

AN ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS' MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FILM *GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES*

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ABSTRACT

*As time progresses, many literary works have been adapted into films, including animated films that often present moral values. One animated film that portrays moral values is *Grave of the Fireflies* by Isao Takahata. This study aims to analyze the forms of moral responsibility expressed by the main characters in *Grave of the Fireflies*. The research employs a qualitative method, using dynamic structuralism theory that examines the interrelationships among the elements of the story as a whole through two types of analysis: intrinsic analysis (characterization of the main characters, plot and conflict) and extrinsic analysis (Japanese cultural values). Furthermore, the analysis is supported by moral responsibility theory to identify and describe the forms of moral responsibility portrayed by the main characters. The results revealed that the main characters moral responsibility in this film is divided into two main forms. The first is Protective and Practical Responsibility, reflected in Seita's decision to care for and protect his younger sister, Setsuko. The second is Existential Moral Responsibility, evident in his decision to leave his aunt's house and the moral consequences that arise from his actions. These two forms of responsibility highlight the strong influence of Japanese cultural values (*bushidō* and *giri*) that emphasize honor, loyalty, sacrifice, and moral obligation toward the family. These findings highlight that *Grave of the Fireflies* not only portrays the destructive impact of war but also presents a profound reflection on humanity and moral responsibility within the context of Japanese culture.*

Keywords: film, anime, moral responsibility, the main character.

A. INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the understanding that literature and film are not merely forms of entertainment, but also serve as powerful tools for conveying important moral values such as responsibility, empathy, and

humanity. According to Nuriadi (2016:6), the word "literature" is derived from the Latin term *Litteratura*, meaning "writing". In line with this, Wellek and Warren (1993:14) define literature as a form of expression that mirrors human feelings and thoughts,

with language serving as the primary medium. In other words, literature represents the creative output of human beings, conveyed either in written or oral form, not merely to communicate information but also to present aesthetic value and profound meaning. In addition to written texts, literature also includes oral works that have been passed down across generations within various cultures. Therefore, literary works not only reflect the socio-cultural conditions of a society but also serve as a medium for contemplating various aspects of life, including moral values and individual responsibility.

Furthermore, with the advancement of time, economic growth, and technological progress, literature has changed its modes of presentation. One of the most notable transformations is the increasing number of literary works adapted into films. This phenomenon is not new; for decades, numerous literary works, such as novels and short story collections, have been brought to the big screen and received positive responses from the public. Adaptations allow stories that were once accessible only through written texts to come alive through visual and

audio elements. Through film, audiences can directly observe characters' expressions, understand the dynamics of relationships between characters, and experience atmospheres that enhance the delivery of moral and emotional messages within the story. This makes film a more accessible and relatable medium for a broader audience, including those who may not be accustomed to engaging with literature in its original written form.

Moreover, one of the film genres that is often used to convey moral values is animation. Although frequently perceived as entertainment for children, animated films often possess profound narratives that address serious issues, including themes of morality and human responsibility. With captivating visuals and strong storylines, animated films serve as an effective medium for imparting life values and shaping the character of their audiences. In many animated films, the main characters are often placed in difficult situations that require them to make decisions based on moral principles such as courage, perseverance, and responsibility.

One example of an anime/animated film that explores moral values is *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*), directed by Isao Takahata. This film is not merely a work of fiction it is adapted from the semi-autobiographical novel by Akiyuki Nosaka, which is based on his personal experiences during World War II. Nosaka lost his younger sister to starvation after the war, and through this work, he sought to reflect his feelings of guilt and sorrow over his inability to protect his family. Therefore, the film possesses a profound emotional depth in portraying a realistic depiction of the suffering endured by orphaned children during wartime.

