



Childhood Trauma as a Pathway to Moral Growth: Elsa's Story in *Frozen* (2013)

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Submitted: 13 Nov 2025

Revised: 8 Dec 2025

Accepted: 12 Dec 2025

Abstract. This study examines childhood trauma as a catalyst for moral growth in the character of Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* (2013). Using qualitative descriptive methods, this study analyzes dialogues, scenes, and visual symbols that depict Elsa's psychological conflicts, emotional repression, and moral transformation. This study undertakes a qualitative textual analysis of *Frozen* (2013), with a major focus on key scenes and dialogues depicting trauma and moral evolution. Synthesizing the trauma theory by Caruth, the recovery model by Herman, embodied healing by Van der Kolk, and moral frameworks by Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Tedeschi & Calhoun, the thesis shall trace how psychological suffering advances into ethical growth. This analysis reveals that Elsa's experiences of fear, guilt, and isolation develop into empathy, accountability, and compassion, demonstrating the transformative role of trauma in shaping moral consciousness. These findings suggest that moral growth emerges through a process of acknowledging and integrating trauma rather than avoiding it. Furthermore, this study describes how children's animated films, particularly *Frozen*, can function as cultural narratives that reflect psychological realities and foster an understanding of resilience and ethical maturity. This paper addresses the gap in the literature by integrating trauma and moral development theories in proposing a new interpretive model that explains how animated trauma narratives foster moral and emotional literacy.

Keywords: *childhood trauma, ethics of care, Frozen, moral development, resilience*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi trauma masa kanak-kanak sebagai katalisator pertumbuhan moral tokoh Elsa dalam film *Frozen* (2013). Melalui metode deskriptif kualitatif, studi ini menganalisis dialog, adegan, dan simbol visual untuk membedah konflik psikologis serta transformasi etis karakter. Kerangka teoretis secara komprehensif mengintegrasikan teori trauma (Caruth, Herman, Van der Kolk) dengan perspektif perkembangan moral (Kohlberg, Gilligan, Tedeschi & Calhoun) guna melacak transisi penderitaan menjadi pertumbuhan etis yang signifikan. Analisis mengungkapkan bahwa pengalaman isolasi, ketakutan, dan rasa bersalah Elsa secara bertahap berevolusi menjadi empati, tanggung jawab, dan belas kasihan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kematangan moral muncul melalui proses pengakuan dan integrasi trauma, bukan melalui penghindaran emosional. Selain itu, kajian ini mengilustrasikan fungsi film animasi sebagai narasi budaya yang merefleksikan realitas psikologis serta memupuk ketahanan dan kedewasaan etis pada audiens. Dengan mensintesis teori trauma dan moral, penelitian ini menawarkan model interpretatif baru dalam memahami bagaimana narasi animasi memfasilitasi literasi emosional. Kontribusi utama makalah ini terletak pada pengisian celah literatur mengenai peran transformatif penderitaan dalam membentuk kesadaran moral yang kokoh pada media populer.

Kata Kunci: *trauma masa kanak-kanak, etika perawatan, film Frozen, perkembangan moral, ketahanan*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma is defined as a painful or distressing emotional experience that a child experiences throughout their life and has a long-term impact on their psychophysiological well-being. Studies show that adverse events that occur in the early stages of a child's life, such as violence, child neglect, or dysfunctional families, usually leave deep psychological scars on a person. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in four adults report having experienced at least one form of childhood violence, indicating that violence occurs in all societies.

This study draws on a focused theoretical lens combining trauma and moral development frameworks. Caruth's (1996) concept of repetition and belatedness explains how Elsa's early trauma resurfaces throughout her emotional journey, while Herman's (1992) stages of recovery moving from denial to reconnection, illuminate her healing process. Van der Kolk's (2014) notion of embodied healing further links Elsa's emotional reintegration to physical expression through her powers. On the moral dimension, Kohlberg's (1981) model of justice-oriented reasoning and Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care together frame Elsa's transformation from fear-driven isolation to empathy and relational responsibility. Through this synthesis, the study operationalizes trauma and moral development as interdependent forces shaping Elsa's psychological and ethical growth.

