

# **The Point of Pointlessness: Healing Through Snapshots of Anime**

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## Introduction

It's a frosty winter day in the mountains as you travel up to a campsite that is well known for its picturesque view of Mount Fuji. On the way there, you stop to rest and enter a small cafe on the side of the road. The owner happily welcomes you to sit wherever you want, and you walk to your seat. Your boots gently clop on the wooden floor as you survey the camping decorations on the walls in the warmly lit area. You enter a room with a steaming yellow teapot on top of an open cooktop, and hear the crackle and feel the warmth of a fireplace. You sit down at a round, comfortable table and order your favorite hot meal. It arrives piping with steam, and you inhale the aroma. Each bite warms your chilled body as you slowly savor it. After the last bite, you sit back, close your eyes, and let out a relaxed sigh.

This is a description of a scene from the fourth episode (17:00 - 19:10) of the anime *Laid Back Camp*. Watching anime as a pastime may be considered relaxing regardless of the genre or themes present in it. However, *iyashikei* anime like *Laid Back Camp* specifically aim to make the viewer feel more relaxed. The word *iyashi* comes from the Japanese notion of “healing” and the word *kei* means “type.” Anime are defined as *iyashikei* by the anime viewing community, and are not set out to be intentionally created. Contrary to how a horror anime is purposefully meant to be scary, these anime typically hold a general consensus for being in the genre of *iyashikei*. Thus, due to the subjective nature of *iyashi*, it is difficult to concretely define what creates an *iyashikei* anime and explain how it differs from other genres. *Iyashikei* anime can be loosely defined as anime that provide the viewer with a sense of calm through its atmospheric worldbuilding and depiction of everyday life in a way that is “healing.” Healing in this context is generally seen as stress relief, rejuvenation, and relaxation.

In my analysis of *iyashikei* anime, I want to explore how it provides an *iyashi* effect to an audience. I build on *iyashi* scholar Paul Roquet’s analysis of ambient literature, and argue that

*iyashikei* anime acts as a tool of mood regulation. Ambient anime heals through plotless, non-narrative storytelling, that lets the viewer simply be present in a relaxed setting amongst “snapshots” of the characters’ various activities.

## Literature Review

The concept of *iyashi* most directly translates to “healing,” and it connotes physical and emotional comfort (Robinson 2019, 191), which is achieved through a range of sensory experiences, particularly visual and tactile. Healing in this sense is emotional, not physical. In the context of this research, *iyashi* will be loosely defined as an experience that is calming and allows for rejuvenation and relaxation of the mind. Some scholars argue that the demand for “healing,” emerged in the 1990s as a result of Japan’s post bubble economy and two traumatic events in 1995: (1) the Kobe earthquake and (2) the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks (Plourde 2014, 119; Roquet 2009, 89). Others note that the neoliberal restructuring of the Japanese workforce contributed to the rise in mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, which added to the prevalence of *iyashi* culture in contemporary Japan (Robinson 2019, 191).

The desire for healing generated demand for goods and services that promote relaxation and stress relief, such as music, art, books, a range of therapeutic modalities, television shows, and cafes (Roquet 2009, 88). The most widely examined manifestation of *iyashi* in society has been cat cafes. Lorraine Plourde argues that cat cafes produce *iyashi* by creating relationships between cats and patrons through sensory experiences, and by providing a calm space to relax in. By interacting with the cats, whether by looking, playing, or petting them, patrons can feel at ease. Cats are *iyashi* objects to be desired and healing commodities that help ease loneliness and anxiety (Plourde 2014, 126). For Plourde, *iyashi* is generated through in-person and immersive interspecies relationships.

In contrast, Paul Roquet looks at *iyashi* in literature as a tool for regulating one's mood. He refers to this genre of literature as "ambient literature," which promotes emotional healing and relaxation in multiple ways. The first is through "sensory invocation," extended descriptions of the "soothingness" of objects through their sound, texture, color, and light (Roquet 2009, 97). The second way is by establishing "incubatory spaces," physical locations that remove one from the outside world and evoke safety and comfort. These spaces generally feature activities outside the chaos of busy modern life. Third is "ambient subjectivity," described as a mundane repetition of everyday life activities that give a sense of expansive nondirectional time (Roquet 2009, 102). Qualities of everyday life may include going to work or school, cooking, cleaning, or shopping for groceries. The last characteristic of Roquet's framework is "narrative ambient counterpoints," a subplot or component of the story that allows for a narrative of illness and healing (Roquet 2009, 104). Roquet argues that these four components promote emotional healing, and frame ambient literature to regulate one's mood in a calming manner. This scholarship similarly defines an *iyashi* experience through the commodification of comfort, a space separated from everyday life, elaborate sensory experiences, and mood regulating objects that can provide a sense of calm.

## Methods

To conduct this study, I consulted several anime series that have been identified as *iyashikei* by six English and three Japanese websites that contained lists of top *iyashikei* anime. Out of the 46 unique entries that these lists identify, the 10 most frequently mentioned series were used as primary sources for this research. In these 10 *iyashikei* anime, there are around 280 episodes in total. Each episode takes around 20 minutes to watch, which means 280 episodes is 5600 minutes (94 hours) of viewing time. Due to time constraints, it was infeasible to watch every single episode of each anime. Thus I watched six episodes of each, resulting in 60 episodes

in total. This took around 1200 minutes (20 hours). I believe 20 hours of content was enough for me to gather enough information to analyze the factors of what makes an *iyashikei* anime.

