# The Power of Innocence

## *An Exploration of the Representation of Childhood within Studio Ghibli Films.*

Michelle Bardon

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the BA (hons) Degree in Animation DL832

20.03.23

# Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Michelle Bardon

# Acknowledgements

I wish to express gratitude to everyone who has helped me during this writing process.

To my parents, Pat and Catherine, for always showing me support and kindness. Your patience and enthusiasm for my work throughout these past four years has been unmeasurable. You really have been my rock for as long as I can remember, and I cannot express my thanks enough to you both.

To my partner James, for always making me laugh, even at my worst times. Your constant love and support truly means the world to me.

To my wonderful friends Lauren, Kellie, Niamh and Siobhan, who either shared these experiences and struggled with me, physically dragged me out of the house, or stayed up late with me on calls to keep me company while I worked. The fact that my sanity is still intact is all thanks to you.

To my thesis adviser, Thomas, for your assistance throughout this process. You've been such an incredible help, and it's been a joy to write this thesis with the insight of someone who is equally as enthusiastic about Ghibli. Thank you for encouraging me to learn and improve throughout the year!

# The Power of Innocence

## *An Exploration of the Representation of Childhood within Studio Ghibli Films.*

Hayao Miyazaki's titles often utilise the child's intuition and empathy to construct strong-minded, capable young leads. Oftentimes these young protagonists make tremendous strides in the development of their confidence and courage through the external factors of unfamiliar journeys, in which they either chose to embark on or unwillingly pushed to experience. My writing will examine the representation of childhood and explore the maturation of the protagonists through the use of narrative and visual elements in four of Studio Ghibli's works: *Spirited Away*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Ponyo*. I will also be examining the pivotal moments of Miyazaki's own childhood that informed both the creation and development of these characters and environments.

# Table of Contents

# List of Figures

# An Introduction

The catalogue of Studio Ghibli is no stranger to depictions of child heroes at the centrepoint of their storytelling. To utilise the attributes of innocence, intuition and empathy in order to portray honest depictions of young leads is something director Hayao Miyazaki handles with the utmost level of care and diligence. In my work it is imperative to understand the themes that are prevalent in the social fabrication of childhood, and how they're emphasised in order to subsequently influence the narrative construction of such characters. I want my writing to hold an appreciation for the power and unique challenges that young heroes bring to these stories, and explore how this innocence adds to the depth of the protagonist. My chapters will explore a variety of components that contribute to the studio's representation of childhood. To initially look towards Miyazaki's personal experience with childhood is crucial, as the construction of child heroes has a tendency to be an unintended reconstruction of one's own past and nostalgia in order to depict a golden age of innocence, along with the honesty of trauma or loss.

For my second chapter I thoroughly explore the intricacies and strains of the child protagonist by looking at Chihiro's journey of discovering courage, strength and determination in a situation of desperation, as well as the formation of an environment that lends itself to magnifying the child-like wonder of Totoro, and Sōsuke and Ponyo's unequivocal love unbounded by societal restrictions.

Finally in chapter three, I note how the first steps of independence can be taken at any stage of a child's development, and true acknowledgement of autonomy can be achieved from a variety of external factors in their life. Kiki's growth and maturity found through the struggles of independence is an archetypal journey of such, but more peculiar instances of liberty involve Ponyo's determination to depart from home, influenced by love, and Satsuki's self-imposed responsibility as a response to her family's taxing situation. Through this we acquire the opportunity to examine themes of isolation, rebellion, and grief alongside conflicting emotions of wonder, enthusiasm and excitement. Such emotional contradictions accurately encapsulate the idea of both adolescence and independence.

# 1

# *Hayao Miyazaki* -
# The Childhood to make a Director

Much of Studio Ghibli's work revolves around the child hero, and the construction of such allows the attribute of innocence to act as a superpower in various ways throughout their journeys. The discussion of childhood and representations of nostalgia in films are often closely related to the directors of such work. Before exploring the merits, downfalls and intricacies of stories centred on child heroes, it is imperative to first look towards the man at its helm who shaped them, and to reflect on his own relationship with childhood. I will explore not only Miyazaki's living situation, which ingrained in him his passions and distastes that subsequently affect the themes of his narratives, but also the connections with his family, and how their effect on his youth impacted the portrayal of his characters and storytelling.

Hayao Miyazaki, born in Bunkyo ward of Tokyo in 1941, was to be the second of four sons of then twenty-six year old Katsuji, director of the family enterprise *Miyazaki Airplane*. The business was led by Katsuji's older brother, and operated in the war effort, manufacturing components for Zero fighter planes. The war had a significant impact on young Hayao's life. In 1944, just a year prior to the bombing of Tokyo, his family evacuated to the safer district of Utsunomiya city. They once again fled in 1945 after Utsunomiya was then also bombed, and settled in Kanuma, where *Miyazaki Airplane* was based. Such a series of events likely ingrained in him his lifelong adoration for aircraft, and undeniably instilled in him his lifelong hatred of war. Despite this, the biggest impact during his childhood years in all likelihood was the long illness his mother Yoshiko endured, who was hospitalised by incurable spinal tuberculosis for many years before being nursed from home. She's often described by Hayao to be a woman of strong character, regardless of their occasional differing beliefs.[1] In spite of her absence from their home and her significant health complications, it's clear to see she played a key role in establishing her son's outlook on life. He has previously mentioned how he cannot clearly detect his parent's impact on him, and how as an adolescent he consciously avoided following in his

[1] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. (Viz Media, 1996). 207.

