

The Price of Power: Commodification of Magic and Its Consequences in Howl's Moving Castle

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Abstract: *This paper addresses the theme of commodification in Hayao Miyazaki's Howl's Moving Castle, focusing on the intricate interplay between magic, power, and ethical dilemmas. While past studies have explored various aspects of the film, few have explicitly connected the commodification of magic to broader societal issues of exploitation and hierarchy, presenting a gap in the existing literature. Employing a qualitative analysis of the film's narrative and thematic elements, this study examines how magic serves both as a source of wonder and a reflection of the darker realities of power dynamics. Key findings reveal that the film illustrates the transformation of magic into a weapon, emphasizing the moral implications of such changes. The narrative highlights three primary themes: the weaponization of magic, its commodification, and the associated human costs. This exploration uncovers how authority figures exploit magical resources for personal gain, complicating the distinction between protector and destroyer while exposing systemic inequalities. In conclusion, Howl's Moving Castle not only critiques the destructive impact of hierarchical systems but also suggests the potential for harmony when resources are managed responsibly. The film's nuanced portrayal of conflict, devoid of clear heroes or villains, serves as a timeless reminder of the far-reaching consequences of ambition and exploitation. This analysis implies that understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing contemporary issues of power and resource management, urging a re-evaluation of humanity's relationship with nature and each other to avoid repeating past mistakes.*

Keywords: Commodification, Magic, Howl's Moving Castle

1. Introduction

World-building serves as a compelling lens through which to interpret texts, inviting audiences to explore the complexities of imagined realms. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001, p. 91) argues that fictional worlds present an "always-incomplete image," prompting viewers to infer and analyze their broader implications. This interplay of the "unsaid" (Macherey, 1978) enriches the meaning-making process, as existing gaps in the narrative are filled by audiences based on their unique worldviews and horizons of expectation, thereby fostering personal interpretation.

In the narrative of *Howl's Moving Castle*, this concept is profoundly embodied in the portrayal of magic—a force that not only inspires awe but also unveils the darker undercurrents of commodification and human exploitation. Magic emerges as a multifaceted symbol within the story world, reflecting both the allure and peril of power. As characters navigate their ambitions

and ethical dilemmas, the narrative challenges viewers to confront the consequences of wielding such power.

This paper aims to unravel the theme of the commodification of magic in Miyazaki's film adaptation of *Howl's Moving Castle*, examining how it mirrors societal values and exposes the intricate tensions between desire and morality.

2. Literature Review

Sára Trávníčková's article (2024) evaluates Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 film adaptation of *Howl's Moving Castle* and its relationship to the original 1986 novel by Diana Wynne Jones. While acknowledging significant divergences in themes, characters, and narrative structure, the analysis argues that the adaptation preserves the novel's essence. Miyazaki narrows the thematic scope, predominantly focusing on love and war while retaining the core message. This article justifies our choice to use Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* as a primary source for our analysis, demonstrating how it reinterprets and enriches the original narrative. The film's visual medium facilitates a unique and emotionally resonant retelling, particularly through its imagery and world-building. The deliberate choices Miyazaki made in character design, thematic emphasis, and visual symbolism offer new dimensions for analysis, especially concerning how adaptations tailor stories for different audiences and media.

Similarly, Delić's (2024) study compares two novels by Diana Wynne Jones, including *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Charmed Life*, to Miyazaki's animated adaptation. The aim is to examine how authors create immersive fantasy worlds by blending realistic elements—such as space, time, history, societal structure, and magic—with the fantastical. Miyazaki's adaptation retains the novel's core narrative but expands its visual and thematic scope. The film intricately incorporates war, death, metamorphosis, and European influences, reflecting Miyazaki's personal experiences and anti-war sentiments. Futuristic flying machines and European-inspired cities contrast with Japanese landscapes, while Shintoism serves as an important motif, further elucidating the film's themes by illustrating how the castle symbolizes a shrine and bathing represents purification. The film's magic system mirrors real-world power dynamics, with themes of identity and transformation emphasized through Howl and Sophie's physical changes.