## Analysis

I will focus on three particular series that are representative of the *iyashikei* genre: (1) *Laid Back Camp*, (2) *Flying Witch*, and (3) *Non Non Biyori*. These anime portray the genre's unique trait of storytelling through "slices," or what I will call "snapshots" of rejuvenating action in a straightforward manner. All three of these anime fall under the subgenre of slice of life, with *Flying Witch* containing minor supernatural elements. Their narratives can be stated in one sentence: *Laid Back Camp* follows a group of friends who enjoy camping in various picturesque sites around Japan; *Flying Witch* tells the adventures of Makato, a young witch, who leaves her home to study witchcraft in a peaceful, suburban neighborhood; and, *Non Non Biyori* is about Hotaru and her experience moving to a rural village from Tokyo, meeting new classmates, and gaining a fresh outlook on life. (A full list and brief description of each anime that was watched for this study can be found in the Appendix.)

To see how characteristics of ambience are portrayed in *iyashikei* anime, first consider a scene (Figure 1) from the first episode (18:10 - 21:00) of *Non Non Biyori*. To welcome Hotaru to the rural area, the other characters lead her through a lush forest, where the other side is a clearing with a beautiful cherry blossom tree. The forest is illustrated with vibrant greens and natural browns. Sunlight filters gently through the leaves of the trees, casting a warm glow onto the ground. Small buzzes and chirps from the surrounding insects can be heard, along with the gentle footsteps of the characters on the forest floor. The cherry blossom tree in the clearing is illustrated with a range of soft pink hues and petals float gently around Hotaru as she approaches

the tree. The sounds and sights of this scene envelop both the characters and the viewer in a sensory, nature filled environment.



Figure 1: Walk through the forest and cherry blossom tree clearing.

In this particular scene, the slow paced walk through the forest and the extended clips and angles of the cherry blossom tree establish the peaceful and calming atmosphere of the setting. Thus the countryside itself acts as an incubatory space and is portrayed as a safe and welcoming environment. The non-urban, nature filled setting of this anime provides the viewers with a break from a fast paced, urban lifestyle. Although the characters move around different spaces of the countryside, they revisit the same parts of the setting repeatedly. This repetition creates a feeling of comfort and familiarity with the setting as a whole. Throughout the show, the characters participate in a variety of activities. Some of these include attending school, taking walks in nature, and going out to eat. Despite the fact that none of these activities are particularly extraordinary, the characters consistently exhibit their excitement. These simple snapshots of life

and cheerful character dynamics create an overall positive atmosphere for the show, as well as give it a sense of timelessness.

Another example of how characteristics of ambience are presented in *iyashikei* anime is in the third episode (9:31 - 11:45) of *Laid Back Camp*. The main characters, Rin and Nadeshiko, set up camp and enjoy a meal of freshly cooked hot pot (Figure 2). They are bundled up in puffy winter jackets, scarves, and hats. The campfire adds a white glow to the front of their faces amongst the starry night sky. There is an enormous amount of steam coming from the hotpot, and a small, satisfied smile on Rin's face, along with a wide, excited smile from Nadeshiko. The bubbling and clinks of the stirring hotpot can be heard in the background amongst the calm voice of Rin, and cheery voice of Nadeshiko as they express their contentment with the food. Near the end of the scene, they remove their jackets, indicating that the meal has warmed them up.

The appearance of the characters, the colors of the cooking equipment, and how much the characters' faces are lit up by the campfire are explicitly illustrated to viewers through the highly visual medium of anime. The vibrant animation allows the viewer to experience this scene with Rin and Nadeshiko through the many sights and sounds of the food and cooking equipment.



Figure 2: Rin and Nadeshiko eating hotpot while camping.

Furthermore, in *Laid Back Camp* the campsite acts as a safe space, offering both the physical warmth of the fire and emotional warmth of friends. It is porous in nature, as it hosts

different characters and food dishes throughout the series. Additionally this space is transitory, as it is established and deconstructed every episode. The repetition of establishing these spaces invokes a sense of comfort and familiarity. These scenes all followed a similar sequence of events. First, the characters travel up to a campsite and survey the beauty of nature. Then, they set up camp, with the anime showing each step along the way. The camping gear is placed on the ground, tent posts are set up, the tent cover is thrown on, a sleeping bag is rolled out, cooking gear is set up beside the tent, and finally the characters sit down and let out a relaxed sigh. The orange glow and warmth of the campfire, along with the scenic view of nature, hot food, and the company of friends create an environment of safety and relaxation. Much like in *Non Non Biyori*, the events of *Laid Back Camp* are nothing extraordinary, being mainly limited to camping, cooking, and nature walks. This simplistic routine amidst a variety of scenic campsites create the anime's relaxed atmosphere and, as with *Non Non Biyori*, provides a sense of timelessness.