This film was selected as the object of study in this research because it presents moral values, particularly the concept of moral responsibility, which serves as the main focus of this study. The selection of this film is based on several key reasons. First, *Grave of the Fireflies* explicitly portrays the theme of moral responsibility through the relationship between a brother and sister struggling to survive amidst the devastation of war. Seita, the older brother, bears full responsibility for

caring for his younger sister, Setsuko, despite his own vulnerable condition. Second, the film offers a perspective on how war affects not only political and economic structures but also directly destroys the lives of individuals, especially children who lose parental protection. In this context, the moral responsibility depicted in the film is not only an individual obligation but also reflects a societal failure to protect vulnerable groups. Indirectly, the film invites us to reflect on how social systems can fail to safeguard those most in need. Unlike other war films that often depict battle scenes, *Grave of the Fireflies* presents a realistic portrayal of the suffering of war victims, particularly children. It shows that the impact of war extends beyond the battlefield, devastating the lives of powerless civilians, especially children who are the most vulnerable victims. Through its touching narrative and stark visual depiction of post-war hardships, the film serves as a powerful reminder that such human tragedies must never be allowed to happen again.

B. METHOD

This study use a qualitative method, aiming to explore and

understand the meanings that individuals or groups assign to a social or humanitarian issue. As explained by Creswell (2009:3-4), qualitative research involves a process that focuses on gaining in-depth understanding of individuals or groups ascribing to a social or human problem through the collection of non-numerical data such as words and interpretative analysis.

Sources of Data

The data consists of the film *Grave of the Fireflies*, directed by Isao Takahata, which serves as the main object of analysis. Specifically, the data collected from the film include, transcripts of dialogues that are related to moral responsibility and visual scenes that depict actions, body language, facial expressions, and interactions between the main characters and their environment or other characters relevant to moral responsibility. These will be interpreted using a qualitative approach, in line with the theoretical framework of dynamic structuralism theory and moral responsibility theory.

Data Collection

The data are collected through several stages, including downloading the film *Grave of the Fireflies* along

with its transcripts of dialogue, repeatedly watching the film to gain a deeper understanding of the main characters, the conflicts they faced, and the emotional and visual contexts that enhance the meaning of each scene, and documenting relevant data in the form of screenshots from the specific scenes and quotations from dialogues that reflect the theme of moral responsibility. The selected scenes are those that depict the actions and decisions by the main characters, particularly in the responsibility between Seita toward his younger sister, Setsuko.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

The study used dynamic structuralism theory which examines the interrelationships among the elements of the story as a whole through two types of analysis: Intrinsic Analysis (characterization of the main characters, plot and conflict) and Extrinsic Analysis (Japanese cultural values). In addition, the analysis will be supported by moral responsibility theory to identify and describe the forms of moral responsibility portrayed by the main characters. Based on moral responsibility theory by Carlos

J. Moya (2006), the analysis revealed four instances of protective & practical responsibility, and six instances of existential moral responsibility portrayed and expressed in specific scenes of the film.

Thus, by applying this approach, two forms of moral responsibility in the film can be identified: Protective & Practical Responsibility (Seita's decision to care for Setsuko) and Existential Moral Responsibility (Seita's decision to leave his aunt's house and the consequences of Seita's decisions on Setsuko's fate).

Discussions

The first stage involves the intrinsic analysis, which examines the primary focus that lies on how the narrative elements, particularly characterization of the main characters, plot and conflict, construct the overall meaning of the film. The character of Seita becomes the main focus of this analysis due to the complexity of his characterization throughout the film.

a) Characterization of the main characters, particularly Seita, as a parental substitute for his younger sister, Setsuko (protective and practical responsibility)

1. Protective and practical responsibility (00:36:18-00:37:50)



Picture 1 the kimono exchange scene

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the kimono exchange scene serves as a pivotal moment that reveals Seita's moral responsibility amid the harsh realities of war. In this scene, Seita faces a painful moral dilemma that embodies both protective and practical responsibility.

From the perspective of protective responsibility, Seita carries the role of an older brother and substitute parent, tasked with safeguarding Setsuko's well-being. The kimono, a precious keepsake from their late mother, symbolizes love, memory, and family honor. However, the scarcity of food forces Seita to choose between preserving this sentimental symbol or trading it for rice to survive. His decision illustrates that moral responsibility involves not

only emotional attachment but also the duty to protect life itself.

