

**Confronting Coming of Age and War in Hayao Miyazaki's
Howl's Moving Castle (2004)**

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Abstract

This research paper evaluates how Hayao Miyazaki's film *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) does not reaffirm or condone the celebration of the kidult but rather solemnizes confronting reality and growing up by the infantilized adult. By placing the narrative of war as a major subject matter within the film, Miyazaki allows the child to step outside their safe space while also contextualizing the actions of the characters Howl and Sophie. On one hand, Howl acts as a vain and powerful wizard who avoids choosing sides in the war and attempts to protect civilians. His maturation is explored through several symbols such as the castle, his hair and appearance, his heart, and the concept of staying human. Simultaneously, Sophie who skips the awkwardness of maturation and acts as a wise and heroic figure with agency and intellect becomes an active agent in ending the war. The characters thus echo Miyazaki's other narratives of psycho-social maturation, combining elements of both Western and Japanese traditions in animation, and fashioning a transnational piece of work that appeals to a diverse audience.

Keywords: coming of age, *kawaii*, kidult, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *shojo*, young adult fiction

Although it is a relatively new market that has developed over the last 50 years, Young Adult fiction has proliferated in consumption and success. According to a 2012 survey, 55 percent of today's Young Adult readers and consumers are over the age of 18 (Howlett, 2015) despite its target market being much younger. The reasons for the popularity of Young Adult fiction lie in its escapist appeal as avid readers claim that it “distracts [them] from the horrors of the real world”, fulfills the purpose of “evoking nostalgia”, and acts as a comforting and hopeful presence for “those who just refuse to grow up” (Hay, 2019, p. 6).

Some critics argue that the infantilization of adults or the emergence of the kidult has been marked by immaturity, avoidance of responsibility, and attempts to escape from adult identity. Maturation constitutes forming human relationships and being conscious of the sociopolitical climate that a kidult usually struggles with (Dvornyk, 2016). A similar rise of the kidult can be observed in the Japanese post-1960s youth subculture or *kawaii* (cute culture) with the introduction of *shojo* (young women) and *shounen* (young men) characters who commodified a longing for childhood and an idealization of infantilized behavior (Daliot-Bul, 2014).

In many ways, *kawaii* culture in visual media reflects Japan's shift from political idealism to postindustrial consumerism after its defeat in World War II. The formation of a subservient political and economic relationship with the United States as a means to success nurtured its “childish” popular culture (Sato, 2009). In terms of gender, studies have found that *kawaii* culture is reserved more for female characters, especially in the fantasy genre. One reason for its association with female characters is because, since the 60s, *shojo* is a genre that is more popular amongst a young female readership. For these adolescent readers, youth was the only interim in which they could enjoy freedom from traditionally gendered obligations of work and marriage at the time. However, *shojo* in the next decades reduced the image of youth to represent cuteness and lovability, hence the visual enjoyability for the consuming eye took preeminence over the freedom this age represented in the 60s, no longer adhering to the original intent of *shojo* culture (Saito, 2014).

Meanwhile, the alternative genre of *shounen* adventures privileged the idea of friendship, featured the hero's journey motif, and was saturated with scenes of combat or training for combat. The genre explored the male identity that existed between the liminal realm of boyhood and manhood (Monden, 2018). It differs from the Western ideal of rugged masculinity as heroic and the tender *bishounen* (beautiful boy) as the victim in need of protection (Gateward, 2005). In comparison, the shounen-like (boyish) and *kawaii* (cute) figure of a male protagonist is not bound by any detractions of adult responsibility within the Japanese texts. This marks the privileging of youth, its preservation, and its celebration as the ideal form of being for the characters before they have to take on the grueling and lifeless task of being an adult.

Hayao Miyazaki, the co-founder of Studio Ghibli (a Japanese animation studio) and the director of the film adaptation of Diana Wynne Jones' young adult fantasy novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), is known for his discerning representations of the profound experience of being at the cusp of adulthood. Similar to the fairytales of Walt Disney, his films have mythological and emotional resonances, but unlike Disney films, they have “reinterpreted the most important Western concepts: war, peace, harmony, beauty, and humanity” (Kuzmina, 2018).

