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The Relationship Between the Forest and Mankind: A Semiotic Analysis of Ecofeminism in Princess Mononoke

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Abstract

Studio Ghibli's 1997 beloved film, *Princess Mononoke*, follows the story of warrior and hero Prince Ashitaka as he fights to cure himself from a deadly curse and save a forest from being destroyed, along with all the creatures that call it home and the residents of the nearby village Iron Town. This paper will show the process of the semiotic analysis that I have performed on Hayao Miyazaki's classic animated movie. I perform this analysis through the lens of an ecofeminist critique, a type of analytical theory that measures human issues and social conflict against environmental issues. In my essay, I will show how the social identities of the characters interact with the natural environment around them, what deeper meaning the ideology of the film could hold in the context of an environmental setting, and why this type of interaction, in this kind of media text, matters.

Keywords: environmental, ecofeminism, semiotic analysis, signifier, signified, *Princess Mononoke*, Studio Ghibli, representation

The Relationship Between the Forest and Mankind: A Semiotic Analysis of Ecofeminism in *Princess Mononoke*

Princess Mononoke, a fan-favorite film, was directed by Hayao Miyazaki and animated by Studio Ghibli in 1997. This complex environmental film features spectacular animation and has a wide cast of colorful and enduring characters. The film overall boasts a positive environmental message about needing to protect and preserve the sanctity of nature from rampant and careless exploitation that should not be overlooked. However, the film also seems to feature some negative stereotypes that are often found in other environmental media. In this essay, I will perform a critical semiotic analysis of the film *Princess Mononoke* through the lens of ecofeminism by analyzing aspects of the plot and characters in order to find potential hidden meanings. By analyzing an older and hugely popular film like *Princess Mononoke*, we are able to see how the tropes studied in this essay have been present in pop culture for a while and that, through the film's popularity, the tropes are being spread to a wide audience. Moreover, by analyzing the film with an ecofeminist lens, we can examine more aspects of the film, including how aspects of human identity and culture interact with nature. Given the film's environmental themes and messages, and their closeness to the characters in the story, an ecofeminist lens helps examine the film's narrative features in a cohesive manner. To begin, I will define the method of semiotic analysis and what it means to look at media text through an ecofeminist lens.

A Semiotic Method: Analyzing the Signifiers and the Signified

Semiotics

My method for discovering meaning in the film *Princess Mononoke* is semiotic analysis. According to Chandler (2007), semiotics is defined by Umberto Eco as “concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). A semiotic analysis would then be a process of analyzing those signs. As for signs, Chandler describes them as “all meaningful phenomena (including words and images)” (p. 2). Chandler also notes that “to interpret something is to treat it as a sign” (p. 2). With this definition in mind, semiotic analysis would be the process of analyzing symbols for meanings. In this case, I am examining what the symbols in *Princess Mononoke* mean. To go through this process, I analyzed the film for signifiers. According to Chandler, a signifier is “the material (or physical) form of the sign – it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted” (p. 14). The signifier, then, is the symbol I will interpret. The messages being interpreted are referred to in semiotic analysis as the signified. According to Chandler, the signified is the signifier’s “meaning” (p. 13). Signified is what the sign means or represents. So, in the semiotic analysis in this essay, I will be looking for signifiers in the film, which allows me to look for meaning in the visuals. Moreover, because this film is animated, its visuals are more than likely deliberately meticulous, meaning they have specific meanings behind them. Since semiotic analysis relies on a media text’s use of signs to discover meaning, *Princess Mononoke* is a perfect subject for this method because of the artist's intentional creative decisions. In this analysis, I will be discussing symbols and their messages within the context of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism

The theory on which I am basing my semiotic analysis is ecofeminism.

According to Adams and Gruen (2014), ecofeminism "addresses the various ways that sexism, hetero-normativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism are informed by and support speciesism and how analyzing the ways these forces intersect can produce less violent, more just practices" (p. 1). Ecofeminism looks at the ways that society and issues interact and are influenced by the nature of everything outside human society. Furthermore, according to Federici (2022), ecofeminism "helps us to understand our social and environmental circumstances and stands as a label for acknowledging how feminism(s) foster a social and political change that involves ecology and the well-being of our planet and ourselves" (p. 67). With these definitions in mind, ecofeminism can be explained as analyzing societal human identities and issues in light of the environment and environmental issues. Therefore, because *Princess Mononoke's* characters and environmental themes are so tightly knit together, an ecofeminist critique allows me to examine how the characters' identities and issues interact with the environment. In this way, I can study how these aspects interact to form the film's messages. So, while watching *Princess Mononoke*, I looked at how the characters interacted with nature and the environment.

