a modest life and is given an opportunity to prove his personal value through a big fight. This study seeks to explore how Rocky's real self and ideal self are constructed and developed throughout the film. This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The primary data were obtained from the film Rocky (1976) and its official script, while the secondary data were derived from relevant books and journals related to Rogers' theory. The data were collected through watching the film, reading the script, identifying significant dialogues, and classifying them based on the concepts of real self and ideal self. The findings reveal that Rocky's real self is reflected through his actualizing tendency, as seen in his effort to maximize his potential despite limitations; positive regard, shown through the support and acceptance from people around him; and self-regard, reflected in his self-perception shaped by past experiences. Meanwhile, his ideal self is represented through striving, as shown in his determination to "go the distance"; ambition, reflected in his desire to prove he is not "a bum"; and self-worth, demonstrated in his ability to define success based on his own standards. Overall, this study shows that Rocky's journey represents a meaningful process of self-development in line with Rogers' humanistic perspective.*

**Keywords:** Carl Rogers; ideal self; real self; Rocky (1976); self-concept

### INTRODUCTION

Literature is a creative medium that captures the many dimensions of human existence, whether expressed through writing or speech, fact or fiction. It explores a wide range of emotions, struggles, and the internal and external forces that shape people's lives. It also touches on various fields of study, especially those connected to the human experience. Its primary forms include poetry, prose, and drama, and it serves as a vehicle through which creators share their personal thoughts, feelings, and life experiences with others (Meiliana 5). In this way, literature functions as a powerful means of reflecting on what it means to be human.

Literature and psychology share a deep connection. Since literature mirrors human life, it naturally intersects with psychology, which examines human behavior, thought processes, and the relationship between the two. Analyzing the psychological dimensions of literary characters helps readers grasp their motivations and inner struggles, while also contributing to the creation of more believable and complex characters (Dar 285). Both fields, though one is rooted in fiction and the other in science, are fundamentally concerned with understanding why people think, feel, and behave the way they do.

Psychology's focus on human behavior and mental processes aligns well with Carl Rogers' theory of the self, which examines the relationship between who we truly are and who we wish to become. Rogers believed that every person possesses an authentic self that is deeply tied to their inner nature, the most genuine expression of who they are, imperfections included (Ismail & Tekke 30). This real self encompasses concepts such as the drive toward actualizing tendency, positive regard, and self regard. The ideal self, by contrast, represents the qualities and values a person aspires to develop, acting as a personal compass for growth and self-improvement (Irtelli, Durbano, and Marchesi 6), and is characterized by striving, ambitious, and self worth.

This theory finds a compelling illustration in the film *Rocky* (1976). The film was selected over its sequels because it provides the most raw and genuine portrayal of the central character, centering on Rocky Balboa's personal growth in ways that lend themselves well to psychological exploration. The film also achieved significant recognition, earning three Academy Awards including Best Picture, which further distinguishes it from later installments and makes it the most fitting subject for examining Rogers' theory of the self.

*Rocky* (1976) is an iconic sports film that follows the journey of an underdog boxer named Rocky Balboa, tracing his path from his modest life as a fighter and debt collector to an unexpected shot at the world heavyweight championship. Rocky's character vividly illustrates the tension between the real self and the ideal self. His real self is expressed through his awareness of his own strengths and limitations, the support he receives from those around him, and the way his past has shaped who he is. His ideal self, meanwhile, is revealed through his determination to face Apollo Creed, his desire to prove he is worthy of respect, his sense of personal value, and his commitment to achieving success on his own terms.

A number of studies have examined this film, including work by Mederson though his analysis drew on the frameworks of realism and existentialism rather than Rogers' theory. Other researchers have applied Rogers' self-concept theory to different films, for instance, a thesis by Salsabila examined how the main characters in *The Sea Beast* reflected Rogers' three components of self-concept through their dialogue, actions, and relationships. Similarly, Rias applied the real self and ideal self framework to the film *Eighth Grade*, analyzing the protagonist's shy and self-doubting nature as her real self, and her aspiration to become more confident as her ideal self. The present study builds on this body of work by applying Rogers' full framework including actualizing tendency, positive regard, and self-regard as components of the real self, along with striving, ambition, and self-worth as elements of the ideal self to Rocky Balboa's character in *Rocky* (1976), under the title "Rocky Balboa's Journey of Self-Concept: A Study of Real Self and Ideal Self in *Rocky* (1976)."

