

Three-Dimensional Aspects of Lightning McQueen's Character Transformation In 'Cars' Movie

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Lightning McQueen's character transformation in *Cars* (2006) using Lajos Egri's three-dimensional character theory, which includes physiological, sociological, and psychological aspects. While animated films are often seen as mere entertainment, there is a gap between theoretical models of character development and their application in animated storytelling. The purpose of this study is to analyze how complex character growth can be portrayed in animation through Egri's framework. A qualitative approach was used, with data collected by watching the film, analyzing the script, and identifying key scenes that reflect McQueen's changes. The analysis examines twenty data points showing his development: physiologically, he appears more controlled, sociologically, he develops relationships in Radiator Springs, and psychologically, he becomes more empathetic and self-aware. The findings indicate that Egri's theory effectively captures character transformation in animated narratives. This study argues that meaningful character growth can be achieved in animation, bridging theory and practice while demonstrating its narrative depth.

Keywords: Physiology, Psychology, Sociology, Three Dimensional Aspects

1. Introduction

Character transformation is an essential element in storytelling, as it reflects the internal and external journey that a character undergoes in response to various life experiences. Stories become more engaging and relatable when characters evolve over time, as these transformations often carry the core themes of a narrative.

In literature, theater, and film, the portrayal of a believable and multidimensional character is a key factor in engaging audiences and deepening emotional connection. To analyze this process, Lajos Egri's theory of the three-dimensional character offers a clear and structured approach.

Egri (1960) argues that a well-developed character must possess three integrated dimensions: physiological (physical traits and habits), sociological (social background and environment), and psychological (internal motivations and emotional life). These aspects do not function independently but work together to shape the behavior, decisions, and growth of a character throughout the story.

Supporting Egri's theory, Robert McKee (1997) emphasizes the importance of conflict in driving character change. He states that "conflict is the essence of character," suggesting that a character's depth and development are most clearly revealed when they face internal or external challenges. This aligns with Egri's concept, reinforcing the idea that transformation occurs when a character's body, environment, and emotions are tested by the circumstances around them. Together, Egri's and McKee's views provide a solid theoretical foundation for examining how a character evolves across time and experience, particularly when dealing with change, failure, relationships, and personal growth.

While these theories have been widely used in literary and cinematic analysis, there is still limited research applying them to animated films, especially those aimed at younger audiences. Animated narratives are often dismissed as simple or one-dimensional; however, many contain complex character arcs and meaningful life lessons. One such example is *Cars* (2006), an animated film by Pixar that follows the journey of Lightning McQueen, a rookie race car who starts off as arrogant and self-centered. Over the course of the film, McQueen experiences a profound transformation that reflects Egri's three dimensions: his physical energy and impulsiveness are gradually replaced by calm and controlled behavior; his social environment shifts from fame and media attention to genuine friendships; and psychologically, he learns humility, empathy, and the value of relationships over personal glory.

The transformation McQueen undergoes is not sudden, but built across multiple scenes that show his responses to conflict, rejection, and acceptance. This makes *Cars* a suitable case study for analyzing how animated films can reflect complex character development. While studies such as Maharani (2021) and Ifianti and Rahman (2020) have applied Egri's framework to literary and live-action film characters, there has been little focus on its application in the animated genre. Maharani's analysis of *The Great Gatsby* shows how the three dimensions shape Gatsby's character, while Ifianti and Rahman's study of *First They Killed My Father* explores how characters develop within a historical conflict setting. These works support the adaptability of Egri's theory but do not explore its potential in animated storytelling.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing Lightning McQueen's character transformation in *Cars* (2006) through the lens of Egri's three-dimensional theory. It demonstrates how animated characters can possess narrative depth, emotional resonance, and developmental arcs comparable to those in live-action or literary works. The choice of this film is justified by its clear, progressive structure of character change, making it an ideal subject for

exploring how physiological, sociological, and psychological dimensions interact to shape personal growth. By doing so, this study highlights the significance of animated films as valid texts for academic analysis in literature, film, and character studies.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine Lightning McQueen's character transformation in the animated film *Cars* (2006), using Lajos Egri's three-dimensional character theory. This method was selected to explore the character's development in depth, focusing on changes in physical traits, social behavior, and emotional state throughout the narrative. The descriptive nature of the approach allowed the researcher to interpret and present the findings in a clear and structured manner.

