

From Ashes to Stone: Development of Chihiro in “Spirited Away”

"You're called Chihiro? That name is too long and hard to pronounce. From now on, you'll be called Sen. You got that? You're Sen."

- Yu-Baaba

An insecure little girl is thrown in a world of wonders, magical and dangerous at the same time, and emerges a strong, assertive character. Chihiro is able to accomplish this because she does not lose her own identity to the name-stealer Yu-Baaba – and in turn does not lose her virtues. Her personal journey becomes even more valiant when compared to the other characters of the bathhouse, who have lost their soul with their name.

The newest installment in Studio Ghibli's unparalleled collection of animation movies, *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (Spirited Away, “Sen or Chihiro in the Land of the Gods”) accomplishes everything its predecessors did – seamless animation, an engaging story, and a brilliant soundtrack. Spirited Away is a story about a girl who is stuck in a mythical world of gods, ghosts, and witches – Chihiro must overcome adversity and fear in order to save her parents and escape the world that has enslaved her. Director Miyazaki Hayao, head of Studio Ghibli, has managed to craft a cinematic masterpiece, one that will doubtless be considered a classic. Spirited Away takes on an extra level of significance, as Miyazaki has announced that it will be his last film. In retrospect, it can be seen that Spirited Away has amalgamated the best elements of previous Ghibli-Miyazaki movies into one spectacular film about a lost little girl named Chihiro. One of these elements is strong character development, which is evident in the character of Chihiro throughout the course of the movie, and becomes the central focus of the movie itself. As the Japanese title suggests, Chihiro undergoes a significant change of character in the movie under

the persona of Sen, but she is still able to retain her own identity, unlike the other characters of the story. As Sen, Chihiro is able to bring out the strength and courage that was deep inside her, becoming more independent and accepting of circumstances. In a mythical world that causes people to lose virtue and become greedy, Chihiro is able to remain innocent because she remembers who she was – through her unclouded perspectives she is able to grow into a courageous, independent, and adaptable individual.

The movie opens with Chihiro waking up from a nap of boredom and disinterest. Her family is moving to a rural town, and from the assorted items in the car, such as a department store bag, and Chihiro's wardrobe, probably from a relatively developed city. It becomes obvious that Chihiro is reluctant to leave her home after her mother points out the public school that she will be attending – Chihiro merely says "I liked the old one better," without taking more than a glance at it. From her response to the wilted bouquet of flowers in her hands, it seems as if she is bitter and sentimental. "This is the first time I've gotten a bouquet, and it's a goodbye bouquet," she says. From the bouquet it can be seen that Chihiro left some good friends behind – probably one of the reasons she did not want to leave her previous home.

Within the bouquet of flowers was a card that her friends wrote for her with "We'll miss you Chihiro," written on it. This card will later prove to be an integral part of Chihiro's character, and can be identified as one of the main symbols of this movie.

The next scene at the entrance of the temple-like structure completes the presentation of pre-transformation Chihiro. Here, she is seen as extremely timid, rather immature, very adhesive, and dependent on her parents. Complaining ever since her father decided to deviate off into the forest path, she shows much reluctance in entering the temple-like structure. Trying to hold her ground outside the temple, she watches in horror as her parents are seemingly swallowed by the darkness. Not wanting to be alone, Chihiro runs after her parents in a desperate cry of, "Mother!

Wait for me!” Cowardly and heavily dependent on her parents, she feels helpless as she clings tightly onto her mother in fear as they proceed further through the tunnel.

Chihiro’s grip on her parents is later forcefully pulled apart when she discovers that her parents have turned into pigs. Still dressed in their normal clothes, her pig-parents no longer behave like humans – they have become fat beasts, only wanting to eat. It is in this scene where Chihiro’s unbelieving attitude is most prevalent – first of all she does not believe that her parents have become pigs, as she runs around frantically in a sea of dark silhouettes calling out “Mother! Father!” Furthermore, she tries to convince herself that what she saw was just a bad dream – until she realizes that it is herself that is fading, rather than the dream. This suspicion is confirmed as a surreal riverboat starts to unload invisible figures – which materialize as they stop on the shore.

Chihiro finally manages to suspend her disbelief in a final defiant act of resisting Haku’s help – and her arms go straight through him. As Haku is the closest resemblance of a human she can find, in addition to the fact that he is not transparent, she has no choice but to trust him. Timidly swallowing the berry not only physically manifested Chihiro in *this* world – but also allowed for her to mentally accept that the transpired events were not fantastic elements of a bad dream. Metaphorically, it can be said that Chihiro was no longer in Kansas, and accepted this hellish Land of Oz as something she must survive through (Plume-Noire).