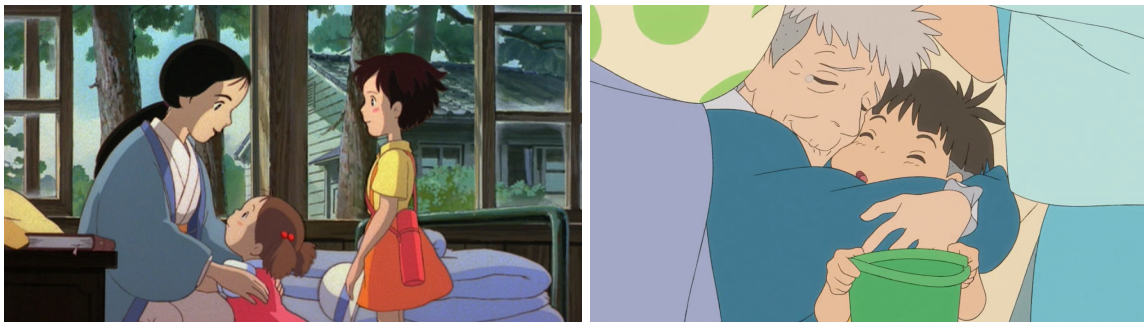
family's footsteps.[2] Yet, his mother was closest to him, and the legacy of her compelling character continues to exist in many of his projects. Hayao's son Goro explained that Yoshiko was someone his father could speak to much more freely than Katsuji, as it was her serious attitude and intelligence that allowed him to ask questions and discuss his ideas openly.[3] His close companion Suzuki refers to Miyazaki as a "Mama's boy," and states that he suspects the common appearances of trenchant old women in Miyazaki's work are tributes to his mother.[4]

This suspicion is quite common, as plenty of his strong-minded female characters have been likened to the director's mother, yet probably none more so than the mother to Satsuki and Mei of *My Neighbor Totoro*. Much like Hayao's mother, Yasuko Kusakabe also deals with a prolonged illness that leaves her hospitalised. She is still attentive and cares for her children while battling her health issues, and the young girls continue to love her wholeheartedly despite her absence. In many ways, *My Neighbor Totoro* acts as a reflection of Miyazaki's childhood. The portrayal of the eldest daughter Satsuki encapsulates many of the responsibilities that come with having an absent mother, just as Hayao once had to endure. Her self-imposed obligations include waking up early to make breakfast for her family, packing lunches, and acting as a guardian to Mei. To producer Suzuki, this mature level of coping seemed unbelievable for a child to express, to which Miyazaki angrily responded, "She did exist. That was me!"[5] As stated by Miyazaki regarding symbolism in stories of young girls, "The girl is the attachment the filmmaker feels to himself as a youth, the childhood self he must leave behind. She is the projection of protection, a symbol of rights that he was unaware he had and which he must now discard as he grows up.. The girl is not living outside him; she is the very self that he has nurtured inside himself.. I am also one of these filmmakers."[6]

The air pirate Dola of *Castle in the Sky* also expresses attributes similar to Yoshiko's personality, as she is lively and spirited in a more masculine sense - as Yoshiko once was before her illness. Miyazaki himself admits that Sophie from *Howl's Moving Castle* is most certainly a reflection of

[2] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. (Viz Media, 1996). 50.
[3] Talbot, Margaret. *The Auteur of Anime*. (*The New Yorker,* Vol. 80, no. 43, 2005).
[4] Talbot, Margaret. *The Auteur of Anime*. (*The New Yorker,* Vol. 80, no. 43, 2005).
[5] Napier, Susan. *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*. (Yale University Press, 2018). 107.
[6] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. (Viz Media, 1996). 130-131.

his mother's kindness and strong will.[7] Witnessing her development, it's clear that the elder Toki from *Ponyo* also strongly resembles her. Bound to a wheelchair, she's isolated and can't help but have an irksome demeanour towards other people. While storyboarding her significance in the film, Miyazaki repeatedly listened to a song that Joe Hisaishi had composed for the feature that reminded him of his mother, but still found difficulty in calculating how he wanted to depict her. He eventually came to the conclusion that for her section at the end of the film she would be so concerned for Sōsuke that she would get up and walk towards him without thinking, even though she is not supposed to be able to walk. She starts running, crying out for Sōsuke. Upon leaping towards her, she catches him in her arms and hugs him fiercely. To Miyazaki, it's as if in that scene his own mother has embraced him. In an introspective manner during the process, he stated, "Movies show who you are. No matter how hard you try to hide it."[8]



(Fig. 1)[9]

Yet in the face of Miyazaki's constant admiration for his mother, he appears to hold a decent amount of disdain for his father's actions. Katsuji was a man with little conviction, professing how he didn't want to engage in war, yet profiting from it daily. He was dissolute, and encouraged Hayao to take up smoking during his high school years, all the while boasting that he was paying for geisha girls at his age. Unlike Yoshiko, he enjoyed going out and partying, and even continued attending nightclubs well into his seventies. According to Miyazaki, he can't recall his father ever having anything of value to say, and he says he regrets not trying to engage in more serious conversations with Katsuji during his lifetime. Speaking of his father's influence,

[7] Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* documentary. (NHK Japan, 2019). Episode 2: *Drawing What's Real.*
[8] Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* documentary. (NHK Japan, 2019). Episode 2: *Drawing What's Real.*
[9] Fig. 1 - Screenshots from *My Neighbor Totoro* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988), and *Ponyo* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2008).

he states, “From the time I was young, I always looked at him as a negative example. But it seems, after all, that I am like him. I have inherited my old man’s anarchistic feelings and his lack of concern about embracing contradictions.”[10]

Considering how Miyazaki's childhood was quite turbulent and difficult at points, it comes as a surprise how sentimental he still is in his romanticism of the magic and wonderment of that time period. Miyazaki’s personal belief in how childhood should be lived is quite a precious ideal to him. He often expresses how he believes children spend an excessive amount of time with technology, and not enough time outdoors engaging their senses and imaginations. Although he aims to inspire children with his films to go out and try to find the magic of nature for themselves, he also recognises the contradictions of having such a message be portrayed through the media of film, and tends to have quite a visceral reaction of disapproval when parents tell him their child watches his movies multiple times a week. He recommends simply watching them a handful of times a year, and holding onto the inspiration from them as long as you can.[11] Yet despite such a passionate care for the wellbeing of children, there are inconsistencies attached to this mindset, as Hayao himself was quite an absent father to his own children during their youth.

Miyazaki has always been a workaholic, but it was particularly intense around that time period. According to Goro, the only time they had the chance to see their father was when he was at home sleeping, as he spent his waking hours in the studio working. When he was a child, the only way Goro felt as though he could connect with his father was by obsessively studying him through his artwork and films, and reading every written piece about him that he could find. While speaking on the topic, he ruefully comments, “I think that I am the No. 1 expert on Hayao Miyazaki.”[12]

Hayao, in time, recognised his shortcomings as a father. In an effort to reconcile, he created *Ponyo* with his son by his side as an animator on the project. Sōsuke, the young protagonist, is also based on a younger version of Goro. With that in mind, Sōsuke’s father works as a sailor,

[10] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. (Viz Media, 1996). 209.
[11] Talbot, Margaret. *The Auteur of Anime*. (*The New Yorker,* Vol. 80, no. 43, 2005).
[12] Talbot, Margaret. *The Auteur of Anime*. (*The New Yorker,* Vol. 80, no. 43, 2005).

and is often absent from his family due to his time out at sea. During these expeditions he's unable to communicate with his wife or son, and this justifiably creates a sense of distress for his little family. However, this distance doesn't prevent his father from caring deeply for his son, despite being unable to assist Sōsuke during the flood in the latter half of the narrative. In many ways this project acts as a love letter to Hayao's family. Reflecting on his absence, he comments "I owe that little boy an apology,"[13] and in making *Ponyo* he does just that.

