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The Mythological Aspects of Spirited Away

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Spirited Away (2001), a film by Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, is a movie that tells the story of a girl named “Chihiro,” who, by accident, and, perhaps, fate, is taken to, or “spirited away,” a world that is not only full of magic and wonder but *is* magic and wonder. And, also, dangerous. It is a place that is unknown and, for the most part, unwelcoming, but, regardless, viewers, along with Chihiro, are taken on an adventure of a lifetime and more. Through creativity and imagination, Spirited Away takes viewers on an adventure, as well as through peril, and exposes them to the magic and wonder in the many forms that it comes in and, most remarkably, the mythological aspects. In a world where spirits are greatly respected; witches are greatly feared; frogs can talk; dragons roam the sky; and monsters can, and will, eat you (if given a reason to), Spirited Away is a wonderful movie to retell the stories of such mythical figures, and it does a wonderful job of retelling, and, perhaps, reinventing, these figures through the many unique, funny, strange, beautiful, and frightening characters that viewers meet in Chihiro’s journey. The mythological aspects of Spirited Away help to create a movie, and story, that challenges and defies the human perception and imagination of such myths that have come to be known and understood in a manner that would clearly characterize, identify, and distinguish them in any other work of art.

Spirited Away is clearly a formalistic movie, which is, in simple terms, a movie of the imagination. Though the story revolves around an ordinary girl whose life takes an unordinary turn, the movie is the product of pure imagination. But what makes the movie even more interesting, apart from the story, is that the movie incorporates characters, or beings, of myth. Though the characters are given identities of their own, they are *not* entirely original. Indeed, the characters differ from mythological figures in some ways because of their unique characteristics, but there is certainly some resemblance and inspiration drawn from them. Take, for example, the

antagonist of the movie, Yubaba. A powerful and frightening witch that most, if not all, of the characters that know her would not dare to cross her (at least not with her notice). But Yubaba is clearly the product of imagination and mythology. Physically, she checks off the main characteristics of a witch: she's old, and ugly, or, if that sounds a bit rude, then she stands out from the rest of the characters (mostly because of her giant head). And, of course, she is magical, but not in the way that witches of mythology are. She doesn't wear a pointy hat, she doesn't have a black cat (but she does have a bird that looks much like her), and she does not use her powers for evil (but she will use them against any, if she must). And then there is her nature: she is kind, but only to those that she is kind to, and when she is kind, and, although, she does not allow the protagonist, Chihiro, from leaving so easily, she decides to give her a chance to prove and save herself instead of destroying her on the spot or eating her. Yuba, though based on witches of mythology, or on how people have come to see, characterize, and know witches, is not like other, or, at the very least, most witches. Her character seems to be, or, perhaps, is the creation of an imagination that sought to reimagine, redraw, and recreate not only the perception of witches, but witches themselves.

Light and dark, two opposite elements that can produce opposite results in a movie through visual, metaphorical, meaningful, and symbolic perceptions. In *Spirited Away*, the element that reigns over the other is light. Light is always present, even at night, which is when most of the action happens. Whether it be the light of the moon or the light of a lamp, darkness is never an overwhelming force, and, or never something to fear, which seems to be, or is, the message or point of the movie. Darkness, or evil, is not present. But that does not mean that all is good, or that all will be good. But not in the sense that something disastrous will happen, or a great evil will come, but rather in the sense that things will not be easy for Chihiro but will not

be impossible to overcome. Not so much as, as the old saying goes, “looking at the bright side,” but keeping in mind that every moment, whether good or bad (but mainly bad) is momentary, and every choice can be fixed. The only moment when darkness does act, or does become, an overwhelming, and, perhaps, a symbol for Chihiro’s mistakes, and failure as her fate, is in a scene where Chihiro, and her friends, are falling into an abyss full of formless dark figures. It is a very powerful and significant scene as it appears to be implying that should Chihiro fail, then she, and everyone that she has come to know and love, can disappear into oblivion. Of course, with their successful escape from the darkness, this may very well be implying that escape, or a change in fate, is possible when the right choices are made. A classic idea, and battle, associated with the concept, and myth, of light and dark: not a force or an act of nature, but an act of one’s decisions that could lead to one’s success, or to one’s failure.