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach focusing on the analysis of psychological elements within a literary work, specifically the film *Rocky* (1976). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in depth understanding of social phenomena by emphasizing meaning, context, and human experience. Rather than relying on numerical data or statistical analysis, this study is grounded in narrative explanations and interpretations of the psychological development of the character Rocky Balboa as reflected in the film's dialogue. The perspective applied is that of psychological literary criticism, drawing on Carl Rogers' self-concept theory, particularly the concepts of the real self and the ideal self.

Data collection was carried out through several stages. First, the researcher watched *Rocky* (1976) repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of the storyline and the psychological aspects conveyed through the main character's dialogue. In addition, the researcher read and analyzed the official film script to ensure precision in quoting the character's verbal expressions. The next stage involved identifying relevant data, namely selecting dialogues and monologues that reflected indicators of the real self and the ideal self. The identified data were then classified into a table containing columns for number, script excerpt, page number, data form, type of analysis, references, and commentary, in order to facilitate a more organized analytical process.

The data in this study were divided into two types. Primary data were drawn from the film *Rocky* (1976) and its official script, while secondary data were obtained from journals and books related to Carl Rogers' self-concept theory as supporting references. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method by examining the film's dialogues through the lens of Rogers'

concepts of the real self and the ideal self, with findings presented in the form of in-depth interpretive descriptions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the self-concept of Rocky Balboa, the main character in the film *Rocky* (1976), using Carl Rogers' self-concept theory as the analytical framework. The analysis focuses on two primary constructs: the real self and the ideal self. The real self is analyzed through three indicators: actualizing tendency, positive regard, and self regard while the ideal self is examined through striving, ambition, and self worth. A total of fourteen data points in the form of dialogues were identified and analyzed to support the findings.

### Real Self in Rocky Balboa

The real self refers to the authentic core of an individual, encompassing their genuine qualities, talents, tendencies, and personal characteristics. As Irtelli, Durbano, and Marchesi define it, the real self is "a person who reflects the individual's true qualities, talents, tendencies, and characteristics"(5). In *Rocky* (1976), Rocky Balboa consistently projects his authentic self through his behavior, personal values, and emotional responses. According to Rogers' self-concept theory, the real self comprises three fundamental dimensions: actualizing tendency, positive regard, and self regard. The following discussion presents findings across each of these dimensions.

### *Actualizing Tendency*

The actualizing tendency is the inherent drive within all individuals to grow, enhance their capabilities, and fulfill their potential. It serves as the core motivation behind emotional, behavioral, and developmental processes that continue throughout life as individuals strive for self-understanding, transformation, and personal recovery (Rias 12). In the film, Rocky's actualizing tendency is vividly displayed in two key moments. In the first datum, Rocky recalls his father's advice: since he was not born with much intelligence, he was encouraged to rely on his body. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, Rocky embraces it as a guiding principle channeling his physical potential through boxing to grow and achieve self-understanding. This reflects Rogers' notion that individuals possess an innate drive to develop along pathways aligned with their own capacities.

ROCKY (continuing): "Y'know how I got started in the fight racket?."

ADRIAN: "By accident?"

CLEANER: "Here -- Three minutes."

**ROCKY: "Yeah -- My ol' man who was never the sharpest told me -- I weren't born with much brain so I better use my body."**

The next quote is Rocky candid conversation with Adrian where Rocky openly acknowledges that he cannot defeat Apollo Creed. However, rather than surrendering to self-doubt, he reframes his goal: instead of aiming for victory, he aims to 'go the distance' to last fifteen rounds, something no opponent had ever done before. This shift reveals that Rocky's actualizing tendency is not contingent upon winning, but upon affirming his personal worth through genuine effort and endurance. His determination to stand at the final bell exemplifies Rogers' idea that the actualization drive motivates individuals toward meaningful self-growth, even when external outcomes are uncertain (Rias 12). This moment highlights Rocky's strong inner drive to grow and prove his value beyond external success.

