

Symbolic Representation of War in *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988)

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of animation has been closely tied to pop culture, particularly Japanese anime which significantly influences global animation. With over 430 anime production studios in Japan, Studio Ghibli has emerged as one of the most popular anime studios. Its popularity is partly due to its exploration of themes related to humanity and environmental issues, including war. Reflecting on the fact of how the film has served as a medium to criticize the war, Studio Ghibli confidently implied it in some of its films, one of which is *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988). This thesis goes beyond recent studies that focus solely on fireflies as symbols of wartime conditions. The broader symbolism used in *Grave of the Fireflies* will be analyzed to see the impact of war in physical and mental aspects before and after the war. By applying symbolism in war film theory to analyze physical and mental aspects, it shows the characters' struggles, fears, aspirations, and sacrifices through symbols that appear throughout the film. Moreover, the findings indicate that all of the symbols used in this film have evolved into two opposing conditions: hopefulness and hopelessness.

Keywords: auditory and visual symbols, grave of the fireflies, hope, hopelessness, symbolism, war

INTRODUCTION

Animation, particularly Japanese anime, has become a global phenomenon, with its colorful imagery, strong characters, and action-packed stories captivating audiences worldwide (Britannica Dictionary, 2020). Originating in Japan, anime has evolved into a dominant force in the entertainment industry, surpassing Western animation in popularity. When Western animation tends to have a more consistent animation style, Japanese animation stands out with its subjective storytelling and unique drawing style, where certain objects receive special attention during crucial moments (McCloud, 1993, pp. 43-45). Despite the differences, anime continues to gain popularity and has become a significant part of Japan's cultural identity.

The popularity of Japanese anime has led to an increase in anime production studios, with over 430 studios and more than 6,000 anime produced in Japan. While anime constitutes a small portion of the domestic film industry, it still dominates Japanese internet streaming, with significant contributions from internet streaming rights and merchandising rights. The collaboration between Netflix and Japanese animation has further boosted anime popularity, particularly in the US. Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, stands out as a renowned anime studio, known for its diverse range of genres and films that love to explore humanity and environmental issues (Rowland, 2020, p. 47). Through their works, Studio Ghibli aims to spread awareness and create a peaceful environment for future generations. With its global recognition and availability on popular streaming platforms, anime has become a worldwide phenomenon.

After World War II, the anti-war perspective influenced Japanese culture, including the creation of anime and manga. Studio Ghibli, driven by the experiences of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata as war victims, also explores war themes in its films. Some of its films, like *Porco Rosso* (1992), *The Wind Rises* (2013), and *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), depict the harsh realities of war. *Grave of the Fireflies* tells the story of orphan siblings Seita and Setsuko Yokokawa, struggling to survive during Japan's final month of World War II. The film contrasts their lives before the war with the abundance and scarcity conditions during wartime. Ultimately, the film ends with the siblings reunited as spirits, watching over a post-war Kobe city peacefully with fireflies surrounding them. Through these films,

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Studio Ghibli portrays the devastating impact of war and the struggle for survival, while promoting a message of peace to people around the world.

This thesis will analyze the use of symbolism in *Grave of the Fireflies*, an anime film that has gained attention and boosted the popularity of Studio Ghibli. The film uses symbolism to address important issues like humanity and environmental issues, including war. Based on the novel by Nosaka Akiyuki in 1967, the film has received numerous awards and is considered one of the finest war movies. It is regularly aired on Japanese television on August 15th, which is Japanese Independence Day. While some view it as an anti-war film, the director, Isao Takahata, and the author, Nosaka Akiyuki, describe it as a “memory of war” to educate future generations (Takahata et al., 2013, p. 22). The film’s realism is conveyed through techniques commonly used in war films, such as desaturated colors and shaky camera movements; some essential elements like aircraft, gunfire, and smoke are sometimes added to support the mood of the film.

