

# How Studio Ghibli uses fantasy to deal with trauma

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*Studio Ghibli, the trail-blazing Goliath of the Japanese animation industry, has a house style that's hard to miss. Throughout its almost two dozen highly-acclaimed animated movies, Studio Ghibli has made its mark as one of the most successful animation companies in the world. While most people might trivialise by calling the movies "children's cartoons", they are so much more.*

What sets Ghibli movies apart from their counterparts, and has gained them so much recognition worldwide, is their art style and the amount of time and thought put behind the details of the animations and stories. Each movie is masterfully crafted to portray deep and relevant issues interlinked.

The studio uses its signature style of beautifully drawn animations and whimsical fantasy storytelling to explore deeper topics of grief, loss, anxiety, deforestation, capitalism, the devastating consequences of war, the perils of growing up, and much more. They use fantasy as a lens through which they explore these hard-hitting, authentic themes to make them easily digestible for people of all ages. The way Ghibli uses fantasy to understand, normalise and deal with trauma in their whimsical, escapist movies is unparalleled.

While younger watchers might not instantly pick up on the subtle plotlines that explore these topics, older fans most likely will. Having been an avid Ghibli fan myself, as a child, I had initially fallen in love with the movies after seeing their mesmerising animations and all-consuming plots. Now that I'm older, however, with every single re-watch I appreciate the immaculately crafted world-building and the intricate storytelling a little more.

No matter what someone's age might be, there is always something to connect with and lessons to take away from these movies. A prime example of this is one of the Studio's first animated films, *My Neighbour Totoro*.

The movie starts with a university professor and his two young daughters moving to a small town to be closer to their mother who is in the hospital, recovering from a long-term illness. While cleaning up the old, rundown house they just moved into, the sisters realise that it seems to be inhabited by tiny, black soot spirits. Nearby in the forest lives a ginormous, fluffy forest spirit named Totoro. Here's the plot twist, only the young sisters can see these nature spirits, the adults around them remain oblivious to their presence. The girls accept Totoro and the rest of the forest spirits as they are, not questioning how such strange creatures can exist in their world.

On the surface, this seems like a whimsical, endearing story of two sisters moving to a new town, exploring the place, and making new friends. Underneath, lies



a darker story of loss and grief as they deal with their mother's sickness, which only seems to be getting worse as days pass.

At one point in the movie, Mei, the younger sister, runs away. After searching for her for hours, the villagers think that she might have gotten lost or may even have died in an accident somewhere. Desperate to find her sister, Satsuki asks Totoro for help, who takes her on a wild, magical ride across the village. They eventually find Mei, a little dirty from walking around but otherwise safe. The girls get to

see their mother in her hospital bed from afar, and all's well that ends well.

Short and straightforward, right? However, there's a much darker, underlying message in the film that most would probably not realise at first glance. Some have said that Totoro could be the spirit of death, the Grim Reaper, who came to assist Mei to the afterlife after she passed away from an accident while running away. When their parents cannot be there for them, Totoro offers them comfort and a magical, dream-like adventure to forget

their worries. Others have analysed it as the mother dying from sickness instead. The entire movie is just an illusion the sisters came up with to cope with their grief and loss. Both explanations are dark and gloomy, however, young watchers would never realise this from the film's heart-warming, happy ending.

In another much-loved Ghibli movie, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, the main character's journey to making a living as a young witch-in-training can be viewed as an allegory for modern creatives trying to make it on their own and the struggles they have to face in a capitalist society. Kiki losing herself in her job and the burnout and depression that results from it are relatable for us living in this contemporary society obsessed with hustle culture. It reminds viewers, both young and old, the importance of taking breaks and simply enjoying life as it comes.

Similarly, *Spirited Away*, a Ghibli movie about a young girl being forced to take a job at a bathhouse to survive and save her parents, has interlinked themes of the horrors of a capitalist society, the dangers of hustle culture, and the all-consuming nature of work. It also deals with the ordeal of growing up, and the many ways that people hold on to a particular stage in their life, refusing to move forward and let go of the comfort of what is familiar.

Studio Ghibli's animations constitute a significant achievement of contemporary popular culture and continue to break boundaries. The studio's use of magical fantasy and escapist narratives to cope with trauma is a very effective way for young viewers to learn about the realities of life without making it gory or horrifying.

Fans who might have enjoyed the movies for their whimsical storytelling as a child might appreciate them for their underlying messages as adults. The fine line between fantasy and reality gets translated into the studio's signature magic realism style, which has captured the hearts of fans all over the world.

Ghibli continues to show viewers that just because it is an animated movie does not mean that it cannot contain meaningful, relatable life lessons in it as well.

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