Through his connection with his mother, Miyazaki gained a deeper understanding of femininity, which in turn allows him to create such strong-willed little girls as the protagonists to explore his deepest childhood desires. His abhorrent attitude regarding war due to his earliest memories result in not only titles that serve as anti-war declarations, but also sincere depictions of his longing for these fictional landscapes that have been largely unaffected by warfare. As we will explore, through a child-eye perspective he depicts the pure beauty that comes from the calmness, the simplicity, and the ordinarily mundane snippets of rural lives connected to nature. With this, Miyazaki paints vivid nostalgic spaces for worlds that could have been, and with the use of the child - or the future - as the protagonist, worlds that could still be.

[13] Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* documentary. (NHK Japan, 2019). Episode 3: *Go Ahead - Threaten Me.*

# 2

# *Spirited Away, My Neighbor Totoro, Ponyo* - The Power of Innocence

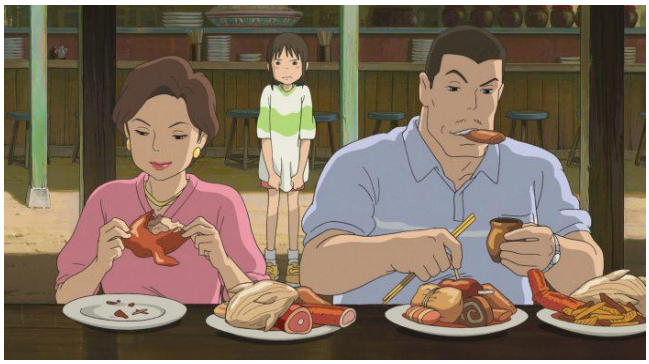
Films concerning and representing childhood, in which children are involved in a significant role in the narrative, have existed in cinema since soon after its origin in the concluding years of the nineteenth century. An important aspect of childhood that is regularly represented in cinema is innocence, which often stems from naïvety and initial incorruptibility from external materialist sources. Miyazaki constructs the child to utilise their unique attributes to their advantage in order to navigate the world, as we will explore, and ignites a child-like wonder through the narrative and visual components of his work.

"Even the weakest, most vulnerable character may become a hero in her own right … the attributes that become the equivalents for the archetypal feminine hero come from the innocent side of her spirit - love, compassion, nurturance, and healing."[14]

The vulnerability of innocence serves as both an unparalleled strength and weakness to these character's development and view of the world, of which the character Chihiro is a prime example of this archetype. By highlighting the power of the child's instinctive selflessness and courage, *Spirited Away* explores the potential detriment of children inheriting the values of their predecessors, as Chihiro's unique advantages of staying true to her authentic impulses is what leads her to fulfil a substantial role within the narrative. Miyazaki crafts young characters to - often at the most vital times of times - hold more instinctual knowledge pertaining to situations than the adults who accompany them. The most comprehensible example of such would be one of the earliest scenes in the film, when Chihiro and her parents happen upon an unattended food stall. Chihiro's parents assume that material money will excuse their improper behaviour as they feast without invitation, yet Chihiro intuitively knows otherwise. She urges them to stop, but due

[14] Emerson, David. *Innocence as a Super-Power: Little Girls on the Hero's Journey.* (The Mythopoetic Society, 2009) 146.

to her age she is met with less respect and authority than that of an older character, and her pleas go ignored. As punishment, her parents are transformed into pigs for their indulgence. The blatant disregard of the child's judgement is one of the many challenges stacked against her on her journey, yet in contrast the intuition of a child is an incredibly powerful attribute in which they possess.




(Fig. 2.1)[15]

"In Spirited Away, as in other Miyazaki features, the child character is vulnerable because of her size, gender, and the great odds against her success, but she is powerful, too, when she realises how much is at stake in the capitalist economy, the dwindling landscape, and the "civilized" society."[16]

An element of this innocence and purity, however, must be sacrificed in order for the protagonist to evolve to a level of independence and growth required at a later stage in the narrative. The transition from unsullied childhood cannot simply be depicted as some sort of sudden initiation into a more mature world, but instead the incremental gradual acquisition of knowledge and experience. The first step of this transition for Chihiro began by obtaining a working contract for Yubaba's bathhouse, subsequently having the second kanji revoked from her name and being given a new identity as Sen. Under new pressures, expectations and discrimination as a recent unwelcomed employee, her youth is evident in the credulous decision to invite the silent creature No-Face inside the bathhouse, simply believing him to be a customer. Soon after his entrance, No-Face begins to imitate gold, luring adult workers to him through materialistic temptation

[15] Fig. 2.1 - Screenshots from *Spirited Away*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001.)
[16] West, Mark I. (ed.), *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture : From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008). 279.

before eating them and adopting a variety of their characteristics. In the meantime, Chihiro's selflessness and kind nature leads her to saving Haku after learning of the curse he obtained from stealing a magic seal from Zeniba. After she returns from her altruistic venture, she is forced to confront the engorged No-Face, deal with the aftermath of her impulsive decision, and as a consequence learns and matures from the experience as she feeds him the emetic dumpling, forcing him to regurgitate everything he has eaten. The unique attribute that allows her to carry this endeavour out, however, is the preservation of her childhood innocence, which allows her to be untempted by desire for materialistic articles such as gold. Her incorruptibility allows her to be adamant on her goal to rescue the workers.

