# OCARINA OF TIME - A Masterclass In Subtext

Sorrow is no stranger to Zelda stories. Casting shadows over all of the exploration, puzzle solving, monster battles and rescue missions, loom big clouds of sadness that over the course of the series has been the Zelda ingredient the writers have been slowly directing our attention to the most. Sorrow is being written like a disease - a virus infecting the happiness of each storyworld and Link, the hero of these stories, assumes the role of the healer – burdened with flushing out the virus and restoring healthy emotional balances to each one. More often than not, it's the supporting characters that carry this sorrow disease and their dialogue is constantly connecting these 2 themes of healing and sadness together, asking Link to heal their sorrows and ease their Regrets.

Titles like Majora’s Mask and Twilight Princess go so far as to position these themes of sadness and regret into the opening dialogue, while Wind Waker and Breath Of The Wild throw Link into broken worlds already operating in the aftermath of destruction, easing the regrets of the characters as they awaken to fulfill their destiny. Oracle of Ages and Seasons use flames of Sorrow and Despair as the villain's dominant threat upon the world, but what’s important is that all of this sorrowful dialogue is unavoidable - necessary rites of passage for story progression and all Zelda stories carry that Zelda Sorrow Language like this. Except one. (Mood shift)

Ocarina Of Time is often overlooked when it comes to discussing which Zelda story is the saddest and this might be because Ocarina director Shigeru Miyamoto and script director Toru Osawa don’t use that the Zelda Sorrow Language like its successors. Those recurring themes of sorrow, regret, sadness, and even healing appear nowhere in any corner of the script. Instead, Osawa sprinkles throughout the character dialogue this kind of off-center cryptic poetic language. Themes like:

* The clear waters surface reflects growth
* Melodies that draw you into infinite darkness
* Memories of younger days
* The flow of time is always cruel
* Being consumed by greed
* Childish minds turn to noble ambition

In the past, these themes have been discussed as standalone sentences, called upon in singular form to assist theories or arguments generated among the Zelda community. But tracking this language back through Ocarina’s entire script, begins to reveal a few continuous thematic threads that when isolated, actually form the skeletons of not only one but two narratively complete stories of sorrow.

With the bones of these 2 threads now in mind, small details that add to the muscle of these stories begin to pop out. Miyamoto and Osawa have used everything in the Ocarina toolbox - dialogue, locations, characters, nature, events, architecture, mechanics and sound design - to hide away subtle clues that all point back to these 2 sorrow threads. Instead of casting obvious clouds of sadness above the adventure through such direct sorrowful dialogue, the creative team have buried sadness down in the subtext of the story and as we begin to uncover all of the hidden details, it becomes clear that Ocarina Of Time is, without a doubt, the saddest Zelda story no one noticed.

In order to make sense of Miyamoto and Osawa’s 2 sorrow threads, we first need to take a look at the beats that construct Ocarina Of Time’s main adventure, and the story opens on The Great Deku Tree sending Navi the fairy to summon Link for a meeting. Sword and shield in hand, Link is warned by The Deku Tree of an evil spreading across the land of Hyrule and is sent to gather the 3 spiritual stones before Ganondorf does. One inside the tree, one in a cave and one in the belly of a giant fish. Using the 3 stones and the Ocarina Of Time given to him by Princess Zelda, Link accidentally leads Ganondorf into the sacred realm and subsequently, to the triforce, granting him one evil wish - govern Hyrule.

Link sleeps for 7 years and wakes as an adult to discover the once healthy Hyrule is now Dark Hyrule and is sent on a new quest to destroy the curses now skulking inside Hyrule’s 5 temples. Through tackling this evil, all 5 sages are awakened - Link’s once childhood friends now transcended to the position of Guardian over each realm of Hyrule - forest, mountain, lake, underworld, desert. With their help, Link takes down Ganondorf and saves Zelda and after succeeding, is sent back in time before Ganondorf hatches his plan. This top adventure line is the face of Ocarina and is essentially the blurb on the back of the box, complete with deadly dungeons, weapons of great power, and time travel.

So where do these 2 sorrow threads come into play? Well, they actually begin where the entire Ocarina narrative begins in that harrowing scene I showed in the prologue, the death of The Great Deku Tree. This scene with the Deku Tree’s death is by far the most dense in its layered symbolism in that its meaning translates differently depending on which 1 of Osawa’s 3 threads is being followed.

On the adventure line, his death is used as the vehicle to establish Link’s motivation - a curse spreads across Hyrule and Link witnesses the effects first hand in the Deku Tree’s death... Off Link goes. But the first sorrow thread though specifically requires attention paid not to why the Deku Tree died but how. Emphasis is placed heavily on the importance of life and natural balance across Ocarina Of Time.

Before his death, the Deku Tree recounts to Link Hyrule’s creation story in detail. Three goddesses, each with their own divine spirit of power, wisdom and courage, cultivate the land, the law, and life to uphold that law in Hyrule. With this creation story embedded in the DNA of Ocarina’s larger narrative, the land Of Hyrule is inaugurated not just as a blank world serving Link’s exploration, but as a living breathing organism - almost sentient with different moods, weather conditions and sleeping patterns. Following the creation story, the Deku Tree goes on to speak of a wicked man of the desert who was the one to cast the death curse on the tree and it’s here in the tension of Hyrule’s natural balance and the death curse that Osawa’s 1st thread begins to take shape.

While the characters in other Zelda stories are the direct victims of the series’ sorrow disease, in Ocarina it is Hyrule’s nature that has been afflicted by Ganondorf’s curse. Link is restoring a natural order tipped off-balance and this quest for purification echoes the ethics found in the Japanese home-grown religion of Shintoism. That’s Miyamoto at the Fushimi Inari Shrine in Southern Kyoto in Japan - Miyamoto and Osawa’s childhood hometown.

While the direct influence of this Shinto shrine can be found in Miyamoto’s Starfox series, the broader spirit of the Shinto faith is embedded on a larger scale across his entire gameography, none more so than the Zelda series which are always stories reverberating off the needs and rhythm of nature. Yet, no Zelda story is quite as distilled in its use of Shintoist ethics than Ocarina Of Time and this is the first sorrow thread.