Narrative Criticism:

Achievement of Narrative Objectives in *The Lion King*

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Abstract

This paper uses the narrative method of criticism to analyze the film *The Lion King*. It first introduces the goal of the research to see how *The Lion King* achieves its narrative objective. Then it will look at a summary of the film and identify features of the film that helped achieve the narrative objective. Lastly, it will identify what the analysis of *The Lion King* teaches about the rhetorical theory.
Personal Implications of Narrative Objectives

As humans, we have an inherent inclination to try and relate and apply situations and contextualize a story to make it personal. Information that is presented to people is often placed in the framework of a story because it is easier to process. “Story is a way of structuring information, a system of informational elements that most effectively create the essential context and relevance that engage receivers and enhance memory and the creation of meaning.” (Haven, 2007, p. 310) Humans place information in terms of stories because it aids in the personalization, as well as the contextualization of that information.

Messages that are communicated in films are presented in situations and scenarios that are relatable; but often times, to broaden the audience that it is intended to reach. In the case of The Lion King, this is true, the context in which this narrative is presented is first and foremost with animation and secondly with animals as characters. In a rhetorical approach, it is interesting to see how films such as these are so effective in communicating its narrative objective to its audience. This type of narrative communication has been prevalent for years, situations that most, if not all people just will not find themselves in; walking through a magical wardrobe to a fantasy land, finding a ring with special powers and going on a journey to defeat evil, and training your mind to become a warrior to defeat a powerful galactic enemy, these are not scenarios many of us find ourselves in.

This analysis is geared towards analyzing the narrative objective in the animated film The Lion King in an effort to see how seemingly un-relatable contexts and situations are used to communicate applicable messages to the audience. Then it will use the
narrative criticism method of analysis to see how this effect is accomplished. Then the implications and contribution it has on rhetorical criticism and theory.

Film Summary

*The Lion King* is an animated film written by Jonathan Roberts, Irene Mecchi, and Linda Woolverton and directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. Starring the voices of Matthew Broderick, James Earl Jones, and Jeremy Irons. It was released on June 24, 1994 and since has grossed more than $420 million (IMDb, 2014) and is currently the record holder with $6.2 billion worldwide sales for its Broadway musical production (New York Daily News, 2014) and to this day it is one of the most iconic Disney movies ever made. It is about Simba, a young lion cub who is the son of the leader of the pack of lions and the king of Pride Rock. He is being raised and groomed to become the heir to the throne.

Mufasa tries to teach Simba about the responsibility of being king, and the wisdom it takes to make decisions. He teaches him about the circle of life and what it means to be brave in the face of danger, rather than searching out danger for no purpose. But there is Scar who is the brother of Mufasa and has always despised Mufasa for being the king. So Scar tricks Simba into getting into a situation that he should not have been in and Mufasa has to rescue Simba and his friend Nala. After helping them, Mufasa scolds Simba for his rashness and then uses the opportunity to tell him that he is always there to guide Simba and will always be his support.

Then we see that Scar is planning to overthrow Mufasa by staging his death, and also making Simba feel guilty and thinking it his fault and running away. Scar’s character’s deception is evident to the audience, but the other characters do not see his
deception, especially a young Simba. Scar puts Simba in the middle of a valley saying that his father wanted to meet him there, so while Simba is waiting in the valley, he signals to the hyenas to chase wildebeest into the valley putting Simba in danger. Then Scar runs to Mufasa innocently and says Simba is trapped in the valley in the middle of the stampede. Then we see young Simba unable to outrun the stampede and Mufasa has to save him. So Mufasa finds Simba in the valley and puts him safely on a ledge but falls back into the stampede. Mufasa tries to jump back onto a ledge, but Scar is waiting at the top and Mufasa thinks he will save him, but Scar pushes him off. Simba doesn’t see what has transpired, and then finds Mufasa dead in the valley. Then Scar shows up and makes it seem as if Simba was at fault. Simba starts to run away, and Scar wants the hyenas to kill, but Simba outruns them and runs off into the distant desert. So as a result Simba is gone and Mufasa is dead, so Scar assumes the throne and brings the hyenas into the kingdom, as repayment for their help and Simba is nowhere to be seen by those at Pride Rock.

