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ENG 271

### Howl's Moving Castle as Viewed by Aristotle

*Howl's Moving Castle* has been on my list of favorite movies for a long time, so it made sense for me to analyze this film for this assignment. It sets the scene with a poor girl named Sophie who is very plain and works in her family's hat shop. She then bumps into Howl, a wizard, who saves her from some men who are being overly flirtatious with her. Once this happens, the Witch of the Waste shows up to Sophie's hat shop and casts a spell on her to make her old, because the witch is jealous of Sophie for catching Howl's attention. Once Sophie realized that she can't show her mother that she is now elderly, she gathers her things and runs away to The Waste, a barren and rocky part on the outskirts of the town that she lives in, to find the witch and get rid of the curse that was put on her. She stumbles into Howl's moving castle and that is where the adventure starts.

Though, this movie is not anywhere close to being a Greek Tragedy, I think that it includes several examples of certain aspects of that genre that Aristotle points out in the *Poetics*.

*Howl's Moving Castle* starts off with soft music and soft color tones. The songs used in the film, or melopoeia, are fitting for the scenes that are unfolding around them. This is an element of storytelling that is not used as frequently in live shows because it is harder to perform it effectively. It is hard to have music over dialogue without that person's lines. On the other

hand, opsis is something that can be used in both theater and in this film. The scenes in the city were full of bright, happy colors and the scenes in the Waste were dull and grey. The same concept is used in theater. The characters' costumes, the props, and the set are all colored to represent how the audience is expected to feel. The characters become living moods.

The way that the characters speak in this film is a strong indicator of what their character is going to act like. Aristotle called this lexis or diction. Each character had a very different way of expressing themselves and that showed the audience a lot about their character before their backstory was revealed. Sophie has a very soft and maternal voice, and she is a soft and maternal character. Calcifer is loud and has a Brooklyn accent and he is easily the sassiest character in the film. This is something that can be overlooked in live theater. When I acted, I noticed that some of the other students in my class often forgot that their voice was a tool. In an animated movie, the voice can sometimes be the most human attribute to a character.

Character, or ethos, is second to plot, muthos, according to Aristotle. He says that the purpose of a play is to portray an action and the characters are primarily there to help that action be completed.

Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end [of life] is a sort of action, not a quality; people are of a certain sort according to their characters, but in happy of the opposite according to their actions. So [the actors] do not act in order to represent characters, but they include characters for the sake of their actions. (Aristotle 93)

In the case of *Howl's Moving Castle*, I have a hard time seeing this as true. I feel that the characters' back stories are so elaborate and if the audience doesn't understand the backstory, the overall plot will not make sense to them. The characters are strongly motivated by their personal

beliefs and experiences and that is what causes most of the reversals. Aristotle does mention that “A plot is not unified, as some suppose, if it concerns a single person”. (p.94, Aristotle), and I agree. A story needs many characters to exist and it can not communicate with only one character. Like I said, each character has their own sub-plots that all come together to help the larger plot. For example, the Witch of the Waste was in love with Howl before the story starts. She is after his heart because he ran away from her when he found out that she was not as internally beautiful as she was externally. She then proceeds to grab his heart out of the furnace of his castle. The heart is what keeps the castle moving. This causes the castle to collapse and causes everyone to have a miserable time. This could just be the characters reacting to what is, or has been, going on around them, but it is clear that plot and character come hand in hand.

Along with these guidelines for character in the context of plot, Aristotle also mentions four rules about characters in Greek tragedy. He says that the characters must be “good”, “appropriate”, “life-like”, and “consistent”. (p. 100, Aristotle) These play a large part in whether or not the audience experiences catharsis when watching the play, or in my case, movie. I think that overall, this film does a wonderful job at applying these guidelines to the characters. It contains characters that are relatable to most audiences, are well rounded, and have elaborate back stories. The characters have their flaws, but that makes them more life-like to the audience. It is more than easy to become attached to the characters in this movie. When I rewatched it, I found myself tearing up a few times. Granted, I am quite a movie crier, but I think that if the characters are not relatable to the audience, there is going to be a lack of catharsis.

The peripeteia, reversals, in this film are not as devastating as they are in a Greek tragedy and the characters in this movie end up fixing the problems caused by these reversals. Because of

this, there is little pathos (suffering) in this film. By pathos, I mean the kind of suffering that comes from the universe, not from the characters doing things to themselves. The suffering that happens in this film is never something that could not have been prevented in some way. The whole reason that there is a war going on in the background of this film is because the prince of the neighboring land was turned into a scarecrow. He could not talk and had to wait for his “true love” to kiss him in order for his true form to be restored. This caused a war that could have easily been prevented.

I thought about these terms, reversal and suffering, in another sense when watching this film because it is a rather happy story, and there are no explicit examples of a true reversal or true suffering. I found myself thinking about how Aristotle said that an audience will not be sad if a morally bad character experiences suffering. In the film, Howl is using his magic to try to prevent the war from getting worse. He transforms himself into a giant bird monster to fly to where the bombs are being dropped to stop them. This is also a strong metaphor for a war monster. Howl must become a monster to restore peace. Turning himself into this creature also causes him to suffer and he puts himself in danger of never being able to become a human again. Howl is a character generally liked by the audience, so the pain that he experiences is not happily accepted by them.

In between reversal and suffering comes recognition, or anagnorisis. This is when the character realizes what has happened to them and has to figure out what they are going to do about it. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Sophie is turned into an old woman for something that was not her fault and when she looks in the mirror in her hat shop, she has to decide what she is going to do about what has happened. She is forced to face the troubles that come with having an old

body, but she changes her attitude right away. She packs a small amount of food and treks into The Waste, a place where no one in her town ever dares to go, in order to find the Witch of the Waste and demand that she reverse the spell that was put on her. Instead of being miserable, she decides to use this new age to be sassy and adventurous. In Greek tragedy, it is more difficult for a character to keep their chin up and muster through because their reversal is much more intense and often times they end up banished, disowned or dead. Also, to point out the obvious, it simply would not be a tragedy if the character made the best of their situation.

Overall, I think that there are some strong correlations between Aristotle's guidelines for a "good" tragedy in the *Poetics* and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Even though the film that I chose was not a Greek Tragedy, there were many scenes in the film where Aristotle's points were followed. Each vocabulary word from the *Poetics* had at least one scene in the film that fit the definition. The major difference that I found between tragedy and this film was the difference between suffering because of what you've chosen to do and suffering because of what you were destined to do, but even with that difference there are still more than enough strong connections to prove that Aristotle actually knew what he was talking about. No wonder people still listen to what he had to say!