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| Thoughts on Spirited Away |
| And what makes it my favourite movie |
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# The start of this document

I vaguely remembered watching “Spirited Away” as a kid, with the image of adults turning into pigs and the red hue of Chihiro’s outfit. However, first time I saw it on television, I was too young to fathom the messages they contained inside. However, as I gradually grew up, and learnt more, there seems to be an undisclosed desire of understanding those cute movies with strange creatures. I have watched them, again and again, from “Ponyo”, “My Neighbour’s Totoro” to “Howl’s Moving Castle”. However, the most famous and successfully film, “Spirited Away” still entirely obscured in my mind. I did enjoy its adventurous journey, and admired Chihiro’s resolution as well as the heartbreakingly beautiful artworks it presented. But something is amiss – its hidden meaning that tie everything together. It did not make sense to me why Chihiro parent were turned to pigs, why No Face turned aggressive, or why Chihiro tears were so big, etc. Not until recently that I was finally old enough to understand its meaning. And it touched me deeply the way no other art pieces did before. Hence, I wrote this document, to make it my own personal manual of life. This document was something very private - it is a conscious attempt to organize my subconscious beliefs. If you ever have chance to read this, that means you are very important to me, that I want you to experience the deep joy I had with the movie that lit my soul.

This movie is about a great adventure of a young girl accidentally lost in the world of ancient spirits. Through ordeals, she has grown up to become a matured person, transformed people around her and saved her parent. This movie is a cinematic masterpiece, an influential testament to the power of love that conquers hatred, the power of friendship that grows in adversity and sheds a light on how a person can find his way through a world of corruption, anger and greed. It’s the kind of art piece, that will make you see life differently.

# A multi-layered storyline of Spirited Away

## Introduction to character Chihiro

To deconstruct this character, we must analyse the childish, insecure Chihiro before stepping into the spirit world. At first, Chihiro is introduced as a withdrawn child, disapproves of changes. She lies down on the backseat of the car, and contrasts to her father’s excitement, Chihiro discontents with her reality. She seems trying to express her upset as a form of protesting, a childish hope that her parent may be moved by her downheartedness and revert their decision, which we all know won’t happen. But behind seemingly lousy behaviours, we can see the qualities that exists in this whinny girl. First of all is her value of friendship. Above all inconvenience caused by moving home, what she holds on to most is her farewell bouquet, a gift from her friends. There was a subtle comparison of the bouquet with the immature Chihiro, which is lovely and magical, yet fragile, need much of attention and is suffocated by the grip of her guardians. This protective manner that parent have exhibited on her, hinders her to realize her true potential. For example, Chihiro displays an instinctive sense of danger, an unadulterated wisdom that has been disappeared in her parent, which is probably resulted from the domination that human has been exerted all over the earth. Her parent, working adults, drives the four-wheel vehicle bouncing through the hill way is a metaphorical image of the confident, to the point of arrogant attitude human has developed toward the world they are living on. Along the way, Chihiro observes and senses that this is probably not a land for human to intrude, and shakenly protests the exploration of her parent. Here we can see an inexperienced Chihiro proves powerless in explaining her intuition and convincing her parent to go back. This is Hayao Miyazaki’s way of saying that intuition, without the experience and awareness, was weak in the external vulgarity, and easy to be swayed. As we see moment later, Chihiro, after all, gives up her judgment to follow the voice of authority.

To audience, Chihiro’s parent is the representation of adult’s mindset in real world. They trust in power of material, first in “four-wheel vehicle” and then in “credit card and cash” which, apparently, are impotent in many situations. Chihiro’s refusal of touching the food once again highlights the wisdom of this young girl. She distrusts in her father’s solution, and believes that they should go or people will “get mad at us”. She knows these foods are not meant to be eaten by her parent, and this place is creepy. In fact, to usual audience, there was apparent abnormality in the setting, where attractive foods are presented at the middle of nowhere, with nobody around. One who is familiar with Asian mythical stories may suggest that this is a magic trap to lure preys, which can be partly correct. But from the very outside, this world has clearly indicated that it does not want to be contaminated by human, and try every way possible to warn human not to enter. And as proceeding further down the film, the spirit world demonstrates a contempt attitude toward mankind, consider them “stink” and “always mess up everything”. Hence, it is quite certain that what brought them to this dismay was Chihiro arrogant parent, who believe everything is theirs as long as they have in hand the power of money and technology. Only when the spirits can’t push human away, they decides to lure them in to teach them a lesson.

The next few screens depict Chihiro first encounter with the spirit world. The traumatic panic vents out from her suggesting the disconnection of youngsters with the world of mythical gods. The transformation of Chihiro parent from human to pig is a strong and bold criticism Hayao Miyazaki point to the civilization we are building. He makes comparison of human with pigs, who consumes everything in front of them, careless about where or who they’ve taken it from. Chihiro discovery of trains seem to foreshadow a journey, and the encounter with Haku at the bridge was the very first help she received. As the sky goes dark, the world of gods and ghosts are revealing itself. I think the dark is the notion of the prevailing subconscious at night, and the present of gods suggesting that mythical deities are part of human subconscious that seems to be forgotten. Contrast to dirty image of pigs as Chihiro’s parent, the spirits delivers the feeling of somewhat transcendent, fragile, and easy-going. The first encounter of Chihiro with water then arrives. I think in this movie, water represents for transformation, the born of something new. Chihiro first encounter with water is filled with panic, a very typical reaction when an over-protected child experiences something overwhelming - she is a child refusing to accept the reality and grow up. This rejection of reality was further elaborate by her persuasion: “This is just a dream. This is just a dream. Wake up, wake up!” About the image of Chihiro turned transparent, it means she discards reality, discards herself as part of this world and therefore will be gone. The food Haku gives her is a wake-up call, that in panic, the act of feeling food in her mouth connects her mentality back with her body, which is further emphasized by her deep breath in next scene. And as she feels the existence of her body, she solidified. The spell Haku applied to Chihiro leg “in the name of the wind and water within thee, unbind her” frees her from temporary paralysis. As a river god under dragon form, Haku was pretty much the representation of water and wind, partly lived inside Chihiro. This sentence may have the meaning that the connection of human and nature has the power to unbind human from their own fear, and help them reached their true potential.

The slave of boiler, Kamaji and sootballs is the second encounter Chihiro meets. Kamaji, in the form of six arms creature, identifies himself as the slave of the boiler. Kamaji represents for the heavy burden of adult working in industrial society. He was the first resident of bath house that Chihiro has to convince. This scene highlights furthermore how Chihiro has been raised as a child, awkward, demanding and indelicate. But it is also highlight a beautiful aspect of this girl, a girl who cares deeply about all creatures regardless of their status. She empathies with the unimportant sootballs, and offers her help to the one that needed it. This scene builds up the very basic foundation of escape route for Chihiro, suggests that her attentiveness and respect for every individual will gives her allies. Those sootballs are the first who stand up for Chihiro and probably their bond of friendship has moved Kamaji, the man who seems to forget his humanity in the face of work. This also explains the advice Haku had for Chihiro, Haku probably awares of Kamaji’s warm heart wrapping inside a harsh outlook, and believes Chihiro would find her support and build up her confidence by confronting this simple man first. And indeed, Kamaji does risk his life helping this girl, offering bribe to Rin to sneak Chihiro to Yubaba office, forcing this old witch to confront her directly, knowing that if Chihiro is persistent, Yubaba will have no choice but to offer Chihiro a place in this world. Kamaji seems to have his own management power at the boiler, but he refuses to adopt Chihiro probably because he knew she can’t handle this heavy labour.

Although Chihiro has her undeniable quality as we will observe throughout the movie. This girl was lucky as she faces the challenges incrementally, and receives warm helps along the way. With Rin, a person who first appear to be distasteful, does protect this child, and evidently assumes her role as a big sister. The encounter with Radish God is lovely. Although this character involves little in the storyline, he helps set the impression of warm and friendly nature of spirited gods despite of their creepy appearance. At the beginning of this film we were known that Yubaba office was at the top, and the fact that our Radish God skip his bathtub, to go all his way together with Chihiro was apparently an act of assurance to this little human girl. Although Chihiro has faced a great challenge when she was unexpectedly thrown into an entirely different world, with the mission of saving her parent, she doesn’t have to do it all alone. I think this expresses Hayao Miyazaki’s attitude about education, that adults should act as a supporter and let the children deal with their problems independently, rather than cocoon them in a harm-free environment.

The encountering with Yubaba is a masterpiece. The extravagance and status of Yubaba is established crystal clear from her spacious apartment occupying the entire top level, to the sophisticated doors and flamboyant ornaments she wears. Yubaba establishes herself as a rich and powerful person. Her disproportional head suggest she is a shrewd witch and a very intimidating figure, each of her words carried gravity and calculative intention of breaking Chihiro to spit out her helpers. She starts her conversation with Chihiro by reprimanding her as a spoiled weakling, insulting her parents by comparing them to pigs, and then blaming Chihiro’s species for messing up everything. When seeing that the mere words won’t be enough to break Chihiro, Yubaba changes her tactic to violent intimidation, and we can see that this actually works. And when our protagonist seems to reach her border, a hero has come to rescue – the big Boh.

