



The Looking Glass: The Interplay of Grief and Fantasy in Ghibli

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Date of Submission: 01-11-2025

Date of Acceptance: 09-11-2025

Abstract

The present study investigates Miyazaki's multifaceted storytelling which often touches upon the transience of life and poses existentialist questions. It aims to explore how his works are replete with the themes of suffering despite being set in an otherwise magical world. By examining three of his movies which include *Spirited Away*, *The boy and The heron*, and *The grave of the fireflies*, the paper focuses on the duality of these works. The films created by the Japanese animation house do indeed permeate with loss though some more explicitly than others. Analyzing the seemingly enchanting world of *Spirited Away*, abandonment trauma remains to be a dominant theme throughout the film. After her parents turn into pigs, *Chihiro*, the ten year old protagonist, becomes trapped in the spirit world where she must use her only resource, physical labour, to survive. Similarly, *The Grave Of The Fireflies* is a great example of what can happen if you languish too long in denial, fantasy or mythologizing your grief-how it can take root and become your world, even as the world around you falls apart, totally unaware until it's too late. A companion piece to *Spirited Away*, *The boy and the heron* is about a young man being thrown into a magical world as he struggles with the grief and loss of his mother who dies in the firebombing of Japan during the second world war. The study uses unsettling and creepy instances of *ghibli* films prompting the viewers to contemplate that understanding and acceptance of grief is necessary to live through it. By addressing these fears, he creates narratives that resonates with audience on a universal level and prompt contemplation of life's fleeting beauty. The research is concerned with the use of fantasy as a lens through which they explore these hard-hitting, authentic themes to make them easily digestible for people of all ages.

Keywords: Suffering, Trauma, Miyazaki, Unsettling, Impermanence.

I. Introduction

Studio Ghibli, once founded with the goal of producing high quality feature films, has been offering its legacy for over thirty nine years to its fans. Miyazaki weaves stories that often baffles the viewers, leaving them wondering if they have missed to obtain the true essence of his creation. While the films are set in idyllic Japanese landscapes conveying feel good themes of humanist sensibilities, they have much deeper undertones. One of the key facets of Ghibli which sets it apart is its employment of *Immersive Realism* in its visual storytelling. *Immersive realism* is a form of genre that strives to balance elements of fantasy and realism. The films involve coming-of-age plots that mostly centre around young protagonists, where they go on adventures which metaphorically becomes a journey of growing up. Beautifully drawn animation and whimsical fantasy storytelling explores deeper topics of grief, loss, anxiety, capitalism, devastating consequences of war and much more. Fantasy is used as a lens through which it explores hard hitting themes to make the films palatable to audience of all ages.

Most of these films illustrates death as a poignant theme. However, the spiritual realm or afterlife is generally presented as a continuity to the human world in Ghibli. Miyazaki's philosophy of life and that of death lies deeply rooted in Shintoism. When *Izanagi*, the Shinto God of creation, was lamenting the death of his wife, *Izanami*, he undertook a journey to *Yomi*. According to the *Kojiki*, it is the shadowy land of the dead, which seems to have geographical continuity with this world. On arriving late, *Izanagi* was refused to be accompanied by his wife back to the living world as once one has eaten from the hearth of *Yomi*, it is



almost impossible to return to life. While pleading with the gods of the land, to make an exception for *Izanami*, *Izanagi* was forbidden to see her in her present state. Growing impatient, *Izanagi* attempted to cast a glance at his wife. Shocked to witness the dreadful form of his once beautiful wife, he intended to return to the living world immediately. Heartbroken *Izanami* sent eight thunders and foul women to chase the God out of the underworld. However, he managed to escape and pushed a boulder in the mouth of *yomotsuhirasaka*, the entrance of *Yomi* to separate the world of living and that of death.