The Story of *Princess Mononoke*

Background

For a little bit of background information regarding the film, according to Fadli (2022), "the film *Princess Mononoke* is set in the Muromachi era in Japan, around 1336 to 1573" (p. 4). This matters because, "in that era, the natural state of the Japanese country began to change drastically. At that time, people in Japan were already able to

make firearms and began to exploit nature for the smooth business of making weapons” (p. 3). This historical environmental conflict is represented through the film’s major conflict.

Plot and Character Description

Princess Mononoke follows the story of the main character Ashitaka, a young, straight, able-bodied Japanese prince from a small village. The film begins with an intense battle where Ashitaka rides Yakul, his loyal and obedient steed, while running from and shooting at a giant boar that has been possessed by a demon of hate. Despite coming out of the fight victorious, Ashitaka's arm is cursed by the boar’s malice, and he has to leave his village to seek a cure so he may live. He comes across a village being raided by samurai and in his effort to stop them, he finds that the curse has given him immense strength. He then meets one of the antagonists, the monk Jigo, a small, greedy, old, straight, able-bodied Japanese man sent by the emperor to find and remove the head of a creature believed to grant immortality. We then meet Lady Eboshi, a middle-aged, straight, able-bodied Japanese woman, the leader of Iron Town and the film's other antagonist who uses cannons to control and destroy nature as she is attacked by Princess Mononoke (San) and Moro. San is the secondary protagonist and is a young, straight, able-bodied Japanese princess raised by the giant, white wolf Moro. Ashitaka helps escort two wounded soldiers back to Iron Town, where we see the jobs of the men, the women, and the people sick with leprosy that Lady Eboshi has saved; we also learn of Eboshi’s of power as her reason for destroying nature. San attacks the town, and Ashitaka receives a wound while protecting her. San then takes Ashitaka to the Forest Spirit’s domain, where he is healed, and we see the Kodama,

small, white creatures of the forest, and the Forest Spirit. The boars, led by the giant, white boar Okkoto, arrive to avenge their brother, who was killed by Ashitaka. Learning that a bullet from Iron Town was what caused their brother to be possessed, the boars, along with San, attack the village. After the battle, Okkoto, possessed by hate, unknowingly leads Jigo and Eboshi to the Forest Spirit. San is consumed in Okkoto's rage and Ashitaka saves her, but Eboshi and Jigo succeed in removing the Forest Spirit's head. Its headless body begins to kill everything in its path, but Ashitaka and Princess Mononoke chase Jigo down and are able to give back the Spirit's head, restoring the forest and curing Ashitaka. The film ends with a promise to rebuild a bond between man and nature.

An Ecofeminist Analysis of *Princess Mononoke*: How Human Identity Interacts with Nature

Since ecofeminism, according to Adams and Gruen (2014), has to do with “sexism, hetero-normativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism” (p. 1), to best do this critique, I will examine how the film represents some of these ideas, one by one.

Representation of Gender in the Film

Beginning with the topic of gender, I start with the signifier of the film's title. Despite being titled *Princess Mononoke*, the hero of this environmental film is the male character Ashitaka. The male character of the film is the one who ends up saving the forest in the end even though the film is named after the main female character. Next, there are the characters of Jigo and the Emperor, who show dominance over nature through the act of cutting off the head of the forest spirit. Jigo dominates nature for greed and the Emperor wants to dominate nature for immortality. Furthermore, Ashitaka

excels in natural environments. He's nearly as fast as the wolves and Yakul, he's easily able to defeat the boar at the beginning of the film, and he is respected quickly by the beings of the forest. This suggests some sort of innate skill in relation to nature, which represents the idea of dominance. Finally, despite being cursed by something that is supposed to kill him, Ashitaka is able to control and use this curse to help him win battles. Compared to the boar at the beginning and Okkoto, who died from the curse in the end, this implies human men have control over nature, that they have dominance over it where animals do not. All of these previously mentioned signifiers could be signified as describing a message of male dominance or mastery over nature. These signifiers describe an idea that men can control nature, and that they are masters over the environment.

