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Hideko Taniguchi

1. Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki states that his animated film, *Spirited Away* [*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*] (2001), was inspired by Sachiko Kashiwaba's *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* [*Kiri no Muko no Fushigina Machi*]¹ (1975). According to Miyazaki, when he was planning a new animated film for and about 10-year-old girls, he, at first, had the intention to produce an animated adaptation of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*. The plan, however, did not materialize, and instead Miyazaki later developed another project, which would eventually become *Spirited Away*.² It is true that *Spirited Away* is not at all a straightforward adaptation of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*, but nonetheless, the two works have many points in common. They both feature the adventures of a prepubescent heroine, who has wandered into a mysterious village inhabited by bizarre nonhumans. There the heroine, a common ordinary girl, is assigned a job by an old witch matriarch.

In this paper, I will explore the influence of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* on *Spirited Away*. Then, I will analyze how Miyazaki has developed and widened the themes of the original story.

2. A Brief Plot Summary of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*

The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist, set in Japan in approximately the 1970's, follows a sixth grade girl, 11 or 12 years old, as she changes from a rather spoiled, complaining, and dependent girl into a self-reliant, strong-willed, and compassionate heroine, who can help not only herself but also others in crisis. One of the themes of the story is the heroine's acquisition of self-recognition and self-empowerment through work.

The story begins with the scene where the protagonist, Lina Uesugi, feels like crying at a tiny rural railway station far away from her house. Then, in

heading for Misty Valley [Kiri no Tani], which her father advised her to visit in her summer vacation, Lina wanders into a mysterious, surreal village, which actually proves to be Misty Valley.

Misty Valley, or April Fools' Lane [Mechakucha Dori] as they call it, is a small village, populated by bizarre nonhumans, who claim to be descendants of witches and wizards. There, Lina is assigned a job to pay for her lodgings by Old Lady Picotte, the matriarch of the pension where she is staying. "Those who do not work may not eat." (29) is the strict old woman's principle. Being at a loss, Lina says at last, "But I can't work. I can't do anything." (29) The narrator of the story continues as follows:

Lina knew that she couldn't do anything by herself. Her handwriting was bad, and all she could do with an abacus was addition and subtraction. Because she had always spent the day at school and gone straight to cramming courses after school, she had never even helped her mother with household chores. (30)

Old Lady Picotte declares flatly to her, "As far as I can tell, you *look* normal....Who says you are unable to do anything?" (30) Then, Lina is sent to work at shops in the village. Having "never even helped her mother with household chores" (30), the heroine is hopeless at first. For example, on her first day at work, she is scolded by the nagging Old Lady Picotte because she goes out for work in an "over-decorated" (48) white dress.

Once Lina starts working, however, she eagerly tackles her assigned jobs. At a second-hand bookshop, for example, she gets down on her hands and knees amidst the piles of dusty books to locate each book. Through working hard and sincerely, Lina gradually learns to be self-reliant, and she comes to be able to reveal her positive potential for diligence, sincerity, persistence, strong-will, compassion, etc. In addition, she learns many and various things from the lodgers, who work as a cook, inventor, or housekeeper at the pension—how to make sandwiches, for example. Lina finds that they love and have pride in their work, and that their job seems to form a part of their identity. The strict and rigid Old Lady Picotte, who embodies discipline, is actually a mentor to her. This is suggested in the following passage:

Kinu-san [a lodger and housekeeper] laughed, then said to Lina, "Your

dress is smeared with dust. I'll wash it for you, so leave it outside your door.”

Sensing that Old Lady Picotte was giving her a very severe look, Lina answered, “I think I can wash it myself.” (58)

Through her experiences in the surreal village, Lina grows to empower herself to be tough, independent, and compassionate, so that she can help not only herself but also others in difficulty. With strong will and compassion, she manages to open up the heart of a stubborn shopkeeper, to save a prince metamorphosed into a jug, and to help reunite a separated family. When she leaves the village for home, the real world, after some weeks' stay, she is no more the spoiled, dependent girl she used to be.