For the final example of these ambient characteristics in *iyashikei* anime, the magical world of *Flying Witch* can be explored. Much like the other two anime, *Flying Witch* takes place in a setting removed from an urban environment. The quiet, suburban neighborhood that Makoto moves to acts as an incubatory space, allowing the characters to roam freely and explore this safe environment. Additionally, similar to the other anime discussed, activities of the characters in *Flying Witch* are animated with vibrant colors, fitting sound effects, and descriptive dialogue, inviting the viewer to be part of a sensory experience with the characters. This is particularly exemplified in a scene (Figure 3) near the end of the second episode (16:52 - 19:50). Makoto and her cousin Kei are making tempura out of *fuki* (butterbur), an earthy and bitter sprout native to East Asia. The ingredients, illustrated in vibrant greens, and the sizzling oil of the tempura

making process are integral to the sensory environment. When the characters taste their cooking, Makoto describes how salt complements the earthy taste of the *fuki* tempura, and how there is a bitter aftertaste which adds complexity to the dish. This descriptive dialogue immerses viewers into the experience and lets them imagine the taste for themselves.



Figure 3: Cooking *fuki* tempura

Consistent with the other anime, *Flying Witch* presents a simplistic, yet cheerful story. Although there may be some supernatural, magical elements in this series, they are not extravagant which allows them to blend in with the rest of the characters' everyday activities. This magic is just enough to remove viewers from the reality of their own world, but subtle enough for the setting of *Flying Witch* to still present itself as peaceful.

From these scenes, it is clear how traits of sensory invocation, incubatory spaces, and ambient subjectivity are presented in *iyashikei* anime. Sensory invocation is presented through animation and sound effects, incubatory spaces are created through peaceful settings, and the ordinary events and lack of conflict in these scenes are characteristics of ambient subjectivity.

Despite the similarities between ambient literature and *iyashikei* anime, there is one key difference between the two: ambient literature and other genres of anime generally have a plot to their story. That is, they have a buildup of tension and then an eventual release at the end of the narrative. However, unlike ambient literature, it is not crucial to have narrative ambient counterpoints in *iyashikei* anime. In fact, most *iyashikei* anime contain little to no violence, surprises, plot twists, or conflict which results in a story that appears to lack a narrative. Thus I will attempt to comprehensively explain the unique narrative structure of *iyashikei* anime by giving several examples of how this genre lacks a narrative-driven story.

In *iyashikei* anime, there are two ways that the story presents itself. The first is through an episodic structure. In these types of anime, each episode contains a singular story. Each episode contains the same main characters, but they do slightly different activities depending on the episode. These episodes can also be seen as standalone stories, as in the viewer could technically start with any of them and watch the series in any order. *Laid Back Camp* is structured like this. The other way that *iyashikei* anime stories present themselves is through several smaller, usually disconnected vignettes within one episode. This is like seeing three to five “snapshots” of the main characters’ lives in each episode. These snapshots are usually loosely connected, but they can also stand as their own story, and the viewer can watch each one without understanding the larger context. *Flying Witch* and *Non Non Biyori* are structured like this.

The lack of a plot and the episodic structure of smaller stories that make up a larger series appear to be two characteristics unique to *iyashikei* anime. In other genres, the order in which episodes are watched matter, as each episode builds on the previous ones by expanding on the characters, settings, and conflicts. There is no big final resolution presented in *iyashikei* anime, and most, if not all of these anime can be summarized in one sentence that describes their entire

premise. The details that happen in these anime are vignettes of this premise. I refer to these vignettes as “snapshot scenes.” The difference between the plot structure of *iyashikei* anime and other genres can be more clearly understood through Figure 4 below.

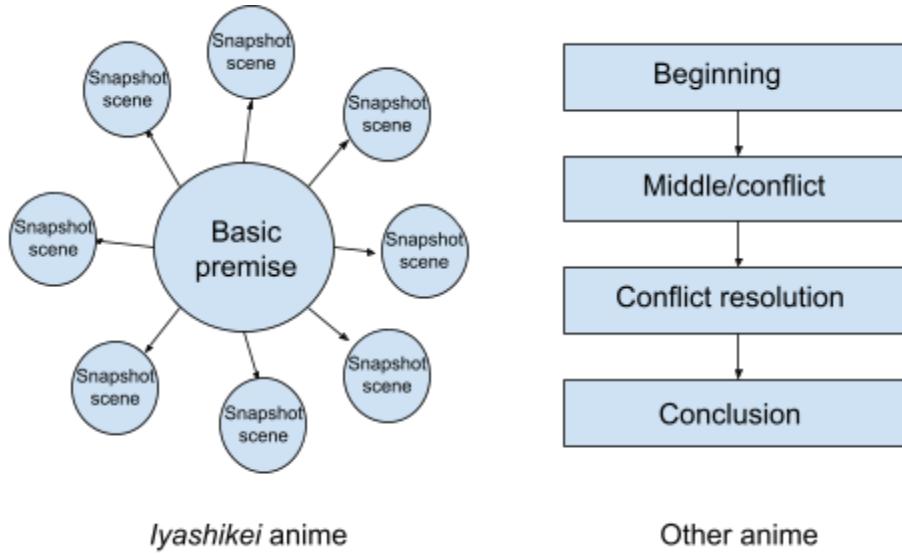


Figure 4: Difference between the plot structure of *iyashikei* anime (left) and other genres (right).

