

When Did I Stop Taking Long Walks In the Rain? Have I Fallen Out of Love With the Clouds in the Sky?

I never really considered such questions until the last few weeks of this year. The question being of nature, childhood and my awkward and tiring love-hate relationship with outside, which loomed excessively over me like a rain cloud of memories and emotions this past weekend when I watched *Weathering With You* (2019) with some of my online friends (a cliché metaphor, I know). We decided to watch this film a few weeks ago after we had all watched *Your Name* (2016) which is the first movie in whatever cinematic universe Makoto Shinkai, the films' writer and director, is creating (both movies take place in the same universe around roughly the same time). *Weathering With You* follows the story of a boy named Hodaka Morishima who's just recently ran away from his troubled home life to escape to the big city of Tokyo in hopes of starting to live freely as an adult. In his escape, he encounters a girl named Hina who through a twist of fate is given the ability to change the rainy weather that has been showering over the city for the past few months to sunny summer days with a single prayer. Throughout the film, Hina and Hodaka embark on a romantic journey across Tokyo to stop the rain upon community request in hopes of bringing a brighter, livelier tenderness to the streets of the otherwise gloomy, overworked city. In the simplest of terms, this movie entails a story that describes how as children, nature is our first true exposure to honest, raw love and how with age, that love begins to dwindle out into nothingness as the responsibilities and burdens of adulthood overpower our perception of the world around us.

In this piece I want to discuss how the social narrative around adulthood reshapes our relationship with nature, specifically drawing from personal experiences and revelations I had

while watching Shinkai's *Weathering With You*. I will be breaking this essay down into 2 parts for clarity. The first part will focus on the theoretical understanding of narrative and how this conceptualises our ideas of identity in the beginning of one's integration into adulthood and how this by extension creates a new relationship between grown ups and the natural world. The second part of the essay will be going into reflection of my own self identification as a young adult in retrospect to nature and how it differs from my past feelings of freedom and admiration for outside environments. In this section, I will be incorporating a personal statement to my past self to articulate how the narrative that pertains to identification and adulthood has essentially spoiled my relationship with nature and how I am working towards unlearning these behaviors. In addition to this essay, I have included a poem entitled "a lost boy and his sunshine girl" written by myself. This addition of poetry and a personal statement incorporated into a piece of academic work is inspired by the essay "Land As Pedagogy" by Leanne Simpson, who in her own academic essay included a story into the work as a way to recontextualize this conversation about an academic concept like climate and how it is just as important to include the personal and also a creative aspect as they play just as an important factor to the discussion. The poem is in the perspective of the film's protagonist, Hodaka, and how he conceptualises innocence and romance in a world that requires children to grow up too fast and through this momentum of maturity, a horrible relationship with nature is concocted.

Part 1 – The Influence of Narrative and Connection: How Do We Lose Our Identity in Nature?

Narrative universally is a term used to describe the structure of a story in a particular voice or perspective through an artistic medium. It is the art of storytelling. It is how we as people communicate our feelings through a piece of work that is beyond the sole construction of critical understanding. To me, art is the most constructive way of articulating the thoughts and

ideas our ordinary world can't ever comprehend. Human emotions, raw experiences and revolutions, yes, can all be stated and produced under a guise of organisation like academia or politics. But art, *art and storytelling* present only what can be comprehended with the eyes, mind and soul. This is particularly why I've been so connected to films such as *Weathering With You* that present such complex themes of the human experience through a medium of animation, novel and music. I've always been fascinated by the poetic structures of artistic storytelling that are articulated within animation, especially ones created by the east. Studio Ghibli was a staple to my childhood and taught me the wonders that can be created when we break from the narrative traditions of storytelling and reconnect ourselves with the world around us. To be frank, and if I hadn't made this clear beforehand, I really *really* liked *Weathering With You*. In fact, as I'm writing this now, I think it's one of the best films I've seen all year. So you can imagine my shock when my friends told me not to look up reviews of the film when we had finished watching it because the collective response to the movie's focal theme was the opposite to my initial reaction. A major plot point that people found frustrating was the alluded message of climate denialism and the belief that Earth's ever changing temperatures are things we as human beings cannot change, so we might as well make the best of it while we still can. This was presented through Hina and her willingness to change the weather for anyone who asked rather than those within Tokyo making active efforts to change their behaviour to allow the world time to 'heal' or go back to 'normal'. However, I never interpreted this sort of message from the movie. In fact, the very things people took issue with the film are some of the reasons I fell in love with it and felt so connected to its overt messages about growing up in nature while it is around you, rather than growing out of it.

