

A Symbiosis of Japanese Shinto Myths and Jungian Archetypes in Miyazaki's Visual Text, *Spirited Away*

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to delve into the mythologies of Japanese culture and their significance in order to aid in the deeper understanding of the characters in the visual text, *Spirited Away*, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. The Japanese cultural practices and folklore mentioned concern the Japanese Shinto religion in particular. These mythologies are examined using the archetypes discussed by Carl Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, and aims to map the protagonist, Chihiro's journey towards self-hood and identity formation. The paper also analyses the archetypes of other major characters in the anime film. The scope of this paper is extended to a close reading of the technical aspects of the film such as mise-en-scene and the examination of important frames that convey deeper meanings and give way to multiple interpretations. Through the close textual analysis of the archetypes found in ancient mythology and folk tradition, the paper aims to show the intersection between mythology and the universal psyche, portraying the timelessness of narratives serving as a mirror to the collective human experience.

Keywords: Mythology, Psyche, Japan, Folklore, Self-hood, Identity.

With meticulously hand-drawn frames and intricately detailed sequences, Miyazaki paints a picturesquely situated fantasy world that chronicles the coming-of-age story of Chihiro and her adventures.

Released in 2001 by Studio Ghibli, *Spirited Away* took no time to organically blend its way into a child's heart with its breathtaking Japanese style animation and its attention to intrinsic details, that make the world in the film seem very real. This visual masterpiece uses a specific color palette and characters inspired by Japanese folklore to represent the richness and diversity of traditional Japanese culture. The anime is not a mere attempt to capture Miyazaki's longing for pre-westernised Japan but "[w]hat Miyazaki does, however, is...a novel artistic recreation of the past" (Yoshioka 267). By embedding the elements of Shinto religion and Japanese mythologies throughout the setting and in its characters, it renders its protagonist as an exemplar of Jung's Divine Child archetype. Through this, the paper aims to explore the connection between personal growth and collective human psyche through myth.

The Roman poet, Horace, in his famous literary treatise "Ars Poetica" talks about the dual power of poetry, stating its dual ability to create an aesthetic experience alongside providing educational value. Similarly, narratives hold the potential to transform an individual's life by providing them with the self-awareness to realise his/her own abilities through storytelling. By incorporating religious and cultural myths with the delightful aspect of visual storytelling, *Spirited Away* leverages the audience's attention and aids them to initiate the process of individuation. This myth infused visual narrative encompasses tribal lores that reveal "knowledge that was originally hidden, and they set forth the secrets of the soul in glorious images" (Jung 23).

Across centuries, our ancestors have turned to myths of creation and rituals of varying kinds for guidance and truth. Upon the advent of science and modern technology, a shift occurred from the subjective heart to the objective mind, overlooking the inner chronicles of who we are, and the eternal truths incarnated in these myths and rituals. Using the motif of traditional Japanese and Shinto myths as a

premise, Miyazaki provides a roadmap to the human psyche, facilitates the viewers to perceive similar movements in their own life and guide them in taking either action or non-action.

Emerging from the Jungian Analytical Analysis in Modern Psychology, “psyche contains all the images that have ever given rise to myths” (Jung 23). It makes us view life as a divine drama where the personal meets the mythical and the unseen influences in the form of myth. It can either enslave or liberate the person as “myth is essentially human action encoded as narration” (Liszka 117) and “the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes” (Jung 56) found in these myths. Upon deliberating on them directly, the process of growth through sacrifice and the styling of our consciousness is initiated. The protagonist of *Spirited Away*, Chihiro starts as an innocent little girl, who is unhappy with her displacement to a new city and subsequently, through various trials and tribulations, she undergoes an authentic transformation, and obtains a soul that knows both light and darkness, yet persists and flourishes. During the course of this visual text, the trials undergone by Chihiro might seem cruel and harsh for a child of her age, but Miyazaki incorporates them to force the audience into having these conversations about growing up and facing uncomfortable truths.

Chihiro is the embodiment of the child-god presented by Carl Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Although she is not the prototype behind this archetype, she closely resembles the qualities and the transformation arch put forth by him. The comparison between Chihiro and the child-god is possible because “myth will simply alter their immediate contents but retain the patterns unchanged, because the mind must, of necessity, go on satisfying its perennial psychic demands” (Brown 470). Jung identifies four essential layers of this archetype, and its ultimate objective is to reach the stage of individuation, where the “individuation process...anticipates a figure that comes from the synthesis of

conscious and unconscious elements in the personality” (160). It aims to align the ego with the self that enables Chihiro to reach the wholeness of self that corresponds to the highest level in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation.