The film offers more gender-related messages through the idea that, in the climax, San is mainly there in a supporting role and for Ashitaka to save. Moreover, the women ironworkers of Iron Town are belittled several times by the men and are not respected by them as the women ironworkers come from brothels. The only one in the town who truly respects them is Lady Eboshi, but since the film depicts her as villainous, the film depicts her thoughts and actions as wrong and morally incorrect. Lady Eboshi's status as one of the film's main villains signifies her attributes as corrupt. Her actions are completely wrong, so anything she sees as positive would then have an air of negativity and immorality around it, demoralizing the female ironworkers even more so. All of these signifiers could represent the signified of male dominance over women.

The men of the film, other than Jigo, are seen as heroes and are not criticized like the women are. However, the women do sometimes verbally fight back against the

men; Kohroku, one of the soldiers Ashitaka saves, is ridiculed constantly by his wife, Tok. The film takes strides to produce a positive theme regarding gender norms with the characters of San and Lady Eboshi as both characters are exceptionally strong and both hold some sort of mastery over nature, with San being raised by wolves and Lady Eboshi's control over nature's resources. Through their feats of strength, strong character moments, and relevance to the film's main story, the film initially pushes against the typical gender norms but, looking into it, it could feel like the film seemingly comes up short in this area due to conflicting messages found throughout the story and through some of the lesser character aspects and moments of Lady Eboshi, San, and the women of Iron Town. It seemed that the film had to say the most about gender, but it represented every other topic through at least two different signifiers, like in the case of sexuality.

Representation of Sexuality in the Film

In terms of sexuality, there are not a whole lot of signifiers regarding this present in the film. However, one signifier could be that all the relationships shown in the film are heterosexual. Because the film has an environmental theme, the filmmakers signify heterosexuality, and heterosexuality alone, as natural. A meaning might also be able to be made through the signifier that since all the women ironworkers in Iron Town originally come from brothels, many of the men in the town don't respect them for that reason. This signifier of criticism against sex workers in a film that is all about nature and the concept of the natural could signify that these women's sexuality isn't natural. The representation of sexuality was a lesser-developed concept in the film, with little outright significance to the environmental theming or story; a message can only be

inferred by looking deep into the relationships of all the characters. However, another idea that is thoroughly described and discussed by the film more obviously than sexuality is colonization.

Representation of Colonization in the Film

Colonialism could be seen in this film through two characters presented in two different lights. This concept could be described more subtly through the fact that Ashitaka is fully accepted into both Iron Town and the wolf's forest hideout despite being an outsider to both communities. This isn't true colonialism as Ashitaka isn't exploiting the communities or the land, but the idea of outsiders finding home in a land that isn't theirs could represent some form of colonialism. More obvious representation can be found with the character and actions of Lady Eboshi. Lady Eboshi herself was an outsider that came to the region where Iron Town currently is and took over the land by exploiting its natural resources and using new foreign and advanced technology. Her capitalization and takeover of the region that once belonged to those that lived in the forest could be seen as a representation of true colonization. Moreover, as the villain, her exploitation of the land as part of the central conflict obviously places her colonization, opposite to Ashitaka's, in a negative light. So, overall, comparing the two representations of the topic, the film does promote an anti-colonization message. While Ashitaka's actions are seen in a more positive light, the negatives associated with Lady Eboshi's character are overwhelmingly negative as she is the villain and a key actor in creating the central conflict. The film also seems to attempt this initial middle-ground stance with its representation of ableism.

Representation of Ableism in the Film

The film originally goes against typically ableist messages as Ashitaka is able to thrive in combat despite his right arm being damaged by the curse. However, the messaging is then semi-sullied through the characters that are sick with leprosy. These characters are considered weak by nearly everyone except Lady Eboshi, but because she is a villain, her admiration and support for them is associated with a morally corrupt character, giving the film an indirect, ableist message. As all the film's main heroes are able-bodied, its environmental focus associates able-bodiedness with the concept of the natural. Near the end of the film, though, those that are sick with leprosy are left to defend Iron Town from invaders, while many of the others are taking part in the Forest Spirit battle. So, there is at least some level of respect and trust for those not viewed as able-bodied, albeit in a more last-resort, support role. The film seems to be split on its messages in this category, however. With Lady Eboshi's admiration of those with leprosy associated with a villainous morality, and the film's overall able-bodied cast, it seems as if the film features this ableist idea that is often found in environmental media. However, it isn't as blatant as other media texts and does take strides, whether successful or not, to go against this trope. Having established all the meanings that can be made regarding an ecofeminist critique, it's time to describe what the film presents as natural and why that matters to the film's message.

