

Life and Death views in Japanese stories for Children

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ABSTRACT

The Japanese people have read Western fairy tales and folk tales since the first book was translated into Japanese in the Meiji era. They have many motifs about life, death and rebirth in another world. These motifs are also common in myths and traditional rituals all over the world. Myths of the end of world are generally followed by myths of the regeneration of the world. The same applies to myths of the end of a human life. These myths tend to show the circulation of the life and death.

These stories strongly influenced to Japanese Anime. Anime is a culture that Japan boasts to the world. Especially Hayao Miyazaki is a famous Japanese cartoon director. His animated films are known that packed into various Japanese traditional folk tales. What seems to be lacking is a consideration of the influence of not only the Western children's literature but also the Japanese folk tales upon his works. We can see that some of Miyazaki's works have been produced in a Western European style. The purpose of this presentation is to advance a new theory that could help us understand both views in his films.

Keyword:Children's Literature, childhood, Japanese anime

1. Introduction

The Japanese people have read Western Myths, fairy tales and folk tales since first such book was translated into Japanese in the Meiji era (1868-1912). Fairy tales contain many motifs about life, death, and rebirth. Such motifs are common in myths and folk beliefs all over the world. Myths of the end of world are generally followed by myths of the regeneration of the world and myths that deal with human death are often followed by myths of rebirth. Such myth, thus, tend to show the pattern of the cycle of life and death. One of the notable features of rebirth is that it is often represented to awake from

one's sleep. The most important example is *Sleeping Beauty*. This is even more true of initiation ceremonies in the various cultural traditions. The same may also be said of relationship between Japanese fairy tales and Japanese folk beliefs that are represented as daydream of childhood in Japanese stories for children.

Let us now focus on dream(or daydream) as rebirth, particularly on the daydream of children in Japanese stories for children. I would like to introduce to you two stories, entitled *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited away*, which are in Japan known as Ghibli anime. Anime is a culture medium that Japan boasts to the world. Hayao Miyazaki is an especially famous Japanese cartoon director. His animated films are well known for containing motifs from various Japanese folk tales and folk beliefs. In the last few decades, several articles have been devoted to the thought in his cartoons, but there seems to be no established theory explaining his ideas.

In my opinion, what seems to be lacking is a consideration of the influence of not only Western children's literature but also of Japanese folk tales upon his works. We can see that some of Miyazaki's works have been produced in a Western European style. For example, his last fantasy animation *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* was strongly inspired by Hans Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, whereas his *Howl's Moving Castle* is based on a novel by the British writer, Dianna Wynne Jones. The latter work has strong ties to the folk tales that are known as Japanese Cinderella tales and that have been handed down as part of Japanese traditional stories. The main character Sophie, who is the heroine of this film story, is very similar to the little girls from the popular folk tales *Ubakawa* and *Hachikazuki*.

The purpose of this presentation is to advance a new theory that could help us understand both the Western and Japanese dimensions of Miyazaki's animated films. First, we shall focus our attention on Andersen's fairy tales because he is a pioneer and has produced one of the first prototypes of a fantasy story for children.

H. C. Andersen's Stories for Children

As the first step in our analysis, we shall briefly examine the birth of children's literature in modern Europe.

Before the modern period, there were myths, legends and folk (fairy) tales. In textbooks and guidebooks on moral behavior and religion of that era, the following trend could be identified. That is, in pre-modern times, adults offered two different kinds of stories to children: on one hand, stories for educating children, and on the other, stories to delight young readers. The purpose of the former was to provide children with examples of good Christian life to follow in their lives. The latter are the

so-called fairy tales, stories deeply related to the world of the folk religion. Since they were fictitious stories with an origin in folk tales and folklore, where fairies, spirits, and elves appear, they were given the name “fairy tales”. In such stories it is possible to cross the border between the world of human beings and all other beings, including imaginary ones. From this point of view, the world of fairy tales is very similar to the images popular in folk religion.