Building on previous scholarship, Frymire (2024) explores how Studio Ghibli adapts novels, with a specific focus on the portrayal of young female protagonists and their journeys of self-discovery. The study argues that Studio Ghibli's adaptations provide a unique perspective on female characters by emphasizing their internal growth, agency, and capacity for self-love. The section on *Howl's Moving Castle* examines Sophie's transformation from an insecure young woman to someone who advocates for herself and others. It highlights how the film underscores themes of self-love and acceptance, with the relationship between Sophie and Howl being pivotal to their individual growth. Studio Ghibli's adaptations reimagine traditional archetypes by creating complex female characters with flaws who overcome both internal and external challenges. The films also present a more balanced view of masculinity, showcasing male characters who often require support from their female counterparts. Overall, the studio's focus on nuanced female characters, combined with its distinctive animation style, positions its films as significant contributions to both the world of animation and literature.

While not solely focused on one particular film, Sharayu Gangurde and Venkatesh Bhagat's article (2024) examines how landscapes in Studio Ghibli films serve as a medium for exploring

the themes presented, particularly the human-environment relationship. These landscapes, rendered with visual richness, reflect cultural and environmental narratives, emphasizing the consequences of environmental degradation. By challenging traditional notions of landscape design, the article underscores how cinematic landscapes foster a deeper understanding of environmental concerns and human relationships with nature through dynamic and imaginative visuals. This framework allows for viewing the film's landscapes not merely as visual backdrops but as integral components of its immersive world, reflecting the interplay between environment and society. Bartolomei, Ippolito, and Mezzino (2023) also explore the central role of landscape in Miyazaki's films, emphasizing how his depictions transcend mere visuals to convey symbolic meanings and foster emotional connections between viewers and the depicted worlds. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, the fairy-tale atmosphere is brought to life through bustling towns, lush meadows, rolling hills, and the wandering castle, which adapts to the characters' emotional states. By analyzing color, lines, and shapes, the study reveals Miyazaki's artistic intent and the emotional depth of his landscapes, underscoring their role in crafting immersive, ecologically conscious narratives.

Jack Collins (2022) similarly identifies architecture as another motif Miyazaki employs in his world-building. This article frames Miyazaki's approach as an organic, architectural process, providing insight into how he begins with sketches and allows stories to develop naturally, resulting in immersive and dynamic worlds—a key factor in *Howl's Moving Castle*. The film's focus on balancing industry and nature is mirrored in the portrayal of the moving castle as both a technological marvel and a space imbued with humanity and magic, reinforcing the layered, morally complex world Miyazaki constructs.

In addition, Xinnia Ejaz's article (2022) argues that the film intertwines Howl's personal growth with a critique of war, using his character arc to explore themes of responsibility, love, and humanity's destructive impulses. Howl's reluctance to engage in war reflects his fear of moral compromise and self-destruction, symbolized by his monstrous transformations. This analysis connects Howl's growth to Miyazaki's broader critique of war as a senseless, dehumanizing endeavor. By emphasizing Howl's journey as a struggle to retain humanity and individuality amidst destructive forces—both external (war) and internal (fear and selfishness)—the article provides a framework for understanding his transformation as both a personal and political statement. This perspective enriches our analysis of *Howl's Moving Castle* by demonstrating how Miyazaki utilizes individual growth to comment on the collective human condition, aligning with his overarching anti-war ethos.

Conversely, while existing research delves into topics such as adaptation, coming-of-age narratives, and war, Al-Rawi Ghaydaa (2025) focuses on how loneliness shapes the protagonists, Sophie and Howl. Sophie's journey is characterized by feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and her struggle to find beauty and worth within herself. Similarly, Howl's eccentric behaviors and avoidance of responsibility suggest his own form of loneliness. By connecting these elements, the paper highlights how their individual struggles with loneliness draw them together. It references visual and narrative choices in the film that intensify these themes, providing a richer understanding of the characters' emotional states. This analysis adds depth to Howl's character, framing his escapist tendencies as responses to his own isolation and chaotic surroundings. Furthermore, the emphasis on the adaptation's cinematographic techniques offers valuable insight into how Miyazaki visually portrays these emotional undertones.

