

# Semiotic Analysis of Kaonashi's Character Transformation in The Movie *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the symbolism of Kaonashi's character in the animated film "Spirited Away" by Hayao Miyazaki using a semiotic approach from Charles Sander Peirce's theory. This approach was chosen to reveal the deep meanings contained in Kaonashi's character through signs, objects, and interpretants contained in the movie. Semiotic analysis will show how these characters reflect internal and social conflicts, as well as how interactions with the environment affect character development. This research enriches the understanding of character design in animated films and its contribution to deeper and more meaningful narratives. The research method used is descriptive qualitative by analyzing data obtained from films, art books, behind-the-scenes videos, and various additional sources. The results show that Kaonashi's character undergoes three main stages of transformation that reflect changes in his identity and the meaning he carries. In the first stage, Kaonashi is depicted as a lonely and ignored figure, who simply stays on the bridge of the spirit world. In the second stage, Kaonashi becomes greedy and loses control while in the spirit bath, showing the negative impact of greed and the need for recognition. In the third stage, Kaonashi finds peace and acceptance at Zeniba's house, showing the transformation to a calmer and more accepted identity. The conclusion of this study is that Kaonashi represents emptiness, loneliness, and confusion of direction as interactions with the environment affect character development, as in the lives of people around the world.

## KEYWORDS

Semiotics  
Character Transformation  
Spirited Away

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## INTRODUCTION

Animated film are an art form that employs moving images to create the illusion of motion. Objects, characters, and backgrounds are depicted in moving visuals to convey stories and emotions to the audience. Films also serve as a mass media tool to deliver messages to society (Kartini et al., 2022) . The story in an animated film is not just a narrative line, but is also the foundation for building a fantastic or realistic world where the characters interact (Blazer, 2015) . Animated films are a medium for storytelling without limits , animation not only entertains but also provides new experiences and broader insight (Weels & Moore, 2016). This means that films always influence and shape society based on their content and the message behind it (Sasmita, 2017).

The characters in animated films are the elements that bring the story to life. These characters often have strong characteristics, ranging from unique physical appearances to complex personalities. According to Selby (2013), the character development process in animated films involves careful visual design and in-depth script writing to ensure that each character has convincing motivation, conflict and development. By watching it, the audience can get the message contained in the film (Kartini et al., 2022).

The characters in animated films can also be a powerful resource for connecting the audience to the story. Both the main character who inspires such a complex journey and the side characters who provide comedy or emotional support play an important role in building an emotional connection between the audience and the story. Character is the basis of a person's daily actions in social life (Yuniati & Chudari, 2021). By paying attention to small details in character behavior, expressions, and dialogue, animated films are able to create deep and satisfying experiences for viewers, making them connect with the story and its characters emotionally (Blazer, 2015).

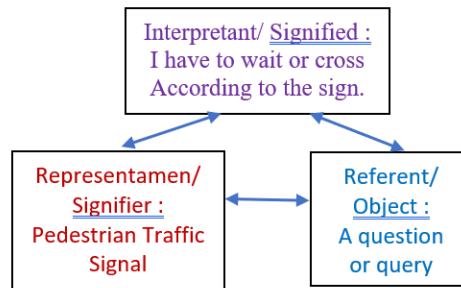
"Spirited Away" is a Japanese animated work, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, which already won many awards when the film was released. Released in 2001, this film has won many awards and received critical acclaim for its strong story, has been a film that received various awards, including the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003 (Abramovitch, 2021) beautiful animation, beautiful characters, also memorable character. This film offers an extraordinary cinematic experience through a compelling storyline, stunning visuals and emotional depth that stirs the senses. The success of this film has reached various levels of audiences from various cultural backgrounds and ages. Film works raise an imaginary reality which can later be compared with the real reality in real society, so that films can form a certain understanding in society from which entertaining lessons can later be learned (Khaira et al., 2022).

