

Adapting Arrietty: Hayao Miyazaki's Re-telling of Mary Norton's "The Borrowers"

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Introduction

Children's literature, literary fairy tale and oral folklore have been integral sources of theme and conceptual thesis for the filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. In this essay I will discuss aspects of Miyazaki's adaption regarding narrative elements from these intertextual sources and the incorporation of them into his own retelling of *The Borrowers*, a children's fantasy novel by Mary Norton. The Miyazaki anime version is entitled *Arrietty the Borrower* (*Karigurashi no Arrietty*). Both stories tell the tale of Arrietty Clock, a thumb-sized girl of about 14 years old who lives with her parents underneath the floorboards of an old house. As "Borrowers" they must not be seen borrowing from human beings. The story concerns what happens to them when they have been found by humans and are forced to find a new home.

For this film, Miyazaki developed the overall story adaptation concept, wrote the screenplay, and created original storyboards of the Borrower's miniature world. Hiromasu Yonebayashi directed the film. In creating his adaptation of this tale, Miyazaki incorporated themes that are also embedded in the hypotext novel as well as earlier fairy tales which carry some of the same qualities in their narratives. These are the quality of smallness (and variants on that theme),

the process of growing up, or maturity, the experience and consequences of a first love between two young people, and the power of virtue—specifically trust, courage and hope in the face of acute adversity.

Arrietty the Borrower can be most simply defined as a fairy tale film. In his most recent comprehensive contribution *The Enchanted Screen; The unknown history of fairy tale film*, an in-depth study of film and fairy tale, Jack Zipes has written: “a fairy tale film is any kind of cinematic production recorded on film ... or in digital form that employs motif, characters, and plots generally found in the oral and literary genre of the fairy tale, to re-create a known tale or to create and realize cinematically an original screenplay with recognizable features of a fairy tale. (Zipes, 2011; 9) In the case of *Arrietty the Borrower* a thematic association can be traced from early folk tale to literary fairy tale to fantasy narrative and finally to Miyazaki’s anime re-versioned screenplay.

The anime re-versioning of particular narrative elements in this story has made it one that can be appreciated by contemporary viewers. Miyazaki has transformed the themes for this story to make it relevant to the contemporary Japanese audience. He kept the thematic core intact but applied it in such a way as to make the viewer possibly see and rediscover the story as a new cultural numinous experience. As Jack Zipes also notices, regarding the creative process found in fairy tale adaptation: “the effectiveness of fairy tales and other forms of fantastic literature depend on the innovative manner in which we make the basic information of the tales relevant for the listeners and receivers of the tales. As our environment changes and evolves so too do we change the media or modes of the tale to enable us to adapt to the new conditions.” (Zipes, 2011; 152)

The contextual change by the Japanese filmmaker is achieved by a transposition of the setting and time period from early 20th century rural England to contemporary 21st century suburban Tokyo Japan. The story plot

itself from the more extensive novel narrative has also been rather loosely adapted and greatly simplified in terms of action, characters and discourse. The film story takes place only over a one week period as opposed to the longer time frame in the book. Spiller, a Borrower who is living in the wild, is a character that does not appear until the second Borrowers novel but has been added into the cast of the anime version. Also, in comparison with the extensive discourse the Boy and Arrietty have in the novel the corresponding one between Sho and Arrietty reveals evidence of consistent streamlining of detail and content. These points illustrate that Miyazaki has taken a substantially loosely adaptive stance to re-telling this story in order to accommodate his particular vision for the tale.

Regarding the reworking of thematic concerns, Zipes has made pertinent observations of the adapting from book to fairy tale film: “filmmakers are ... on firmer ground when they disregard the notions of a literal interpretation and endeavor to provide a new reading of the fairy tale novel by re-creating it with the techniques and moving images of film. They are fully aware that they are implicated in a cultural discourse about a particular fairy tale novel and that they are staking out a claim *not* to present the most truthful interpretation of the work in moving pictures but its most innovative and imaginative representation. This representation is historically stamped. It is valid in and for its time.” (Zipes, 2011; 284) Zipes describes such types of films as ones which can challenge the viewers to see and experience the tale from a fresh perspective. There is a sense of newness, yet vital themes can be purposefully retained and embedded into the new work, revealing a sense of creating, yet re-creating within the parameters of the original template of themes.