This reality is clearly recorded in the story of Elsa from the Disney film *Frozen* (2013), where her childhood isolation and emotional repression form the foundation for inner conflict, moral awakening, and empathy. Elsa's story shows that suffering can be a path to moral and emotional growth if pain is acknowledged and overcome. When understood more broadly in cultural studies, children's films are not merely a form of entertainment; they need to be seen as sites of cultural pedagogy and also spaces where social, moral, and psychological meanings are created and transmitted. As Henry Giroux (1999, 2021) points out, Disney strives to maintain itself as an "educational machine" that fosters cultural understanding of family, morality, gender, and identity across generations. Through trauma, recovery, and moral transformation, Disney films engage in pedagogy that both reflects and reproduces societal values. For example, in *Finding Nemo* (2003), loss and resilience emerge as signals of emotional maturity that parallel the same moral arc seen in *Frozen*. Thus, children's animation provides a valuable lens through which to examine how contemporary society narrates trauma and healing in the moral imagination of popular culture. While previous studies have examined either the psychological recovery or the moral symbolism in *Frozen*, they rarely address how childhood trauma functions simultaneously as a psychological burden and a catalyst for moral development in a single character. This study therefore asks how Elsa's childhood trauma in *Frozen* (2013) operates as a pathway to moral growth, integrating trauma theory and moral development frameworks in a single analytical model.

Building on Giroux's (1999, 2021) view of Disney films as forms of cultural pedagogy, this study narrows its focus to *Frozen* (2013) to explore how trauma narratives operate as both psychological and moral education within animation. Recent scholarship has highlighted the increasing psychological depth and moral agency of Disney's female protagonists (Zurcher, 2019; Liao, 2020), providing a foundation for examining Elsa's journey as a model of moral awakening through adversity. From a trauma perspective, Chen and Lin (2020) argue that *Frozen* offers a symbolic space for processing emotional pain, while Rahma and Indriastuti (2021) interpret Elsa's development through the lens of post-traumatic growth proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Similarly, Garcia (2022) positions *Frozen* as a moral allegory that transforms suffering into ethical

awareness and emotional literacy. However, these studies largely separate trauma's psychological dimension from its moral implications. Addressing this gap, the present study integrates trauma frameworks from Caruth, Herman, and Van der Kolk with moral development theories from Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Tedeschi & Calhoun to provide a holistic reading of Elsa's transformation, showing how childhood trauma operates simultaneously as a source of psychological struggle and a pathway to moral growth. This study analyzes the narrative and visual forms of childhood trauma experienced by Elsa in *Frozen* (2013) and explains how these experiences function as catalysts for her moral growth and ethical transformation. By integrating trauma theory with justice-based and care-based models of moral development, the article proposes a holistic framework for understanding trauma as a moral resource in contemporary animation, extending existing work that treats psychological and moral dimensions separately.

METHODS

This study employs a theoretically informed thematic analysis of Disney's *Frozen* (2013). By integrating Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic phases with narrative film analysis conventions, the research examines plot structures, character arcs, and key symbolic turning points that represent psychological and moral shifts.

The primary dataset consists of 15 key sequences from *Frozen* (2013) that explicitly depict Elsa's traumatic experiences, emotional responses, and moral deliberations. These sequences were identified through a two-stage viewing process based on three inclusion criteria:

1. Representation of the childhood accident and its long-term consequences.
2. Presence of visual or verbal markers of fear, guilt, or isolation.
3. Explicit instances of moral decision-making or ethical reflection.

The analysis followed five stages: repeated viewing/familiarization, thematic coding of traumatic events, moral mapping, interpretive synthesis, and literature triangulation. To provide a multidimensional reading, the study synthesizes three psychological frameworks: Caruth's (1996) repetition theory, Herman's (1992) recovery model, and Van der Kolk's (2014) theory of embodied healing.

Moral evolution was mapped by applying Kohlberg's (1981) justice-based reasoning (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional stages) alongside Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) post-traumatic growth framework was employed as the overarching bridge between psychological recovery and moral transformation.

The researcher acted as the primary instrument, utilizing reflexive thematic analysis and analytic memos to mitigate confirmation bias. As the study utilizes a commercially available film, formal institutional ethical approval was not required. The analysis respects the intellectual property rights of Walt Disney Animation Studios. While the single-film design limits statistical generalizability, the study aims for theoretical transferability by illustrating the applicability of trauma and moral frameworks to animated narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that Elsa's moral transformation follows a clear psychological trajectory from repression to post-traumatic growth. These developments can be organized into sequential phases that correspond to shifts in moral reasoning and emotional awareness. As summarized in Table 1 (entries 1–3), Elsa's early experiences center on guilt, repression, and obedience-based morality, forming a pre-moral, fear-

driven foundation for her later transformation. In contrast, the final sequences (entries 12–15) illustrate post-traumatic growth and moral integration, visually represented through the thawing of Arendelle.