Miyazaki (2002) stated that this film is an adventure genre even though there are no scenes of brandishing weapons or fights involving pain. However, this story is not a conflict between right and wrong. This is a story where the heroine will be thrown into a place where good and evil live together, and there, she will experience the world. This film tells the journey of a young girl named Chihiro, a 10 year old girl who was lost in the spirit world after her parents turned into pigs, and had to try to find a way to return home and return her parents to humans. This film is an adventure interesting magic, which conveys a moral message about trying to grow up and be independent.

One of the characters that is the focus of the author's attention in "Spirited Away" is when Chihiro meets Kaonashi, known as a "no face" creature. Kaonashi is an ambiguous creature with the ability to absorb the emotions and behavior of those around him. This character plays an important role in reinforcing themes such as greed and the fragility of identity in the film. Although initially seen as a frightening character, Kaonashi experiences complex development as the story progresses, showing softer sides and suggesting the possibility of deep transformation for the character. The strong and unique design plays an important role in establishing the visual identity of the film as well as in communicating meaning and emotion to the audience, even though Kaonashi does not have clear facial expressions, this character has a strong presence in the story and has a significant impact on the storyline. Therefore, it is important to dig deeper into the meaning and symbolism contained in Kaonashi's character.

Kaonashi has become an interesting subject for writers and film fans to research further. Kaonashi can be a symbolic system, as explained (Yumiolda & Zulkifli, 2022), that Peirce views almost everything in life as a sign that can represent something else and has meaning in it (Yumiolda & Zulkifli, 2022). Through a semiotic approach, he can express meaning through the relationship between signs in the object of study (Yumiolda & Efi, 2023). Semiotics is the science that studies signs (*Sign*), the function of a sign (*object*), and the production of meaning (*interpretant*), these three points are in the theory of Charles Sander Peirce (Tinarbuko, 2008).

### The Semiotics of Charles Peirce – Symbols



**Figure 1.** Peirce Theory Semiotic Map  
(Source: Yumiolda & Zulkifli, 2022)

The transformation of Kaonashi's character is the focus of research because this character is not only a complement to the narrative, but also carries deep meanings that can provide a deeper understanding of the moral message and themes implied in the film. A semiotic analysis approach was chosen to reveal the complexity of this character through dismantling the signs and symbols contained in his various appearances, behavior, and interactions with other characters in the story.

The Author explore information from previous studies as comparison material and consider that previous research is considered relevant and related to the research that researchers are currently conducting. One of them is research (Dewi & Mutiaz, 2023) , the Chinese cultural content in the character design of Yun Jin Game Genshin Impact using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the Chinese cultural content in the design of Yun Jin's character in the game Genshin Impact with the aim of increasing character sales in *the game* and provides suggestions for involving cultural elements in semiotic analysis for further research. Meanwhile, in research (Halim & Yulius, 2023) Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic analysis of the film "*Selesai*" analyzes using film semiotic analysis with a focus on the influence of camera angles on the moral message conveyed and the use of cinematography as visual rhetoric.

This research aims to fill the gap in the literature by conducting an in-depth semiotic analysis of the character Kaonashi in the animated film "Spirited Away". Semiotic analysis from Peirce's theory becomes a powerful tool for understanding how Kaonashi symbolism includes psychological concepts such as emptiness, loss of identity, and need of self-recognition. This research aims not only reveal the depth of Kaonashi's character, but also to enrich understanding of how character development can enrich the content of the story and provide deeper meaning to the audience. It is hoped that this research can provide a new contribution to the understanding of character design in the context of animated films and produce deeper insights.

## METHOD

This approach uses descriptive qualitative methods with the researcher as the key instrument (Nismoro, 2024) . using Charles Sander Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze the film Spirited Away, carrying out semiotic analysis means trying to understand the meaning of the signs in the film, including the things hidden behind them (Wibowo, 2013). The first step is to identify relevant characters, scenes, and story elements. Data was collected by re-watching the film and noting the signs that appeared.