Miyazaki's magical and whimsical world bridges the gap between the realms. Born in 1941, four years before the American bombs dropped on Hiroshima, Miyazaki grew up while the country picked up the pieces following the conflict—physically and spiritually. He witnessed the horror and duality of the war, thereby developing the antiwar stance. The widespread destruction that surrounded his childhood has undoubtedly furnished the filmmaker's personal outlook and influenced his art. Inevitably, grief as a theme powerfully looms over most of his works. However, Miyazaki's art should not be mistaken for nihilism; they simply exhibit a certain lack of faith in contemporary capitalist value structure (Olivier, 64).

II. Literature Review

The research demonstrates how hard hitting themes are dealt through the lens of fantasy by Studio Ghibli. Roy et al. show how "the aesthetic of picturesque" (Roy 119) is used in Studio Ghibli films to portray the ruins, disorder, asymmetry and the ragged topography caused by the second world war. While the existing research obtains a study of how picturesque has been employed in the films to depict the ruins, this research adopts a qualitative approach to explore how grief is handled by Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki, who have themselves faced the consequences of war and therefore learnt to live with its consequential trauma. The paper sheds light on the makers' optimism and their philosophy of life thereby overshadowing the trauma and grief that the characters of these films go through. The scope of the present research exceeds the ruins of the external landscapes and deals with the internal conflict of the characters who struggle to come to terms with the disoriented situations in their lives, travels to the other world where their mental growth and maturation takes place and they return to their original world gathering life lessons. The use of hope and optimism

at the face of conflict has also been an important scope in the present study.

The antiwar stance of ghibli

Miyazaki's family had to evacuate "bombed out cities" for multiple times since he was three years old. Similarly, Isao Takahata, the co-founder of Studio Ghibli, who was just six years older to Miyazaki, lived through a childhood troubled by war and growing industrialism. As art imitates life, the trauma of war is quite prominent in their works. One of their early production, *The Grave Of The Fireflies* opens with the central characters already dead and a railway worker who checks the dead bodies of the refugees who once took shelter in the station, comments "this one is gone too" (Takahata 00:02:12). The opening prepares us for the impending horror and gloom. The film features Seita, a teenager and his younger sister, Setsuko desperately struggles to survive the aftermath of the Kobe bombing by the American forces. As both of their parents pass away in war, these two children are left on their own. Although they manage to take refuge at their aunt's place temporarily, her cold behaviour towards them makes them run away and set their own world in an abandoned cave near the lake. The film proceeds to put forward the heart-wrenching event that follows including Setsuko's demise and eventually Seita's. The action seems to unfold from the perspective of Seita's ghost. Thus Takahata's condemnation of patriotism is quite significant as innocent lives are lost at the expense of the meaningless war. Although, he repeatedly states that the film is not an antiwar narrative, he carefully passes down the trauma of the war to the future generations. At first viewing, *Grave* is a terribly tragic film, which would lead one to label it simply as a historical document of suffering. Susan Napier states that, indeed, *Grave* is a "victim's history". Does the film present a picture of victimhood, playing off the viewer's sentimental feelings towards the slow, starving death of an innocent girl, aestheticizing her suffering without addressing larger historical questions? Or is there something deeper at work in the film (Goldberg 40)?

Miyazaki's semiautobiographical masterpiece, *The Boy And The Heron* is also set against the backdrop of the second world war. "The parallel world in *The Boy And The Heron* are crafted to reflect Mahito's inner state. Each world is an embodiment of a particular emotional challenge he must face, whether it be the overwhelming grief of losing a loved



one, the deep longing for connection, or the traumatic memories that continue to haunt him.” (Ting, Bakar and Fanfan 312). The plot involves young Mahito evacuating to the countryside after his father married his sister-in-law. Mahito failed to save his mother from the firebombing that had set Tokyo hospital ablaze and the guilt haunts him throughout the film, except for the ending, when he finally manages to come to terms with his disoriented life. The theme of war looms over the entire narrative beginning the schoolchildren participating in the war effort to Mahito’s father running a factory that produces fighter planes. Through certain tear jerking sequences, the movie intends to convey how the war took away the most valuable possession of a child—his innocence.

