

# Grave of the fireflies

## – review essay



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Released in 1988, Grave of the Fireflies is the story of Seita and his younger sister Setsuko, who lost their mother and father through different events of World War II.

As a result they are forced to try to survive, any way they can, though their efforts are finally lost when Setsuko dies of malnutrition, and Seita dies not long after. It's based on a semi-autobiographic book by the same name, whose author lost his sister due to malnutrition in 1945 during the war. The main value shown throughout the film is the endorsement of family, illustrated through the ever-growing relationship of Seita and Setsuko. The film provides an insight into Japanese culture, by showing the battle between those who subvert traditional roles in families and community, and those who fight to maintain them, such as Seita's aunt.

There is also the question of moral ambiguity. In the film, family is viewed as the most crucial relationship people could have, as it provided necessities such as love, support and survival in body and spirit in a time of crisis. One could not survive during the war without the support of others, and the bonds between family members were very strong. Traditionally, Japan emphasised lineal and instrumental ties within a family, rather than emotional, which explains Seita taking complete responsibility for Setsuko. But the movie also pulls on the heart strings, showing the growing relationship between Seita and Setsuko, and how much they love each other.

The dying words of Setsuko: " Seita. Thank you", shows just how strong their connection is, and their love for one another, in those simple words. The value of certain traditional roles in family and society, in the film, are

undermined during the time of crisis. We see the desire to maintain traditional roles. However, these roles become irrelevant during times of crisis and others must step up to fill the holes. Examples throughout the film are things like some of the first scenes, when, after an air raid, the injured are taken to the school, which is set up as a hospital.

Education is moved aside, to deal with more important things. Also, when Seita asks the farmer if he could sell him some of his food. The farmer, traditionally one of the main providers of food for the community, can't even afford to give food to two children. He barely has enough for himself. Though negative, it shows what people must do to survive in a time of crisis. Moral? No, but it is necessary.

Another example is Seita's aunt. She is trying very hard to keep the traditional roles of family in play, with her husband going off to work each day, and her daughter at school. She criticises Seita for lazing around all the time, for not working or fighting for his country like his father is. But in reality, Seita is doing a lot of work, for a boy his age. He is taking care of Setsuko, who is only a child, which is a big responsibility for him.

Seita had dreamed of being a soldier, like his father. But, probably from about the time his father went to war, he was left with his mother who had a heart condition, and a young child to take care of. And though it would have been very hard, he could have fulfilled his dream of going off to war. But he chose to stay, and care for his remaining family. Then, when his mother died, he had an even harder job of being the sole carer of Setsuko. This all relates,

not only to how certain roles in society change in difficult circumstances, but to the strong bonds of family mentioned before.

Seita provides the love and support that Setsuko needs to deal with the loss of her parents and the scarring images of war, as well as caring for her physical needs as best he can. Through Seita's story, the film illustrates the tragedies of World War II and what many Japanese people had to suffer through. They lost a lot, but what remained with them was their patriotism for their country, and pride; which, in the end, was nullified anyway. Japan's pride caused great damage to the nation.

The war had been going on for a while, but in 1943, Japanese leaders realised that the war was probably lost. They ended up wanting to stop, they just didn't know how to. It was a case of "Once you get in, you can't get out because pride is on the line". This resulted in more unnecessary ; of people. Seita's pride reflected the pride of Japan during the war.

Upon leaving his aunt's house and realising that he can't survive without her support, he decides not to return, and stick with what he's got. His pride gets in the way of his rational thought process, because he knew he couldn't take care of Setsuko alone. Audience reactions to certain sections of the movie weren't the same. Different cultures saw things in the way that they thought was right. For example, when the film was shown to a Japanese audience, people sympathized and agreed with Seita's choice to not return to his aunt.

This reflected on the pride of their nation, and how they've been brought up; to keep their pride. Whereas when the film was shown to an American or Australian audience, people thought Seita's decision was foolish, and that he

should have returned to his aunt, for the well being of him and Setsuko. The film has a way of conveying its message without stating that there are good guys and bad guys, or heroes and villains, or “our side versus the enemy”. Instead, the enemy is the indifference that war causes, and the pride which can blind people of their humanity. The main focus isn't on the war, but on the personal journeys, and the suffering which was initially caused by the war, but furthered by pride and arrogance. It's more of an anti-war film, since the opponent is the war itself.