Additionally, Kucenski (2022) employs three of Hayao Miyazaki's films, including *Howl's Moving Castle*, to explore the theme of pacifism and its rendering in the soundscape, including dialogue, sound effects, and especially music. Kucenski analyzes musical cues, utilizing piano reductions transcribed aurally alongside scene cue sheets that detail timecodes, shot descriptions, sound effects, dialogue, music presence, and general comments. The study focuses on two pivotal scenes: the "City Bombing" and "Flower Garden." The former alludes to the Dies Irae and Tarnhelm progression, associated with death and evil, while the augmented triad connects to violence and chaos. A descending parallel trichord motive is linked to characters who have lost their humanity. Conversely, the latter scene develops a main theme through changes in texture, instrumentation, and meter, transitioning into pastoral qualities that ultimately disrupt the peace. Kucenski's findings reveal that Miyazaki and Hisaishi integrate music, sound, and visuals to convey complex themes of pacifism and anti-war sentiment.

In relation to this, Roy (2022) further explores how anti-war messages are conveyed in *Howl's Moving Castle* using the concept of the picturesque, as defined by William Gilpin. Initially an aesthetic ideal emphasizing roughness, decay, and asymmetry, the picturesque evolved post-World War I to represent the devastation and suffering caused by conflict. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, the picturesque manifests in war ruins, chaotic architecture, and character transformations. The film employs the picturesque to underscore the absurdity of war while emphasizing themes of metamorphosis. This aesthetic is not merely for visual pleasure but serves as a conscious tool for delivering anti-war messages, reinforcing that Miyazaki and his collaborators do not utilize the picturesque for mere aesthetic enjoyment but as a powerful means to convey significant themes.

Halpin (2022) examines *Howl's Moving Castle* as a powerful tool for resisting issues of neoliberal capitalism, arguing that directors like Miyazaki, who have experienced resistance to capitalism and authoritarianism, use their work to offer new narratives and reimagine life. This study explains how the film portrays war as pointless and driven by greed, with characters like the Witch of the Waste and Madame Suliman depicted as victims of systemic oppression rather than inherent evil. *Howl* challenges capitalist values by rejecting constant productivity in favor of idleness. The film emphasizes human connection, as the characters form a "family" to foster a better world, blending nature with technology to resist exploitative systems. Visual contrasts highlight the destruction wrought by war and capitalist aggression, while the notion of "breathing space" promotes compassion and reflection. Through these elements, *Howl's Moving Castle* critiques oppression, fosters empathy, and inspires action toward a more just and sustainable world.

Lastly, Ayatllahi and Afarin (2024) employ Martin Heidegger's philosophy to analyze existential death, using *Howl's Moving Castle* as a case study. This analysis focuses on Sophie's journey toward authenticity as she confronts death, particularly her transition from inauthenticity to authenticity. Key concepts such as Dasein, authentic versus inauthentic existence, and the role of anxiety in revealing Dasein's true self are explored. The article argues that Sophie initially lives inauthentically; however, after being cursed, she experiences the urgency and anxiety of her mortality. This catalyzes her journey toward taking responsibility for her life, making her own choices, and understanding herself, aligning with Heidegger's notion of authentic living. The animation's visual and narrative techniques, including changes in Sophie's appearance and the use of color, reflect her existential transformation. The study concludes that Sophie's confrontation with death and aging acts as a catalyst for her personal growth, demonstrating how the film effectively depicts Heidegger's ideas on existential death.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This analysis employs the concepts of commodification as articulated by Russel Belk (2020, p. 31), who asserts that “commodification can make what were once intimate personal or shared family goods into assets exchangeable in the market.” This perspective underscores how the intrinsic value of personal connections and communal possessions can be diminished in favor of market-driven exchanges. Similarly, Margaret Jane Radin and Madhavi Sunder (2004, p. 3) describe commodification as a dynamic involving a relationship of ownership, where the subject (the owner) engages with the object (the thing owned).

