

# Howl's Moving Castle: Perspectives from Literature to Film

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**Abstract.** *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), commonly known as a highly acclaimed animation film directed by the master filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, was based on a teen fiction novel written by the late author Diana Wynne Jones. Miyazaki adapted the book and transformed it into one of his beloved animation films. Although the concept and the overall message is the same, this paper has the objective of carefully analyzing the differences concerning the characters, the plot and the message between the novel and the motion picture, as well as comparing the film version to Miyazaki's personal aesthetic and his train of thought in order to understand where the differences are coming from.

**Keywords:** Hayao Miyazaki, Diana Wynne Jones, Howl's Moving Castle, Studio Ghibli, Japanese Animation.

## 1 Introduction

Howl's Moving Castle is commonly known as the 2004 animated film directed by Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki. In fact, the plot is not his original creation (which is unusual) - Howl's Moving Castle is actually based on a novel of the same name written by the late British author Diana Wynne Jones and published in 1986. Both the book and the film tell the story of an eighteen-year-old girl named Sophie and of young Wizard Howl after they cross paths when the former gets cursed and, consequently, transformed into a ninety-year-old woman by the Witch of the Waste.

## 2 Hayao Miyazaki

### 2.1 Short Biography

Hayao Miyazaki was born in Tokyo, in 1941. He is a co-founder of *Studio Ghibli* and he champions hand-drawn cel animation. However, more recently, he uses computer graphics to enhance traditional art. He is in charge of the full creative process, from scriptwriting to storyboard sketching to correcting many of the final frames by hand. [1]

Miyazaki started his career at *Toei – Doga’s* animation studio. At first, he started by designing the scenes and, later on, he started directing stories, writing scripts, working on scene details and doing key animation. [2, 3]

In 1984 Hayao Miyazaki directed *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, a film based on his own graphic novel that had been published in *Animage*, a Japanese anime magazine. The success of this film allowed Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki to start their own animation studio – *Studio Ghibli* – in 1985. *Nausicaä* can be considered the cornerstone of future projects directed and produced by the studio, such as *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989), *Porco Rosso* (1992), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), *Ponyo* (2008) and *The Wind Rises* (2013). [4] Miyazaki won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film at the 2003 U.S. Academy Awards with *Spirited Away* [5] and, in 2004, his film adaptation of Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle* received the Osella award at the 2004 Venice Film Festival [6].

## 2.2 Personal Aesthetic

Hayao Miyazaki believes that animation is more than just cartoons, comics, a children’s book or even a film. In his view animation opens up a way to build the imaginary and make fantasy come alive. This conviction allowed Miyazaki to establish himself as a reference within the animation world, mainly in Japan but also across the world. This way, he changed and revolutionized the way animated cinema was seen in Japan. [7]

Moreover, Miyazaki has always been pretty consistent in terms of themes and motifs present in his works. The most common are: Environmentalism, Flying, Children, Anthropomorphism, Zoomorphism, Metamorphosis, Wind and Weather, Worlds Within our Own, Shinto and Japanese Mythology, Social Community, European Influences, Japanese Culture [8] and War and Death [9]. Some of these themes are closely associated with the artist’s life, such as War having lived through World War II, and Flying, since he grew up surrounded by airplanes. [10]

Miyazaki’s version of *Howl’s Moving Castle* mainly focuses on four of those themes and motifs, namely War and Death, Metamorphosis, Flying and European Influences.

Miyazaki’s childhood heavily influenced the themes and the kind of plot that the artist chooses to approach his works. Born in the middle of World War II, his childhood was strongly shaped by the harsh reality of war. As such, Miyazaki has always been sensitive to war-related themes and these play a large role in most of his films – *Howl’s Moving Castle* is no exception [11]. Flying is also a relevant theme in Miyazaki’s works. He always depicts some sort of flying motion, and it usually involves airplanes [12]. Miyazaki fell in love with those thanks to the airplane business that his father and uncle ran (*Miyazaki’s Airplane*) [13]. In *Howl’s Moving Castle’s* case, the director added futurist flying machines to the film version of the story, considering that these were never mentioned in the original work. [14] Metamorphosis is also a prominent theme in *Howl’s Moving Castle*, due to Sophie’s physical age floating through the film in order to mirror her psychological age and the way she sees, her self-esteem and the way she wants to portray herself. [15]

*Howl’s Moving Castle* bears heavy European influences, as the sceneries, buildings and settings clearly display European characteristics as well as inspiration drawn from the continents culture, mainly because the original story was based in a fictional European-inspired country named Ingary. [16]