The intervention of Boh served multiple purposes. First, this funny-as-hell scene is masterly deployed to release the tension, at the same time, reveals another side of Yubaba as a caring mother. Seemingly evil at first, Yubaba also shows us that she is a woman capable of loving, and especially honours her words. If we look further to her previous dialog with Chihiro, we can also see that as a businessperson, she take pride in her job, considering it an honourable service of serving “6 million weary gods”. She clearly distasted the way human run their world, which was justify. Although from the very beginning Yubaba has assumed the position of a villain, we can see that she also has respect for customers she is serving, and empathy with their damages which was caused by human. The grudge she holds toward Chihiro is probably not personal, but to human as general. The awaken of Boh does offer Chihiro an escape route by revealing Yubaba’s soft spot, and thus foreshadow their incredible friendship later on.

The signing of contract was a profound and strong image. Yubaba indeed impresses us by her wisdom. More than anyone else, she understands the power of words, as words offer meaning to life and identity to a person. The act of stripping off Chihiro name, leaving behind only single Kanji character – “Sen” can be considered as a heavy critic to the industrial economy at Japan, which striped off people identity for the sake of efficiency. But this was also serve as a double-fold image, as by simplifying Chihiro name instead of changing it, she brings Chihiro to her essence, which later on establishes foundation for Chihiro transformation. It was interesting to note that the name “Chihiro” means “One Thousand Questions”, while “Sen” mean “One Thousand” in Japanese, which was a clever word-play to point out that sometime, “less is more”. It is also a first proclamation that “Spirited Away” will not just stop at criticizing, but will eventually shed a light on resolution.

In the next scene, Hayao Miyazaki feed in to storyline yet another complicated character - Haku. Haku appeared at first as a helper, but as this rendezvous, he appears cold, aloof, and cares nothing about Chihiro’s situation. He demands Chihiro to call him Haku – Sama, as he walks her down the elevator, even tell the protestors at bathhouse to cook her if they feel needed. As we can see, Chihiro really experiences a blow from Haku attitude, and later on childishly asks Rin whether if there were two Haku(s) in this house. Rin unfriendly attitude toward Haku gives us a clue that the Haku we saw at the bridge is rarely seen, and probably only be revealed around Sen-Chihiro.

Until this point, we can see very clear the philosophy of building character in this movie. Hayao Miyazaki clearly depicted the dual nature of human being, as a mixture of both good and bad. And our young Chihiro seems to intuitively understand it, and this personality, as in my belief, was what that set Chihiro apart.

Next morning, the good Haku wakes Chihiro up and bring her to see her parent. As we can see, Chihiro is not a perfect hero. She indeed forget her name, and seems to lose belief in herself. She tells her parent “Don’t eat too much or you will be killed” which reveals her innocence and powerlessness. After consecutively hit by overwhelming events, Sen was at her utmost vulnerable. And at midst of difficulties, Haku has one more time offers his assurance and empathy. A small act as giving Sen a simple breakfast is enough to make this girl bursts into tears. I especially love Sen’s tears that were expressively depicted in this scene. Big, watery tears falling down her cheeks were poignantly touching. It makes Sen looking so small compare to her sadness and impotence. The piece of rice Haku offers is not simply a breakfast, it is an act of deep understanding. And in return, despite of her doubt about this contradict person, Sen-Chihiro decides to devote her unwavering loyalty to him. And this trust has been the foundation of their escape, as they continuously bring out the best in each other. Haku plays a vital role in transforming the dependent and insecure Chihiro to a braver and wiser Sen, and Sen’s bravery and wise innocence in return reveal a Haku nobody have ever seen.

The tear of Chihiro, now Sen, probably reveals that although incredible, Sen is not a superhuman. The burden of growing up and facing the brutality of industrial work with her guardians being removed is no joke. Hayao Miyazaki empathies with the challenge our young generation has to face. Unlike the previous generation of Asians, who had benefited from years of self-development guiding by religion, tradition and ancient wisdom as children. We younger generation of this world don’t have such a luxury, we were exactly like Chihiro who was thrown into the great challenge with empty hands, totally unprepared. At the screen at the beginning of Chihiro’s encounter with spirit world, when observing the panic Chihiro had at mystic deities, we can see how alienate our generation is with the soul of nature. We fear the very thing that has been supporting us, nurturing us and protecting us for thousands of years. Under the industrialization evolution and the coming waves of technology revolution, we human are on our way to denounce gods and devils, and as a result removing the celestial elements of our existence in this vast and overwhelming universe. Although this movement is inevitable, one cannot deny that by smashing every psychological protection which has been developed for thousands of years, human are standing at a great challenge of rebuilding their perception to cope with this new world.

## The working at bathhouse

The first day of working, we can see that our new Sen has tried really hard to catch up with her colleagues but seems to stumble behind. And like this new life isn’t difficult enough for her, she, was handed over a toughest challenge – cleaning “The Stink Spirit”. This decision also reveals the complexity in Yubaba. At first this seems to be a petty vengeance Yubaba throw at the child who dared to challenge her and actually won. As the stink spirit approaches the bathhouse under a terribly stench shell, Yubaba shrewd judgment seems to suspect this is not an ordinary guest, he is going to need a special service from a special employee. We can see the conflict in this person act and her words, her instinct clearly sense something different about this guest, and personally stands at the entrance to greet him with Sen. However, at her conversation with subordinate, she want to get rid of this customer as soon as possible by handing him over to Sen. Logically speaking, assigning this customer to a young inexperienced worker will only wreak havoc to her own bathhouse and prolong this guest’s staying. This probably reveals her hidden respect for this small girl, but her ego stops her from even recognising it. When the stink spirit approaches, only she and Chihiro actually stand there greeting him, when other retreats behind curtains. Chihiro standing there involuntary, but Yubaba stands there on her own accord, even reprimands Chihiro for covering her nose, which she deems as a disrespectful gesture. I truly admire the way artist at Ghibi draw the horror expression of Yubaba and Chihiro, with their hair stand up and their eye balls protrude. This expression not only derives a strong psychological effect to audience, as we can actually feel the horrible smell the character have to deal with (which actually turn my skin goose-bumped), it also serves as a pivot to strike the balance between the complexity underneath the childish shell of this movie.

The encountering of Chihiro with The Stink Spirit is interesting and funny as hell. At first, we audience cannot help but wondering how a scrawny and inexperienced Sen can handle this tremendous task. In here I have my first hand witness of Hayao Miyazaki’s art of storytelling using juxtaposition. Ghibi’s artists designed the stink spirit very much contrast to Sen in term of visual appearance, make him big, dark, thick and old comparing to young, thin, and bright Chihiro. It presents him as too big of an obstacle for Sen to overcome in audience’s eyes. This setting fetches the curiosity to audience naturally and captures their attention. However, although introduction of tension is impressive, later part of resolving this tension was even more masterfully delivered.

Immediately after our stink god immersing himself in the bathtub, he immediately turns the entire surrounding to mud. I believe this image exhibited certain influence from Buddhism philosophy in Japanese culture, that in order for the beautiful lotus to blossom, stinky mud must be presented to nurture its ground. And in here we see a small, fragile lotus struggling in the mud, working her way to transformation. In parallel, we also see the limitation of powerful Yubaba, which foreshadow her later impotent in restraining an even tougher guest – No-Face. Her laugh toward Sen’s suffering reveal her grudges and urge of petty vengeance, which in turn blind her from the beautiful transformation which is about to happen. While the flow of herbal water is falling down from wooden rack, a signal of transformation emerges. This transformation starts with the mythic god. Thanks to Sen attentive and equal respect for all creatures, she starts to see that this god needed help. When being brought close to him, Sen immediately realizes the cause of his pain was a protrude stick out of his body, and her innocence perceives it as a stick. But Yubaba, who has rich experience with this world and the consequence of human act, immediate wakes up to realize that the problem was much bigger. She immediately sets aside her grudge toward Sen to helps her, and as thus serves a more important goal.

And behold yourself! Because the next scene, in my humble opinion, was a masterfully combination of emotional satisfaction, powerful condemnation, and deep philosophies. It also further complicates the characters of this film, and set perfect build-up for what comes next.