In a review written by Kim Morrissy, Morrissy addresses how *Weathering With You* essentially articulates against the importance of social responsibility that comes with tackling climate change effectively through the character of Hina and her disposition to give her life for benefit of others and Hodak's willingness to sacrifice the stability of the planet to be with Hina. She writes:

“Hina has the power to stop permanent climate change if she sacrifices her own life. She is ready to do so, but Hodaka pulls her out of it at the last minute, and a timeskip reveals that Tokyo has flooded some years later. [...] In broad strokes, the idea that people have to make a choice between their personal lives and the greater good is represented in the film. Hodaka doesn't want Hina to sacrifice herself, so he makes the choice to save her at the possible expense of the planet. However, as far as climate change goes, the choice is not so stark. There is no expectation on us to kill ourselves in order to do our part for the planet. Setting up a conflict around self-sacrifice is great for upping the stakes in a narrative, but doesn't make much sense if the climate change analogy is literal” (Morrissy 2019).

These criticisms are definitely worth consideration when articulated in such a way and they do hold weight to real life engagements we as humans have with climate change in the 21st century. However, as I've iterated previously, the film's primary message is about the moments of innocence experienced in our youth through our relationship with nature, not to be a commentary about the expectations for what humans need to do in order to tackle and combat climate change.

My goal in this portion of the essay is not to articulate claims or beliefs on why I think these criticisms of the film are invalid. My intentions in including these criticisms are to

articulate how nature has become an objection to the existence of child-like emotions in contrast to adult responsibilities and has become a tool to elicit feelings of selfishness and finger pointing when discussing world issues. In an article written by Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber entitled “Literature and Environment” for the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, the authors of this text discuss how nature, when presented in political and social conversations about climate change, is often articulated in a way that makes nature sound like a singular tangible concept. The objective of embodying nature as a physicality of our world, rather than a complex habitat of our existence is a manipulation tactic to “[...amplify] people’s ability to inflict damage on nature” (Buelle, et al. 422). Now, you may be wondering, what does this have to do with *Weathering With You* and how it showcases this idea that human beings grow up hating nature as a consequence of the expectations adulthood imposes on us? In all honesty, it initially has no strong connection to the arguments made by Buelle, Heise and Thornber surfacely. However, when I read criticisms about the movie, written by adults, telling other adults they should halt their enjoyment of a fun film about a girl with superpowers and a boy with no sense of home falling in love while working together to stop the consistent downpour in their city, similar feelings of toxicity about the enjoyment of nature resonate in such critics. The claim made by Buelle, Heise and Thornber is made as a way to contextualise the existence of nature within entertainment media and how ecocritics hyperfixation on adaptationism in relation to the human experience poorly provides explanation for “the enormous variability of cultures [and ecology] over the same time period” (Buelle, et al. 422). The authors of the article also go on to say that literary works, and by extension films (because storytelling in a visual medium is still novel storytelling), simultaneously succeed and fail in connecting the nuances of climate and human culture because the works accurately and

inaccurate construe “both the dynamic evolution of ecosystems over time and the aesthetic texture of literary works that makes them something other than realist documentations of nature” (423) and therefore should be taken at face value when consuming them entertainingly.

