

American and Japanese Enviro-toons: Human-Nature Relationships in *The Little Mermaid* and *My Neighbor Totoro*

Introduction

In the past thirty years, ecocriticism has developed from its early stage with only a group of disconnected and scattered lone enthusiasts writing ecologically-informed criticism to its current state as a sophisticated and highly recognized “earth-centered approach” that reframes theories drawn from a variety of disciplines including ecology, biology, sociology and philosophy (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). It is an umbrella term used to explore the human relationship with the earth as portrayed in literature. Since it covers a wide range of critical approaches, it is difficult to define. One of the pioneers in this field of literary criticism, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996, p. xviii), simply and precisely defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. This definition has flourished in usage since the late 1980s and has been and continues to be the most popular and widely used definition. The complex intersections between culture and nature suggest that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it”, forming the fundamental premise that all ecocriticism shares (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix).

Throughout the years, the scope of ecocriticism has expanded as a discipline. Traditionally rooted in literary writings which focus primarily and explicitly on nature, ecocritical approaches are now applied to a variety of expressive media including film, television and music (Pike, 2012). The gradual deterioration of environmental quality caused by man-made disturbances and human exploitation of nature has caught the public’s attention, resulting in an increase, in particular, in the number of films with environmental themes. According to Weinman (2004), who first introduced the term

enviro-toon for the discussion of animation with a green theme, not only do enviro-toons shape people's perception of the natural world by depicting the complexity of environmental issues through comedic portrayals, they also leave room for audiences to freely and safely explore environmental issues by including facts, images and ideas of nature. Enviro-toons, therefore, are seen to be a powerful medium that shape people's, especially young people's, understanding of nature. This understanding is set to be the basis for their long-lasting beliefs and values about the world – beliefs and values which are generally formed during childhood.

Even though the ecocritical interest in film studies is seen to be expanding, the exploration of enviro-toons is still in its early stages as an emerging category in the field (Buell, Heise, & Thornber, 2011). Much of the work conducted to date focuses on films produced in English-speaking countries which investigate the human-nature relationship. Ecocriticism focusing on films produced in non-English speaking countries remains under-explored. Also, a cross-cultural ecological literary criticism is lacking. Since environmental films encompass all corners of the world, studying diverse interactions with nature could expand environmental awareness.

This essay will focus on animated films produced by two world-renowned studios in two culturally different countries: Walt Disney Pictures in the United States and Studio Ghibli in Japan. An ecocritical approach will be adopted to investigate the human-nature relationship across these distinct cultures. Two environmentally themed films will be analyzed. They are *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). The two selected animated films were both produced in the late 1980s. Even though they were only released eighteen months apart, it is interesting to note that

Walt Disney Pictures and Studio Ghibli provide audiences with contrasting representations of the human-nature relationship. According to Wager (2014), cultural customs, values and beliefs are crucial factors in influencing people's understandings of the natural world. These understandings are usually reflected in films through depictions of natural landscapes and non-human life forms. In what follows, cultural evidence relating to the environment in the United States and Japan will be drawn on to investigate the divergent attitudes towards nature expressed in the two animated films. The essay will be divided into three sections with the first section exploring the idea of the human exploitation of nature in *The Little Mermaid*, followed by the second section examining the idea of environmental preservation depicted through the harmonious human-nature relationship in *My Neighbor Totoro*. The last section will focus on the implications of raising environmental awareness in classrooms, as suggested by a cross-cultural analysis and discussion of selected enviro-toons. The broader aim of the project is to direct people's attention to the relationship of humans to nature portrayed in the two selected animated films through a cross-cultural and ecologically focused analysis.

Human Exploitation of Nature in *The Little Mermaid*

Walt Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) is a film adaptation of a classic fairy tale written by Hans Christian Anderson. The film is about a beautiful mermaid Ariel, who lives in an enchanted underwater world, but is fascinated by life on land. Being a headstrong teenager, despite her father King Triton's lawful order forbidding her access to the human world above, she makes a visit to the ocean surface and then falls for a handsome human prince. Determined to pursue her love for Prince Eric, she defies her father and turns to the wicked sea witch, Ursula, to make a dangerous deal

to trade her voice for becoming human for three days. Ariel must wordlessly win Prince Eric's heart while she is human, or her soul will forever be in Ursula's possession. The romantic plot, seemingly, centers around a love-struck mermaid pursuing love. However, some implicit environmental issues are embedded in the film and are reflected through the human-nature interactions.