Meanwhile, through practical responsibility, Seita understands that survival demands realistic decisions. As Moya asserts, moral responsibility lies not only in the result but in thoughtful reflection before acting. By Seita's hesitation before agreeing to his aunt's suggestion reflects his deep awareness of the moral weight behind his choice. This inner conflict becomes more evident when Setsuko cries, "*No! They're Mama's! You can't take them!*", that revealing both her emotional pain and Seita's struggle between preserving memory and ensuring survival.

Furthermore, from Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, this scene carries cultural depth. Because in Japanese tradition, the kimono represents honor, identity, and family respect. Influenced by *Bushidō* (the code of honor) and *Giri* (social obligation), where Seita's decision mirrors the moral tension between dignity and necessity a choice between cultural ideals and survival. Thus, by trading the kimono, Seita transforms the act into moral repayment (*on*), honoring his mother's love by securing Setsuko's life. In

short, this demonstrates that in times of war, individuals are often compelled to sacrifice personal ideals to uphold the most fundamental human responsibilities protection and the will to survive.

2. Protective and practical responsibility (00:46:23-00:47:20)



Picture 2 the scene when Seita carries Setsuko during an air raid

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene in which Seita carries Setsuko during an air raid illustrates a form of moral responsibility protective and practical.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, Seita's action goes beyond the natural bond of siblings. It reflects his moral awareness and sense of duty as a protector in a life-threatening situation. As Moya explains, moral responsibility is not only judged by the outcome of one's actions but also by the awareness and ethical intention behind them. In this moment, Seita acts swiftly and decisively, prioritizing

Setsuko's safety over his own. This demonstrates protective responsibility a conscious choice to protect others despite personal risk. At the same time, his immediate and rational action shows practical responsibility, the ability to translate good intentions into effective, concrete behavior. His decision reveals that true responsibility is not limited to emotion but realized through moral action.

Furthermore, through the lens of dynamic structuralism, Seita's behavior reflects the deep influence of Japanese cultural values, particularly *giri* (social obligation) and *bushidō* (code of honor). These values emphasize loyalty, sacrifice, and courage. Thus, by using his own body as a "living shield" for Setsuko, Seita embodies these ideals and symbolizes devotion rooted in cultural and moral tradition. Yet, this act also exposes the tragedy of war that children like Seita are forced to assume adult responsibilities due to the collapse of societal protection. Even so, he continues to uphold the moral teachings of his family and culture.

3. Protective and practical responsibility (00:55:30-00:56:20)



Picture 3 the scene when Seita embraces Setsuko

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene where Seita carries Setsuko during an air raid illustrates both protective and practical forms of moral responsibility.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, Seita's action goes beyond a simple sibling bond. It reflects moral awareness and a sense of duty as a protector in the face of danger. As Moya emphasizes, moral responsibility is not judged solely by outcomes but by conscious intention and ethical awareness. Seita's quick decision to prioritize Setsuko's safety over his own demonstrates protective responsibility a deliberate choice to safeguard another despite personal risk. At the same time, his calm and effective response reveals practical responsibility, showing that genuine

morality lies not only in emotion but in decisive, purposeful action.

Meanwhile, through the lens of dynamic structuralism, Seita's behavior reflects the cultural influence of Japanese values such as *giri* (social obligation) and *bushidō* (the code of honor), which emphasize loyalty, sacrifice, and courage. Thus, by using his own body as a shield, Seita embodies these ideals and demonstrates devotion rooted in both cultural and moral tradition. However, this act also reveals the tragedy of war, where children like Seita are forced to take on adult responsibilities due to the collapse of social protection. Even in such hardship, he continues to uphold the moral teachings of his family and culture.