Don’t look back

The Ghibli films usually follow a pattern where the child protagonist enters a strange world, meets characters who either help or hinder their journey, and returns to their original world with maturity and courage to face the uncertainties of life. This brings us to the base mythological story function that Joseph Campbell called *psychological function*. These are myths that Campbell writes *carry the individual through the stages of his life* and mostly, it involves trials, initiation or symbolic or literal death and rebirth as a better version of themselves. In *Spirited Away*, Yubaba’s bathhouse is a sort of an underworld or otherworld that acts both as a liminal space for Chihiro who is at the brink between childhood and adolescence as well as a deterrent space for those who are not yet ready for transformation.

The film opens with the whiny, ten year old Chihiro relocating to a new city along with her parents leaving her old life behind. For a child this is a huge event triggering fear of abandonment. On their way they accidentally cross a dark tunnel to end up in a strange world where her parents turn into pigs right after stuffing themselves with the food of the realm, leaving Chihiro all alone to rescue them and find her way back home. Haku, Yubaba’s apprentice, comes to rescue Chihiro, to provide her with the food of this strange realm to prevent her from disappearing (Reider 6). This motif of consuming food from the other world in order to stay alive in that world reminds us again of Izanami consuming food from the hearth of *Yomi*. According to the folk belief of *Kamikakushi*, sudden disappearance of people are attributed to the *kamis* who take them to

the spirit world but the initial sulky looking ten year old never stopped believing that her parents would be turned back into humans in the *real world* (Reider 6).

“The transition from childhood to adulthood is a marvel to behold. Chihiro undergoes a series of adventures and in her encounters; she finds inner strength and establishes a new identity in the strange world. In this sense, the fantasy realm can be a period of “seclusion” during which the protagonist is “submitted to ordeal by initiated seniors or elders” (Turner 154) as a crucial passage into adulthood. This is “magical there-and-back again adventure” (Nikolajeva 134) that marks the protagonist’s maturation and inner liberation” (Fahmi 34). While leaving the *other world*, Chihiro is able to take with her the experience and knowledge that she needs to relocate to a new city. This is symbolised by the hairband that Boh, Kaonashi and Yubaba’s happy servant weave for her in Zeniba’s cabin. Her reference is again made to the Izanagi-Izanami myth, according to which Izanagi takes off and throws his hairband on the ground as he leaves the underworld while having to escape from the fury of Izanami.

Asking someone not to look back as they leave a place, as Haku instructs Chihiro as she sets off for her *Real World* is a very specific motif that comes up in a number of mythological stories, from Orpheus going to get Euridice from the ancient Greek underworld, to Izanagi going to get Izanami from the underworld in Japanese creation mythology, to Lot’s family being told not to look back at the city of Sodom as they flee in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. As Orpheus looks back immediately while leaving the underworld to see if Euridice was indeed following him, he loses the chance of being reunited. The trial for Chihiro in *Spirited Away* is to leave the strange world without any emotional attachment that would not let her move on in her life, Haku being the personified symbol of the possibility of emotional attachment. However, Chihiro doesn’t look back as she has learnt her lesson. The hairband she wears as the film is about to end symbolized the maturity the other world has inflicted on her. Unlike Izanami, Chihiro successfully travels back to the real world without getting stuck in the underworld.



This element in the myth gets its own reversal in *Spirited Away*. While Izanagi loses a hair ornament, Chihiro gains one. This bit is significant as Izanagi, who needed to leave Yomi in a hurry, failed his quest, lesson unlearned while Chihiro leaves the underworld in a peaceful manner, trials passed and lessons learned.