The Little Mermaid seems to adopt an economic approach to ecology when addressing the human-nature relationship. Economic ecologist Kenneth Watt suggests that "economic ecology's goal is to maximize the productivity of each type of ecosystem and each level of that ecosystem for human benefit" (cited in Merchant, 2007, p.188). Echoing Watt, Merchant (2007), in considering human beings as economic animals, asserts that humans aim to exploit natural resources to maximize their own benefits as they position themselves above nature and believe they have the ability to control it. There are numerous examples of consumption, especially of food, in *The Little Mermaid* that shows regular human practices of exploiting the ocean as a source of food. The film opens with a ship sailing through the fog, filled with sailors singing stories of the mythical merpeople. While they are singing, a fishing net full of flapping fish is being pulled onboard. A struggling fish which is grabbed by one of the sailors eventually slips from his hand and returns to the ocean. It then heaves a sigh of relief before swimming away from the ship and into the ocean's depths. This example not only justifies Sebastian the crab's assertion that "the fish on the land ain't happy, they sad 'cause they in their bowl", it also highlights the sea animals' risk of being eaten when they enter the human world above the ocean. To cite another example, Sebastian is always trying to avoid being caught and cooked by Chef Louis who is obsessed with preparing dishes involving different kinds of sea creatures. This

example, along with King Triton's assertion that all humans are "spineless, savage, harpooning, fish-eaters, incapable of any feeling" when Ariel's infatuation with Prince Eric and his identity are revealed, suggests that humans treat themselves as managers of the world who can use or even exploit environmental resources to satisfy their wants. These scenes that show humans' attempts to consume Ariel's sea friends are some of many references made in the film to humans' capacity in manipulation and desire to exploit the natural world.

Some critics have argued that the portrayals of food consumption in *The Little Mermaid* expose a dominance hierarchy between the human and ocean realms. Ariel's transformation from a mermaid to a human also reflects the human dominance over nature. Murphy (1995) argues that Ariel's decision to trade her voice for human legs in pursuing the possibility of love with the human prince symbolizes a loss of power. Her power loss is further solidified by her marriage to Prince Eric. In their pursuit of love, Ariel seems to be the only one who makes a sacrifice for the relationship as she risks her soul to be close to the prince for only three days. Also, instead of Prince Eric transforming into a merman for his marriage, Ariel assimilates into the human world by giving up a part of her identity – the mermaid tail – permanently. Since Ariel is a half-fish, half-human creature that makes her belong to both the natural and human world while Prince Eric belongs entirely to the human world, the one-way self-sacrifices that she makes subtly reflect the human superiority to nature. Furthermore, her sacrifice signifies a distinct boundary between the two worlds as one cannot possess identities from both sides – one must choose one side or another.

The Little Mermaid's implicit depiction of consumerism further illustrates the disruption of ecological balance caused by human activities. Consumerism, according to Wager (2014), is “the economic process, social activity, and cultural mindset which revolves around the widespread spending of capital for goods and services that serve non-utilitarian purposes” (p. 56). The concept of consumerism is reflected in the sunken artificial objects that do not belong to the natural realm of the ocean. Most of these objects can be seen in two scenes - the shipwreck where Ariel collects man-made objects and the underwater cavern where she stores and displays her treasures. The wide varieties of human artifacts include containers, silverware, toys, clocks, globes, jewelry, paintings, musical instruments and all kinds of ornaments such as statues and vases. Ariel’s massive collection of human items can be seen as a reflection of an era of excess and consumerism in the United States during the 1980s in which the film was produced.