As a result, Clare Bradford (2011) argues, that his work has become transnational. His style and representation strategies travel across cultures. *Howl's Moving Castle* is an example of a fantasy narrative, telling the story of a shy, young woman, Sophie Hatter, who is cursed by a spiteful witch that turns her into an elderly woman. In her quest to return to normalcy and to

find herself in the process, her only hope lies in the hands of a self-indulgent and vain wizard, Howl Pendragon. Miyazaki's treatment of the protagonist blends British traditions of illustration with the Japanese attention to cuteness (*kawaii*). He also draws both on American cartoon traditions and early Disney animations to introduce “fantasy figures evocative of American pop culture” (Bradford, 2011, p. 10). While his depiction of the natural world, the *ukiyo* or “floating world” is reminiscent of Japanese landscape painting, the idealized setting is disrupted by the “Zeppelin-like” World War I aircraft and destruction of the idyllic countryside. The impersonal machinery is countered by the love that grows between Sophie and Howl which restores peace and order. While Bradford (2011) examines Miyazaki stylistically, my research analyzes the film as a coming-of-age narrative that negotiates Japanese anime and manga culture and Western young adult literature conventions.

Although Miyazaki has loosely interpreted several elements from the text, his most innovative streak is the construction of a war narrative, Sophie's fate as an old woman, and Howl's more heroic characterization, which allows the central characters to come of age. Miyazaki through *Howl's Moving Castle* is writing a treatise on the painful and disillusioning process of maturation while addressing contemporary sociopolitical and cultural concerns. He questions whether youth can ever escape social responsibility and whether growing older comes at the cost of losing one's freedom. In this paper, I critically analyze *Howl's Moving Castle* to understand the way Miyazaki creates a dialogue between the kidult and its opposite, the precocious, to show that they are both equally subversive because they are out of sync with the normal trajectory of growth.

Diana Jones's novel version creates more of a safe space for the kidult in a conventional comforting fantasy world as compared to Miyazaki with the involvement of war and the effects of industrialization in the narrative. Miyazaki forces his representative kidult Howl into confronting reality and growing up. Additionally, Sophie's journey is a subversion of a conventional *shojo* character. Even though the temporal trajectory of both the characters has been reversed in the narrative, as their journeys overlap, they become a part of the bigger social and political narrative. Miyazaki's reworking of *Howl's Moving Castle* can be seen as a continuation of his previous film's treatments of psycho-social maturation.

Tracing Miyazaki's Filmography

Hayao Miyazaki's filmography ranges from fantasy fiction in *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), to *Castle in the Sky* (1986), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) hybrids similar to *Howl's Moving Castle* in their focus on war, and then his last film before retiring from filmmaking, *The Wind Rises* (2013), is fully grounded in the reality of Japan's involvement in World War II.

The topic of psycho-social maturation is a recurring element in all of his films. For example, *Spirited Away* (2001) features a young girl Chihiro, who confronts one of the biggest fears a child could face – being separated from their parents. It is conquering that fear of separation through her journey into an unknown spirit world, finding and being the savior of her parents that spurs her into adulthood. Through the narrative, she is also able to confront her apprehension and doubts about moving to a new town by using her wits and compassion to find a way out of the spirit world and come to terms with the changes in her family life. Bergstrom (2016) contends that her youth gives her access to the fantastic and the fantastic, in turn, aids her growth. Critics like Harold Bloom categorize crossover fiction as low literature and criticize fantasy literature for taking readers away from realistic scenarios because this

escapism leaves them unprepared for the harsh world outside (Stengel, 2019). Miyazaki on the contrary shows that the real and the magical are equally essential for children to become mature individuals.

Howl's Moving Castle juxtaposes the fantastic and the real when it opens with a steampunk, industrial traveling castle flying over green pastures. Copious amounts of smoke are seen rising from the homes of a small town and a coal-powered train, while images of fighter jets and war parades color the town grey (0:01:30). It seems as if Hayao Miyazaki's fantasy world has been infiltrated by the real world. Here witches, wizards, and magical spells coexist with a cold mechanical world of industrial progress and mindless war.

