



Creative Storytelling and the Hero's Journey to Catharsis: A Case Study of *The Lion King*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the concept of *catharsis* in Creative Storytelling through the lens of the *Emotional Hero's Journey* and its pedagogical applications. Drawing connections between Aristotle's *Poetics* and contemporary narrative theory, it presents *catharsis* as the culmination of the hero's emotional and moral transformation. Using Disney's *The Lion King* as a case study, it illustrates how emotional challenges, inner conflicts, and processes of self-discovery lead to *catharsis*. The study highlights the educational potential of storytelling to cultivate empathy, self-reflection, and social-emotional learning, transforming narrative experience into a means of psychological insight and educational enrichment.

KEYWORDS: Creative Storytelling, Hero's Journey, *Emotional Journey*, *Catharsis*, *Poetics*, "The Lion King".

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1. Introduction: The Hero's Journey and Emotional Journey in Creative Storytelling

Creative Storytelling is the art of conveying ideas, emotions, and experiences through coherent, emotionally engaging narratives. It enables individuals to interpret their experiences linking thought with emotion, and to dramatize life lessons that illustrate both the external and internal journeys of the hero toward *catharsis*. Through narrative, audiences explore universal human experiences, enhancing both intellectual and emotional engagement.

Joseph Campbell (1949) introduced the archetypal "Hero's Journey," later adapted by Vogler (2007), who demonstrated its practical value in literature, cinema, and education. This twelve-stage model structures the hero's path from the ordinary world to transformation and return with the "acquired treasure". The journey not only ensures plot cohesion and logical narrative progression but also provides a framework for understanding the emotional and moral growth of characters.

The *Emotional Journey* focuses on the hero's internal path toward self-realization and *catharsis*, emphasizing psychological transformation through challenges and conflicts. It begins with an initial state of balance that is disrupted by events provoking intense emotional responses, setting the hero on a path of self-discovery. While initially reluctant, the hero gradually accepts the challenge, encountering emotions such as fear, anger, disappointment, joy, and hope. At the climax, the hero confronts deepest fears, undergoes profound transformation, and achieves *catharsis*. Common themes may include coming of age, loss, abuse, abandonment, or bullying (Lampropoulos, 2024).

This journey reveals the events that shape and affect the hero's psyche, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between external challenges and internal growth. Through difficulties, the hero recognizes strengths and weaknesses, gains autonomy, and develops resilience. Emotional identification allows students to empathize and engage actively, fostering insight and personal growth (Lampropoulos, 2024). In educational contexts, such identification encourages learners to reflect critically on moral dilemmas, social interactions, and personal decision-making, bridging literature and psychological awareness.

1.1 Creative Storytelling and Aristotelian Poetics

Creative storytelling aligns with Aristotle's concept of *mimesis*, using narrative, song, and movement to imitate life (*Poetics*, 1447b). Its key elements –harmony, proportion, and completeness– ensure the logical and aesthetically engaging presentation of both characters and plot. Stories may follow linear, nonlinear, or circular structures, often divided into three acts, that reflect Aristotle's principle of beginning, middle, and end (Lampropoulos, 2024).

A well-structured narrative enables characters and events to evolve coherently, fostering emotional engagement and cognitive understanding. By adhering to Aristotelian principles,

storytellers can create works that are simultaneously aesthetically compelling and pedagogically meaningful. Such narratives enhance learners' comprehension of cause-and-effect relationships, character development, and emotional dynamics.

Moreover, Aristotle emphasized the value of eliciting emotional responses as a means of promoting moral and intellectual reflection. In Creative Storytelling, this principle underscores that characters' struggles and resolutions are not merely entertaining but serve an educational purpose. They help learners recognize patterns of human behavior and internalize ethical or social lessons. Through the careful structuring of narrative, educators can guide students to anticipate the consequences of actions, analyze motivations, and engage deeply with both the external events and the internal transformations of characters.