The 1980s, dubbed the “Decade of Greed”, is summarized in five words – “get rich, borrow, spend, enjoy” - by a Time magazine reporter (cited in McKenzie, 2004, Decade of greed, para. 1). It is a decade that is governed by President Reagan. Under his economic policies, including reductions in taxes and creations of approximately 16.7 million jobs, the average income of all economic segments of the American population increased (Ridenour, 2004). The income rise was not the only contributing factor to the spread of consumerism. The tremendous increase in the popularity of cable TV also played a part. An explosive growth of infomercials was witnessed during the mid-1980s. It is estimated that around ten to twenty thousands infomercials aired per week (Theiss, 1999). This new means of consumption provided consumers with easy access to the market. Furthermore, cable TV opened doors for ordinary

Americans to watch the luxurious lifestyles of the rich and famous. As a result, consumers were encouraged to follow celebrities' consumption habits – associated with a high status lifestyle – to purchase goods that contain a relatively high aesthetic value but a low level of use value. As can be seen in Ariel's collection of human artifacts, most of the items are aesthetically pleasing and some serve only a decorative purpose with no practical use (for example, paintings and statues).

This era of excess is reflected most fully in the lyrics of one of the signature songs in *The Little Mermaid*, entitled “Part of your world”. When Ariel is expressing her desire to be human and to live among their culture through the song, she mentions her collection and that she has twenty “thingamabobs” (ornamental corkscrews). Considering the corkscrew as a durable and non-disposable tool, the twenty sunken corkscrews may be reflecting the cultural norm of excessive consumption and humans' limitless and unquenchable desire for goods. Ariel continues her song by expressing how she wants more of not only the “thingamabobs”, but also the “gadgets and gizmos” that refer to different kinds of human objects, antiques and artifacts. As Ariel is a mermaid who is conceived as being half human, unlike her animal friends, she expresses humanlike desires toward material possessions. Her attachment to man-made objects that is shown by her collecting behavior not only reflects her desire for human objects, it also quenches her curiosity in humanity.

The idea of excessive consumerism depicted in the film provides clear evidence of the human exploitation of the natural world. Consumerism causes environmental degradation as manufacturing a product depletes natural resources and pollution is usually entailed in the production process. The disposal of commodities also pollutes

the environment. Ocean pollution, resulting in excessive consumption behaviors, is shown in the film as Ariel's treasures are, in fact, unwanted consumer goods discarded in the ocean by humans. Even though the sea creatures do not seem to be disturbed by the human litter, they do sink to the bottom of the ocean and occupy a part of the fish and wildlife habitats.

In many ways, *The Little Mermaid* seems to be a typical romantic animated film with a happy ending. However, the theme of human exploitation of the natural world is subtly embedded in the film through the interactions between sea creatures and humans and the idea of excessive consumerism. The imagery of food consumption, the mermaid's bodily transformation and marine trash reflect that humans tend to position themselves above nature instead of within nature. Therefore, a rather negative human-nature relationship is depicted under the sugarcoated happily-ever-after love story between the protagonists.

Harmonious Coexistence between Humans and Nature in *My Neighbor Totoro*

Studio Ghibli's *My Neighbor Totoro*, which seems to adopt an organismic approach to ecology, suggests that humanity is a part of nature. In what follows, how the film encourages environmental preservation by promoting a harmonious human-nature relationship will be investigated. As mentioned, the film, which is set in the rural outskirts of Tokyo in the late 1950s (Eggert, 2010), was released in 1988. With reference to the Japan Environment Agency (1983), more than a 10 percent loss in greenery was observed in areas surrounding Tokyo between 1970 and 1980 because of the increase in population density. In 1986, the Prime Minister's Central Office carried out a survey focusing on environmental protection. Unlike the visible

consumerist culture in the United States, 49.1 percent of the participants indicated that they preferred “spiritual affluence” to “material affluence”. Also, nearly half of the surveyed participants supported natural conservation (Japan Prime Minister, 1986). The high level of public concern with environmental preservation emerged as one of the national priorities, a priority reflected in the nostalgic portrayal of a more innocent rural lifestyle in *Totoro*.

In contrast to the economic approach to ecology, which calls for human gains by exploiting natural resources, the organismic ecology views “the natural world as a set of communities where living creatures cooperate in interconnected relationships” (Murray and Heumann, 2014, p.96). In other words, both humans and non-humans should maintain an interdependent relationship to benefit both parties as they are considered to be a part of nature. In the film, the protagonists’ adventurous encounters with a wild nature and the spirits that guard the forest imply the possibility of a harmonious coexistence of humans and nature.