Anime itself as a medium for fairy tale and children’s fantasy stories has long been considered an appropriate format for creative reasons and its ability to wonderfully unfold the heart of fantasy directly to the viewer. “Fairy tale’s ability to mutate and recreate itself over time and context is reflected in the

plethora of contemporary fairy-tale fictions; not only literary re-explorations of the tale as short prose form but also excursions into the novel, poetry, the comic book, and live-action and animated film....” (Tiffin, 2009; 1) Moreover, Dani Cavallaro points out in her recent contribution to fairytale anime that “the interplay of anime and the fairy tale tradition reveals fantasy’s power to invigorate with unparalleled vigor the fabric of both the actual and the hypothetical, braiding through its warp and woof the impish thread of the unexpected.” (Cavallaro, 2011; 19)

One feature of fairy tale anime film relevant to Miyazaki’s adaptation is the screenplay, which serves as the vehicle for discourse of the film and is based on material taken from the novel. Through the screenplay some of the themes are mirrored and accentuated, as the spoken elements complement and support the visual ones in the film by providing movement and structure to the action in the story.

Finally, Miyazaki has in particular inserted into the thematic core of this work important essential qualities in the attitudes of the two main characters, Arrietty and Sho (the “Boy” in the anime version). These are the virtues of trust, courage and hope. Together with a powerful interplay of the well-directed visual components, the screenplay dialogues reveal these virtues as integral carriers of imminent spiritual thematic conveyance to the viewers of this film.

Beginnings

The Borrowers is a children’s fantasy novel in which we find “smallness” as a basic theme in the narrative. This kind of story is related to the tale type of “little people” (700) in the Aarne-Thompson index, in which the hero is a tiny being with many adventures in the great world populated by humans, ogres, etc.

These tales are found in various cultures and from these sources, through the literary agency of *The Borrowers* story, we see that Miyazaki selected to retain this intriguing theme for his tale of the tiny and adventurous Arrietty Clock.

One of the most famous of these tales is the story of Tom Thumb, one such diminutive character from 16th century English folktales. The basic version involves a tiny thumb-sized boy who is born of magical origins and in growing up has many adventures in the great medieval realms of human beings. As well as being featured in an 18th century play by Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Thumb*, the Tom Thumb-type stories are also found among the works of Charles Perrault (*Petit Poucet*), and the Brothers Grimm, (*Thumbling*). Also from the Western tradition is *Thumbelina* (1846), a literary fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. The thumb-sized girl, born to mortal humans by magic agency is taken from her home and she must find a place where she can truly belong. In the end she meets a tiny fairy prince with whom she finds happiness.

In addition, there is *Gulliver's Travels*, the literary classic satirical fantasy novel by Jonathan Swift (1726). On his first voyage, Gulliver encounters the Lilliputians, a collective of tiny people replicated on European models and cast into a miniature scale city and society in the fantasy-land of Lilliput. It is a reverse situation in which satirical humorous consequences arise from a huge human being managing in a diminutive scale world.

Japan also has stories in which diminutive heroes appear. One of these is *One-Inch Boy* (*Issun-boshi*), a traditional folk tale that also tells the story of a tiny boy-being similar to Tom Thumb. He also is realized through some magical agency and leaves home to grow up and seek his fortune in the feudal world of Japan. He has many adventures and meets a princess who uses the power of a magic object to transform him to human size. They marry and find happiness in the end.

One other story is about a girl. *Taketori Monogatari* (*The Bamboo Cutter*), is

a 10th century Japanese folktale and the story of Kaguya-hime, a tiny girl baby who is found inside the stalk of a bamboo tree by a childless bamboo cutter. She is also a small being who grows to be normal human size. She grows up, lives in the human world and is courted by many, but eventually returns to her true supernatural realm of the moon above in the end.