Wynne Jones's original novel version rarely mentions an impending war, focusing more on character development and subverting fairy-tale-like elements of the genre. Additionally, it begins with the conventional setting of a fairy tale in a far-off land with a protagonist who is an outcast in her own life: "In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three" (Jones, 1986, p. 8). This allows the novel to become a conventional young adult text that discusses serious themes in the safety of a far-off land as compared to Miyazaki who makes the war and its impact an unchanging reality.

Confronting War

Howl is forced to confront the war despite his unwillingness to pick either side, transforming into a monstrous bird while battling to protect civilians. Cavallaro (2014) observes that in the animation even characters like the Wicked Witch of the Waste are "no less critical of the war than Howl – even though she is too selfish to do anything about it – and is likewise unwilling to lend her magical powers to the cause" (p. 17). Unlike her, Howl is desperate to protect his loved ones, including Sophie. It is a marker of Howl's growth that he finds something precious enough to him to spur him into action: "I've had enough of running away, Sophie. I've got something I want to protect. It's you" (1:34:07). Miyazaki's animation suggests that sympathy and love can preserve humanity by countering the destructive impulses of modern man.

Howl's position recalls *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Porco Rosso* (1992) with the protagonists "caught between warring factions, and the brutalizing effects of war, even if one were to endeavor for peace" (Kimmich, 2007, p. 134). Osmond (2012) also argues that Howl and Porco are "reflection[s] on the limits of masculinity, portrayed as both nobly idealist and incorrigibly childish, except when redeemed by love" (p. 135). Thus, when Howl comes to see war as a threatening, non-discriminating agent in damaging the lives of both civilians and his loved ones, he realizes his shortcomings: "I'm such a big coward, all I do is hide. And all of this magic is just to keep everybody away. I can't stand how scared I am" (1:09:28). Sophie also acts to penetrate Howl's self-involvement by opposing him with her maturity, pushing him to confront Madame Suliman, and forcing him to understand that true self-recognition can only come with the help of others.

As stated by the Producer Toshio Suzuki, this serves Miyazaki's purpose to portray "romance under the fire of war" which he does in his later film *The Wind Rises* (2013) as well. However, weaving in war serves a deeper purpose which is to declare war as a pointless endeavor humanity goes through (Yazbek, 2015) while being a supplement to the restoration of peace. In an interview with contemporary artist Takashi Murakami (2005), Miyazaki reveals that Howl's dilemma related to war is tied to his encounters as a child growing up during World

War II. He comments on his guilt and trauma as his family left Tokyo by a truck while refusing to help other families begging them to let their children escape too. Seeing the senseless violence himself, he deems war as unnecessary even though war advocates like Madame Suliman who admits “it’s time to put an end to this idiotic war” (1:54:17) by the end of the film. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) too features opposing sides, with human settlement destroying a forest for its gains. Despite the clearly defined opposing forces, both sides have justifiable grievances and work to protect their groups. In this way, Christine Hoff Kraemer (2004) also arrives at a similar conclusion when she observes, “Miyazaki avoids the cliched Western trope of good vs. evil” (p. 5) and relays a nuanced outlook on the conflict.

The Castle as an Escape

The backdrop of war contextualizes the coming of age of the kidult Howl Pendragon. It may seem that Howl is painted solely as a heroic figure and romanticized by Miyazaki despite his vanity, flamboyancy, and irresponsible attitude. Miyazaki, however, criticizes him for his neglect and childishness by having him confront his shortcomings and allowing the kidult to grow up. When we meet Howl, he is being chased by black sludge-like creatures used by the Wicked Witch of the Waste to get him to join the war effort (0:06:00). Even inside his Moving Castle, he is constantly being sent messages from the monarch to achieve the same purpose: “Wizard Jenkins must report to the palace immediately” (0:24:29). Howl, instead, engages in escapism. As if to emphasize the flightiness of his character, he is often flying away from his pursuers both literally and figuratively as his castle also functions as a portal that allows him to change locations at a turn of the wheel. One of his escapes includes the secret garden he reveals as a gift to Sophie: “That was my secret hideaway. I spent a lot of time here by myself when I was young” (1:21:26). The fact that he reveals it to Sophie underlines his growth since a secret hideout becomes a gift to keep a loved one safe from harm.