The chart on the left depicts the structure of an *iyashikei* anime, while the right illustrates the typical story flow of other genres. On the left, the basic premise represents the one sentence summary that can be provided which encapsulates the little background information needed to fully understand each story. The arrows pointing outwards towards the various “snapshot scenes” emphasize that each scene is self-contained and focuses on the present moment without building off other scenes. The only thing that these snapshots have in common is that they all happen in a similar setting with the same characters that are established from the premise of the show.

On the right, the typical flow of other genres is illustrated. Each part of the story builds on the last, with the presentation of a main conflict and resolution. To further understand the differences between the plot structure of *iyashikei* anime and other genres, I will consider two seemingly similar anime scenes, however, one is from an *iyashikei* anime and the other is from a

non *iyashikei* anime. Through the analysis of these scenes, the unique plotless structure of *iyashikei* anime becomes more clear.

The two scenes that will be analyzed come from *Non Non Biyori* and *Kimi ni Todoke*, the former, an *iyashikei* anime, and the latter, a romance anime. *Kimi ni Toko* was chosen because it does not have any fantastical elements in it and portrays scenes of everyday life like an *iyashikei* anime, but is not classified as one. Both *Non Non Biyori* and *Kimi ni Todoke* have a scene that involves characters participating in a “test of courage.” In Japanese culture, this is known as a *kimodameshi*, *kimo* meaning “courage” and *dameshi* meaning “test”. A test of courage is an activity usually done with a group of friends, where they explore scary places such as a forest or an abandoned building generally at night (Kowabana 2020). In *Kimi ni Todoke*, this scene is integral to the story and moves the plot forward significantly. However, in *Non Non Biyori*, this scene is only a snapshot scene of the characters enjoying their night. These scenes will be analyzed to illustrate the differences between the plot structure of an *iyashikei* anime and a non *iyashikei* anime.

To first consider the scene from *Kimi ni Todoke*, some background knowledge is needed, which already presents it as a story that follows a more typical plot than any *iyashikei* anime. *Kimi ni Todoke* follows the love story of high schoolers. The main love story surrounds Sawako Kuronuma, a shy and misunderstood girl, dubbed “Sadako.” Her long black hair and quiet demeanor frighten her classmates who compare her to the main character of the horror film *The Ring*, whose Japanese name is also Sadako. Sawako’s classmate is Shouta Kazehaya, a cheerful and popular boy, referred to as Kazehaya throughout the series. The story follows the blossoming love between Sawako and Kazehaya and Sawako’s character development as she learns to

interact with people and be accepted by others thanks to her own effort and with Kazehaya by her side supporting her.

In the first episode (11:34 - 16:25) of *Kimi ni Todoke*, Sawako and Kazehaya's classmates are getting ready to do a test of courage that consists of exploring a forest at night (Figure 5). Sawako, with the encouragement of her new friends, Ayane and Chizuru, decides to play the part of a ghost to enhance the scare factor of the experience for everyone. Sawako vows to do her best to make sure everyone has a great time. The classmates enter the forest in pairs and as each pair runs into Sawako, she plays her part in scaring them and they run away, afraid. Eventually, Kazehaya appears and decides to stay with Sawako for a bit. They talk about personal matters and Sawako expresses that she did not want to ruin Kazehaya's popular image by hanging around him at school. Then Sawako's friends show up and tease Kazehaya for staying with her. The scene ends with Kazehaya commenting on how Sawako is slowly opening up to others and she mentions that it is all thanks to him.



Figure 5: Test of courage in *Kimi ni Todoke*

The test of courage scene in *Kimi ni Todoke* has three main functions that are crucial to pushing the plot forward. One, it introduces Sawako's perception of herself and how other students view her. Two, it is a catalyst to Sawako's character development throughout the story. And three, it starts to hint at the blooming romance between Sawako and Kazehaya. In the beginning of the scene, Sawako happily expresses that she is finally being "useful" to everyone

by being the ghost and says, “*Ureshii! Konnani minna no yaku ni tattete*” [I’m happy! In this way, I am being useful to everyone](12:47). This indicates to viewers that before, she felt as if there was no reason why anyone would appreciate her presence. As explained above, students are scared of Sawako’s demeanor and they scream when they see her. Sawako’s interaction with her classmates illustrates that while she may see her ghost role in one way, her classmates still misunderstand her to an extent. When Kazehaya appears, he and Sawako connect through a friendly and insightful conversation as he mentions that she is not as gloomy as everyone perceives her to be. Sawako reflects on how since she met Kazehaya, she has been able to experience so many positive feelings that she has never felt before. This establishes the motif throughout the story that Kazehaya is Sawako’s main pillar of support as she grows more confident in her ability to interact with others. Finally near the end of the scene, Kazehaya gets embarrassed when Sawako stares at him for too long. This, in addition to when Ayane and Chizuru tease Kazehaya for staying with Sawako, hint at the romance that drives the main plot of the story.