In respect to *Weathering With You* and its depiction of innocence, romance and adulthood with an integration of human interactions to the weather, the same expectation applies; entertainment works that *include* nature are not exclusive political commentaries *about* nature. And it is for this reason that I find it hard to agree with the criticisms against the film for primarily promoting climate denialism and feel as though it takes away from the overt messages the film is trying to iterate. However, after reading Brian Petersen, Diana Stuart and Ryan Gunderson’s “Reconceptualizing Climate Change Denial”, I can’t completely fault critics for coming to such a conclusion. In the article, which has a primary objective of reframing climate denialism into discussion about ideological denialism regarding the world’s climate, Peterson, Stuart and Gunderson state that marketability of climate change plays a large part in the misdirected theology around climate change and its existence of deniers. They state that “[c]arbon markets create a market-based approach to a problem that dissolves the need for political and social action” (Peterson, et al. 130) and that the functions of capital diversion are the primary reason why misplaced rage or focus on the inherit issue of climate change (131) is exactly how the same corporations contributing to environmental issues can avoid blame.

Relating back to the idea of narrative and adulthood, the very expectation of those who enjoyed *Weathering With You* to rethink this enjoyment on the basis that the film was created in bad faith or that the film contributes to harmful beliefs about environmentalism rejects the very being of childhood, which is a primary theme in the film. As children, the ability to see the good or potential in things we primarily encounter on the premise that children have no implicit biases

on things that are unknown to them is expectant behaviour. However it is during our primal years of adolescence, that the emergence of cautiousness is an attribute persistently drilled into our heads. We have all heard the heeds of warning to not believe everything we hear and see and to engage with things both open mindedly as well as critically. I also believe these things are important skills to acquire as one grows older. However, it is this hyperfixation on the critical that neglects humans to allow themselves moments of absentmindedness in the name of enjoyment. And I feel as though these moments are mostly common within adults, rather than children.

There is a constant shaping and reshaping of the adult and their existence within themselves that detaches their engagement with reality and the world they inhabit. In retrospect to narrative as an art form, the narrative of adulthood in real time is a self construction of storytelling that primarily exists through experiencing and then re-experiencing moments in the beauty of living (MacAdams 107). Beginning in the late stages of adolescence, the construction of one's identity or narrative is understood through coming to terms with the social world. Nevertheless, I believe that this method of conducting what is meant to be a journey of self actualization begins to become a method of self reintegration of a world that we once knew very differently when we were children. As kids, when someone is hateful towards us because our physical features differ from those around us, the behaviour of the other child is described as either 'mean' or an act of 'bullying'. When a similar experience happens to us in adulthood, this attitude can be perceived as a belief that stems from social prejudices and no longer constitutes solely being understood as 'mean'. If the thing that made someone look different was their skin colour, that 'mean' attitude becomes racism. If the person is disabled, it becomes an act of ableism. If it is gender specific, it becomes sexism. At their core, both attitudes produce similar

outcomes of feeling isolated and emotionally impaired. However, as we grow older the implication of what we entail is shifted and the narrative of whatever identity we knew as children changes. This also changes how we engage with our environments and the world and by extension the natural world.

Part 2 – My Remnant Memories of Dancing in the Rain: An Open Dialogue With My Past Self and My Relationship to Nature

There's a quote from Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls", that resonates with this unfamiliar feeling of limbo I'm currently stuck in where I both exist in the natural world but it is no longer consistently integrated into the narrative of what is becoming of my adult life. On page 113 the narrator says to herself, "[these] stories were about myself when I had grown a little older; they took place in a world that was recognizably mine, yet one that presented opportunities of [...] boldness" (Munro). In this passage, the narrator is having an internal dialogue with herself about the lack of courage she is allowed to experience within the constraints of her old fashioned, countryside home life. However, her imagination presenting her a world she knows exists, but she cannot access is exactly how I would articulate the constraints of adulthood in correspondence to the natural world. While watching *Weathering With You*, an overwhelming sensation of joy and remnant memories of my childhood that stemmed from watching Japanese animation films with my older siblings was consistently prevalent. Watching these films as a kid, the outside world was magnificent, majestic and serene. For every action to happen in nature, there was a reaction and I found it fascinating. I wanted nothing more than to explore it. I found myself continuously referring back to moments of my youth that weren't necessarily about my time in nature, but more so how much I was exposed to it from movies and storytelling and how