Table 1. Phases of Elsa's Psychological and Moral Transformation in Frozen (2013)

No	Scene / Timestamp	Event Description	Psychological Meaning	Moral Development Stage
1	00:05:10–00:07:00	Childhood accident injuring Anna	Formation of guilt and repression	Pre-moral stage; trauma origin
2	00:08:20–00:09:00	Parents command “Conceal, don’t feel”	Emotional suppression and avoidance	Obedience-based morality (fear-driven)
3	00:10:10–00:11:00	Anna sings outside Elsa’s door	Symbolic isolation and emotional freezing	Disconnection from empathy
4	00:31:40–00:33:00	Coronation anxiety	Fear of exposure and relapse	Fragile self-control
5	00:34:20–00:36:00	Power exposure and panic	Repetition compulsion of trauma	Defensive withdrawal
6	00:36:30–00:38:00	Escape to the mountains	Physical and emotional isolation	Avoidance of social contact
7	00:39:00–00:41:30	“Let It Go” and palace creation	Illusion of freedom through avoidance	Pseudo-liberation (denial)
8	00:40:00–00:42:00	Solitude in the palace	Internalized guilt and fragmentation	Moral stagnation
9	00:50:10–00:51:30	Anna reunites with Elsa	Reconnection and empathy reemerge	Beginning of healing
10	01:09:00–01:10:30	Elsa imprisoned	Acknowledgment of consequences	Conventional morality (responsibility)
11	01:20:10–01:21:40	Elsa runs to save Anna	Altruism and courage over fear	Post-conventional morality
12	01:22:00–01:23:30	Elsa embraces frozen Anna	Emotional reconciliation; compassion fully restored	Moral integration and maturity
13	00:35:00–00:36:00	Arendelle begins freezing	Visual metaphor of Elsa’s emotional paralysis	Trauma externalization
14	00:55:00–00:56:30	Arendelle’s deep freeze worsens	Intensification of suppressed emotions; symbolic crisis	Moral disequilibrium
15	01:23:00–01:23:20	Thawing of Arendelle	Symbol of healing, renewal, and re-integration	Post-traumatic growth

As summarized in Table 1 (entries 1–3), Elsa's early experiences are consistently framed around guilt, repression, and obedience-based morality, which establish a fear-

driven pre-moral foundation. In the middle of the film (entries 4–8), avoidance and emotional stagnation dominate, illustrating how trauma perpetuates moral paralysis and isolation. The final stages (entries 9–15) show a gradual shift toward empathy, responsibility, and care, aligning with post-conventional morality and post-traumatic growth. These patterns collectively illustrate the trajectory from repression to moral reintegration, supporting the study's argument that trauma serves as a catalyst for ethical transformation.

The findings show that Elsa's trauma-driven moral development cannot be fully explained through a hierarchical, justice-based model of morality alone. Instead, her transformation reveals that care, vulnerability, and relational responsibility are central to post-traumatic moral growth. The results of this study indicate that Elsa's experiences of childhood trauma do not merely shape her emotional reactions but construct a developmental pathway that evolves from fear-driven moral reasoning toward relational and empathic ethics. Throughout the film, trauma first appears as repression, avoidance, and emotional numbing, consistent with Caruth's (1996) conceptualization of trauma as a recurring, unresolved experience. These reactions are reinforced by parental directives, aligning with Herman's (1992) description of enforced silence and disconnection as early coping strategies among trauma survivors. Elsa's construction of the ice palace exemplifies what Van der Kolk (2014) terms emotional withdrawal, a protective yet ultimately restrictive defense that isolates the self from both pain and connection.

This study found that Elsa's childhood trauma became her moral growth journey in the film. By combining trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; Bessel Van Der Kolk, 2014) with moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) to analyze this study. Each piece of data collected illustrates the trauma Elsa experienced gradually, from suppression and avoidance to empathy, responsibility, and moral integration.

1. Phase I: Childhood Trauma and Emotional Suppression

Elsa first experiences trauma when she accidentally injures her younger sister (Data 1, 00:05:10 – 00:07:00), triggering feelings of guilt and fear that shape her early emotional patterns. Afterwards, her parents reinforce emotional repression by instructing her to “Conceal, don't feel” (Data 2, 00:08:20 – 00:09:00), a moral directive that equates control with virtue. This moment represents the beginning of emotional suppression and the internalization of fear as a coping mechanism.

The effects of repression deepen when Elsa isolates herself both physically and emotionally (Data 3, 00:10:10 – 00:11:00). Anna's repeated call, “Do you want to build a snowman?”, symbolizes the breakdown of communication and the persistence of unprocessed trauma. Across these early sequences, Elsa's behavior such as withdrawal, silence, and self-blame reflects the first phase of her traumatic trajectory, characterized by emotional suppression and moral rigidity.