Now, consider the test of courage scene in *Non Non Biyori* in episode six (15:13 - 20:15). As mentioned previously, this anime follows Hotaru, who moves to the countryside from Tokyo. In one of these scenes, the characters decide to explore a shrine at night. This scene particularly focuses on Komari and Natsumi, sisters who Hotaru meets and befriends. Natsumi brings the friends to a shrine and suggests that one of them acts as a “ghost” to make the experience more scary. They play a game that involves getting past the “ghost” and putting a five yen coin on the deck of the shrine. Through rock-paper-scissors, Komari is chosen to be the ghost. She wanders off to get ready to scare the others but ends up getting scared herself from being alone in the dark. There is a box of props that Natsumi brings containing a white sheet for the person

pretending to be a ghost. Komari puts it on and panics, realizing there are no eye holes for her to see through. As she is by herself, she hears footsteps and turns around but she sees no one. In actuality, one of the friends slips past her and places the five yen coin on the shrine. When Komari turns back around, the friend is gone and she cries out of fear and confusion because she does not know how the coin got there. Komari backs up and comically lands in the prop box, making the ghost cloth fall over her head again which leads her to panic due to the darkness. The scene ends with Natsumi checking in on Komari to find her ringing the bell of the shrine in the ghost costume while crying for evil spirits to go away.

This test of courage scene is just one snapshot of the character's lives out of many in the show. There is no real relevance of this scene from a story perspective, as it does not move the narrative forward nor contain any insight about the characters like the test of courage in *Kimi ni Todoke* does. The scenes before and after do not have much of a connection to this scene, as they presented themselves as their own separate snapshot in the world of *Non Non Biyori*. In the scene before the test of courage, the characters were working on homework and in the scene after, they are playing cat's cradle in a classroom.

Rather than moving a plot forward in any way, the test of courage scene in *Non Non Biyori* acutely focuses on the present moment of the characters. There is no reference to past or future activities or any major conflicts. Instead the characters' dialogue reflects exactly what they are doing, feeling, or seeing in the moment. For example, when Komari goes off by herself to prepare to scare the others, she talks directly about her actions saying “*Nani, kono shi-tsū?*” [What is this sheet?] (17:17) when she finds the box of props that Natsumi brought. Picking up the white cloth out of the box, she says “*Ahh, kore kabbute obake ni narette koto ka?*” [Ahh, I guess I'm supposed to put this on and become a ghost?] (17:20), describing her direct thoughts

on the matter before her. She also vocalizes her fear of the dark and panic in a matter-of-fact way.

Furthermore, there are some scenes that contain little to no dialogue, which allow the viewer to focus on the present setting and mood. When Komari is first shown by herself, there are around twenty seconds of no dialogue where the camera just shows her standing in the dark in front of the shrine from different angles, before zooming in on her nervous face. The camera first shows her standing in front of the shrine from a back angle, and then from a top angle. When it zooms in on her face, the viewers see a scared, but comical expression as seen in the left of Figure 6 below. Note that viewers can tell Komari is afraid due to her large, black eyes which are usually illustrated as green as seen in the right of Figure 6. However, viewers can also see that her expression is comical from the way that her mouth is illustrated in a “w” shape. Throughout this scene, slightly eerie but whimsical music plays in the background, which indicates the playful nature of the situation, rather than a scary or unsettling mood that may be present in a similar situation of a horror anime.



Figure 6: Komari’s scared expression (left) versus her regular expression (right).

Other genres of anime may have similar scenes with little to no dialogue, but they appear to be extremely more common in *iyashikei* anime comparatively, with at least one of these scenes appearing in every episode. Additionally, these scenes of silence likely serve a different purpose in other genres than in *iyashikei*. In a horror anime, scenes of silence usually build up tension,

suspense, and fear. In an action or drama anime, scenes of silence may allow for characters to be reflective of their past or direct the focus to physical action fights on the screen. In an *iyashikei* anime, these scenes of silence usually involve camera panovers of nature or jump cuts of the characters doing a fun activity. The aim of these scenes is to allow viewers to experience the present activity with the characters in a relaxed or humorous way. In the test of courage scene of *Non Non Biyori*, the scene of silence is a comical way to show Komari's feelings from being chosen as the ghost. This acute awareness of these present feelings through both dialogue and a lack of dialogue is unique to *iyashikei* anime.

To briefly summarize, both of these scenes involve a group of friends participating in a test of courage. In *Kimi ni Todoke*, this scene progresses the plot of the story by establishing Sawako's character development and the romance between her and Kazehaya. There is a good amount of personal reflection and insight in the dialogue regarding the past and present experiences of Sawako. Kazehaya's dialogue inspires Sawako to have more confidence in herself and establishes him as a means of support to her. The plot is significantly moved forward and viewers gain more insight in the characters and the story through this scene.