The film opens with a family moving to a rural neighborhood where there are only paddy fields, dirt roads and forests with giant trees. It is not only the new home of the protagonists, Satsuki and Mei, it is also home to some spiritual non-human inhabitants. As the two sisters excitedly explore their house and the new surroundings, they encounter different kinds of magical creatures. After chasing and following two small, semi-transparent rabbit-like spirits through the forest and falling into a hole in a magnificent camphor tree that grows near the home of the family, Mei sees the gigantic bear-like creature, Totoro, dozing inside a cave. Showing no signs of fear, she approaches Totoro by climbing up his body and lands on his fluffy belly, scooting

closer towards his sleepy face to pet his nose. Being interrupted in his sleep, the beast twitches his face and yawns loudly. Instead of getting scared by the roaring sound, Mei is amazed with her discovery and laughs with excitement. Eventually, she feels comfortable enough to curl up and falls asleep on Totoro's stomach that is only a few inches away from his enormous mouth.

Mei and her older sister, Satsuki, belong to the human world and Totoro represents the realm of nature. Mei's first encounter with Totoro marks the moment of the two worlds being brought together. It suggests no signs of a power imbalance in the human-nature relationship and demonstrates that humans have no desire to position themselves above nature as Mei chooses to share a peaceful moment with her new acquaintance. On the other hand, the natural world shows acceptance and tolerance towards human co-habitation as suggested by Totoro's kind gesture of allowing Mei to stay on his stomach.

The protagonists' next few encounters with Totoro, the King of the Forest, show how the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature is mutually beneficial to both inhabitants of the two realms. On a rain-soaked evening when Satsuki and Mei realize that their father forgot to bring his umbrella to work, the worried girls decide to carry an extra umbrella and pick him up at the bus stop. Patiently waiting for their father's arrival, Satsuki gives her tired little sister a piggyback ride while she rests her umbrella upon her shoulder. All of a sudden, Totoro, with only a small piece of leaf on its head to shield itself from the driving rain, lumbers from the forest and joins the girls at the bus stop. Noticing the raindrops pattering on Totoro's nose, Satsuki shares her umbrella with him. He accepts the offer and is delighted at the sound made upon

the umbrella by falling raindrops. In return, he gives her a set of acorn seeds wrapped in bamboo leaves that makes her dance with happiness.

In this widely celebrated scene of the film, Satsuki's encounter with the King of the Forest suggests more than a moment when man and nature collide again. According to Hodgkinson (2013), "the umbrella is a symbol of affection, caring, or love" in Japanese culture. Satsuki's offering of her umbrella to Totoro to shelter him from the rain can be understood as humans taking an initiative to protect the natural environment and that the protection is provided out of love. Since Satsuki does the good deed out of genuine care and kindness, getting anything in return seems to be the last thing on her mind. For this reason, she is deeply appreciative of the surprising gift from Totoro and this reciprocal gift can be seen as a symbol of the unexpected benefits of natural protection.

The packet of acorn seeds, posited as a gift from nature, prompts another encounter with the forest spirits. Upon receiving the seeds, Satsuki and Mei excitedly plant them in their garden. One night, Satsuki awakens and sees Totoro and the bunny-like creature dancing around the garden where the seeds are planted. She awakens Mei and they join the germination dance with the creatures to raise the planted acorns into seedlings. The seedlings quickly grow into numerous small trees which later conjoin to form a giant tree with huge roots lying spread-eagled on the ground and the dense foliage growing into the sky and dwarfing Satsuki's house.

The rapid process of seed germination and growth of the plants is clearly an imaginary situation that can only appear in films. Not only does this scene seem

enthraling to the audience, it is crucial in depicting an interdependent relationship between humans and nature that offers mutual benefits to both realms. The seeds turning into little sprouting plants signify the birth of a human-nature connection. In order to build a strong and enduring connection, active effort is required from both sides. The protagonists' engagement in the germination dance with the mythical creatures is a reflection of the importance of human active engagement in natural preservation. Without Satsuki and Mei's participation, the oak tree would not grow into a size that provides a wealth of shade, offering protection from different forms of disasters and providing natural resources for humans to maintain a decent life.