The castle itself is a metaphor for Howl’s growth from a kidult to an actual adult. Like Howl it is obscure, can escape sticky situations at any given moment, remains in the background, and can transport Howl to idyllic, peaceful pastures where he can remain separated from humanity. It is a structure that Howl has constructed to remain hidden and one in which he can neglect his duties. But as the film progresses and Howl battles harder and harder to deflect what comes at him, and starts to lose control of his fantasy, the castle itself starts to crumble and collapse. The completion of his maturation is reflected in the rebuilding of the castle which was previously referred to as a “dilapidated heap” by Sophie. It is greener, with wings that allow it to fly above the battleships that terrorized the skies, and more functional, symbolizing how Howl himself has risen triumphant and above the immorality of war (1:54:40).

Keeping Up Appearances

Madame Suliman surmises at the Palace that Howl has “been using his magic for entirely selfish reasons” (1:02:10) implying that he is neither brave, humble, nor proactive. Howl’s reputation as a villainous, heart-eating sorcerer only precedes him when Sophie meets him not because he lives up to his image but as someone who does not do much at all and wishes to be left alone. Moreover, he is someone who takes on various aliases and disguises to fool those who seek him as both Pendragon and Jenkins.

When Sophie asks him how many aliases he has, he answers “As many as I need to keep my freedom” (0:51:02). His desire to isolate himself from the reality and burden of responsibility as a powerful wizard capable of doing good comes from his desire to not grow up and confront

the rot that surrounds him. This desire is not just rooted in selfish reasons but in an attempt to prevent his powers from being misused by Madame Suliman, displaying his understanding of its consequences. While disguised as the King of Ingary, he says, “We have tried using Madame Suliman’s magic to shield our palace from the enemy’s bombs. But the bombs fall on civilian homes instead” (1:04:39). It becomes obvious then that Howl does have a sense of duty to not become a cog in Suliman’s war machine.

Several symbols and motifs in the narrative signify Howl’s progression from kidult to adult. The first is the change in his hair and appearance. Howl adheres to the *shounen* appearance with his effeminate, delicate features and ostentatious robes. At the beginning of the film, his frivolity is depicted through the long, dyed blonde hair that he immediately cuts into bangs, and then proceeds to dye again, this time turning red, going awry due to Sophie’s intervention. The breakdown over his beauty seems to be a juvenile concern as he laments “I see no point in living if I can’t be beautiful” (0:46:50). Swinnen (2009) discusses how Howl’s effeminate appearance and passivity in contrast to a masculine exercise of brute force against warships acts as a manifestation of his two warring, split selves. While his appearance is befitting that of a *bishounen*, the *shounen* hero described by Monden (2018), the training for combat stages or facing combat, is abhorred not just for the sake of avoiding maturation but due to the grave nature of violent combat.

His maturation is marked by a less ostentatious, shorter, and darker hairstyle (1:19:06). His costume also changes from a long white and colorful wizard’s robe to a less flamboyant white shirt and dark pants, thus completing his coming of age. This implies that he has also shed the child-like ignorance and the camouflage behind which he sought shelter. Despite finding the war’s machination too large for him to handle on his own, he is no longer incapacitated by his helplessness.

His change in appearances is also tied to his transformation into a giant, monstrous black bird to save the civilians from shelling and some other wizards who have joined the war effort (1:26:17). Unlike the novel where Howl does not express any sentiments towards the war, in Miyazaki’s adaptation he takes on the role of a “pacifist wizard” (Yazbek, 2015). When he returns as a bird-transformed being after one of his battles, he comments bitterly to Calcifer that “this war is terrible” and the wizards who have turned themselves into monsters for it “won’t ever recall they were human” (0:42:36). Howl’s reluctance to join the war and give into this metamorphosis is of significance due not only to his fear of death but perhaps more so to the fear of losing his soul. Participation in this mindless war may turn him into an aberration, something subhuman. Howl’s reluctance is also linked to his fear of commitment. He can neither commit to relationships nor his purpose as a wizard because both make him encounter his shortcomings.