These patterns outline the initial stage of Elsa's psychological and moral journey, which will be further discussed in relation to trauma theory and moral development frameworks in the following section.

2. Phase II: Adult Re-enactment and Repetition

Elsa's coronation day in scene 4 at 00:31:40 – 00:33:00 depicts Elsa's fragile psychological balance. Fear and anxiety in facing public attention indicate unresolved trauma (Bessel Van Der Holk, 2014). In scene 5 at 00:34:20 – 00:36:00, Anna removes Elsa's gloves, causing Elsa's powers to erupt uncontrollably. This scene illustrates what Caruth (1996) calls repetition compulsion because Elsa's uncontrolled use of her ice powers repeats her earlier childhood accident in both action and emotion. The similarity

between the two moments, where unintended harm is followed by panic and guilt, shows how unresolved trauma continues to resurface unconsciously.

In data 6 at 00:36:30–00:38:00, Elsa's flight into the mountains serves as a representation of two sides of the coin: literally moving outward but, subconsciously, further retreating. In data 7 at 00:39:00–00:41:30, Elsa builds her ice palace as she proclaims, "No right, no wrong, no rules for me," a scene which has come to symbolize emotional release not integrated into one's psyche. Far from depicting healthy healing, the form of expression here aligns more with what Tangney and Dearing (2002) refer to as a shame-avoidant coping mechanism, wherein an individual attempts to find relief from the distress by allowing for temporary emotional discharge while avoiding further vulnerability. This act also captures Lewis's (1971) theory that shame often prompts withdrawal rather than productive self-reflection. In trauma analysis, Van der Kolk (2014) would explain such withdrawal in terms of emotional numbing, a strategy that minimizes pain but unfortunately restricts both the capacity for joy and relational connecting.

3. Phase III: Shame, Isolation, and Illusory Freedom

Data 8 at 00:40:00–00:42:00 illustrates that Elsa's solitude is a paradox in her trauma recovery process because she isolates herself as a means of maintaining control, while the isolation itself perpetuates suffering. The frozen landscape visually depicts this internal desolation. Herman (1992) states that trauma survivors commonly internalize shame and perceive themselves as sources of danger or harm. Elsa's perception of being dangerous by nature epitomizes self-blame and internalized stigma. The lyrics of "Let It Go" articulate the emergence of avoidance through denial and attempted self-liberation, serving as an emotional release rather than a constructive step toward healing. This is consistent with Tangney's (1995) contention that shame-based coping often yields temporary relief while leaving the core wound intact.

4. Phase IV: Reconnection, Responsibility, and Care

In data 9 at 00:50:10 – 00:51:30, Elsa's healing begins with her reunion with Anna in her own ice palace. This event also awakens Elsa's empathy and revives the morals that have been suppressed since childhood. Post-traumatic growth occurs through the reinterpretation of suffering as a moral resource (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Anna's persistence reopens Elsa's emotional side, namely her guilt as a social obligation.

Data 10 at 01:09:00 – 01:10:30, where Elsa's confinement in Arendelle illustrates the transition from avoidance to responsibility. In taking responsibility for her actions and powers, Elsa's moral development can be analyzed through the lens of Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral reasoning. She ascends to the conventional level, where moral judgment is guided not by fear of punishment or pursuit of reward, but by adherence to social rules, justice, and responsibility toward others. This stage reflects Elsa's increasing sense of moral maturity, as her decisions are shaped by internalized principles of duty and fairness rather than impulsive emotional drives.

This development is evident when Elsa chooses to isolate herself in the North Mountain after her powers are revealed. In the scene where she sings "Let It Go", Elsa declares, "Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know... Well, now they know!" This moment signifies her internal conflict between societal expectations and self-acceptance. However, her decision to distance herself from Arendelle, though seemingly self-liberating, is also motivated by a sense of prudence and moral responsibility: she believes that by removing herself, she can prevent harm to others. This action aligns with the "law-and-order orientation" within Kohlberg's conventional stage, where moral reasoning is guided by the maintenance of social order and the welfare of others (Kohlberg, 1981).

Later, when Elsa realizes that her withdrawal has endangered Arendelle, she takes accountability and returns, demonstrating her recognition of moral duty beyond self-interest. Her transformation from fear-driven avoidance to a conscious act of moral responsibility illustrates a progression toward mature conventional morality, in which justice and care coexist as guiding principles of ethical action.

