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Japn310 Japanese Cinema

An Pham

### Princess Mononoke

The famous director Hayao Miyazaki from Studio Ghibli has made many countless films that Japan would consider to be “classics”. He’s made many films spreading different messages and themes carefully through each animated film he has directed. Some of self-love, self discovery, family, and even war. Looking at *Princess Mononoke*, or *Mononokehime*, Hayao Miyazaki really dives arguably a bit into deeper and urgent matters. *Mononokehime* dives deeply into environmentalism through shintoism, nature, and the general ability for empathy.

To start off in the film we see Ashitaka who is an Emishi prince, fight a large boar demon. This boar demon is actually called Nago, who was the guardian of the forest. In these first scenes we can see that Nago is full of anger and pain, and before he got killed, Ashitaka got wounded by a curse on his arm. Due to being cursed, he’s banished from his village and takes off with his elk called Yakul. During his travel, Ashitaka arrives at a forest and sees some animal deities, one of which being a wolf god called Moro, who adopted a human girl named San. We also see the forest god, also known as Shishigami. These creatures live near Irontown, and the humans residing there who are under the rule of Lady Eboshi partake in deforestation. Due to this, there’s

much conflict between the creatures and the villagers. As Ashitaka is in Irontown, he stops a fight between San and Lady Eboshi, but gets hurt. He gets healed in the forest by the forest god, which angers the boars as they roar about how the forest god did nothing for Nago. After some back and forths between the wolves and boars, Ashitaka explains to the current leader of the boars, Okkoto, the reason as to why he had to kill Nago. After being distraught about the news, he warns Ashitaka to not come back, and in turn gets warned by the wolves to not fight the humans. Okkoto refuses and says he'll keep fighting the humans up until the last boar is dead. Later, Lady Eboshi decides that she'll get the forest god's head and present it to the Emperor for his protection despite having suspicions that he'll overthrow her. Not long after, the boars end up getting wiped out and Lady Eboshi retrieves the forest god's head which triggers it to become the god of death. It excretes black ooze everywhere which causes everything to decay. In the end, Ashitaka and San are able to get the head back and return it to its owner which in turn reverts the damage back and Ashitaka is cured of his curse. After all this commotion, San and Ashitaka go separate ways and Lady Eboshi decides to rebuild Irontown to be more ecologically friendly.

Though it's not directly mentioned, there's a lot of Shintoism used here in this film. Shintoism is an ancient polytheistic religion meaning that they believe in many kami, or gods, of "things". These things can range from animate to inanimate beings and objects that take all kinds of shapes and forms. These kami do not necessarily mean they are all good, but can also be

bad as well. Shintoism is still a quite popular religion and belief practiced in Japan. One could imagine when comparing it to Christianity, that a lot of respect goes into the one and only God. Even the little white spirits seen throughout the film in the forest are called Kodama, which signify that the forest is healthy. Naturally in Shintoism, there's a lot of respect that goes into all these deities where people can go to shrines to pray and give respect to. As mentioned previously, there are beliefs of different gods and of course those include different gods within nature. River, mountain, and tree gods. In *Princess Mononoke*, we have the boar god, wolf god, and forest god. There are many more. The Japanese Mononoke itself doesn't have a direct translation, but the closest one could translate it to would be vengeful spirit. Though because it's not directly mentioned, Hayao Miyazaki doesn't really classically follow traditional Shintoism as he's not bound to do so as it's an animated film. "Purification is a tenet of Shinto, an action showing respect to the spirits. Prior to entering sacred grounds or a sacred temple, Shinto practitioners will engage in a process of purification, wiping themselves clean morally and physically. ... Shinto values become a vehicle through which Miyazaki can reach audiences by appealing to their spiritual connection with nature and bring further meaning to his stories" (Morgan). Hayao Miyazaki really demonstrates this through the scene when the boars were upset about Ashitaka being healed by the forest god, and the wolves retorted back saying that the Shishigami is a god that gives and takes life. The level of grandness with spirituality really shows the metaphoric extent of disaster that Hayao envisions will happen in the real

world. If people don't change their actions and general mindset, the world will collapse on itself.