1.2 Aristotelian *Catharsis*

In *Poetics* (1449b21–1450b20), Aristotle describes *catharsis* as the purification of emotions through *pity* and *fear*. Düring (2006) interprets it as a process of “elimination” or “removal” of unpleasant emotions –an emotional release. Tsitsiridis (2010) questions whether *catharsis* is experienced by the hero or the audience, while Heath (1996) views it as therapeutic process that enables moral and emotional understanding.

In Creative Storytelling, *catharsis* has a dual role: it signifies both the hero's internal transformation and the audience's emotional release. Students, while safely observing these emotional trials, are encouraged to re-evaluate their own perceptions of fear, guilt, and grief. In this way, *catharsis* serves as both an artistic and a psycho-pedagogical tool, bridging literary engagement and emotional development.

Furthermore, catharsis fosters metacognitive reflection: as students process the hero's *Emotional Journey*, they become more aware of their own emotional responses, biases, and coping strategies. This pedagogical function transforms storytelling from a purely aesthetic experience into a structured framework for social-emotional learning and self-regulation.

1.3 The *Emotional Hero's Journey* as a Path to *Catharsis*

The Hero's *Emotional Journey* represents the psychological and emotional dimension of the Hero's *Journey*, focusing on the protagonist's internal transformation. Initially, the hero exists in a state of equilibrium within the ordinary world. The “call to adventure” triggers intense emotional reactions, such as fear, doubt, or excitement, challenging the status quo. Initial resistance to the call is a key element, as the hero needs time to recognize the mission's significance and value.

During trials, the hero experiences a spectrum of emotions –fear, anger, anxiety, joy– that prompt reassessment of values and abilities. Internal struggles reach critical points, where the

hero must confront their deepest fears and doubts. At a pivotal moment of insight or crisis, the hero undergoes significant emotional development, resulting in an internal transformation and integration of experience (Stiles, 2002). Each stage introduces new challenges, moral dilemmas, or emotional tests, contributing to the hero's growth. Encounters with antagonists, failures, or moments of isolation amplify emotional intensity, making eventual catharsis more meaningful.

By analyzing each stage of the *Emotional Hero's Journey* –call to adventure, trials, confrontation, and ultimate transformation– students can identify emotional patterns, recognize coping strategies, and gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of personal development. This process also strengthens critical thinking, as learners assess narrative decisions, examine character motivations, and articulate their own thoughts and feelings, fostering empathy, social skills, and narrative intelligence.

Through storytelling, creators and audiences share experiences, recognize the emotions influencing decisions, and enhancing creative thinking and the ability to structure and express their own stories effectively (Lampropoulos, 2025). The hero's internal transformation serves as a mirror for students' self-reflection, encouraging them to examine their emotional responses and develop problem-solving skills without direct exposure to personal trauma (Lampropoulos, 2024). This comprehensive process links Creative Storytelling to the psycho-pedagogical function of education, providing a safe, structured framework for emotional growth and reflective thinking.

2. The *Emotional Journey* in *The Lion King*

Disney's *The Lion King* (1994, 2019)¹ exemplifies the *Emotional Hero's Journey* through Simba's growth from naïve cub to responsible adult. His initial imbalance stems from naivety and a disregard for responsibility. The death of Mufasa and Scar's manipulation provoke grief, guilt, and fear, leading to Simba's exile. Mentors Timon, Pumbaa, and Rafiki guide him toward decisiveness, helping him confront internal doubts. The emotional climax involves acceptance, courage, and overcoming fears, culminating in victory and restoration of both internal and external balance. The final *catharsis* embodies wisdom, maturity, and inner peace, with reconciliation and fulfillment completing the journey (Favreau, 2019; Minkoff & Allers, 1994).

Key stages with emotional intensity and educational relevance

The following key stages highlight both the emotional intensity of Simba's journey and their pedagogical implications, demonstrating how the narrative can foster empathy, self-reflection,

¹ This analysis draws on narrative elements from both versions of *The Lion King* (1994, 2019), referenced strictly for academic and educational purposes in accordance with the principle of fair use. It is further informed by a student project produced within the course *Creative Writing/Storytelling - Project Method* at the Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work, University of Patras (Lampropoulou, 2024).

and creative engagement among students.