By taking a clear either/or stance, he will have to shoulder the responsibilities that come with his choice. Howl’s real fear is to take on a decisive identity as a hero or a villain. Here Howl echoes 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s characterization of children as “angelic, innocent and untainted by the world which they have recently entered” (Duschinsky, 2010, p. 3). Adulthood, on the other hand, is a transition into a disillusioned and corrupted self. Pastoral isolation will keep him blissfully human while war will bring out his base self in an increasingly industrial world (Saleem, 2016). As a counterargument, Miyazaki here is not criticizing adulthood itself, but the enormity of the stakes in Howl’s world. If Howl takes a wrong decision, then not only his soul but the lives of others would be at risk, and for a conscientious character like Howl, the thought is debilitating. Miyazaki here is sympathizing

with the kidult standing on the threshold of adulthood. Maturity and growth signify an individual's confrontation with the ultimate loss; that is to say, a loss of innocence. For Howl, knowing is painful and instigates action that has consequences.

The Burden of a Heart

Another recurring motif is that of his heart. It is revealed that his "heartlessness" is not a result of choice but of circumstance – he gave up his own heart to save a dying falling star, consequently giving birth to Calcifer, the fire demon. This is apparent in the curse the Witch sends to Howl: "You who swallowed a falling star, oh, heartless man, your heart shall soon belong to me" (0:32:33). Howl is as much a victim of circumstances and exploitation by Madame Suliman. Vieira & Kunz (2018) agree that Howl in the adaptation is less flamboyant and flirty "drama queen" and more concerned with helping the victims of the war while still being vain and immature. Howl's representation reflects Miyazaki's exposure to European children's literature during his higher education. He was a part of a children's literature research society which shaped "his views of storytelling and character development" (McCarthy, 1999, p. 44). Consciously aware of the Western fairy-tale tradition, Miyazaki makes Howl into more of a romantic hero figure who is far more sympathetic and wrestles with morality (Navas, 2021).

Once Sophie recovers Howl's heart from the Witch, she remarks that "it's so warm and fluttering like a bird" and recognizes that "it's still just the heart of a child", implying that Howl had been unable to grow up. Upon its return, he feels the full weight of his conscience: "I feel terrible like there's a weight on my chest" to which Sophie responds "a heart's a heavy burden" that he must bear to live responsibly (1:53:04).

Sophie – The Unconventional "Shojo"

One of the themes unlikely to have been anticipated by Jones who was writing the novel in 1984 was the emerging popularity of the *shojo* and *kawaii* in Japanese anime productions which objectified and commodified a longing for childhood and had the female protagonists characterized by their weakness and dependence on others (Yazbek, 2015). Miyazaki's *shojo*, on the other hand, is independent, secure, and autonomous. In Napier's (2005) opinion, such a portrayal is targeted directly to a Japanese audience aiming to empower the aging population not to yearn for youth to embrace the fact that "all *shojo* will eventually disappear" as Sophie's youth does (p. 193). Gwynne (2013), however, argues that Sophie's representation can be owed to the aftermath of second-wave or post-feminism gaining popularity in modern, neoliberal Japan which is increasingly accepting of "individualism, choice, and empowerment, particularly conceived through commodification and consumerism" (Dales and Bulbeck, 2013, p. 178).

Sophie Hatter starts her coming-of-age journey when cursed by the Wicked Witch of the Waste and turned into an old woman. However, after the initial moments of panic, it is no longer a curse for Sophie. Before the curse she is secluded in her father's shop, making hats to keep her father's legacy alive rather than doing something she wants to do, and has no ambition of her own, which we see when she is asked by her sister, "Now Sophie, do you really want to spend the rest of your life in that hat shop? (0:08:54). Her curse becomes a form of liberation as she finally leaves the house in search of finding a way to break it. Unlike Howl, growing up opens up new avenues for Sophie to take on a journey to explore her real potential. Sophie quickly adjusts to old age and appreciates the invisibility that it gives her and the mobility that she did

not have before when portrayed as a young woman cornered by soldiers whose unsolicited advances make her uncomfortable (0:05:09). Here Miyazaki's character is highlighting the social paradox that is attached to a woman's age. Even though youth is admirable in women, at the same time youth when seen through a male gaze reduces women to an object of desire. Society reduces a woman to a mere body while old age finally opens up the world to her gaze. Sophie as an old woman becomes the observer who sees the outside world with her questioning gaze and grants her the wisdom to make it better. She is the precocious child who has made an early venture into the real world – a world that Howl finds burdensome.