These theoretical constructs resonate deeply within *Howl's Moving Castle*, suggesting that the commodification of magic extends beyond mere material goods to encompass the individuals who wield such powers.

In what ways are these individuals reduced to mere instruments of conflict, and how does this commodification strip them of their autonomy? This analysis posits that the film illustrates a hypothesis: when magic is commodified, does it serve as a metaphor for broader societal issues, particularly in how it mirrors the dehumanization experienced in contexts of war and unchecked authority?

Through its vivid world-building, *Howl's Moving Castle* explores the destructive consequences of centralizing power and exploiting resources, prompting viewers to consider the real-world parallels regarding the systematic dehumanization wrought by conflict.

Focusing on three key aspects of world-building—geopolitical and environmental features, social and economic structures, and technological advancements—this essay aims to analyze how the film showcases the commodification of magic and its profound impact on both individuals and society. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to illuminate the intricate interplay between power, commodification, and the moral ramifications that ensue within the narrative framework of *Howl's Moving Castle*. By framing these findings as questions, the analysis encourages a deeper exploration of the film's themes and their relevance to contemporary societal issues.

Analysis: The Price of Power in *Howl's Moving Castle*

Howl's Moving Castle invites viewers to explore the intricate relationship between magic, power, and the human experience. Central to the film are three interwoven subthemes: the weaponization of magic, the commodification of power, and the human cost of ambition. These elements suggest a range of ethical dilemmas faced by individuals and societies when extraordinary resources are manipulated for various purposes.

The weaponization of magic raises questions about how something once revered can be transformed into a tool of conflict, prompting viewers to consider the moral implications of such changes. The film highlights the ways in which authority figures may exploit magic for personal gain, often leaving innocent lives in jeopardy.

In examining the commodification of power, *Howl's Moving Castle* reflects on the societal patterns of dependency and exploitation that can arise during times of conflict. The trade and manipulation of magical resources may serve as a commentary on the complexities of treating essential aspects of life as mere commodities, complicating the distinction between protector and destroyer. This theme can be analyzed through the lens of Resource Dependence Theory, which suggests that power structures emerge when entities control essential resources, leading

to relationships of dominance and subjugation. By depicting magic as both a necessary asset and a potential weapon, *Howl's Moving Castle* illustrates how dependence on commodified power fuels systemic inequalities.

The narrative also touches on the human cost of ambition, as characters navigate the consequences of their choices within a world shaped by power dynamics. This aspect invites viewers to reflect on the personal sacrifices and moral dilemmas that emerge when individuals find themselves entangled in the struggles of authority and conflict.

Together, these subthemes form a rich framework that opens up avenues for reflection on the nature of power, the ethical use of resources, and the potential impact of choices on humanity. As we delve into these themes, we may uncover layers of meaning within the film's critique of societal structures and the complexities faced by those navigating a world where magic and ambition intersect.

a) The Commodification and Weaponization of Magic

We are introduced to the world of *Howl's Moving Castle* through Sophie Hatter's eyes. Together with Sophie, an unassuming young woman who is cursed by the Wicked Witch of the Waste out of jealousy, we see how magic bleeds into the ordinary life of the people of Ingary. In the first scenes of the movie, we see Howl use magic to harmlessly dismiss some soldiers who were disturbing Sophie. Shortly afterward, he uses magic to help him and Sophie walk on air, an act that leaves Sophie starstruck after they part. Magic is at its core an object of wonder, and we continue to see how it can bring little joys to the lives of people who use it. Howl and Markl sell magic in the form of potions and charms to the common folk. In this instance, magic is used as a remedy—one that can, for example, guarantee a ship's safety for travel. In the hands of those who wield it to help others, magic is indeed a resource that is highly valued.