## 3 Diana Wynne Jones

### 3.1 Short Biography

Diana Wynne Jones was born in London, in 1934, as the daughter of two teachers. When the Second World War broke out, shortly after her fifth birthday, she was evacuated to Wales and afterwards moved several times. Like Miyazaki, she also experienced and lived her childhood during the war period, although in a different country (Jones was in the U.K. while Miyazaki was in Japan). In 1943, her family settled in Thaxted, Essex. She went to Saint Anne's College in Oxford University and attended lectures by J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the *Lord of the Rings*, and by C. S. Lewis, author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. [17]

At the age of eight she knew she wanted to be a writer, but she only started writing novels during the mid-1960s while raising her family. She was renowned as one of England's foremost children's book authors. She was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2009, and passed away from the illness in 2011. [18, 19]

Diana Wynne Jones wrote *Howl's Moving Castle* because, one time when she was visiting a school, a little boy asked her to write a book about a Moving Castle. The author liked the idea and therefore, wrote *Howl's Moving Castle*, the first book of a trilogy. [20]

### 3.2 Personal Aesthetic

Diana Wynne Jones' works were mostly fantasy. Her books range from amusing slapstick situations to sharp social observation and witty parody of literary forms. [21] Jones was highly influenced by her family situation. Her parents were neglectful of her needs and those of her two younger sisters, who were usually put in unpleasant and unsavory situations by them, such as going hungry or being forced to sleep in poor conditions. [22] Jones then began writing stories for her sisters. Due to her own experiences during her childhood, some of the themes usually present in her works include bad mothers, family relationships, secret identities, subtle allusion, complex time travel, crowd scene climaxes, imprisonment and release and sacrificed children. Her fiction can be considered relevant, subversive, witty and highly enjoyable. [23] It usually also has a dark streak underneath the surface and provokes a constant awareness of how unreliable the world can seem and actually be. [24] Some of her recurrent themes present in *Howl's Moving Castle* are appearances, freedom and confinement, family, old age, the concept of home, morality and ethics, identity and, of course, being the fantasy writer she is, fantasy and fictional worlds. [25, 26]

## 4 Howl's Moving Castle

### 4.1 The Concept of Jones vs. the Concept of Miyazaki

*Howl's Moving Castle* is a novel written by the late Diana Wynne Jones and published in 1986. It was then adapted into an animated film (2004) by the master filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki after Hosoda Mamoru, who was expected to direct the project, pulled out, leaving Miyazaki to take the reins and adapt the book.[27] The plot is set in the magical

country Ingary and the story depicts the adventures of the young Wizard Howl and a regular eighteen-year-old girl named Sophie, who has been cursed and, consequently, transformed into a ninety-year-old woman by the Witch of the Waste.

Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* is both a light-hearted and a tantalizing fantasy story that draws you in by deconstructing a number of familiar fairy-tale conventions. [28] According to the author, the book is highly visual and Miyazaki was most likely drawn to this specific aspect. Although both artists are set in culturally different countries, the worlds that each of them brought to life are very much alike. You can tell the parallel between the book version and the film version easily, as the latter "eloquently documents those affinities with reference to both stylistic traits and thematic predilections". [29] However, it is still possible to tell that the 2004 animated version of *Howl's Moving Castle* belongs to Hayao Miyazaki, as it is filled with similarities to his other works and some of Miyazaki's classic themes and motifs have been implemented in the story, changing it ever so slightly. While the focus of the book is the character development of both Sophie and Howl, as well as Sophie's inner struggle and identity issues, the film, on the other hand, heavily focuses its plot on the War (theme that is only vaguely mentioned in the book – the King was planning a war). Even though both Jones and Miyazaki were children during World War II, their reactions to it have gone in opposite ways – while the writer tends to leave the actual war out of her books, Miyazaki never misses a chance to represent both the horror of war and the exciting effects that bombing raids can bring into a film. [30] Miyazaki himself pointed out in an interview with the US magazine Newsweek in June 2005 that *Howl's Moving Castle* was influenced and profoundly affected by the then ongoing war in Iraq. [31]

We can say that the book centers on Sophie, a young and exceptionally talented hat maker, whose creations are affected by her magic – a detail about her character that we never really get to see in the film version. On May Day, on her way to visit her sister Lettie, she is courted by a young man (Howl), who offers to buy her a drink. At this point, Sophie has no idea of his actual identity. She timidly refuses the offer and Howl lets her go and they are only to meet again after Sophie forces her way inside his castle. Having enraged the Witch of the Waste, Sophie is cursed and, thanks to that, transformed into a 90-year-old woman. Unwilling to show herself to her family, she runs away, under the pretext that she is seeking out her fortune. She eventually reaches Howl's castle and, more fearless than ever due to her advanced age, she forces her way inside the unconventional walking house. There, she meets Calcifer, the fire demon, and, later on, Michael, a teenage boy who is also Howl's apprentice. She strikes a bargain with Calcifer, claims her position as a housekeeper, and begins investigating the fire demon and the reason why he's tied to the castle [32].