First, analysing the emotional satisfying of this screen, we have to look at the way the whole bathtub act like an orchestra under the direction of Yubaba, leading by Chihiro, to pull out all the garbage inside our Stink God. It was deeply satisfied to see our God releasing all of the foul burden he carry within himself, especially through the final pull, when the sound “Phuutt” of the knob releasing out all contamination liquid. The River God return to his pristine form, which was exquisitely drawn and voiced to deliver the ancient yet lightness feeling, the pure sense of transparent cleanliness of a river. And finally, the sudden and powerful thrust of River God to the raining sky, in the cheering of all spirits, is a wonderful conclusion to this heroic effort that Sen played as central role.

However, as pleasing as this scene is, it also delivered a strong punch into human crime with nature. Hayao Mizayaki condemned human irresponsible acts that poison the very nature they lived in, turned a powerful, fresh and nurturing river into a polluted, stagnant flow of industrial trash. He humanized the nature as an entity with its own pain and feeling, to criticize the cruelty act of mankind and deeply touch every single audience regardless of their perception level. He made no attempt to hide this intention, as he pointed the camera directly to the stinky heap of dung that has been pulled out of River God. It was a crying-out-loud call to awake his fellow human being of the agony they have created while pursuing materialistic well-being.

We also cannot ignore the philosophical element of this scene. First, by caring about the well-being of the Stink Spirit rather than quickly finishing her job, Sen has seen something nobody has been able to see - the root of his pain. This establishes an important belief in some Buddhism branches, that all mishap was caused by wrong perception, and correcting wrong perception started with paying attention. But as we can see, Sen’s mindfulness alone was not enough, she also needed experience and leadership of Yubaba, and the support from Rin and Kamaji. This may serves as a message to all young people out there, who want to make a good change, that they don’t have to and should not do it alone. As this is much bigger than just one individual, he is going to need his loyalty friends, experience from older generation and the cooperation of people. The water again served as the symbolic medium of transformation. And at the end, while giving people gold, Ancient Spirit dedicated a green dumpling to Chihiro. We can instantly realize this must be an extremely valuable gift, which compare to it, gold seems like dirt on the ground.

To prepare for the next waves, and also the climax of this movie, Hayao Miyazaki has subtly planned the presence of No-Face. After Sen’s refusal of accepting his gift, he is still lurking around in this bathtub, watching people hushing for the gold River Spirit left behind. Here the director wanted us to take caution, as at the midst of triumph lying the potential of corruption. As River Spirit unleashing his richness to reward everyone, we see another Yubaba as an impressive businessperson. After observing Sen’s heroic act, she immediately drops all of her prejudices about Chihiro and views her as an exemplify figure that everyone should follow. In here we can see the core motivation of this complicated character – profit. Everything in her life is calculated as a balance sheet, she is extremely flexible, and willing to abandon anything – her grudge, prejudice, urge of vengeance if she see a benefit in it. Hayao Miyazaki has revealed a deeper aspect of this important figure, Yubaba is a shrewd and profit-driven businessperson, a maestro running an incredible efficient enterprise, a sly manipulative witch but she was also an woman with principles and ethnic. However, her laugh at Chihiro’s misery also serves as a set up for what will be revealed next – her limitation and unfulfilling life. And last but not least, this scene was served as an important mark for Chihiro transformation from a weak girl to a mature and confident young woman. Although this transformation has been underneath and is depicted so smooth that it is impossible for us to actually pin down at which stage it happened inside Chihiro, we can say that this scene was perhaps her most significant development until this point of storyline. This is Chihiro first accomplishment in this world, which serves as a vital pivot for her confidence and her trust in intuition. By comparing her with a lotus flourish under adversity, together with strong image of water’s flow, Hayao Mizayaki signals a silent but massive transformation within Chihiro’s mentality. We can see that after this event, Chihiro starts emerging as a true hero, who does not think twice to stand up for the people she love, who is capable of not just saving, but radically transforming people around her. This is where we see Hayao Mizayaki’s pragmatism as he is no dreamer who believed in instant change in one person, no matter how impressive they are. Chihiro changes are not instant and out of thin air, it is incremental - a natural adaption to her situation, bit by bit, but firm and consistent.

After a dramatic day, the night scene with the calm blue sky and the vast sea of crystal clear water served as a smoother to calm audience down, and at the same time, pampering them for the next ambush. The scenery was breathtakingly beautiful, as the entire town emerged in a stratosphere of sky touching the ocean of water. The image of the single train cutting through thin aquatic layer is somewhat heartbreakingly lonely. It was perhaps the internal feeling of Chihiro; she is seeing her process of growing up as a lonesome journey and the heavy burden she has to carry make her feel small.

The next turn of this movies introduce an even greater tension, which is so complicated that Hayao Miyazaki switch his style of story-telling that he has stick to from the very beginning. So far what we have seen, this story was told in a chronological order, with the third point of view strictly follow Chihiro. However, although No-Face has play it mild role at first, this character become incrementally important throughout Chihiro journey. From this point, our master and his artists decided to separate their journeys, and told them in a parallel structure to build up the tension between these two individuals. And later on, they merged these two storyline into one, and ingeniously resolved this tension in a flawless and dramatic style.

First, we should see what happens with poor No-Face.

## The special relationship between Chihiro and No Face

In order to understand this figure, we need to come back to the first time Chihiro crossing the bridge and entering the bathhouse. There was one individual who stands out of the crowd with his transparent and black body, with a mask, covering by a sad smile and ominous red stoke across his eyes. Although seems harmless at first, this was the only individual that immune with the influence of Haku’s magic and actually paying attention to Chihiro. Eventually, one may asked why this is the only creature who is capable of suspecting our young protagonist? And why Chihiro was the only one that seems capable of seeing this creature?

Metaphorically, No-Face was a symbolic container of all instinctive desires existed within human being. In a very traditional and antique setting of this movie, other gods seems to be the representation of old perceptions and values that had been built throughout thousands of years. And as from perception of Chihiro, a young Asian who was raised under a blending culture of western and eastern, there might be a hole in the philosophy of this old belief system. Which is that this system suppressed, even denounced the very existence of any human desires it deems destructive. And that was why other gods seems to wilfully ignore the presence of this creature. But Chihiro was different, she did aware of this. To further criticize the wilfully blindness of this tradition, Ghibi’s artist has designed this character distinctively contrast to other spirit. While other gods seems to be solid, wearing colourful and luxury garments, always come in flocks, this exiled creature has a dark and transparent body, was alone and sad, always carefully observing the surrounding. I do not think that Hayao Miyazaki wanted to criticize the old way of living, as it has held Asian society together for thousands years. But with the generation of young Asian nowadays, represented by Chihiro, things have changed. The old system of suppression and denunciation has proved to be impotent in keeping primitive desires away from youth. As the powerful waves of western media emerging, it floods young fragile minds with sexual themes, luxury lifestyle and the glamour of fame. While other old gods successfully ignore No-Face, young Chihiro who accustoms to Western media does not. And No-Face immediately realises this vulnerability as his chance to obtain what he has been yearning for, the attention and acceptation of other spirits.

The appearance of Chihiro in this bathhouse has brought a hole in Yubaba security system. With her old, non-human employee, they wouldn’t even be able to see No-Face while he is outside the bathhouse. But with Chihiro inside, all No-Face needs is to invoke her empathy and waits for her invitation. While Chihiro pouring the cleaning water outside, No-Face deliberately showed up in a very empathetic situation, which strike into Chihiro kindness . She invited No-Face in, which probably broke the spell Yubaba has set up to prevent intruder. This innocent error of Chihiro appears to be a bad at first, however, later on, this exact imperfection is what make Chihiro special, and raises her above everybody else. This also expressed the hope this animation master invested in young generation of Asian, that with correct guidance they can rise above their ancient generation in term of wisdom and leadership.

Once No-Face had crept in to the bathhouse, he immediately looked for Chihiro and offered her bribe. First, while young Chihiro was unable to convince the petty foreman to give her what she needed to do her job, No-Face had appeared to help. This first gift could be seen purely as an gratitude No-Face has for the kindness of Chihiro. But as the gift coming at second time, Chihiro was immediately realised this act has crossed the border of gratitude. She justifies it as more than she deserved, and politely turn it down, saying she didn’t need them that much (while in face she did). The focus of camera on the generous gifts No-Face gave to Chihiro did an impact in invoking the greed of audience. We could not help but feel sorry for Chihiro who turns down those cards she desperately needed. But here we saw an self-controlled and intelligent Sen, who can justify the thin border between gratitude and bribing, and straightforwardly rejected it although with slight hesitation. Here the movie revealed the first thing about No-Face, he gains his strength if his desires were satisfied. As Sen rejected his offer, No-Face quickly fades away. However, he is still around observing people. The event of freeing the Unnamed River God seems to be bright, but as other bathhouse workers immediately pour over the ground to collect gold, there is also ill omen. No Face, invisible to people, was standing there watching their act. Seeing The River God quickly gain the respect from everybody by throwing gold to ground, his plan of doing exactly the same proves to be disastrous later on.

