

The themes and ideas of spirited away

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Spirited Away is one of the most famous and interesting Japanese films of all time. This film, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki, was the most famous of his work, which says a lot based on the tremendous amounts of success he's achieved throughout his career. This movie received high acclaims universally during its release, leading to it becoming the highest grossing film in Japanese history. Although on the surface this movie seems to be quite unusual and confusing at times, it contains so many thematic elements that can be analyzed when you look deeper into them. This movie is uniquely full of imagination, and has elements to it that are truly captivating for all audiences.

Hayao Miyazaki is widely regarded as one of Japan's greatest animation directors, earning the nickname of "The Japanese Walt Disney". His films are known for their entertaining plots, the compelling characters, and the "breathtaking" animation in them. Hayao Miyazaki has several trademarks that are present in almost all of his films, including having a young protagonist or children play significant roles in the plot, references to environmentalism and pollution created by humans, including flying in the action sequences, and having the human protagonists enter an unusual land that is inaccessible or forbidden to the outside world. Additionally, there are often two main characters, male and female, one of which having an unusual past or a magical power, they are often set in European cities with Japanese influence added, and there are also scenes involving labor or recognition towards working-class people with women and children offering assistance. Therefore, Spirited Away can be categorized as a typical movie for Hayao

Miyazaki, as it includes every one of these trademarks that are constant within his work.

One very important theme that was a major plot point of this movie was the importance of one's name. Yubaba taking away Chihiro's name signified her initial enslavement at the bathhouse, as a way of stripping her from her identity. However, remembering one's name was the key for Chihiro's escape, and Haku tells her that if she doesn't she will be trapped in the spirit world forever. The power of a name is that it is the one word that defines a person, and although Chihiro had lost that by becoming Sen, she needed to hold onto that in order to remember the qualities that make her who she truly is. Haku is used as an example of the danger that comes with forgetting one's identity, and only through Chihiro is he able to regain his identity and become free. Names are a fundamental factor of the power struggle in the spirit world, as the people with the most power maintain control by stealing and changing others' names, and only those with the inner strength to hold onto their own identities will be able to set themselves free.

The power of words also plays a big role to the characters in this film. When Chihiro is first introduced to the spirit world, she is warned repeatedly by Haku to use her words to get herself a job and not get distracted. Chihiro insists her way into a getting job by not listening to how many times she got denied, and she learns to use her words carefully in order to get what she wants from Yubaba, and essentially saves herself in the process.

Additionally, by only saying the right things, she was able to successfully save others by not disclosing that the assistance that Haku, Lin, and Kamaji

gave her. This importance placed on one's words shows how powerful they can really be, and how careful you must be when choosing them.

Another important thematic aspect of Spirited Away is the way the film blurs the line of good and evil. At the start of the film, the characters appear to be very clear cut as good and bad. However, as the plot of the film develops, we start to see the other sides of these characters in how they influence Chihiro's pursuit to escape. Characters like Haku and No-Face appearing to be good when we first encounter them, but end up revealing their evil qualities later on. Meanwhile, characters such as Zeniba, Kamaji, and Lin seem to be unpleasant at first, but eventually play a big role in helping Chihiro escape. The character who goes through the most change in this film is No-Face, as he goes from being innocent at the start to evil after he eats people, then back to good again as Chihiro brings him to Zeniba's house to live with her. Even the clearest cut of characters seems to show different sides to themselves, when the main antagonist Yubaba showing a lighter side to her as she cares for Boh, her baby. This thematic decision is not usually used in the animated film genre, as these movies usually show a clear divide between good and evil. Being able to blur these lines of good and evil and challenge the first impressions we make of these characters provides a great example of these traits in the real world, which is incredibly important for the young target audience to understand.

Spirited Away also subtly explores the shock that comes with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Chihiro's experience in the bathhouse represented her immediate transition into the life of an adult by throwing her

into the world of work. Being inactive and idle is a luxury that comes with childhood, and both Chihiro and Boh demonstrate these traits before they experience any major events. For Chihiro, it's her laying in the backseat of her car as her parents drive her, and for Boh it's always laying around in his pile of pillows while his mother goes out to do her work. These characters both seem to be incapable of doing things independently, and they both have the tendency to complain or whine. When Chihiro first becomes Sen and needs to start her job, she proves herself to be slower and less effective than the other workers. Lin confirms this behavior by saying Sen must have never worked a day in her life. But just like people adjust to the life of work and improve their skillsets, Sen is able to slowly work her way up to becoming an industrious worker, as she's able to take on challenging tasks such as washing the stink spirit. This is another theme that is typically not addressed strongly in films at this age range, making it a unique aspect of Spirited Away.

An important lesson that this film teaches is that everyone makes their own choices that will define who they are. Much of the plot of Spirited Away is influenced by the internal decisions that Chihiro makes to help others, which were her own personal choices that created additional challenges for her to face. At the start of the film, Chihiro is entirely motivated by fear by the unfamiliar and tough environment that she is thrown into. As the plot progresses and other motivations like love and compassion for others come into play, she starts to face additional problems. She starts to face resentment from others due to her desire to not follow the invariable way of life in the bathhouse, which comes from her profound love for Haku. She

chooses to confront the dangerous obstacles she faces with compassion, which is an entirely internal decision, despite the danger she puts herself in. The most important thing about these actions that Chihiro makes is the fact that she doesn't entirely remember these decisions and the danger she put herself in during those situations. This symbolizes to the audience that everyone has the power within themselves to show this same kind of compassion and love in their lives, and even if no one remembers you or your actions, it still matters.