The Chihiro of cowardice makes one final appearance as she walks (or rather, crawls) down the stairs. Breathless after just a few steps, she decides to try walking – until the step breaks underneath her. In one final desperate move, she sprints down the stairs until she can make contact with the opposite wall. As the cowardly Chihiro continued falling into the canyon below, only Chihiro’s reluctant courage remained on the stairs as she realized that her situation called for it.

Chihiro soon realizes that she has stumbled into an extravagant traditional Japanese bath house...for the gods. The proprietor of the bath house was a disproportionate old hag, a witch by the name of Yu-Baaba. Chihiro pleaded with Yu-Baaba for a job at the bath house, as Haku had warned Chihiro that anyone without a job was turned into a pig by Yu-Baaba. Through determined, unrelenting persuasion (which she would have not done before, like her feeble attempts at preventing her parents from going in the temple), Chihiro was given a job by Yu-Baaba...under one condition – that Chihiro would work under the name of “Sen.” Having no choice, Chihiro agrees, and Yu-Baaba lifted the words off of the contract signed ‘Chihiro’ – leaving only ‘Sen’ in its place, and then imprisoning the remaining characters...as if Chihiro had signed ‘Sen’ herself. The significance of Yu-Baaba leaving a letter (and not replacing the whole name) is that there is still one small part of Chihiro left – we later find that it is her undying virtue that remains a constant force throughout the movie. Before Haku leads Chihiro to her new job, he asked for her name and received the stuttered reply, “Chi...Sen.”

The morning after, Haku wakes Sen and leads her to the pigpen where her parents are kept. Upon seeing the two sleeping pigs that are her parents, Sen rushes over and calls out, “mother, father! It’s me! It’s S-Sen!”¹ Her stutter is extremely significant, as Sen hesitates for a split second about her name. Notice the difference of stutter between when Haku asked for her name and when she is calling out to her parents. While in the former situation Chihiro is aware of her true name, she is convinced the day after that Sen had been her name all along. Although she feels a drive to rescue her parents, she no longer remembers why, how, or where she is from. Instead of saying “I’m going to save you so we can go home,” she says “Don’t eat too much or they’ll eat you,” which shows a difference in perception already. Sen has already come to accept

¹ The stuttering is noticed only in the Japanese release of Spirited Away, not in the American Disney release

that she is a part of this world, and although oppressed, seeks escape for her and her parental swine. But for what reason? She is reminded by the card that her friends gave her.

Inside the pocket of her shorts, the card from her friends reminded Sen that she had a real name – Chihiro. To be reminded of her true name was enough for her to remember of her past and purpose. She also becomes aware of the plight of Haku, who can no longer remember his name, and therefore remains a prisoner of Yu-Baaba. The card that her friends gave her, in this sense, is a symbol for remembrance and of lasting memories. Now that Sen has regained knowledge of Chihiro, the weakness that she used to exhibit is replaced with courage and a sense of responsibility, which also frees her from Yu-Baaba's mind-washing control.

A now accepting and courageous Sen shows her valiance while serving her first customer – a giant dirty and stinking mud monster. Sen is the only employee of the bath house that has the courage to face the stink of the monster – she fights through the thick mud and her own fears in order to help this customer bathe. It is apparent that Sen is keen on completing the task, even after she discovers that there is an object lodged in the side of the monster. With the help of the other workers of the bath, they pull out what seems to be objects from the human world...it becomes apparent that the mud monster is not a monster at all, but rather Kawa no Kami: the god of the river, who had come to the bathhouse to heal his wounds and to purge himself of all the pollution that he has suffered. Henceforth, Sen was recognized as a bold and honorable employee of the bathhouse.

Sen's new sense of independence is shown through her care for Haku's injury. Seeing that Haku is seriously hurt and on his way to Yu-Baaba, she decides to proceed up to the office herself, no matter how. It turns out that the only way was by crossing a pipe on the outside of the bathhouse – an old, decrepit pipe that looked like they couldn't support her weight. With little hesitation, Sen steps boldly onto the pipes and continues. Compare this scene to the scene

where Chihiro walks down the stairs – although the pipe was much more intimidating and truly dangerous, Sen faced her fears and felt that for Haku's sake she must proceed.

Sen is also willing to sacrifice her own well-being in order to save Haku (now in dragon form). Knowing that she will have to feed Haku the bitter dumpling given to her by Kawa no Kami in order to save him, she forces his mouth open and reaches all the way down with no regard to the sharp and menacing teeth that line the dragon's mouth. Even though the dragon had shown menacing gestures to her before, Sen places Haku's life before her arm, facing her fears and thrusting her arm into the jaws of the suffering dragon.

Sen continues her quest to help Haku by taking the train to Zeniiba's house. Although she was strongly advised not to go, she felt that she had to apologize for the wrongs that Haku had innocently committed. She had, after all, already flushed out the evil spirit eating away at Haku's life force – which turned out to be what looked like a harmless little worm. Miyazaki has taken great care in not portraying any characters that are pure evil – this little worm almost appears as if it had no idea that it was killing Haku.