Right after the peaceful, eye-watering scenery of Chihiro loneliness was the start of another disaster. As from his careful observation, No Face believes the first thing he need was a voice to communicate his demands to people. And thus he lures the greedy talking frog by gold and quickly eats this poor creature to obtain the voice of the frog. Here we see a different side of No Face, the violent and cruelty side contrast to his mellow and introvert personality outside the bathtub. By introducing the mellow side of this individual first, Hayao Mizayaki wants to stress on the fact that No Face was not a villain in his nature. His anger and aggressiveness is a mirror that reflect the anger and aggressiveness hidden under obedient workers inside a bathtub, a result of Yubaba’s manipulative and exploitative scheme of treating her employee as slaves. The image of No Face is yet another strong punch into the industrialization society of Japan, and carried within itself a profound philosophy. Even though the frog he ate was small and seems diminutive, what contain inside this frog significantly transforms No Face’s figure, from a lone spirit with hidden hands and legs, now assume long hands and long legs with disproportional large tummy. This massive transformation visualizes the enormous discontent suppressed inside this small frog. Similar to Chihiro, the transformation of No Face is incremental, but in no way slow and underneath. From a transparent figure with neither appendage nor mouth, he transformed into the figure with legs after Chihiro say hello to him at the bridge. He had his hands after Chihiro’s acceptance of his first gift. And when the frog accepted its gold, a monstrous frog mouth appeared. And when the mouth appeared, the violence emerges. The development of No Face was exquisitely overlapped with the development of Chihiro, put together in parallel streamlines of actions. While the development of No Face was expressed out to his appearance, the development of Chihiro was a silent process. And while inner quality of Chihiro and of No Face were both unleased as a react to outer environment, as the story developed, audience experienced a strikingly contrast result lead by this two transformations. They both makes Chihiro and No Face become powerful individuals. However the transformation of Chihiro, which origin from her caring for people she loved, leads to a very different result comparing to the transformation of No Face, which origin from his yearning to satisfy his own desire. Here “Spirited Away” put forward an important message, that there are two incredible powerful forces that govern all of our human actions. They are the urge of fulfilling instinctive desire, and the caring for well-being of people we loved. These two forces continually influent our actions and transform us, and in order to live a rich life we need to constantly make hard choice to follow the second route.

At the second encounter of Chihiro with No Face, we have another chance of witnessing Chihiro’s impressive wisdom while she frantically finds a way to save Haku. Comparing her with indelicate Chihiro previously, we can see she has quickly learnt to behave in manner. Contrasting to humble Chihiro is arrogant and violent No Face, who mercilessly throws the manager, and lavishly offers gold to Chihiro. Although being completely blind by the greed of people around him, No Face still reserve a special affection for our little hero, and in return, Chihiro is the only one who is honest with him. As Chihiro turns down his gold, No Face experiences some sort of lost. He experiences the unease as he is unable to make somebody he adores happy. He is both confused and downhearted, and in confusion he tried to blame anybody but him. The act of eating two bathhouse workers was an act of trying to take control of the outside, to compensate his powerless inadequacy inside.

Despite the perfection of its previous sections, the climax of this masterpiece, divided into two stages even pushed everything to an entirely different level. In term of visual, it expressed the intensity of violence and powerful conflict through blood, cannibal scenes, and extravagant greed together with the filthy of pure black mud. In term of philosophy, it was much deeper than the previous part, it not just depicted the most powerful conflict of human being - it offered young people a way to reconcile it. In term of humanity, it was an influential testament to the immense power of love and caring that capable of transforming hatred and evils.

## Stage 1: the power of love that triumphs the power of hatred

The first cannibal scene at the bathtub was immediately followed by Chihiro’s dream. Once again we see the manoeuvring of juxtaposition in Hayao Miyazaki’s art of storytelling. He followed the previous dark screen with the vivid and innocent dream of Chihiro, which further illustrate her inner state. The first thing Sen realizes in her wake-up was that everybody has gone, and the second thing comes to her mind was her parent. This shows the determination of young Sen, who under the acceptance of new environment, still doesn’t forget her purpose. Following by Sen’s resolve is the discrepancy of service industry, which is disguised under sugar words and pretentious respect. The peaceful scenery of outside the bathtub is immediately replaced by the turbulence inside. One cannot ignore the words of foreman, which suggests his subordinates to serve even the leftover food to new coming guest. Rin approaches Sen and shares with her the gold new guest gave to everyone, and try to pull Sen along, but as we can see the only concern of Sen had was to save her parent, by telling Rin she will come down to Kamaji place. Her expression of caring was childlike, and yet deep and loyalty.

What comes next was a strong testament to the capability love that overrides hatred and saves life. This was when we encounter a new character, Zeniba. This person, at the first glance, is indistinguishable from her twin sister, from her powerful magic, to her reaction to vengeance. Observing the way the paper bird attacked Haku in dragon form, we can see a clear intention of killing this poor creature. However, in few short minutes, the love and wisdom of Chihiro doesn’t just save Haku once, but actually four times.

The first save come from the selfless act of Chihiro, she calls Haku to her room while Haku is hopelessly defencing himself from the paper bird, despite the fact that it will invite danger to her directly. It unveils the deep love Chihiro has for this tragical sorceress and subtly reveal young Chihiro’s transformation as she now put Haku’s life above her own. Fortunately, the paper birds quickly loss their aggressiveness and power once they enters inside the premise of bath house. Her love has temporary restrained the impulsiveness of executing punishment, and probably given Zeniba some slack to rethink her decision.

The reaction of Haku afterward truly shocks us, as he grumbles and throws a hateful look toward the person who just risked her life to save him. Haku refuses to answer Chihiro’s concern and throws himself to the open air, flies straight to Yubaba’s office. This reaction, although astonishingly cold, doesn’t surprise Chihiro. As opposed to Haku naive belief that Yubaba powerful magic will save him, Chihiro astute judgment immediately realise he is leading his way to death. The dragon form of Haku revealed his aggressive and greedy side, his thirst for power, his anger of a lost person and his over-confidence in power of magic and protection of Yubaba, and as a result he refuses Chihiro’s help to seek his way to his master. Chihiro, probably aware of Yubaba’s exploitative nature and conflicts inside Haku, doesn’t mad at his reaction and knows that only death is waiting for him at Yubaba’s place.

The second save come from her in time arrival, after getting rid of Boh. Chihiro rushed directly toward Yubaba’s minions to protect the dragon from being thrown down to a bottomless dark pit, where Haku probably deserved after his long period of crimes. And while Chihiro struggle in defending Haku’s life at the face of aggressive minions, we started to see an important milestone, that proved first-hand the power of love: the transformation of Zeniba.

As we can see from the beginning of this scene, Zeniba have a clear intention of ending Haku’s life as a punishment for the crime he committed. However, after observing the selfless love of Chihiro has for Haku, something started to dawn on her perception while she is under the form of paper bird. The first evidence of this change was her decision to involve directly in this scene. If she just stays still, it is clear that young fragile Chihiro won’t be able to save Haku under the continuous attacks from Yubaba minions and the coming threat from demanding Boh. Haku will surely die, and probably pulling Chihiro with him. But the bravery in Chihiro had somewhat moved Zeniba, and she decides to help by turning all Yubaba’s minions and Boh into a harmless form and restraint their violence, but leaving Haku and Chihiro intact. Nevertheless, this old witch is not entirely convinced, as in the coming dialog, she deliberately tests Chihiro’s loyalty. However, in the last sentence of her dialog - “All dragons are kind and stupid”, we saw an element of empathy that Zeniba had developed for Haku. And surely this was resulted from the way Chihiro put her trust in him despite that “He is going to die anyway”, the fact that Haku was a thief and his ungrateful gesture to Chihiro selfless act. Haku probably would be saved by Zeniba, if his next action which vents out from fear, broke Zeniba spell and push life of his friends – Chihiro and Boh, to grave danger.

However, by saving Haku and facing death, Chihiro has found for herself a new friend, Boh. Boh are yet another impressive learner and a valiant, loyalty friend. Just like Chihiro, Boh started off as a spoiled, selfish child who suffered from the over-protection of his parent. Unlike Chihiro who appeared to be quite normal at first, Boh has a figured of an over-sized baby, at first cannot even walk on his own feet, continuously crying for petty reasons. In the roomy setting of Boh place, the wall was covered in garment, the toys was tossed around carelessly. Especially, the artificial setting of nature added on to the over-protective attitude of Yubaba toward her son as well as the mindless luxury she drown Boh in. Image of spoiled Boh was a strong criticizes to parenting method in Asian modern society. The adults of modern Asian have experienced a period of war and extreme poverty as a child, but when they grew up, they were a part of industrialization process in entire Asia, which dramatically increase prosperity and raising living standard. As a form of childhood fulfilling, they tried to provide their kids the life they wished they had, by protecting them from any harm or providing their kids with abundance of foods and toys. This intoxicated attitude in turn weakens their children, which was powerfully expressed in the image of Boh’s prison.

