RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Arc of Dramatic Catharsis: When Push Comes to Shove, Purge and Release, and How to Measure Them

Niki Lambropoulos[1]

1 Department of Education and Social Work, University of Patras, Greece

Abstract

The emergence of global, even universal, narratives has fostered a rich dialogue among diverse cultural expressions, enabling stories to transcend borders and resonate with audiences worldwide for maximum impact. Aristotle's Poetics[1] is widely regarded as the foundational text in creative storytelling, playing a vital role in transmitting culture, values, knowledge, and traditions while inspiring innovation and change. It encourages imagination, exploration, and experimentation, fostering a dynamic, organic space that cultivates originality and growth. The hero recontextualizes reality within this framework, ultimately achieving relief, assimilation, and catharsis. By overcoming escalating external and emotional obstacles and internal conflicts, the hero drives the plot; their decisions and actions lead to liberating realizations and deeper self-understanding. Thus, dramatic catharsis serves as both the cause and purpose of the hero's journey, shaping an arc that charts a path toward psychological transformation and self-actualization. Given the limited research on how the arc of dramatic catharsis unfolds in storytelling, this article presents a meta-study, synthesizing the findings of previous research.

Corresponding author: Niki Lambropoulos, niki.lampropoulou@upatras.gr

1. Introduction: Standing on Aristotle's Shoulders

The challenges of the 21st century have created a new framework of competencies, emphasizing the need for participatory culture and connectivity among individuals and their communities. By transforming our identities[2][3], we reshape our self-perceptions and understand our existence as the unfolding and evolving expression of a unified personal narrative[4]. Culture forms fluid identities that arise from our interactions and daily conversations[5].

Creative storytelling offers both personal and collective identification and projection[6], serving as a vehicle for transmitting culture, values, knowledge, and traditions, while also inspiring change. Stories often tackle social issues, challenge norms, and propose alternatives, fostering creativity and driving positive progress. In educational settings, they create an engaging and supportive environment that enhances skill development and makes knowledge more accessible and

impactful. Storytelling requires the ability to comprehend and synthesize various forms of texts - written language, images, multimedia, etc. - while integrating and maintaining meaning within the narrative[7]. Recognizing creative storytelling as a competence, *narrative intelligence* and *narrative literacy* - the ability to critically and functionally receive and compose narratives - are rooted in inherent cognitive processes through which humans interpret themselves and the world.

Narrative thinking, a cognitive process, enables individuals to make sense of the world by constructing and interpreting stories. It involves organizing information, events, and experiences into coherent and meaningful narrative structures, providing order to experiences and imbuing social reality with meaning through the narrativization of human actions. This form of thinking spans personal, cultural, historical, and imaginative domains, often coexisting within a single story. Storytelling and narrative thinking fulfil fundamental human needs to archive experiences into classifications, fostering understanding and meaning making, while building bridges from individual to community. Narratives help people interpret personal life stories, understand historical events, and navigate social interactions. They serve as frameworks for organizing and interpreting information, shaping perceptions, and influencing beliefs and behaviours.

According to Aristotle[8][1], tragedy is an imitation of a serious and complete action (with a beginning, middle, and end), possesses magnitude (significant in scale, and impact), and has serious implications creating a cohesive narrative[9]. It evokes pity and fear, and by doing so it brings about a catharsis of purging of emotions[10]. Freeman discusses essential Aristotelian principles and elements in modern storytelling anchored in peripeteia (reversal of fortune), and anagnorisis or awareness (recognition, discovery)[11], balancing dramatic turns with revelation moments. Through mimesis - a creative process that represents both universal and human experiences[11] - heroes confront and overcome emotional obstacles, conflicts, and trials that may parallel the audience's own experiences. The characters serve as symbolic role models, and their emotional journeys provoke disharmony in the audience's soul. This emotional tension is eventually resolved, restoring balance and bringing pleasure[12]. Heath[9] highlights Aristotle's view of tragedy's "therapeutic function": experiencing intense emotions in a safe, controlled environment leads the audience to a cathartic release. Catharsis serves as both an emotional and psychological outcome of the Hero's Journey and the Hero's Emotional Journey.