ROCKY: "Can't do it."

ADRIAN: "What?"

ROCKY: "I can't beat him."

ADRIAN: "Apollo?"

ROCKY: "Yeah, I can't beat him."

Adrian touches his face.

ROCKY: "I been watchin' the movies -- studyin' -- He ain't weak nowhere."

ADRIAN: "What're we going to do?"

ROCKY: "I dunno"

ADRIAN: "Oh, Rocky -- you worked so hard"

**ROCKY: "It ain't so bad, 'cause I was a nothin' before"**

ADRIAN: "Don't say that."

ROCKY: "C'mon, it's true -- But that don't bother me -- I just wanna prove somethin' -- I ain't no bum... It don't matter if I lose... Don't matter if he opens my head... The only thing I wanna do is go the distance -- That's all. Nobody's ever gone fifteen rounds with Creed. If I go them fifteen rounds, an' that bell rings an' I'm still standin', I'm gonna know then I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood..."

## *Positive Regard*

Positive regard refers to the acceptance and appreciation an individual receives from their surroundings, demonstrated through acts of recognition, love, affection, warmth, friendship, praise, and appreciation (Madhumathy. S 990). In *Rocky* (1976), this dimension is the most extensively evidenced, with six data points drawn from Rocky's interactions with key characters: Gazzo, Adrian, and Mickey. Each relationship represents a distinct form of positive regard that collectively reinforces Rocky's sense of identity.

In quote below, Gazzo, Rocky's superior and a strict debt collector demonstrates positive regard after Rocky defied his order to use violence against a debtor:

GAZZO: "Yo Rock. Did I give you a job this mornin? How come ya didn't break this guy's thumb like I asked ya? When ya don't do what ya are told, it makes me look bad, kid."

ROCKY: "I figure if I break the thumb this guy gets thrown outta his job and can't pay nothin no more."

GAZZO: "It don't matter. It's my reputation. These guys think they can get off light. It's bad for my reputation -- It's bad for business. See ya killer."

Gazzo gets into his car.

**GAZZO (to Bodyguard): "The Rock's a good kid."**

This reflects Rogers' assertion that positive regard can still be granted even when expectations are not fully met, as long as the individual upholds genuine positive values (Madhumathy. S 990). Gazzo's affirmation of Rocky as 'a good kid' spoken privately signals a form of acceptance that transcends professional obedience.

In this quote, Adrian directly challenges the stigma around Rocky's identity as a fighter:

ADRIAN: "It is just hard for me to understand why anybody wants to be a fighter."

ROCKY: "Ya gotta be a little soft to wanna be a pug... It's a racket where ya' almost guaranteed to end up a bum."

**ADRIAN: "I don't think you're a bum."**

This statement is a direct expression of affection and recognition. As Rogers explains, positive regard includes expressions of affection, attention, and appreciation from others.

In the next quote, Adrian extends her positive regard by publicly defending Rocky's potential against her skeptical brother Paulie:

PAULIE: "Ya gotta have a guy help ya exercise, mebbe somebody to be standin' by with a towel or run errands, y'know."

ROCKY: "Hey, who cared about me yesterday, huh? Nobody -- I think I'm gonna train myself."

PAULIE: "Without havin' good people around, ya won't have such a good chance."

Adrian is not happy with her brother's overbearing attitude. She faces him.

**ADRIAN: "Einstein flunked out of school... twice."**

PAULIE: "That so."

**ADRIAN: "Roosevelt finished last in his class -- Beethoven was deaf, an' Helen Keller was blind -- I think Rocky has a good chance."**

By invoking figures who succeeded despite limitations, Adrian shows genuine acceptance and belief in Rocky's capability a clear embodiment of the recognition and emotional warmth.