Back in the 19th century Denmark, Hans Christian Andersen published "*Stories for Children*" (*Eventyrfortalte for Boern*, 1835). In this first volume of fantastic stories for children, children's literature was born. This was because he included his original story for children among all the other stories which were based on Danish folk tales. His original story was entitled *Little Ida's Flowers* (*Den lille Idas Blomster*, 1835). All the stories in the compilation are alike, and yet quite different from one another.

The original one is of particular importance because it keeps in touch with reality even when it talks about little Ida's dreams. Folk tales never have such a dual viewpoint, a connection between reality and dreams, which belong to the world of the imagination. In the story, the little girl recognizes that it is impossible for flowers and dolls to dance and speak in reality, but she, nonetheless, continues to believe that that is possible in the imaginary world of dreams. Therefore, although a fantastic story, this story by Andersen retains reality as its premise. This is the main difference between literary fantastic stories and traditional fairytales, namely, a fantastic story that represented by dreams of childhood has its roots in real life. This unique co-existence of reality and fiction makes it possible to situate them both in one world, while at the same time keeping them separated. Thus, the story is not simply an illusion, but, rather, imagination. Such a literary form is connected a dream(or daydream) of childhood, and is the basic matrix of fantastic stories these days. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the features of Andersen's story *Little Ida's Flowers* are representative of the very nature of children's literature. This peculiar dualism of reality and fantasy makes possible another kind of dualism: the transition between this world and the other world.

Another property of children's literature is that it tends to depict the place where one can live in eternity. That is a very typical motif in children's literature, a characteristic that exist from the very beginning of this genre. There is another example: *The Little Match-Seller*. Andersen describes another world that is similar to Heaven, and his image of that world is influenced by folk beliefs of his childhood. The flame functions to connect the real world to the other world. Thus, this can be regarded as ‘passages’ which are often found in folk religion and daydreams of childhood.

In complete antithesis to the Christianity at that time, Andersen created a fantasy world for children who had died in his stories. This kind of imagination reflected his personal religious sensibilities as well. Although he was Christian, he did not accept the

traditional Christian view of and discourse on life and death.

For this reason he created mystic, eternal world different from the concept of the Christian Paradise and refused to believe that little innocent souls go to hell in case of premature death because of the inherited sin. It is as if he felt that poor children should be reborn and receive salvation in the other world that he created, rather than in the real world. Andersen in his many stories tried to describe not only certain aspects of death, but also a world after death.

Life after Death in the Children's Fantasy Literature

Many authors in Europe subsequently contributed to that new literary genre. Notable followers appeared in the first stage of what is called the Golden Age of children's literature in the United Kingdom. The first author to pay attention to life after death in children's literature was Charles Kingsley (1819-1875). Kingsley's masterpiece of children's literature *The Water Babies* (1863) was created by his vivid imagination. Kingsley was unsuccessful in his religious activities in the real life, but he attempted to overcome those difficulties through literary fantasy intended for children.

Another example can be seen in George MacDonald. He was directly influenced by Andersen's stories and admired his fantasy. Furthermore, his literary work, now little known in Japan, inspired many major authors, including J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis stated that, above all, he regarded MacDonald as his "master".

MacDonald longed for immortal life in spite of the fact that he was a Christian minister. He expressed his views of death and life in his stories, which was an effective means of conveying his religious view, because he believed that fantasy which included such dualism could take us to the realm of truth which lies beyond reality.

Owing to the fact that they both had lost relatives in their childhood, Kingsley and MacDonald were dissatisfied with the then contemporary issues in religion, especially with the discourse on hell laid out by Christianity, to which they belonged. The other world as they imagined it was not found in traditional Christianity – it was a mysterious and fascinating place that remained an eternal mystery of human life.

But if that is so, then what is the difference between folktales and children's literature? The main difference is that these authors are modern intellectuals who have certain knowledge of science, and who are interested in the social environment surrounding children.