5. Phase V: Altruism and Care Ethics

At the climax, Elsa's moral development is in line with Gilligan's 1982 ethics of care. In data 11 at 01:20:10 – 01:21:40, when Elsa rushes to defend Anna in the midst of the storm, her actions change from protecting herself to truly courageous actions born of empathy. Her statement, "Love will melt," illustrates how trauma becomes compassion. In data 12 at 01:22:00 – 01:23:30, when Elsa embraces Anna, it is a moment of emotional and moral synthesis. Afterwards, in data 14, the melting snow and the return of spring illustrate the restoration of moral harmony and self-integration. According to Van Der Holk (2014), this phase is called physical healing, where emotional peace becomes somatic. Elsa's tears represent her acceptance of vulnerability as a moral strength.

6. Phase VI: Symbolic Transformation and Moral Integration

Data 13-15 shows changes in the environment in Arendelle, providing a visual allegory for Elsa's emotional inner transformation. Freezing represents emotional paralysis, while melting represents moral renewal. The change in costume and lighting from cold blue to warm colors depicts a story of reintegration and growth. Sanders (2018) comments that through the film *Frozen* (2013), Disney redefines heroism to position emotional vulnerability as a moral strength, rejecting the patriarchal portrayal of stoic femininity.

Through Elsa's journey, the film *Frozen* (2013) develops a pedagogical narrative that familiarizes viewers with emotional literacy, resilience, and moral responsibility. Her transformation illustrates the fact that trauma is no longer a personal burden but a moral resource once it is acknowledged and integrated. In this context, suffering functions as moral pedagogy when pain is transformed into empathy and isolation into ethical relationships.

A critical dimension emerging from the findings is the transition in Elsa's moral reasoning. Early in the narrative, Elsa's decisions reflect Kohlberg's (1981) justice-based morality, notably Stage 3 and Stage 4, where behavior is guided by rules, obedience, and a rigid sense of responsibility. Her isolation, fear of hurting others, and adherence to parental injunctions emphasize a morality rooted in duty and external expectations rather than internal agency. However, the turning point—especially in her interactions with Anna during the confrontation in the palace and the final sacrificial act—showcases a movement beyond rule-based reasoning.

This shift marks the entrance of Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care, emphasizing relational responsibility, empathy, and emotional attunement. Elsa's moral development certainly cannot be explained by Kohlberg's hierarchical cognitive model; rather, her development concurs with Gilligan's critique that moral reasoning is not a development toward abstract justice but, rather, is situated in relational contexts. The findings suggest that Elsa's journey critiques the limitations of Kohlberg's theory by showing that moral maturity does indeed grow not just from logical reasoning but from the restoration of connection and compassion. Her final self-sacrifice in Anna's behalf illustrates the very highest form of care-based morality, whereby ethical action rises from relational understanding rather than from rule compliance.

By integrating both frameworks, this study shows that trauma recovery is not merely emotional but structurally moral. Elsa's transformation is a perfect example of

post-traumatic growth as explained by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), where adversity leads to increased empathy, relational depth, and ethical awareness. Ultimately, the interaction of justice-based and care-based models offers a more complex reading than either framework in isolation. The value of this study, therefore, lies in its ability to demonstrate that Elsa's character arc reconciles two seemingly competitive moral theories: she begins within the confines of rule-based morality but ultimately transcends it through relational ethics, suggesting that trauma can serve as a bridge between cognitive and affective dimensions of moral development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that childhood trauma, while often associated with pain and dysfunction, can also serve as a transformative force that fosters moral awareness, empathy, and resilience. The analysis shows that trauma and moral development are best understood through an integrated lens that connects trauma theory with justice and care based models of moral reasoning. Rather than treating trauma as purely psychological damage, *Frozen* portrays it as a catalyst for ethical growth and relational maturity.

The study identifies three key shifts in Elsa's moral orientation: from fear based obedience to conventional responsibility, and finally to relationally grounded care. These transitions are visually and narratively expressed through recurring symbols of freezing and thawing, which externalize Elsa's movement from repression and isolation toward connection and compassion. In doing so, the film reveals how moral reasoning and emotional recovery are intertwined processes that transform suffering into empathy and ethical responsibility.

While this research offers theoretical and interpretive insights, it remains limited to the textual analysis of a single film. Because the analysis draws from a specific synthesis of trauma and moral development theories, its conclusions are interpretive rather than generalizable. Future studies could examine audience reception or apply this framework to other protagonists, particularly male characters, to explore whether similar patterns of trauma recovery and moral reasoning appear across gender representations. Ultimately, Elsa's journey demonstrates how confronting trauma can reorient moral agency from rule based self protection toward relational responsibility, suggesting that contemporary animation plays a crucial role in narrating trauma as a pathway to ethical growth rather than as mere damage.

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