That Which May Yet Save Us

> *"i want to be so kind it echoes backwards in time and undoes the things that hurt you. i want to be so kind it radiates from me. i want to be so kind that i make someone else find faith in humanity again. there's not much i can do, i'm small and weak and i only know so many words. but i know i can be kind. and sometimes, i believe, that changes the world."*

Shonen (少年) is a genre of anime typically targeted at teen and preteen boys and includes extremely popular shows like Dragonball, Naruto, One Piece, and Boku No Hero Academia. Many of the most well known and popular anime in the west, are in fact shonen. The classic shonen story follows a fairly particular plot arc and has a fairly particular type of underlined protagonist. I am of the opinion that Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality can basically be thought of as shonen in how it's written, if not particularly good shonen.

This is because there are a few particular tropes that shonen has which define nearly everything about the genre, things which lie beneath the surface of the actual world but define a sort of logic that universe of shonen anime operates on.

In order to demonstrate this, I'm going to use Black Clover as an example. Black Clover is possibly the most stereotypical fantasy shonen ever conceived of. The main character somehow manages to be more Naruto than actual Naruto is.

In Black Clover, Asta, the main character is an orphan and is the only character born without magic in a world where literally everyone can do magic. He has a fellow orphan, Yuno who acts as his compatriot and rival to whom he compares himself and is constantly challenging himself, and despite not having any magical powers he sets himself the goal of becoming stronger and becoming the Wizard King, the most powerful mage in the kingdom he's from. This willingness to work to overcome one's born station is the first piece.

With just yamato damashii (大和魂) we can actually reverse engineer all the pieces, but let's keep laying things out. While Asta's rival trains in magic, Asta trains in *getting swol*, in what amounts to a very stereotypical training arc. Eventually there's a day when all the children receive spellbooks at their coming of age, which help hone their magic and are tied specifically to them. These spellbooks come in lots of flavors allowing for all sorts of flashy, varied, and interesting forms of magic. Asta has no magic and doesn't get a book.

Later as Asta and Yuno are walking home, Yuno is accosted by a vagabond for his spellbook, since he is a magical prodigy and received a powerful spellbook and Asta goes to his defense despite having no magic.

This is the part that really demonstrates the second major piece. Asta does the impossible and somehow brute forces the universe into giving him a spellbook despite having no powers. But not just any spellbook, an anti-magic spellbook from which he draws an enormous sword to beat their attacker.

If you think this is leading up to me saying that Eliezer's Challenging the Difficult sequence is actually just restating shonen anime tropes than you're absolutely right. Eliezer's Challenging the Difficult sequence is actually just restating shonen anime tropes.

Let's continue. Asta and Yuno travel to the capital city where they are both discriminated against for being lowborns from the sticks. The pair have the goal of joining the magic knights, the in-universe version of the Aurors. The magic knights come in flavored squads and each has a powerful captain, and there's a tournament arc where the characters have to prove their skills before the captains in order to have a chance to join the knights. With his rare spellbook, cool Sasuke vibe aesthetic, and being a child prodigy, all the magic knight squads want Yuno. But despite having no magic Asta manages to get into the knights as well, with his anti-magic sword catching the eye of the captain of the black bulls, the "worst" magic knight squad.

Asta coming up from the bottom, having no magic, ending up in the worst magic knight squad, being an orphan, living in poverty in a tiny village, all these setbacks are intended to make Asta's use of willpower to overcome everything all the more impressive. He even goes as far as to say at one point, "My power is not giving up!" Asta is held up as a role model, and in general acts as an advertisement for seishin (精神) "look at what the power of actually trying really hard can do for you!"

This is reinforced in the character of the black bull's captain Yami Sukehiro. The only character in the show with a Japanese name. He uses a katana in a show otherwise depicted like medieval Europe. He's just that badass.

Yami is also a shonen protagonist, he's just a retired one. He already completed his hero's arc and settled into being the captain of the black bulls, but the way that Yami acts, and how he encourages his team, really leans hard on the underlying assumptions of the universe that shonen runs on.

