

Heather O'Connell  
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Use of Fantasy to Convey Psychological Development in Miyazaki Hayao's Films  
Final Essay

Miyazaki Hayao's films are famous both inside and outside of Japan. According to *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, by Susan J. Napier, his works are known for two main distinct characteristics; beautifully animated worlds and memorable heroines. Miyazaki's female protagonists exemplify strong character traits such as bravery, curiosity, and perseverance in situations that traditionally belong to male protagonists. His worlds, although imaginary, have enough ties to reality in the details that viewers can feel the connection and "believability." By using such blatantly fictional universes and atypical female protagonists, Miyazaki can easily highlight the non-fictional elements and universal human narratives for his viewers. Miyazaki's use of fantastical worlds to express his female characters' psychological development throughout the course of their stories is a prime example of this method.

In *My Neighbor Totoro*, as two sisters face difficult times, their mental strain and eventual triumph is exhibited in the various creatures they encounter throughout the film. At the beginning, when Satsuki and Mei are first exploring their new, supposedly haunted house, many small dustbunny creatures called "kurosuke" appear, but as soon as the house becomes full of light and laughter, they disappear. If the viewer takes the creatures that appear in the film as constructs of the girls' imagination, as Shimizu Yoshiyuki believes, then the kurosuke are manifestations of their worries and doubts, which is why the magical dustbunnies disappear when the girls begin to feel more at ease in their new home. Totoro himself can be thought of as a fictional creature created to ease their loneliness, such as when Mei first encounters him while her father is busy working and later when both sisters are waiting by themselves at the bus stop. At the end of the film, Satsuki calling upon Totoro and the cat bus to assist her in finding her sister, rather than them revealing themselves to her, can be interpreted as Satsuki actively using her own imagination and mental strength as a technique to deal with the situation. This depiction of the girls' ability to cope with their worries, loneliness, and various psychological strain through magical creatures is Miyazaki's way of telling what could be a real-life story through the lens of a magical, imaginary world.

In contrast, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which is set in a world where magic is not imaginary, depicts the story of Kiki learning to believe in herself through the loss and return of her magical powers. In this story, Kiki is undergoing the emotional turmoil of her coming-of-age year, where she must learn to live on her own. Miyazaki illustrates her mental strain and lack of self-confidence with the loss of her powers, which only return once she decides to push aside her doubts and believe in herself. Napier suggests that there is a clear connection between Miyazaki's use of flight and empowerment in his heroines, therefore the loss of Kiki's innate flying ability can be construed as her inability to empower herself.

Furthermore, becoming unable to converse with Jiji even after the return of her flying powers can be seen as evidence of her newfound self-reliance in that she no longer needs the constant aid of her companion. Miyazaki illustrates the connection between Kiki's magical powers and her mental state in order to showcase her transformation into a confident, self-reliant witch.

*Howl's Moving Castle* is another film with established magic, but rather than a heroine who practices magic, the heroine is cursed by magic and is only able to conquer the curse after she accepts both herself and her emotions. At the beginning of the movie, Sophie was living day to day without any passion in her life as if she had given up on trying to achieve anything more than what she had already attained. Becoming a 90-year-old woman suited Sophie's resigned personality, but even though she found a level of peace and freedom under the curse, had yet to find acceptance or passion within herself so the curse remained. It was not until Sophie became impassioned about Howl's safety that the curse began to break down and she looked young again for a moment, revealing that she was starting to be true to herself and her desires to want more from life. She returns to her youthful appearance again when passionately asking Howl what she can do to help, which shows that she no longer wants to be the resigned old woman under the curse. However, she immediately reverts to her cursed appearance when Howl says she is beautiful, which is a sign that she still did not accept herself, even if she had already realized her passions. It is only at the end of the film, after she played a crucial role in saving her friends, that Sophie accepts herself entirely and breaks the curse for good. Further evidence that the curse is a representation of Sophie's psychological state, is that her hair remains grey even after the curse is conquered, because the whole experience of finding herself is the type of significant event that leaves a mark on one's mind; in this depiction, the "mark" is the "aftereffect" of the curse. Miyazaki uses the magic of the curse to symbolize Sophie's development from resigned to confident.

Lastly, the various encounters within Chihiro's journey in *Spirited Away* represent her mental transition from being unhappy about moving, to accepting her new life and pushing forward. At the beginning of the film, Chihiro gets stuck in the spirit world, which could be a representation of how she wants her life to stay the same. Giving up her name to Yubaba with the warning from Haku to never forget her name is similar to Chihiro moving on from her past life, but not forgetting her memories from the past. When Chihiro is ordered to tend to the "stink spirit," who is actually the spirit of a polluted river, she has to trudge through all the repulsive muck in order to help him, which is similar to dealing with the messiness of settling into a new life after moving. For persevering and working hard to clean the stink spirit, Chihiro receives a token from the revitalized river spirit. This can be seen as a metaphor about the benefits of creating a new life; working through all the difficulties of moving may be extremely difficult, but afterward there will be benefits. At the end of the film, Chihiro's ability to see through Yubaba's trick with her parents is the final proof that Chihiro's mental state is stabilized and that she had become a clear-headed individual. Chihiro is able to leave the spirit world because she is no longer steadfastly against moving and has already triumphed over the various hurdles of moving to a new town.

Miyazaki Hayao's use of magic and fantasy in his constructed fictional worlds in order to illustrate the psychological development of his female protagonists can be seen in these four films. Although each of the films have very different stories and settings, the symbolism of the magical elements in regard to the protagonist's mental state is clear. The sisters' imagined creatures in *My Neighbor Totoro* showcase their use of imagination to cope with troubles in reality, while Kiki's fluctuating powers in *Kiki's Delivery Service* symbolize her issues with self-confidence as she comes of age. Conquering the curse in *Howl's Moving Castle* is a representation of Sophie's acceptance of herself, and Chihiro's misadventures in *Spirited Away* directly relate to her personal issues with moving. While these films can be enjoyed simply for their incredibly detailed worlds and memorable characters, by becoming aware of the symbolism, viewers can further appreciate Miyazaki's works and build stronger connections between the fiction and reality illustrated through his storytelling.

Works Cited

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