4. Protective and practical responsibility (01:25:18-01:25:52)

Picture 4 the final scene



Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the final scene of the film when Seita gently tells

Setsuko, "*It's late. Go to sleep now*" represents the culmination of Seita's protective and practical responsibility. In this moment, Seita fulfills his protective duty as an elder brother who seeks to comfort and guard his sister, while his practical responsibility is reflected in his calm and caring actions, ensuring Setsuko's peaceful rest. Although both siblings have already died, Seita's sense of responsibility endures beyond physical life. His words serve not only as a farewell but also as a symbolic affirmation of eternal guardianship, showing his continuous care even after death.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, Seita's act embodies awareness and inner reflection key elements that define moral responsibility according to Moya. His statement reflects a deep moral consciousness, suggesting that true responsibility extends beyond action into intention and emotional depth.

Meanwhile, through the lens of dynamic structuralism, the scene gains meaning from the interaction between text and Japanese culture. The phrase "*Go to sleep now*" functions as a metaphor for eternal

rest and reflects cultural values of acceptance, peace, and familial loyalty after death.

In short, this final scene transcends the story's ending it becomes a touching moral reflection, showing that love, duty, and compassion can persist even beyond the boundaries of life and death.

b) Plot and conflict (existential moral responsibility)

1. Existential moral responsibility
(00:49:07-00:49:45)



Picture 1 the scene when Seita decides to leave his aunt's house

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene where Seita decides to leave his aunt's house serves as a pivotal moment that reveals his existential moral responsibility.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, Seita's choice is not impulsive but the result of conscious reflection and moral awareness. As Moya emphasizes,

moral responsibility is measured not merely by outcomes but by an individual's understanding of the moral values behind their actions. In this sense, Seita demonstrates maturity by recognizing his duty to protect Setsuko not only physically but also emotionally, preserving her dignity and happiness.

Moreover, Seita's decision reflects what Moya terms "*rational wants*" desires aligned with moral principles rather than emotional impulses. Though aware of the risks, he chooses independence over humiliation, valuing dignity above comfort. Yet, this idealism leads to tragedy, showing the tension between security with shame and freedom with risk. Through this, Seita embodies existential courage the willingness to act according to one's beliefs despite painful consequences.

From the lens of dynamic structuralism, his action also reflects Japanese cultural values such as *bushidō* (the code of honor) and *giri* (social obligation). Thus, by rejecting his aunt's authority, Seita symbolically refuses degradation and upholds his family's honor. As Mukarovsky, cited by Teeuw, suggests, such actions gain meaning through their

relationship with the broader cultural and historical context in this case, Japan during wartime.

2. Existential moral responsibility (00:59:20-01:00:15)



Picture 2 the scene when Seita talks
with a farmer

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene where Seita speaks with the farmer serves as a key moment that reveals his existential moral responsibility.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, Moya emphasizes that true responsibility involves not only good intentions but also awareness of the consequences of someone's actions. This is reflected when Seita rejects the farmer's advice to return to his aunt's house. Although his decision stems from a noble desire to protect his dignity and shield Setsuko from mistreatment, it unintentionally worsens her condition due to hunger. This moment therefore captures the moral tension between

pure intention and tragic consequence.

Moreover, the scene highlights Seita's internal conflict between dignity and survival. That returning to his aunt's home could ensure safety but require humiliation, while independence preserves honor but invites hardship. Despite the risks, Seita's choice demonstrates moral courage and his sense of duty as an older brother who upholds family honor.

From the lens of dynamic structuralism, Seita's act also embodies Japanese cultural values such as *bushidō* and *giri*. Thus, his refusal to rely on his aunt is not mere stubbornness but a culturally rooted assertion of integrity against degradation.

In short, this scene highlights how, even amid desperation, Seita faces moral choices that balance principle and survival. His decision reflects the essence of existential moral responsibility: the courage to act with integrity, even when such choices lead to suffering.

3. Existential moral responsibility
(01:06:12-01:06:20)



Picture 3 the scene when Setsuko begins to hallucinate

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene where Setsuko begins to hallucinate marks the culmination of Seita's existential moral responsibility. At this point, Setsuko's severe condition reflects the tragic outcome of Seita's earlier decisions.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory, this moment reveals more than Seita's sorrow it shows his painful awareness that he can no longer save his sister. His silent, empty expression signifies the realization that his choices, though driven by love and the desire to protect family honor, have instead led them toward tragedy. As Moya states, moral responsibility is not defined solely by good intentions but by the awareness of their consequences. Seita's decision to leave his aunt's house for

the sake of dignity and independence, therefore, becomes a moral awakening a recognition that his actions have deepened Setsuko's suffering.