Yet, in the film, the main couple meets in a completely different way from the one they meet in the book – Sophie is on her way to visit her sister, on the day of a military parade and, while trying to find her way, bumps into two soldiers who harass her (the war theme is already foreshadowed at this point of the film). She is then rescued by the wizard Howl, who claims he has been looking everywhere for her. ("*Sorry I'm late, I've been looking everywhere for you*") This specific quote references a passage close to the end of the film, where Sophie says "*Find me in the future!*". Howl is being followed by the Witch of the Waste's spies (weird blob-like men). In order to escape, they walk on air, soaring above the cheering crowd. This can be seen as a metaphor for falling in love and the way that it feels. [33, 34]

Miyazaki has made the original plot slightly shorter and shifted its focus, but he is still very faithful to the original story, as the key plot points are still there. Miyazaki kept the story's drift and tenor, but the narrative was made more complex than in the book, as some strands of the story are left open, unanswered, which allows viewers to complete the story using their imagination and their own interpretation of the film. This does not happen in Jones' version, as everything in the narrative is clearly explained and the reader is able to finish the book without being left confused and with a sense of needing answers. Everything is thoroughly explained and the plot is linear. On the other hand, in Miyazaki's version of *Howl's Moving Castle*, besides having a different focus, time displacements occur, which may leave the viewer confused but, at the same time, allows him to come to his own understanding of the story. [35] Concerning the divergences between the book and the film, the author believes that every book has to be altered in order to come over to the screen, because a book can give the readers the subjective perspective of a character, while all the other media only give you the outside. Nevertheless, Diana Wynne Jones believed that Miyazaki's adaptation of her book was wonderful [36].

Nonetheless, there are three major divergences between the book and the film: Howl's and Sophie's depictions, and the Witch of the Waste as a character, as well as her role in the story. [37]

#### **4.2 The Characters According to Jones and According to Miyazaki**

As it was pointed out previously, three of the major divergences between Jones' and Miyazaki's versions of *Howl's Moving Castle* are related to the characters, how they are portrayed and the roles they play in the narrative. In order to understand the way that the plot has been changed between versions, it is imperative to analyze the characters in both versions, so that the differences and the similarities come to light. Overall, the characters are fairly identical but, knowing that Miyazaki was forced to trim the plot, in order to make it "fit" the film format, it is only natural that some aspects of the characters that were present in the book ended up being left out or changed to match his aesthetic.

This way, the first character that has to be mentioned and discussed is Sophie herself, the protagonist. The core is still the same in both versions. Sophie is the oldest sister in the family and, because of that, she takes over the hat shop that used to belong to her father. In the book, Sophie has two younger sisters, and not just one. Being the oldest, she believes that she is fated to have the worst luck out of all sisters. This fact is never revealed in Miyazaki's version. The viewer is told that Sophie has one sister (Lettie, who is working at *Cesari's*, like in the book), but the other one is never mentioned. Besides that, in the film, the viewer never really knows what happened to Sophie's father – he is simply not present. In the book, Sophie is depicted as stubborn, nosy with a tendency to avoid her own problems, hiding behind a wall of irritation that more often than not culminates in some angry cleaning. In the film, she is portrayed as more emotional, aware of her own feelings, kind and a bit of a neat-freak – the viewer never really learns the reason why she spends her time cleaning and taking care of the castle – the spectator simply believes that she does so because, when she first arrives at Howl's home, she realizes that the place looks absolutely nasty and disgusting. [38]

Another very important difference between both versions that allows the reader to understand Sophie's curse better is the fact that Sophie herself holds some magical power. Sophie is never shown displaying some sort of magical ability in the film, but in

the book, her magical powers play a crucial role. When Sophie meets up with Mrs. Pentstemmon (character that will be addressed later on), the latter tells the girl that she possesses a magical gift and so Sophie learns that she's able to talk life into things and that her words work as magic. Later on, Howl tells Sophie that he has tried to break the Witch's curse several times, but ended up concluding that Sophie liked being in disguise. Calcifer mentions that the curse isn't from the Witch of the Waste alone, but that it actually has two layers of magic – one of them is the curse from the Witch of the Waste and the other one is Sophie's own magic that is keeping her as an old woman because Sophie believes it is easier to cope with all the problems and with Howl being old, it is her own way of running from her own issues.[39, 40] This fact ends up creating some hilarious situations in the book, since Sophie is still unaware of her own powers – she accidentally charms one of Howl's suits and transforms it into a suit that can pull girls in. While her magical abilities are everywhere in the book, they are absolutely non-existent in the film version.