Simba continues to run through the desert and eventually is found by Timon and Pumba who befriend him and stay with him as he grows into a full-grown lion. Timon and Pumba teach Simba to live carefree, “hakuna matata.” Simba forgets the purpose for his life and lives his life worried only about having a good time with Timon and Pumba living in a lush forest.

At this point, Nala find Simba in the forest and they both catch up, but then Nala tries to convince Simba to come back to Pride Rock and challenge Scar for the throne and his rightful position as King. But then Simba is upset and doesn’t want to tell Nala the reason he won’t come back. Soon after, the wise man of Pride Rock, Rafiki, gets wind
(literally) that Simba is still alive and then he goes on a journey to find Simba and encourage him to return back home. After finding Simba, Rafiki gives him a lesson on leaving the past behind him, and moving on. He also leads him to realize that his father taught him to remember who he was and that he was raised to be responsible and Simba soon realizes that he has to return to Pride Rock. After getting back, he has a fight with Scar and the hyenas for the throne, and eventually the truth comes out that Scar planned and killed Mufasa so Scar is chased off and Simba becomes kings and restores Pride Rock to its former glory.

Process of Narrative Criticism

There are three steps to performing narrative criticism on a piece of rhetoric. Selecting an artifact, analyzing the artifact, and formulating a research question. (Foss, 2009, p. 310-317) Narrative criticism really looks into the a story because stories are so effective at making connections because it shares a particular experience, creates a sharable world, and allows for personal involvement. A good story makes the audience feel, and narrative criticism looks into why and how a story is effective in this purpose.

When it comes to artifact, it has to carry the characteristics of a narrative. For an artifact to be a narrative, it has to be comprised of at least two events. It also has to be true that the events of the narrative are organized in some sort of time order. Then for an artifact to be a narrative, there must be a relationship between the events in the story. The last thing that is indicative of a story is that it must be about a common subject. These things are indicative of a narrative and should be evident when performing narrative criticism.
The next step of narrative criticism is analyzing the artifact, which is comprised of two major steps and another that is occasionally done. First is identifying the objective of the narrative. A narrative typically has an agenda that is communicated to the audience, whether it is “never give up” or “to encourage action,” a narrative has a message to convey to the audience. The next step to analyzing the artifact is identifying the features of the narrative that help achieve communication of the narrative objective. So this entails looking at the setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, theme, and type of narrative and seeing how these features of the narrative help communicate the narrative objective. Lastly, based on the occasion, evaluating the narrative based on the objective set forth is performed to consider the appropriateness and achievement of the objective.

The last step in the narrative criticism process is formulating a question. This question is usually focuses on one of three things: The objective of the narrative that was identified, the strategies that help in accomplishing the objective, or the appropriateness of the objective that was communicated in the narrative. The process of narrative criticism takes an in depth look at the various characteristics of a story, and seeing how those characteristics were effective in accomplishing the objectives the narrator intending to communicate.

Film Content

*The Lion King* is a film that was aimed to reach a wide audience. While it is often considered a children’s movie, it is film that any one can enjoy and grasp a positive message. The narrative objective that was evident in the film was to heal from loss and encourage action. This objective was exemplified in the life and events of Simba, and
was a message that was impressed upon the audience. Some of the features that had the most influence on the effectiveness in achieving the narrative objective were setting, characters, events, and temporal relations.

The effect of the setting has a big implication on the narrative objective. To heal and take action, in the film, Simba leaves his home, where he suffered loss and felt inadequate and unwanted because he felt at fault for the death of his father. So as a result of his feeling of dejection from his home and family, he was displaced in the film. He ran away from his reality mentally, but physically, running out to the forest with where he finds Timon and Pumba and puts distance between him and his home. Also when it comes to the point when Simba has to take action, and return to his initial purpose, he has to again physically move from his escape to the place of his purpose. The setting serves as an example for the audience to connect to, whether they are physically or mentally displaced from their purpose or running away to heal, the setting helps the audience grasp the narrative objective.