The parallel world in *The Boy And The Heron*

Young Mahito agonized by the new turn of events in his life, finds himself to be isolated in the new house. Although, his heavily pregnant stepmother, Natsuko is extremely kind and probably harbours motherly affection towards him, Mahito fails to accept her. Meanwhile, a strange Heron stalks Mahito, insisting Mahito to accompany him to the tower, as he knows where his mother is while claiming that she is still alive. Although he remains distrustful of the bird and plans on avoiding the heron as long as possible, Natsuko goes missing in the woods somewhere near the tower. In order to bring Natsuko back, Mahito makes his own way to the tower. He realizes that the shape shifting heron was lying about his mother but curiosity gets the better of him. Anyway, after entering the gates of the tower Mahito finds himself to be trapped in a magical world where time and space is flexible. This magical world is soon realized to be an island, where a younger version of his mother, Himi resides. Himi appears to exist beyond linear time, holding memories of motherhood and gifted with powerful magic that seems to be connected with her tragic death. Himi befriends Mahito and saves him on several occasions. Reconnecting with his mother once again on the magical island relieves of the burden of guilt he has been carrying for so long.

As the plot unfolds, we realize that the architecture of the parallel world is created by his great uncle who has been looking for somebody from his bloodline, who is not tainted by malice. He is the one who has summoned Mahito to take control of his magical bricks that have built this magical world. "The building blocks serve as a powerful visual metaphor for the construction of one's personal inner world, particularly in the context of grief, loss and longing. In this parallel world each character-Mahito, the great uncle and the stepmother-contributes to the creation of this alternate reality, each bringing their own emotional baggage and psychological states into the mix. This suggests that the parallel world is not a monolithic

construct but a composite of emotional states of its inhabitants, particularly those of Mahito, who is deeply affected by his mother's death" (Ting, Bakar and Fanfan 313).

When Mahito is bullied by his new classmates towards the beginning of the film, he hits himself with a rock, being overcome with emotion and ends up scarring the side of his head. Although it is the violence of the war that takes away his mother, Mahito never steps back when it comes to inflicting violence. He calls warplanes beautiful and upon meeting the annoying heron, he whacks it with a stick. Thus the lesson is clear-the violence of the war brings forth more violence until its grief is turned into a self-destructive cycle of aggression. The title of the book that his mother has left for him is extremely symbolic as it reads *How Do You Live*. Hence, when Mahito is offered the magical bricks by his great uncle to create a world free of suffering, Mahito declines pointing to the self-inflicted wound on his head. Thus, Mahito succeeds in coming to terms with his life as he realizes that suffering is essential to life, and rejects the lie of perfection.

Magic Vs Mundane

To quote Miyazaki:

"Anime may depict fictional world but I nonetheless believe that at its core it must have certain realism. Even if the world depicted is a lie, the trick is to make it seem as real as possible. Stated another way, the animator must fabricate a lie that seems so real viewers will think the world depicted might possibly exist." (Miyazaki 21).

One of the eminent features of Ghibli is how seamlessly magic and mundane of quotidian life is blended in. Ordinary moments are kinetically made exceptional with a delicate sense of transient beauty, imparting the idea that real magic is not always about foreign fairylands or legendary beasts, but rather found in the simple joys and small gestures of kinds of everyday life. For an instance, the great uncle in *The Boy And The Heron* repeatedly struggles to maintain a balance of the blocks that made up the magical world as he has always been trying to make a perfect world free from suffering. However, as Mahito denies to inherit the charge of looking over the building blocks that constitutes the world, the parakeet king takes over



the blocks and instantly shatters them,.Hence the world collapses, conveying that Mahito no longer needs it.Upon realizing that the magic of life lies in overcoming the hurdles no matter how high they are,Mahito accepts to face reality.

The fireflies looks magical in the night sky but the symbolic meaning Takahata intends to convey through them in the film *The Grave Of The Fireflies* is quite unsettling.Fireflies represent the shortness and impermanence of life.The war look away endless innocent lives,not even sparing the little ones.They are also symbolic of the human soul and foreshadows the siblings' death as in a scene where Setsuko is burying them ,she asks her brother why the fireflies and their mother had to die.While it can be compared to the firebombs that wrecked their life,it also serve as an icon of hope and perseverance.The film reflects the consequence of unchecked nationalism and glorification of war that left long lasting scars behind.