At one point Yami is in a pitched battle with the villain Licht. Yami has dark magic, and Licht has light magic, making for a very visually impressive battle in the anime. But when Licht's allies show up and nearly overpower Yami, it takes the timely intervention of the other magic knight captains to save him.

Despite this, Yami's attitude is rather nonchalant about it all. He was bemused, but also slightly disappointed, feeling that if they hadn't shown up, the battle would have allowed him to surpass his limitations and become more powerful. Yami also gives this

as advice many times during the show. When a character complains that they are nearing the limit of their abilities, Yami just tells them "well then toughen up and surpass your limits."

The particular thing that makes this trope work, that makes Black Clover work, and which also, in my opinion, makes Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality work, is that when a character in one of these shonen stories goes beyond their limits, the universe responds to them. When Asta puts in a really extraordinary effort and tries his hardest and surpasses his limits despite having no magic, the universe responds by giving him a spellbook which synergizes with his physical ability. When Harry figures out what dementors really are, it lets him summon the superpowered **Man** patronus, which was a secret lost to history.

In this sense, the characters never really face repercussions for their actions. If they start to get cornered by the consequences, they can always just crank it up another notch, become even more impossibly powerful, and come out on top anyway. The universe is fair and the arc of history is towards good and benevolence, the world is meaningful, their actions have purpose and consequence, and they can, through hard work, be worthy of the highest position despite the circumstances of their birth. Anyone can surpass their limits if they work hard enough, look at this kid with no magic becoming the most powerful mage, isn't that inspiring?

This assumption of underlying universal benevolence is the defining feature of this sort of stereotypical shonen.

JD Pressman and Sarah Constantin have both recently written about this:

> there is also what we might call "one-place trust," where one trusts other people in general rather than trusting a specific individual or group of individuals…one must first have *trust* in order to trust y to do z or to trust y more generally

> Jones (2004) calls it "basal security," while Herman (1992/1997) refers to "basic trust" but also to a sense of "safety in the world." Améry (1999) describes an enduring loss of "trust in the world" that he experienced after torture and subsequent incarceration in Auschwitz

> "losing trust" involves losing a habitual confidence that more usually permeates all experience, thought, and activity
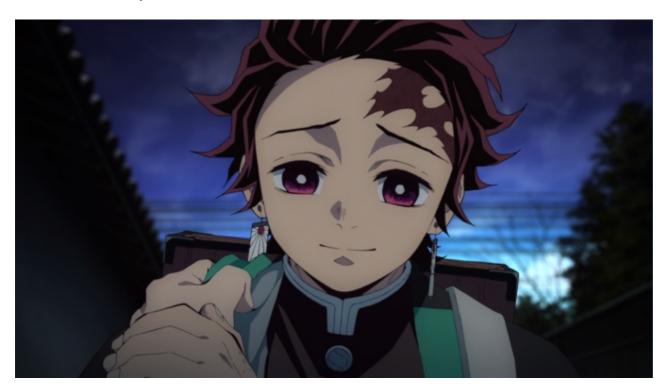
> we experience a fundamental assault on our right to live, on our personal sense of worth, and further, on our sense that the world (including people) basically supports human life.

> Janoff-Bulman (1992, pp. 5–6)…identifies three such beliefs as central to one-place trust: "the world is benevolent;" "the world is meaningful;" and "the self is worthy."

Sarah goes on to say that losing one's basal security should be thought of as a bad thing, and basically equated it with trauma and abuse. JD goes on to disagree with this, going as far as saying that losing it was potentially *necessary* in order to actually be the sort of person who could make a real and meaningful difference in the world.

For my own part, I probably don't have my one place trust intact at this point. When I was younger, I did, but the world has a way of wearing us down. This makes the ***just try really hard*** model of willpower kind of weak and ineffectual seeming to me in the face of grim, bloody, meat hook reality. It's easy to win by trying really hard when your universe runs on placebomancy, but the harder that <u>reality ensues</u>, the less you can go <u>beyond the impossible</u>.