Meanwhile, from the lens of dynamic structuralism, Seita's actions are shaped by Japan's cultural values, particularly *bushidō* and *giri*. Where these influence his refusal to return to his aunt's home, a culturally understandable yet morally burdensome choice. In short, this scene captures Seita's tragic moral conflict between survival and dignity that highlighting the weight of responsibility that comes with choosing principle over safety.

4. Existential moral responsibility
(01:08:00-01:08:30)



Picture 4 the scene when Seita collect items from abandoned houses

Based on the moral responsibility theory by Moya and dynamic structuralism theory developed by Teeuw, the scene in which Seita takes advantage of an air

raid situation to collect items from abandoned houses can be understood as a concrete example of existential moral responsibility.

From the perspective of moral responsibility theory by Moya, moral accountability is not only related to legal rules or normative ethical standards but also involves an individual's deep awareness of the consequences of their actions, especially under extreme conditions. In this scene, it can be said that Seita is not portrayed as a thief acting out of greed or personal gain. Rather, his actions are driven by a full awareness that he is the sole protector of his younger sister, Setsuko. In other words, Seita understands that if he does not act quickly in such a manner, Setsuko will continue to starve and edge closer to death.

Moreover, from the perspective of dynamic structuralism theory developed by Teeuw, Seita's behavior in this situation cannot be separated from the cultural context of wartime Japan, in which the social order had collapsed, resources were scarce, and state protection for its citizens, especially children, was virtually nonexistent.

Furthermore, within this context, Seita's actions can be seen as an individual's response to an extreme situation in which the social system fails to fulfill its basic functions. He not only embodies the struggle of an older brother trying to save his sister but also symbolizes the broader human struggle for survival amidst the collapse of social structures. Additionally, Seita's decision is influenced by Japanese cultural values such as the *bushidō* (code of honor), which emphasizes courage and honor, and the concept of *giri* (Japanese social obligation), which demands loyalty and responsibility toward one's family. In short, the existential moral responsibility carried by Seita in this moment illustrates that in times of crisis, one may be compelled to break societal norms to uphold deeper moral obligations toward loved ones.

5. Existential moral responsibility (01:17:55-01:19:33)



Picture 5 the climax scene

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory, this scene represents the emotional climax of Seita's existential moral burden as an older brother. From the beginning, Seita is shown struggling tirelessly to protect his sister, Setsuko stealing food, selling his mother's belongings, and sacrificing his pride all in the hope of keeping her alive. However, as Setsuko's condition worsens, Seita gradually realizes that his efforts may have come too late. Despite this painful awareness, he continues to care for her, showing his unwavering love and responsibility even in despair. When Setsuko smiles faintly and says, "*Nii-chan... thank you,*" it serves as a quiet yet devastating farewell before her death, marking the most heartbreaking point in the film.

From Moya's perspective, Seita's moral responsibility extends beyond good intentions; it lies in his rational awareness of his limitations. He knows that Setsuko is suffering and that his choices, however well-intentioned, cannot change her fate. Thus, his burden reflects the intersection between love, duty, and helplessness. In short, this moment reveals that moral responsibility does not always lead to success or

redemption. Instead, it reaches its highest expression in the sincerity to keep trying and caring, even when all hope has already vanished.

6. Existential moral responsibility (01:22:52-01:24:55)



Picture 6 Setsuko's cremation scene

Based on Moya's moral responsibility theory and Teeuw's dynamic structuralism, the scene of Setsuko's cremation represents the final expression of Seita's existential moral responsibility as an older brother. Although he failed to save Setsuko's life, Seita continues to fulfill his last duty with deep love, respect, and devotion.