The first direct look at Boh revealed him hiding inside a pile of pillows, which was a way of saying the caring Yubaba had for her child was suffocating. The conversation between Boh and Chihiro exposed the way Yubaba poisoning her son’s innocent view about the world, building a mental prison that keep Boh inside. Without Chihiro’s accidental visit, Boh probably stayed forever that way. However, Chihiro’s opinion about the world had invited doubt to this youngster’s mind. For the first time of his life, he experienced a different view about the world outside rather than his mother’s words. And that was perhaps the first motivation for Boh to take action. And in return, Chihiro had her first lesson about dealing with demanding, lonely child, which will eventually build up to the way she deals with No Face.

The second motivation of this character was his loneliness. He was longing for friend to play with, and selfishly intimidate Chihiro to stay back, giving absolutely no care about what she felt. As the story goes, we discovered this is not Boh’s nature, it’s just a character that he developed as a response to the false education of Yubaba. These two forces – loneliness and curiosity, together finally push Boh to do something he has wished to do: walking out of his mother protection, to discover the world on his own.

The scene of heavy Boh walking out of his prison was a highly sophisticated scene, with the participant of Zeniba, Haku and Chihiro. Here we focus on character Boh to complete the picture. We can see that here Boh encountered an entirely different aspect of life. Contrasting to his warm, harm-free curb, the first view he had at the outside world was full of blood, detestation and violence. This is also where we observe first hand Boh’s courage. We can clearly see how much he scared of blood through his watery eyes, but his bravery, curiosity and longing for companion was stronger. These three elements had dramatically transformed him from an oversized baby scared of almost everything, to a person that dares to confront life’s ugliness. And together with Chihiro, he embraces on the greatest journey of growing up and saving people.

Boh is yet another impressive figure who rises at midst of adversity instead of giving up and getting lost, a comparable companion to Chihiro. Although most of matured characters in this animation are disappointing, the young protagonists in this movie: Haku, Chihiro and Boh come on the scene as wise, selfless and valiant fighters. I guess Hayao Miyazaki want to put his hope in the youngsters, believing that their new awareness of the dark side in human nature will eventually pave a way to a more completed wisdom, where people stop ignoring anything unfit to doctrines, and start embracing instinct as ally. He believes this is the most completed way of reconciling the internal conflict that has wrecked generations of mankind.

Here audience experiences the thrill of gravity as this heroic crew is falling down to the dark pit. The accidental act of Chihiro, holding dragon’s horns, revoked a memory in both of them about their past relationship. The horn was the representative of Haku’s aggressiveness and violence, and the act of Chihiro holding his horns was a subtle implication that this girl has took control of this dragon hot-head. This indeed results in the wake up of Haku, as he steers his body to Kamaji’s boiler, the herbal master of this house.

As next scene flips in, we realise Chihiro is even not entirely sure the dragon is Haku, yet still throws herself in danger to save him. Chihiro deeply touches audience with her deep love , unwavering loyalty, and confidence in her instinct. We can see that under dragon form, Haku seems to be an animal rather than a human being, completely lacking of control. The scene where Chihiro feeding Haku the herbal cake was exquisitely drawn, to portray the instability, animalistic of this character, contrasts to the warmness, caring of Chihiro, which eventually triumphs as she successfully shut his mouth. As Chihiro pushes the green cake deep in between Haku’s menacing teeth, we audiences cannot help but being anxious for the fate of her fragile arm, but yet this girl did it, without hesitation or fear, further highlight her imperishable trust in the good of Haku.

The dialog with Kamaji unwraps the mystery of Haku’s complexity in a deeper level. He sheds light on the origin of his journey to crimes, explaining that Haku was started as a benevolent but lost spirit. He slowly drifted off this good nature to become the current person because of Yubaba’s manipulation. Kamaji noticed his eye has changed, which was indication of the soul he slowly lost. Haku was yet another victim of industrialization economy and management scheme, which treated employees as slaves to maximize profit. But even in dragon form, the drawings of this character still express hope. We saw all four Haku’s identities: warm Haku that help Chihiro, Haku-Sama the servant of Yubaba, Haku the dragon and the true Haku – Kohaku River God, despite of their wild differences, all share one thing in common – his green iris. It is the representation of the innermost part of Haku’s soul that was indomitable. Unlike Kamaji, Chihiro saw it through, decided that Haku was worth saving and her intuition turns out to be priceless later on.

The love of Chihiro has indeed conquered not only the impulsive hatred inside wise Zeniba, the anger and greed of the blinded Haku, but also transformed the spoiled Boh into a brave and adventurous young man. After spitting out the seal and peeping bug, Haku turned back to his human form, which released tension of this stage, to move forward to the highest climax of this movie, the confrontation of Chihiro with No Face.

## Stage 2: the power of caring that transforms evil

The confrontation of Chihiro with No Face is a perfect resolve to the build-up tension. This scene (in my opinion) was the pinnacle of this masterpiece. It was constructed by superb art of storytelling, blending with flawless animation technique to deliver an influential philosophy and damnation. This climax has lived up to its previous counterparts, made this anime unforgettable, hauntingly obsessive and profoundly touching.

**No-Face:** [offering a bowl of food] Try this. It's delicious. Want some gold? I'm not giving it to anybody else!

[approaching her]

**No-Face:** Come closer, Sen. What would you like? Just name it.

**Chihiro:** I would like to leave, sir; there's some place I need to go to right away, please. You should go back to where you came from, you can’t help me with what I want. Where is your home? Don't you have a dad and mom?

**No-Face:** [sulking] No... no... I'm lonely... I'm lonely.

**Chihiro:** [backing away] What is it that you want?

**No-Face:** I want Sen... I want Sen...

[shoving a handful of gold in front of her]

**No-Face:** Take the gold! Take it!

**Chihiro:** Are you going to eat me?

**No-Face:** Take it!

[Boh bites him]

**No-Face:** Huh? Ow.

[attempts to swat Boh, but misses]

**Chihiro:** If you want to eat me, eat this first. I was going to save it for my parents, but I think you'd better have it.

[feeds No-Face the medicine. No-Face starts to vomit everywhere]

**No-Face:** ...Sen! Sen, what did you do to me?

First, let us look at the storytelling aspect of this scene, using juxtaposition. Here there are three important aspects need to be delivered, first was the cowardice and greed that blind Yubaba and her subordinates (Rin was out of this scene), second was the frightening monster No Face has turned into, and third was Chihiro bravery and wisdom. Henceforth, to build the setting, Ghibi’s artists had subtly introduced the chaos and terror of bathhouse’s workers before letting Chihiro, with remarkable composure, walking into viewer’s perspective. The next step is to introduce to this screen two-faced Yubaba, which represents corruption in this bathhouse. Her sugar words and fake respects for customer are immediately exposed by her rage with Chihiro. It further unveils how she sees Chihiro, a gold squeezer, which indeed explains her previous gratitude for Chihiro’s service for River God. Next, despite of all her experience and magic, she fails to realize her own son, which even cut deeper into the corruption of this businessperson - gold has overridden her maternal instinct, made her forget what is truly important. As this condemnation was not strong enough, Hayao Mizayaki even pushed it one-step further, by depicts Yubaba thrusting Chihiro, together with her own son to deal with No Face alone, while herself retreats outside and reprimands anybody who show concern for their safety. Contrasting to the rest, Chihiro and Boh faced this challenge with exceptional calmness. It is noteworthy to mentioned that, just minutes ago, Boh was still a crying baby afraid of everything, but now, his courage has preceded his mother. While his mother, with all of her power, stepped back, Boh was marching in with no shred of doubt.

After completing a perfect set up, here we are, at the wide angle view of Chihiro and No Face. The juxtaposition is again masterfully exploited in this screen. No Face, who is a monstrous black spirit, confronts small Chihiro who retains a dignify silence. Here we see the convergent of Chihiro and No Face’s development routes. While Chihiro maturity is embellished through her posture and her silence, No Face growth smashes into audience face with his disfigure, his devilish voice and his mammoth body. Despite No Face’s menacing aura and elephantine size, it is Chihiro who dominates the room. When the conversation starts, is when the tension reveals its nature. First, No Face continuously offers Chihiro bribe, this time with food. It is a blatant attempt of pleasing this girl and thus establishing his power of control. Then seeing Chihiro’s silence, he is puzzled, and ask whatever she likes, he can give it to her. Here we see lessons No Face has learnt, the over-confidence in power of money. Like Chihiro’s parent, he believes money can solve all problems in the world. It is Chihiro who teach him that, there are things money cannot satisfy – “You should go back to where you came from, you can’t help me with what I want”. This strikes directly to No Face’s growing dissatisfaction inside the bathhouse, as although all of his demand was served, he feels empty more than ever. I think here Chihiro started to sense his agony, and want to alleviate it, thus she instinctively looks for the root of his pain, as her next question was “Where is your home? Don't you have a dad and mom?”