Throughout the film there are also clear signs of naturalism vs. human industrialism. This clash between humanity and nature is a huge test of compatibility that's reliant on life or death. The irony being that the forest god literally does give and takes life according to the creatures that reside alongside it. We're constantly seeing clashes between San and the animals against Lady Eboshi and her villagers. Besides these clear conflicts that are happening in the film, viewers can go back and reference back to Ashitaka and Nago's fight. Why was Nago so enraged and in pain to the point that he turned into a demon? Irontown is constantly taking wood and resources from the forest that Nago had resided in and protected prior to turning into a demon. Of course these humans also have firearms through their advancement with industrialism as you could imagine with the name of the village itself, Irontown. So these animals, despite being such grand creatures, are essentially helpless creatures to these humans. Seen as mere pests and disturbances to the humans' progression in evolving into better livelihoods. Even Ashitaka's home village sees Nago as a cursed being while the animals residing within the forest feel a passionate sorrow towards him. "Ore mining and deforestation have impacted San's natural world tremendously. When the smiths ruthlessly sabotage nature and when Eboshi beheads the Forest Spirit Shishigami, there is an immediate ecological catastrophe" (Cheng). To witness humans commit an atrocity such as killing a god that can give and take life leaves the viewers

feeling shock. Personally, while feeling shock, it was a bit unsurprising the lengths that humans will go to fulfill their desires. The direct mirror of deforestation in the movie and in real life is still really prevalent to this day despite the movie having been released back in 1997. The problems that the environment has been seeing throughout the period humans have been destroying nature are still being worked on. It's also still a very difficult problem to be tackling despite scientists knowing the answer on how to start mending the world.

Hayao shows the audience what the two different sides are going through. The pain of the animals, and the struggles that the people of Irontown are facing as a lot of them are outcasts and picked up by Lady Eboshi. They're always at each other's necks and the other side doesn't understand the other's perspective. They can't seem to understand each other. To see eye to eye. Ashitaka has really acted as a mediator between the creatures and the village. He intercepts the fight between San and Lady Eboshi, and he really just talks to them. Ashitaka can really understand where they're both coming from. He's also in love with San, who despite being a human, sides with nature. This displays that humans are not separated from nature, it's a choice and something that has to really be seen. The lack of empathy from the humans really goes to show that they clearly do not understand the consequences of their actions. Referencing back to Ashitaka's curse as well really helps see the pain that Nago had to go through, even just by a portion of what Nago had truly felt. "Prince Ashitaka, trying to get the fatal curse upon him lifted, ends

up in the middle of the conflict which serves as a metaphor for the conflict between humans and nature today. Its maker Hayao Miyazaki's warning is very clear: if nature is pushed too hard in this unequal struggle, nature is going to bite back" (Moore). It's not impossible for people to show that they can learn to do better though. Though Lady Eboshi comes off as a villain, she isn't necessarily one as she's trying to protect her people and doesn't know any better. Her perspectives are broadened though after the beheading of the forest god. She put not only the entirety of the forest in danger, but her village as well. This shared experience really opens Lady Eboshi's eyes to see the kind of destruction humans are capable of, through her own hands. Though they're unable to return back to a pristine sort of world as everything has been already touched by the humans and will likely continue to do so, Lady Eboshi does promise to be more conscious of how she will be rebuilding Irontown. These parallels between the film and the real world are just reflections of each other.

Hayao Miyazaki has been breaking the boundaries of animated films being aimed towards children. The problem he's addressing allows his audience to be of any age, gender, and social status. We're all starting to face the consequence of our own actions from mega corporations and their industries, as well as our own collective efforts towards its destruction. The thing is, we don't live in a film where someone decides our fate. We have to do that ourselves together. Everyone has to make an effort and face our problems and act towards a solution.

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