On the other hand, in *Non Non Biyori* the test of courage scene does not significantly progress the story in any way, but rather acts as another “snapshot” that takes place in the story’s setting of the countryside. There is no connection between this scene or any other scene, and this is not a major plot point in the story. Furthermore, the dialogue in *Non Non Biyori* represents the present actions of the characters by reflecting what they are doing, seeing, and hearing at the moment. There are no inner conflicts, deep insights, or personal reflections as is seen in the dialogue of *Kimi ni Todoke*. The test of courage in *Non Non Biyori* focuses purely on the activity

at hand and viewers can draw little to no conclusions about the depth of the characters' personalities.

To further exemplify the idea of plotless *iyashikei* anime, consider the cyclic formula of the *Laid Back Camp*. In each of the episodes, the characters talk about camping somewhere, go to the campsite, enjoy the beautiful scenery, cook something at the campsite, and then go to bed. The lack of plot in this anime especially, allows the viewer to appreciate the romanticization of everyday life. For example, walking outside may be seen as an activity of banal modern life.

*Laid Back Camp* both romanticizes this activity by having the characters camp amongst picturesque, natural scenery, and exaggerates the happenings of walking outside through the characters' expressions and enthusiasm.

In the second episode (15:07 - 17:02) of *Laid Back Camp*, Rin sets up camp by herself and decides to explore the surrounding area of the campsite. Much like the scene in *Non Non Bijori*, this scene is constructed in a way that hyper focuses on the activities of the present through a few lines of simple, but descriptive dialogue. The scene (Figure 7) begins with Rin walking by some picnic tables under a large awning and then exploring campground bathrooms near a trailer park. Rin then passes a house and exclaims it looks like a huge face, before snapping a picture of it. She wanders past a storage house for firewood, and then runs into some puppies. The dogs happily greet her and she snaps a photo of them as well. After that encounter, she walks around some more and runs into a statue of an animal with its mouth wide open. Rin faces the statue and imitates its expression by opening her mouth wide. The scene ends with her taking a picture of Mount Fuji reflected in a lake.



Figure 7: Rin’s walk through the campsite.

This scene is an excellent example of the romanticization of everyday life in *iyashikei* anime through a snapshot of Rin’s life, which can ironically be seen through the literal snapshots of Rin’s camera. Much like the test of courage scene in *Non Non Biyori*, this nature walk scene of *Laid Back Camp* does not set up or contribute to an overarching story, as there is none. Instead it chooses to focus on the idiosyncrasies of Rin’s walk. These are charming and small, but they illustrate pleasant things that make walking outside enjoyable. There is very little dialogue in this scene, and if there is, it is centered around Rin’s thoughts and feelings in the present moment.

The romanticization of the banal in *Laid Back Camp* is deliberate and subtle, but it is enough for the viewer to appreciate the smaller things in life through Rin’s thoughts and actions. Rin takes the time to stop and really look at everything that she walks past. When she walks by the house she mentions, “*Dekai kao da!*” [It’s a huge face!] (16:03), before snapping a picture of it. The camera stays on this scene for around three seconds, which pushes the viewer to find the

face in the house as well, through the placement of the windows and doors. Without this comment from Rin and the pause of the camera, most viewers would not give a second thought to the house, as the face is only there if one is aware of it.

Furthermore, Rin imitating the expression of the animal statue is charming and mildly comedic, especially considering that she is by herself. She stares at the statue and pauses to ask it “*Raion ka? Raion na no ka?*” [A lion? Are you a lion?] (16:47), which again pushes the viewer to think about the question with Rin concerning what animal the statue resembles. The statues here do not just serve as a decorative function to the backdrop of the setting, rather they are part of the forefront of this scene. This snapshot of Rin’s life illustrates to viewers how objects or figures that may settle in the background of one’s life, such as a house or a statue, can be something special if one takes just a few moments to appreciate its beauty. Therefore, through the romanticization and exaggeration of the qualities of banal modern life in these *iyashikei* anime, viewers may learn to appreciate their day to day activities more, and thus find increased enjoyment and beauty in their everyday lives.

Finally, consider the plotless nature of *Flying Witch*. The world of this anime is not much different than the world that viewers are familiar with. *Flying Witch* presents itself as any other slice of life, however it introduces the main character, Makoto, as a witch contrary to the other characters, who are not witches. Viewers get no backstory on the history of witches in this world, or even what kind of abilities these characters possess. The anime simply presents Makoto as a witch with a black cat as a familiar, and illustrates her ability to perform simple magic spells. Magic in this anime is not the main focus, as Makoto is shown to attend school like anyone else and does not use her magic on a regular basis. When fantastical elements are present, the other characters are portrayed with a curious innocence and wonder as Makoto explains her spells.

Through the minor fantastical elements, lack of plot, and curious wonder of the characters, *Flying Witch* aims to rejuvenate people through its charming snapshots. For example, in the first episode (9:35 - 13:35), Makoto moves in with her cousin Kei and his younger sister Chinatsu. Chinatsu shows Makoto around the area and Makoto goes shopping for things that she will need during her stay. The scene begins with Makoto and Chinatsu walking on a bridge and Makoto expresses how nice and relaxing the town is. As they are talking, the camera pans to different shots of a naturesque town including a stream of running water and a scenic view of the mountains. They enter an indoor strip mall and explore various stores. Literal snapshots of Makoto and Chinatsu looking at bowls, towels, and trying out furniture and hats are shown. Then they approach a donut shop, and Chinatsu excitedly runs up to the store and recommends Makoto her favorite donut flavor. After they leave the strip mall, they walk past a small home improvement retailer that is selling brooms in front of their store (Figure 8). Makoto decides to buy a broom, as she believes it is a useful item for her as a witch to have. While Chinatsu stares in disbelief, Makoto straddles the broom and starts flying. The scene ends with Makoto and Chinatsu flying on the broom to Kei, and Chinatsu enthusiastically describing her magical experience to her brother.





