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Theme

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PROCEEDINGS

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CREAFTA 2026 (International Conference on Creative Practices in Film, Theatre, and Animation) is an academic platform that brings together scholars, practitioners, and industry experts to present and discuss current research, innovation, and practices in the fields of film, theatre, animation, and creative arts. The conference aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue, encourage creative research dissemination, and strengthen regional and international collaboration in the creative industries.

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These proceeding compiles peer-reviewed papers presented at CREAFTA 2026, representing diverse perspectives and research contributions across creative practices in film, theatre, animation, and related disciplines.

A Comparative Study of Environmental Storytelling Element in Cultural Perspective in Animation Films

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ABSTRACT

As environmental crises has alarmingly increased, including Malaysia, where deforestation and floods occur yearly. Children's media has become a critical tool for fostering ecological awareness. This study examines how environmentalism storytelling can educate young audiences about environmentalism. As Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo* (2008) and Tom Moore's *Song of the Sea* (2014) demonstrated how environmental storytelling simplify complex messages for young audiences. While eco-criticism in animation is well-studied, few works explore how cultural perspectives shapes environmental messages. In contrast, Malaysian animation tends to prioritize Malay folklore rather than ecological themes. Through a qualitative method, by using content analysis of eleven literary works, there are seven key elements identified that can be used as a framework to analyse both *Ponyo* (2008) and *Song of the Sea* (2014). Future research should explore how animators can adapt this approach, using cultural stories to highlight environmental crises like plastic pollution or habitat loss.

Keywords: *Environmental storytelling; Animation; Cultural perspective; Eco-education; Children's media.*

INTRODUCTION

The increasing degradation of the natural environment, from climate change to biodiversity loss has intensified global demands for creative communication strategies that inspire join effort (Kaoma, 2016; Clayton et al., 2020). While traditional media such as radio effectively spread information, storytelling, especially in animation, foster awareness by immersing the audiences in emotionally resonant narratives (Gottschall, 2019). This medium's power lies in its ability to simplify complex concepts through metaphors, distortion and movements. These tools are uniquely suited to convey complex messages such as ecological crises to audiences (Wells, 1998; Bruner, 1991).

A strong technique is environmental storytelling, where narratives are embedded in the design of virtual worlds, enabling audiences to unconsciously absorbs messages through exploration and visual cues (Mateas & Stern, 2005). For instance, Hayao Miyazaki's films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997) explores ecological themes and relationships as narrative agents, framing environmental degradation as cultural and spiritual conflicts (Bartolomei et al., 2023). Such works demonstrates animation's capacity to reframe ecological debates by humanizing non-humans and visualize futures shaped by sustainability or exploitation. In Malaysia, film such as *Upin Ipin: The Lone Gibbon Kris* (2019) integrate environmental themes but primarily focuses on cultural folklore and marketability over direct endorsement of environmental messaging (Mohd & Ishak, 2011). This study addresses these gaps by

analysing the elements of environmental storytelling and compare two animated films, *Ponyo (2008)* and *Song of the Sea* (2014). This is to map how environmental storytelling in cultural perspective proved to be an effective way of conveying environmental messages. This research encourages Malaysian's animators or researchers to explore more on this topic to educate younger generations on ecological degradation

This study aims to achieve specific objectives, as follows:

1. To identify the elements of environmental storytelling through literature review and scholar.

2. To analyse the comparison and compare the usage of environmental storytelling elements in *Ponyo* (Japanese) and *Song of the Sea* (Irish).

3. To establish the usage of environmental storytelling elements through Japanese and Irish animated films so that we can adapt the suitable application to our animation film through this environmental storytelling.

