

Spirited Away is a film lauded for its fantastic animated visuals and endearing narrative. Yet, as Westerners, we miss a few particulars in the movie that strongly hint to certain aspects of Japanese myth and religion. These mythological and religious aspects are not only based off of certain types of characters and stories that are found in Japanese culture, but are also just plain Japanese cultural norms that the western world is not often exposed to. I will illustrate my point using three examples.

1) The Ambiguity of Character in *Spirited Away*

In the western world, we usually make moral demarcations between right and wrong. This causes us to have a black and white view of the world: one side *has* to be right, and the other side *has* to be wrong. This moral view of the world is found within the great western religious traditions that have spread all over the world. The God of the Bible is found to be the ultimate source of truth and good, while his nemesis, the Devil, is seen as a liar and evil. This example illustrates that good and evil are always in contention, always against each other. This greatly contrasts with the traditional Japanese view that forces, moral or otherwise, are usually more ambiguous in their character and actions, often performing both through the course of a story.

In *Spirited Away*, we are introduced to the characters of Zeniba. Zeniba is the twin sister of the witch and proprietor of the movie's bath house, Yubaba. The first time we are introduced to her, she is mercilessly attacking Yubaba's servant, Haku. She is quite angry and lets all the characters around her, other than main character Chihiro, feel the brunt of her anger, even turning her nephew into a mouse. Yet, when we are later re-introduced to Zeniba later on in the film, we find her to be act kind and warmly to Chihiro. This time around, she acts more like a grandmother, dispensing wisdom and care to Chihiro. This is different from the last time Zeniba was in the film, in which she almost killed another character, spilling Haku's blood everywhere. In Zeniba's defense though, she acts like anyone else would after having a precious object stolen from her. The only difference is that she is able to carry out the punishment most of us only think about. This anger does not make her a bad character, it makes her a person. The last scene she appears in shows she can act as kind and caring as anybody else. So while she may look like a witch, we are taught that appearances and intent can be deceiving. This message is only made clearer through the character of No-Face.

Zeniba is not unlike the Japanese god of storms, Susanoo. A troublesome god, he ransacked heaven to his sister's, the sun goddess Amaterasu, dismay. She went into hiding because of this, and Susanoo was banished heaven for having upset his sister as such. Yet, he is never painted as an evil character. Unlike

the Devil of Western lore, he is not cast out of heaven and then relegated to the pits of Hell. Indeed, he does the opposite. He saves a maiden from the seven-headed serpent, and goes on to achieve other notable feats. Looking back at the mythology of Susanoo, the ransacking of heaven looks to be the work of an unruly youth and nothing more. So, it is with these examples of Zeniba and Susanoo that we can see that characters in Japanese stories are not deemed as either evil or good. They are capable of both. These characters mimic human nature in that humans are capable of as much good as bad, and for that, we cannot put either ourselves or these characters into neat moral distinctions.

2) That Witch is not a Witch

I mentioned earlier that Zeniba is the twin sister of a witch we are introduced to earlier on in the film. The name of that witch is Yubaba, and for all intents and purposes she acts as the “witch” of the movie. Why is she a witch? Well, she can pull Chihiro into her office with a wave of her hand, she is able to turn her employees into giant bouncing heads, and she even has the ability to turn into a crow-like creature. Seems like she fills the category of a witch, right? Well, for western audiences at least. Japanese culture really has no equivalent. Yet, Yubaba is also able to fill other roles that are captured within Japanese history. As proprietor of the bath house, she acts as a sort of den mother to all who work there. She gives them quarters to sleep in, food, and jobs that tip good from time to time. In this vein, Yubaba has more in common with the elder women that looked over the prostitutes of the red-light districts in the sprawling cities of Japan. She acts like it to. She tallies her money, keeps a watchful eye over any miscreant guests, and uses a forceful hand. There is also the fact that Japanese religion and history are rife with female shamans. The first ruler of Japan, then known as Yamato, was said to be a shamaness known as Himiko, who was known for her spells and great power. Yubaba is also rather similar to a female shaman. She is feared for the power that others assume she has, and when she shows it, it relies more on her own power than that of spells. She is also present in the spirit world, giving her an enormously strong connection to the powers that reside in that domain. Yubaba even has a more human look about her when compared to the other spirits, giving a hint that it is the human-type character that has the ability to channel this power, not the spirits themselves.

3) Spirits, Spirits, and More Spirits

A Western audience may not understand why Miyazaki drew the background characters in the movie like he did. We see giant waddling ducks, a spirit with an expressionless mask, and even a large character known as the “Radish Spirit”. Are these just randomly drawn characters, or is there some meaning

attached to them? If you were able to answer yes to that question, then you are correct. Miyazaki did not just randomly draw spirits, but he created these various spirits within the context of Japanese mythology and the beliefs of the native Japanese religion, Shinto. In Shinto, it is said that all things are “kami”, a word used to describe anything ranging from a god, to a spirit, or to any object that may inspire awe. This means that most natural objects that we perceive as sedentary and dead actually have a sort of essence that, through the right channels, we can perceive.

Miyazaki provides such a channel through his film. He personifies the spirit of a radish through the radish spirit. The giant ducks are actually kappa, deadly water spirits that drag children into rivers to drown (Miyazaki makes them look like harmless ducks in the film). When we are introduced to the boiler room, the soot from the furnace is shown to be working for the creature named Kumaji that runs that place. These are *susuwatari*, soot spirits that work hard but shy away from any visitors. Miyazaki doesn't just focus on the minute details of the Japanese spirit world though. He dreams bigger, and does so in a way we did not quite expect. Miyazaki goes about this by introducing what appears to be a sludge spirit halfway through the movie. The monster has garbage trailing behind him, and the employees and other customers cannot stand his smell. After he takes a bath though, everything changes. It is revealed that he is a dragon-like creature that has water for a body. He is a river spirit, carrying around the pollution and trash that had accumulated in his river. This nod to environmental pollution is also a nod to Shinto. Shinto maintains that the environment is sacred. Many mountains and other natural objects are used as sites of worship, or are the objects of worship. Miyazaki not only shows how Shinto kami can be represented, but even includes the fact that the sites themselves are sacred and divine to Shinto and the Japanese sensibility of the spiritual. This gives his movie both a flavor of religion and myth, and religious theme that some Japanese would be able to realize and relate to. Through the mediums of film and animation, Hayao Miyazaki has been able to capture the basic tenets of what makes Japanese religion what it is and how that informs the viewpoints of the society that has grown around it.

Hayao Miyazaki made *Spirited Away* with a Japanese audience in mind. So we as westerners must then take the time out to understand what it is exactly that makes this film Japanese to begin with. The characters and spirits, along with their powers and appearances, are all a testament to Japanese myth and religiosity. They express facets of Japanese identity and culture that we have to understand the context of so that we can understand what kind of world it is that Chihiro has found herself in. Hopefully these three points have provided a decent introduction to the difference regarding Japanese views, and how *Spirited Away* can be used as a teaching opportunity that can communicate this to students.