One of the most intriguing characters in this film was No Face, the spirit who Chihiro allowed to enter the bathhouse. No Face goes through the greatest transformation of all of the characters throughout the film, starting off as seemingly innocent and friendly, changing into a monster who eats people, and then back to innocent and friendly when Chihiro saves him. His defining traits that No Face has are that he reacts to emotions and obtains the physical and personality traits of those he ingests. Hayao Miyazaki explains this character to be a metaphor, essentially a libido that everyone secretly possesses, as all of the actions we make are influenced by what is around us.

An interpretation of No Face's meaning is that he represents a child, having childlike qualities. The main evidence for this is how No Face essentially mirrors the actions and personalities of everyone around him. No Face starts out by simply following Chihiro around, seeking approval from her by offering her many bath tokens for her task, as she repeatedly turns him down. However, as No Face starts to interact with the other workers at the bathhouse, he starts to experience first-hand their greedy nature, as they all

quickly jump at the opportunity to collect the gold that No Face leaves on the floor. The more he interacts with these greedy individuals, the more their nature starts to wear on him, as he inherits their selfishness. This escalates to the point where he evolves into a monster, consuming everyone and everything in his way. Later on however, No Face is able to settle down to be more like his initial nature, due to spending time with Chihiro and Zeniba, characters who portrayed selflessness and kindness. These qualities are very similar to that of a child, as No Face essentially reflects and imitates the nature of the people around him.

As shown by the bathhouse workers and their effects on No Face, the role of greed is significant in Spirited Away. Greed is also portrayed to Chihiro through her parents, and the transformation they go through turning into pigs. These examples play into the larger theme of temptation, which is shown through the bathhouse to represent its prevalence in the adult world. At the start of the film, before Chihiro experiences the bathhouse, her first major shocking revelation is that her parents were turned into pigs when they decided to eat the food they had found. By giving in to the temptation of the food they found, Chihiro's parents gave into greed instead of thinking selflessly like Chihiro, who claimed the food wasn't meant for them. In the movie, this transformation into pigs was initially irreversible for Chihiro's parents, reflecting the nature of greed in the real world, as that kind of lifestyle can consume you. Additionally, Chihiro was able to determine during her challenge that none of the pigs in the pen were her parents due to the fact that her mindset had changed through everything she experienced at the bathhouse. Greed was also a very evident factor when it came to

Yubaba, who always wore extravagant clothing as a way to show her power over everyone. Through this powerful theme, Hayao Miyazaki was trying to show that everyone can be consumed by greed, as long as they are enticed by the right thing.

Another theme that is shown in Spirited Away that is common throughout all of Hayao Miyazaki's work is environmentalism. All throughout the film, the consequences of harmful actions towards the environment and the damage it does to people and society is frequently addressed. Two characters in particular, the stink spirit and Haku, served as direct examples of environmental concerns when Chihiro comes across them. When the Stink Spirit first arrives to the bathhouse, all of the staff tries to drive it away unsuccessfully, as it makes itself into the largest bath. Chihiro then notices something sticking out of the it, discovering that rather than a monster, it was really a river spirit that was corrupted by the extensive pollution from his river. After removing the stick, an enormous amount of human trash poured out of spirit (including a bicycle), freeing him to fly away like a dragon. Hayao Miyazaki says the stink spirit represented his own personal experience cleaning out a river (which also contained a bicycle), in which he helped restore it to be clear and habitable for fish to live in. The stink spirit not only serves as a reminder for how harmful our pollution can be to the environment, but also teaches us that we are capable of repairing this damage we've created if we really try to fix it.

Secondly, the character of Haku has a big role in representing environmentalism in Spirited Away. Haku's struggle to reclaim his identity

and escape the spirit world is resolved when Chihiro figures out at the end of the film that Haku is really the spirit of the Kohaku River, a river that had been destroyed through human settlement. It is explained that where the river once was now turned into apartments, proving that human's demolition of nature was the reason Haku lost his home and almost his name forever. Chihiro's father mentioned early in the film that the bathhouse was right next to an abandoned theme park, and talks about how frequently theme parks were being developed everywhere until they all closed, due to an economic downturn. This explanation provided even more evidence for this environmentalist theme, as it showed how poorly land was managed, with large areas of land being destroyed just to build structures that wouldn't last. Even to a lesser extent, Chihiro's parents transforming into pigs was a form of self-pollution, as they feasted on the food that was meant for the spirits to consume. This showed that they had become victims of their own irresponsible actions, and were punished in consequence. While *Spirited Away* does not explicitly promote environmental awareness, it offers an insightful examination of human-created pollution, one that people can look to gain a perspective on the issue.

Spirited Away is an incredibly complex film with so many underlying themes within it. This masterpiece by Hayao Miyazaki delves into the meaning and power that words and names hold, the ambiguity of good and evil compared to our initial expectations of people, the abruptness of becoming an adult and entering the world of work, the power we all have to make our own decisions, the dangers of greed and temptation, and the horrors of the human effects on the environment. It is incredible that a movie centered

around a young viewer audience can have so many deep themes that are integrated into it, and provides lessons for people of all ages to learn from. It is no surprise that this film received all of the critical acclaim that it did, as it is clearly one of the most unique and captivating animated films of all time. Overall, this film by Hayao Miyazaki was able to captivate millions through its stunning visuals, it's exciting plot, its diverse and intriguing characters, and the deep themes that it provides that people of all ages can learn from.