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Princess Mononoke

It is common for many movies, especially movies aimed at children, to have a villain who does evil just for the sake of being evil. The audience is not supposed to understand their motives or sympathize with them, and these characters are often designed to be deeply unlikeable with little to no redeeming qualities. Disney villains like Cruella de Vil, Maleficent, and Mother Gothel do not have admirable traits, and this makes it easy for younger audiences to pinpoint these characters as antagonists. However, not everyone creates their characters this way. Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke* is well known for digressing from this cookie-cutter method of making characters. The antagonist of the film is Lady Eboshi, a head-strong woman who is the leader of an industrial town that is aptly named "Irontown". Despite Lady Eboshi being the antagonist, she is not a traditional "villain" as someone may see in western movies. She has many admirable traits, such as providing refuge for women forced to work in brothels, taking in and caring for lepers, and working hard to ensure the prosperity of Irontown and its people. On the other side of the coin, there is the protagonist, San. San was raised by wolves and despises humans for what they have done to the forest, gods and the spirits. Finally, caught between the opposing sides of Lady Eboshi and San, there is Ashitaka. Ashitaka acts as a sort of middle-ground between San and Lady Eboshi. He is close with San and helps her appease the

deer god, but he also gets along with the people of Irontown and helps them when he can. This contrasts with Disney where the main character is seen as good, and the villain is evil.

Additionally, the major characters in *Princess Mononoke* seem to each represent a side of the conflict, with San representing nature and tradition and Lady Eboshi representing humans and industrial society. Having this struggle between Lady Eboshi and San, as well as having Ashitaka stuck somewhere in the middle, is a great commentary on human industrialism versus tradition. Compared to other films, *Princess Mononoke* neatly demonstrates the conflict between tradition and industrialization, as well as using morally grey characters to represent each side of the struggle which causes the viewer to sympathize with both sides.

While the struggle between good and evil is usually quite clear-cut, in Miyazaki Hayao's film *Princess Mononoke* it is not. The antagonist, Lady Eboshi, acts in a way that is understandable, and in some ways, relatable. While her methods of trying to achieve her goal were not good and ultimately led to the destruction of the town she loved so dearly, viewers can sympathize with her and may be led to wonder if they would do the same thing in her situation. The main character, San, also has very understandable ideas, motivations, and goals. As opposed to a clear-cut "good" character, she often uses violent means to try to achieve her goals, such as attempting to assassinate Lady Eboshi. San and Lady Eboshi both symbolize one of the largest struggles of man: tradition versus modernization. Lady Eboshi wants to industrialize the area surrounding Irontown and strip the surrounding forest of resources. San, on the other hand, rejects humans entirely. Her parents abandoned her as a baby and she was raised by wolves, and thus does not acknowledge or accept the fact she is human. She lives off the land just as the other animals of the forest do, and does not use technology such as the guns, cannons, or bombs that the people of Irontown use. Throughout the movie, Lady Eboshi and San are at each other's

throats, struggling between modernization and nature. Ashitaka offers a sort of middle ground, not industrial like Lady Eboshi, nor wild like San. He socializes with the men in Irontown, helps the women work the bellows, and talks with the lepers who are separated from the rest of Irontown to prevent the spread of illness. He also befriends San and meets her wolf family, though the wolf god does not approve of him. In the end, he goes against Lady Eboshi when she decides to kill the deer god and he helps San restore order to the forest. He does not wish harm to either side of the battle and simply does what he feels is best for the situation, such as when the deer god became the night-walker after being killed and started to destroy the forest. These characters all represent the very real struggle mankind faces and has faced for centuries, the balance between nature and humans. Additionally, Miyazaki chose to not have the film come to a more standard “satisfying” ending, it is left with Irontown needing to be rebuilt and San and Ashitaka separated, which is more realistic of how things do not always come to clean conclusions in the real world. Lady Eboshi, San, and Ashitaka being morally grey is very important to the story, and the point of *Princess Mononoke* would be lost if they were turned into one-dimensional characters such as many traditional Disney characters.