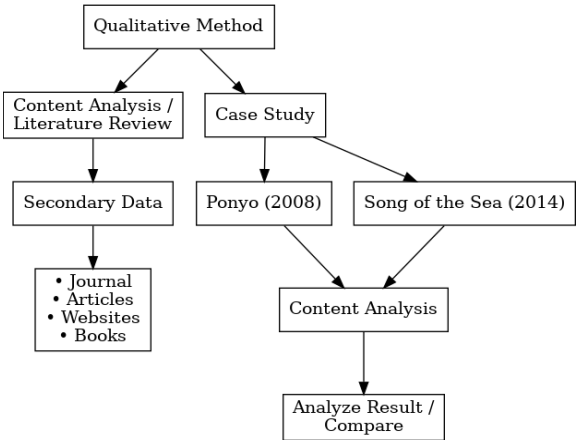


Figure 1: Overview of Research Methodology

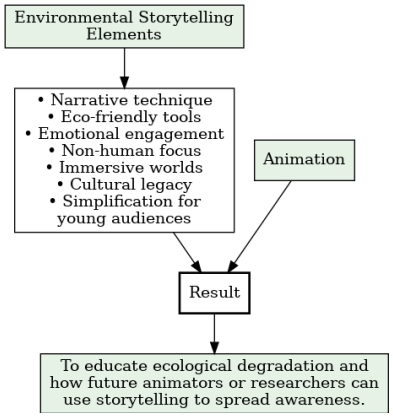


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework for Storytelling-Driven Environmental Education

The conceptual framework shown in *Figure 2* maps this interaction, emphasizing how animation translates abstract crises into emotionally urgent, culturally grounded calls to action, and the role of

storytelling in preserving and appreciating diverse cultures. By combining both the elements of environmental storytelling with animation, it would result in future animators and researchers being able to use environmental storytelling to spread awareness on ecological degradation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was guided by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework bridging ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, and media studies, focusing on animation's unique narrative and affective capacities. This specification allows for an analysis that uses animated films as complex cultural texts that shape young viewers' understanding of ecological principles and human-nature relationships.

Table 1: Summary of Shared Elements in Environmental Storytelling Identified by Scholars

Element	Description	Supporting Literature
Simplification of Ecological Concepts	Breaking down complex environmental issues for young audiences	Hawley (2022); Mathur (2024); Omoera et al. (2024)
Emotional Engagement and Empathy	Evoking empathy through emotional narratives and non-human perspectives	McCormack et al. (2021); James & Morel (2018); Gabell (2023)
Allegory, Metaphor, and Fantasy	Indirect storytelling techniques to convey ecological urgency	Christensen et al. (2018); Gabell (2023)
Cultural Context and Traditional Knowledge	Integrating folklore and mythology to localize and transmit environmental values	Poulsen (2023); Lee et al. (2021)
Representation of Non-Human Agency	Portraying nature as an active agent to challenge anthropocentric views	Quinto (2022); Omoera et al. (2024)
Narrative Structure and Immersive Worldbuilding	Creating believable, emotional environments to enhance engagement	James & Morel (2018); Gilpatrick (2020)
Promotion of Pro-Environmental Behaviour	Modelling sustainable attitudes and values within stories	Hawley (2022); Mathur (2024)
Accessibility and Intergenerational Engagement	Using animation to bridge generational gaps and make ecological messages widely accessible	Poulsen (2023); Lee et al. (2021)

This comparative analysis of academic literature identified a consistent eight elements that characterize effective environmental storytelling in animated media for young audiences. The synthesis reveals that successful narratives operate through a synergistic blend of cognitive, emotional, and cultural channels to foster pro-environmental values. A frequency analysis of these elements across twelve key sources,

confirmed the dominant role of narrative structures, followed closely by emotional engagement and the use of eco-friendly tools within the narratives.

The most prevalent and impactful techniques include metaphorical and allegorical storytelling. This primary strategy uses fantasy and symbol to simplify complex, often distressing, ecological issues such as pollution and biodiversity loss. For instance, scholars like Christensen et al. (2018) argue that this indirect approach preserves narrative significance while softening the emotional impact for young viewers, making dire warnings more digestible without diminishing their core urgency.

Emotional engagement via non-human perspectives, a significant finding is the strategic centering of narratives on animals, spirits, or nature itself to build cognitive empathy. As demonstrated by McCormack et al. (2021) and Gabell (2023), this technique invites viewers to develop emotional connections with the natural world, fostering a sense of moral responsibility that abstract facts cannot achieve.

