

Death Note and Shonen Anime by Nick Nicely

Shonen anime and manga is probably the most popular genre in Japan and worldwide. Currently what is referred to as "the big three", the three biggest most highly grossing anime/manga series One Piece, Bleach, and Naruto are all of the Shonen style. Traditionally Shonen anime is directed at young boys but more recently it seems these series have been able to gain a lot of adult interests by adding more serious elements such as extreme moral dilemmas and more mature characters. Of the anime I have seen Death Note is probably the best example of this. In this Paper I will attempt to explain why it succeeds as a shonen anime but also has the ability to interest an older audience.

Because some people might not agree that Death Note is in fact a shonen anime I will first give more insight into some characteristics of a typical shonen story. A shonen story is usually characterized by fighting with supernatural powers or ones gained from advanced technology. Usually the protagonist is a young boy who is somewhat extraordinary. He is typical in most senses of the word so he is easy to relate to but there is always something immediately awesome about him be it his personality, intelligence, or strength. The whole point of a shonen anime is to create a character young boys can relate to but at the same time one they want to be. In Death Note, Light Yagami is a student who is revealed to be in the top of his class so right off the bat we see this character is extraordinary in some way. We also notice that he is extremely bored at school. This is something a lot of children might be able to relate to. Light is still able to seem like a somewhat good role model because he is bored not because he is dumb and doesn't understand what he is meant to learn but because it isn't challenging in the slightest. So right away we have a character that is easy to relate to and we can sympathize with his boredom. Now to give him a cool super power. A pretty common thing to happen in shonen anime is something magnificent randomly falling out of the sky and changing the protagonist's life. In Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann the main character lives underground in a cave until a girl falls through the roof and changes his life. In Hikaru No Go the main character randomly comes across a haunted go board and the ghost haunting it makes him the best go player in the world.

A final reoccurring theme in a shonen story is deus ex machina which means any time a situation seems impossible for the main character to conquer some device always appears that makes him suddenly able to win. Some examples of heavy use of deus ex machina use in shonen anime would be in Dragonball Z where the main character goes through 3 literal transformations to a more powerful version of himself each new one occurring just as it seems he might lose and in Digimon where new evolution types are constantly being discovered as the characters face new stronger enemies. In Death Note this plot device can be seen with the introduction of Misa and shinigami eyes. Shinigami eyes are eyes that allow the user to see anyone's true name and time of death written above their head in exchange for half of his remaining life. Because L, the "antagonist"'s identity is unknown this is really the only way Light would be able to learn his real name and be able to kill him. But he won't choose this option because he doesn't want to die early. Just when it starts to look like L is going to win in comes Misa a girl who was given a shinigami lifespan and wouldn't really suffer from giving up half of her life. So in this way Light spontaneously gains everything he needs to win.

As far as the aspects of the show that make it appeal to an older audience the major one is the fact that it is very grey as to who is good and who is evil in this series. Most viewers probably side with Light Yagami because it is his perspective the story is told from but you could just as easily root for L. to come out on top. Light commits murder with the intent to cleanse the world of evil people by either killing them or making them afraid to act for fear of being killed. To side with Light you have to decide if murder is justified when you are intending to save good people or if it is evil no matter what. L is the character who decided that what Light "kira" is doing is immoral from the start and fights to figure out his identity and bring him in. This situation makes the series very interesting psychologically. You are forced to except that what Light is doing might be right but you also have a character who is taking a stance and saying it isn't and you can't really disprove him.

The other major thing that makes this series appeal to an older audience is the character design, art style, and setting. Although Light is only a High school student you are able to forget this because he is so tall and intelligent that he seems like he could be in college and this gives him a bit more credibility with Older audiences. He also rarely appears in a school environment past the first episode. He is more often found in a setting amongst adults. As far as the art style in this anime, it is very dark. A grey scale color pallet pervades every scene of the anime and the characters really only were black white or grey. This dark color scheme separates this anime from other shonen anime with extremely bright happy colors everywhere and allows it to seem more serious. Thus appealing to an older audience. In fact Madhouse uses the same color scheme here as they do in many other anime such as Shigurui that are definitely not for children.

I am impressed by Death Note's success at appealing to a large audience. The varying levels of depth in the show are genius and leave people of every age group with something they can enjoy about the series. Maybe the success of this anime will lead to similar anime being created in the future that allow multiple age group of people to connect and discuss based on common interests.

References

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