As these examples illustrate, the boundary between natural and human worlds is non-existent, whereas in *The Little Mermaid*, a clear division between the two realms is presented by the portrayals of the ocean world and the land above. The human protagonists and the forest spirits representing the realm of the natural in *Totoro* share the same piece of land, both calling it home. Their interactions show no signs of superiority or inferiority in any form. Instead, their peaceful coexistence and the harmonious relationship that they develop throughout the film encourage the idea of environmental preservation.

Implications of the Cross-Cultural Ecocritical Analysis for Teaching

Glotfelty (1996), who is a pioneer in the field of ecocriticism, mentions that ecologically focused criticism directs our attention to issues that we need to be thinking about. Its most important task is to raise awareness about those issues. Facing a wealth of challenging environmental issues nowadays, it is crucial to seek solutions to the problems in order to maintain the Earth's sustainability. Making

people aware of the environmental impacts of their activities is the first step in improving environmental quality.

As mentioned, enviro-toons are seen to be a powerful medium in shaping young people's perception of the natural world as complex environmental problems are delivered in an understandable manner. The beautiful animation, enthralling plot and iconic characters in Disney and Studio Ghibli animated films are the reasons that captivate young audiences from around the world. Since both animation studios are major players in the global culture, they are in a privileged position that allows them to strongly influence young people's understanding of nature. Therefore, the environmental themes they explore should be examined critically.

Even though the two selected animated films were both produced and released in the same period of time, contrasting representations of the human-nature relationship are being presented. By exploring these representations and the embedded environmental issues with students through watching the well-known animated films, it would be easier for them to grasp the complex ideas and values of nature. Furthermore, the cross-cultural study enables students to have a glimpse of nature and the human-nature relationship portrayed in two different cultural contexts. The differences in depictions may make them reflect on their own behaviors towards the environment and raise their awareness of healing environmental wounds.

Conclusion

As the analysis of *The Little Mermaid* and *My Neighbor Totoro* illustrates, contrasting representations of the human-nature relationship are being depicted. In *The Little*

Mermaid, the portrayals of food consumption, the transformation of Ariel's body and her collection of marine trash found in her ocean home imply a hierarchical relationship between humans and nature. Since humans position themselves above nature, they aim to exploit the natural resources to satisfy their unlimited wants. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, on the contrary, the depiction of the protagonists' adventurous encounters with the friendly guardians of the forest and their peaceful co-existence implies a harmonious human-nature relationship. Through the interactions between the protagonists and the forest spirits, the harmony between man and nature is seen to be mutually beneficial to the inhabitants of the two realms.

The divergent representations of the human-nature relationship can be explained by the cultural differences since our relationship with nature is largely influenced by culturally defined worldviews and practices. As the two selected films were produced in two diverse cultural contexts, the cultural evidence is an important factor to be considered when conducting the film analysis.

It is interesting to note that the environmental themes are embedded in the films through the portrayals of the human-nature interactions. They are not shown as explicitly as another pair of films, Walt Disney's *WALL-E* (2008) and Studio Ghibli's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008), produced by the same studios twenty years later. Both films foreground the environmental impacts of pollutions caused by human activities. *WALL-E* portrays a dystopian world where skyscrapers are replaced with mountains of trash. The protagonist WALL-E, a hardworking robot, has been left behind to collect and condense the stray piles of trash as humanity has caused extreme and long-lasting environmental damages to planet Earth. Therefore, humans have no

choice but to leave it behind and to separate themselves from the natural environment by living in a spaceship. On the other hand, taking *Ponyo* as an example, the vivid images of Ponyo, the goldfish princess, being almost killed by a piece of marine trash leave room for audiences to think about and reflect on the interactions between humans and the natural world. Furthermore, both films seem to address the issues of environmental restoration by portraying a collaborative human-nature relationship. It is seen that the initially divergent representations of the human-nature relationship in the two cultural contexts come into alignment over a twenty-year period. The changing representations of this relationship in more recent films should be investigated as it would be beneficial in raising young people's environmental awareness.

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