this in some way affected my perception of the natural world. To some capacity while watching this movie, I felt like a kid again. I feel like this is an odd phenomenon to experience considering nothing about the natural world has really changed because I know the places I used to find solace in as a child are still there. The park down the street from my house is still in full use. The ravine my friends and I would throw rocks into still exists. The swing set I would use to see above the trees or where I would read books I got from the neighbouring library is still intact. This world, this boldness, it's all still there. However, I can't access it anymore not because it's no longer tangible but because I have been conditioned to believe these places are things of the past and that they no longer attribute to the meaning behind growing up.

I can still go out whenever I want to explore. I can fall in love with nature again and again because it's always there whenever I need it. However, the older I get, the less I feel I can allow myself to be just as in love with nature as I once was. The older I get, the less time I find I have to enjoy the simplicity of being out and free. I often wonder when this happened; this feeling of being *too old* to be outside. Or rather that I'm too old to make time to *enjoy* being outside. When I was young, I spent extensive amounts of time lounging in the sun either by myself or with friends. Or I would wander aimlessly in the rain without an umbrella so I could experience nature for exactly what it was which to me at the time was just something that happened and was something I was in. When I was a kid, I absolutely adored the rain. When I would wake to the gentle tapping of water against my window, a fuzzy feeling filled my stomach. It made the day go by smoother. As a kid and even a teen, I would be overjoyed when I got to go out into the rain. My favourite part was when it had been raining for hours, possibly all night, and tiny little lakes would appear within the sidewalks. I rarely ever did for sake of convenience, but I had these intrusive feelings of just rampaging through every single one. I hate

the feeling of wet socks and I rarely ever remembered to wear rain boots or waterproof shoes before going out. Sometimes I would just think “Screw it! It’ll dry” and just jumped in which puddle seemed small yet satisfying to emerge my torn up converse in. It made me feel calm, and honestly I’m still not 100% sure why. I haven’t experienced this in a long time. Frankly, I can’t even say why that is either. It’s just a part of growing up, I guess. But what the fuck does that even *mean*? When did I stop feeling the need to jump into every puddle that crossed my path? When did I stop wanting to feel the grass between my fingers? Or dirt on my knees? When did I become *too mature* to desire the surrounding space of nature? The most interesting part about my revelations of how my relationship with nature has changed is that I cannot pinpoint any specific moment of when this shift has occurred. It’s just something that’s happened and I hadn’t noticed it until it was staring me dead in the eyes. I thought a lot about this during the planning of this paper in particular. From ages of about 2-14 you are constantly outside because nature is framed to you as your home away from home. You laugh in it, you cry in it, you eat in it, you hate in it and you love in it. It was *the* place that encompassed feelings of solitude and freedom that otherwise couldn’t be found from the confines of my bedroom or my classroom when I was young. Then I turned 14 and started existing outside less and less because my environment stopped encouraging me to go there. And if they did advertise moments of reconnecting with nature or experiencing outside, it was with limitations; people are always telling adults to go on hikes or for runs through the trails. They aren’t telling them to go on a picnic or play tag outside with their friends. Now, as adults or just people getting older, if you do go outside, it has to be with a purpose because with age comes more responsibility and preparation for the “adult world” and with this preparation leaves less time to just go out and exist.