Grounded in the importance of storytelling for humanity and inspired by Aristotle's Poetics[13], the first text to study and analyse storytelling, this research presents a meta-analysis of studies on pre-defined and emerging storytelling structures. These studies were conducted with primary school and undergraduate students, both onsite and online, in bilingual environments, after teaching them the frameworks of the hero's journey and the hero's emotional journey.

2. The Hero's Journey and the Hero's Emotional Journey in Creative Storytelling

Creative storytelling is the art of communicating ideas, emotions, and experiences in a captivating and engaging manner. It is an intrinsic human process that helps individuals understand their experiences and themselves, organizing events and thoughts into coherent narratives that integrate emotions and reflections[14]. Our capacity and desire for storytelling are closely tied to decision-making, both for a story's characters and in determining what elements remain in the narrative[12], ensuring it resonates with the audience. Stories are a vital means of interpreting life[15]. Through narratives,

we remember events, communicate ideas, and create meaning from experiences.

During narrative thinking, a structure is imposed on events and experiences, causal relationships are identified, and meaning is assigned. This process leads to the formation of mental frameworks or schemas that help interpret new information and integrate it into existing knowledge and beliefs. In this context, creative writing is both a cognitive and a reflective discipline. Teaching it involves two complementary elements: the act of writing creatively and the act of critically reflecting on the writing process and its outcomes[16].

One of the most enduring narrative frameworks is the Hero's Journey[17][18][19], which outlines the external journey of the hero. Complementing this is the Hero's Emotional Journey, which focuses on the hero's internal and psychological transformation[14]. By capturing both external and internal experiences, these journeys reframe reality and mental imagery, evoking cognitive and emotional responses from the audience[11]. The Hero's Emotional Journey is essential for character development and plot progression. It traces the protagonist's internal transformation and evolution of emotions, beliefs, and motivations. At a critical moment or insight, the hero undergoes a profound emotional change - reconciling with the past, confronting inner conflicts, and finding release and renewal. As they return to the ordinary world, they bring back lessons and changes, experiencing nostalgia and fulfilment. Ultimately, the hero achieves a new emotional state and balance, reflecting their growth and transformation. This framework helps elucidate how a hero's evolving emotions contribute to their character arc and align with the Hero's Journey. Together, these journeys drive the protagonist to catharsis, uniting external events and internal transformations into a cohesive and meaningful narrative.

3. The Arc to Dramatic Catharsis

Characters act in ways that are consistent, believable, and fitting to their roles, while the three-act structure—beginning, middle, and end—can be interpreted as setup, confrontation, and resolution. These structural elements encompass plot unity, symmetry of action, and multidimensional character development[20]. The Hero's Emotional Journey charts a process[21] as a path to catharsis by focusing on the protagonist's inner transformation and growth. The hero encounters emotional obstacles and internal conflicts, ultimately achieving a liberating realization and deeper self-understanding. To fulfil their journey, they must confront their greatest fears, push their limits, and wrestle with emotions such as despair and self-doubt. Through a critical moment or revelation, the hero undergoes profound emotional change, resulting in inner transformation and assimilation[22]. Stories function as bridges for internal meaning, aiding the assimilation of experiences during narration[23]. This process involves transforming specific problematic experiences—painful memories, destructive relationships, or traumatic incidents—rather than changing the individual outright. Assimilation also occurs interpersonally, where shared narratives reconcile differing perspectives. Symmetry and assimilation guide the audience toward catharsis.