Elizabeth Parsons (2007) posits that Sophie's representation challenges the "grandma trope" by examining the sociocultural locations in which she is positioned. Sophie also in many ways appreciates her old age by remarking to herself in the mirror: "This isn't so bad now, is it? You're still in pretty good shape. And your clothes finally suit you" (0:12:17), showing that she has gained confidence and self-esteem. As an old woman, she is not restricted in her position but possesses agency and assertiveness. She finds Howl's Castle on her own by searching for tools, discovering the living scarecrow she calls Turnip Head, commenting that one should never underestimate a grandma, and claiming that she is "sick of being treated like some timid little old lady" (0:33:30). Her age gives her a newfound sense of intellect and peace that she did not possess before as she remarks: "it's so strange, I've never felt so peaceful before" (0:40:09).

Parsons adds that children's fantasy texts like *Harry Potter* usually have the issue of agency resolved by bestowing the weaker child protagonist with special powers that allow them to transcend their limitations in adult-led societies. *Howl's Moving Castle* subverts this notion by elevating the already existing status and power associated with real old women by positing nurturing and protecting as heroic and powerful acts. Miyazaki's old women cannot be categorized or stereotyped, nor are they invisible, meaningless, existing beings without any sort of agency.

Swinnen (2009) observes that, unlike the novel, Sophie's appearance as an old woman is not glossed over as she has a non-slender body, wrinkles, and an enlarged nose, a deliberate decision made by the color design director Michiyo Yashuda. As a result, Miyazaki also contests another binary, that of youthful beauty as opposed to aged unattractiveness. The binary is evoked to break the *shojo* trope of a sexualized youthful female. The manga and anime industry usually sees this youthful, sexualized female characterization as a sign of empowerment. Others find this transformation more of a "make-over than a "power-up" because the protagonist sees themselves as consumers rather than having actual agency, hence the creators of manga and anime only "aestheticize girl power" (Tran, 2018, p. 19). In contrast, Sophie's reverse metamorphosis depicts a shift for *shojo* sexuality which celebrates old age and its accompanying wisdom as a sign of true empowerment.

Agency as an Old Woman

Sophie possesses agency and her presence changes the trajectory of Howl's life. She takes control of Howl's Castle (which as I have discussed earlier is symbolically linked with Howl's persona) posing as the cleaning lady, and taking care of its mess through her will and determination: "I've become quite cunning in my old age" (0:18:01). Even then, she is never cast in a biologically essentialist role as a nurturer. We see Calcifer run the castle and Howl take over cooking breakfast during their first meeting, while Sophie becomes an active participant in protecting the castle (0:29:50). She emerges as the hero figure, seeing as how she

figures that the secret to fixing Howl's condition is directing his younger self to "find me [her] in the future!" (1:47:49). She subsequently saves the nation too when she kisses Turnip Head and he transforms back into the lost prince, whose disappearance caused the war between the two kingdoms. Howl's identity crisis and the political crisis are resolved through Sophie's help.

Yara Yazbek (2015) argues that Sophie "exemplifies the qualities that sharply define all the *shojo* protagonists that are seen in almost every Miyazaki film" (p. 17). By allowing Sophie to fly, Miyazaki uses flight to depict the feeling of falling in love and as a possibility of escaping from the past and its traditions. Flying is usually associated with confidence and competence, something that can be seen in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) as well. When Kiki is confident, she gains the ability to fly whereas self-doubt robs her of her powers. Unlike Kiki, however, Sophie's self-confidence is negatively affected by her self-doubt and insecurity. It negatively affects her metamorphosis, disrupting her power of being old yet young at heart, turning her into a bitter old lady when struck with fear. For example, when Howl takes her to his secret garden she states "even though I'm not pretty and all I'm good at is cleaning" (1:15:55) she turns from her younger to her older self despite Howl's insistence to the contrary. Therefore, Miyazaki's *shojo* is distinct from the traditionally naïve and objectified *shojo* in classic anime.

