

Chihiro's Experience in the Parallel World of *Spirited Away*

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Introduction

Many children depicted in children's literature experience hardship and grow mentally and physically through their efforts to overcome the difficulties. Courageous and endearing protagonists in children's literature from fairy tales to young adult novels often encourage young readers to face challenges directly and use any available advantage to fight against severe circumstances. Bruno Bettelheim says "the fairy tale views the world and what happens in it not objectively, but from the perspective of the hero, who is always a person in development" (203). Readers or hearers identify with the protagonist of the story they are enjoying, and they make simulated pseudo-experience of development.

The development of a positive personality through such hardship is usually the central theme of the stories in children's literature, following the primary procedure of the Hero's Journey of Joseph Campbell: call to adventure, long journey to the mysterious world, ordeals, victory, returning home. When the protagonists come back to the original place, they are different from what they used to be. They have gained both the physical maturity and the insight into the profound meaning of life.

At this point, Hayao Miyazaki's animation *Spirited Away* (2001) has an unusual pattern. Chihiro, the protagonist character of *Spirited Away*, strays into another world with her parents through the tunnel when they

are moving to a new town. Soon after they get into the exotic-and-ancient-looking parallel world, Chihiro's parents eat meals prepared for gods and spirits and turn into pigs. Chihiro is an indulged child in the real world, but without any guardian, she is compelled to survive for herself as Oliver-Twist-like poor children do in the 19th-century children's literature. Separated from her parents and given a new name Sen, Chihiro experiences hard work at the bathhouse called Yuya. In addition to the hard work, Chihiro explores how to save her parents. The experience in the parallel world, however, does not bring any change to Chihiro. At the least, the animation does not describe Chihiro's internal development at the final scene.

This paper will discuss the difficulties of growth of children today in Chihiro's experience. They cannot become mature straightforwardly just through hard work or perilous situation. Chihiro's efforts for survival is no longer a familiar story for the 21st-century children.

1 . Chihiro in *Spirited Away* and *Rina in The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*

Spirited Away shows the same tunnel that connects and separates the real world and the fantastical world of spirits both at the beginning and at the end. In either case, Chihiro follows her parents and goes through the tunnel with much hesitation clinging to her mother's arm. Even after she survives for herself she relies on her mother. The experience of the hard work does not signify any ritual initiation for Chihiro.

In this sense, Chihiro is significantly different from the protagonist of the young adult novel *Kiri no Mukou no Fushigina Machi (The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist)* , which inspired the motif of *Spirited Away* (Kano, 181) ¹. Rina, the protagonist of *The Marvelous Village Veiled in Mist*, is the 6th-grade girl and with her father's recommendation travels to another

world whose motto is “if you don't work you shan't eat.” Rina learns that the residents of this place are the progeny of wizards and witches and accepts the mysterious phenomena. She works at a sweet shop, a bookstore, a ship chandlery, a ceramics store, and a toy shop. Rina feels independent and self-reliant after the experience of many kinds of labor and her father approves of her growth when she comes home.

Chihiro has the same kind of experience as Rina does, in a more horrible way. Rina knows that her father had the same initiation when he was at the same age, and she can expect the travel should be safe. But Chihiro has no conviction that she would overcome the challenges and she is not sure that she would be reunited with her parents. A film critic Morihiko Saito says that *Spirited Away* consisted of two parts: in the first half Chihiro's labor receives recognition, but in the last half Chihiro betrays the expectation of the audience (124-26) . As a result, Saito says, the subject of *Spirited Away* changes from the growth of the protagonist to the isolation of the postmodern times represented in Kaonashi (129-31) . Kainasho offers money when he asks someone to be his friend. Kaonashi is usually successful, but Chihiro rejects his proposal. At this point, the stress of the story shifts from Chihiro to Kaonashi. Instead of depicting the growth of the protagonist, *Spirited Away* highlights the alienation in the postmodern human relations that Kaonashi represents.