The arc of dramatic catharsis[24] distils events, removing elements that could disrupt coherence or unity[12]. This creates symmetry and balance. Tragic causality[25] examines the interplay between human agency and divine will, where human actions shaped by free will intersect with the influence of gods or fate. This dynamic shifts from personal struggles to the epic scale, with inevitable events evoking pity and fear. By sequencing emotional vulnerability, the narrative facilitates the

audience's evaluation of factors influencing the hero's actions and ultimate fulfilment[24]. These events, enacted by characters, drive the narrative to its conclusion. The purpose of tragedy is the purging of emotions and restoration of homeostasis, achieved through symmetry between the character's traits and their final actions. By witnessing the hero's suffering, the audience experiences cognitive insights[11], emotional relief[12][26], and psychological assimilation. Catharsis, as Else[27] argues, arises through a sequence of pitiable and fearful events, purifying painful actions. However, this catharsis is not directly psychological but structural, embedded in the plot. Aristotle, in his Nicomachean Ethics[28] suggests that emotions like fear and compassion have their place; certain things ought to be feared, and empathy is essential for humanity.

The Hero's Emotional Journey unveils the protagonist's psyche, connecting content, theme, and human emotion. This highlights universal truths that resonate across sociocultural contexts[14]. By reshaping thoughts and uncovering hidden strengths, storytelling fosters a multidimensional understanding of events, as a single event can carry multiple meanings. Interpersonal assimilation mirrors intrapersonal processes, allowing individuals to reconcile their past and confront conflicts. This stage, marked by redemption and inner peace, culminates in the hero's emotional transformation. The narrative concludes with a new emotional equilibrium, reflecting their growth[14].

As the Hero's Emotional Journey unfolds, catharsis extends to the audience. By witnessing the hero's trials, the audience internalizes the values of perseverance, determination, and self-awareness, achieving their emotional shift toward balance. Simultaneously, creative storytelling enables the storyteller to explore personal experiences from a safe distance, reframing traumas into positive, transformative narratives. The Hero's Journey and the Hero's Emotional Journey frameworks[14][19] offer tools for understanding oneself and the world. Stories become roadmaps, guiding individuals back to safety and balance. Through realistic or imaginative narratives, students can process negative experiences, reframing them into empowering, imaginative constructs that foster resilience and self-discovery.

4. From Push to Shove, Purge and Release, and How to Measure Them: A Meta-Analysis

Meta-analysis[29][30] aiming at results synthesis composes a statistical technique used to combine multiple studies' results addressing a common research question; in this case, identifying similarities for the hero's journey towards catharsis in diverse students. By aggregating data from individual studies, meta-analysis provides a more comprehensive and precise estimate of the effect size or relationship under investigation. It helps to resolve discrepancies among studies, increase statistical power, and offer insights that individual studies may not be able to provide. The key features of meta-analysis are the integration of systematic review, ensuring that studies are selected and analysed based on predefined criteria to minimize bias; the quantitative synthesis as a pooled effect size depending on the data and research question; the heterogeneity analysis analysing of the variability among study results to determine whether differences are due to chance or other factors such as age in these studies. One advantage is the insights' generalisability by revealing patterns or trends not apparent in individual studies. However, there are limitations such as the quality dependence; the validity of a meta-analysis depends on the quality of the included studies. The heterogeneity advantage can also be a disadvantage as there are significant differences in study methods or populations.

The studies conducted during the 8th Semester at the Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work at the University of Patras have provided foundational and practical insights; thus, the methodology and application of meta-analysis will be applied to the results. Several methods were utilised altogether, such as questionnaires, focus groups, key matrices, code matrices and content analysis with TAMS Analyser. Concepts are classified and grouped in code matrices under higher-order, more abstract formations called categories and super-categories (families). Observation matrices were kept in the primary school classrooms[19][20] and during several students' focus groups. They combined criteria on one axis (the 12 hero's steps to observe) with instances or categories on the other axis (the hero's emotional journey stages). The code matrices were derived after texts were inserted and coded in the Text Analysis Markup System (TAMS Analyser[31]) and a measure of inter-rater reliability (IRR) reached 90%+ range and was considered functionally acceptable. These codes could be used to analyse numerous themes providing a matrix for examining the hero's transformative and cathartic experience.

Meta-analysis effectiveness was reached by synthesising diverse data to provide a deeper understanding of the Hero's Journey's impact on the storytellers' as well as the audience's transformation and emotional growth. The methodology ensures reliable insights, enriching both theoretical and practical applications in creative storytelling.