In this quote, Gazzo again demonstrates positive regard this time more forcefully before the fight:

**GAZZO:** "Listen, kid, I'm with ya. Ya know, I'm with ya -- Italian, we're blood. You kill this rug -- We Guinneas gotta show these Afro Americans where it's at. Give it your best shot cause I want ya to prove to these bums on the corner that my man can't be beat by this rug... Ya got any action on the side."

**ROCKY:** "Yo, you gonna show, Tony?"

**GAZZO:** "Where else am I gonna go."

**GAZZO (to Bodyguard):** "Bet three grand on Rocky."

**BODYGUARD:** "He's a bum -- are you kiddin?"

**GAZZO (slaps Bodyguard):** "No! I'm not kiddin!"

Gazzo's declaration of ethnic solidarity, his financial bet on Rocky, and his immediate physical defense of Rocky's dignity when the bodyguard dismisses him all reflect positive regard in the form of recognition, support, and appreciation.

The next quote is Mickey Rocky's trainer provides positive regard in the form of mentorly emotional support during the most vulnerable moment of the fight:

**ROCKY:** "How I look out there, Mick?"

**MICKEY (truly worried):** "Great, kid, great."

Everyone is distraught over Rocky's dangerous condition.

**MICKEY:** "We gotta stop it, kid."

**MIKE:** "Ya gave it ya best shot!"

**MICKEY:** "Nobody's gonna say ya didn't give ya all. I can't let ya go out."

**MICKEY:** "I don't care what they say, you're a winner."

**ROCKY:** "Yo, can I have my locker back?"

Mickey's declaration that 'I don't care what they say, you're a winner' transcends the outcome of the match and affirms Rocky's worth on a deeper personal level. This embodies Rogers' concept that positive regard, expressed through recognition and emotional support, can strengthen an individual's identity.

The next of positive regard appears in next quote, following the fight:

Rocky frantically looks in all directions and barely manages to see Adrian jumping up and down waving. The crowd is carrying him away. He attempts to lower himself but the crowd won't permit it. Rocky instead turns and begins climbing across people's heads and shoulders. He resembles a man trying to go up a down escalator. People are jammed so tightly together Rocky manages to crawl across them to Adrian. Still suspended in air, Rocky leans down and Adrian jumps up and they lock in an embrace.

**ADRIAN:** "I love you -- I love you -- I love you..."

The two are swept along into the greatest night anyone can remember...

Adrian's repeated declaration of love is the most powerful expression of unconditional positive regard in the film. It reflects full acceptance without judgment a form of emotional support that Carl Rogers emphasized as crucial for a person's psychological development. Her words affirm Rocky unconditionally, helping him feel safe and valued on his life journey.

## ***Self Regard***

Self regard refers to how individuals view themselves through the lens of others' perceptions, reflecting one's internal sense of acceptance and self-worth shaped by external feedback (Rias 14). In *Rocky* (1976), Rocky's self regard is constructed through years of being overlooked and undervalued, yet he maintains a stable sense of self-worth that does not depend on external validation. Two data points illustrate this dimension.

In this quote, when Paulie suggests that Rocky needs a support team to train effectively, Rocky responds with a declaration of self-sufficiency:

**PAULIE:** "Ya gotta have a guy help ya exercise, mebbe somebody to be standin' by with a towel or run errands, y'know."

**ROCKY:** "Hey, who cared about me yesterday, huh? Nobody -- I think I'm gonna train myself."

Rocky's response acknowledges the reality of his social neglect while simultaneously choosing to act on his own values. In line with the theory of self regard which refers to how individuals evaluate and accept themselves based on how others treat them (Rias, 2024) Rocky's reply shows that although he once felt neglected, he still possesses enough self-worth to believe in his own ability and continue his fight in his own way.

In the next , a similar expression of self regard appears in his conversation with Adrian before the fight:

ROCKY: "Yeah, I can't beat him."

ADRIAN: "Oh, Rocky -- you worked so hard."