Cultural contextualization and legacy, the integration of folklore and traditional knowledge, as discussed by Poulsen (2023) and Lee et al. (2021), serves as a vessel for ecological wisdom. This strategy delivers culturally resonant messages by adapting timeless values, such as balance and respect, to contemporary environmental concerns, making them both familiar and relevant to specific audiences.

To ground these theoretical findings, a detailed comparative case study of Hayao Miyazaki's Ponyo (2008) and Tomm Moore's Song of the Sea (2014) was conducted. This analysis demonstrates the practical application and cultural specificity of the identified strategies. Both films masterfully uses non-human protagonists, Ponyo as a fish-girl and Saiorse as a selkie, to personify ecological disruption and interconnectivity. Furthermore, they construct immersive worlds where the environment is a direct reflection of emotional and ecological states; the chaotic yet nurturing ocean in Ponyo mirrors the characters' journey, just as the petrified faeries in Song of the Sea externalize a world suffering from ecological and emotional disconnection.

However, the films meaningfully diverge in their cultural framing, which shapes their narrative delivery. Ponyo is visually and symbolically rooted in Japanese Shinto animism, where every element of nature possesses a spirit. Its environmental message is conveyed through vibrant, child-friendly visuals that metaphorically critique issues like marine pollution. In contrast, Song of the Sea is structurally and aurally indebted to Irish oral storytelling traditions. Its ecological themes of memory and loss are woven into a lullaby-like narrative, using Celtic mythology as a framework for understanding environmental restoration.

This comparative analysis underscores a central conclusion: the universality of environmental concerns is best communicated through culturally specific storytelling method. The findings confirm that animation's unique power lies in its diverse ability to simplify, emotionalize, and culturalize complex environmental themes. By modeling sustainable behaviors and constructing believable, ecocentric worlds, animated storytelling moves beyond mere information delivery to actively shape attitudes, inspire deep empathy, and promote a more personal and enduring understanding of ecological interconnectedness in young audiences.

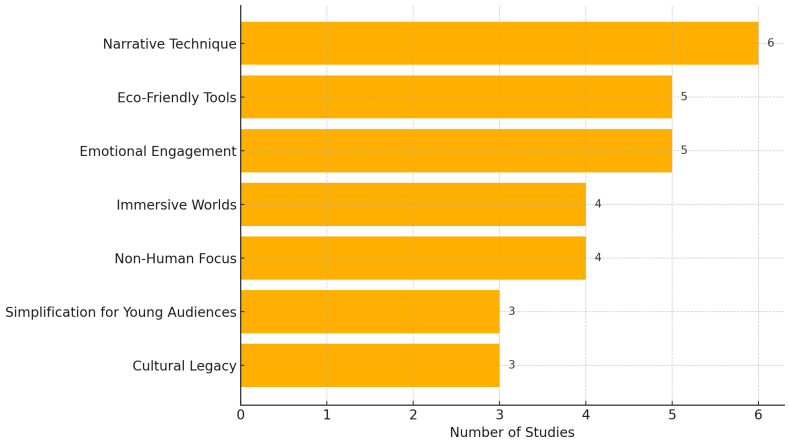


Figure 4: Comparison of Environmental Storytelling Elements in *Ponyo* and *Song of the Sea*

It is important to note that this study is based on a comparative literature analysis and specific case studies; thus, its findings, while indicative of broader trends, would benefit from empirical validation through audience reception studies with child viewers. Future research should quantitatively measure the impact of these identified storytelling elements on children's environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of *Ponyo* (Japan) and *Song of the Sea* (Ireland) examines how environmental storytelling can simplify complex ecological concepts for young audiences. By employing non-human perspectives such as Ponyo's identity as a fish alongside cultural metaphors and immersive worldbuilding, these narratives effectively balance educational content with emotional engagement, avoiding overt didacticism. In the context of Malaysian animation, where environmental themes remain limited despite pressing ecological challenges, this study proposes a framework for localizing metaphors by adapting elements of Malay folklore to convey biodiversity loss.

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