4.1. Creative Storytelling Case Studies (2022-2024)

In Lambropoulos and Ntriza[19], a case study was conducted utilizing a creative storytelling teaching scenario based on the Hero's Journey. The approach aimed to enhance 6th-grade Greek primary school students' understanding of Children's Rights, specifically addressing the dual role of child labour as both a cause and consequence of school dropout. This case study explored how a creative storytelling educational scenario could raise awareness and cultivate a culture of respect for Children's Rights and the Right to Education while motivating students to engage in writing their own stories. The research drew on data from questionnaires, students' written stories, and a researcher's observation matrix within the classroom. A quantified qualitative analysis of the stories revealed heightened student awareness and respect for Human Rights, particularly the Right to Education, alongside a recognition of their importance. Structurally, all student stories followed a three-act format: a beginning (introducing the setting, key information, and a problematic situation), a middle (including twists and turning points), and an end (featuring the climax). In the climax, the hero completes their transformative arc and returns to school. Each story incorporated key elements such as the protagonist, setting, time, and emotions, showing that students followed the Hero's Journey framework with flexibility and creativity. Many students also explored secondary themes to complement the main narrative. Overall, the intervention successfully raised awareness about child labour's impact on education, as reflected in the recurring theme of the hero overcoming obstacles and returning to school. The mixed-methods analysis suggested that students effectively expanded their knowledge and awareness of Children's Rights through their storytelling. The Hero's Journey framework enabled them to develop ideas within the Social and Political Education course, focusing on child labour as both a cause and consequence of school dropout.

In Lambropoulos and Plota[32], a case study with second-grade primary school students employed questionnaires and

content analysis of their written stories, using TAMS Analyzer for coding. The study found that the Hero's Journey framework significantly improved students' narrative coherence, plot structure, and the chronological sequencing of events. Even when using well-known heroes like Spiderman, students adapted the stories to reflect their unique perspectives. Initially, students hesitated to modify existing stories, expressing reluctance by stating, *"We shouldn't change a story and make our own."* This hesitation was linked to their prior relationship with familiar tales outside the classroom. However, after the intervention, their storytelling skills improved, showcasing more complex conflicts and better-structured plots.

Lambropoulos and Kostara analysed undergraduate students' assignments using TAMS Analyzer, developing a detailed code matrix to illustrate catharsis as a transformative journey rather than a final experience. According to focus group discussions, the narrative heroes underwent intense emotional challenges that mirrored the students' journeys. The stages of catharsis included resonating with the hero and initial emotions, internalizing the story, reaching the emotional climax, experiencing catharsis and self-empowerment and enhancing creative expression. Students reflected on personal challenges and recognized the value of inner strength and mutual support, inspired by their heroes' victories. For example, Simba's triumph and Lyra's reconciliation prompted discussions about overcoming personal fears and peer pressure.

Dimitropoulou and Lambropoulos[33] tested the Hero's Journey in an eLearning environment, where 6th-grade students were tasked with writing bilingual stories in French and Greek. Although initial reactions were negative due to the perceived difficulty of following both the Hero's and emotional journeys, enthusiasm grew as the students engaged with the digital format. The bilingual aspect, coupled with multimedia storytelling, was particularly well-received. However, creative challenges persisted, echoing findings from Lambropoulos and Plota[32]. Students showed a preference for producing stories as videos with audio support, citing enhanced comprehension. Despite difficulties in developing written expression, the bilingual format encouraged students to explore new phrases and idioms. This approach demonstrated the value of incorporating multimedia and intercultural elements into storytelling, broadening both the narrative and cultural horizons of students.

5. Synthesis and Discussion

The insights derived from the meta-analysis referred to the following:

1. Effectiveness of the Hero's Journey Framework: Across different age groups and contexts, the Hero's Journey has proven to be a powerful pedagogical tool. It aids in structuring narratives and promotes creative thinking while enhancing students' understanding of complex social issues like Children's Rights and child labour.

2. Raising Awareness through Storytelling: Storytelling can effectively raise awareness of societal issues and foster empathy and a culture of respect. The recurring theme of overcoming obstacles highlights how storytelling can instil resilience and hope.