This question had a strong impact on No Face, touching his greatest pain as an exiled, lost spirit who deserted of love and caring. His mask sulks back, his body is contorted - an indication of his attempt to run away from these questions. His pain is so great, that he immediately try to suppress it the way he had done, throwing gold to people and consuming luxury. This image strikingly reminds us of the way we deal with our pain. Instead of trying to understand it, we distract ourselves by falling into other feelings, the thrill of artificial substance, fake respect from service industry and the short-lived romance. We direct our resource to take control of the outside, to compensate our impotent inside. And when we find out it doesn’t work, we piss off, we anxious, without even knowing why. No Face’s attempt to eat Chihiro is a desperate act of taking back his control externally, which we all know, only deepens his inner pain.

“Where is your home? Don't you have a dad and mom?” is another way of dealing with the rage within ourselves. Chihiro treats agony as a baby needs caring and attention, but not pampering. When No Face admits to her that he had no parent or no home, Sen deeply synchronised with his grieving, and decides to rescue him first instead of her parent. She gives him the cake she saved for them, and led him out of the toxic environment that turned him into a monster. After vomiting out all of the corruption he had consumed, his soul was purified and he slowly came back to his mellow nature. In the end, Chihiro turns a monster everybody terrifies into a companion by caring about his pain and pruning out all external influences inside him, instead of overindulging his desire or attacking him with powerful magic.

In between there are three details that worth mentioning:

First was the courage of Boh, while No Face was wrapping it hand around Chihiro neck, preparing to throw her into his mouth, Boh had a valiant act - he bite the monster with his tiny tooth. Of course with his strength, he could not do much harm to a mammoth monster, but by risking his life he did distract it, and gave Chihiro some slack to plan her solution. Here we saw from a Boh who is scared and whinny, he has become a valiant protector who dare to attack the very thing his mother was frighten, even though he has no chance of winning. By observing Chihiro save Haku, Boh has his first lesson about putting others’ welfare above himself. The short screen where Boh-mouse mimicked Chihiro act of stepping on the peeping bug, confirm his power of observation and his willingness to defend for people he loves.

Second was the screen where Yubaba made her first real attempt in restraining the monster. When confronting No Face, she stood down and shout out “Not on my premise!”, which was an act of declaring her authority and ownership. Her unleash of magic ball can be considered as the releasing of authority power. However, this scene was a strong sarcasm to anybody who overconfident in ability of authority to suppress evil. The spell, as we know, fired back on Yubaba and covered her in the dung of corruption and greed. This is Hayao Miyazaki’s way of saying authority has its limitation, that to deal with inner lost the strength of authority will only backfired.

Lastly was the outer transformation of No Face. It was hard to visualise the complex and invisible forces, especially a concept as obscure and generic as human primitive desires. Yet the drawing of No Face, from his arrogant posture, to his monstrous shape and his transparent blackness, ingeniously portrayed this nature of human. No Face successfully reflects what inside each employee of bathhouse, their loneliness, their arrogance, their greed, their thirst for attention, and probably their hidden respect for Chihiro. His image hints at the nature of transformation that origin from satisfying personal desire for attention, power and respect. The transformation is blatant, smashed into people eyes, and radically transforms their outlook, their attitude and their behaviours.

In term of visual effect, you can see the merry chasing of Chihiro and No Face expressed the highest details in portraying gravity, human’s movements and effect of light on characters’ bodies. Here we have our chance to savour a merry chase of acceleration and light around the bathhouse with windows. The exquisite in movement of No Face, the posture of human gestures, and the deep lighting, all were exquisitely handcrafted with unbelievable precision. The superlative details in these hand-drawing frames immersed audience in the chasing and infuse an incredible life force to these figures. This animation, to my perception, contained more life in itself than majority of motion pictures.

## The train of maturity

This was yet another brilliant example of craftsmanship demonstrates in this classic anime, which conveyed its transcendent aesthetic, as well as deep philosophical and humanistic values.

The first thing noteworthy here is the meaning of this train. This train was often interpreted as the train of maturity, which is probably correct. However, strictly speaking, the progress of maturity in Chihiro happened inside the bathhouse and spanned across her entire time there. Therefore, it may be confused to explain this train as her journey of growing up. Actually, after much turbulence, intensity and highly sophisticated actions and reactions, this scene was deployed here at this point to serve three purposes.

Firstly, it relaxes audience after ambushing them with strong images of gores in its climax. Here, our eyes were rewarded with breathtakingly surreal natures and touching background music. It was important to pay attention to sound in this scene, where the sound of water was purposefully amplified to wash our soul under the pristine waves. In the scene Chihiro waving her goodbye to Rin, you can help but get awed at the blue sky touching the tranquil surface of ocean. As the train moving forward, we saw a house, then a single shadow standing at the crossway, then a distant town, then the train station where all other heavy, darkly transparent passengers unloaded their luggage to leave, seemingly unaware of the little girl standing there, looking for something. The artistic paintings were released slowly to give audience some slack to contemplate its beauty and get the poignant feel from its colours and images. I genuinely powerless in expressing its strange effect on myself. So just go and watch it, you will know what I meant.

The second purpose of this part was to recap what happened to our young Chihiro until now. The train passes through a single house floating on an oasis. We can assume this was the house of Chihiro’s childhood. At the second screen, a lone figure standing at the crossway, represented for her loneliness when family’s protection was removed from her, and the heavy burden of saving them she had to carry. The third screen related to her first accomplishment in the bathhouse. This accomplishment helped her seeing the nobility of her job, and brought her joy in labouring. This is when the burden of working was no longer a part of her journey, and so the dark figures remove their heavy luggage and leave the train. Nevertheless, at that stop, Chihiro had left her innocence behind, encapsulated in the image of a small girl standing at the station. Then we see the train passed through a series of gaiety billboards. These were the luxury of life that Chihiro has walked through, which encapsulated in the encountering with No Face. The loud sound of train and the first person view tell audience that they are inside Chihiro’s mind, and the images are visual expression of her thoughts. It was until dark that the whole crew reached Swamp Bottom, the destination of age-old wisdom. The train continues forward, makes us wondering what mystery life will reveal at its next stops.

Thirdly, the lone, dark, transparent figures scattering across the railway is also an accusation of working industry, which bereaves people their identity, joy and thus life force. They turns human beings into the shadow of themselves, who have nothing left but responsibility. The modern society of Asian also ruined kid’s childhood. We cannot help but feeling that the kid at that train station just waits for her parent to come home, whose minds are probably never leave their workplace. Connecting back to Boh’s life (and probably Chihiro’s), we can’t help but feel like modern parents seem to abandon their kids for the chasing of materialistic wealth.

## The consultation with age-old wisdom

**Haku**: “You still haven’t noticed that something precious to you has been replaced.”

Haku says this to Yubaba after Chihiro heals him and takes off for Zeniba’s with baby Boh. Yubaba doesn’t realize Boh is missing because Zeniba has made Yubaba’s attendants look like him. Haku understands that greed has blinded Yubaba to what she truly values, and his words suggest that without this hint Yubaba will remain oblivious to what is missing. Though she usually smothers Boh with attention, Yubaba is distracted by her work and doesn’t realize that Boh is definitely not acting like himself. When Haku tells Yubaba that something precious has been replaced, we see an subtle transition of attention in Yubaba. The first thing the old witch looks for is the pile of gold in front of her on the table. Only when she sees that the gold is safe does she understand he’s talking about another precious thing, and when she refocuses her attention on Boh, she discovers he isn’t Boh at all. Immediately, the gold turns to dirt. Her greed has left her with nothing, and now, with no material objects to protect or covet, she frantically search for her baby. Her ballistic anger was ingeniously portrayed to show us how important Boh is to her life, thus illustrates her tragedy. Gold and power has blinded her to what really matters, and make her unhappy all the time.

About Haku, acknowledging that Chihiro has saved his life, Haku finally decides to stand up against his master to save her and her parent. Here we see an dauntless Haku, selflessly put Chihiro’s freedom above his own life. His unwavering courage is contrast to the cowardice of other managers in the bathhouse, who are crouching under Yubaba’s feet.

[**Zeniba**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0687189/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Once you do something, you never forget. Even if you can't remember.

Contrast to tensing atmosphere at Yubaba places, Zeniba house is warm and endearing. At first Zeniba seems as unscrupulous as her sister, but Zeniba leans more consistently toward good. At one point she notes that she and Yubaba are complete opposites even though they are identical twins, but their differences aren’t always so black and white. While Zeniba threatens to kill Haku for stealing her seal, she later forgives him with no strings attached. She even gives hint to Chihiro to save Haku by saying “Once you do something, you never forget. Even if you can't remember.” This profound quote reveals a truth about human: our actions in the past subconsciously influence our life, and explain our present behaviours. Therefore to find answer, one need to look deep into one’s past.

