

Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (2001):
Spirits, Workers and Class Disparity

How does *Spirited Away* represent difference in terms of class?

Animation, Paul Wells explains, has consistently drawn from the tradition of caricature. In doing so, animation simultaneously functions as a satirical device, serving as a means of commentary through the deliberate magnification of specific physical characteristics, as well as a design strategy that focuses on redefining aspects of the body and the landscape for aesthetic purposes (Wells, 1998: 188). Animation is therefore unique in its capacity to engage with the anthropomorphized body and the contextual landscapes within which it operates and, as such, in its creation of the codes and conditions by which social class may be defined and understood. This is evidenced throughout Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2001), wherein Japanese folklore and cultural traditions seamlessly intertwine with contemporary concerns related to consumerism and social class distinctions. Thus, by means of a close examination of the juxtaposition in character portrayals between the upper and lower social strata, as well as the dynamics that arise within the vertically structured hierarchy of the bathhouse, this essay seeks to scrutinize the manner in which class differences are represented.

Spirited Away follows the story of Chihiro's coming-of-age as she navigates the mystical realm of spirits in order to save both herself and her parents. Chihiro, unlike Hayao Miyazaki's traditional heroines, is an ordinary girl, making her a natural mediator due to the nativity of her age, exploring the complexities of the spiritual world and how it connects with the human realm. Far from being entirely otherworldly, the difficulties Chihiro faces on her journey bear striking similarities to the challenges that ordinary people face in the context of a global consumerist culture, as she joins the bathhouse workers to reclaim the freedom of her parents, who have been turned into pigs by the bathhouse's owner, Yubaba. Yubaba assaults her directly during this pursuit, thereby usurping Chihiro's name and changing it to "Sen." This name change represents a contractual binding that imposes servitude upon her, emphasising the stark deprivation of individual identity and autonomy experienced by people from lower socioeconomic strata, in contrast to Yubaba's centralised authority and power over the bathhouse and herself.

Chihiro is thus assimilated into the working class in the realm of the spirits, which is portrayed in the film as a hegemonic mass motivated solely by greed and self-interest. Miyazaki communicates this concept

through the uniformity of character design among the workers. Each of which exhibit a consistent set of facial features, characterized by frog-like, widely separated eyes, compressed noses, and large mouths, drawn with simple lines lacking any detail. Additionally, their color palette predominantly consists of muted, earthy tones, encompassing shades of gray and brown for the male characters, and light pinks and blues for the female characters. The muted and desaturated colour palette, in stark contrast to the vibrant hues employed by the bathhouse's clients, effectively functions to emphasize the dreary and uneventful existence to which these individuals are confined. Simultaneously, in conjunction with the uniformity in character design, this underscores their collective identity, visually representing what philosopher Antonio Gramsci refers to as the “cultural hegemony” in which the dominant class's ability to shape and control the prevailing values, removes the ability of the subordinate class to gather individual thoughts, ensuring their compliance (Gramsci, 1971: 46). This is emphasized by the character’s movements, particularly in their initial encounter with No-face. In the scene, the spirit known as No-Face releases a pile of gold after Chihiro declines to accept it, prompting the gold to scatter across the floor. This instigates the workers to forcefully wrestle each other to obtain the gold, becoming an indistinguishable mass of characters, losing their individual shapes and merging into one another. Miyazaki actively erases any semblance of individual identity from the working class, emphasising the hive mentality and "cultural hegemony" that drives them towards a single goal — the acquisition of gold, and thus capital wealth.

This characterization contrasts with that of the spirits, who are intricately associated with the film's upper class. The spirits are depicted in a variety of shapes and sizes, including humanoid and fantastical forms. The designs of these spirits are notable for their meticulous attention to detail, with each spirit possessing distinct and intricate features that add to their visual allure. Yubaba's appearance, for example, is meticulously crafted; she is completely bedazzled in jewels and perfectly groomed, with individual strands of hair thoughtfully rendered. Her wrinkled face denotes her seniority and authority while also emphasising her range of expressions. Furthermore, each spirit's movement is carefully animated to reflect their individual personalities and characteristics. No-Face, for instance, moves with a shuffling, uncertain gait, adding to his mysterious and unpredictable nature, whereas the river spirit flies around swiftly looping around the bathhouse pillars, mimicking the fluidity of water in river streams. Thus, unlike the depiction of lower class individuals, those within higher positions within the hierarchy are animated in a way which forefronts their individual qualities, emphasizing their freedom and power. Moreover, Jeffrey Cohen’s essay regarding the construction of monsters and spirits explains how, “monsters must be examined within the

intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (Cohen, 1996: 5). This is because as a product of pure culture, monsters embody specific anxieties that are not easily translated to a different time or place (ibid). Thus, in the context of *Spirited Away*, these monstrous entities could be interpreted as symbolic representations of the anxieties that persisted following the bursting of Japan's Bubble Economy in the 1980s, with the country still grappling with its aftermath in the early 2000s. The opulent and intricately crafted depiction of these entities, along with their ostentatious displays of affluence and liberty, contrasted against the backdrop of a hegemonic working class, paralleling the class divisions aggravated in Japan at the time.

The power disparity among the distinct social classes portrayed within the bathhouse is further accentuated by their respective physical proportions and, consequently, the spatial allocation they occupy within the cinematic frame. Chihiro's child-like form, defined by her small, unassuming, and unimposing stature during her journey into the spirit realm, represents not only her function as a lower-class servant but also the vulnerability inherent in her position. The bathhouse employees have a similar proportion, small and unobtrusive, fiscally positioned closer to the floor, symbolising their subservient status within the hierarchy. This is juxtaposed with the stature of Yubaba and the other spirits, who possess more imposing figures characterised by their greater height and width, conveying an authoritative demeanor. They command the spaces they traverse—which, like them, are big and spacious to accommodate their presence—and, in so doing, their physical presence asserts their dominance within the hierarchy of social class. This is highlighted in the scene where Chihiro has to share an elevator with one of the bathhouse's visitors, despite being informed that the elevator is strictly for staff. In this case, Chihiro is the first to enter the lift, but once the spirit enters (neglecting the warnings not to), her physical presence yields to his, causing her to be pressed against the wall, unable to move. This sequence underscores not only the existence of a substantial size difference between members of opposing classes but also the contrasting manner in which they feel compelled to occupy the physical space. The more affluent individuals tend to dominate the space that surrounds them, feeling entitled to it due to their position in the social hierarchy, whereas the workers are forced to relinquish their space, treating it as a luxury rather than a fundamental right (as evidenced by the lack of individual resting spaces for workers, who are forced to share their sleeping quarters with numerous other labourers).

Moreover, the bathhouse's architectural layout and artwork create a realistic and enthralling background for the otherworldly realm, enabling its symbolic association with the hierarchical structure of Japanese society. In the film, the character Yubaba is symbolically aligned with the central authority presiding over the bathhouse, located at the top of the building. The detailed design of her quarters is characterized by spaciousness and opulence, replete with an array of luxuries, including jewel embellishments and vibrant curtains in shades of purple and blue, colors that traditionally connote royalty. Conversely, as one descends through the bathhouse levels, a discernible reduction in room size and the abundance of material possessions becomes evident, corresponding to the waning individual agency and identity of the workers. Residing at the opposite extreme of this vertical hierarchical relationship is Kamaji, a character metaphorically linked to the "tsuchigumo," or Spider Spirit. Kamaji not only performs his labour but also sleeps within a dimly lit, cramped chamber dominated by a coal-fueled machine, devoid of natural light, visually constraining him within his social position (Reider, 2005: 15). Therefore, rather than being neutral space, the structure within the bathhouse parallels what Nakane Chie refers to as the vertical structure of Japanese society, in which relationships such as senior-junior rankings are strong and strictly prescribed and people in lower social ranks work for and obey the orders of those in higher echelons (Nakane, 1970: 16). Thus, through the disposition of the bathhouse, Mizayaki is able to reflect social stratification, perpetuating the lack of mobility within classes.

Mizayaki therefore, successfully blurs traditional notions of identity and social class through what Paul Wells refers to as the radical vocabulary of animation, merging consumerist concerns within Japanese society in the early 2000s with traditional folklore elements (Wells, 1998: 189). In doing so, he creates a whimsical and fantastical world which, despite its outward beauty, highlights the deep corruption of the individual within the working class, who is enslaved not only by his surroundings but also by his own mentality.

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