Despite the fear of war, people still find war films fascinating, which led to a rise in the genre’s popularity in the film industry after World War II. Films about the war became increasingly popular, attracting audiences, particularly those aged 18 to 25, who were influenced by the anti-war perspective and concerns about the conditions of war (Paris, 2007, p. 6). However, the war genre goes beyond political conflicts, it also explores the experiences of individuals during wartime in various genres, from drama to romance. Symbolic representations of war in films create a bond between the narrative and the audience’s emotions by portraying the struggles, fears, aspirations, and sacrifices of the characters. The use of symbols in war films allows the audience to experience a small fragment of the war and build up their emotional responses, which can guide their understanding of the related issues. Symbols play a crucial role in conveying ideas and forging an emotional connection with the audience. *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), a film rich in symbolism, captures the complexity of war through its storytelling. Isao Takahata, the film’s producer, is known for his ability to employ symbolism in discussing complex themes. Many of Studio Ghibli’s films, including *Grave of the Fireflies*, used symbolism to convey messages and enhance their appeal to the audience. In the context of anti-war films, this film uses several elements, such as aircraft to represent air raids and fireflies to symbolize the condition of war.

The roller coaster experience the war theme film offers has attracted me to analyze further how the symbolic representation of war in *Grave of the Fireflies* has been captured. *Grave of the Fireflies* shows Isao Takahata’s talent for turning a complex theme, in this case, issues of the humanities, into perfect storytelling through symbolism. Moreover, this film is viewed as a remarkable work of Japanese animation and is known as one of the finest war movies. Within the realm of Studio Ghibli, symbolism is a powerful tool used to convey messages and enrich the audience’s watching experience, particularly in the context of anti-war films.

This study aims to identify symbols used in this film to represent the condition before and after the war, especially in both physical and mental aspects. Also, the meanings that are produced by those symbols, are hope and hopelessness. The significance found in this study shows the role of films as agents of propaganda and mass persuasion. Symbols in films are often used as a medium to critique war conditions and highlight the experiences of the people as war victims, specifically in this film, Japanese people. Furthermore, there is a thin line where the symbols shift into two conditions, hope and hopelessness, in the film. To smooth the analysis process, the author will employ the theory of symbolism in war films generally. Specifically, it will focus on identifying the meaning of symbols that appear before and after the war based on their familiarity or their context within the film. In addition, to gain a better understanding of the evolution of the symbols before and after the war, I will use Hiltner & Rainio’s study on the use of gloomy colors to convey negativity and bright colors to signify positivity, providing a better understanding of how symbols evolved before and after the war. By examining these theories and other relevant supporting theories, this study aims to find out whether the symbols in the film evolved into one similar condition, from hope to hopelessness.

Hope and Hopelessness: Symbolic Representation of War

In *Grave of the Fireflies*, the conditions before and after the war are vividly portrayed on two opposite sides. Before the war, color, music, and symbols were bright and vibrant, symbolizing hope. Nevertheless, after the war, all of those symbols appeared in a darker tone, which stood for hopelessness. These symbols reflect the characters' mental and physical struggles, especially in wartime. Symbolism in war films views film as a medium to play the history of war and at the same time as a weapon for propaganda that portrays war from several sides, such as glory, power, and destruction. Aside from providing audiences with realistic war experiences, symbols create an emotional connection with them on screen. This study focuses on identifying the meaning of symbols to represent the condition before and after the war based on their familiarity and contextual meaning. In addition, to gain a better understanding of the symbol evolution before and after the war, the theory of visual and auditory symbols will be used to support the main theory by analyzing the choice of music and color in this film. By examining these theories, this study aims to find out whether the symbols in the film evolved into one similar condition, from hope to hopelessness.

The Symbols That Demonstrated The Physical Aspect Before and After The War

This part will focus on discussing the use of symbolism to represent the shift in condition in the physical aspect before and after the war. These physical aspects appear in the form of basic human bodily needs, which are food, place, and clothes. This is because all of those symbols are essential for human survival, and without those aspects, humans can not live in sufficient living conditions. Furthermore, all of those aspects appear in two drastic conditions, before and after the war, that have a lasting impact on the meaning they produce.

Food as a Representation of Abundance and Scarcity



Figure 1



Figure 2

Rice holds great importance in Japanese society, symbolizing abundance and public welfare. During wartime, rice was a portion of each family, which made white rice a luxury item. As a result, the meaning of rice in this film is dependent on context, as rice is commonly connected with prosperity, health, and wealth in many Asian cultures (United Dumplings, 2020). In the film, a white rice ball, or *onigiri* (おにぎり) shown in figure 1, appears as a symbol to represent the abundance condition before the war. After the war, the white rice ball disappeared and was replaced with a rock that Setsuko thought was a white rice ball she used to eat, as shown in figure 2, to symbolize the scarcity condition after the war. The colors used in the film deepen the symbolism of the symbols, with white representing purity, cleanliness, and safety vividly portrayed before the war (Tavarangi et al., 2016, pp. 116-117). However, after the war, the symbolism changes to reflect the opposite ideas of scarcity and despair, followed by gloomy colors to represent hopelessness (Hiltunen & Rainio, 2023, p. 69). The shift from rice to rock symbolizes the cruel impact of war, where people lose everything and gain nothing. The symbols reflect the overwhelming despair and loss of hope, leaving characters in powerless situations.