But here's a question: what might a shonen protagonist look like who had lost their sense of base trust? Who was damaged and scarred by the world, who has failed before, who wasn't able to give enough and suffered the consequences of it, but who kept trying and was still every bit as heroic?

Tanjiro Kamado is the main character of Kimetsu no Yaiba. His family is killed by demons in the first episode of the anime, save for his sister, who is turned into a demon.

Tanjiro sets out on what basically ends up being a shonen storyline, including a training arc with a wise old teacher, but he's not the hot-headed impulsive bruiser that Asta is. Tanjiro is a kind-hearted and softly spoken boy. The emotional burden of finding his family slaughtered sits heavily upon his shoulders, as does the responsibility for saving his sister, who he *literally* carries around on his shoulders in a box since exposure to sunlight would be fatal to her.

But despite everything, Tanjiro's defining feature continues to be how kind he is. He frequently laments on how sad the deaths of the demons he's had to kill are, and his compassion is his strength. His goal isn't so childish as wanting to be the strongest, he wants to stop people from being eaten by demons, and he knows that in the grand scheme of things, he can't even fully stop that.

In the first episode, a demon slayer who finds Tanjiro remarks that if he had just been a bit faster, he might have been able to save Tanjiro's family, and clearly feels bad about not making it in time. This is used as a refrain in episode eleven when Tanjiro arrives not quite in time to save someone's life from a demon.

The world of Kimetsu no Yaiba is not benevolent. Violent, senseless, and bloody deaths are frequent. Despite that, Tanjiro keeps trying to help people and keeps trying to save his sister.

And this is something that I can deeply resonate with. The world is beautiful, and it is also cruel and violent and bloody and senseless. We can't save everyone, but keep trying anyway, in the hope of doing at least some good. Some people are beyond help, and yet we should be kind to them anyway. There are lots of good reasons to give up and collapse in on ourselves, but there are also lots of reasons to keep trying in spite of it all. Don't give in to hopelessness and despair, even after suffering an immense tragedy. Keep trying to do good, to make the tragedy have meant something.

I think this message is possibly one of the most important ones to take to heart. It's 2019 and the world is on the brink of several different forms of destruction. Bad things will happen. People will die. And we will not be able to stop it. There is only so much we as individuals can do. The world is big, and we are small, we are dwarfed by the tasks we have ahead and in many cases will not succeed. People will die because we were not strong enough. Because we were not able to do enough. Because the world was heartless and cruel, and when someone should have stepped in, when someone should have done something, there was no one there to do anything.

But we must try anyway. We must try despite knowing it's impossible. And above all, we must be kind. We must be kind to each other, to ourselves, and to our world. Our kindness should be a source of strength.

Everything is so polarized and there's so much hate everywhere. It frequently feels like we've given up on trying to be kind, and I constantly see so much anger and hate from people who I would probably agree with if their positions weren't always expressed in the form of disdain and vitriol.

Even if I have to be enemies with someone, I don't want to let feelings of hatred and vindication and self-righteousness rule me. I would rather stop being enemies with someone then punitively destroy them, and I really get the impression that a lot of

people would gleefully abuse a surrendering party under the guise of moral superiority. Yes, sometimes people are beyond help and we must bring steel against an enemy that threatens the lives of those we love, but we must do this without giving into malice.

There's so much hate in the world today. There's so much resentment and fear and anger. We don't need to put out more of that, we don't need to add to the problem. Our actions should be motivated by a love of humanity, not be a hatred of our enemies and a sadistic desire to harm them.

At the point we're at, no amount of drawing battle lines and gleefully canceling our enemies will make things better. If we want things to be better it has to start with us. We have to be better, just because our enemies aren't doesn't mean we should stoop to their level. What the world needs isn't more people taking sides, what the world needs is more people being kind to everyone, regardless of their side. Whatever else we do, however else we do it, we must be kind. And maybe, just maybe, if we're lucky and we play our cards just right, that will be enough to save the world.