



PONYO (Cert U)

Reel Issues author: Jeremy Clarke

Overview: Animated asventure. Against the wishes of her sea spirit parents, young fish Ponyo longs to become human after she meets five-year-old boy, Sosuke.

Director: Hayao Miyazaki (*Spirited Away; Nausicaa of The Valley of The Wind*)

Producer: Studio Ghibli

Length: 98 mins

DVD Audio Tracks: English dubbed, Japanese with English subtitles.

Caution: Contains very mild threat (BBFC)

THE FILM

Ponyo, a young fish, swims from her home deep in the ocean to the coast where the humans live. Here she is rescued in the shallows by small boy Sosuke only to be recaptured by her over-protective *Sorcerer's Apprentice* magician-like father, who rules over her undersea home. But Ponyo decides she wants to return to shore and become a human girl companion to the boy.

Sosuke lives with his mother, Lisa, in an isolated coastal house. His ship's captain father, Koichi, is often away at sea, while Sosuke's mother works in a care home for the elderly next door to her son's school.

Ponyo's disobedience to her father's will threatens to throw the natural world out of balance by drawing the moon closer to the Earth. Her escape back to Sosuke not only causes a tempestuous sea storm but also accidentally releases her father's magical potions to generate Devonian Era aquatic life forms. With Sosuke's coastal hometown largely underwater, he must prove his love for Ponyo is strong enough to

ensure she will remain fully human. If it is not, she will turn to foam.

Loosely speaking, the story is Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, but different.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

This is a film exploring and playing with fairy tale and mythological archetypes. *Ponyo* grounds itself in the ordinary details of everyday human existence – going to school, driving a car, working in an old people's home. Fantastic imagery (a man living underwater, a storm at sea, prehistoric fish) jostles with more mundane material (rubbish-strewn harbour water, a mother caring for her hungry baby, a family sharing domestic meal times). While *Ponyo* is clearly suitable for children, how far do you think it works for adults? Do you find the fantasy elements more compelling than their ordinary everyday counterparts – or vice versa? Are both equally attractive? Is fantasy a legitimate element of grown-up storytelling culture? (Perhaps group members can share examples that they have found compelling.) Are there ways in which fantasy can help us understand and deal with the word around us that more realistic or naturalistic stories cannot?

While Hollywood animation embraces computers, Studio Ghibli dissolved their computer department prior to this production to make *Ponyo* the old-fashioned, handcrafted way. The visuals are undeniably beautiful to look at throughout and the results are both memorable and charming. Why do you think our culture is so obsessed with the newer, faster, more advanced way of doing things? Is this always such a good idea? Are the older ways sometimes better?

We're used to seeing children's films from the UK and the USA on our screens; however, this film comes from

a very different culture. What differences do you notice between this family film and British or American ones? Are there elements you like or dislike – if so, what are these elements and why do you feel the way you do about them?

Did you watch the film in English, in its native Japanese (with English subtitles), or both versions? Why did you make that particular choice? If you saw one version, would you like to see the other? If you saw both, which did you prefer – and why?

INTERACTIONS

- **Read Proverbs 31.10–31.** To what extent do you relate to Ponyo's family situation? Ponyo's father is protective of his daughter, wanting only the best for her. Her sea-goddess mother is prepared to try and allow Ponyo to join Sosuke – provided his love for Ponyo meets the required standard, which Ponyo's mother will put to the test. How do you feel about the different attitudes Ponyo's father and mother have towards their daughter? What do you make of her parents' relationship?
- Sosuke's family, by contrast, are ordinary human beings. We don't see much of his shipboard father, Koichi, but his mother Lisa seems to have her fair share of tensions and difficult situations to deal with. She conducts (long-distance) rows with her husband and hits the beer when he unexpectedly can't come home; she tries to help Sosuke work through situations in which he finds himself and looks out for him too, preventing him from drowning on at least two occasions. What do you think of Lisa as a wife and mother? How successful is she in this role? (See also Proverbs 22.6):
- **Read Matthew 18.1–6.** The film treats its young protagonists with great dignity. What differences do you see between it and other family films with regard to this?
- **Read Leviticus 19.32.** Because Lisa works at the old folks home next to her son's school, Sosuke often talks with three of the old ladies there. The film treats its older, minor characters with great dignity. Can you think of other films that manage to do this? What about other media, e.g. advertising or TV? How do they compare in their treatment of old people? If films or other media fail to treat the old with dignity, or even to deal with them at all, what are the wider social implications? Is there something we can learn from other cultures about the treatment of old people?
- **Read Romans 8.5–25.** In the opening reel, whilst swimming as a fish Ponyo gets trapped in a glass jar, just one of hundreds of items of human society's rubbish floating in the harbour waters. Washed up on the shore, she's freed from the jar by Sosuke, who promptly takes her home in a bucket of water. Elsewhere, Ponyo's father expresses disgust at the disrespectful way humans treat the natural world. How far do you agree with his view?

CLIP TO DISCUSS

**Chapters 11-12, 0.40.26-0.48.44,
approx 8 1/2 minutes**

Ponyo has escaped her father's imprisonment and her numerous sisters have turned from small into gigantic, grey fish which swim alongside her towards shore causing a major coastal storm. Driving Sosuke home from the old folks residence through the wind and rain, Lisa ignores warnings about treacherous weather conditions on the coastal road. Ponyo – now transformed into a little girl – pursues Sosuke by

running across the backs of the giant fish which move through the sea beside the road like gigantic waves. When the boy claims he saw a little girl fall from a wave, his concerned mother stops the car for them to look, but the weather is fierce and this pause in their journey is soon overridden by Lisa's desire to reach the high up safety of their home. Once the car has arrived there, the storm subsides. Ponyo and Sosuke are reunited, the boy recognising the girl even though when he met her before she was a fish.

- Lisa, a working mum juggling the demands of both work and parenting, ignores warnings that the road is unsafe because of the storm and heads straight through it at speed for home. Sosuke simply trusts her. Think of a situation where a crisis has made you act in an arguably unwise way in order to get through it. Why do you think you did what you did? In retrospect, did you do the right thing? Should Lisa have paid more attention to the safety warnings?
- The image of a girl running on the cascading backs of fish possesses great mythic power. What do you make of this image? Do you find any other images in this film particularly striking – if so, what are they and why? Applying a similar rationale, what do you make of the following images from the Bible? The throne in heaven in Revelation 4.1–14 is part of a mystic vision while Jesus walking on water in John 6.16–21 is a miracle related within an historical narrative. (*Ponyo*, in contrast, is clearly a fictional tale.)

OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

- We are constantly reminded by this film of the life cycle – growing up, the need to assert our independence from parents and what happens

when we get old. Can you think of other films that do this?

- *Ponyo* is a fantasy about a fish turning into a little girl. This seems unlikely in the real world, but how far do we really understand God's creation? Look at Job 38.1–18 and 41.1–34.

Jeremy Clarke is a journalist covering film, animation and related media. He has contributed to numerous magazines including Third Way, What's On (London), Manga Max, Starlog (UK) and Films & Filming. His work has also appeared in such books as The BFI Companion To Horror, Aurum Film Encyclopedia (Gangsters) and Film Review Annual.

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