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### Princess Mononoke and Her Progression Through Time

*“Princess Mononoke”*, a Studio Ghibli film written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki released in 1997, has been among one of Studio Ghibli's most successful and well known films to date. With a great deal of the characters within the film stemming from Japanese mythology and folklore, many of the original values and morals of these characters have shifted since then to become more aligned with the societal values we typically see today. Hayao Miyazaki's character, Princess Mononoke, has been adapted into the character we know today in an effort to advocate for cultural ideas such as feminism, as well as attempting to be a call to action for environmental issues.

Hayao Miyazaki's *“Princess Mononoke”* opens with a prince by the name of Ashitaka from a small unknown and secluded village. Prince Ashitaka had been cursed by a demon during his efforts to protect his village during an attack. After being foretold his soon to come fate that the demon mark would slowly take over his body, poison him and kill him, Prince Ashitaka sets out west in search for a way to lift the curse. During his journey, Ashitaka encounters a small feral looking girl who is seemingly distrustful of humans with a pack of wolves and two wounded soldiers. Upon being spotted the feral girl and the wolves leave and Prince Ashitaka escorts the wounded back to their mining colony nearby. During Ashitaka's time in Tatara, the mining colony, it is revealed that they have been the ones stripping the local forest for its resources and are after the head of the forest god, the sole protector of the forest. While at Tatara,

the same small feral girl attacks the colony in an effort to kill their leader to put a stop to the destruction of the forest. Following the attack, Prince Ashitaka leaves the mining colony with the wolf girl, otherwise known as San. Ashitaka pleads with the wolf girl and the forest god's to cure him, but sadly they cannot. Having accepted his fate, Prince Ashitaka convinces San to let him join her in her efforts to save the forest. Together San, Prince Ashitaka, and the gods of the forest try to stop Tatara from advancing but are unsuccessful when Tatara succeeds in taking the head of the forest god, throwing the entire forest into a decay. Having realized that there would be no forest resources to mine without the forest god, the mining colony Tatara, San, the forest god's and Prince Ashitaka come to their senses to end the conflict between them in order to combine their efforts to return the head to the forest god in order to restore the forest's natural balance (Miyazaki).

Throughout Hayao Miyazaki's "Princess Mononoke", there are ample references to Japanese mythology regarding demons, yokai and various god's, though the most notable being that of Princess Mononoke herself. Originally, the word "Mononoke" referred to a vengeful spirit in Japanese mythology and folklore and was said to be fueled by feelings of rage, jealousy or resentment. Mononoke spirits first appeared in Japanese mythology and folklore during the Heian Period (794 AD - 1185) and the meaning and thoughts behind the name has since then evolved (Britannica; "Mononoke Meaning"). Mononoke spirits are said to take the form of inanimate objects but do however favor objects such as trees, rocks, rivers, or other various forms of nature. These vengeful spirits tend to linger around places such as shrines, temples, or cemeteries but they are by no means restricted to these areas. Mononoke can be hidden relatively anywhere. Whenever a Mononoke takes vengeance on a human, they may become possessed and force illness, death or even a curse against the human. Unlike other Yokai or demons from

Japanese mythology and folklore that can not be exercised once in a dwelling, inanimate object or human, Mononoke spirits can. However, it is said that Buddhist priests were among the only ones that were capable of performing this exorcism. Mononoke were of great concern for Japanese people, instilling fear regarding inanimate objects and the nature around them where there typically would not have been. Since the Heian Period the term Mononoke in reference to a vengeful spirit has changed so greatly that the term Mononoke has an almost new meaning entirely in modern society (“Mononoke Meaning”).