In *Weathering With You*, a prominent message sent throughout the film is this essence of growing up too fast because the world around you has given up hope on what the future will look like. As young people growing up during climate disasters, we are constantly reminded that we have everything in the world *except* for time. In the film, Hina represents this loss of time and expectations to grow up faster than expected when her mother dies of a fatal illness and she is left caring for her younger brother. In her mother's dying moments, she goes out into the rain and prays for God to let the sun shine once more so she and her mom can go on a walk together again before she passes. It is through this prayer that she is granted the powers of being a Sunshine Girl and can from then on pray for the sun to shine through the rain. However, with each prayer, a part of her soul breaks off and she begins to wither away. She becomes a girl running on borrowed time and she makes peace with this. However, Hodaka does not. When Hina explains to him that she is dying, he refuses to accept it and prays for Hina to be safe and with him forever because to Hodaka, "good" weather is not a substitute for the human experience of feeling at home and being in love. He says when venturing to save Hina from her sacrifice that he doesn't care if the sun never shines again because he wants Hina "more than any blue sky" and that essentially "the weather can go crazy" without her powers (Shinkai 2019). The reason I bring this up is because Hodaka is able to see how adult responsibilities, such as making great sacrifices in this case, spoil the moments of solace and comfort we feel when we're young. He is also able to make peace with the potential for bad weather and is willing to adapt within such a world if it means he can be with the people he loves. His happiness and innocence is not spoiled with how the outside world conducts itself, which is something many of the adults in the film are unable to do which is why they go to Hina in the first place. And it is this that reminded me of

just how much children are able to enjoy, accept and appreciate their surroundings even if these surroundings are universally perceived as undesirable.

When you're young the natural world is an abyss of possibility and wonder. You wanna explore every inch of it, to know every fact about it and to exist within every nook and cranny of it. When you're young the world isn't quite yet spoiled. There isn't the frustration of driving to work in snow or walking home from the store in the rain. As Hodaka says in the film "the human mind works in mysterious ways. You just need to see the sun shining in the morning to feel energised. A blue sky makes you feel happy you're alive. [...] I realised how much the human heart is connected with the sky" (Shinkai 2019). The weather has no effect on our mood when we're young. As children, when the seasons change, we adapt into the best way we know how; by living, embracing and playing through it all. Children see the beauty in the world's most hideous depictions and they fall in love with it over and over again. However, when you're an adult, this love slowly starts to wither into disdain and we are left with nothing but feelings of resentment and toxicity. I want to break away from this thought process. I want to walk in the rain and feel the puddles of the water fill my shoes. I want to grow old, not out. I think once I'm done writing this, that may be one of the first things I do.

a lost boy and his sunshine girl by suad alad

The rain has stopped from its continuous fall. The grey overcast of the gloomy clouds have passed from sight. The trees begin to bloom. The sun begins to shine. Everyone's faces beam with joy.

My heart is full when I can see the clearness of the blue in the sky. I notice the colour matches the blue accents that overcast her iris. *She is so beautiful. This* is what my old town lacked.

The saturation of the grass, the silk texture of the leaves. The freshness of the air. My old town lacked life. It lacked beauty. It lacked *her*.

"I love this job," she tells me one night. "I love to help people". When we first met, she told me she'd been given a gift. Later, she says that it comes with a price. *Everything always does*.

I keep this to myself, because whatever price it is, it could never match her smile after she prays for clearer skies, and the world of nature happily complies.

We were changing the world, she and I. We were making people happy. We were a *we*. A team. A duo. A pair.

A lost boy and his sunshine girl.

She's different. Bright, but dimming. Her hands become gray in colour with every prayer she whispers to the clouds to pause the outpour of their tears; "Please let the sky be clear so we can enjoy this day outdoors. To be with our family, our friends, our homes". *Please let us be children*.

I wonder where it went. The colour of her skin. The brightness of her eyes. The softness of her smile. Before, I couldn't miss her from miles away. She was bright and she was bold. She was everything, and now she was becoming nothing.

I want to save her. I have to save her. *But how?* I am not special. I have no gift. I have no home. My home was her, and now she's gone.

I close my eyes and clap my hands together tightly. I plead and I beg and I cry and I pray to whatever god is willing to listen. *Please don't let her go. I just want to be with her. I just want her to be safe. To be whole. Please let her live. Please let us see another sunny sky together*.

Please, if you are out there, let us be children, just this once.

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