

Toradora:

A Belated review

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Recently a number of the staff began talking about a show called "Toradora". Although I was mid-series on a couple of other things I was watching, I decided to give it a go, as I always hate to be left out of a good time. What I found was a show that re-sparked my love of Shoujo. Although it was a "Tsun-Dari" (Japanese for "You'll hate the female protagonist") show, it avoided a lot of the typical "Moe" trappings. Furthermore, although all the characters were invariably cliché's, it almost seemed to be akin to a John Wayne western, in that you go into it knowing who all the characters are and how it's going to end, the only difference between it and every other of its kind is in the nuances. And nuances there were. Although some of it was two dimensional, the background characters actually contributed to the plot, and were somewhat developed through time. Although it was not to the "GAINAX" level of best-friend character development, the various side characters DID change and grow up throughout the story.

It's that particular subtlety that struck me the most about the series, actually. I could easily spend an essay breaking down all the characters and how they do or do not develop, but I think a far more interesting element of the story was the backdrop framing it all.

In the first episode, just after Taiga and Ryuji first meet, Ryuji is called to the staff office for failure to turn in his assessment on where he wants to go in life out of high school. Although the scene is short, and seemingly serves to simply comically reinforce that Ryuji is such a scary looking dude that even the teachers are afraid of him, the echoes from it overshadow the remaining series. In the end we are presented with a fantastic expose of the seemingly endless days of boredom and drama that accompany a directionless youth.

The opening credits tell us that there are five prominent characters we should probably learn the names of, and that at some point we're going to get to see a well prepared parade. Although they were wrong on both accounts, it's a good starting place. Aside from the clearly defined main characters (both of which at no point in time give any indication that they are even aware the sun will rise the next day), the first segment of the story is dominated by Minori, the hyperactive overachiever that Ryuji has a crush on. Minori throughout the entire series is billed as a weirdo (and at points is even called that by her classmates). I find it either deeply ironic or deeply profound that the character with the most clearly defined goals in life is also the oddball of the series. She knows what she wants to do in life, has her goals, and works her ass off to achieve them. She studies hard, works hard on her extracurricular activities, and spends her evenings working feverishly at apparently dozens of part-time jobs. When later in the series someone is curious what her plans are she enthusiastically answers without even being asked. At one point she is identified as being out of touch with her friends emotionally, and mentions that she hasn't been to Taiga's place since middle school. She explains it as having to do with drama relating to Taiga's father, but to me it is a reflection of the distance that is growing between her and her friends as she focuses herself more and more firmly on the future. I also suspect that she rejects Ryuji's confession of love not because she wants Taiga to be happy, but because she knows that

a boyfriend will interfere with her priorities, and that temporal things such as love come and go, but that she only has one shot at building a strong foundation in her youth. Although she is eccentric, she is probably the wisest of the characters, and frequently takes the voice of an old-timer when talking to the other students.

Kitamura, like Minori, also has a plan for himself. He too is diligent, studious, and active. The only flaw in his plans is that they are deeply centered on his love interest, the Yakuza-esque student president (incidentally, another weirdo with a solid life plan). Though Kitamura is presented as calm, collected, and generally having his shit together, we get the impression that he is least in touch with himself. Prior to the series he was a directionless mess, and he is the one who goes through the most changes throughout the series. The most dramatic of which occurs when the keystone of his future is pulled out from under him and he collapses emotionally. Unlike the protagonists though, he pulls his shit back together and presumably either returns to his path of general success with the end target being the affections of a blue meany, or to aspiring to be an exhibitionist who flashes strangers in Uedo park. Either way, he's got it going on.

Ami is particularly interesting as she already has a life before her. She's a popular model, apparently a good singer, and a good enough actor to keep most of the school fooled into thinking she's something other than a malicious bitch who is smart enough to exploit others insecurities in an attempt to avoid ever having to address her own. We can assume that after her brief retreat to attend normal school that she will go on to have a brief singing career with Hello Project, followed by starring as a serial killer in a few mediocre movies and then eventually fade into oblivion doing either diaper ads or porno films. Although her character sees some changes, she is blessed with a detachment from it all, and even at the peak of all the emotional crap, she keeps her composure through it all. Even after Ryuji tells her to her face that he loves Taiga, and Minori is breaking down in front of her, she simply says "Life goes on" without shedding a tear.

Taiga is a terrible character, and I refuse to waste time writing about how she goes from being a directionless flake to still being a directionless flake. Ryuji however, I sort of like (mostly because I identify with really heterosexual characters who get excited about cooking). To go back to Ryuji, after that first introduction to the future planning paperwork he has difficulty filling in, he spends the bulk of the school year focused on his sex life. He goes from drama to drama, and fling to fling with very little focus on himself. Whether he is worried about taking care of his mother, babysitting his girlfriend, watching out for his stalker, or pursuing the girl he's had a crush on for years, the end result is that he isn't spending a dime's worth of time thinking about what's best for him, or where he is going. As the series progresses his friends fade in and out, and more and more frequently mention their long term plans. After a point even his teacher starts investing in her future, after giving up on love, which the series increasingly presents as a false idol. Finally, everyone and their dog start pressuring him into going to college. Rather than man up and focus on what he needs to though, he chooses to try and run away with Taiga. Eventually even that worthless brat realizes that he needs to get his shit together