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Major Paper 2

*Spirited Away* is a 2001 Japanese animated fantasy film written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. It is an adventure in which the protagonist, a young girl by the name of Chihiro, embarks on a quest to save her parents who turn into pigs in a supernatural realm. In many of his interviews, Miyazaki says that the intended audience for his work has always been children. However, this film attracted more than its intended audience. When released, Spirited Away became the most successful film in Japanese history. It became the highest-grossing film in Japanese history and received numerous acclaimed awards including the Best Animated Feature at the 75th Academy Awards and the Golden Bear at the 2002 Berlin International Film Festival (Spirited Away). So, it is clear that this children's animated film has aspects that can be enjoyed by both children and adults. In facts, a lot of themes and motives that Miyazaki incorporated in the film can be interpreted on different levels. To young audience, it can be simply seen as a Japanese traditional children's folktale in which a young girl journeys from her childhood to adulthood. However, a close examination of her journey provides the audience with a reflection of today's society. The obstacles she encounters in her journey make us ponder upon the modern society's problems such as materialism, greed/consumerism and environmental pollution.

The film begins with sulky Chihiro in the back seat of her father’s Audi. The family is on its way to a new home in a new town. When her father gets lost, they discover an abandon theme park. As they investigate the park, the parents find a pile of unclaimed food. Her parents start eating, and soon, they are both pigging out. Chihiro on the other hand refuses to eat the food and instead decides to explore the park. When she returns, she finds out that her parents have turned into pigs. When night falls, Chihiro meets a boy named Haku and he leads her to the bathhouse. Haku helps Chihiro find work at the bathhouse, a way to save her parents from serving at a dinner platter, and find her way home. While Chihiro works at the bathhouse, she is faced numerous challenges, including the Stink God, No Face spirit and, most importantly, her parents that turns into pigs.

The main motives that occur in the film are materialism and greed. Both humans and spirits are greedy, and their greed is always destructive. The most obvious examples are Chihiro's materialistic and greedy parents. Because the film is set in a precarious period just after Japan's bubble economy of the early 1990s, the things that the father says confirm that he is a son of the bubble years who believes that prosperity never ends. The film opens with Chihiro's family in the Audi. On the way to their new home, as the tarmac road becomes a rutted track and the car struggles going uphill, Chihiro's father proudly says to his family, "It's ok. We got Four-Wheel drive!" Also, when the parents are enticed by the food on a counter, her father assures Chihiro by saying, "I've got credit cards and cash!" (Miyazaki). It seems like the material goods such as a credit card or an imported car make Chihiro's father unbeatable as if it gives him some kind of a power; a power to make a way through the woods and buy more than enough food to devour. However, this power eventually leads the parents to be obsessed with consumption of either material goods or the magical food. And their "orgy of consumption turns them into pigs, who have lost all memory of their human existence" (Napier 299). Through the parents' characters, Miyazaki intends to criticize the Japanese adults' dependency on credit cards and how it had caused their economy to collapse.

The high dependency on credit cards is not only Japanese society's problem. It is actually one of the dangerous problems that most capitalistic economic societies of the present time have been facing. American society, for example, seems like a paradise for anyone who has credit cards. Getting a credit card in our society is almost as easy as getting a sandwich for lunch. Having a credit card is very convenient; it enables you to make purchases online and buy a wide range of things. But, it has been known that not a small number of American people are suffering from financial difficulties due to their credit card debt. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of credit card holders is projected to grow to 183 million by 2011 and as of May 2013, the average credit card debt of U.S. household is $15,162 and American consumers owe $846.2 billion in credit card debt in total (TIM). The people that go on spending spree with their credit cards without considering the consequences will not turn into pigs like Chihiro's parents, but will face their own version of punishments such as a pile of financial debt or even bankruptcy.

Another character that represents the film's motif of greed well is No Face. Chihiro's first encounter with No Face happens on the bridge to the bathhouse. After she gets a job at the bathhouse, Chihiro sees him again standing outside the window in the rainy night. She leaves the door open for him to come into the bathhouse thinking he is a guest. Chihiro's first big mission given by Yubaba at the bathhouse is to clean a sludge-caked big tub. In order to do this, she needs a token that can be sent to Kamaji, who operates the boiler room of the bathhouse, so he can send medical water. The worker who is responsible for distributing the tokens refuses to give Chihiro one because she is a human. When Chihiro is frustrated, No Face suddenly materializes and steals a wooden 'herbal soak' token for Chihiro. Chihiro thanks No Face and goes back to work. After helping her the first time, No Face reappears with a heap of tokens, holding them out to Chihiro pathetically. But, Chihiro, confused by his action, refuses and says, "There are so many..." (Miyazaki). Just like she rejects the unclaimed food at the theme park, she again removes her from participating from consumerism by rejecting No Face’s gold. As a result, Chihiro is the only character that does not get the punishment; she does not turn into a pig or get eaten by the monster.

