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Comparison: *The Tale of Heike* with *The Heike Story* (2021)

Just a few years ago in 2021, a Japanese animation studio Science Saru released an eleven-episode anime called *The Heike Story*. It's an adaptation of *The Tale of Heike*, which chronicles the fall of the Heike clan. I wish to look at the differences between the anime adaptation and *The Tale of Heike*, as well as a crucial new element added to the anime. That being, the addition of viewpoint protagonist, Biwa. Her role and character throughout the story is an important bridge between the audience watching the story unfold, and an expansion on the themes of impermanence from the original *Tale of Heike*. Namely, if nothing lasts, and nothing about it can be changed, then how do you cope with that? How can you accept it?

*The Tale of Heike* is a well-known epic throughout Japan, with hundreds of various episodes collected in total. These episodes document the downfall of the Heike clan (also known as the Taira clan) during their struggle against the Genji clan (also known as the Minamoto clan). Much of the story features great feats. However, what features most prominently in the story are its themes. Those themes being how eventually, karma comes to collect in some way shape or form, and nothing on this earth, not even a man-made empire, will last forever.

Our main protagonist in the anime, Biwa, is a young girl whose father is murdered by Heike soldiers. She's named after a stringed instrument, the biwa. During tellings of the original story, a performer would sit, strum a biwa, and chant the events that happen during the episodes. She also has an unusual power: her blue eye lets her see into the future. Thus, she can see the downfall of the Heike before it happens. This catches the attention of Taira-no-Shigemori, the current head of the Heike clan, who brings her to the estate to live with the family. However, Biwa initially refuses to use her powers to help him. After all, the Heike were responsible for her father's death. Though as the story continues, this reason fades away as she becomes closer to other members of the Heike clan.

Much like Biwa, Shigemori also has a special power from one of his eyes: the power to see spirits. He, out of everyone in the Heike, is the most concerned about the fate of the clan. Notably, he tries to find a relatively peaceful solution to various conflicts, such as trying not to harm any monks when they attempt to storm the palace gates over an incident at Enryakuji temple. Eventually, he passes away at the end of the fourth episode, and Biwa inherits his ability to see spirits in her other eye.

Biwa's role in the anime serves to connect the audience to the story through a character who has the same perspective of the Heike, and their downfall, that a modern viewer may have. Since *The Heike Story* is both based on real historical events and a well-known collection of stories based on it, the average viewer in Japan is likely to know of the Heike's downfall, much like how Biwa can see these events before they happen.

In the first half of the anime, Biwa tends to not get too involved with the Taira's affairs, usually either playing with Shigemori's three sons or playing the Biwa. These three sons, Taira-no-Koremori, Taira-no-Sukemori, and Taira-no-Kiyotsune, all have relatively minor parts in the

original text. However, here they are Biwa's friends, and she gets to know them on a more personal level. She frequently squabbles with Sukemori and speaks with Koremori when he is plagued with doubts and fears over his experiences on the battlefield.

Kiyotsune on the other hand, forms a bond with Taira-no-Atsumori, who in this anime, has more screentime than in the original. In The Tale of Heike, Atsumori only appears in an episode where he boldly faces a Genji warrior by the beach and asks him to fight him in battle, even if he dies. This passage becomes a tragedy when it's revealed how young Atsumori was, and the warrior even initially intended to spare him, but as other Genji warriors surround them, he is forced to slay Atsumori. Among Atsumori's personal possessions is a flute, a hobby shared with Kiyotsune in the anime, and thus, the two meet and wind up becoming friends over their love of the flute.

Eventually, this bond ends tragically. Atsumori values fighting with honor and valor, greatly admires the military feats of the other members of the Heike clan, and wishes to face any battle head-on. Kiyotsune on the other hand, after experiencing tragedy after tragedy, death after death in the family, he quickly becomes very depressed. This eventually leads to his suicide by drowning, which Biwa sees through her eye. This scene here is crucial in Biwa's central character journey, as Kiyotsune's death leads her to break down sobbing that once again, even though she could see someone's death happen in the future, she couldn't prevent it. What's the point of looking to the future if you can't prevent anything terrible from happening?

This incident isn't the first time Biwa saw someone's fate and worried for them. As early as the second episode, Biwa winds up forming a friendship with Taira-no-Tokuko, who is Shigemori's sister, and eventual wife to Former Emperor Go-Shirakawa's son Emperor

Takakura. Biwa sees a vision of her struggling in the sea just as she's about to marry the prince she is betrothed to, and she begs Tokuko not to leave. Tokuko does so anyways.

Eventually, Tokuko loses her son, the young Emperor Antoku at the Battle of Dan-no-Ura, as his grandmother, Kiyomori's widow, brings him into the sea with her. Tokuko herself dives into the waves in an attempt to join them, although this time, Tokuko was said to have survived in the original story, and in the anime, it's Biwa herself who helps pull her out of the water.

The many deaths that Biwa witnesses, is a connection to the themes of the original. Everything passes, those that flourish must fall. Seeing the events yet to come and being unable to change them is because those events were meant to happen, like the leaf must fall from a tree, or like the snow must melt in the spring. But even though nothing in this world truly lasts, there is sorrow, and grief when loved ones pass away. What else can you do?

Biwa finds this answer through her estranged mother, whom she reunites with. Her mother tells her that though she abandoned her and her father, she still prayed for their happiness. That's the one thing that Biwa can do, pray. It's the one thing we all can do, when circumstances are out of our control. Pray for safety, pray for happiness, pray that our loved ones will rest peacefully.

Biwa's story isn't the only connection the anime gives to the themes of the original story. Throughout the anime, there are shots of nature scenes that all share a common motif. They all feature some part of nature passing by. Flowers bloom and fall, snow falls, among other things. The specific type of flowers falling are especially important, since they are directly mentioned in Gion Shoja, the first chapter of the Tale of Heike. Since they are so important to the original

story, the falling on these sala flowers are often contrasted with something else, like a person dying or a teardrop falling. It's all to serve the theme of impermanence.

Given that such a vast tale was adapted into a mere eleven episodes, each running at roughly 22 minutes, the anime condenses quite a bit. For example, the story of Yoshitsune's cliffside assault is only touched upon for a few brief seconds, and the scene where a Heike soldier shoots at a deer isn't mentioned at all.

To conclude, framing the Tale of the Heike through the view of an outsider for the most part helps to bring the modern audience who would have been passingly familiar with the original tale into a new perspective. It also helps the audience connect more with the people in the story of the downfall of the Heike and creates more feelings of attachment. We know the events to come, but we can only observe. But even if we can't change anything directly, there is still power in praying and hoping for the best anyways.

#### CITATIONS

*The Heike Story*, created by Hideo Furukawa, developed by Science SARU, first aired

September 16 2021- November 15 2021

*The Tale of the Heike*, as translated by Helen Craig McCullough, version published April 1988.