A crucial narrative concept in the work of Studio Ghibli is the depiction of the child as the inheritor of the flawed system that adults have created, and how the child represents the damaged present and future.[17] Understanding such concepts allows for the opportunity to reflect on the commentary for which the portrayal of these children are used as a device for us to increase our consciousness of global issues and societal ills through empathetic identification. The catalogue of Studio Ghibli is unique in its approach to the construction of childhood, as they utilise critical exploitations of conventional narratives to invite self reflection and criticism to the flawed attributes of the mature world, such as greed and selfishness. The circumstances which Chihiro finds herself in ultimately change her in a dramatic way, as she is removed from familial surroundings and pushed to extremes in order to recover her parents and her previous conventional life. She enters the film as a naïve and timid girl, overwhelmed by the unfamiliar world she finds herself in, but she leaves with the courage, selflessness and curiosity of a child experiencing their first taste of independence.

"In some ways, Spirited Away reiterates a common trope of feminine self-sacrifice, but here the meek girl becomes a formidable warrior. Chihiro's unselfconscious generosity is her weapon; she uses kindness rather than violence, to succeed in her workplace and to repair the injuries to the natural environment that are personified in troubled spirits like Haku."[18]

[17] Arai, Andrea, *The 'Wild Child' of 1990s Japan.* (South Atlantic Quarterly, 2000). 4.
[18] West, Mark I. (ed.), *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture : From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008). 279.

*My Neighbor Totoro* exhibits one of the strongest portrayals of a narrative concerning childhood in Ghibli's repertoire. The meticulously crafted detail of the naturalistic imagery in the film allows an audience of any age to match the childish curiosity of the young protagonists. Quiet glimpses of Japanese landscapes crafted by art director Kazuo Oga establish the film in a breathtaking way, and are commendable for both the beauty in which they're portrayed, and the convincing practicality for the rural community of the film. Many marvellous images can be utilised as an example of such. A solitary leaf carried over a stone in a glistening stream of water. A small community of farmers in the distance planting rice. The plopping of rain into a cluster of puddles. A snail steadily crawling up a plant stem as a long afternoon comes to a close. Poetry is drawn from the child's-eye perspective of the sublime.

(Fig. 2.2)[19]

"Seeing as the young characters see is a vital step toward entering Totoro's world."[20] Such painstaking detail in which the scenery is depicted is representative of how children view the world around them. Witnessing nature in this child-like way, as something with an almost magical quality to marvel at, becomes a gateway to believing the supernatural is integrated with the natural. Miyazaki acknowledges the keen observance of children when discussing the background art in a 1988 interview. "Kanta's Granny took to Satsuki and Mei because she loved them for being able to see the soot sprites even though they had come from the city. She realized that they were not just unusual city kids, but children whose eyes were unclouded and clear. Such

[19] Fig. 2.2 - Screenshots from *My Neighbour Totoro*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988.)
[20] Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki Master of Japanese Animation*. (Stone Bridge Press, 1999.) 134.

children notice the blueness of the sky, the acorns on the ground, the little flowers blooming at the roadside. And this is true of children throughout the country."[21]

The protagonists of the film, Satsuki and Mei, are approximately aged ten and four years old, respectively. Mei, who is the youngest of the two siblings, is a headstrong, bold and joyful child. As is typical to see with young children, it is obvious that Mei looks up to and strongly admires her older sister, often closely following Satsuki around, repeating what she says, and imitating her sibling's actions. She has similarities to her older sister, in that she bears characteristics of persistence and bravery, yet still contrasts Satsuki's dependable and sharp-witted nature in moments of obstinacy and single-mindedness. One of Mei's strongest qualities, however, is that she is acutely observant, but her youth also channels that quality toward commodities that would be deemed mundane by most. Through her fascination of a bucket with a hole in its base, she uses it to frame her vision, and arrives at a position where she discovers two small spirits singlehandedly despite their attempts to remain unseen. As most children would be - she's led by her curiosity, following them and adventuring through the secret burrows leading to the hollow of a large camphor tree, where she finds Totoro sleeping. As Miyazaki states, "For some reason she doesn't fear goblins, and the goblins open up to her because her child's world has not yet been tainted by the common sense of adults."[22] Though, this observance from a child so young can become troublesome, as Mei has a tendency to obsess over things she deems to be interesting, pursuing them until she forgets the passing of time or the route home.

Although Satsuki still bears typical attributes of a young child when she runs excitedly through unfamiliar territories and exclaims about small details she notices to Mei, such as seeing fish in the river, she still has quite a bit of sensibility about her. The juxtaposition of her composure when meeting new people to Mei's is a strong indication of the difference in maturity between the girls. While Satsuki is mannerly and polite to strangers, introducing both herself and Mei on her younger sibling's behalf, Mei's composure is simply reactionary. Rather than greet Kanta's Granny when they first meet, she screams at her unexpected presence, and dashes behind Satsuki to hide. When entering the hospital for the first time, Satsuki bows to greet the other patients in

[21] Hiroaki Ikeda, "Totoro was not made as a nostalgia piece", in *My Neighbor Totoro* roman album, Toho Studios, 1988. (Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. Viz Media, 1996).
[22] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. (Viz Media, 1996). 260.

the room, whereas Mei runs right past without paying them any acknowledgement after she makes eye contact with her mother. Her bursts of high-energy, lack of a strong attention span, and easily excitable demeanour perfectly encapsulates what it's like to be such a young child, full of life. As Miyazaki once said, "Children aren't conscious of wanting to run. They're only aware of wanting to get somewhere quickly… So, when you send a little child on an errand and tell him "Don't run," as he is replying, "Okay," he's already running. [*laughs*]"[23]

Sōsuke from Miyazaki's 2008 feature film *Ponyo* shares similar qualities to Mei, especially in terms of his inquisitive disposition, fascination with nature, and stubborn yet cheerful temperament. Similar in age to Mei, five-year-old Sōsuke also finds a magical creature through instinctual curiosity, and it's also his inherent connection to nature that allows him to do so. In this film Miyazaki once again portrays the beauty and magnificence of nature through a child's-eye view of the world. The sea is the centrepoint for the lives of many of the characters, and it's the consistent engagement with the ocean that drives the narrative onwards. The hand-drawn rendering style of the world indicates a return to a nostalgic childhood setting, yet thematically the narrative expresses a fury towards the defilement to nature caused by humankind. Concerning the visual elements of the film, Wu notes "These gentle lines, shapes and warm coloring slightly differ from Miyazaki's previous works in that the gentleness itself caters in part for the infantile perspective of a preschool audience."[24] However, unlike the purely tranquil and sentimental qualities of how the environment is portrayed in *Totoro*, nature doubles as a treacherous force in *Ponyo*, as tsunamis wrought by the children's pursuit of their sincere connection to one another causes the earth the revert back to the Devonian era. Naturally, in typical Miyazaki fashion of giving power to purity, the children embracing their unconditional love eventually becomes the solution to saving the world.