Zeniba also critiques greed and overconsumption, and she insults Yubaba’s indulgent parenting. Zeniba is no saint, but her old age wisdom helps everyone to discover the truth about themselves. Later on as we can see, by the end of the film Sen addresses both Zeniba and Yubaba as “Granny,” which suggests not only that both twins are wise in their own way, but that they are merely two sides of the same coin.

As the final gift to Chihiro, Zeniba, Boh and No Face personally join together to made Chihiro a purple hair tier. This hair tier was a symbol of friendship, old age wisdom and desires, which is something she should tie to her head. As the dragon soars high into sky night, we knew they are flying toward their ultimate freedom, the gift of life that only the bravest people deserves.

## The conquer of anger

While on their way back, Chihiro has remembered the first time she met Haku. The next dialog revealed everything about Haku’s character. It is the strongest condemnation to human violation, and paves us a way to conquer the violence and anger in our heart.

[**Chihiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0383708/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Listen, Haku. I don't remember it, but my mom told me... Once, when I was little, I fell into a river. She said they'd drained it and built things on top. But I've just remembered. The river was called... Its name was the Kohaku River. Your real name is Kohaku.

[Haku is shedding away his white dragon skin. The two are falling from the sky, holding each other's hands]

[**Haku**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0997115/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Chihiro, thank you. My real name is Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi.

[**Chihiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0383708/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Nigihayami?

[**Haku**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0997115/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi.

[**Chihiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0383708/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): [starts to cry] What a name. Sounds like a god.

[**Haku**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0997115/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): I remember too, how you fell into me as a child. You had dropped your shoe.

[**Chihiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0383708/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Yes, and you carried me to shallow water, Kohaku.

[they put their faces close together]

[**Chihiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0383708/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): I knew you were good!

In these few seconds everything fall together, Haku’s nature was revealed, which explained all the conflicts. It is important to recall that throughout his various forms and identities, both good and bad, the only thing that has always been remained in him was his green iris, which hints at his core as a god of nature and a benevolent deity. His greed, violence and thirst for power, which eventually pushed him to Yubaba, was probably resulted from human act of draining all the fresh water inside him and fill in his river with their greedy projects. His feeling for Chihiro was complex as Chihiro was a reminder of his good side and his initial love and caring for human, something belong to his essence that Yubaba‘s magic can’t repress. However, he had an instinctive hatred and distrusted for human, especially when he is under dragon form, for what they have done to him. Although he already forgot his past, the feeling of being betrayed was still there, causing conflicts every time he see Chihiro, and so he repeatedly refuses her help, and thus puts his life and her life in danger. The worst part was that he could not understand why he was angry, which drowned him further into crimes. However, as Chihiro explained to him the source of his hatred and reclaimed his identity, his internal struggle vanished, and he was finally free. His dissolving into human form implied that he is ready to leave the past behind, and build a new life around his new wisdom.

We can now see that Haku was a victim of human cruelty act to the very thing that nurtured them. Ghibi’s artists did it once when they portray the Unnamed River God under the shell of stink spirit, but by illustrating Haku as a person and introducing his conflict throughout the movie, they deepen this pain much further. His suffering now was the suffering of a human being, even bitterer, suffering of a juvenile child that had his home destroyed, had his blood shed and almost lost his life for stealing.

About Chihiro’s tears, these were tears of bliss. She has agonized about Haku’s true motives and character since the moment she met him, and she now remembers that he saved her from drowning when she was very young. Suddenly, all of her decisions are justified, and her doubts about her abilities disappeared. She has trusted her instincts, and her instincts have proved trustworthy. That explained her final whisper “I knew you were good”.

Throughout the movie, Sen has doubts about Haku, but she nonetheless stands by him. Her loyalty reveals her understanding that a person’s character is multi-layered and that appearances can be deceiving. While the rest of the bathhouse workers seem to hold fast to the first impressions they have of their customers, Sen treats everyone equally and finds out what’s beneath the surface. Chihiro gives people and spirits a chance to prove their goodness even if that goodness is hidden, and her acceptance helps to free her.

The marvellous disembodiment of Haku, which blasting his silver scales into vast blue sky was the most beautiful scene in “Spirited Away” to my personal view. It was just … magical, and liberating! Haku’s sparkling irises connect with Chihiro’s watery eyes as they floating in the air is a superb illustration of their happiness and inner freedom.

Philosophically, this screen delivered a sagacious advice to handle violence, hatred, anger which are always resulted from inner confusion: in order to deal with them, you have to understand its root, and in order to dissect its root, you have to take a deep look into your past and accept help from others. The moment you bring the cause of your suffering to awareness was the moment of self-actualization and freedom, self-actualization in the sense that you now know who you really are, and freedom in the sense that you are now master of your own actions.

## The perfect ending to Chihiro’s journey

After this heroic crew landing, Boh immediately returns to his original form and hugs his mother. His sentence to her “If you make Sen cry, I won’t like you anymore” was a wonderful conclusion to his transformation.

At first, it appears to be another childish demand of Boh. But analysing deeper, we see profundity in it. First, it implies that, after all the lies and her failure to recognize him, thus push him to grave danger, Boh still loves his mom dearly. However, it is also his way of saying enough is enough. That he can forgive her for what she had done to him, but he will not forgive her wrongdoings if she hurt his friend. Boh has learnt much about the world when he was transformed into the Boh-mouse. His more manageable size enabled him to accompany Sen on the greatest adventure of his life, and Sen showed him there is more to life than mindless luxury. He observed how she rejects greed for good deeds and sees how her devotion and honour affect those around her. He finds joy in making something for a friend and participating in the real world, as opposed to the virtual reality in which his mother imprisoned him. He eventually respects Sen so much that he stands up against his mother for what is right, even though it means Sen will become Chihiro again and leave him behind. Boh is the representation of friendship that strengthens through ordeals, and a sounding example of Chihiro’s power in bringing out the best in people.

Although Boh still lacks of understanding about the rules govern this world and still somewhat over-confident in his mother’s power, Chihiro does not. The twin sisters Yubaba and Zeniba teach Chihiro that good and evil both exist in the world, and often exist within the same person. While Yubaba represents evil and can be quite scary, she also honours her word and is scrupulously honest in her business dealings. She recognizes that everyone needs to feel useful and gives a job to anyone who wants one, which is a way of acknowledging the dignity of every individual. Yubaba’s action reflects her view that everyone is as sly and greedy as she is, which is somewhat correct in many cases. Chihiro acknowledge her good side and empathy with Yubaba’s situation, knowing that there are rules that even Yubaba cannot break. She takes on the challenge to complete her transformation from a reluctant little girl to a confident young woman. She has no hesitation in her voice when she answers Yubaba’s question. She trusts her instincts once again and tells Yubaba that her parents are not among the pigs before her, thus freeing herself and her parents from their slavery.

The final screen, as the car backwards out of the temple, we can’t help but feeling wistful. And that was probably Chihiro’s feelings too. Through hardship she has forged friendships, has leant her lessons about manner, honour and altruism and grown up to a young, self-sufficient lady. Although her journey is incredible, we can see that everything help free her, was within herself all the time. She constantly made the right choice, not because of her wisdom that spring out of thin air but because she was guide throughout by the moral disciples that we all have been taught since day one. Chihiro simply got the gut to do them.

# The symbolic images used throughout the movie

**“Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi”:** This was the original title of “Spirited Away” in Japanese; roughly translate means “Sen and Chihiro of one thousand hidden gods”. To western audience this name is a bit lavish. In my opinion, “Spirited Away” was a wonderful capture of original movie title, as spirit in English means both human enthusiasm and the ghost. This title hints that the removal of ancestral elements rob human their liveliness. Although these two titles deliver two different feelings, one leans toward theme of growing up, the others is more toward criticising industrial lifestyle. However, a perfect translation is hardly possible, and “Spirited Away” actually made this movie much more approachable to western audiences.

**The green herbal cake**: as a prize for Chihiro’s service, the Unnamed River God reward her a green dumpling. As we can see, this was an unusual gift, a food of extremely horrible taste that caused the consumer to spit out anything in their stomach. This herbal cake, in my opinion, was a symbolic representation of self-impurity, which was difficult, bitter but in return help people getting rid of the poisonous elements inside them. It was the first step in transformation of character who was consumed by greed, arrogance and hatred.

**Water:** water in this movie was an implication of transformation. It also has the effected of washing all the dirt and mud in one’s soul.

**Mud:** Mud appeared twice in this movie. First, it was produced by Unnamed River God, which has brown color of dirt, is a symbol of adversity. It has the effect of nurturing growth if the individual learn to embrace it, and that was why Hayao Mizayaki let Chihiro stumbling in it. However, mud also represents human corruption, especially the kind of mud that was produced by No Face after absorbing all the corruption of bathhouse’s workers, which covered Yubaba wholly.