2. Kaonashi as a Representation of Miscommunication

Kaonashi means “no face” in Japanese. If one has a sense of identity to one's face and name, Kaonashi comes to be a representation of postmodern existence deprived of secure foundation for identity. Kaonashi has neither of the fundamental elements of personality. Without a countenance, he is

a shadowy existence and has to have the name that always reminds him of his critical deficit. It is because Kaonashi is not confident in communication with others that he offers cash, and it is just superficial generosity. He is trying to buy companionship. He tries to make up for his interpersonal communication disability with material gifts and money.

But it does not answer why *Spirited Away* does not show the development of Chihiro's personality. Indeed Kaonashi is an essential character. In the last half of the story, Kaonashi makes a trip to one more parallel world with Chihiro and visits the sister of the mistress of the bathhouse and Kaonashi finds the place to which he should belong. But the question why Chihiro cannot achieve her development through her hardship remains unanswered.

Tsutomu Saijo, professor of Japanese classical literature and mythology at Senshu University, shows another analysis of Kaonashi. According to the narrative tradition, Saijo explains, one cannot come back to the ordinary world if one goes to a parallel world on one's own will (24-25) . *Spirited Away* has three layers: the world of Chihiro's daily life, the world of the spirits and gods beyond the tunnel, and the world under the water. In the first move from the first layer to the second, Chihiro hesitates to go. It is her parents who urge Chihiro to proceed into the unknown world. But in spite of the fact that Chihiro herself decides to visit the world beneath the water at the second move, she can return to the world of the spirits and gods above the water. Saijo discusses that Kaonashi is the unconsciousness of Chihiro and concludes that Chihiro can come back because Kaonashi remains under the water (139-44) .

If Kaonashi is the unconscious psychology of Chihiro, it means that Chihiro leaves her second ego. This analysis leads to the view that Chihiro no longer can grow into all-around adulthood. She has lost the second self. She cannot be a perfect person in the future.

3. Chihiro's Development and Isolation

But when Chihiro comes back to the bathhouse she shows a durable power of self-decision and reveals the deceit of Yubaba, the mistress of the bathhouse. Chihiro looks independent at the final scene of the world of the spirits and the gods. Here Chihiro once transforms from an indulged child into an industrious and diligent worker. She knows what she wants. She wants to find out where she is and she reviews the connection between herself and the world. She also feels responsible for the rescue of her parents. It is no doubt that Chihiro gains maturity through the journey to the world under the water. Chihiro proves her development by revealing that her parents are not among the herd of pigs to which Yubaba points. Though there is a massive amount of discussion even on the Internet why Chihiro has an insight into the absence of her parents among that herd of pigs, the reason for her insight is not essential. The penetration works in Chihiro just to show the development and maturity.

Nevertheless, Chihiro cannot maintain this maturity when she returns to the world to which she initially belongs. She comes back to her daily life with her parents through the tunnel again just to become an indulged and spoiled child as she has been in this world.

That is because the social system of the world into which Chihiro has to return is entirely different from that of the parallel world where she has gained the value of industriousness and a sense of independence. There is no other way for Chihiro but to live in the reality of the postmodern society where children have to spend an extended period of moratorium before they get mature. The community expects children to take a long time to grow. Chihiro's growth in the parallel world has no meaning in the postmodern world. Her parents and other adults will treat Chihiro as a wayward child, and they will prefer Chihiro's willfulness to her cool-headed thoughtfulness.