Today, the word Mononoke does not bring as many negative or scary images as it did in comparison to the Heian period, but instead the name brings to mind Hayao Miyazaki’s character Princess Mononoke we know today from pop culture. While Princess Mononoke is based off of the vengeful Mononoke spirit from ancient Japanese mythology and folklore, many of the characteristics, behavior and motives of the character have changed or at least are displayed differently in comparison to the Mononoke spirit. One of the most notable differences between Princess Mononoke and the vengeful spirit Mononoke is the form in which Hayao Miyazaki chose to represent her with. Rather than depicting her as a unpleasant-looking monster like most Mononoke are in ancient drawings, Miyazaki instead chose to present her as a pretty, young, and small teenage human girl. Miyazaki’s choice of design for this character was purposeful as he wanted the protagonist of the film to be something that would otherwise be expected to be a powerful demon, god or even just a man. In most Japanese mythology and folklore, the warrior is typically displayed as a big strong man or a Samurai, however Miyazaki has done quite the opposite. From first glance at Princess Mononoke she has a seemingly small build and stature with no defined muscles, but in action she is by far among one of the strongest humans throughout the entire film, even putting up a fight against wild boar over three times her size and

winning fights against the mining colonies defenses. Miyazaki chose to depict her as a woman in an effort to call attention to the idea that women too are strong, capable, and a force to be reckoned with, and that being a warrior is not solely the role of a man. Miyazaki's choice to make Princess Mononoke a mortal human is purposeful as well. Whereas Mononoke spirits have the ability to live on for hundreds of years, Princess Mononoke does not. Instead, on multiple occasions throughout the film Princess Mononoke is on the verge of greeting death (Miyazaki). Miyazaki's motive to make the protagonist human instead of a monster brings attention to the idea that humans, though fragile and mortal, can still be fearless even with death lingering over them at all times. Princess Mononoke's character design was deliberately chosen to convey to the audience that not only are humans capable of much more than we hold ourselves too, but also that women can be strong, and tactical warriors just as much as anyone else.

Miyazaki portrays these ideas of female power through not only San, but in the leader of the mining colony, Lady Eboshi. Lady Eboshi, who is San's sworn enemy throughout the movie for leading the mining colony to over-source the forest, depicts the idea that women can not only be strong and fearless like San, but smart and tactical leaders as well. Within the movie it is mentioned that once Lady Eboshi took control of the mining colony, life within the colony improved greatly; with many of the members of the colony openly expressing gratitude and compliments on her leadership skills. This character placement is even more significant when the setting of "*Princess Mononoke*" is taken into consideration. During Japan's Muromachi Period in which the movie takes place, it was uncommon for women to hold positions of authority and to have fighting knowledge like Lady Eboshi, however Miyazaki still chose to portray the leader of the mining colony as a female in an effort to call attention to women's abilities in different roles (Miyazaki).

Another one of Hayao Miyazaki's main motives for the movie "*Princess Mononoke*" was for it to be a call to action on today's worsening environmental crisis and the importance of having a positive relationship between humans and nature. Princess Mononoke, who Miyazaki uses as the face to advocate these environmental issues to the audience, spends the majority of the movie thinking of ways to drive humans out of the forest and fighting off the humans from over mining and deforestation. In the end the forest is drained of its energy by human greed, making it completely unlivable for everyone now, including the forest creatures (Miyazaki). Miyazaki wanted to send the message that humans and nature must live in harmony in order to survive. Humans need nature in order to live, but human greed can ruin us all just like the movie "*Princess Mononoke*" portrays. By having San the face and voice of the forest, Miyazaki effectively communicates the urgency of the environment situation with San's aggressiveness and deep rooted understanding of nature. Considering the spirit Mononoke's existing relationship with nature as a camouflage, it gave Miyazaki a perfect opportunity to develop the character into nature's advocate in order to convey the importance of living in harmony with nature rather than using it for personal gain.

Since the release of Hayao Miyazaki's "*Princess Mononoke*" in 1997 the ideas associated with the word Mononoke have shifted to become more aligned with society's views on women and the roles of nature as well as the consequences that come along with disregarding nature's importance. By adapting characters like Princess Mononoke within "*Princess Mononoke*" Miyazaki effectively combines ancient Japanese mythology and folklore and contemporary views to appeal to today's audience in an effort to convey ideas of much needed change within the world today.

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