One night when everyone is asleep, No Face reveals his monstrous nature. He entices the bathhouse workers with gold that seemingly grows from his hand. His first victim is a greedy frog worker. No Face swallows the frog and takes on his voice. Then, he endlessly demands food from the bathhouse staff. When Chihiro comes to solve the problem, No Face tries to entice her with gold and food, but Chihiro again refuses his proposal. And No Face mumbles, "I'm lonely, lonely" (Miyazaki). No Face suggests a modern society "that is out of control, lacking in subjectivity, unable to connect with others and animated only by the empty urge to consume" (Napier 305). This monstrous voiceless spirit must swallow others in order to speak. And the only way he knows how to fulfill his emptiness is by consuming. Miyazaki says in his commentary of the movie that No Face is autobiographical character and he is in all of us (Miyazaki). We live in an age of materialism in which people value material goods than anything else. If there are more material goods available than ever before for people to consume, why do so many people feel empty and lonely these days? The reason No Face feels continuously feels empty is because he possesses "no real sense of self and unable to communicate effectively" (Napier 304). Thus, in order to stop feeling empty, people must acknowledge their emptiness and try to identify the origin of such feeling. And they should be able to find a way to share their feelings with someone because sometimes just talking about your feelings can make them go away. If No Face is able to talk to others about his feelings, his loneliness might not have been built up inside of him and burst into truculence.

One of the destructive results of people's excessive consumerism is environmental pollution. Miyazaki illustrates this phenomenon in the film through the Stink God (he said in the commentary of the movie that the scene was inspired by his experience of cleaning a river). The Stink God is the first guest that Chihiro has to deal with. When he first appears, he looks like an animated pile of brown excrement and his stench is so bad, it spoils food and knocks workers senseless. When Chihiro help him bathe, she finds out that there is a thorn stuck in him which turns to be a rusty bicycle handler attached to various other pieces of manmade junk. As Chihiro and other workers pull forcefully, the torrent of detritus becomes untangled and the Stink God is revealed to be a river spirit, finally freed from the pollution caused by human. If such spirits existed in real life, they are likely to be disguised as the Stink God because people have polluted nature. For instance, rich Western countries dump garbage and hazardous waste in developing countries causing a disastrous environmental pollution. One of the Chinese cities, Guiyu, is called an Electronic Waste Village where the city's main business is processing discarded electronics. Also, there is a buildup of trash in the Pacific Ocean that formed a floating island of waste the size of Texas. In a materialistic society, people carelessly decide to buy unnecessary things. The society encourages us to buy new products, particularly electronics these days, as they come out. Because most of them are made up indecomposable materials, the old products do not just magically disappear as we throw them away. Instead, they are dumped into rivers, oceans and forests and encroach upon nature. If we do not save the nature, as Chihiro does by removing detritus from it, soon we will face our punishment from nature in return. As a matter of fact, we have already experiencing the punishments in the form of natural disasters such as a massive earthquake, climate changes and etc. Since humans cannot survive without nature, it is urgent for the modern mankind to realize that the consequence of the excessive consuming materials is not just limited to financial debt, but also includes a fatal threat to our nature. Later in the film, the audience finds out that Haku who helps Chihiro and is also Yubaba's main apprentice used to be a River God. Chihiro helps him bring Haku's true nature back and reclaim his river. However, Haku does not have a home to return to because his river has been covered with cement to get spaces for building apartment complexes. Like Haku's story, if we do not help our nature, as Chihiro does by removing detritus, we will no longer have Mother Nature to return to.

In *Spirited Away*, the audience sees how a protagonist, Chihiro, transforms from an apathetic and whiny young girl to a mature and compassionate young adult after overcoming a series of hardships. In order to save her greedy parents who turn into pigs, she has to work at a bathhouse where she has to clean the ancient polluted Stink God and deal with the disastrous No Face monster. Through Chihiro's adventure, Miyazaki Hayao makes the audience think about the causes and dangers of the excess consumerism in modern society and the importance of our Mother Nature. After her journey is over, Miyazaki may have hoped, the audience also grows a little wiser with Chihiro.

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