Chihiro cannot become Alice, who falls into the underground

wonderland then comes back with the maturity that is valuable in her ordinary world. On the surface, the pattern of Chihiro's journey resembles the adventures Lewis Carroll's Alice experiences. Each visits a parallel world and go back to her everyday life. But Chihiro cannot achieve Alice's maturity. Alice runs after a rabbit that has a watch and falls into the wonderland. Though Alice seems to be entirely at a loss in the wonderland because of the influence of the Disney animation, Alice always has a goal in her mind. Soon after the fall, Alice finds a well-kept garden through a small window. Alice says to herself she wants to get to the garden. The watch and the garden are the representation of orderliness. Alice becomes confused in the wonderland but never loses her intention. She wants to catch up with the rabbit obsessed by the watch, and she aims at the garden. Alice traces the development unconsciously to gain the value of the Victorian era. Alice comes through disorder into the Victorian bourgeois order and norm. There is no contradiction between the morals of the everyday world into which Alice comes back and the values she gains in the parallel world. Alice experiences the world where reason is nonsense, and she concludes that rationality is a priority. Alice finds her identity in the opposite direction of the paradigm of the underground wonderland.

But Chihiro can find no continuity from her discovery and achievement in the parallel world. In the real world, Chihiro cannot live on the value of industriousness that she gains through the hard work at the bathhouse. To be austere and stoic is no longer a moral lesson in the affluence of the 21st century. ² Chihiro has a substitutional parent at the bathhouse and receives both mental and physical experiences, which are useless in the actual world. Chihiro is indeed a selfish child, but the separation from her parents gives her a chance for independence. Chihiro obediently accepts the lessons and grows into a diligent child sparing no efforts. But she cannot make use of this achievement. She has to come back to the extended childhood, where she is allowed to complain about anything. Chihiro is expected to behave

like a dependent child without any responsibility.

Conclusion

Chihiro cannot share her memory of the parallel world with anyone in her ordinary world. Chihiro has no chance to gain approval for her courageous survival. She has to keep her achievement to herself. Chihiro has no person who understands and approves her independence. *Spirited Away* is a cruel story as T. S. Eliot said in *The Waste Land* that “April is the cruellest month. No person listens to Chihiro’s memory of the hardship.

This loneliness in the achievement of initiation is the destination of the postmodern child. Chihiro cannot share her experience even with her parents. Her efforts for survival is no longer a familiar story for the 21st-century children. Chihiro has no one to share her memory with, and she cannot expect anyone to sympathize with her. She has to keep her experience secret in her mind. Chihiro can be said to be a typical postmodern child who grows in an affluent society with values that respect diversity. She travels to the world where people put a priority on the importance of hard work, but she returns to the present real world where her old experience has no effect.

Chihiro cannot comprehend the meaning of her experience or verbalize it by her own words. She has to live through an extended moratorium period dependent on her parents both economically and mentally. *Spirited Away* has various aspects of entertainment that young audiences enjoy, but it also shows that present-day children cannot grow in a straight way through ordeals of hardship. There is no role model for the development of children in the 21st-century paradigm other than the protagonists who try to get over the challenges they face by gaining the strength of industriousness and patience. Joseph Cambell says about the hero today in the last chapter

of the third edition of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as follow;

The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be around, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. (337)

Spirited Away does not show how Chihiro will live after she returns to the ordinary world. It is not clear if that Chihiro can be a hero after she gains independence here. If she could be, she would have to “share the supreme ordeal” (Cambell, 337) because the hero today has to “carry the cross of the redeemer- — not in the bright moments of his tribe’s great victories, but in the silence of his personal despair” (Cambell., 337) .

Notes

- 1 Miyazaki says in one of the interviews that narratives of fantasy are internally connected with each other and that it is difficult to tell which influences which. In this sense, *Spirited Away* is the synthesis of Miyazaki’s imagination caused by various stories and myths.
- 2 Chihiro is no longer “father’s daughter.” She has no father against whom she should seek for the new identity. She can follow neither the hero’s journey nor the heroine’s journey that Maureen Murdock discusses in her book. Murdock explains that the heroine’s journey starts with the search for identity “when the ‘old self’ no longer fits” (6) . Then the heroine experiences the gender crisis and reaches “the integration of masculine and feminine” in the cycle of the journey (5) . But Chihiro has little if not “no” conflict between masculinity and femininity.

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