The primary data source was the film itself, directed by John Lasseter, chosen for its clear storyline and strong depiction of character transformation. McQueen's journey from a self-centered racer to a more mature and empathetic individual provides a suitable case for applying Egri's framework, which consists of three key dimensions: physiological, sociological, and psychological.

Data were collected using documentation techniques. The researcher viewed the entire film via the Disney+ Hotstar platform, consulted the official film script from www.scripts.com, and took detailed notes on scenes and dialogues relevant to the character's development. Attention was given to McQueen's physical expressions, interactions with other characters, and emotional changes that reflect the three dimensions proposed by Egri.

The analysis involved identifying and categorizing scenes based on Egri's dimensions. Physiological aspects included observable behaviors and physical responses; sociological aspects were examined through McQueen's social interactions and environment; and psychological aspects focused on internal conflicts, realizations, and emotional shifts. These findings were then analyzed descriptively to understand how each dimension contributed to the character's growth.

The results were organized thematically under the three dimensions, with selected scenes and quotations used to support the interpretation. This structure helped reveal how the different aspects of McQueen's personality are interconnected, providing a comprehensive view of his transformation and illustrating the relevance of Egri's theory to animated film analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

Egri (1960, p. 33) emphasizes that to fully understand a character, one must consider three core elements: physiological traits, social background, and psychological state. These interconnected aspects contribute to a character's richness and help make them believable and compelling to the audience. In Pixar's *Cars* (2006), Lightning McQueen starts as an ambitious

and self-absorbed race car. This study uses Egri's three-dimensional model to examine how his character evolves throughout the narrative.

Data 1

McQueen: Whoa, Doc. Time to clean out the garage, buddy, come on.

McQueen: What? He has a Piston Cup? Oh, my gosh. Three Piston Cups?

Doc: Sign says stay out.

McQueen: You have three Piston Cups. How could you have...

Doc: I knew you couldn't drive. I didn't know you couldn't read.

McQueen: You're the Hudson Hornet!

Doc: Wait at Flo's, like I told ya!

McQueen: Of course. I can't believe I didn't see it before. You're The Fabulous Hudson Hornet! You used to hold the record for most wins in a season. Oh, we gotta talk. You gotta show me your tricks. Please.

Doc: I tried that.

McQueen: You won three times! Look at those trophies!

Doc: You look. **All I see is a bunch of empty cups**

In the physiological aspect, Lightning McQueen shows excitement and surprise when he finds out that Doc Hudson is the Fabulous Hudson Hornet. His loud voice, wide eyes, and quick movements reflect his impulsive and energetic nature. This contrasts with Doc's calm and steady behavior, which indicates emotional maturity and control.

In the sociological aspect, the scene highlights the different backgrounds of the two characters. McQueen comes from a world of fame and attention, where success is measured by trophies and recognition. He is amazed by Doc's past victories and struggles to understand why Doc does not take pride in them. Doc, on the other hand, has experienced being forgotten after his accident, which made him see fame as temporary and meaningless. His line, "**All I see is a bunch of empty cups,**" reflects his disillusionment. This moment begins to shift McQueen's view of success and personal value.

In the psychological aspect, McQueen starts to admire Doc, but only because of his achievements. He is eager to learn from him, yet still focuses on fame rather than understanding Doc's emotional past. Doc's quiet pain shows a deeper emotional experience that McQueen does not yet grasp. However, this moment marks the beginning of McQueen's emotional development and helps him move toward becoming a more thoughtful and caring character.

Data 2

[Gas bell rings]

Sheriff: Hey! What are you doin'?

Sally: It's OK. You can trust me, right?

Sheriff: I trust you, all right. It's him I'm worried about.

Sally: Hmm... I trust him. Come on, let's take a drive.

McQueen: A drive?

Sally: Yeah, a drive. Don't you big city racecars ever just take a drive?

McQueen: Ah... **No. No, we don't.**

[Gas pump stops]

Sally: Hey, Stickers! You comin' or what?