But we soon learn that magic is not merely a mystical force; it is also a commodity manipulated by those in authority for destructive purposes. The film presents a striking commentary on how something inherently extraordinary can become a tool of oppression when subjected to commodification. This transformation invites viewers to reflect on the ethical implications of wielding power irresponsibly.

One poignant example is the weaponization of magic to fuel war machines, thereby distorting its original purpose as a force for wonder into an enabler of violence. The sight of airships powered by magical resources underscores this distortion, as they unleash havoc on cities and innocent civilians. This misuse of magic reflects the dehumanizing nature of war, where even the extraordinary is reduced to mere instruments of conflict. It raises critical questions: What sacrifices are made when magic becomes a weapon? How does the pursuit of power lead to the commodification of both resources and lives?

b) Commodification and Conflict

The film further illustrates the commodification of magic through its sale and trade, highlighting how both sides of a conflict seek to control this resource to advance their territorial ambitions under the guise of protection. The enchantments cast to shield territories often backfire, devastating the very people they were meant to protect. This duality of magic as both a protector and a destroyer illustrates the paradoxical consequences of exploiting such a resource without regard for its ethical implications. The visuals in the film, especially pertaining to nature such as the lush green hills and the bustling city of Ingary, give the

implication of wonder and peace not disrupted by warfare. However, the striking contrasts of the wastelands and battlefields serve as a social commentary to relate to a much bigger picture. The film further explores this idea when magic seems to reflect on the broader societal consequences. The wastelands, where Howl resides with his magical castle, are seemingly barren with no signs of other life forms. The dark and somber atmosphere depicts the changes in landscapes and the reality of the overexploitation of magic. The intentional usage of these kinds of visuals highlights how the overuse of magic can change what was once beautiful into something barren and unwanted. It mirrors how ecological disasters caused by over-extraction, due to the unethical way people with power—in this case, people with magic—use them for their own gain will only have a negative outcome in the long run. How does the commodification of magic reflect broader societal patterns of dependency and exploitation during wartime?

The theme of the commodification of power in *Howl's Moving Castle* aligns closely with Just War Theory, which evaluates the morality of war and its consequences (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2025). The film critiques the failure of *jus in bello* (justice in warfare), as magical warfare lacks proportionality and discriminates against civilians. Airships drop magical bombs that obliterate entire cities, and wizards transformed into monstrous beings wreak havoc without control, reflecting real-world instances where military technology, such as drone strikes or chemical weapons, is repurposed for widespread violence, often harming innocent people. By showcasing magic as both a source of wonder and a tool of devastation, *Howl's Moving Castle* critiques the unchecked militarization of power, emphasizing how, once commodified and weaponized, extraordinary resources are often wielded without regard for ethical consequences, leading to immense human suffering.

This critique resonates deeply with real-world situations, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where military resources originally intended for peaceful applications are repurposed for violence (AJLabs, 2023). For instance, white phosphorus, known for its beneficial uses in manufacturing, has been utilized as a weapon, injuring civilians and destroying homes. This mirrors the enchantments in *Howl's Moving Castle*, intended to protect but ultimately harming innocent civilians when misused. Such parallels compel viewers to consider the moral cost of treating resources as commodities, particularly when their misuse results in the suffering of innocents. In both the fictional world of the film and the real world, the commodification and weaponization of power often lead to ethical dilemmas and human suffering, highlighting the need for more conscientious handling of potentially dangerous resources.

c) The Human Cost of Power

Moreover, the film delves into the commodification of individuals who harness magic, reflecting real-life exploitation patterns. Those who master magic become targets for authorities, often drafted as soldiers or weapons. When pushed to their limits, they risk becoming monsters—both literally and figuratively—cursed by their actions in war. This transformation serves as a blatant demonstration of dehumanization, wherein individuals lose their humanity amidst conflict. Howl's refusal to participate in the war critiques this exploitation, mirroring the actions of conscientious objectors who resist being drawn into systems of violence.