Figure 8: Makoto and Chinatsu's outing to the home improvement retailer.

Similar to the other *iyashikei* anime scenes discussed previously, this scene of *Flying Witch* acutely focuses on the present moment and does not contribute to a larger story. The setting of this story in particular is illustrated as peaceful, allowing viewers to take a step back from their busy everyday life. When walking through the town, Makoto describes it to Chinatsu by saying, “*Ochitsuku to ii masuka, jikan ga yukkuri to ii masuka*” [It’s calming and time seems to slow down here] (9:39). This line in particular indicates the calm nature of the setting, which may juxtapose the hectic city life of many people.

The broom scene in particular has the ability to take viewers out of their present environment, and place them in the present world of the anime. When Chinatsu and Makoto first approach the brooms outside the store, Chinatsu asks Makoto matter of factly, “*Houki kau no?*” [Are you going to buy a broom?] (11:00), to which Makoto responds, “*Yappari atta houga nanika to benri desushi*” [I think it would be a convenient thing to have] (11:04). Chinatsu does not know that Makoto is a witch yet at this point in the episode, so these lines set the expectation that Makoto will most likely use the broom for cleaning. However Makoto soon breaks this expectation when she begins to fly. When she returns to the ground, Makoto mentions that the bamboo broom feels a bit awkward and wonders if she will get used to it. This is said in such a casual manner that it makes a witch shopping for a broomstick look like any other person shopping for furniture. As stated previously, the supernatural aspects of this anime are present,

but are also subtle enough to seem natural in everyday life. There is a certain innocence and wonder through the other characters experiencing the magic of Makoto, similar to that of a kid experiencing a magic trick. Thus, *Flying Witch* presents viewers with a refreshing perspective on a world slightly altered by magic, but all in all, not unlike their own.

### **The appeal of *iyashikei* anime**

In *iyashikei* anime, stories are not structured with a beginning, middle, and end. There are no conflicts that are left unresolved by the end of each individual episode. Each scene or episode is a snapshot of these characters' lives in the particular setting that they are in. Dialogue, or a lack of dialogue, also does not progress the story forward. Rather, what characters say is closely related to their actions in the present moment. Why would viewers want to watch such an evidently plotless, and thus seemingly pointless story?

The appeal of *iyashikei* anime, of a seemingly pointless story, appears to lie in two main ideas: (1) the *iyashi* effect of these anime and (2) its relatability to a viewer's real life. In terms of the *iyashi* effect of these stories, they contain traits of ambience that Roquet has identified as having an *iyashi* appeal. *Iyashikei* anime have natural settings and generally cheerful characters who engage in romanticized everyday activities, which provide a sense of familiarity and safety. Furthermore, the simple and porous nature of *iyashikei* anime allows people to pick up from wherever they left off in the series without having to remember any major or complex plot points, character relationships, or conflicts. Additionally, as mentioned previously through the various scene descriptions, these shows contain bright and visually appealing color palettes and their soundtracks generally consist of relaxed guitar or piano melodies. Thus watching an *iyashikei* anime could be ideal for some people who want to relax mindlessly.

In addition to its *iyashi* appeal, *iyashikei* anime are more relatable than other genres, as they mainly focus on aspects of everyday life. While entertaining, most people can not relate to the events that happen in supernatural or action packed stories. It is very likely that a majority of people can relate to the events of *iyashikei* anime and the snapshot, plotless structure of the genre itself, as one's own life also does not follow any kind of set plot.

Furthermore, these snapshots appear to be pointless on their own, and hence create a feeling of the plotless nature of these anime. However they do ultimately accumulate into something grander and more meaningful. In *Non Non Biyori*, *Laid Back Camp*, and *Flying Witch*, the main characters develop new friendships and learn to appreciate the beauty of a quiet, nature filled setting. Just like in real life, friends are not made instantly. Rather they are made through shared experiences and conversations. These do not have to be eventful by any means, and most of the time, they are not. However it is the fact that these experiences happened at all that contributed to the greater reward of friendship.

*Iyashikei* anime romanticize the mundane, which may, but not always, allow viewers to gain a greater appreciation for the smaller, less noticeable aspects of life. Something as simple as eating a meal, going on a walk, or buying household appliances can be seen as exciting or pleasant through the lens of *iyashikei* anime. These stories take the background occurrences of one's life and bring them to the forefront. They highlight the appreciation and charm that one may get from taking a few moments to pause and enjoy the experience in front of them, which I believe is ultimately the point of these seemingly pointless stories. In all, *iyashikei* stories are essentially the embodiment of the famous adage: "It's not about the destination, it's about the journey."