3. Narrative Structure and Coherence: Students significantly improved their narrative coherence and plot complexity post-intervention. Initially hesitant to create original stories, they gained confidence and skill through structured storytelling

exercises. Students showed creativity by adapting familiar characters and blending known narratives with their unique perspectives.

4. Emotional and Personal Growth through Catharsis: The transformative power of storytelling relies on experiencing catharsis as the students connect with their protagonists' journeys, reflecting on personal challenges and emotional growth. The structured stages of catharsis (from initial resonance to self-empowerment) underscored storytelling as a tool for emotional and creative development.

5. Multilingual and Digital Storytelling: Despite the initial hesitation, the students embraced the challenges of bilingual, digital storytelling, recognizing its potential to enhance engagement and cultural literacy. The preference for multimedia storytelling (e.g., videos with audio support) suggests that integrating technology can make the process more accessible and appealing, even for students who struggle with traditional written formats.

6. Challenges and Adaptations: Across all studies, students initially faced difficulties in creating original content or engaging with new formats (e.g., bilingual narratives). However, guided interventions helped them overcome these hurdles, demonstrating the adaptability and scalability of the Hero's Journey framework across diverse educational contexts.

7. Broader Educational Impact: These studies collectively highlight how storytelling, when paired with structured frameworks like the Hero's Journey, can transcend traditional classroom learning. By fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence, storytelling becomes a dynamic tool for both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Regarding the arc of dramatic catharsis, it appeared as a transformative process, framed as an ongoing transformative journey rather than a singular emotional release. The Hero's Journey, integrated into diverse educational settings, empowers students to explore and articulate complex issues creatively while fostering personal growth, intercultural understanding, and narrative competence. The structured stages of the Hero's Journey guide students through emotional highs and lows in a controlled, educational context. This framework makes the abstract process of catharsis tangible and accessible. Students experience catharsis in stages: initial resonance with the hero, internalising the story, emotional climax, self-empowerment, and enhanced creative expression. The students deeply relate to their protagonists' emotional challenges, mirroring their personal struggles. This connection fosters introspection and personal growth. As for their emotional and cognitive development, by navigating the hero's journey, the students gain emotional insight and build resilience. cathartic experiences help them to confront fears and pressures, such as those tied to peer dynamics and self-doubt. They experienced symbolic triumphs via the heroes' victories, or reconciliations, inspiring students to recognise their own inner strength and value mutual support. These narrative resolutions provide a safe framework for students to explore and process real-life challenges. storytelling's impact on creative expression was evident; experiencing catharsis boosts students' creative confidence and motivates them to express complex ideas. Their storytelling becomes a tool for self-discovery and empowerment. Catharsis in storytelling supports both emotional and narrative intelligence and narrative competence[34][35] as it encourages students to actively engage with their learning, enhancing their ability to tackle sensitive topics.

Creative Storytelling cultivated students' emotional engagement in the Hero's Journey to change a given and usually

unpleasant initial situation presented in the stories. Students seem to define the story through their identification with the characters and take responsibility for their creation. Creative Storytelling is an active methodology that supports students to actively engage in their learning, engage their senses, and communicate their discoveries[20]. It is a cognitive tool that develops meaning and universal values in context (situated understanding[36]). The Hero's Journey can support any student to create their own stories and guide them, because such problems are real, but safely framed in the context of a fictional story. Aspects of themselves are revealed, presenting unexpected thoughts, feelings, or even fears without exposing themselves.

Students can be actively involved in the learning process, develop imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills, improve communication skills, and develop their interest in a wide range of topics. In the educational context, the students identify with their heroes, create mental images, and approach issues more objectively, distanced from their own experiences[20]. Creative Storytelling has specific structural elements (time, place, characters), and the story's progression follows three stages: beginning – orientation (Act I), middle–action development (Act II), and end–closure (Act III). Additionally, the story provides strong motivation for students, as it offers a clear structure and evolves in parallel with the exploration of a theme[37]. Overall, the results highlight students' difficulty in developing written narratives while adhering to specific rules. Even those students who expressed interest and a love for reading stories and comics preferred to assist in the production of the digital version of the story.