Although Chihiro's development into a stronger character is significant in itself, what is perhaps more significant is the fact that she was the only character to experience such positive dynamic changes. Compared to several of the other characters, Chihiro achieved far greater results and learned much more, for the better. To show this change, the idea of pairs and double meanings was used by Miyazaki as a subtle element in the film. The most obvious one would be Chihiro and Sen – Sen is actually the kanji pronunciation of one of the characters in her name. Unbeknownst to Yu-Baaba, by leaving the smallest character of her name (which, ironically, literally means “one thousand”), she has allowed for Sen to reclaim Chihiro. This fact prevents Sen from falling into a state of greed, a trait shared by all the other bathhouse workers. Whoever

had their name taken away from Yu-Baaba has seemed to lose control of their own character, and helplessly allowed themselves to be consumed in the pits of avarice.

The masked ghost is probably the most enigmatic character of the movie, and serves to illuminate Chihiro's shining presence. The ghost is essentially an empty shell – his thoughts and actions are tailored to the desires of those around him. Upon entering the bathhouse, he notices that the sight of gold makes the bathhouse workers squirm in greedy ecstasy, and so seeks to lure them with gold. By successfully ensnaring the frog and eating him, he assumes the shape of a frog – which suggests that the ghost takes on the personality and voice of his prey. The frog was probably eaten first because of its non-humanoid features, to show a physical, and implied mental change, which would not be as obvious when the ghost eats a person.

The ghost can never manage to tempt Sen, however. Offering her valuable items such as the bathhouse cards and a handful of gold nuggets, she always politely refuses him. A subtle detail about the ghost is what tells the viewer the environment the bathhouse has – every time that Sen refuses the ghost, the ghost turns increasingly transparent. It is almost as if in order to solidify in the bathhouse, one has to be greedy and desire riches (unless one had eaten the bitter dumpling).

This idea of solidification is also shown with the arrival of Zeniiba at the bathhouse, where she cannot assume an opaque state. This is probably due to the virtuous intentions of Zeniiba, Yu-Baaba's older twin sister, who is not driven by greed. Although the two sisters look, dress, and talk the same way, the personalities are wildly different. While Yu-Baaba is the owner of an extravagant bathhouse for the gods, the centerpiece of a festive town, Zeniiba lives by herself in a small, isolated cottage with flowers on the doorframe. While having tea with cake, Sen (confidently referring to herself as Chihiro) asks Zeniiba about her familiarity with Haku, and why she feels like she has known Haku for a very long time. Zeniiba simply responds, "You

can't erase things that have happened in the past, it's just that you have forgotten about it right now." While Yu-Baaba's world may be one of forgetfulness and stolen identities, Zeniiba's is one of recovered old memories and a strong sense of self. Chihiro is told to treasure her name, and to be assertive of her identity. The masked ghost is also asked to stay at Zeniiba's house to serve as her assistant – in this peaceful and humble environment, the ghost has nothing but kindness to learn from Zeniiba.

Flying back to the bathhouse Chihiro is able to remember her encounter with Haku in the past, and with the uttering of one word – Haku's real name – the flying dragon dissipates and Haku is returned. The significance rests in the fact that Haku has never been seen in his human form outside the bounds of the bathhouse, so it is quite possible that one aspect of Yu-Baaba's control over him assumes that he take on the shape of a dragon – a feared character in Asian mythology – any time he is to venture outside. Now that he remembers his name, Yu-Baaba no longer has that control over him. Falling through the air with tears streaming upwards, Haku begins to remember his past...Chihiro has therefore saved the life of the cursed Haku, who now has managed to recover his true identity.

With a level head and an unclouded heart, Chihiro is able to assume the identity of Sen – instead of the nightmare of being in this netherworld, she is able to retain her virtues and develop into an independent, courageous, and resourceful individual. She accomplishes this by resisting greed, the one aspect that separates her from the rest of the workers of the bathhouse. The irony is shown through the subtle use of double meanings in this movie – although Chihiro is looked down upon as a human, she seems to be the most virtuous of all, a value that humans are supposed to learn from gods. The collective result from her continued strength was to remember Haku's real name, and by doing so saving his life.

Upon leaving the bathhouse Chihiro is told to not look back. Clenching onto her now-human mother once again, however this time to seemingly lead her mother out rather than an attachment of fear and uncertainty, Chihiro hastily walks through the tunnel. Only when she exits the tunnel does she look back – and sees that the entrance is no longer a red temple made of ash, but a weed-covered stone arch. Although the true reason for this difference is unknown, it can be speculated that Chihiro entered the ash-made temple a fragile character that will be blown away by the wind, but is now a solid, confident individual walking out of an arch of stone, one that accepts her role in the environment of her new home.

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