Similar to the strengths of Chihiro's character, the powerful unfiltered attributes of childhood are what make the protagonists of *Ponyo* so determined and passionate. Sōsuke is inherently affectionate, perceptive and inquisitive, which are typically traits associated with childhood. He

[23] Ikeda, Hiroaki, "Totoro was not made as a nostalgia piece", in *My Neighbor Totoro* roman album, Toho Studios, 1988. (Hayao Miyazaki, *Starting Point: 1979-1996*, Viz Media, 1996).
[24] Wu, Cheng-In, *Hayao Miyazaki's Mythic Poetics: Experiencing the Narrative Persuasions in Spirited Away, Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo. Animation: an interdisciplinary journal.* (SAGE Publications, 2016). 183-203

takes note of Ponyo due to this, and may have simply disregarded her at the start of the narrative as she is perceived to be an ordinary goldfish. His venture of kindness, warmth and an innocent desire to help is rewarded by gaining a beloved friend in the process, which may be Miyazaki's subtle indication for children in the audience to find the joy in nature themselves and discover their own rewards.[25] These key factors are also what allow us to witness two children whose love is unbounded by restrictions of cultural society. Sōsuke wants to take care of her with no preconceived notions about who or what she should be, his innocence allows him to simply cherish her as she is. When Sōsuke initially shows his treasured fish to the elders, Toki yells in fear, claiming that fish with human faces cause tsunamis. Following Toki's warning to Sōsuke to return Ponyo to the ocean where she belongs, Sōsuke discards the sceptic pessimism and pledges to Ponyo that he will protect her, and in response she calls his name for the first time, and proceeds to exclaim that she loves him. Although Toki was eventually correct about the prophecy concerning the tsunami, Sōsuke recognising his innocent instinctual desire to care for Ponyo, displaying authenticity while addressing these emotions, and voicing such inclinations is what allowed their relationship to develop significantly. This declaration is arguably the source of Ponyo's conviction to return to the surface after her father captures her. This stands as a clear example of Miyazaki's belief in the spiritual power that words hold, and how he regularly incentivises the child protagonists to make statements meaningfully and with conviction.[26]

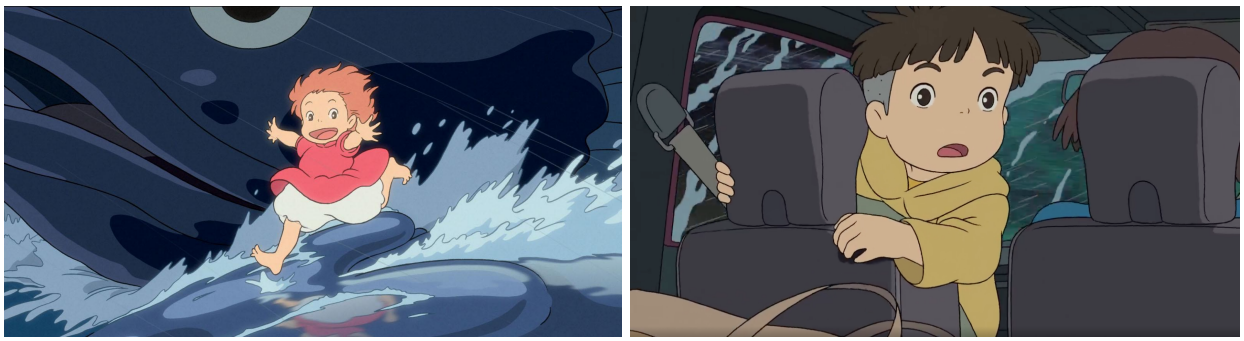
In the wake of Ponyo getting apprehended, Lisa attempts to console Sōsuke, stating that he can't change fate and that the ocean is her home. Despite this, the children fight this fate in their own ways, once again highlighting the strength of the child's intuition as Sōsuke leaves the green bucket she once resided in atop the fence outside their home to act as a beacon for Ponyo to find her way back. Though unlike how the selfish parents of Chihiro likely would have acted towards this resistance to move on, Lisa gently encourages her child's action and wishes in a nourishing parental manner.

In pure determination to reunite with Sōsuke, Ponyo escapes her captivity. During her endeavour, Miyazaki vividly portrays the rash, tunnel-vision decisions a child will make in order to reach

[25] Ikeda, Hiroaki, "Totoro was not made as a nostalgia piece", in *My Neighbor Totoro* roman album, Toho Studios, 1988. (Hayao Miyazaki, *Starting Point: 1979-1996*, Viz Media, 1996). 355.
[26] Miyazaki, Hayao. *Turning Point: 1997-2008.* (Viz Media, 2008). 198.

their goals. Forging an exit from her bubble confinement and creating a hole in the window, she floods the lair and it subsequently overflows with sea life in a matter of seconds. Such antics cause her father's elixir to spill out and lead to powerful tsunami waves as a result. Ponyo, however, doesn't recognise this as a problem, but as a solution, as she runs on the waves and enthusiastically utilises the situation as a manic stepping stone to reach the boy. Compared to the alarmed reaction of Koichi and his co-workers on the boat toward this danger, it highlights the clear difference in maturity through Ponyo's disconnect from the gravity of the situation. Yet, witnessing the ocean's apocalyptic state from a child's eye gives a unique perspective, as perilous waves become something akin to an amusement ride, and Ponyo's dubious proficiency of utilising the tide results in a skill probably envied by a child, despite clear dangers which ordinarily would warrant concern. This depiction of Sōsuke and Ponyo's innocent excitement is contagious, however, as the magic and turbulence of nature follows their love.