**ROCKY: "It ain't so bad, 'cause I was a nothin' before"**

In this brief yet revealing exchange, Rocky demonstrates a realistic self-image shaped by his past experiences of being unrecognized. Because he has never been treated as special, the prospect of defeat does not destabilize him. He has accepted himself as he is, and this acceptance, rooted in prior treatment by others, forms the basis of his self regard (Rias 14). Rocky's self regard, while shaped by a history of marginalization, has paradoxically become a source of resilience.

**Table 1.** Summary of Real Self Indicators in Rocky (1976)

| Indicator                   | Key Evidence                                                                                        | Theoretical Basis                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Actualizing Tendency</b> | Using his body to compensate for intellectual limitations; aiming to 'go the distance.'             | Innate drive to grow and realize potential (Rias 12)                                    |
| <b>Positive Regard</b>      | Support from Gazzo, Adrian, and Mickey through verbal affirmation, defense, and unconditional love. | Acceptance and appreciation from others that strengthens self-worth (Madhumathy. S 990) |
| <b>Self Regard</b>          | Training alone despite neglect; accepting defeat without being destabilized.                        | Self regard shaped by how others have treated the individual (Rias 14)                  |

## Ideal Self in Rocky Balboa

The ideal self represents the version of oneself that an individual most desires and values. As Rogers defines it, the ideal self is "the self-concept that an individual would most like to have, that he or she values most" (Rogers 200). It encompasses the aspirational dimensions of self-concept: striving, ambition, and self worth. In *Rocky (1976)*, Rocky Balboa's ideal self is projected through his relentless training, his desire to prove his worth, and his personal standards for measuring success. The following discussion presents findings across each of these three dimensions.

### Striving

Striving refers to the continuous effort to attain one's ideal self, encouraged by the natural motivation for self-actualization and the drive to reach one's full potential (Rias 16). In the film, striving is most clearly articulated in quote below, where Rocky explains to Adrian that he knows he cannot beat Apollo Creed, yet his goal is not to win but to 'go the distance' to endure fifteen rounds.

ROCKY: "Yeah, I can't beat him."

ADRIAN: "Oh, Rocky -- you worked so hard."

ROCKY: "It ain't so bad, 'cause I was a nothin' before."

ADRIAN: "Don't say that."

**ROCKY: "C'mon, it's true -- But that don't bother me -- I just wanna prove somethin' -- I ain't no bum... It don't matter if I lose... Don't matter if he opens my head... The only thing I wanna do is go the distance -- That's all. Nobody's ever gone fifteen rounds with Creed. If I go them fifteen rounds, an' that bell rings an' I'm still standin', I'm gonna know then I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood..."**

This redefinition of success is central to understanding Rocky's striving: he is not oriented toward external victory but toward an internal benchmark of personal achievement. His willingness to endure pain, sustain effort, and persist against insurmountable odds reflects the conscious striving to close the gap between who he is and who he aspires to be. As Rogers theorizes, individuals are naturally motivated to reach their full potential, and Rocky's sustained effort in the face of near-certain defeat embodies this principle (Rias 14). This quote highlights Rocky's strong commitment to achieving his ideal self through persistence and personal determination.

## *Ambitious*

Ambition involves the drive to reach goals, values, or traits considered ideal or desirable, and serves as a strong motivator for personal growth and creativity (Rias 16-17). Two data points illustrate this dimension in Rocky's character. In quote below, Rocky reveals that he began boxing at the age of fifteen with a singular purpose: to prove that he was "not a bum" and that he had what it takes to become a good professional fighter.

ADRIAN: "Aren't you skating?"

**ROCKY: "Ain't skated since I was fifteen -- That's when I started fightin' -- gotta watch the ankles. Yeah, fightin' use to be tops with me, but no more. All I wanted to prove was I weren't no bum -- That I had the stuff to make a good pro."**

This statement expresses an ambition rooted not in wealth or fame, but in the desire to be perceived as capable, worthy, and respected. In quote below, Rocky reiterates this aspiration during his conversation with Adrian before the fight, emphasizing again that his central goal is to prove he is "not just another bum from the neighborhood."