3. The Influence of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* on *Spirited Away*

When we compare the two works, it is clear that *Spirited Away* is influenced by *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* in some ways. This is especially true for the settings, the plots, and the characterization of the protagonists. *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* and *Spirited Away* both revolve around the unusual experiences or adventures of prepubescent heroines who wander into surreal worlds inhabited by bizarre nonhumans.

As for the characterization of the heroine, it should be noted that these heroines are common, ordinary girls. They are not at all like many other tough heroines in comics and animated films, such as super-powered witches, beautiful warrior princesses, or transformed or cross-dressed fighting girls. Unlike those popular tough heroines, who show their toughness and independence mainly by fighting and defeating evil villains and enemies, Lina and Chihiro do not have any supernatural powers or superhuman physical strength. Though, in the end, they turn out to be tough, independent, yet compassionate heroines, they are not created to be special. In addition, they make their first appearance as complaining, spoiled, and dependent prepubescent girls. Such girls can be commonly found everywhere today. In this sense, they are a typical example of today's prepubescent girls (and boys, too). Then, the audience can “recognize themselves”³ in Lina and Chihiro, and their empowerment stories can have a strong appeal especially to the young

girl and boy audience of their age.

Work is one of the most important factors in both *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* and *Spirited Away*. In the mysterious, surreal worlds they have strayed into, the heroines are assigned jobs by the old matriarchs. For them, work is the only means of survival in the surreal world of magic and spirit. Lina has to work at shops to pay for her lodging; and Chihiro needs to get a job at the bathhouse, otherwise she will be changed into an animal. Moreover, through working hard and sincerely with bizarre but supportive nonhumans, the heroines come to reveal their hidden potential for self-reliance, willpower, diligence, sincerity, courage, assertiveness, compassion, etc. Empowered through their working experiences, they can even acquire the courage to endure difficulties and to deal with various problems and even to take risks to save others. Subsequently, they return back to the real world, as empowered individuals. *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* and *Spirited Away* share the sincere and optimistic belief that work can provide a good opportunity to acquire self-knowledge and to achieve self-empowerment. In *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*, Nikolai Nosov's *The Adventures of Dunno and His Friends* [*Nezunaika no Boken*] (1954) is referred as a book Lina wants to read. The book written in the time of Soviet Union shows the importance of the empowerment and the enlightenment through working.

4. Differences and Development: Discussions

As we have examined, *Spirited Away* is inspired and influenced by *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*. Both works are, more or less, a short Bildungsroman of the ordinary prepubescent heroine, which follows the course of her self-recognition and self-empowerment. However, by adding considerable modifications and alternations, Miyazaki has created his own story, which draws a far broader range of audience and wider appeal.

The mysterious, surreal world Chihiro in *Spirited Away* wanders into is different from the one Lina strays into in *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*. In the fantasy story, the nonhuman inhabitants in Misty Valley are all good-natured and highly moral. On the other hand, in *Spirited Away*, almost all inhabitants have more complicated characters—they are not completely good or completely evil. Unlike her counterpart, Old Lady Picotte, Yubaba,

the old matriarch of the bathhouse, is greedy and selfish, and does many evil deeds for money, but she is a devoted and loving mother at the same time. Haku and No Face [Kaonashi], for instance, are also double-faced characters. Moreover, such binarity of characters is symbolized by the old identical twin witches, whose personalities and life styles are opposite to each other: the greedy and self-centered Yubaba, and the generous and compassionate Zeniba.