As I already mentioned, Andersen wrote an original story called "Little Ida's Flowers", which is regarded as marking the advent of children's literature. Unlike previous typical fairy tales such as Cinderella or Snow White, Andersen's story integrated imaginative

folk beliefs and the realism of modern science. It is for this reason that this story manages to include both a fantastic world and the real world and that his tales contain aspects of both life and death. Thus, his world view is represented by a dual-structured composition that is called “frame story”, and that composition also typifies Miyazaki’s style of creation.

Moreover, they are devout Christians; some of them were or almost became ministers. These used to be the required conditions for becoming an author of children’s literature. That is the reason why these stories are clearly distinct from fairy tales, which based on folk religions.

In short, the religious worlds that are described in the modern fantasy stories tend to incorporate many elements and derive views of death and life from folk religion, although they were formed on Christian basis. According to Humphrey Carpenter, the above-mentioned authors describe Arcadia as a mystic eternal world, one that differs from the world found in Christianity. Following his argument, we may say that in their creations of children’s literature they in fact seek to conduct a religious experiment of replacing Christianity. This is because the authors could not bring themselves to understand the loss of the people who were closest to them through the creeds of Christianity, especially Calvinism. That is, they refused to believe that little innocent souls of children go to hell by because of their premature death. What we see in these stories is the quest for the acquisition of a comforting view of death and life through the creation of fantastic stories for children. That is the authors’ answer to the question of where we come from and where we go. In other words, the authors go on a deep speculative journey to explore the mystery of life by undertaking a round trip from this world to the other world and back, with the aid of folk religion, and during that journey they continue to make attempts at discovering the answer to the question of where we come from and where we go.

We may say that they made full use of their imaginations in creating alternate realities, and through this, made an attempt to understand the meaning of the world.

The Dualistic Composition of Hayao Miyazaki in His Fantastic Stories for Children

In Europe, the other world in children’s stories reflected author’s religious thinking and exploration of ideas. The same thing can be said of Miyazaki’s works. Miyazaki’s creations too are infused with spirituality and have been influenced by the European children's literature. Furthermore, many of his stories also contain symbols from Japanese folklore.

Uyakawa and Hachikazuki are heroines of a typical Japanese story, in both cases their name serves as the storytitle, the same as with Cinderella. They are based on it is beautiful, but is forced to dare ugly appearance in order to protect themselves. It can be said that the initiation which represented as death and life. When she became ugly figure, although it is good as dead once, and continues to maintain even their own essence, finally it appears their true form. It is a Dualism which is included in these stories that deferent from the Western Cinderella. Miyazaki's films took over the dualism of death and life from both children's literature and Japanese folk tales.

The suggestion that one can live in this world while also living in the otherworld is a special feature of daydream of children, and can be regarded as the basic matrix of contemporary fantastic stories.

Now we will analyze dualism in Miyazaki's work and show that it is a quest for a new view of death and life that motivated him to create fantastic stories for children.

Let us take a look at the structure of two animated films written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki from a different angle.

i) Dual aspects in *My Neighbour Totoro*

In the good old days in Japan, Satsuki and Mei who are daughters of a university professor Kusakabe, moved into an old house so as to be closer to the sanatorium where their mother was hospitalized. Satsuki and Mei find that their new house is inhabited by tiny animated dust creatures called *susuwatari*—which were based on folk belief at that village.

One day little Mei found two strange creatures in the grass and followed them. She passed through the bush and into the hollow of a great camphor tree. She met and befriended a larger version of the same kind of super-natural creature that seemed to be the spirit of this tree, which identified itself by his roars that she recognized as “Totoro”.

An important point to emphasize is that not only Mei met Totoro, but that, in fact, her sister Satsuki also accepted Totoro's existence through her primordial faith, the kind which Miyazaki believed was based on children's innocence. This faith proves by next episode on rainy evening.