These signs are analyzed to understand their representation. For example, Kaonashi's behavior reflects greed and emptiness. Researchers explore the social and cultural context that influences characters and scenes, then interpret the meaning of these signs to understand the messages conveyed. The results of the analysis are summarized to provide insight into complex themes in the

film, such as greed and acceptance, as well as their potential for further research. This plot helps reveal hidden meanings in the film and how semiotic signs are used to communicate with the audience.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Kaonashi's Character Transformation

Kaonashi first appeared when Chihiro was trapped in the spirit world and working in a spirit bath. Both of her parents have been turned into Pigs, and Chihiro must find a way to return to the human world with them. Kaonashi is depicted as having a semi-transparent body and wearing an expressionless mask that can change. He just stood quietly in the middle of the bridge, different from the other spirits heading towards the baths. Kaonashi couldn't speak, only making soft "ah? ah..." sounds. A few days later, when Chihiro opened the door to throw away the water used for mopping, Kaonashi was still standing outside looking at her. Chihiro opened the door to the bathing room so Kaonashi could enter to take shelter. Chihiro considers all spirits to be guests who must be treated well.



**Figure 2.** Chihiro Meets Kaonashi  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

### 2. Kaonashi's 2nd character transformation

While Chihiro was doing her other task, Kaonashi suddenly appeared slowly, who started out invisible, gradually became visible, giving her a herbal label for her work needs that Chihiro actually needed. Chihiro also thanked Kaonashi because initially Chihiro was not given the label by the foreman who took care of all the labels for the bathing water. When Chihiro had taken care of the labels to release the herbal bathing water in the large bathtub, Kaonashi appeared again near Chihiro, this time Kaonashi turned out to be carrying a lot of labels in his small hands for Chihiro, but Chihiro had got it earlier, she only needed one, so Chihiro rejected it by saying "I don't need that much", "No, just one is enough".



**Figure 3.** Chihiro Rejects Kaonashi's Labeling  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

Then Kaonashi sounded disappointed with his voice and disappeared again, the labels fell to the floor, until Chihiro finished her first job serving one of the spirits who turned out to be a famous river god and caused an uproar in the bathhouse because the river god paid the bathhouse with lots of scattered gold and also secretly gave Chihiro a herbal medicine for her. Chihiro thought the herbs could turn her parents back into humans again.



**Figure 4.** Chihiro Gets Herbal Medicine  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

After the bath closed and all the workers were sleeping, it turned out that Kaonashi was still wandering around in the bath, was caught by one of the guards at the bath, asked Kaonashi to immediately leave the bath because there should be no more guests, but from Kaonashi's hand slowly a little gold appeared little by little, and dropped it on the floor, the guard was shocked and took the gold, Kaonashi again took out more gold from his hand and let the guard take it from Kaonashi's hand, which turned out to be when the guard took the gold from Kaonashi's hand, Kaonashi's fingers suddenly became very long and entangled the guard and immediately swallowed him whole.



**Figure 5.** Kaonashi Eats the Bathhouse Guard  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

The same thing happened to one of the other guards at the bathhouse, but Kaonashi had started to change because he could perch on the wall of the bathhouse like a frog and could talk, offering a lot of gold in his hand while saying *"master, I'm hungry"*, *"Here is the money"*, *"I'm a guest, I want to soak in the tub, wake everyone up!"*. The scene then moves to Chihiro who wakes up from her sleep and is confused because all the workers are not there, Chihiro looks for other workers and it turns out that all the workers have woken up much earlier than before, very busy because they serve Kaonashi who every time he is fed, Kaonashi will throw a lot of gold to all the workers who serve him.



**Figure 6.** Kaonashi Gives a Lot of Gold  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

Kaonashi also did the same thing to Chihiro when Chihiro accidentally met Kaonashi whose body size was already bigger than before, Kaonashi offered her more gold than anyone else, but Chihiro rejected him again *"don't want to, don't need to"* and Chihiro immediately left politely but seemed to be in a hurry when all the workers were focused on picking up the pile of gold which had fallen from Kaonashi's hands, who was again disappointed because of Chihiro's refusal. When all the workers were busy picking up the gold, Kaonashi in the end immediately swallowed the two workers in front of the other workers and makes everyone run around in panic because they just found out that Kaonashi can swallow people.