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Figure 3



Figure 4

Despite rice and rock, another symbol used to represent war in the food category is Sakuma Drops candy. Sakuma Drops candy is a typical sugar-based candy liked by Japanese children and adults. It has various fruit flavors in one small candy tin. This type of candy is the oldest and most popular in Japan, and it can be seen through its appearance in *Grave of the Fireflies*, as shown in figure 3. According to Carl Jung, symbols are most effective when they combine image and emotion (Jung, 1969, p. 93). While the candy tin may seem ordinary, its symbolism deepens when infused with emotions. In this scene, Sakuma Drops candy symbolizes the abundance of conditions before the war, transitioning from a colorful, sealed tin to a rusty candy tin with nothing inside it but a piece of bone.

The drastic shift in candy tin highlights the characters' emotional and physical struggle in wartime. Moreover, the interpretation of these symbols depends on individual familiarity and knowledge of the context. While Sakuma Drops candy tin served as a symbol of abundance before the war, rusty candy tin served as a symbol of scarcity and despair. Supported by the significant color red used on the candy tin, it represents energy, excitement, and the spirit of life (Tavarangi et al., 2016, p. 117). Additionally, the auditory symbols in the film, such as the use of the "Main Title" track, enhance the emotional impact, portraying the brutal impact of war with its sad melodies and effectively portraying the despair and loss experienced by innocent lives in wartime. The use of visual and auditory symbols together effectively portrays the physical and emotional consequences of war on innocent lives. In line with this, the contrast symbol used to represent abundance and scarcity is a perfect set to show the impact of wartime.

Place as a Representation of Comfort and Misery



Figure 5



Figure 6

The Second World War brought a wave of devastation where everything was destroyed, and many lives were lost. Many people lost their homes and loved ones during the war, including Seita and Setsuko. Seita and Setsuko's home in the film, shown in figure 5, serves as a symbol to represent before the war condition, and the meaning of it depends on the context of the story. Their home before the war symbolizes safety, love, and stability, constructed from wood, a material deeply connected to Japanese culture and nature. The meaning of the home symbol in this scene aligns with the idea of home by Edwin Heathcote, which he believes is a base of everything and a place that shields individuals from an uncertain future (Heathcote, 2014, p. 1). It is further emphasized by the use of brown color, which is often associated with warmth, stability, and reliability (Tavarangi et al., 2016, p. 120). Due to the air raid, many houses were destroyed, including Seita and Setsuko's home, which forced them to turn an abandoned bomb shelter, shown in figure 6, into their "second" home. Unlike homes that offer safety, abandoned bomb shelters symbolize the misery and hardship of post-war conditions, emphasizing the characters' struggle to survive. The film uses contrasting colors to show

different timelines, with brighter colors before the war to represent hope, while dark and gloomier colors after the war represent depression and stressful situations that individuals had to face during wartime.

Similar to the symbolism in film that is used in the form of food before, the auditory symbolism also plays a part in giving deeper meaning to this scene. As Sun (2016) stated, auditory symbols are similar to human voice, sound, and music, which can affect the overall theme of the film, contrast the atmosphere, and even evoke the emotions of the viewers (Sun, 2016, p. 902). In this film, the “Main Title” track with its haunting melody reflects the characters’ struggles and longing for their pre-war lives, while the soft piano notes convey sadness and loss. Near the end, “Home Sweet Home” (塙生の宿) plays during the “Setsuko Montage” scene, highlighting the siblings’ longing for security and comfort from their pre-war life. The music contrasts melodies at the beginning of the film with the ending track, which is played with sad and haunting melodies, illustrating the brutal impact of war on their lives. As previously mentioned, the loss of basic human needs is vividly portrayed in this film, and another crucial aspect to consider is clothing.