This depiction connects to Biopolitics, a concept explored by Michel Foucault, which examines how power structures control human life (Arnason, 2012). In the film, wizards are treated as state assets rather than individuals with autonomy, reflecting how governments manipulate populations to sustain war efforts.

The film also explores the notion of human invention and its relationship with magic. While machines enhance human capabilities, magic allows for even greater power. However, as Howl utilizes magic to fuel his moving castle, he chooses not to wield it for destruction but rather to preserve his peaceful life. This choice underscores the film's message about the ethical use of power. The film further explores this when magic criticizes pollution, much like in real life. The technological advancements of battleships and war machines that conquer the air and ground simultaneously show how industrialization can lead to environmental devastation and highlights how pollution still happens if man-made advancements are not kept in check. The smoke emitted into the air during times of warfare conforms to this idea too, highlighting that nature is severely affected once again when the use of natural resources is overused with no ethical implications in sight. How can magic, much like nature, be harnessed for positive ends instead of destruction?

The character of Madame Suliman epitomizes unchecked authority amplified by war. Operating within the royal court—a setting of luxury and privilege—she remains detached from the chaos her decisions cause. Her greenhouse, symbolizing life, starkly contrasts with the devastation of war zones, illuminating the elite's disconnection from their actions' consequences. Through her coercive manipulation of wizards like Howl, who are stripped of their autonomy, the film critiques how hierarchical systems exploit individuals for war while shielding those in power from its repercussions.

The transformation of wizards into grotesque, birdlike monsters serves as a vivid metaphor for the psychological toll of war on veterans. This loss of humanity and identity resonates with real-world phenomena such as PTSD, emphasizing the moral and emotional scars left by combat. Howl's struggle to reclaim his humanity reflects the broader challenge faced by those complicit in violence, raising questions about the cost of power and its impact on individuals.

Ultimately, *Howl's Moving Castle* critiques the commodification of magic and its users, illustrating how power perpetuates conflict and dehumanizes individuals. The authoritarian structures depicted highlight a classist dynamic, where decisions made by the elite disproportionately affect the lower classes. By framing these discussions through the lens of commodification and power, the film urges viewers to reflect on the moral ramifications of their choices and the human cost of ambition, warning against reducing something profound like magic to a means of warfare.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Howl's Moving Castle* reflects the complexities of the real world in profound ways. This analysis reveals that the commodification of magic serves as a metaphor for humanity's exploitation of power, nature, and its resources. By exploring the weaponization of magic, its role as a service, and the ethical dilemmas it creates, the film critiques the destructive impact of hierarchical systems, paralleling real-world conflicts where the pursuit of power often leads to significant human and environmental suffering.

Moreover, the film suggests that magic can coexist with nature, as exemplified by Howl's use of his abilities to protect his loved ones. This portrayal highlights the potential for harmony and growth when natural resources are managed responsibly. Ultimately, *Howl's Moving Castle* underscores the consequences of commodification, illustrating how the exploitation of resources can lead to the dehumanization of individuals.

The film refrains from depicting clear heroes or villains, instead presenting a nuanced view of war as inherently detrimental. This choice emphasizes the cruelty and far-reaching effects of conflict on the world, intentionally avoiding sympathy for the nations involved. The themes of exploitation, conflict, and the ethical use of power serve as a timeless critique of war and its devastating consequences, suggesting that humanity may find no escape from such patterns if it continues down the same path.

Magic, portrayed as both a destructive and restorative force, acts as a metaphor for humanity's choices, reminding viewers that the possibility of coexistence and harmony is always within reach. This relevance highlights the effectiveness of world-building in critiquing past conflicts while serving as a cautionary tale for the future, urging us to avoid repeating the mistakes of our predecessors. As we reflect on these themes, *Howl's Moving Castle* encourages a deeper understanding of the importance of ethical stewardship of power and resources, and the imperative for compassion in the face of adversity.

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