"For all his extravagant visions of enchanted bathhouses and fabulous monsters, Miyazaki's deepest art is to draw poetry from both the adventure and nirvana of childhood."[27]



(Fig. 2.3)[28]

Throughout the work of Studio Ghibli children hold exceptional strengths that allow them to explore mystical worlds, personal challenges and frightening situations with a sense of integrity, selflessness and curiosity that comes much more naturally to them than to someone corrupted by the ills of society. Although no simple solutions are offered to these children during their struggles, the conclusion of these films suggest that the heroic action is not to conform to the often conservative mindsets of our elders, but to truly trust one's intuition first and foremost in

[27] Osmond, Andrew. *Spirited Away*. (BFI Publishing, 2020.)
[28] Fig. 2.3 - Screenshots from *Ponyo*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 2008.)

making significant decisions. The careful construction of the world of nature and the supernatural through the lens of a child also allows us to enter the headspace of the young protagonists, experience the magic, and regain the "sense of wonder" that Miyazaki declares is essential for living a valuable existence full of life.[29]

[29] Napier, Susan. *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*. (Yale University Press, 2018). 106.

# 3

# *Ponyo, Kiki's Delivery Service, My Neighbour Totoro* - The Dawn of Independence

The discussion of independence tends to be likened to adolescence, which has the particular struggle of inhabiting such an unstable liminal space - not yet having the maturity of an adult, but no longer truly being considered a child. Yet, through exploring autonomy in the catalogue of Miyazaki's work we can discern that external factors have the ability to ignite a fire of curiosity and independence under a character of any age, and as we will examine, even a five-year-old girl. I plan to explore how individualism is not bound to a presumed age where one is regarded to have acquired enough maturity to make their own decisions, but can also be sparked by ambition to experience more of the world to further your craft, adopting responsibilities to lessen your family's burdens, or forthright disobedience arising from the simplicity of falling in love.

An instance of a young protagonist craving independence from home, Ponyo longs for exploration, and eventually a life on land, away from the ocean in which she was raised. Yet, parental influence on her decision is non-existent, in stark contrast to what we witness in Kiki's escapade. While Kiki's decision was shaped by generations of tradition and expectation for pursuing her craft, Ponyo's father is adamant on keeping his daughter home, away from the threat of human life. The passionate red-headed Fujimoto harbours many of Miyazaki's own pessimistic proclamations with his disdain for how humans have negatively affected the world, such damage demonstrated early in the film by a shot of a fishing vessel trawling a large quantity of human waste through the sea. He states he "used to be human," but he now longs to convert the earth's landscape back to a vast sea covering the land. This disdain toward humanity is the root cause of any attempts to vainly shelter Ponyo and prevent her from transforming into a human. Ponyo, however, is indifferent to Fujimoto's concern, continuing to pursue her love for Sōsuke despite the treacherous circumstances such actions proceed to cause. In an act of trying to shelter Ponyo and dispel her appeal to the surface, her wizard father apprehends her and forces her to revert her form. She proceeds to display her greatest direct act of defiance and rebellion by

pushing herself to develop human limbs once again through the use of her powers, and flees the submarine laboratory.

Although complexities are apparent in his paternalism, his often authoritarian, ill-considered method of parenting differs acutely to the strategy of Ponyo's mother, whose nurturing philosophy centres on encouraging her daughter's desires with consideration and compassion. By wholeheartedly accepting Ponyo's favourable new name (unlike Fujimoto, who persistently continues to address her as Brunhilda), and empowering Ponyo to pursue a life on land with Sōsuke, it encourages the children to look after both themselves and one another. Napier interestingly makes the comparison, "The movie also continues *Spirited Away*'s critique of middle aged parents. Although Lisa and Kōichi are far from Chiriro's piglike materialistic parents, they are also distant from the sensitive and supportive mother and father in *Totoro* or *Kiki*."[30] Arguably, the same could be stated for the single-minded Fujimoto, with his reluctance to sympathise with his daughter's desires. However, despite her absence for a significant portion of the narrative, the arrival of Granmamare undeniably displays her nurturing qualities akin to the admirable parents of *Kiki* and *Totoro*.

(Fig. 3.1)[31]

Ponyo's metamorphosis is a gradual process, which underscores her own magical abilities. Later in the film, once reunited with Sōsuke, she audaciously gains control over her transformations, and willingly turns to her human form as she strives to be accepted by him. This attempt to adapt and habituate to external factors closely resembles the attitude of teenage years and

[30] Napier, Susan. *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art.* (Yale University Press, 2018). 243.
[31] Fig. 3.1 - Screenshots from *Ponyo*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 2008.)

self-discovery for many people. The desire to fit in and become more palatable to peers, which we'll also see Kiki struggle with, is an inevitable factor of growing up and discovering independence. As explored by Williams, mermaids have traditionally acted as figures which "embody hybridity"[32] and as such acts as a symbolic method of discussion for the transition of maturing for teenage girls, or in Ponyo's case, the transitional period of truly becoming autonomous. Additionally, Ponyo's evolution being phased as it is further highlights this concept of liminality that mermaids typically epitomise. Her desire for Sōsuke's acceptance makes his pledge to Granmamare to love her for all of her aspects, including the fish that continues to reside within her, all the more powerful.

The hopefulness and uncertainty of adolescence, and entering the liminal space between childish innocence and inevitable maturation, is an issue handled delicately and thoroughly by Studio Ghibli's fourth feature film. *Kiki's Delivery Service* focuses on the coming of age of the central protagonist, Kiki, who is at the brink of childhood. As she reaches the age of thirteen, she leaves the familiarity of her quaint lakeside village to journey into the foreign city of Corico in order to begin her witch training and practise her trade. This, in part, is due to an old custom for young witches, declaring that once a witch reaches the age of thirteen she must leave her place of residence for a year to complete her training. However, filled to the brim with enthusiasm, Kiki decides to depart a month early for her trip, abruptly abandoning a camping expedition with her father for the promise of a clear night to travel. Unlike Chihiro of *Spirited Away*, Kiki is not unwillingly cast into a situation where she is forced to mature under strenuous circumstance, but instead makes the conscious decision to take the next step in her development by following in the footsteps of the generations that came before her. It's worth noting, however, it is apparent that her immaturity and innocence clouds her expectations of the upcoming journey from being realistic. She is written, at least at the beginning of the narrative, to perfectly encapsulate the optimism and romanticism children have for their idea of the future. These idealistic expectations are short lived, though, as she is swiftly met with the harsh reality of her inability to navigate a new metropolitan area that she has not previously traversed. Despite her immediate altercations with police and cold and condescending pedestrians, she is luckily greeted with the ability to

[32] Williams, Christy. *Mermaid Tales on Screen: Splash, The Little Mermaid and Aquamarine.* (McFarland, 2010). 194-205.

carry out her aspiration of growth when she meets a baker, Osono, who takes her in. Thus begins the journey of a sole girl's delivery service. "In Kiki and Arrietty, the coming-of-age script is visually represented by the unfamiliar/ defamiliarized spaces the protagonists learn to navigate… The conflicting emotions that characterize adolescence – wonder and anxiety, vitality and self-doubt – are represented visually by the changes in the landscapes they occupy."[33] We watch as this new world unfolds before her, while also being invited to view the initial steps of the compassionate transformation from childhood to adulthood.