Satsuki and Mei were waiting for their father's return at the bus stop and grew anxious when he did not appear on the bus they expected him to be on. When Mei fall asleep on Satsuki's back, Totoro suddenly showed up before them, allowing Satsuki to see him for the first time. He gave them a bundle of acorns and nuts.

They sowed acorns in a field near their house and waited for them to shoot out their sprouts. A few days later, the girls awoke at midnight to catch the sound of Totoro's ceremonial dance around a field where they had sowed acorns. Satsuki and Mei join in

in their pajamas, whereupon the acorns sprout, and grow into a huge oak.

In the morning the girls find that the tree itself was gone, but that the acorns had indeed sprouted. The children start jumping around crying with joy: “Although a dream, it wasn’t a dream”.

Thus, here we can see that a balance is maintained between reality and fantasy. It is necessary to keep in mind that this dualism is based on Andersen’s dualistic fantasy.

Moreover, what these examples make clear is that the children would find Totoro whenever they would go to sleep after facing a problem. This is related to the previously mentioned notion that children need sleep to go beyond the limits of reality.

ii) Chihiro’s rebirth in *Spirited Away*

Chihiro and her parents were traveling to their new home. Chihiro was reluctant to separate from her old friends and go to a new school. However, they get lost and enter the other world where a boy named Haku warns Chihiro to get out before the sunset. However, she is forced to stay there in order to help save her parents by taking a job given to her by an old witch named Yubaba, who was the owner of a bathhouse for the spirits of mountains and rivers.

One day Chihiro finds a piece of paper called shikigami which is a spell by Yubaba’s twin sister Zeniba that attacks the dragon into which Haku transformed. To remove the curse placed on Haku, Chihiro and her companions start a journey to Zeniba’s island, far away from Yubaba’s bathhouse. At the end, Chihiro manages to achieve her objective to free both Haku and her parents, who were also under a spell by Yubaba.

Haku’s salvation by Chihiro is reminiscent of the famous motifs in the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the Japanese myth of Izanagi and Izanami. When Chihiro returned to her real world, she crossed the river that divided this world from the other world. Haku promised to meet her again in near future. Both Orpheus and Izanagi failed to bring their wives back from the nether world. However, in Miyazaki’s story we can see a sign or a suggestion that Chihiro and Haku will be able to meet again soon somewhere, since Haku gives his word to Chihiro to that effect.

From this viewpoint, one may say that the unfortunate, dissatisfying partings in the two myths were replaced by a happy ending in *Spirited Away* due to Miyazaki’s dualistic position.

Moreover Chihiro’s return to this world suggests her “rebirth”. When Chihiro and her parents return to this world, none of them remembers that they were spirited away despite of some mysterious phenomena appearing around them. Before their leaving, due to sparkling Chihiro’s hair elastic which Zeniba gave to her, the hidden truth can be seen in this realistic scene through both a producer’s and viewer’s eyes.

For the reason mentioned above, it is reasonable to suppose that Chihiro's adventure and her relationship with Haku were neither the truth, nor a simple daydream.

Conclusion

I will now get to the crux of the matter. Miyazaki's dualism can be compared to both imagination as children's daydream and children's rebirth which originated in Andersen's fantasy.

As we know, children have a strong affinity for supernatural beings in their imagination of daydream, but without fully departing from reality.

Miyazaki and other authors of literature for children similarly made full use of dualism based on their imagination in creating alternate realities and, through this, tried to understand the meaning of the world.

If one is trying to escape from one's troubles in reality, one is not able to overcome the difficulties. However, once absorbed into the world of imagination and separated from reality, one stands face to face with one's troubles. Thus, one re-encounters the world objectively, and finds a means to overcome the difficulties by their rebirth.

Children's stories maintain a balance between death and life as both reality and fantasy, because they rely on the power of dualism in children's imagination of daydream, and are, thus, an effective means of conveying the author's religious view about childhood. It is through the rebirth of children's stories that we will be able to cope with difficulties and make a new life, providing we realize that realities can often be influenced by our own imaginations.

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