Although the narrative commences in contemporary urban Japan with a vulnerable child holding onto farewell flowers from her friend, the shift into the mythological realm is indicated by the change in the frame composition that shows a clear demarcation between the urban and the rural parts of Japan as the colour changes from greys to soft greens, further reiterating that they are getting closer to the Kami world.

The tar road in Fig.1, stopping just before the huge tree, is no coincidence. It is a conscious choice by the director to convey that they are entering into another world. Found under the tree is a wooden gate named Torii, which according to the Shinto religion is an entrance into the realm of the kami (spirits), “functioning as a boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds” (“Shinto”). The Japanese title of *Spirited Away*, ‘Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi’, translates to Sen and Chihiro’s spiriting away. and the word Kamikakushi can be translated as ‘hidden by Kami’. In a famous Japanese folktale, Urashima Tarō, a fisherman suddenly disappears from the world and is believed to have met Kamikakushi. When he finally returned to the world, “three hundred years had passed on land...he found that all his family had died” (“Japanese folklore”). Taking root from this folktale, Kamikakushi has stretched its branches into *Spirited Away* as Chihiro and her parents disappear from the physical world and enter the spiritual realm.



Fig. 1. Gateway to Kami Realm. *Spirited Away*. Directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

Studio Ghibli, 2001.

After the three enter the spirit world, they are welcomed with open pastures and an abandoned town that is well-structured and invites them with delicious food. Chihiro is cautious of this new environment, but her parents start eating the food without caution and turn into pigs. As the night falls, the town gets crowded by shadow creatures and Kami. Soon after, Chihiro's physical body starts to fade away and Haku, the deuteragonist, gives her food from the spirit world to save her. The belief of consuming food from another realm to stay there stems from the Japanese creation myth. After the death of Izanami (Goddess of creation), her husband goes to Yomi (netherworld) to bring her back, but having consumed food from Yomi, she is unable to leave. A similar echo is found in Persephone's consumption of pomegranate seeds from the underground, and these "archetypes are the imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually" (Jung 174).

Miyazaki posits Chihiro in a state of total abandonment, in an unknown temporal reality, with no parents or acquaintances to provide guidance, thereby making it a site of renewal and reinvention through a spiritual and mental journey. The vital quality of the child-god is that he/she is "smaller than small and

bigger than big” (Jung 155). This is embodied by Chihiro, as she is vulnerable, yet possesses great strength to overcome all the perils moving against her. After being stranded in the spirit realm, she initially shows moments of weakness, but after her conversation with Haku, an apprentice of Yubaba, she pushes herself off the ground and seeks work from Yubaba, proprietor of the Onsen. It can be noted that certain features and actions of Yubaba have a close resemblance with the Japanese folktale character, Yamauba, who is a mountain witch with Golden White hair and cannibalistic quality. She turns humans into pigs before consuming them.

Before employing Chihiro in the Onsen, Yubaba makes her sign a contract and removes a few characters from her name. The name Chihiro can be translated as ‘a thousand questions’. After Yubaba gets hold of some of the characters in her name, she is reduced to Sen, which simply means a thousand. In the Japanese culture, Kotadama, a mystical power is said to reside in a person’s name, and by taking her name, Chihiro’s ability to think, and to question is also taken away, thereby making the abandonment seep through the deepest levels, but Jung emphasises that “abandonment is...a necessary condition. Not just a concomitant symptom” (164), considering that it empowers Chihiro to integrate her shadow with the self.

Despite the abandonment, Chihiro can navigate the kami world with relative ease, due to the inhabitants of the spirit world she encounters along the way. According to Jung, the child-god is “endowed with superior powers and, despite all dangers, will unexpectedly pull through” (166). Whilst a comparison of Chihiro to a child with a superior power like Jesus is not possible, she possesses an alternative form of these powers through her mental strength and self-sufficiency. This enables her to be apprehensive towards the help offered along the way by characters like Haku, Zeniba, Kamaji, and Lin.

Towards the second half of the film, Chihiro journeys towards a modest cottage in Swamp Bottom that belongs to Yubaba's twin sister, Zeniba, who is displeased with Haku for stealing the magical seal that belongs to her. Chihiro, with her heart full of compassion, visits her to return her seal to save Haku, and receives advice on remembering Haku's name to liberate him. This encounter enables her to form a meaningful relationship with both Zeniba as well as Haku. Being a henchman of Yubaba, Haku ought not to come to the aid of a human, yet he provides her with spirit food in the beginning and guides her to find work at the bathhouse. He provides her with a blueprint to survive the spirit world and the various dangers that lurk about. In turn, Chihiro returns his kindness by saving his life using the gift given to her by the River Spirit and by letting him know his real name, Kohaku. Upon hearing his own name, he remembers his identity as the Kohaku River spirit and gains back his freedom and his mystical powers.