However, the small beings in Mary Norton's novel are neither members of a highly socialized and urban collective with governments and cities, nor supernaturally conceived beings who may have access to the powers of a fairy realm. The Borrowers exist entirely as mere mortal beings. As such they have no claim to other magical world fairy realms. Their connection to the uncanny, lies in their humble existence as a very small race of human beings who have been secretly surviving in the midst of a mundane human-sized world. This kind of mixing of the uncanny directly with the normal is an example of magic realism. In this type of fantasy, magic is placed directly within the everyday world, much as the same way as fairy tales are able to do. The events are not taken out of the here and now, but are rather a part of it. "If magical-realist literature incorporates and naturalizes the fantastical into the ordinary world, magical-realist film approaches other visual forms in the genre since the camera renders everything real." (Greenhill, 2010; 66) The uncanny quality of the Borrowers existence within the human realm gives permeates the story and provides a magic-realist feeling to the tale. Using the magic-realist style in the anime adaptation is not only appropriate but serves to enhance the narrative texture to be harmoniously and effectively executed.

In regards to the sphere of 20th century children fantasy literature, *The Borrowers* are special. Jerry Griswold, in his analysis of children's literature cites this story as among important books in his survey of the thematic feature of "smallness" found in that genre. Griswold emphasizes the importance of a contrasting sense of scale. "The small worlds of children's literature ...

present alternatives to consensual notions of dimension and ... adult notions of importance. (Griswold, 2006; 7) There are many examples of the diminutive hero; Stuart Little, Winnie the Pooh, Beatrix Potter's animals, Tinker Bell of Peter Pan, etc. Animation films also feature the tiny hero type: Toy Story, The Rescuers, and Antz, to mention but a few. (Griswold, 2006; 53) As characters that have been repeatedly employed throughout folktale, literary fairy tale and children's literature and film, the diminutive hero-being is worthy of revealing great themes as their stories have been adapted and transformed in new ways by anime. "Often, the extreme difference represented by figures out of scale giants or thumbings, for example—emphasizes similarities rather than antipathies between characters. This theme is explored in the Borrowers between lonely and imaginative children of wildly different sizes. The size difference, an essential element in children's literature, throws the complicated relationship between adult and child into high relief. It is a big/small dynamic." (Grenby, 2009; 187) The animated version uses this motif which enhanced the characteristic quality of 'smallness' of the tiny heroine Arrietty Clock.

The anime story of Arrietty is remarkably similar to these oral and textual fairy tale predecessors in that she is a tiny human being living in the world of giant humans, emphasizing the contrastive scale of smallness in a giant-sized realm. But there are differences. In Arrietty's story it is Miyazaki's intention that we are taken inside her diminutive lifestyle to experience her small world from the point of the Borrowers. As Miyazaki says about the story of Arrietty in contrast to the Japanese folktale: "The world of Issun Boshi is not the world seen from the view of Issun-Boshi, but there Issun-Boshi appears in the scenery ... so ... it is attractive to make a film with the motif that tiny people live a secretive life beneath the house where human-beings live." (Cut Magazine Interview, 2010/9, p. 16) In Miyazaki's version we are shown things from her perspective and this voice is directed away from the macro into the micro-realm

of existence.

Another theme in this story is the process of growing up, or maturity and the important experiences that comprise it such as accountability for one's actions and the magical transformation of first love in the lives of youth. The process of maturity is one that is seen throughout the fairy tale corpus and runs throughout this story as well.

Arrietty learns an important lesson about the consequences of her actions not only on herself but on those other important people in her life. As Borrowers, the Clocks must carry out their "borrowing" from human beings without being seen. Once that happens, they must evacuate and locate another house in which to live. They consider human beings a necessity yet too greatly untrustworthy and dangerous to co-exist with them openly. However, this is just what Arrietty causes to happen by first carelessly being seen by the boy Sho and then later by purposely deciding to openly meet and befriend him. Her impulsive decision to meet and talk with him results in the loss of her former safe home. Her maturing out of her former sheltered life of an only child into a young adult is first seen on her first borrowing adventure with her father. However it is then mirrored also by her first contact and unlikely romantic attraction to Sho, the huge and potentially dangerous human boy.

The theme of maturity (seen as accountability or responsibility) and finding first love and have been blended together within the plot. Miyazaki loosely adapted these by basically using a very carefully orchestrated simplified storyline. The screenplay reveals how discourse has been used in the simplification of the adaptation in order to complement and carry forward the stimulating visual components which display the richly textured miniature life of the Borrowers.