In addition to Lady Eboshi and San, there are many other morally grey characters. The deer god, as mentioned above, both brought Ashitaka back to life and destroyed the forest in the process of trying to retrieve its stolen head. The gentle yet intimidating deer god quickly changed into a fearsome and near inescapable beast. In fact, all of the gods and spirits in *Princess Mononoke* are morally grey, whereas in other movies they would likely be portrayed as completely benevolent beings. The deer god’s appearance can best be described as haunting, neither comforting nor downright terrifying, but rather a being that cannot be pleaded with and will decide whether to save someone or something entirely on its own moral basis. The wolf god

Moro is both sympathetic to baby San who was abandoned by her parents, while simultaneously ruthless towards other humans. Moro is by no means an antagonist but is also not a gentle character. Moro, as a character, evokes a feeling of wariness, the audience never quite sure when she may turn on Ashitaka. There is another antagonist, who was initially hidden and not revealed to be an antagonist until near the end of the movie, named Jiko-bo. Jiko-bo introduces himself as a priest and initially helps Ashitaka, providing useful information. However, towards the end of the movie his true nature is revealed. His motivations, unlike movies with more caricature style villains, are realistic of what is seen in today's society. He wants to kill the deer god for money and power, and the theme of human greed is not only prevalent in *Princess Mononoke*, but also many of Miyazaki's other works. The desire for money and power can lead people to do horrible things, and a significant number of wars have been started over these two things. It is important to have morally grey characters in movies, as people in the real world are not black and white and cannot be put into boxes such as "good guy" or "bad guy" and pretending that they can be in movies can make for a stale film.

As it happens, when *Princess Mononoke* was set to release in the west, the concept of an animated movie having morally grey characters seemed to baffle American directors. According to an article by Stephen Kelly, "They wanted to know whether Lady Eboshi was a good guy or a bad guy, whether the Shishigami was a good god or a bad god." (Kelly) This reflects the general direction western animated movies tend to take, and the attitude that animated movies must be simple so that children can understand them. However, turning characters like Lady Eboshi and the Shishigami (also known as the deer god) into one-dimensional characters who are either good or bad would take away from the moral of the movie. In real life, it can be hard to pinpoint what caused a person to commit a crime or do a terrible deed, as the reasoning of "they are simply

evil” often does not fully explain the circumstances that led up to the event. As Neil Gaiman, a fantasy author and the man who adapted the Japanese script of *Princess Mononoke* puts it, “Miyazaki built a film in which there are no bad guys. There are only consequences” (Kelly). This is very true throughout the movie, as each character suffers from their own action. Ashitaka gets cursed after saving his village. Lady Eboshi indirectly causes the destruction of the town she worked hard to care for and improve. Just as in real life, everyone must suffer the consequences of their actions, regardless of how just their intentions were. In the context of Miyazaki’s tendency to relate his movies to World War II and post-war Japan, many people believed their actions were just, only to have to face the consequences of those actions at a later point, or to realize they were wrong at a time when it was already too late to change anything. Lady Eboshi did not realize how reckless and irresponsible it was to kill the deer god until she had already lost so much. This is part of what makes her a morally grey character, the fact that she does feel compassion and remorse, which many one-dimensional villains do not feel.

Stephen Kelly was not the only one to note *Princess Mononoke*’s commentary on the labels of “good” and “evil”. An article by Saadia Peerzada elaborates on Miyazaki’s use of morally grey characters. In the article, Peerzada says, “The film doesn’t create individual villains or evildoers but recognizes ‘evil’ as a product of an environment” (Peerzada). This is referring to how no one character can be labeled as “evil” because, in the cases of San and Lady Eboshi, most of their actions have good intentions behind them. For Lady Eboshi, the actions she takes are evil, but she seems to truly want what is best for the people of Irontown. She also seems to believe that San’s soul was “stolen” by the wolves, which leads viewers to believe that she may sympathize with San, even if just a little bit. This stance is not a coincidence, and Peerzada includes a quote from Miyazaki about how in life and politics, labels like “evil” are slapped onto