The colors of *Spirited Away* are, for lack of a better word, natural. In other words, they are colors that match, or go, very well with what viewers would see, or might see, in real life: the blue of the sky; the dark of the night; the greens, reds, oranges, yellows of nature; the colors of the clothes that are associated with and identify the roles of the characters; and the colors of certain characters, colors that would define the characteristics, or certain characteristics, that would be, or seem, appropriate at first sight of the characters. *Spirited Away* is beautifully colored, but there are certain colors that are contradicting in the sense that people have come to identify and understand the meaning or significance of certain colors. One of these colors is the color black, which is associated with an important character in the movie called “No-Face.” Depicted as, perhaps, the strangest character in the movie (quiet; wears a white mask that is capable of expressing emotions; and is completely covered in, what appears to be, a black cloak), No-Face could easily be associated with death, or a figure of death. Of course, No-Face could

also be associated with sadness; despair; insecurity; loneliness; mystery; fear; loss; and, perhaps, oblivion. Common ideas and perceptions that people have come to associate the color black with, or, perhaps better to say, the myth of the color black. For the most part, from the beginning towards the end of the movie, No-Face is shown to be a mysterious and lonely figure, or *thing*, to be avoided and ignored, but he is *revealed* to be no different from any other who wants, or yearns, to be noticed; to be welcomed; to be accepted; to be friended; to belong; and to be what he is *not* shown to be, but perceived and believed to be: a monster. Yes, nothing is done to change No-Face's physical characteristics (not that anything has to be or should be done), but his behavior and actions contradict the significance, or myth, associated with a character of his being.

In Spirited Away, the settings and décor create not only a world of imagination, creativity, magic, and wonder, but a world created for the imaginative, creative, magical, wonderful, and mythological characters that would not have much, if any, place in the real world. When looking at Spirited Away from a certain perspective, the settings and décor are unique in the sense that it is a world created for and dominated by figures of myth, which, ultimately, make this world a myth itself; but it is a world that exists, and it is a world that viewers are allowed to see and journey through. Of course, being an animation, creating the world that Spirited Away takes place in, and filling it with the things and life that make and claim this world as its own, was like painting on a blank canvas, which makes this world more real. However, apart from showering rains that can form an entire ocean that looks like it could stretch for miles, one could say that the settings of Spirited Away is not very unique or special. It is a beautifully created world, one that was created for its inhabitants (spirits and other supernatural beings), but it looks as if it could be a part of the real world, which it is mistakenly taken as by Chihiro and her parents and, perhaps

by first sight, viewers. Nevertheless, as beautiful, and wonderful, as it may seem, it is also a dangerous world, much like the real world. Serving as the home to supernatural beings, the world of Spirited Away functions in the same manner that the real world does: everyone has somewhere they need to go and need to be and want to go and want to be; spirits, though greatly respected, outrank other spirits in terms of power and wealth; and, unless one has power and, or wealth, working is the only way one can be provided with necessary accommodations, which are still necessary. This seems to contradict the idea, or myth, of a “peaceful afterlife.” Well, not so much of a “peaceful afterlife” for those who cannot afford one, which is a bit ironic but also significant in the sense that one is not given a “peaceful afterlife,” but one can have, or can make for themselves, a “peaceful afterlife,” or a peaceful *life*.

The formalistic narrative of Spirited Away is one that revolves around the ideas of trust, friendship, adventure, uncertainty, danger, magic, love, wonder, and imagination. Spirited Away does not push past the boundaries or limitations of imagination, but rather shows, or proves, that there are no boundaries or limitations when it comes to imagination. Anything is possible. And when such ideas, or elements, are used together, one can see the relation between a story of imagination and reality. In other words, what viewers see is not so different from what they see in real life. The difference is that, in Spirited Away, we have a story that includes witches, spirits, etc. The myth that lies here is that such beings are above human characteristics and, or concerns. In some ways, they may be, but, upon closer examination, they are not. In the story, Chihiro, the protagonist, finds herself trapped in the spirit world, along with her parents, who have been turned into pigs as a punishment for their disrespect towards the spirits. In order to free herself, and her parents (or more like *save* herself and her parents), she must work for the powerful and frightening witch Yubaba. A simple story, in simple terms, but when considering Chihiro’s story

before her arrival to the spirit world, the story is even more simple: a girl who is forced to move with her parents to a new community and is not happy about it. Do her problems really disappear when she is in the spirit world? Yes, but she gains new ones. Should there be *no* problems in a world where there would not be, or should not be? That would be the idea, but not the case. Does Chihiro really go to a “better place,” or, perhaps better to say, a “different place?” Things may appear to be different, but behind everything, things are not very different. Does Chihiro’s story really change? Yes, and no. She’s been taken, or “escaped,” from her old life and must find a way to return to it, but she forgets about it, for a moment, in her journey through her new surroundings and new life. Does *the* story really change? The story is and remains as it started as: a story about a girl who must find her own way home.