The next Kaonashi scene is when Chihiro is called by the boss of the bathhouse named Yubaba, the boss of the bathhouse, calling Chihiro to take responsibility for Kaonashi's dangerous entry into the bathhouse. Kaonashi gets bigger and snaps at all the workers, including Yubaba. He just wanted to meet Chihiro. When Chihiro was reunited with Kaonashi, Kaonashi offered Chihiro lots of food and gold, *"try eating this, it's delicious"*, *"or do you want gold? I decided just for you"*, *"come here"*, *"what do you want?"* with Kaonashi's voice changing like different people taking turns.



**Figure 7.** Kaonashi Tries to Get Chihiro  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

The conflict with Kaonashi occurs when Chihiro finally asks Kaonashi, *"Where did you come from? there's a place I want to go immediately"*, *"You'd better go back to your place, you definitely can't give me what I want"*, *"Where is your house? You must have a father and a mother, right?"* Chihiro's continuous questions made Kaonashi startled and he backed away slowly because he couldn't answer Chihiro's question, Kaonashi just mumbled repeatedly saying *"No...no..."*, *"Lonely...lonely..."* until finally Kaonashi came forward again and forced Chihiro to take the gold by force, Chihiro was still silent and didn't take the gold until finally Chihiro was the one who offered something this time to Kaonashi, namely the herbal medicine that she got from the river god, her first guest at that time. *"I actually wanted to give it to Mom and Dad, but it's for you now."* when Chihiro let Kaonashi eat it, Kaonashi immediately took out the food he had eaten last night, Kaonashi didn't know what Chihiro had just given him, making Kaonashi angry at Chihiro and chasing her out of the

room, the scene became a chase between Chihiro and Kaonashi, Chihiro continuing to run from the top floor to the bottom floor, Kaonashi who was continuously chasing Chihiro also gradually started to reduce his body size because he kept vomiting while chasing, to the point where Kaonashi vomited several bathhouse workers that Kaonashi had initially swallowed, it turned out that these workers were still alive all this time inside Kaonashi's stomach.



**Figure 8.** Kaonashi Chasing Chihiro  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

### 3. 3rd Kaonashi Transformation

Chihiro has left the bathing building, at the same time as Kaonashi has ended up returning to his initial form which looks limp and can only say "ah..", Chihiro continues to lure Kaonashi away from the bathing area, because Chihiro already knows that Kaonashi is dangerous if he stays still at bathing area.



**Figure 9.** Kaonashi's Size Returns to Normal and Followed Chihiro  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

However, when Chihiro was about to board the train to meet someone who could save Haku, Kaonashi wanted to come with Chihiro, and Chihiro also allowed him to accompany her on the trip. When they arrived at their destination, Chihiro met the twin of the bathhouse owner named Zeniba. Zeniba invites Chihiro to rest first from the long journey, Kaonashi is calmer, and Kaonashi is also taught to knit with Zeniba while Chihiro rests. When it turns out that Haku went to pick up Chihiro, Chihiro finds out that Haku has returned healthier than usual. Haku said that Chihiro could return to her human world with her parents who could also return to being humans as long as they returned to the bathhouse to terminate the labor contract and answer Yubaba's test questions. When Chihiro was about to return to the bathhouse with Haku and say goodbye to Zeniba, Zeniba asked Kaonashi to stay with her so they could help with Zeniba's homework together. Kaonashi nodded happily, at a glance Kaonashi's mask as he nodded showed a slight smile and his voice sounded more relieved.



**Figure 10.** Kaonashi Lives with Zeniba  
(Source: Spirited Away Animated Film, 2001)

In the first scene, Chihiro meets Kaonashi (in figure 2) which looks like a (sign). Kaonashi always kept quiet, didn't move or walk, just turned his head slowly at what he wanted to see, and didn't express anything. Projections of surrounding objects show that no one sees Kaonashi, such as when Chihiro and Haku walk on a bridge full of other spirits. The meaning (interpretant) seen in this scene is that no one cares about Kaonashi's existence, even though in fact everyone there can see him. Kaonashi was ignored by all the residents there, and only Chihiro who greeted Kaonashi.