In *Spirited Away*,young Chihiro traverses a surreal universe,gradually turning into a poised,independent individual.The transformative narrative serve as a potent reminder of the dormant magic within us,awakened only by the hardships we face.In order to survive in the spirit world ,Chihiro finds herself a job in the bathhouse which depicts the danger of capitalism.Kamaji,the man with six arms ,is a labourer at Yubaba's bathhouse who makes herbal concoctions and ensures that there is hot water for the guests.His six arms are symbolic of overwork implying that he does the labour of three people without any additional benefits.To cope up with the ruins of the war ,Japan implemented long working hours in their work culture.This oftens results in the loss of individualism as work becomes closely tied to one's identity.As Chihiro signs the employment contract,Yubaba magically steals the "hiro" from her name which means to "to inquire",leaving only "sen" meaning "thousand",thus reducing her to an object which has a monetary value of thousand.Besides capitalism feeds on greed.In the film ,we witness how greed can transform a person as Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs as they fail to stop devouring the food.

Coping Mechanism

The book *How Do You Live* which Mahito's deceased mother left for him,is said to have inspired Miyazaki in real life.In his works he prominently answers the titular question.Although the magical worlds of fantasy acts as respite in the

films,Miyazaki doesn't shy away from potraying the ugliness of life.The quest of the central figures often ends in self fortification.He convinces us that there can be no tragedy without some uncommon sweetness or some anchoring strength that the characters must provide for themselves.

The *grave of the fireflies* has often been considered as the most depressing film ever produced by the Japanese production house.As Setsuko and Seita sets off during the air raid,the elder brother doesn't seem panicked in the face of their world crumbling right infront of them.On a contrary,he ties his little sister to his back in order to escape faster.The film informs the audience in the beginning that the fate of the siblings is sealed in death,but it is Seita's gesture of kindness in the face of terror that stands apart.Little Setsuko who stands for innocence is completely unaware of the situation and the horror that follows.Hence,a hug or the warmth of the body inflicts courage and confidence in her to prepare her for the upcoming events.Another important symbol which acts as a ray of hope for viewers is the candy can which will be later used for containing Setsuko's ashes.The candy can was one of the few things which the siblings could carry with them.It contained fruit candies which could instantly uplift the little girl's mood.Eventually,as the can grew empty,we as viewers grow conscious of the impending doom that awaits for the children but as Seita fills it up with water,gives it a shake and makes a fruit drink out of it,we realize that at the face of challenges,patience and holding oneself back is all that counts.

This optimism can also be noticed in *Spirited Away*,where the circumstances constantly tries to take Chihiro down.Although the wicked witch stole her name and cursed food transformed her parents into pigs,Haku ,the river spirit feeds her and looks after her.Initially incapable,Chihiro works day and night tirelessly in the bath house.Even the most difficult customers are left to Chihiro and she singlehandedly fulfils their demands.When the stinking spirit visits the bathhouse oozing with sludge and polluting all it comes in contact with.Instead of running away like the others,she offers it her help. In a review of *Grave Of The Fireflies* for *Japanamerica*, Roland Kelts wrote,'Hollywood will have you believe that heroes are needed when times are tough.Isao Takahata shows s the humble opposite ,that when times are tough what you need most is humility,patience and self restraint.thats's how one survives''



III. Conclusion

Ghibli has paved the way for Japanese culture to be shared among people globally, popularizing Japanese way of life and its aesthetics to the world. Each of the film is a quest into the unknown, filled with magic, wonder and life lessons waiting to be discovered. From soaring sky high on the back of a dragon to exploring ancient forest spirits, there is no limit to the adventures the characters embark on. Fantasy as a convention seems to convey the message that there is no limit on our ability to conquer and accomplish. Although some of the earliest memories Miyazaki has recalled in his interviews involved being confronted by the devastating consequences of the second world war, he never adopted a pessimistic way of life. As his personal experiences have influenced his storytelling, his films often feature strong, independent and multidimensional protagonists who never obscure the difficulties of life. If art is indeed the imitation of life, certainly beneath the surface of his timeless, soul-searching narratives echoes a deeper conversation of a man with his past, attempting perhaps to reconcile himself with the ugliness of the world through the rapturous beauty of his art.

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