Eiko Kadono's novel, from which the film is based, declares that the city of Corico is "neither Western nor Japanese."[34] However, Miyazaki's unique design of the city is an amalgamation of a variety of different European inspirations, "from Ireland, Stockholm, San Francisco, Paris, to some town in Italy." He intentionally constructed an alternate Europe, one to represent "how the world would have been in the 50's, if the war had never happened,"[35] to mirror Kiki's optimism. An extension of this eclecticism is witnessed in the mixture of technologies from various time periods, such as a black and white television set and a biplane coexisting in the same scene, specifically chosen for the optimism their creations inspired rather than historical accuracy. By intertwining Kiki's optimism of adolescence with the design of the city, it induces a specific type of nostalgia for an idealistic world that could have been.

The lack of witches prior to Kiki's arrival in the progressive city signifies that her trade is dwindling. "Flight is a metaphor with a triple purpose here – for independence, for the loneliness of being different, and also for talent of any kind."[36] She's in a transitional period where by the standards of her home village, her style and interests are quite modern, yet by city standards she's viewed as "old fashioned." Her dress more closely resembles that of the garments of old ladies in the city rather than the fashion trends of her peers. The alienation of the liminal space that she is experiencing in this period of her life becomes increasingly evident in scenes tackling modern femininity. Her transition to adolescence and to a capitalist society sees her embarking on the delivery of a pie, with which she helped bake, to a contemporary city girl's social

[33] Gutierrez, Anna Katrina. *Mixed Magic: Global-Local Dialogues in Fairy Tales for Young Readers*. (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017). 57.
[34] Kadono, Eiko. *Kiki's Delivery Service.* (Fukuinkan Shoten, 1985).
[35] Miyazaki, Hayao. Interview: *Kiki's Delivery Service DVD.*
[36] McCarthy, Helen. *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation.* (Stone Bridge Press, 1999).

gathering. Her witch garments are met with disdain, and the pie is crudely labelled as "stupid." Despite keeping her side of the encounter professional, she clearly succumbs to the emotions that such harsh words elicit, flying home in the rain and burying herself under a blanket to shut off from the external world. The cultural divide between Kiki and the civilians of Corico ignites archetypal adolescent insecurities for her, and this self-conscious behaviour leads to the loss of her powers. This previously established loneliness is then amplified when she loses the ability to understand her feline companion, Jiji. "An apocalyptic episode that gives her the opportunity to move away from her childhood dependency on her broom and Jiji and seek intersubjective growth through her peers: the sociable young inventor Tombo and the painter Ursula. She regains her power of flight only when she needs them to rescue Tombo, and this implies that self-realization is completed through intersubjectivity."[37] This sequence signals a significant transitional period for Kiki, growing from her childish dependencies and simple expectations of the world, and truly taking the initial prominent step into the maturation that adolescence warrants. This newly-developed characteristic is able to flourish by her ability to overcome obstacles presented by modernisation without completely discarding her connection to magic and nature. During the credits, a brief extension of the tale shows Kiki successfully coming into her own as she has adapted to this once daunting lifestyle, becoming an empowering marriage of tradition and modernity, as both she and Tombo adorn her place of work with a new sign for "*Kiki's Delivery Service*."


(Fig. 3.2)[38]

[37] Gutierrez, Anna Katrina. *Mixed Magic: Global-Local Dialogues in Fairy Tales for Young Readers*. (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017). 58, 59.
[38] Fig. 3.2 - Screenshots from *Kiki's Delivery Service*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 1989.)

The two protagonists featured in *My Neighbor Totoro* encapsulate similar behavioural patterns to both Ponyo and Kiki respectively. Both similar ages to the aforementioned characters, they perfectly encapsulate simultaneously the discussion of innocence, childhood and instinctual curiosity along with independence, liminality and harbouring responsibility. Mei, who's character we've previously examined, carries many similarities to Ponyo's boisterous and inquisitive demeanour. Yet on the other hand, Satsuki faithfully mirrors many of Kiki's hardships and responsibilities, despite having dissimilar circumstances being the source of such.
These responsibilities stem from the incorporation of an absent mother hospitalised by illness - and the looming fear of her potential death - which sees Satsuki taking up commitments such as making breakfast early in the morning, doing chores around the house, and being a parent-like guardian towards Mei. Satsuki shelves all personal desires in order to take on adult responsibilities to aid her family, and lessen their burdens through this tense period. McCarthy rightfully recognises, "Miyazaki was to approach the problems of the transition into adult life in more detail in Kiki's Delivery Service; in Satsuki, he gives us a delightful portrait of a child not yet ready to start moving into the adult world, but with some of its responsibilities forced on her by circumstance."[39] She's unique in this journey of adapting to a semi-independent lifestyle and maintaining a sense of duty, as it all seems to be self-imposed, and much of Miyazaki's own childhood trauma is echoed in her character.

(Fig. 3.3)[40]

Yet despite shouldering so much, both her and her sibling Mei maintain a cheerful outlook regarding their new move to the countryside, perhaps as a defence mechanism for handling their

[39] McCarthy, Helen. *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation*. (Stone Bridge Press, 1999.) 136.
[40] Fig. 3.3 - Screenshots from *My Neighbor Totoro*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988.)

personal anguish. The beginning of the feature sees the girls frantically running around their new home, energetically performing cartwheels and laughing in the garden. Though in an honest depiction of grief, this attitude is inconsistent, and inevitably has brief moments where her fear comes to the surface in a more candid fashion. A sensation of dread is carried through the wind as Satsuki goes outside at night to retrieve kindling for the fire, to which her looming sense of terror suddenly erupts as the wind becomes more aggressive in its portrayal. Both of the girls then find protection in the bath with their father as the weather becomes increasingly disruptive. Tatsuo responds to their anxieties in an incredibly commendable, proactive way - this act of compassion is not dissimilar to Granmamare from *Ponyo*'s approach to parenting - laughing at the disturbance and exclaiming that he's not frightened of ghosts, and as such sets an example for his children to follow this line of thinking to overcome their apprehension to the unknown. The exaggeration of bravery quickly causes laughter to fill the room while exhibiting to the girls a way in which they can cope with their trauma, and allowing a light-hearted tone to return to the screen.