When Sophie gets cursed and turns into a 90-year-old woman, in the film, she “is not depicted as an entirely ancient-looking woman as a result of the witch's curse. In fact, she is never, within the main body of the cinematic narrative, uniformly and incontrovertibly presented as either young or old”. The way her age oscillates makes her neither 18 nor 90, but actually several ages all at once. [41]

The differences between book-Sophie and film-Sophie are not restricted to psychological traits but to physical ones as well. Sophie in the book has ginger hair while in the film, Miyazaki decided to give her brown hair instead. When the curse is broken, in the book, Sophie goes back to her original hair color – ginger – while in the film, her hair remains silver.

Wizard Howl is also portrayed differently in the film. Diana Wynne Jones claims that Howl, in the film, is less like a drama queen and more of a hero [42]. He has, in both versions, a reputation of a heart-eater (he is said to eat young girls' hearts to his own amusement), although, in the book, the reader learns that this title that the Wizard holds was not a result from choice but from his circumstances – he gave up his own heart to save a dying falling star and, consequently, give birth to Calcifer, the fire demon. Having no heart, Howl knows no sincere emotion, so he lives by his desire to make ladies fall for him and then, once they do, abandon them in order to rid himself of their attentions. Accordingly, the character can be seen as vain, self-obsessed and shallow [43], as he spends infinities of time in the bathroom making himself look beautiful and wastes most of his free time attempting to woo ladies, including Sophie's sister Lettie. Towards the end of the book, the reader learns that Howl was not really attempting to make Lettie fall for him, but trying to learn more about Sophie through her younger sister. Another fact that is mentioned in the book but is left out in the film version is that Howl is not a native wizard from the Land of Ingary. He is actually from Wales (modern day – eighties – Wales) and his name is Howell. He started getting interested in Magic, wrote his doctoral thesis on magic spells. Back in Wales, Howell already enjoyed going out with girls and then jilting them. In an attempt to hide from three rugby players whose sister he had jilted, the accidentally opened a portal leading to Ingary, where he moved almost permanently.

Another interesting difference between both adaptations that is directly linked to Howl's character is the Black door in his castle. In the film version, when the black is the one on dial, the door leads to a war field. In the book, on the other hand, it leads to

Wales, allowing Howl to visit his family, namely his sister Megan, his brother-in-law Gareth, his niece Mari and his nephew Neil.

In the film, Miyazaki portrayed Howl as being substantially less flamboyant. While in the book, Howl spends most of his time either pampering himself in order to look as beautiful as possible or wooing girls, acting like a flirty drama queen; in the film version, Howl spends most of his time busy with the ongoing war. He still avoids responsibility of any kind and anything that involves making decisions like he does in the book, but the fact that he is more concerned with the war and not girls, makes him, as pointed out before, less of a drama queen and more of a hero. [44]

The Witch of the Waste also plays different roles in both versions. While in the film she is only the antagonist at first and towards the second half of the film, she loses her place as the main antagonist to Madame Suliman, in the book, she is the antagonist (along with her fire demon) from the beginning to the end. Jones made the Witch of the Waste the main villain in the book, depicting her as an unredeemable fiend with no sense of humanity, since her heart had been fully consumed by her own fire demon (Miss Angorian). In the film, the character was built and portrayed differently. She is, indeed, the main antagonist, but only until the point where Madame Suliman strips the Witch of her magical powers and returns her to her real age. From then on, she is depicted as a frail old woman who is not independent and needs to be taken care of. This allows the viewer to empathize with the character. Moreover, she was granted some character growth as, by the end of the film, she was finally capable of acting selflessly (when she gives Howl's heart to Sophie) [45]. In the book, the Witch of the Waste is killed by Howl, while in the film, Sophie takes her in and takes care of her. Miyazaki allows Jones' characters to forgive the witch, adding some more emotional depth to the Witch's character.

Once again, the differences are not only psychological but also physical. The look Miyazaki gives the Witch is different from description of the character that we get from Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle*. The female author describes her as "carefully beautiful" [46] and tastefully garbed, while Miyazaki makes her an obese woman who dresses flamboyantly.

