

Media Analysis: Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

Anime and the Kid Hero Fantasy

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Anime calls attention to norms that we have in our own societies. One way anime confronts these norms is by displaying a story's sole faith in a child; responsible for saving themselves, others, or the even world. In this case, exploring children in the roles of heroes, anime confronts some of our beliefs surrounding children. This is significant because our understanding impacts the roles that we believe different groups of people should be responsible for. While anime leads us to question our own understanding of children and their abilities, there are significant unrealistic aspects within this confrontation.

Adults in anime usually act as aiding or guiding characters, and anime "is littered with adults playing the role of advisors, who give the heroes bits of information or tools they need in their quests... they notably don't ever take in the children or join in on the quests in order to protect them." (Grave of the Child Hero, Hal Shipman) The significance of this is that the child heroes of anime do not need adults and the nurturing that they are supposed to provide. "The role of the parents is to temper the child's wildness, the natural state, through nurture and discipline." (The Grave of the Child Hero, Shipman)

This is apparent in Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Spirited Away*. Main character and heroine Chihiro, basically is dependent on herself for survival, with no aid from any adults. To connect this to the real world and dig into a deeper rooted message of anime overall, one must consider what these nontraditional roles of children and parents mean. The polar opposites of kids in anime and kids in real life displays a deeper thought within anime, but also our own practices and understandings within our own society as human beings. Anime reveals a lot about people's abilities, especially children. Is it so crazy of a fantasy to trust children?

Hal Shipman notes one example of these unrealistic aspects in his article *Grave of the Child Hero*:

"While there are cases such as Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away, where the goal of the child's journey is to save her parents (whose absence is part of the plot), the dangers of

unaccompanied travel are ignored, at best. One might believe that there would be no problems in running away from home.” (Grave of the Child Hero, Shipman)

This is one of the many aspects one would see neglected in anime: the nature of kids as naive. However, as Shipman is pointing to, anime tends to ignore the issues one might be anticipating the protagonist to be faced with. This is significant because it is the way in which kid heroes in anime are problematized. Anime typically does not display what could potentially go wrong for a child on this journey. Often, we witness the child hero successfully complete their task.

Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* is a strong and clear example of the unacknowledged dangers kid heroes face, but somehow always overcome. Protagonist Chihiro is a young girl who is tasked with saving her parents from being turned into pigs forever after they eat food that isn't theirs. Overall Chihiro is a good person, kid, and daughter. "Chihiro is confronted with situations which challenge her physically, socially and psychologically in addition to her understanding of reality." (*The Spiriting Away of Chihiro: Miyazaki's Global Heroine*, Cassi) She shows this along her journey where she chooses to help others, including friends, enemies, and elders. Each of Chihiro's choices to save someone else along the way of her overarching goal to save her parents ends the way in which she hoped for. In saving Haku, a friend she makes, she chooses to do the right thing in hopes that it will save him: returning the seal that Haku stole from Zeniba, his boss's identical sister. By doing the right thing, Chihiro ends up saving Haku and returning Zeniba's property. Chihiro grows as a character throughout the film, however, she reveals the very prominent unrealistic aspect of everything going right for a kid hero.

Kids as heroes is an aspect of fantasy because in the majority of popular culture there is often an adult who plays the role of the hero or protagonist. This is the norm. Some series have teenagers such as Peter Parker as Spider-Man, but rarely do we witness children ages younger than 16 as the hero of a story. In contrast to the norms of western popular culture, anime utilizes children as the main hero and character. The age differences of main characters and heroes is

significant, and alters the story of the anime. This common feature seen in anime brings about many questions. An interesting and important aspect of kids in these roles is the aspect of dependency that the anime has on the children. Of all age groups, children are typically seen as the group least likely to be trusted or depended on for any serious matter. To see the absolute opposite occur in anime, calls into question the importance of children and the roles that they play; in life, stories, film, and more.

The heroic role that we so often see children play in anime shapes the story moving forward. To change the character playing the hero of a story drastically shifts the journey that the character goes through, and the goal they are aiming to reach, and the outcome of it in the end. There is much to be said about the preference of children over adults as the heroes in anime. What do children have that adults do not? To explore this it is also important to consider the limitlessness of anime. Anime as a genre, firstly, makes kid heroes possible. Anime enables all of these extreme fantasies such as superpowers and children as heroes. Anime is a medium of entertainment and art that encourages boundary pushing and new ideas. Children in the roles of heroes is certainly one of those. Because this is something abnormal in real life and even in western popular culture, kids as heroes in anime can be categorized as a fantasy.

In all anime, like most other forms of entertainment, a structure is followed. Anime typically very quickly introduces a problem, and following that, somebody who is faced with solving that problem. Anime depends on “an adolescent, who is thrust into a dire situation and sometimes even responsible for saving the world.” (Grave of the Child Hero, Shipman) The significance of this character and problem trope is the trust that is put into the adolescent faced with saving the world. While this task of saving the world, and all of the tasks it includes for the hero along the way, appears to be a large ordeal, anime assigning this responsibility to a child hero lessens its gravity. Throughout the anime we often see the child succeed in these tasks almost always without consequence. This always successful journey that we see so often in

anime also aids in making the problem less serious, and classifying the story of the child hero as a fantasy.

Hal Shipman's analysis of the child hero trope addresses the roles of kids and adults and the relationships between them in anime. In a way, the adults in anime serve as motivational characters for the child. This motivation however is usually in the form of doubt and lack of attention for the child or their problems, and their ideas or solutions. In response to the lack of attention or abundance of negative attention, "these young heroes take action on their own", and "succeed specifically in spite of the adults." (Grave of the Child Hero, Shipman) The natural role and characteristics of a child from philosophers Locke and Descartes that Shipman references distinctly oppose their characters and their abilities in anime. Children in real life are referred to and understood as innocent, helpless, and in need of nurturing. This nature of children is confronted in almost any anime one could watch. Most often, a series or film follows a growing and coming of age storyline. This is true for a lot of anime. In this, we are introduced to the child hero in a commonly understood child-like manner. Throughout their journey in completing their task, the child is then seen growing more into the hero of the story, with more adult-like characteristics.

Spirited Away is a vivid and obvious example of these fantasy characteristics of anime. Miyazaki utilizes not only a young child, but a girl. The audience not only witnesses defying the limits of ages for heroes, but also gender. In the analytical essay *The Spiriting Away of Chihiro: Miyazaki's Global Heroine*, author Cari Callis writes, "Hayao Miyazaki speaks directly to Japanese women of all ages with specific reference to those who make the final transformation in their personal Heroines Journey's by connecting to their spiritual awareness through nature." (*The Spiriting Away of Chihiro: Miyazaki's Global Heroine*, Callis)

Chihiro is a special and capable character. Like any child, she experiences nerves and doubts herself. However, considering her situation and responsibilities of saving her parents and herself from an unknown town, she does pretty well. "It's through surmounting these challenges

that this little Japanese girl becomes a capable person.” (*Hayao Miyazaki*, Tom Mes) The audience is introduced fairly early on in the film to Chihiro as clearly a child, but one who contains a different sense of maturity. She surpasses her parents in good decision making, as she refuses to join them in eating food that is not theirs. Chihiro’s display of maturity makes her the perfect embodiment of a hero. While this is true, Chihiro’s mature characteristics, which enable her to become the heroine, also contribute to the aspect of fantasy that exists within the film *Spirited Away*, the trope of kids playing heroes and heroines, and the broader genre of anime.

Works Cited

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