## Conclusion

I have argued that *iyashikei* anime is a genre of ambient media. A distinguishing feature of this genre is its storytelling, constructed through “snapshots” of the characters’ lives within a specific setting. Through my comparison of the “test of courage” scenes of *Non Non Biyori* and *Kimi ni Todoke*, I have illustrated the clear difference in plot structure between an *iyashikei* anime and a non *iyashikei* anime. I further explored the lack of plot and the purpose of *iyashikei* anime through analyzing scenes in *Laid Back Camp* and *Flying Witch*, in addition to looking at the appeal of such a genre through its *iyashi* effect and relatability to a viewer’s real life.

It is important to note that this study focused on specific characteristics of *iyashikei* anime that were related to the story structure, events, characters, and setting to understand what defines the *iyashikei* genre more comprehensively. This study did not focus on the psychology of relaxation behind an anime’s color palette, sounds, animation, or camera angles. However, the exploration of this avenue is encouraged for future studies to better understand how an *iyashi* feeling is created through these features of an anime.

The nature of modern day life and the drastic rise of mental health issues make finding ways to relieve stress an important skill to live a healthy and happy life. People have different ways of coping with stress including exercise, meditation, and relaxation. The Japanese idea of *iyashi* captures the feeling of stress relief and rejuvenation, particularly from one’s everyday life. *Iyashikei* anime help provide this feeling through the structure of its story, setting, and characters. It is important to consider that because of its lack of plot, *iyashikei* anime may not be appealing to all people, and some may find them to be boring or slow to watch. However, I believe they are worth giving a shot. So, the next time you are feeling overwhelmed or stressed

in your daily life, consider picking up an *iyashikei* anime and immerse yourself into a peaceful setting, to simply be present with the characters amongst a variety of rejuvenating activities.

## Appendix

Lists of *iyashikei* anime were consulted from the following six English sites: Game Rant, Fandom Spot, The Rockle, Ranker, CBR, and Otaku USA Magazine. Series marked by an asterisk (\*) also appeared on Japanese sites (Mirtomo, Smart Log, Ruiji Anime) with listings of *iyashikei* anime. The below list contains the following for each anime: title, years released, episode count, frequency of how many English sites it appeared on, genre, themes, and a one sentence summary. They are listed by frequency, and then alphabetically.

1. *Laid-Back Camp* (2018-2021) ~25 episodes (frequency: 6) \*
  - a. Genre: Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: CGDCT (cute girls doing cute things), *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: Rin meets new friends who share her love for camping in various picturesque sites around Japan.
2. *Natsume's Book of Friends* (2008-2017) ~74 episodes (frequency: 6) \*
  - a. Genre: Drama, Slice of Life, Supernatural
  - b. Themes: *Iyashikei*, Mythology
  - c. Sentence Summary: Natsume's ability to see strange creatures allows him to bond with these creatures.
3. *Aria The Animation* (2005-2006) ~ 39 episodes (frequency: 5) \*
  - a. Genre: Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: In a futuristic city full of gondolas and canals, Akari is a tour guide of the city and creates friendly relations with tourists.

4. *Barakamon* (2014) ~ 12 episodes (frequency: 5) \*
  - a. Genre: Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: Childcare, *Iyashikei*, Visual Arts
  - c. Sentence Summary: Seishuu, a talented calligrapher, is sent to live on a rural island to develop his own unique calligraphy style.
5. *Flying Witch* (2016) ~ 12 episodes (frequency: 5)
  - a. Genre: Slice of Life, Supernatural
  - b. Themes: *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: Makato is a witch who leaves her home to study witchcraft in a peaceful, suburban neighborhood.
6. *Girl's Last Tour* (2017) ~ 12 episodes (frequency: 5)
  - a. Genre: Adventure, Mystery, Sci-Fi, Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: In a post war world, Chito and Yuuri explore the wastelands of the world and enjoy each other's company.
7. *Mushishi* (2006-2014) ~ 46 episodes (frequency: 5)
  - a. Genre: Adventure, Fantasy, Mystery, Slice of Life, Supernatural
  - b. Themes: Adult Cast, Historical, *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: Ginko researches mysterious life forms called “mushi,” which are capable of mimicking things from the natural world.
8. *Non Non Biyori* (2013-2021) ~ 36 episodes (frequency: 5) \*
  - a. Genre: Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: CGDCT, *Iyashikei*, School

- c. Sentence Summary: Hotaru moves to a rural village, meets new classmates, and gains a fresh outlook on life.
- 9. *Sweetness and Lightning* (2016) ~ 12 episodes (frequency: 5)
  - a. Genre: Gourmet, Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: Childcare, *Iyashikei*
  - c. Sentence Summary: Kohei raises his daughter alone since the death of his wife and learns from one of his students how to cook.
- 10. *Tanaka-kun is Always Listless* (2016) ~ 12 episodes (frequency: 4)
  - a. Genre: Slice of Life
  - b. Themes: *Iyashikei*, School
  - c. Sentence Summary: Tanaka is a lethargic teenager who meets a new friend Oota, and is thrown into new, exciting situations.

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