ROCKY: "Yeah, I can't beat him."

ADRIAN: "Oh, Rocky -- you worked so hard."

ROCKY: "It ain't so bad, 'cause I was a nothin' before"

ADRIAN: "Don't say that."

**ROCKY: "C'mon, it's true -- But that don't bother me -- I just wanna prove somethin' -- I ain't no bum... It don't matter if I lose... Don't matter if he opens my head... The only thing I wanna do is go the distance -- That's all. Nobody's ever gone fifteen rounds with Creed. If I go them fifteen rounds, an' that bell rings an' I'm still standin', I'm gonna know then I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood..."**

Together, these data points reveal that Rocky's ambition is defined by self-validation rather than dominance an internal image of the person he wants to become that aligns with Rogers' concept of the ideal self as motivator for identity formation and personal development (Rias 16-17). Rocky's ambition reflects his strong desire to redefine his identity and prove his personal worth.

## *Self Worth*

Self worth is a subjective assessment of what is important to a person and what they want, which may increase or decrease depending on how well a person meets the standards and expectations set by others or oneself (Rias 17). In this quote Rocky explicitly acknowledges his inability to defeat Apollo Creed, yet states that it does not bother him. Instead of fixating on the objective outcome of the match, Rocky redirects his focus toward a goal he can control: proving to himself and others that he is not a loser.

ROCKY: "Can't do it."

ADRIAN: "What?"

ROCKY: "Yeah, I can't beat him."

Adrian touches his face.

ROCKY: "I been watchin' the movies -- studyin' -- He ain't weak nowhere."

ADRIAN: "What're we going to do?"

ROCKY: "I dunno."

ADRIAN: "Oh, Rocky -- you worked so hard."

ROCKY: "It ain't so bad, 'cause I was a nothin' before --"

ADRIAN: "Don't say that"

**ROCKY: "C'mon, it's true -- But that don't bother me -- I just wanna prove somethin' -- I ain't no bum... It don't matter if I lose... Don't matter if he opens my head... The only thing I wanna do is go the distance -- That's all. Nobody's ever gone fifteen rounds with Creed. If I go them fifteen rounds, an' that bell rings an' I'm still standin', I'm gonna know then I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood..."**

This reflects a highly individualized assessment of self worth Rocky does not measure his value by external standards such as winning or losing, but by his own capacity to show that he is "not a bum." His willingness to endure physical punishment in pursuit of this internal standard demonstrates that his self worth is self-defined and consistent with his core values, even in the face of adversity.

**Table 2.** Summary of Ideal Self Indicators in Rocky (1976)

| Indicator         | Key Evidence                                                                                              | Theoretical Basis                                                                           |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Striving</b>   | Enduring fifteen rounds against Apollo despite certain defeat.                                            | Continuous effort driven by natural self-actualization motivation (Rias 16)                 |
| <b>Ambitious</b>  | Boxing since age 15 to prove 'I weren't no bum' and prove professional capacity.                          | Internal image of the desired self as catalyst for identity formation (Rias 16-17)          |
| <b>Self Worth</b> | Reframing defeat as not problematic; setting personal success metrics independent of the fight's outcome. | Subjective assessment of importance and desire, independent of external standards (Rias 17) |

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the representation of Rocky Balboa's real self and ideal self in the film *Rocky* (1976) using a psychological literary approach based on Carl Rogers' self-concept theory with a descriptive qualitative method. In terms of the real self, Rocky demonstrates an actualizing tendency through his realistic awareness of his own limitations while still choosing to "go the distance," positive regard reflected in the support of those closest to him such as Adrian, Mickey, Paulie, and Gazzo, and self regard shaped by self-acceptance despite being frequently ignored and belittled by those around him. Meanwhile, his ideal self is manifested through his persistent struggle against Apollo Creed to prove that he is not a "bum" (striving and ambition), as well as his confidence in defining success on his own terms (self worth). Overall, this study demonstrates that humanistic psychology, particularly Rogers' theory, is an effective approach for understanding the complexity of character development in cinematic literary works.

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