The expectation that Satsuki places on herself to be the temporary caretaker for her family tends to cause some inhibition for her to enjoy the simple aspects of childhood, despite being only ten years old. Her reservations are on display for the audience when she visits her mother in the hospital with Mei, and resists showing the same level of physical affection to her mother as her little sister does. Yet, she's not fully ready to abandon her dependence as she still allows herself to find comfort in her mother brushing her unruly hair. This behaviour is exhibited once again when she initially shows uncertainty towards Totoro's invitation to soar into the sky with him (in direct contrast to Mei, who leaps onto him without a second thought). This hesitation is swiftly discarded, though, as she "then grins in surprised joy realising that, yes, she can share the magic."[41] Through her delayed actions she conveys the internal dread that to move into adulthood is to leave behind care-free ventures and wholehearted happiness. These interactions with Totoro gradually allow her to recognise that spontaneity is exciting regardless of age and duties, and permits her to connect to her childhood in a way that her daily life cannot.

[41] Osmond, Andrew. *Spirited Away*. (BFI Publishing, 2020.) 38.

Each of these characters explore varying external circumstances and age ranges that the initial steps of independence can stem from. No two journeys are especially alike, and yet we can draw similarities from each of these characters and situations despite their differences. Such is the nature of autonomy, as the departure from childhood innocence and parental dependencies is a customary human experience, and is a subject that's handled with care in the narrative of these chosen films.

# To Conclude

Through this exploration of the representation of childhood in the work of Studio Ghibli, we can discern the main notes of importance. Miyazaki's connection with femininity and his romanticism of the era of childhood undoubtedly stem from his connection to his mother. As such, complex young female leads flourish in his work as a result. His characters face situations with the determination, commitment, strength and resilience that are typically reserved for male characters in Japanese animation. This unique perspective of complex narratives led by the lives of little girls challenges not only typical anime stereotypes of how girls should be perceived, but also the power in which the youth can hold, all the while pushing expectations of how honest and self-reflective childhood depiction can be in animation. Filmmaking for Miyazaki, whether intentional or not, is akin to staring into a mirror, as we witness his characters and environments reflecting his loved ones, his ideal landscapes meshing with his preferred time periods to take shape in perfect harmony, and his philosophies through how he perceives the world. This honesty in depiction allows us to connect deeply with the child heroes and their worlds through empathetic identification. The appreciation for the complexity of the shared felt experience in the establishment of the narrative allows us to sympathise and fear for the vulnerability of these young characters. Yet, this vulnerability doubles as a unique strength for these protagonists, as their often instinctual generosity, grounded intuition and nonviolent tactics subvert our expectations and represent the child as a force to be feared, as well as to be feared for.

The next stage for the development of these young characters is to take the initial steps towards independence, which we experience through Ponyo, Kiki and Satsuki. For Kiki, who undergoes this coming-of-age script at a stage that's somewhat typical for an adolescent, the interpretation of the hardships posed by such sudden liberty is explored thoroughly and honestly. Her attempts to balance financial independence with the new unknown territory of inner maturity is unsteady at first, but her journey to maturation is made feasible by her potential to overcome hurdles presented by modernisation without renouncing her connection to magic and nature. Ponyo, despite her age, leaps enthusiastically at the chance to depart from home to pursue a life on land with Sōsuke, displaying signs of rebellion, recklessness, and a strong desire for autonomy in the

process. Her transition to human as a result of her yearning for independence is a visualisation of her adaption to external factors and marks the beginning of her journey of self-discovery. Satsuki is inadvertently pressured to mature for the sake of her little sister and somewhat heedless father's wellbeing without the presence of their mother in the home, but nevertheless still makes the decision to assume responsibility on her own accord. All of these young girls decide to take their first steps towards adulthood at some point in their journeys, and in the process begin to leave behind the innocence that may have held them back formerly, but none have completely renounced their childish urges.

No matter the stage of development these characters are at, each is faced with unique strengths and downfalls from either embracing innocence without hesitation or steadily advancing to a more independent mindset. To experience either phenomenon is simply a natural stage of human existence, and Miyazaki consistently depicts such a journey earnestly, and always with consideration for the magical bewilderment of youth.

# Works Cited


Arai, Andrea, *The 'Wild Child' of 1990s Japan,* South Atlantic Quarterly, 2000. E-Book.

Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* documentary. NHK Japan, 2019. Episode 2: *Drawing What's Real.* Web. https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/ondemand/video/3004581/

Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* documentary. NHK Japan, 2019. Episode 3: *Go Ahead - Threaten Me.* Web. https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/ondemand/video/3004593/

Emerson, David. *Innocence as a Super-power: Little Girls on the Hero's Journey,* Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 9. 2009. Article.

Gutierrez, Anna Katrina. *Mixed Magic : Global-Local Dialogues in Fairy Tales for Young Readers*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. E-book.

Kadono, Eiko. *Kiki's Delivery Service,* Fukuinkan Shoten, 1985. Print.

McCarthy, Helen. *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation*, Stone Bridge Press, 1999. Print.

Miyazaki, Hayao. Interview: *Kiki's Delivery Service DVD.* Youtube. https://youtu.be/8Go65KvFnfQ https://youtu.be/D35iA9pEph8

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*, Viz Media, 1996. Print.

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Turning Point: 1997-2008,* Viz Media, 2008. Print.

Napier, Susan. *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art,* Yale University Press, 2018. Print.

Osmond, Andrew. *Spirited Away*. (BFI Publishing, 2020). E-book.

Talbot, Margaret. *The Auteur of Anime*. (*The New Yorker,* Vol. 80, no. 43, 2005). Web. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/01/17/the-auteur-of-anime

West, Mark I. (ed.), *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008. E-book.

Williams, Christy. *Mermaid Tales on Screen: Splash, The Little Mermaid and Aquamarine,* McFarland, 2010. Journal.

Wu, Cheng-In, *Hayao Miyazaki's Mythic Poetics: Experiencing the Narrative Persuasions in Spirited Away, Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo. Animation: an interdisciplinary journal,* SAGE Publications, 2016. Journal.