individuals and they are punished for the crimes committed by a group of people. This was a phenomenon that happened in Post-war Japan, where everyone pointed fingers at who was to blame for the crimes committed, each person claiming they were only acting as someone else ordered them to. Miyazaki often included themes of World War II in his movies, so it is no surprise that he chose the use of morally grey characters to make an argument against picking one person to pin the responsibility of all the evil actions onto. Miyazaki's choice to show that evil actions are a product of environmental factors is commentary on the futility of the use of scapegoats who took the punishment for crimes.

Furthermore, not only does it make for an interesting movie, but Miyazaki's theme of modernization versus tradition is very reflective of post-war Japan. Saadia Peerzada discusses how when Japan started to industrialize, it moved further and further away from Shintoism. They assert that Shinto has a significant role in the film, even besides the inclusion of spirits and gods. Peerzada comments on the role of nature in Shinto and the role of nature in *Princess Mononoke*, saying, "Nature isn't dependent on humans to be its keepers and that human greed is bound to be met by man's own destruction". This is reflected in a very literal sense when Lady Eboshi's killing of the deer god, who can be seen as representing nature, leads to the destruction of Irontown. As people turn towards capitalism and lose respect for nature, they begin to take advantage of the land just as the people of Irontown did in *Princess Mononoke*. Miyazaki intertwines this real-life struggle with the plot and characters within *Princess Mononoke*. When the humans in *Princess Mononoke* sap the resources from the forest, the spirits that dwell there fight back, which is very different from the way spirits are typically presented in other Miyazaki movies. In movies such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, the spirits are peaceful and cooperative with the main characters. On the other hand, the spirits in *Princess Mononoke* do not hesitate to kill

humans, and even though Ashitaka wants to help San and the wolves, the wolf god does not trust him. A point Peerzada makes is the importance of the deer god, and how throughout the movie the deer god both destroys life and restores life. The deer god seems to act on no other principle besides his own, making him a truly neutral character. Peerzada's analysis of *Princess Mononoke* and Miyazaki's messages of human greed emphasizes the film's relevance to our current climate and how his warning has withstood the test of time.

While *Princess Mononoke* showcases morally grey characters more clearly than some of Miyazaki's other movies, some of his other works still stray from the traditional good character versus bad character archetype. One example would be *My Neighbor Totoro*, which does not have an antagonist at all. Instead, the characters in that movie fight against grief, illness, and growing up. *My Neighbor Totoro* also has strong themes of nature and modernization, though instead of the two conflicting, they work in harmony. The spirits in *My Neighbor Totoro* are friendly towards the human protagonists, as well as being very helpful and curious. Just as Peerzada mentioned, Miyazaki creates contrast between the gentle spirits of *My Neighbor Totoro* and the powerful spirits of *Princess Mononoke* that are not afraid to fight back. In addition to the spirits, comparisons can also be made between San and Ponyo's father, who is also distrustful of humans. In the movie *Ponyo*, the antagonist is Ponyo's father. He is a strange man who chases down Ponyo after she goes to the surface, though he is only doing what he believes is best for her. He is much like *Princess Mononoke*'s San, as he does not like humans due to the way they destroy the nature around them. Both movies have a commentary on how humans destroy the nature around them, though *Princess Mononoke*'s commentary is more heavy-handed, gory, and dark.