Discourse and Theme

In looking at elements of the screenplay, we see that *Arrietty the Borrower* has relied upon fairy tale narratives for its use of certain discourse structure. The folk voice introduction often used in fairy tales has been used in the anime reversion. The film also shows that discourse elements were taken from the novel to re-tell the story in an appropriate way for the other media. The parallel mode of discourse is employed through the screenplay by Miyazaki and relates back to several points of theme in the story.

“In keeping with film’s apparently transparent offer of itself as a substitute for oral and folk tradition, many fairy-tale films rely ... on an explicit evocation of the folk voice in order to frame and contextualize their narratives.” (Tiffin, 2009; 185) This initial voice-over introduction replaces the once-upon-a-time formula with a narration that projects the story at key points.

In the book, Mrs. May is the narrator. “Yet in telling her story to little Kate this relic from an Edwardian ... past also invokes a child teller as a prime source. It was her ‘little brother’ Mrs. May asserts, who was privileged to see the ‘frightened creatures whom credulous ancestors had still identified as fairies or the ‘little people’.” (Grenby, 2009; 164) At the very start of his film story, Miyazaki inserted a brief, if not all too short voice-over introduction that substitutes for the one Mrs. May gives in the novel or the fairy tale teller’s voice of: once-upon-a-time formula. It reads:

Sho: That summer, I spent that one week at the house where my mother had grown up.” (*Arrietty the Borrower*, 2010, p. 210)

Although in both cases it is Arrietty’s story being told, the storytelling is started in another voice. In the screenplay, it is a simplified voice-over of Sho

as he rides in his grandmother's car on the way to the house. This is greatly condensed from the novel's first full chapter in which Mrs. May is talking to Kate.

Another example of how the screenplay has been simplified from the novel into the looser adaptation by Miyazaki is the discourse between Arrietty and the Boy, or Sho. Their screenplay conversations are obviously not as extensive or detailed as those in the novel. They are poignant and essential in that they reflect themes that are imbedded in both media; these specifically reveal Miyazaki's concern for the state of the human being today as well as his ongoing focus on the environment and nature in his films.

One of the key conversations in both the novel and film takes between Arrietty and the Boy when they are talking outside in the grassy garden area next to the big house. Their discussion in the novel covers at least an entire chapter in the book and is at first animated and confrontational but soon turns a little more friendly and later leads to a co-operative and sympathetic stance between the Boy and the Clocks throughout the story. At one point in this conversation, the topic turns to the idea that the Borrowers are part of a fading people. They are the last of their kind in the opinion of the Boy, who having just returned from India, thinks he knows the world:

"As for you, I don't believe that there are any more Borrowers in the world. I believe you're the last three," he said.

"We're not. There's Aunt Lupy, and Uncle Hendreary and all the cousins."

"I bet they're dead." And what's more no one will ever believe I've seen you. And you'll be the very last because you're the youngest. One day," he told her, smiling triumphantly, "you'll be the only Borrower left in the world."....

"Now, you're crying," he remarked.

"They're not dead," said Arrietty in a muffled voice ... "They live in

a badger's set two fields away, beyond the spinney. We don't see them because it's too far. There are weasels and things and cows and foxes ... and crows...."

"Which spinney?" he asked.

"I don't KNOW!" Arrietty almost shouted. "It's along the gas by the gas pipe- a field called Parkin's Beck." She blew her nose. "I'm going home." She said.

"Don't go. He said, not yet.".... (The Borrowers, 1952; pp. 11–112)

The comparable dialogue from the screenplay also takes place outside in the green garden area, just behind Sho's grandmother's house. In this case Arrietty has come with great courage and curiosity to openly talk to the boy who has changed her life. Arrietty and Sho seem to be about the same age while in the book the Boy is about five years younger than pre-teen Arrietty. The conversation appears to be between two equals, rather than an older girl and a younger boy child. The tone of their exchange is serious and sober, less childish than that in the novel. Moreover the nature of their innocent yet subtle attraction is seen in the dialogue. When Arrietty finally shows herself by standing on a rock Sho says:

Sho: You're beautifull!

Arrietty: We have to move. We've been seen. Borrowers aren't meant to be seen by humans.