**The small bird that carried Boh:** This small bird was probably the representation of Yubaba’s love for her son, which always carried Boh on his journey of growing up.

**Radish God:** Radish God assumed the figure of a giant radish, wearing a hat that look like a ramen bowl. This hat was probably the representation of human oppression that he had to suffered, as they continuously harvested him for food. But despite that oppression, Radish God still held no grudge against young Chihiro, and actually empathy with her situation. It revealed the indulgent caring of nature for human being, although they have wrecked their world mercilessly.

**Zeniba:** Zeniba was representation of old age wisdom, which has its perfection and imperfection. Zeniba seemed to have a strong sense of justice, that the thief needed to be punished. She had a well of knowledge about world and the nature of human being. She was a wise and powerful witch just like her sister, but chose to live far away from the industrialization bathhouse her sister is running. However, although as powerful as she is, she lacks the leadership that Chihiro had, which prevented her from influencing her knowledge to change this world for good. It is the same with today landscape, where old age wisdom no longer involved in politics and businesses.

**Yubaba:** Yubaba represent for the generation of managers in industrial age at Japan, who consider subordinates as slaves, to serve their own agenda rather and equal partners. They strip off people their identity, thus life force for the sake of efficiency. Although that was an efficient management scheme which helps maximizing profit, it created an enormous discontent suppressed inside each worker. In long term it is a recipe for disaster, as it corrupt people and brought out their worst.

**No Face:** No Face was a representation of all human’s instinctive desires. His transformation suggested that these desires will be amplified greatly by influence of external environment. The value of this movie though, is it suggestion to restraint these forces. The first step was to recognize their existence instead of running away from them, by considering them just as equal as other parts of yourself. The second step was to purify it out of external influences, instead of pampering it, thus brought it back to its true intensity. The last step was to put it under the guidance of age-old wisdom, and thus freeing yourself from its destructive nature.

**Haku:** Haku is probably representation of the anger and lost inside each of us, when we remove the role of nature out of our life. This figure actually has multi-layer of meanings, as he also represents for the suffering of nature under human invasion, the enduring caring of nature with human being and also the indulgence of love, that capable of bringing out the best in each individual.

**Rin:** Rin was a big sister that taking care of Chihiro since day one. Although appeared at first to be harsh and selfish, she later revealed that she was a brave and warm person. From her instant affection to Chihiro and her feature, we can vaguely guess that she was once human too. But she has lost her identity to Yubaba and can’t free herself from the bath house. Rin represent for the wistful dreams that human never do, and the friendship at workplaces you should develop, which can be tremendously helpful in your personal growth.

**Kamaji and sootballs:** They are the representation of people at lowest level in working hierarchy - the employees who have to labor cheaply and intensively. Contrast to middle, collar workers represents by the frogs, Hayao Mizayaki seems to expresses affection for these people. Under the harsh outlook, they seem to have a warm heart.

**Car & credit card:** Card represent for the power of technology and credit card represent for the power of money, both are primary tools for human to obtain their domination in this planet. Humankind trusted on this kind of power, and believed it was the way to obtain everything. Apparently, this movie warned human about the invisible forces that they couldn’t control.

**Transparent figures at the train:** these transparent, lifeless and faceless figures on the train were represented for the burden of growing up, including responsibility with family, and the working environment that steal people their life force and their identity.

# The artistry of this masterpiece

This movie had frequently use juxtaposition to contrast and compare opposite concepts, and then resolving the conflicts by merging these two concepts together. Ghibi’s artists build a set of characters that neither good nor bad but rather the mixture of both, even our young Chihiro at her finest is not perfect, and Yubaba at her worst still demonstrate quality. Normal approach of cinematic was to separate good guys from bad guys, so it will be easy to introduce the conflict and resolving it clearly. However, “Spirited Away” takes a more complex approach - it continuously dissects characters into good and bad components, arranges them and finally merges them together. By conventional wisdom, this approach will introduce complexity to the storyline and puzzle audience, but Ghibi’s artists has masterfully compressed them in metaphors and multi-layers dialog, makes this story eloquent and deceptively simple on the surface.

The transformation of each character in this story was perfectly smooth. In case of Chihiro, it is even impossible to tell when her changes started to take place. This movie covers the progress of transformation by revealing deeper and deeper layers of each character like peeling the onion, while retain the outer most layer to ensure their coherent identity. Excepting for No Face, everybody’s transformation in this movie was internal, and thus makes this anime so close to reality.

This movie also touches the highest level of expression through its ability to visualize the invisible. We all know movies do not smell, but this one does. We can actually feel the horrible stench of the Stink Spirit through ingenious illustrations. We all know movies can’t spit and caress, but yet as No Face chase after Chihiro I actually felt the mud splash on my face, and as the train skims through thin layer of water, my ears and eyes were washed. We know desires don’t have shape, yet in this movie it does. And although through our naked eye, nature doesn’t have feelings, yet in this movie, their agony was deep and heart-breaking, even more real than human emotions played by actors. Finally, the drawings that depicted the light, the human movement and the loneliness of nature just made me simply speechless! This masterpiece was so adored among animators partly because of its finest attention for detail. Unlike motion picture, in animated film, everything has to be created, from a gust of wind to a drop of water. And therefore, traditionally, to reduce work animation movies often omit the detail of background, and the feature of object was simplifying to hide the sophisticated effect of lighting. However, we see no such compromise in this masterpiece, as lighting was exquisitely depicts in each movement of characters, to build not a story, but a real world of fantasy. Even under untrained eyes, we can see every single diminutive detail was taken care of, the way Chihiro put her shoes on, the way shadow moves across on Yubaba’s wrinkles and the way the light illuminates on No Face’s body across the merry chase.

# The visionary of Spirited Away

Firstly, this movie represents a revolutionary idea I never saw in other pictures. It tackles the most destructive element of human nature – their instinctive desire. Through thousands of years, the ancient wisdom had developed a tight system to denounce its existence from human perception. But with modern movement of liberalism, these desires were explored freely, and so frequently exploited for marketing and political purpose. It leads human astray, and creates an economy built on greed, profit and egotism at cost of humanity. However, this development has its undeniable perks, as it bought to human prosperity never before seen in mankind history, and it was part of an inevitable route. Mythical stories no longer served their purpose in helping people to understand the world, old wisdom no longer sustains with human new found knowledge and power. Now social media have triumphed and flooded young fragile minds with provocative images. Hayao Miyazaki was no dreamer to believe there is a coming back to ancient wisdom, like the train now only run in one way. Instead, he trusted that by aware of their own dark side, young people can ultimately find a way to live with their primitive desires in harmony. By seeing it as a baby needy of attention, you care about your dark side just as much as you care about your bright parts. Eventually, it can become your ally on the journey of growing up. However, like a wise parent, you can’t pamper this child, satisfy all it demand and let it run free; you need to protect it from external influence, and leave it beside the watch of age-old wisdom.

This movie structure was also tightly connect one part to another, created an unavoidable chain of events that seems to be coincident at first. Every action in this movie has its causal effects, which was a close description of real life. That although we cannot know if there is a predefined route planned for us, we do know what happened in the past influence present, and your action in present influence the future. That adversity is ultimately educational. That one act of kindness will go a long way. That honour, loyalty and altruism are the foundation of an enriching life. And that the road to freedom, starts with awareness of yourself, and daring to receive help from others.

The image of Chihiro also moon into the stereotype of heroes, with masculine body and destructive weapons. Here we see a scrawny girl that makes most of Hollywood heroes look like a giant baby hoping around with plastic toys (no offend to you, Avenger). Here we see a ten year old kid that rescues her parent from their wrongdoings, not the usual way around. Here we see a savior that transforms evil from inside, which is ten thousand times harder than suppressing them. Here we see a human being with imperfections, and yet was more completed than any character I have ever seen.

Finally, this movie put a hope in young generation who were born at midst of the greatest transition in mankind history. This movie built a role model, that was a perfect blending of the old with the new, a kind of person that capable of resolving the inner conflict within themselves, thus resolving the outer conflict between human and nature. Many people might argue that this is not a children movie, but in my opinion, every stroke in this movie dedicated to kids. It was true that the multi-layer nature of this movie was too complex for small children, but this movie does not mean to be watched once. Its adorableness carries innocent minds onto the great adventure of Chihiro, but it hidden complexity also fetches wonder into their subconscious. Thus, as they grow up, they were compelled to watch it again, and realized a new perspective. Again, this movie was not designed to be watched just once - it was designed to grow up with its audience, to nurture their imagination, and to inspire their courage, honour and altruism along their life. Most important, it gives them hope in ordeals, by saying “Yeah, this endeavour is difficult, but it is worth it, and it is ultimately joyful!”.