Flo: Mm-hm! **And you thought he was gonna run.**

Physiologically, Lightning McQueen's reaction shows that he is confused but also a little curious. When Sally invites him for a drive, he looks surprised and hesitates before replying. His voice sounds softer and more thoughtful than usual. He doesn't respond with jokes or arrogance like before. Instead, he seems calmer and more open. This small change in how he speaks and moves shows that he is beginning to lower his guard and slowly shift his attitude. Unlike his earlier loud and fast-paced behavior, he now takes time to think and notice what's around him. This signals the start of his personal change.

Sociologically, this moment shows that McQueen is starting to adjust to life in Radiator Springs. At first, he didn't respect the town or its people. He thought everything there was too slow and boring. But now, Sally's question about simply enjoying a drive makes him reflect. His short answer, "**No,**" shows that his world never allowed time for calm or enjoyment. Still, he agrees to go with her, which is a new experience for him. The simple drive becomes a symbol of him trying something outside his usual lifestyle. When Flo says, "**And you thought he was gonna run,**" it shows that the townspeople didn't expect him to stay or care. But his choice to go with Sally proves he is slowly earning their trust and becoming more a part of the community.

Psychologically, this scene reveals how McQueen is starting to think differently. He has always been focused on winning and moving fast, with little time for quiet or connection. When he responds to Sally with, "**No. No, we don't,**" it shows that peaceful moments are unfamiliar to him. Sally's kind tone and her ability to gain the Sheriff's trust also help McQueen feel more comfortable. Though he says little, his decision to follow her is important. It shows that he's beginning to trust others and wants to connect more. This marks the early stage of his emotional growth. He is moving away from being selfish and closed-off to becoming someone more open and willing to build relationships.

Data 3

All: Hi, Sally.

Sally: All right, what's goin' on?

Mater: Ladies and gentlecars, please welcome **the new Lightning McQueen!**

McQueen: Pow! What do you think? Radiator Springs looks pretty good on me.

Sally: I'll say. Ka-chow. You're gonna fit right in in California.

Sally: My goodness. It looks like you've helped everybody in town.

McQueen: **Yeah, everybody except one.**

In this scene, physiologically, the people of Radiator Springs warmly welcome Lightning McQueen, who now appears with a new look that reflects his inner growth. His interaction with Sally and Mater shows that he is no longer focused only on fame or appearance, but is starting to build real connections with those around him. Physiologically, his new paint job, inspired by Radiator Springs, represents a meaningful change. When Mater introduces him as “**the new Lightning McQueen,**” it signals more than just a fresh design, it shows a shift in how he is seen by others and how he sees himself. His relaxed voice and steady posture reveal a calmer, more grounded version of himself. He is no longer the flashy racer obsessed with winning, but someone who feels proud to be part of something bigger.

Sociologically, McQueen is no longer an outsider in the town. At the beginning of the film, the townsfolk were distant and unsure of him, but now they accept him as one of their own. Sally and Mater’s lighthearted welcome, along with the reactions of other characters, show that McQueen has earned their trust and affection.

Sally’s line about him fitting in California suggests that he can now carry the values he learned in Radiator Springs wherever he goes. His willingness to help others in the town further reflects this change. He is not just living for himself anymore but has become a part of the community.

Psychologically, this moment highlights how much McQueen’s mindset has changed. Early in the story, he was focused only on winning and being the best. Now, when Sally tells him he has helped everyone in town, and he replies, “**Yeah, everybody except one,**” it shows that he is starting to see the bigger picture. He knows he still has more to improve and begins to take responsibility for others. This shows emotional maturity, as he is learning to care, reflect, and grow, not just as a racer, but as a person.

Data 4

Doc: Hey, kid, are you all right?

McQueen: **I don't know, Mack. I don't think I...**

Doc: I didn't come all this way to see you quit.

McQueen: Doc? **Guys, you're here! I can't believe this!**

Doc: I knew you needed a crew chief, but I didn't know it was this bad.

McQueen: You said you'd never come back.

Doc: Well, I really didn't have a choice. Mater didn't get to say goodbye.

Mater: Goodbye! OK, I'm good.

Doc: All right, if you can drive as good as you can fix a road then you can win this race with your eyes shut. Now, get back out there!