There are some other, smaller differences between characters in the film and the book. Starting with Suliman, in the film, Suliman is a woman (and a Royal Witch) and she was Howl's magic teacher in the past. She is portrayed as the main antagonist during the latter half of the film, as she seems to have total control over the King of Ingary. In the book, Suliman is not only a man and a royal Wizard, as he has been victimized by the Witch of the Waste and, consequently, gone missing. There is another character in the book, that has already been mentioned in this paper, namely, Mrs. Pentstemmon. She is closer to Madame Suliman in the film, only that she has no control over the king and she is not seen as an antagonist. In fact, she is killed by the Witch of the Waste in the book. In the film, Madame Suliman strips the Witch of the Waste of her magical powers and abilities.

Another major difference between Miyazaki's animated feature and the novel by Diana Wynne Jones resides in Michael and Markl's characters. Michael is a character from the written version of the story and he is actually a 15-year-old teenager who lives with Howl and Calcifer, as the wizard's apprentice. Throughout the book, he becomes friends with Sophie and eventually falls in love with one of her sisters – Martha. In Miyazaki's version, Michael was transformed into a 5-year-old child and he was renamed Markl. He is still Howl's apprentice but all the romance around the character and

Sophie's sister was removed. This modification allows the director to introduce playful sequences that can be compared to *Totoro's* (1988) sequences featuring Mei. [47]

It is also possible to find divergences in the canine characters and in the Scarecrow. In the book, the dog is, by chance, freed by Sophie when she finds him trapped in thorns. Later on in the narrative, the reader realizes that the dog had been cursed by the Witch of the Waste and, consequently, had been under a spell all along. In reality, the dog was a young man (Percival). In Miyazaki's film, the canine character (named Heen) plays the role of Sophie's sidekick after having escaped Madame Suliman.

As for the Scarecrow, in the film (Turnip Head), he works as a source of support for Sophie. In the book, the character is seen as terrifying by Sophie, as she is incredibly scared of the hopping and bouncing Scarecrow who seems to be following her around.

### 4.3 The Underlying Message in Both Works

The message portrayed in both works is partially the same, although Miyazaki's version adds some of the director's personal view when it comes to the theme of war, as was pointed out earlier. Miyazaki's late works (*Howl's Moving Castle* included) have a stronger focus on his personal political and philosophical views and beliefs. The film is filled with little comments and opinions on the matter of war that let the viewer get to know a bit of Miyazaki's political views and way of thinking, as well as get a small taste of the war-driven catastrophes that the Japanese animator has experienced through his life, mainly during his childhood. Although the pivotal point of the story is still Sophie's adventure, Miyazaki chose to portray the film as a war love story instead of a character development driven story. We accompany Sophie through her adventures and, during the latter half of the film, the viewer is taken to the setting of the war. We still get to see and acknowledge Sophie's character development through the film, but the war makes the greatest impact. The viewer is taken on a political ride, that works as a critique of the contemporary and international politics surrounding the Iraq war, filled with battle scenes and fires. The impact is so tremendous that it is practically impossible to disregard the war in order to focus on Sophie's journey alone. [48]

On the other hand, Jones believes that her ideals and way of thinking are intellectually close to Miyazaki's but, the way she wrote her own story is far different from the way Miyazaki adapted it. Nevertheless, Jones herself claims that Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* is a wonderful film [49]. Jones' plot focuses on Sophie's journey and development, the way she learns to accept herself as she is and how she becomes aware that family does not necessarily mean those who are related by blood. These aspects are still present in the film, but they are overshadowed by the war subplot. [50]

Both versions offer strong messages concerning the view of the self through Sophie's development through the story, although Miyazaki's version also conveys some strong insight on war, morality and ethics.

## 5 Conclusion

After knowing the remarkable and painfully significant aspects of the experiences of both the author and the director, one can better understand the symbiosis between the two versions of the same story. *Howl's Moving Castle* is wonderful both as a book and as a

film. Although there are several differences between the two, both touch our hearts and take us to a different world – the world where Sophie and Howl live. After learning about Jones' childhood experiences, it is possible to conclude that the characters mirror some of her own experiences. For example, Sophie is the oldest of three sisters (like she was) and Howl is from Wales (and we got to know that she lived there during a certain period of her life). In *Miyazaki's Howl's Moving Castle*, the characters assume a more universal characterization, since they are not particularly specific to the filmmaker's childhood and experiences. Although the characters are differently portrayed both in the book and in the film, they do not fail to be alluring and charming. In both versions, they make the viewer or the reader follow them and want to know more about them.

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