1. **Imbalance:** Simba initially enjoys a carefree life under his father's protection but disregards warnings, disrupting his equilibrium.

Pedagogical implication: Students can discuss the role of naivety, privilege, and unawareness in emotional development, reflecting on their own experiences.

2. **Grief and Manipulation:** Following Mufasa's death and Scar's psychological manipulation, Simba experiences guilt, fear, and isolation. Emotional intensity peaks, provoking deep reflection on responsibility and coping with loss.

Pedagogical implication: Observing grief allows students to identify with difficult emotions, fostering empathy and recognition of consequences of actions.

3. **Determination:** Friends (Timon & Pumbaa) and mentor (Rafiki) guide Simba toward courage and acceptance of his destiny. Emotional intensity is moderate, focused on hope and encouragement.

Pedagogical implication: Highlights the importance of social support and mentoring in overcoming challenges, reinforcing collaborative learning principles.

4. **Inner Conflict:** Simba confronts fear, self-doubt, and reluctance to assume responsibility. Emotional tension is high, emphasizing moral and psychological struggle.

Pedagogical implication: Encourages students to examine internal conflicts and strategies for self-regulation and decision-making.

5. **Emotional Climax - Acceptance - Renewal:** Simba decides to face his challenges, restoring confidence and resolving internal conflicts. Emotional intensity peaks positively, combining courage, insight, and determination.

Pedagogical implication: Demonstrates the transformative potential of confronting fears, enabling discussions about resilience and self-efficacy.

6. **External and Internal Victory:** Simba confronts Scar, achieves justice, and regains inner peace and leadership. Emotional intensity remains high, highlighting courage, justice, and restoration.

Pedagogical implication: Students can explore the interplay between internal growth and external action, linking narrative resolution to real-life problem-solving.

7. **Catharsis:** Through recognition of past mistakes, confrontation of fears, and reconciliation, Simba attains emotional maturity and equilibrium, reflecting the universal path to *catharsis*. Emotional intensity stabilizes, producing relief and satisfaction.

Pedagogical implication: Provides a model for students to understand emotional processing and the psychological benefits of narrative resolution, promoting self-awareness and reflective thinking.

This case illustrates how storytelling engages viewers in emotional identification, empathy, and personal reflection, paralleling educational objectives in Creative Writing and social-emotional learning. It fosters self-awareness, reflective thinking, and the development of narrative intelligence and creativity (Lampropoulos, 2024).

3. Conclusions

The Hero's *Emotional Journey* serves as a psycho-pedagogical tool, guiding both the hero and participants toward *catharsis* and self-awareness. By confronting negative emotions such as loss, guilt, betrayal, or fear, *catharsis* highlights the importance of self-discovery and personal development. Creative storytelling allows students to identify with the hero, experience emotional states, and reflect on values and behaviors, promoting empathy, self-esteem, and psychological resilience (Lampropoulos, 2024).

Moreover, engagement in Creative Storytelling fosters emotional maturation, as experiencing events through the hero helps students understand consequences and internal conflicts. Stories function as "psychological maps," enabling learners to transform negative experiences into constructive frameworks and creating a safe space for processing emotions. In this way, Creative storytelling aligns with principles of Positive Psychology and education (Vasileiou & Theodosakis, 2022), enhancing students' emotional, social, and cognitive well-being.

Importantly, tracing the hero's emotional trajectory provides students with insight into personal growth and *catharsis*. Observing and discussing the hero's emotional challenges offers a structured opportunity to develop reflective thinking, moral reasoning, and emotional intelligence. Ultimately, this process facilitates *catharsis*, self-awareness, and emotional balance, providing tangible psycho-pedagogical benefits, and reaffirming the central role of the Hero's *Journey* as both an educational and therapeutic framework.

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