While there are many relevant comparisons between *Princess Mononoke* and other Miyazaki films, there is another interesting comparison, which is between *Princess Mononoke* and Disney movies. Most Disney movies, especially the older ones, have villains that are made to be as unlikeable as possible to the point where they become caricatures. The villain of *Cinderella* is only referred to as “The Evil Stepmother”, which sums up her entire character and personality. This archetype is simple and easy for viewers to understand, especially children. The “villains” in Miyazaki movies often have more depth to their personalities and backstories; such is the case with Lady Eboshi. One of the first things viewers learn about Lady Eboshi is how much the people of Irontown adore her, especially the women. According to the townspeople, she would buy the contracts of any brothel women she came across. She also treated the women and men more equally than many other civilizations would have, having the people with leprosy make guns specifically for the women to defend themselves with. The lepers who made the guns stated that Lady Eboshi would clean them and bandage their wounds, whereas in other places they were feared and scorned. This is very significant for a time period in which misogyny and discrimination against the disabled was commonplace, and immediately earns her some sympathy from viewers. Originally, she is set up as a sort of hero, and it actually takes a while for the movie to reveal that Lady Eboshi was destroying the forests and was indirectly responsible for the curse that Ashitaka now suffered from. This flip of portrayals can leave the audience feeling conflicted about whether or not they should root for her and sympathize with her, or if they should scorn her. It is probably that the intent is for viewers to do both, to neither idolize her nor reject her, but to accept her as a very real reflection of humans and their complex motivations.

Despite Disney often following the trope of having a villain, some Disney movies do provide more morally grey characters that are similar to the characters in *Princess Mononoke*. An example that comes to mind would be *Moana*. The main antagonist turns out to be an angry goddess who is pacified at the end of the movie. The reason the goddess was angry was because Maui, one of the protagonists, quite literally stole her heart. This is like how San, despite being the protagonist, has many flaws and bad character traits as well as how her selfish actions often lead to very real consequences for her. Additionally, both San and Moana are strong, likeable female protagonists who care deeply about their families. *Moana* also has themes of coexisting with and respecting nature, just like *Princess Mononoke*. The plots of both *Moana* and *Princess Mononoke* hinge on the fact that the balance between humans and nature has been disturbed and is threatening to destroy that which the main characters hold dear. Both the main character of *Moana* and the main character of *Princess Mononoke*, referring to Ashitaka, are searching to end a curse caused by another character's greed and must contest with nature itself to do so as well as fight an angered god. These movies and their plots are very similar, as well as their well-detailed characters with realistic motivations. Characters such as these are easier for viewers to relate to, as they are complex and have good traits and bad traits just as real humans do.

Miyazaki Hayao uses morally grey characters in *Princess Mononoke* to showcase the struggle between tradition and nature versus modernization and industrialization, a struggle which is very prevalent in today's society. Miyazaki's presentation of characters like San, Lady Eboshi, and the deer god as well as his use of those characters to point out the human predicament of trying to label people as "good" or "evil" is very different compared to western movies such as *Cinderella* and is very applicable to post-war Japan. Humans and, in the case of *Princess Mononoke*, spirits and gods, are not wholly good or wholly evil. In fact, the movie

essentially rejects labels such as “good” and “evil”, as pointed out by Stephen Kelly and Saadia Peerzada. Fitting humans into those boxes does not work, and the movie shows that very well. Lady Eboshi is seen as a sort of hero by the people of Irontown for essentially freeing the women of their contracts and taking in lepers who were cast aside in other societies, and at the same time she completely disrespects the spirits, gods, and nature. San, on the other hand, cares deeply for nature but is willing to go to extreme lengths to defend it. These types of complex characters are not often found in older Disney movies, though they have been more prevalent recently in movies such as *Moana*. Furthermore, in comparison to other popular Miyazaki films, *Princess Mononoke* takes a more gruesome approach to showing some of the messages that are often present in Miyazaki films. One such theme is humans and their relationship with nature, which can be seen in movies such as *Ponyo* and *My Neighbor Totoro*. However, in *My Neighbor Totoro* the spirits are benevolent towards humans, while the spirits and gods of *Princess Mononoke* are much more guarded and hostile towards humans, and with good reason. Ultimately, Miyazaki’s portrayal of the complexity of human motivations in *Princess Mononoke* by using morally grey characters sets it apart from western movies, and even other movies that Miyazaki himself directed.

Works Cited

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