Regarding the bilingual environment, students attempted to translate phrases into French but struggled to fully grasp the cultural nuances the researcher had initially set out to explore. The teachers' preference for traditional methods is often linked to their perceived reliability and their long-established effectiveness in delivering positive results for students. On the other hand, students demonstrate familiarity with digital technology in their personal lives, using it to communicate and express their emotions and ideas. However, this creative use does not extend to their school environment; students tend to approach learning as passive receivers, limiting their potential to generate and develop new ideas.

6. Conclusions, Implications for Research, and Future Research

The meta-analysis revealed that the Hero's Journey and the Hero's Emotional Journey towards catharsis have proven effective across different age groups and contexts. They were interwoven in the stories to form a path toward catharsis, offering relief and balance. This can be the result of traumas and uncomfortable experiences, such as loss, guilt, betrayal, manipulation, or isolation, which the hero faces along the way until the disrupted symmetry and balance are restored. These structures help narratives and enhance creative thinking, raising awareness of social issues, and supporting coherence as students improved their narrative skills and plot complexity post-intervention. They also gained confidence and creativity in adapting familiar characters and creating original content. The overall journey cultivates emotional engagement, imagination, and critical thinking and supports active learning and co-creation, encouraging a sense of ownership. The stories followed a clear three-act structure: orientation, action development, and closure; this structure motivated them for thematic exploration. Creative writing and storytelling enabled the students to externalise their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, fostering engagement in narratives that reflect the characteristics, experiences, and

interests of their peers. The sense of ownership, the joy of co-creation, and the strong emotional involvement are elements essential to storytelling. Through reframing these experiences, storytelling facilitates constructive feedback, metacognition, and reflection, enhancing self-esteem, self-awareness, and autonomy. Students experience a sense of discovery and creative euphoria as both the storyteller and audience are transported to a different, stress-free reality where they can explore themselves and their world.

Storytelling promotes empathy, respect, and resilience and encourages reflection on overcoming obstacles suggesting both the storytellers and the audience's emotional and personal growth through catharsis. Catharsis fosters personal reflection and emotional growth through stages (from resonance to self-empowerment) for creative development. Catharsis serves as both the cause and purpose of the hero's emotional journey, manifesting in the hero's inner growth, spiritual development, and psychological transformation. It encompasses deep psychological changes, vital to the story's progression and self-realisation, a profound understanding of the tragic causality between actions and their consequences. The hero, therefore, acts as a reflective self, as students reflect on what they would do in the hero's place and experience catharsis when the character decides to overcome their fears.

Digital storytelling has the potential to enhance students' creativity and interaction as it is found to promote critical thinking. With guidance from trained educators, students are encouraged to critically reflect on their experiences. Sharing experiences through digital storytelling fosters stronger emotional connections among students, increasing emotional communication and inter-school collaborations, facilitating the exchange of ideas and providing new stimuli for creative work.

Although the benefits have not been extensively studied on an international level, they are evident enough to encourage the educational sector to adopt these new technological methods in practice. Students faced difficulties with original content and new formats but overcame them with guided interventions. Storytelling fosters critical thinking, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, and creativity and provides a safe framework for exploring complex personal and social issues. There are bilingual and cultural Challenges as students struggled with translating cultural nuances in a bilingual environment. They preferred producing digital stories, despite initial challenges with written formats.

While the case studies and this meta-analysis are limited in scope and cannot provide generalised conclusions, they can serve as a starting point for further research. The aim would be to reassess the storytelling structures and create alternative ones or freedom from them. There might be a need for broader adoption and acceptance of Digital Storytelling to integrate multicultural-friendly online environments to reduce digital and social inequalities. Long-term studies involving more participants from diverse contexts are essential to draw reliable conclusions about creative storytelling and the arc of catharsis impact while the primary focus remains on the storyteller and their audiences, who are at the core of creative storytelling.

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