Ideology of *Princess Mononoke*: Significance Behind the Film's Messages

To look for a deeper meaning, it's best to establish an ideology for doing so. Noël Sturgeon's (2009) "politics of the natural" pairs well with the theory of ecofeminism as they describe similar analytical frameworks. "Politics of the natural" describes the idea that behaviors we observe in nature are truly the only "natural" actions that should be

reflected in our human society. According to Sturgeon, this framework is one that “uncover[s] the implications for environmental, social, and political issues of this traffic across the mainstream culture and environmental movements” (p. 6). Furthermore, it also includes looking for “the connections between social inequalities and environmental problems” (p. 6). This framework looks for deeper meanings in how social identity issues and issues related to nature interact or, more simplistically, how human identity and nature interact. As explored in the film, the framework pertains to nature for its messages and themes, and how the behavior and actions of the human and animal characters could be shown to represent what is “natural” and “unnatural” in human society. For example, because Ashitaka is so in tune with nature, his character traits and qualities could be seen as “natural” human aspects that everyone should have, and any person that differs from his traits would be seen as not “natural.”

With the “politics of the natural” in mind, I will be looking for a deeper meaning signified in the previous sections. First, the film depicts the concept of gender by showing men as masters of nature through Ashitaka’s skill and power outdoors and through Jigo and the Emperor's exploitation of the Forest Spirit. This concept gives the film's representation of gender a deeper meaning as it depicts the male characters as more powerful than the female characters. Ashitaka and Jigo are the central characters of the ending conflict, with San playing a supporting role despite the fact that both San and Lady Eboshi have been more integral to the plot than Jigo up to this point. The deeper meaning behind this is the idea of male dominance, or superiority, over women.

With these ideas in mind, it seems the film is trying to say that it is natural for men to have power in nature, that it's natural for men to dominate the environment and

be able to control and exploit it willingly. This matters as it depicts an untrue idea that humankind, or powerful people in society, have complete control over nature. It matters because it makes environmental issues seem small. In the film, saving the forest, in the end, was solved by simply giving the Forest Spirit his head back. Solving environmental issues isn't a simple process and can't be fixed by a handful of people, but this film gives off the feeling that it is easy and can be controlled. Combined with its view of gender, it feels like the film is trying to say that it is natural for men to have power over women and be better than them. This matters because it could make people feel like lesser beings who aren't as important or are weaker than others. This idea carries over to the rest of the concepts discussed in the film. Its representation of exclusively heterosexual relationships and belittling of people who have had to do sex work in this natural setting gives off the message that only heterosexuality is natural and deviating from a "normal" relationship opens you up to ridicule.

The film's representation of able-bodied characters as the main heroes in this natural setting alludes to the common trope in environmental media that being physically well and able-bodied is natural. All these deeper meanings matter because they make people who don't fit into these "natural" social categories feel like outcasts, that they don't belong in nature, that they are not natural. This matters because making people feel this way is clearly wrong. Nature belongs to everyone.

At least, the film does not represent colonialism or the colonization and exploitation of nature in a positive light. You can imagine Ashitaka's "acceptable" or non-intrusive representation of colonialism being canceled out or overpowered by Lady Eboshi's clearly negative representation of colonialism. The more positive message in

this category makes sense though as it fits with the film's overall “protect the natural world” message.

Of course, *Princess Mononoke* carries an overall, front-and-center positive environmental message about respecting and keeping nature safe. The point of this essay was to discover whether the film features, possibly unconsciously, negative tropes and stereotypes that are often found in environmental media. Through a semiotic analysis of the film, using an ecofeminist lens, I was able to determine the film's deeper meanings that seemingly support negative tropes and stereotypes: that it is natural for men to dominate and control women and nature; that you are natural only if you conform to the social categories of straight and able-bodied. This meaning matters as the people who aren't represented in this natural setting may get the impression that they themselves don't belong in nature.

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