



My Neighbor Totoro

This film is a deceptively simple tale of Satsuki and Mei, two young girls who move with their father to the countryside while their mother convalesces in a nearby hospital. They soon discover that the surrounding forests are home to a family of Totoros, gentle but powerful creatures who live in a huge and ancient camphor tree and are seen only by children.

Recommended for all ages

Themes: coming of age; family; folklore; environment; cross-cultural understanding

Director(s): Hayao Miyazaki | **86 min** | **Animation** | **1988** | **Country:** Japan | **Language:** Dubbed in English

Official film website: www.studioghibli.com.au/myneighbortotoro



SET THE STAGE | THOUGHT-STARTERS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Although anime is a widely diverse genre, there are distinctive characteristics: Japanese animation tends to focus more on realistic settings and accurate representations of place and less on movement; characters almost always have disproportionately large eyes but proportional bodies; facial expressions are exaggerated and simplified; and anime frequently uses classic film techniques such as panning and zooming, as opposed to American animation styles which rely more upon dramatic tableaux. Set in a rapidly industrializing post-war Japan, this film emphasizes the importance of having a connection to the natural world and draws heavily on classic Japanese woodcut traditions.

Yen Pham explains: "My Neighbor Totoro is an excellent introduction to Shinto and to animistic beliefs and practices generally. There are also references to Japan's other major religion, Buddhism, in the O-Jizo statues that are present whenever the girls are really frightened."

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Anime:** A style of Japanese film and television animation, typically aimed at adults as well as children.
- **Camphor Tree:** A large evergreen tree that grows up to 100 feet tall.
- **Dubbing:** The term most commonly refers to the replacement of the voices of the actors shown on the screen with those of different performers speaking another language. This is also called revoicing.
- **Susuwatari:** Small, dark, dust-like house spirits seen when moving from light to dark places.

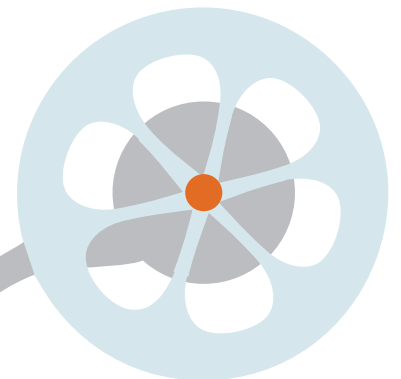
For more film terms, refer to the PCFF Film Glossary (pcfri.org/FilmHub).

Clues and Cues



Pay attention while watching

- What Japanese cultural traditions and practices do you notice in the film?



TALK ABOUT IT | DISCUSSION

- One of the most important themes in this film is the human connection to the earth and nature (which is an important part of Japanese culture). What are some scenes/ examples in the movie that emphasize this connection? In the film, the main characters find comfort in nature. Have you ever found a sense of peace or inspiration in the natural world?
- What did you learn about everyday Japanese customs and practices from this film? How are they similar to or different from your everyday habits and customs?
- The young male character introduced early in the film seems afraid of Satsuki. Why do you think this is? What does it tell us about their ages in the film?
- What is the importance of family relationships in the film? What does the relationship between Satsuki and Mei say about the importance of sisterly bonds? What are some examples from the film that demonstrates this importance? What kind of relationship do Satsuki and Mei have with their father? Are they close? Does he seem attentive? Are there any moments where you think he could have been more thoughtful about his children?
- Throughout the film, characters are placed in situations that many would see as scary (i.e. the bus stop at night, first interaction with Totoro, moving into a "haunted house"). However, in many of these scenarios, the characters do not react the way we expect. Why do you think the director chose to have the characters react as they do? What is his message about dealing with fearful situations?
- Totoro is a made-up creation by the writer/ director Miyazaki. What qualities did he give this character? What do you think this character symbolizes? Why do you think he created a fictional beast rather than using something already familiar to most audiences? Why is the movie named after Totoro even though he only plays a small role in the film?
- Totoro is kind of like an imaginary friend for the two main characters. Did you have any imaginary friends growing up? What role did they play in your life?
- Famous film reviewer Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film, "My Neighbor Totoro is based on experience, situation and exploration – not on conflict and threat." What do you think he meant by this? What are some scenes in the film that support this opinion?

GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



For Activity Reel details, downloadable storyboard template and more, visit the the Film Hub website: www.pcffri.org/FilmHub

• Writing Prompt

Option 1: Family relationships and family struggles are a key component of this film. What are some ways the family works together to get through tough times? How are the characters' attitudes revealed when working through difficult times? Do you think this is realistic? Do you have any struggles you've had to overcome with your family? How did you and your family do it?

Option 2: How is nature important in your life? In what ways do you connect to the natural world? Are there things that you do to help preserve it? The main characters in this film have the freedom and time to explore nature without adult supervision. Do you have or did you have the time and freedom to explore your world away from adults? If so, where did you go and what did you learn?

• Making Art

Materials: Watercolor paints, canvas or watercolor paper.

Option 1: One of the primary characteristics of anime is fluid, watercolor-like landscapes. Miyazaki, the director of the film, uses watercolor as the basis of his animation. Pick one of your favorite settings or landscapes. Consider a beach, park, hillside, backyard, or even a city street that is important and familiar to you. If you can't think of anything, look at the scene outside your school window. Recreate it with your own watercolor painting skills. Before you know it, you may be painting as well as Miyazaki!

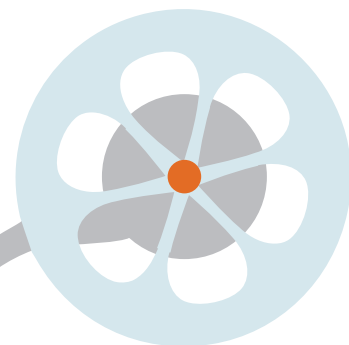
Option 2: Using Totoro as your inspiration, create your own magical creature and draw it in an anime style.

• Planting

Materials: Seeds, dirt, and time!

The human connection to the earth is an important theme throughout the film. It's time for you to grow your own tree and monitor its growth.

Using seeds from trees (like acorns), seeds from your kitchen (like avocados), or seeds that you can buy, plant a tree in the yard or in a small pot. Like Satsuki and Mei, monitor the growth of the plant by measuring it on a daily or near-daily basis. If you have time, make a chart that shows how the plant has grown over time. Maybe it will be big enough one day to fit Totoro on the top!



MAKE CONNECTIONS | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources complement the film and inspire further discussion or programming.

BOOKS

- **The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation**
by *Thomas Lamarre*
An academic text, which applies cutting edge critical theory to anime.
- **Understanding Manga and Anime**
by *Robin E. Brenner*
A basic guide for librarians about anime.
- **My Neighbor Totoro Picture Book**
by *Hayao Miyazaki*
A picture book with dialogue and illustrations directly from the film.

FILMS

- **Patema Inverted** (2013)
Patema and Age leave their community's tunnels to find out why gravity was reversed by an energy experiment.
- **Summer Wars** (2009)
A young math genius solves a complex equation and inadvertently puts a virtual world's artificial intelligence in a position to destroy Earth.
- **Wolf Children** (2012)
This modern-day fairy tale is an exquisite fantasy about a single mom, Hana, who had the misfortune of falling in love with a wolf man.

- **Spirited Away** (2001)
Another Miyazaki film about a young girl navigating a complicated spirit world.
- **Mei and the Kittenbus** (2002)
A short, unofficial sequel to *My Neighbor Totoro*.
- Indicates PCFF festival selection

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- **New England Anime Society**
www.neanime.org
- **Providence Anime Con**
twitter.com/ProvidenceAnime
- **Find Anime Shops**
www.otakuwanted.com/shops.php

BEYOND THE FILM | RELATED INTERNET LINKS

- Lesson plan provides an overview of Japanese cultural habits:
www.indiana.edu/~easc/outreach/educators/boxlessons/documents/daily_life.pdf
- Lesson plan about *My Neighbor Totoro* focused on understanding family structure across cultures:
aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/our_family_and_other_families
- An environmental lesson plan using *My Neighbor Totoro*:
www.aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/living_efficiently_daily_energy-saving_practices_from_totoro_and
- Roger Ebert's 1993 review of *My Neighbor Totoro*:
www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-my-neighbor-totoro-1993
- Familiarize yourself with some other anime films. This will give you some comparative insight on where *My Neighbor Totoro* fits in relation to other films of its genre:
aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/living_efficiently_daily_energy-saving_practices_from_totoro_and
- An annotated anime filmography for teachers:
www.aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/anime_filmography_1
- Common Sense Media lists anime classics grouped by age:
www.common Sense Media.org/lists/best-anime-movies