Clothing as a Representation of Affluence and Destitution



Figure 7



Figure 8

Besides the term ‘years’, Japan used the term “era” a long time ago, and the name of the era will be determined by the name of the new emperor. Based on the setting of time in this film, around June 1945, which is known as the Shōwa era (昭和時代), most Japanese people at that time wore kimono regardless of their gender. The word “kimono” originally meant “clothing,” but today it translates to “something to wear” (Mori et al., 2012, p. 117). Kimonos have a rich history and are considered one of the national dresses of Japan, often reflecting Japanese people’s love of the four seasons by using their fabrics, colors, and designs. It not only comes with a rich history and traditions but kimonos are also seen as a piece of artwork. In this film, Seita and Setsuko’s mother is shown wearing a layered kimono with a bright color before the war in figure 7, symbolizing beauty and comfort, as well as affluence. However, wartime has brought significant changes in the siblings’ lives, including the way they dressed. In figure 8, Seita and Setsuko appear with dirty white t-shirts and Japanese Monpe pants, highlighting their destitution condition. Monpe pants were traditionally worn by Japanese women workers or laborers. The drastic change from affluence to destitution is vividly portrayed through Seita and Setsuko’s transition from wearing kimonos and dresses to ripped clothes and Japanese Monpe pants. The meaning of these symbols depends on the context and societal agreement during that period.

In addition to the visual contrast before and after the war, the music in the film also plays a crucial role in evoking the audience’s emotions. During the scene where Seita takes Setsuko playing at the beach, the music transitions from joyful melodies to a warning siren, reflecting the shift from the secure, peaceful pre-war period to the harsh wartime reality. The shift of melodies is used to emphasize the impact of war on the siblings’ lives, echoing the contrast in the way they are dressed—from vibrant and neat kimonos to ripped and dirty clothes—emphasizing the drastic shift in living conditions from affluence to destitution, followed by the loss of privileges and vulnerability.

Ultimately, symbols in *Grave of the Fireflies* are used to show the extreme shift from hope to hopelessness condition before and after the war. It is portrayed by the choice of bright colors and positive interpretations of symbols before the war, contrasting with gloomy colors and negative interpretations of symbols after the war. This aligns with studies by Hiltunen & Rainio (2023), which

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show how gloomy films evoke feelings of hopelessness, while hopeful films offer brighter and more hopeful feelings. It clearly shows how all the symbols that appear in physical aspects, from food, place, and clothes, evolve from hope to hopelessness based on the meaning of the symbols they portray, the use of color, and the choice of music before and after the war.

The Symbols That Demonstrated The Mental Aspect Before and After The War

This part will dig deeper into the characters' personalities and focus on how the film uses symbolism to represent changes in the characters' mental states before and after the war, as reflected in their attitudes and behaviors. In detail, the mental aspects will discuss several aspects, such as the characters' facial expressions, interaction skills, mindset, and body language.

The Shift of Attitude as a Representation of Joy and Sorrow



Figure 9



Figure 10

War not only has a great impact on the human physical condition but also the psychological condition. The change of attitude of each character during the war has vividly portrayed the impact of war on people. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2010), attitude is the way that you think and feel about something or someone; the way that you behave towards someone or something that shows how you think or feel; to have a good/bad/neutral attitude towards someone or something (Hornby & Turnbull, 2010, p. 80), shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, values, and social influences. Before the war, Seita and Setsuko experienced moments of joy, such as when they used money from their mother's bank account to buy necessities, including broken umbrellas. Despite the rain soaking their bodies, they happily sing together under the umbrellas, reflecting their carefree lives and strong bonds, as shown in figure 9. The song they sing, "A Rainy Day," was originally about a mother and kid, but Seita modified the words into "*Nii-chan* has come with an umbrella" which illustrates Seita's role as Setsuko's big brother and protector, keeping his younger sister safe from the war's harsh realities.

Furthermore, the characters' facial expressions and interactions play an important role in conveying the audience's feelings. Their interactions and facial expressions, as discussed by Meike Uhrig (2018), convey their inner emotions and thoughts (Uhrig, 2018, p. 5). However, as war devastates their lives, their expressions shift from joy to sorrow. Setsuko's cheerful expressions turn to fear and sorrow, symbolized by her blank expressions throughout the end of the film and Seita's expressions while holding Setsuko's dead body, shown in figure 10, which represent the loss of hope and sorrowful feeling. Faced with the harsh reality of being alone, Seita is slowly trapped in devastating conditions. Despite Seita's efforts to maintain joy and hope for Setsuko, her death brings overwhelming sorrow to his life. The film's visual elements, especially facial expressions and color use, vividly portray the emotional and psychological toll of war on the characters.