In the scene of Kaonashi's slow transformation (in figure 6), a sign shows Kaonashi continuously changing until he becomes very big. The more often Kaonashi eats, the bigger Kaonashi's size increases. Initially, Kaonashi only had legs, then could speak with changing voices. Every time he swallows people, Kaonashi gains their voices, personalities, and ways of thinking.

In the projection of the surrounding objects, when Kaonashi was able to give a lot of gold, the workers cheered and served Kaonashi to ask for gold from him. They gave Kaonashi a lot of food until Kaonashi made a mess in the bath because Chihiro kept refusing whatever Kaonashi offered. Finally, Kaonashi vomited everything he had ever eaten because of the herbal medicine that Chihiro gave him.

The meaning (interpretant) of what Kaonashi does in the bath is that Kaonashi pays attention to the environment of the bath. During this time, Kaonashi never entered the bathhouse because it was forbidden by the owner even though the workers didn't know the reason. Kaonashi follows the culture embedded in the bathhouse that if he wants to be recognized, he must have something valuable.

Kaonashi followed the path of the river god who came to the bathhouse by bringing out a lot of gold from his hands so that he could be served by all the workers there and enjoy luxury. Because Kaonashi already knows how to be acknowledged by everyone, he becomes greedy wanting everything: recognition, food, and worldly pleasures. Even though he has everything now, there is still one thing he can't get, namely Chihiro. Chihiro was the first to greet him, and Kaonashi wanted to thank her. All this time, Kaonashi was lonely and wanted to be friends with Chihiro. However, due to the culture of the bathhouse environment, Kaonashi does not understand how to make friends, and this becomes an obsession with eating Chihiro. When Kaonashi vomits everything in his stomach because of Chihiro's herbal medicine, the meaning is that Chihiro expels all the greed that Kaonashi has swallowed, making him pure again. Kaonashi, who is always silent, looks listless, and is ignored by everyone, still follows Chihiro to Zeniba's house because only Chihiro still thinks Kaonashi 'exist' without having to have wealth.

In the scene while Kaonashi is at Zeniba's house (in picture 10), the sign shows that Kaonashi looks calmer, polite and obedient to Zeniba, unlike when he was in the bath. In the object projection, Zeniba immediately opened the door to her house when Chihiro, Kaonashi, and her two friends were already in front of Zeniba's house door. Zeniba invites Chihiro and the others to drink tea together. When Chihiro was about to go home with Haku, Zeniba offered Kaonashi to stay at her house, and Kaonashi happily agreed. The meaning (interpretant) contained during the scene at Zeniba's house



is that Kaonashi pays attention to the environment and culture around him. Zeniba's home environment is the opposite of Yubaba's bathhouse environment, where the bathhouse is a business place that prioritizes wages and guest service. Meanwhile, Zeniba's house is just a simple house where someone can live warmly.

All this time, Kaonashi just stayed on the bridge because he wasn't allowed to enter the bathhouse and wasn't considered because he didn't have anything. However, Zeniba allowed him into her house in a friendly manner without asking for anything in return. Zeniba's calm is followed by Kaonashi, who is happy to finally have a 'home'. Zeniba considers him existence without having to pay in gold, because they can help each other with housework. Chihiro's questions to Kaonashi at the bathhouse were finally answered one by one. Kaonashi's emergence started from nothingness and emptiness, without Father and Mother, but now he has Zeniba. When Chihiro returns to the bath with Haku, Chihiro still thinks Kaonashi exist and doesn't hate him, making Kaonashi feel 'enough' and 'relieved'.

## CONCLUSIONS

The character Kaonashi in the film "Spirited Away" represents emptiness, loneliness, and confusion. Through Peirce's semiotic approach, Kaonashi as a representamen shows various signs that reflect changes in character. The objects in the spirit bath influence Kaonashi to be greedy and capitalistic, reflecting a modern mindset where wealth and recognition are the main goals. However, when at Zeniba's house, the objects and environment make Kaonashi more docile and calm, reflecting a more positive environmental impact. The interpretation of this transformation is that Kaonashi's interaction and adaptation to his environment greatly influences his character development. Culture and environment greatly influence Kaonashi's character, reflecting the importance of social context in the formation of identity and behavior, as in human life throughout the world.

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