Sho: Borrowers?

Arrietty: We borrow only what we need from the humans. Things they don't miss ... without being seen ... soap, sugar, cookies, power and gas ... since my great-grandfather was a Borrower and we've lived that way.

Sho: Until now no on one ever saw them? ...

Arrietty: ... Probably ...

Sho: ... All my fault ... is there anyone else of tiny people except your family in the house?

Arrietty: No one else lives here. Just the three of us.

Sho: Are they any in other houses?

Arrietty: I'm sure there are, though I've only met one so far.

Sho: Yeah. But soon you'll be the only one left. Every year there's fewer of you right? You're a doomed species you know....

Arrietty: What? That's not true There's lots more of us. Spiller said so!

Sho: Spiller?

Arrietty: He's one of us. He said there's lots more ...

Sho: There is probably just a few of you ... lots of species are already extinct. I've only seen them in books. So many beautiful species. But the environment changed so they died out. It's sad but that's what fate has in store for your kind.

Arrietty: Fate, you say? You're the one who changed things. Now we have to move away!! We have to survive. That's what papa said. So, we're leaving, even its dangerous. We'll make do, we always have. You don't know anything about us! We're not going to die out so easily!!

Sho: I'm sorry. You're right.

(Arrietty the Borrower, 2010, p. 234)

The screenplay dialog wording casts a different mood to the dialogue in comparison to the more chatty, friendly and almost childlike nostalgic one in the novel. In the hypo-text example, specific relatives' names, a particular place are mentioned, even though an emphasis on personal feeling to Arrietty as possibly being the last of her kind is shown with his boastful impression of her belonging to a type of human being that is slowing and regrettably reaching

its end of days. Extinction is not exclusively implied directly in describing her situation. With the mention of her relatives and a possible future reunion with the other Borrowers the tone of the exchange provides us with some feeling of possible continuance, not unavoidable extinction.

In the screenplay dialogue it is the second conversational encounter between Sho and Arrietty. There seems to be some bond of loneliness and isolation between them which hints at the possible “fatal attraction” of two very different types seen when Sho directly remarks on her beauty. He then refers to beautiful species having gone extinct and the changing environment which caused them to die out, to which Arrietty objects and refuses to accept. The original idea of a fading time for a race of people has been transformed into a more contemporary global environmental issue of biodiversity and a species in danger, the ongoing loss due to problems caused by mankind itself.

While we saw earlier how Miyazaki was intrigued by the phenomena of a miniature human and lifestyle paralleled with the other themes, here we see intention to portray a “modern theme of perishing races and the inner-heart communication of first love of a boy and girl coming from different races....” (Studio Ghibli, 2010; 8) By doing so Miyazaki’s shows his desire to relate to his viewers through the inclusion of this theme as spoken by the main character Sho and Arrietty’s bold response to his fatalistic musings. She directly counters his negative fatalistic thinking based only on book information with determination, courage and hope that has been learned from actual life experience. She does not let his weakness of life destroy her own will to survive. Thus, she has an impact on Sho himself, who is actually deeply struggling by himself with his own illness and issue of mortality.

Finally, also through the screenplay discourse of these two characters we find revealed a more subtle virtue-based theme of the power of courage, trust and hope in the face of acute adversity. This theme is important because it allows

Miyazaki to ensure an optimistic ending to the film, to what some analysts have referred to as his “utopian power to live”.

Trust is one of the biggest lessons in growing up learned by Arrietty after responsibility. In the film story, in order to rescue her mother from the maid Haru who has captured Homily and put her in a jar in the pantry, Arrietty must trust the human boy to order to deliver her mother from a vicious fate. The fairy tale motif of the small hero co-operating with the human together to solve a problem is seen here. Arrietty goes to Sho for help. The screenplay describes this situation:

Arrietty comes into the room when the screen window opens ...

Arrietty: My mother is gone!

Sho: Ahh!

Arrietty: It seems the roof was opened ... and she might be captured by a human!!

Sho: Let's find her!

(Arrietty the Borrower, 2010, p. 240)

In that moment for Arrietty, trust replaced suspicion and courageous necessity replaced fearful hesitation in deciding what to do. Together they do find and release Homily to the later chagrin of Haru, the curiously cruel housekeeper, who serves as the main antagonist character in the story.