Next, the characters involved with Simba’s life help the audience connect to the narrative objective. Simba changes over time; first he is scared of what the pack will think of his mistake so he avoids his purpose and responsibilities. But then he becomes courageous, and realizes he has to step up and fulfill what he was raised by his father to do. Scar serves as the character that opposes and tries to defeat Simba, and steal away his rightful place as king. Scar serves as a hindrance to Simba’s purpose and antagonist. Then is Simba’s journey through the film, Mufasa serves as encouragement and a reminder as to the support and love that he has behind him. Lastly, Rafiki serves as Simba’s wise advisor. Rafiki helps Simba learn an important a lesson and also remember
that he has a purpose and is able to fulfill it. The characters help depict the narrative objective, because it allows the audience to make connections for people or events that represent the trials, encouragements, and guidance for their lives. All of these characters help the audience relate personally to the story and also grasp the narrative objective.

Another feature of the narrative that aided in the presentation of the narrative objective were events; primarily the kernel or major events that take place in the story. Simba being tricked into thinking that he is at fault for his father’s death is the first kernel event that sets the story in motion. Next, the Rafiki helping Simba realize his purpose and that his father was a support that he could look to. Lastly, Simba defeating Scar and the hyenas is the last kernel event, and serves as the consummation to Simba’s journey. The events help the narrative objective shine through, seeing the healing that Simba needs and then the call to action achievement of his purpose. The events in the story are able to exact emotion from the audience and lead them to see the narrative objective come to fruition in Simba’s journey.

Lastly, the temporal relations help the audience to see that there is a time that has an effect on the narrative objective. In Simba’s life, he needed time between the death of his father and his re-assuming the throne his had a rightful claim to. This helps the audience realize the time implications time has on the healing process.

All of these features help the audience follow the narrative objective that is exemplified in Simba’s life and help them make connections to the journey Simba went through. *The Lion King* is infamous for its ability to evoke emotion from the audience, from the sadness of Mufasa’s death, to Simba’s happiness with Timon and Pumba in the jungle, to the triumph that Simba experiences. All these features of the narrative evoke
emotion and help the audience understand the implications the setting, characters, events, and temporal relations have on the emotion and connection that is established with the objective of healing and call to action.

Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

The Lion King helps understand how stories that have seemingly un-relatable contexts and situations can be used to communicate an applicable message. All of the features that were discussed were all emotionally driven. The characters evoke emotion because of the struggle, obstruction, and encouragement that they represent. The setting goes through change because of the emotional implications that are present in the narrative. The events all have a major effect on the emotion of the character and audience. And the temporal relations reflect the emotional implications that are present. Emotion drives the story and what the audience connects to.

Stories are what humans relate to on a deep level. When a story is captivating, it is interacting with emotions and creates a lasting effect and allow for connections to be made by the audience. “Emotions determine the meaning of everything - if we’re not feeling, we’re not conscious.” (Cron, 2012, p. 44) Humans are emotional beings and when there is an emotional connection made, there is an indelible connection that is made to memory and meaning.

This criticism of The Lion King shows that the context, situation, scenario, or species dictates the effectiveness of a narrative at achieving its objective; it is the emotional appeal that is made. The emotional connection that the audience makes is important to the ability to applying the narrative objective to the audience’s own lives.

Conclusion
Narrative criticism leads to the understanding of the effective of stories. The background of narrative criticism establishes its importance in the field of criticism because of the deep-rooted nature of humans to think in terms of story. Humans have, and will always think in terms of story because it conducive to committing to memory and easy to connect to. If a connection can be made on an emotional level, the narrative has a high likelihood to accomplish its narrative objective.
References