Miyazaki has created a story with a multilayered structure. With the multilayered plots and episodes, *Spirited Away* conveys a broader social perspective underlying the story of the heroine's personal empowerment. Such multilayeredness cannot be found in *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*. This may be derived from the difference of media—a children's fiction and an animated film. Concerning to the target audience of the *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki has repeatedly expressed that it is a movie for and about 10-year-old girls.⁴ At the same time, he “oppose[s] simplifying the world for children,” because “The fact of the matter is that children know, somehow they intuit and deeply understand the complexity of the world we live in.”⁵ He also argues as follows:

The most important thing for me in making this movie was to persuade the 10-year-olds that this movie was for them. I wanted them to be able to recognize themselves in the characters. I think I would like them to leave the movie theater with a sense of humanity about the complexity and difficulties of the world we live in.⁶

Today, animated films tend to draw a far broader audience, and Miyazaki has actually made a comment that *Spirited Away* is a film for those who are, were, or will be 10-year-olds.⁷ He has also said, “A real dedicated children's film is something that adults will also find rewarding.”⁸

The audience interpret and appreciate *Spirited Away*, with a multilayered structure, in many and various ways, according to their understanding. This is just like the way we usually understand what happens in real life, which is actually more complicated than the animated film. For example, a very young child in the audience might enjoy *Spirited Away* as an exciting story of Chihiro's adventures in a wonderland, whereas an adult and an older child might recognize Miyazaki's messages about contemporary social problems such as excessive materialism and environmental destruction.

The episode of Chihiro's rescue of Haku is an example. It is one of those episodes Miyazaki has created to characterize the heroine. When Haku, transformed into a white dragon, is found seriously injured by Zeniba's paper birds, Chihiro learns that Yubaba has cast a spell upon him and has ordered him to steal a magic gold seal from Zeniba. After causing him to vomit the seal, Chihiro determines to take a risk to save him. She makes a trip to return the golden seal to Zeniba and to make a sincere apology for Haku. Zeniba is generous enough to forgive him, and she says that it is Chihiro who has broken Yubaba's spell to control Haku. Flying on the back of Haku in his dragon form, Chihiro recalls her old memory and says that he might be the god of the Kohaku River, into which she fell and was washed away ashore safely. Her words remind him of his own name and identity. In this significant episode, where she takes a risk to rescue her friend Haku, such attributes as toughness and compassion are well combined in her, and, as a result, her androgyny is highlighted.

At the same time, this episode also includes environmental issues. Haku, actually a river god, in crisis and under the spell of Yubaba, who embodies money-worshipping materialism, symbolizes environmental destruction. This is a metaphor of the environment polluted and destructed due to rampant development. In the 26 years between *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* and *Spirited Away*, Japan experienced the rise and fall of the bubble economy from 1986 to 1991, which is criticized for having accelerated commercialism and materialism, dehumanization, and environmental destruction in the country. The passing reference of Chihiro's father to closed and abandoned theme parks built in around 1990 is an allusion to this. The image of ruined theme parks, developed in the period of the bubble economy, symbolizes the results of the excessive commercialism and money-worshipping materialism. In this context, Chihiro, who courageously rescues Haku, has a typical aspect of Miyazaki's heroines, who strive to save community or the world.

Spirited Away was released at the turn of the century, when people looked back on the past century and stepped into the new century. The animated film conveys the message to the audience, especially to children of Chihiro's age, that just like Chihiro they also have a power to change the world and to build better future.

Notes

This paper is partly based on my presentation titled “*Spirited Away: Is It More Than Just an Animated Version of The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist?*” (2013)

1. The literal translation of *Kiri no Muko no Fushigina Machi* is *The Mysterious Town behind Mist*, but, in this paper, I will employ *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*, which is the title of the English edition (1987) translated by Christopher Holmes. All quotations from *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist* [*Kiri no Muko no Fushigina Machi*] are from the English edition.
2. *Spirited Away—Movie Pamphlet*.
In addition, in an animated film, *Mimi wo Sumaseba* [*Whisper of the Heart*] (1995), written by Hayao Miyazaki and directed by Yoshifumi Kondo, there is a scene where the heroine’s male friend is reading *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*.
3. Steven Horn, “Interview with Hayao Miyazaki.”
4. *Spirited Away—Movie Pamphlet*.
5. Steven Horn, “Interview with Hayao Miyazaki.”
6. Steven Horn, “Interview with Hayao Miyazaki.”
7. Hayao Miyazaki, *Turning Point: 1997-2008*, p. 255.
8. Steven Horn, “Interview with Hayao Miyazaki.”

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