The genre of Spirited Away makes it a coming-of-age movie in the sense that it is about a girl who faces challenges that push her not only past her limits but past her imagination and understanding, which she, ultimately, learns and grows from. But unlike most, if not all, coming-of-age movies, Spirit Away tells no ordinary coming-of-age story as Chihiro is not taken on an ordinary adventure and does not face ordinary challenges. To start with, being amongst supernatural beings, Chihiro, the only human, clearly stands out and clearly has no place amongst them, which is made clear to her. She is looked down upon. She is underestimated. She is not always treated kindly. And she is not accepted by most. Social challenges, as it would seem, but even more so when considering the fact that, apart from being human, Chihiro is reminded of her flaws as a human. But, interestingly, nothing ever seems to get to Chihiro or make her feel bad. Of course, as she is accepted by more characters, the relationship between Chihiro and them changes. So, it is not so much a coming-of-age movie in the sense of social acceptance, but rather on a personal level. Yes, the perception that others have of Chihiro

changes, but it is Chihiro's change of character that is the most important and impactful.

Through, and after, her journey, Chihiro remains as herself but proves not only to others, but to herself, that she is capable of more.

The ideology in *Spirited Away* is unique in the sense, or, at least, in one sense, that spirits should and must be respected (much like how certain figures in real life must be respected), but it also differs in the sense that a child can, or has any chance of, saving him or herself from something much greater than anything that they have ever faced. A powerful myth, but one that *Spirited Away* challenges and proves false. At the beginning of Chihiro's journey, the movie takes its first step in proving that a child can overcome obstacles, even the strangest, when they have a helping hand. In Chihiro's case, "Haku," an "apprentice" of the witch Yubaba. After gaining Chihiro's trust, Haku becomes an important character in the story by becoming one of certain characters that help Chihiro on her journey. Haku also takes on an important role in the story by becoming not just Chihiro's friend, but guardian. Yes, he cannot always be with Chihiro, and he is not always with her, but it is because of him that Chihiro learns to face the first of certain challenges to come. There are, of course, other characters that contribute to Chihiro's ability to defy the myth concerning her success in saving herself and her parents from Yubaba. Another is "Lin," one of many of Yubaba's workers. Lin and Chihiro (who, at that point in the movie, is given a new identity, "Sen") develop a sisterly relationship. Assigned to work together, Lin becomes another guardian to Chihiro, who may have learned or taken certain characteristics from Lin. What may seem to be, or is, a result of her newly made friendships, Chihiro steps forward to face every challenge, thus, breaking the myth that a child cannot overcome, let alone face, anything on their own. Chihiro does do that, and more by helping her friends: she helps Haku remember who he really is, and, perhaps, she inspires Lin to follow her dreams.

The tone of Spirited Away almost coincides with the genre (coming-of-age) but it is not exact. When considering Chihiro's situation, there is a serious tone, but there is also a humorous tone. Humor seems to draw, or seems to *want* to draw, the attention of the viewers *away* from the seriousness of the situation, and it does this in certain ways. One, by turning Chihiro's parents into pigs. As later explained by Yubaba, as punishment for eating the food of the spirits "like pigs," Chihiro's parents were transformed into pigs. Probably not humorous when considering the (somewhat) cruelty made towards Chihiro's parents, and the shock to Chihiro, but it is a rather ironic punishment. And it is also better than any other possibly worse punishment. Another way that humor is expressed is through Chihiro's clumsiness or immaturity. Perhaps not always intentional, or on her part, but there are certain scenes where Chihiro expresses clumsiness or immaturity. Being that she is a child, it is natural, but it does not define her. Viewers are reminded that Chihiro is a child and of her fragileness, in terms of her being different from the other characters, but the humor that comes from Chihiro's immaturity is also reassuring in the sense that no harm, no wrong, and no evil can be done when a child, or, simply, when someone pushes past all that is set before them. Or, at the very least, that things can be fixed and, thus, made right.

Spirited Away is a beautiful movie that was beautifully, and carefully, made not only to entertain, but to rekindle the pure joy, wonder, and imagination that exist in and make up stories that are, themselves, pure joy, wonder, and imagination. Of course, there is more to this movie than just joy, wonder, and imagination. There is a message, and connection to the important lessons that viewers might not realize, but the important of all being, in simple terms: Only we can decide our fate; not others, and not the adventure. Through myths, Spirited Away challenges and proves this idea as the movie, and Chihiro, for lack of better words, show, or prove, that

things are, ultimately, not as they appear: the characters, the situations, the settings, etc. With determination, motivation, inspiration, and imagination, anything can be done, anything can be achieved, and anyone can succeed. In the movie, we see this with Chihiro and in the impact that she has on the characters that she meets and the friends that she makes, and we see this in the work that went into making this movie, which does not fade or age with the passing of time.

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