Simultaneously, Sophie acts as a foil to the Wicked Witch of the Waste, who in turn chooses to disguise her real age and uses her powers to wreak havoc and support the war, therefore subverting Rousseau's idea of an adult's conscience being bound by eventual corruption due to loss of innocence. Once Her Majesty takes away the Witch's powers, she becomes a helpless and harmless old woman, unable to take care of herself yet still selfish for Howl's heart as she holds on to it, refusing to give it to Sophie when Howl needs it. She ultimately redeems herself by surrendering possession of Howl's heart, to which Sophie remarks: "Thank you, you have a big heart" (1:50:21). Therefore, the witch does not entirely fall into the category of a simplistic "evil" character. Her disguised age is a sign of the insecurity of an aging woman, an insecurity that Sophie has overcome. She is a jilted woman too: her bitterness towards Sophie is a product of her jealousy; Howl has chosen Sophie after rejecting the Witch once he realized: "She terrified me and I ran away" (0:51:08). However, like Howl she is a victim of Madame Suliman who exiled her to the Waste and then stripped her of her powers, the truth of which Sophie recognizes too when she exclaims to her in the Palace: "You lure people here with an invitation from the king, and then you strip them of all their powers" (1:03:20).

In contrast, Sophie is nowhere depicted as harmless or helpless, for she actively pushes Howl to voice his opinions against the war at the Palace, and even agrees to go in as his representative to Suliman and remains undeterred by her manipulation. She can see through Howl's pretense: "He may be selfish and cowardly, and sometimes he's hard to understand, but his intentions are good" (0:54:48). Parsons (2007) argues in this regard that Miyazaki presents old women as beyond categorization and stereotyping as they can be both powerful and weak, nurturing and selfish while positing "grandma behaviors as powerful, magical, heroic, and successful" (p. 223). Having an old woman as the hero figure who is far wiser and more proactive than the young male wizard celebrates the process of growing up. Sophie as the premature adult counters the kidult Howl and thus subverts the coming-of-age narrative. Her narrative of self-discovery works in reverse to Howl's trajectory of growth. If Howl needs to come to terms with adult responsibility, Sophie has to ultimately recognize her capability and wisdom. Where Howl needs to commit to a responsible decision, Sophie needs to step out of her comfort zone and seek out new challenges.

The film adaptation's exploration of aging appears to be far more nuanced than the novel in terms of the ending that the two preserve for Sophie. While in the novel, Sophie completely turns back into her younger self with her reddish hair (Jones, 1986, p. 220), in a way restoring equilibrium, Miyazaki's adaptation allows Sophie to retain her grey hair. Upon seeing her new hair Howl exclaims: "Wow! Sophie, your hair looks just like starlight. It's beautiful", to which she ecstatically agrees, "You think so? So do I!" (1:53:15). It is a permanent yet beautiful alteration that has taken place as a result of aging not just physically but also in terms of wisdom and experience. Vieira (2018) agrees that Sophie's metamorphosis floats back and forth throughout the film to mirror her psychological age, the way she sees herself, her self-esteem, and how she wants to portray herself – the grey hair then becomes a way to hold onto the positive aspects that aging has to offer. In this manner, Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* solemnizes aging and coming of age for both Howl and Sophie and in the process subverts both the representation of Japanese *Kawaii Shoyo* and the Western kidult.

Conclusion

In summation, the film adaptation by placing the characters against the backdrop of war rewrites the concepts of western kidult and Japanese *kawaii*. Miyazaki's characters cannot afford the stagnant naivety of youth in a world rife with human ambition and mindless bloodshed. To survive, they have to be sympathetic towards others and take responsibility for their choices. Coming of age for Miyazaki is akin to making a painful transition, yet this transition is a necessary stepping stone for human survival. Howl Pendragon is an embodiment of kidult's refusal to take responsibility in the face of war. As Howl is forced to confront the conflict within him, his growth is depicted through a series of symbols and motifs, namely the walking castle, his hair and appearance, his heart, his transformation into a bird, and the meaning of staying human. Similarly, Sophie transforms from an unconfident, naïve, and self-doubting girl to a wise, assertive, and self-aware woman when she is cursed with old age. Old age in women for Miyazaki is not a curse but rather an opportunity to escape inhibiting conventions in patriarchal societies. Miyazaki's rendition as a result confronts the bitter reality of war and creates a coming-of-age narrative that prepares the adolescent audience to step out of their safe space and into the real world, a recurring motif in most of his films that a diverse audience can relate to.

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