As for the Boy, Sho, in both the novel and the film he is afflicted by some debilitating illness. In the anime he is due for heart surgery in a few days. Through his contact with Arrietty and understanding how she faces overwhelming and dangerous odds with determination and courage, the boy Sho also gains maturity and the will power necessary to face his own uncertain situation. On the day of departure, Sho and Arrietty say farewell and he tells her

that she has given him the power to live again:

Arrietty: When is your operation?

Sho: The day after tomorrow.... I'm going to be okay. You gave me the courage to live ...

Arrietty gives Sho a parting gift of her hair clip as a memory. He emotionally responds to her:

Sho: You are part of my heart now, I'll never forget you ever....

(Studio Ghibli, 2010, p. 249)

These direct, simple yet vital words in the screenplay imbue an uplifting current of the power of hope from Miyazaki for young people as necessary and possible in as much as they have the courage to help each other by mutually supporting their processes of growing up. It also serves to support Miyazaki's own hopeful and utopian outlook in the retelling of this story, despite the obvious ironical and tragic overtones of the Borrowers' fate. Yet the final scene as written in the screenplay shows the dawning of a new day, and with it hope. As Arrietty and her parents float down the stream with Spiller at the helm of brass tea kettle boat we see a hopeful vision:

"Arrietty is looking back, and then she looks forward. The morning sun shines on her face. Her hair is flowing in the wind. The kettle is going ahead in the river which is shining golden hit by the morning sun."

(Studio Ghibli, 2010, p. 249)

It is true that in the end of the novel, there is great ambiguity surrounding if and how the Borrowers did escape the extermination attempts by the humans in the house. In the novel, the fate of the Boy, however, was certain as told

by his sister, Mrs. May. She told the girl that later, as a man he was killed in a war on the frontlines of a battle. In dissecting the inner meaning of this story, Knoepflmacher has taken a somewhat socio-historical summation and says “(Norton) wants readers to understand that her narrative of persecution and survival is meant to evoke both the fall of a Victorian empire and the rise of a darker empire ... she also suggests that the entropy that has winnowed the race of Borrowers is not limited to any historical period. Their illusory belief in their superiority over human ‘Beans’ will be adopted by other; mass-migrations and mass exterminations to which they are subjected will surely recur.” (Grenby, 2009; 169) The deeper intent and symbolic meaning of Norton’s tale may have some association with such ideas, but there is still room for debate. As Griswold astutely noted, “among readers it has been something of a parlor game to suggest who the Borrowers represent.” (Griswold, 2009; 59) There are Norton’s life experiences, the surrounding time frame of the 1930’s in Europe, and the later war years to consider in a macrocosmic sense. Yet the interpretation of such a story cannot be but multi-layered and difficult to definitively conclude if not inclusive of Norton’s own secretive imaginary world of “smallness” that she fostered as a nearsighted child.

The story of *Arrietty the Borrower* is enmeshed in the rich fabric of intermediality through folklore, literary fairy tale and the world of the magic realism in children’s fantasy literature, yet Miyazaki has made it relevant through anime for young people today and infused it with integrity-evoking virtues of hope, courage and trust. Miyazaki’s motivation for making this particular film is stated in the introduction of *The Art of Arrietty the Borrower*: “He has decided to produce this film ... to comfort and encourage people who live in this chaotic era by changing the setting to Japan from England and describing tiny people who live a small life with their wisdom and ingenuity and borrowing what they just need.” (Studio Ghibli, 2010; 8)

The anime adaptation version by Hayao Miyazaki of this story takes on the cast of a fairy tale, with neo-nostalgic overtones. It remains resolute in its illuminating view on the state of the human beings today and the painful experience of young people growing up in a diminishingly stable and increasingly less secure world. This wonderful anime reversion finds the other socio-historical complications unnecessary in order to direct the viewer attention to the beauty of a much simplified yet intentionally open ended conclusion that has possible fortunate outcomes for both the Boy and Arrietty, and so our own lives as well.

Filmography

Arrietty the Borrower, 2010, Directed by Masuharu Yonebayashi; Screenplay by Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, Japan, Tokyo.

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