From the perspective of Moya's theory, moral responsibility is not measured by success or failure but by sincere intention, awareness, and the courage to act despite tragic outcomes. Seita's decision to carry out the cremation alone, without seeking help, reflects his unwavering commitment to care for and honor his sister until her final moment.

From the lens of dynamic structuralism, this act also reflects Japanese cultural values that view personal involvement in a loved one's cremation as the highest form of devotion. For Seita, this moment becomes not only a ritual of farewell but also a way to atone for his guilt and complete his moral responsibility.

The second stage, namely the extrinsic analysis it can be observed that *Grave of the Fireflies* cannot only be understood as a standalone text, but also as part of a complex Japanese cultural values that enhance the meaning of each scene.

a) Japanese cultural values (*bushidō* and *giri*)

1. Bushidō: The way of the warrior/code of honor

Bushidō is a moral code embraced by the samurai in Japan, which encompasses values such as honor, courage, loyalty, responsibility, and self-sacrifice. Nitobe (1908:146-150) explains that the spirit of *Bushidō* is not limited to the samurai class alone, but has spread to all levels of Japanese society. This can be seen in the film, where the values of *Bushidō* are strongly reflected in the character of Seita that influences his decisions and actions. Although he never

explicitly declares that he is willing to sacrifice for his younger sister, Setsuko, his actions show his full commitment to his responsibilities as an older brother.

Just like a samurai who is willing to die for honor, Seita also embodies this principle. Although he may have failed practically because he did not survive, but he succeeded morally because he never abandoned his responsibility as a brother to his sister until the end of his life. Therefore, although Seita is not a samurai by status, he is a manifestation of *Yamato Damashii*, or "the soul of the Japanese people," a spirit that upholds honor, integrity, and responsibility, even in the darkest of times. He serves as a living example that *Bushidō* values still exist, not merely as historical heritage, but as guiding principles that can lead a person to live with dignity.

2. Giri: Japanese social obligations

Giri can be understood as a moral obligation, social responsibility, and a debt of gratitude that must be repaid even if it conflicts with one's desires, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships in Japan such as between parents and children.

This concept is clearly reflected in the film, particularly in Seita's actions. Because for Seita, caring for Setsuko is not merely an expression of sibling affection; it is also a form of repaying the sacrifices made by their parents. By protecting Setsuko, Seita sees himself as fulfilling a debt of gratitude toward them. So in this, *Giri* becomes a powerful moral motivation that drives Seita to persevere even during times of crisis.

E. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

The results of this analysis show that there are two forms of moral responsibility portrayed and expressed by the main characters especially through the character of Seita. Seita not only serves as the central figure of the entire dynamic of moral responsibility presented in the film but also reflects a realistic depiction of moral responsibility that emerges under the pressure of circumstances, a burden that must be borne by a teenager in the midst of a wartime situation. That consisting four instances of protective and practical responsibility and six instances of existential moral responsibility.

And also, Japanese cultural values such as *Bushidō* and *Giri* add moral depth to Seita's behavior, showing that his moral struggle is not merely personal but also reflects the ethical values embedded within Japanese culture. These elements together form a cohesive moral narrative in which Seita's actions are understood not merely as efforts to survive, but also as manifestations of moral responsibility rooted in Japanese tradition and ethics. In short, this study concludes that *Grave of the Fireflies* transcends a mere story of wartime suffering. Instead, it reveals that human responsibility rooted in both culture and conscience will always persist, even in the midst of despair.

Suggestions

1. For future writer

To broaden the scope of the study, future writers may also explore other objects of study, such as analyzing short movies, novels, or other forms of media that are not limited to films. This is because the forms of moral responsibility can also be found and examined across various media.

2. For the readers

The writer hopes that the results of this study can be used as a means of moral reflection, particularly in understanding the importance of responsibility and empathy in everyday life. This is because, indirectly, the film *Grave of the Fireflies* can be utilized not only as a form of artistic appreciation but also as a meaningful educational medium for discussing human values and human dignity within the study of literature and film.

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