Lin, who is also a worker at the bathhouse, protects Chihiro like a big sister in multiple instances. While working in the bathhouse, Chihiro is on the verge of getting caught by the frog worker, who enters the same elevator as her, and comments that she smells like a human. Lin saves her by convincing him that it's the roasted newt. At a pivotal point in the story, she shields Chihiro from the River Spirit that enters the bathhouse for purification, and listens to her suggestions in cleansing the spirit. Throughout the entirety of the film, Chihiro is not in possession of any magical powers, yet she is invincible in the way that she shows paramount resilience through all the hardships, and is able to overcome human greed and befriend the most dreaded No-Face spirit. When she finally leaves the spirit world, she is tempted to look back much like the Greek musician Orpheus, but Chihiro doesn't end up as a victim of her own emotions like him. With her forward resolve and empathy, she becomes invulnerable and unbreakable.

The hermaphroditism prevalent in Chihiro is not one of biology but of the psyche. It is a "creative

union of opposites” (Jung 169), where she embodies animus, which is the integration of the masculine unconscious in the conscious female psyche. For a man, only the conscious mind “has the masculine sign, while the unconscious is by nature feminine. The reverse is true in the case of a woman” (Jung 170). Chihiro performs labour that is traditionally associated with the male body, such as performing hard physical labour in the boiler room, negotiating with Yubaba, and riding a dragon. Through it all, she retains the traditionally prescribed feminine qualities such as care, empathy, and intuition. With this, her physical body becomes a site of integration of the anima and animus, affirming her psychic wholeness.

The individuation process requires an individual to cross the vulnerability threshold and enter the unconscious realm to face their shadow. By confronting their own performative persona, the unknown darker side of the individual is brought to the conscious level and during it, the individual is able to unlock their inner potential, their desires and fears. Upon obtaining new knowledge about themselves, they can successfully dissolve their persona and integrate the conscious ego with the unconscious self, resulting in self-realisation.

The divine child is “all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning, and the triumphal end” (Jung 173). Chihiro’s character arc is one of rebirth through vulnerability and suffering. She crosses the vulnerability threshold by entering the kami realm unknowingly, and in losing a part of herself by momentarily parting with her name, she distances herself from the persona attached to it. In the guise of trials and tribulations, the true strength and potential of Chihiro hidden and repressed in her shadow is brought out. The shadow part of the unconscious is popularly attached to the negative desires, impulses, and traits, but they also hold strength and mental power that we are yet to be aware of. A reverberation of the same is found in Demeter’s myth, where the

underworld is the space of transformation, and in mourning, she can have uncomfortable conversations of loss and pain, thus bringing about growth and maturity. These darker cycles enrich our perspective of life and force us to understand our shared humanity, as we cannot always have springtime. These seasonal changes are the crucible of Chihiro's becoming.

Upon understanding her own strengths such as empathy, courage and strong will to overcome misfortunes, she reclaims her real name and provides the right answer to Yubaba to exit the kami realm. In doing so, she can transcend the self and become whole. The story starts and ends with psychically the same Chihiro, but she has undergone exceptional metamorphosis in terms of her mental resolve and psychological maturation, showing a reconciliation of her own shadow and persona.

The concept of spiriting away (hidden by kami) can be seen as a social death and a spiritual birth for Chihiro as it gives "an unstable youth a period of rest from this world while s/he has disappeared. If and when s/he comes back to this world, s/he is ready to start a new life" (Reider 21). She is a desolate and distressed child before entering the spirit world and when she gets resurrected back from her social death, she transforms into a young girl, who has fully grown into her own skin and has discovered herself. Through the archetypes created by these myths, which in turn form our collective unconscious, a helping hand is provided towards guiding humans in setting in motion, the process of individuation. "Many analysts agree that one extremely important aspect of myth is to relate the macrocosm to the microcosm" (Doty 255).

Shinto myths and Jungian psychology intersect through the collective unconscious, where culturally unique symbols and archetypes express universal psychic patterns. These "[a]rchetypes are

complexes of experiences that come upon us like fate, and their effects are felt in our most personal life” (Jung 45), and the one of divine children emerges in the form of the macrocosmic myth of a culture, but they all work towards the ultimate goal of aiding individuals in facing their shadow and liberating themselves.

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