Before the final race, Lightning McQueen appears discouraged and unsure of himself. Physiologically, his movements and voice reflect this low energy. When he says, “**I don’t know, Mack. I don’t think I...**,” his tone is soft and hesitant, very different from the confident way he spoke earlier in the film. His posture likely appears slouched or uncertain, showing how defeated he feels inside. However, when he sees Doc Hudson and the other Radiator Springs residents arrive, his mood quickly changes. His surprised and excited response “**Guys, you’re here! I can’t believe this!**” and his more animated body language show how their presence lifts his spirit. Doc’s calm but firm encouragement helps McQueen regain his confidence and prepares him to face the race again.

From a sociological point of view, this moment shows how McQueen has changed in how he relates to others. At first, he was focused only on himself, racing, and fame. He didn’t care about anyone else. But now, the support from the Radiator Springs community means a lot to him. When Doc, Mater, and the others show up, it’s clear that McQueen has built real friendships. Doc’s return to racing just to help McQueen shows their strong connection. Even Mater’s humorous goodbye reflects his genuine care. McQueen is no longer alone. He is now accepted by people who once doubted him, and he accepts them in return. When he chooses Doc as his crew chief and listens to his team, it shows that he values teamwork and support. He is no longer acting only for himself, but as part of a group.

Psychologically, this moment reflects McQueen’s emotional growth. At the start, he believed he had to succeed alone and rejected help from others. But now, he is more open and emotionally honest. When he says, “**You said you’d never come back,**” he expresses how moved he is by Doc’s support. This shows he is learning to trust and appreciate those who care for him. He realizes that strength comes from connection, not just independence. He now wants to race not just for personal victory, but to honor those who helped him grow. His focus has shifted from trophies to gratitude, teamwork, and friendship, proving that he has become a more thoughtful and mature individual.

Data 5

Darrell: Lightning McQueen is gonna win the Piston Cup!

Sally: Come on! You got it! You got it, Stickers!

Chick: I am not comin' in behind you again, old man.

Lynda: Oh, no!

[Breaks screeching] [Engine idling]

Chick: Yeah! Whoo-hoo! I won, baby! Yeah! Oh, yeah!

Flo: What's he up to, Doc?

King: What are you doin', kid?

McQueen: I think The King should finish his last race.

King: You just gave up the Piston Cup, you know that?

McQueen: This grumpy old racecar I know once told me somethin'. **It's just an empty cup.**

Bob: Darrell, is pushing on the last lap legal?

Darrell: He's not really pushin' him. He's just givin' him a little bump draft.

In the physiological aspect, Lightning McQueen's behavior during the final race contrasts sharply with his earlier actions. Once known for his speed and obsession with winning, he now chooses to stop racing to help The King after a crash. His slower, gentle movements as he pushes The King to the finish line reflect care and empathy rather than ambition. His calm actions, without many words, clearly show that he has matured emotionally and physically.

Sociologically, this moment reflects a shift in McQueen's values. By helping The King, he shows respect for others and rejects the win-at-all-costs mindset. Unlike Chick Hicks, who wins through dishonesty and gains no admiration, McQueen earns the crowd's respect through fairness and compassion. This act reflects the influence of Radiator Springs, where he learned the importance of friendship and integrity over fame.

Psychologically, this scene marks McQueen's inner transformation. Previously driven by trophies and fame, he now prioritizes honor and kindness. His statement, "**It's just an empty cup,**" shows that he has internalized Doc Hudson's values. Helping The King finish the race illustrates McQueen's shift from selfishness to selflessness, completing his journey toward emotional growth and maturity.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Lajos Egri's three-dimensional character theory is a valuable framework for analyzing character transformation, even within animated films such as *Cars* (2006). By examining Lightning McQueen's development through physiological, sociological, and psychological aspects, the analysis highlights how character depth can be portrayed effectively in family-oriented media.

However, this research is limited to a single character in one film, which may not fully capture the broader application of Egri's theory across various genres or animation styles. Future studies may expand the scope by comparing multiple characters or films to test the consistency of Egri's model in different storytelling contexts.

The findings of this research have practical applications in literary and film studies, particularly for educators and scholars analyzing character development in narrative media. This

study also demonstrates that even animated films aimed at younger audiences can offer complex character arcs that convey important life values, such as empathy, humility, and community. Further exploration could examine how such character portrayals influence viewers' emotional understanding and ethical perspectives.

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