To conclude, war forces people to leave behind joy and confront agony. The interpretation of characters' facial expressions varies, highlighting the main characteristic of symbolism—arbitrariness. These expressions shift from smiles and laughter to tears and sorrow, reflecting a drastic shift from hope to hopelessness. Before the war, Seita and Setsuko's expressions, music, and visuals were joyful and hopeful. As the war progresses, these elements vanish, emphasizing the loss and despair the

characters face. This contrast is supported by the use of bright colors before the war and gloomy colors after the war that portray the impact of war on individuals' lives.

The Change of Behavior as a Representation of Optimism and Pessimism



Figure 11



Figure 12

The war has had a significant impact not only on the physical but also on the mental aspects. As discussed before, war leads to a shift of attitude from joy to sorrow. Not only attitude, but it can also change the way people behave in their surroundings. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2010), behavior, which comes from the word “behave” that has meaning the way to do things in a particular way; the way that someone behaves, especially towards other people: good/bad behavior (Hornby & Turnbull, 2010, pp. 120-121). Before the war, Seita and Setsuko were optimistic and diligent, as shown in figure 11, where both of them carried food that Seita purchased from a farmer. Even when the war rose and half of the city was destroyed due to a raid attack, Seita still expressed his optimism and faith that their father would take revenge on the enemy and everything would be back to normal. However, as the conditions worsened, their optimism turned to pessimism and desperation. Faced with the harsh reality of war and Setsuko's illness, Seita is left with devastating conditions with no place to rely on, which forces him to do unlawful acts, such as stealing, as shown in figure 12, where Seita makes the desperate choice to steal sugar from a nearby sugar cane field. Moreover, this drastic shift from optimistic to pessimistic behavior captures the desperation and struggles the characters faced during wartime, where people have lost their faith in the bright future where war has never existed. It demonstrates how the war has significantly affected social norms and individual lives, leading them to engage in unlawful acts they would never consider under normal circumstances.

Music in film not only serves to complement the aesthetic value of the film, but it can greatly influence the overall mood of the film. Similar to the discussion before, auditory symbols, particularly music, play a crucial role in illustrating the drastic shift in characters' behavior due to wartime. Before the war, the music had happy and cheerful melodies to represent positivity and optimism, enhancing scenes of Seita and Setsuko's happiness and teamwork. For instance, the music titled “Moving” (引越) played in the background before the war while showing Seita and Setsuko start working together to prepare their dinner. The cheerful melody, along with Setsuko's laughter, signifies the joyous moment they experienced before the war and highlights a sense of nostalgia. In contrast, the music played after the war has a sad melody that evokes a sense of longing and despair, mirroring the characters' facial expressions after the war. Overall, music used in both contrast conditions, before and after the war has added depth and enhanced the emotional impact caused by the war on people's lives.

To summarize, war has had a massive influence on every aspect of people's lives, including the way the characters' behavior changes from optimistic to pessimistic. Based on all the analysis above, it vividly illustrates the complexity of Seita's character and the impact of war on people's attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the interpretation of all symbols that occur in the form of attitude is dependent on familiarity. Also, the contrast of colors used before and after is vividly portrayed in both different conditions and can have different meanings too. The use of bright colors, happy expressions, and happy melodies before the war is to highlight the hopeful conditions, meanwhile, after the war, the gloomy colors along with desperate expressions appear as a representation of the hopeless conditions. These elements collectively portray the shift from hope to hopelessness, emphasizing the harsh reality of war and the moral dilemmas that individuals face when confronted with the harsh realities of wartime.

CONCLUSION

War not only affects people physically but also emotionally, scattering their spirits. The use of symbolism in *Grave of the Fireflies* has a unique characteristic where all symbols in the film evolve from hope to hopelessness, highlighting the profound impact of war on people's minds and bodies. The meanings of these symbols vary, depending on the context or familiarity. On the other hand, familiarity or people's interpretations of symbols determine the meaning of the symbols. Most symbols, however, have a meaning that is dependent on the story's context or mutual agreement. Every symbol in the film functions as a critique against the war. The majority of research found online exclusively concentrates on the use of fireflies as a sign to represent war, ignoring the other objects that might serve the same purpose. With *Grave of the Fireflies* exploring the themes of war, I believe that this film not only plays as a memory of war days but also serves as a medium to show the cruelty of war through animation. The use of animation here may give a vivid idea to the younger generation of the importance of unity and the consequences of war on every aspect of a human being.

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