

# Resonance and Post-Otherness in Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* (2020)

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## Abstract

*Influenced by colonial relations and post-colonialism, the contrast between Irish and (Anglo-) Irish or English characters has been a focal point in twentieth century Irish literature. From racist nineteenth century cartoons in Punch magazine depicting the Irish as monkeys, to the themes of isolation that pervade the work of Anglo-Irish writers, otherness has been central to these representations. Political and economic developments have created new contexts for representation in recent decades: the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and subsequent end to a period of violent sectarian conflict known as the Troubles, the Celtic Tiger period of economic growth and prosperity, and modern social developments that include referenda on abortion and gay marriage, have changed both the experience of living in Ireland and the expression of Irish identity. Consequently, contemporary Irish identity seeks to include an increasingly diverse population and focuses less on Irish/English binaries, instead considering urban/rural differences, environmental concerns, and the impact of globalisation.*

*Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* (2020) presents one opportunity to consider 'post-otherness' within Irish storytelling and cinema. Its key protagonists, Mebh Óg MacTíre and Robyn Goodfellowe, strongly resonate with one another despite their cultural differences, forging a bond on their quest to validate their sense of self. They neither share a cultural background nor identify entirely with their respective communities but, in coming together to face existential challenges, the pair become more comfortable with their own identities. Blurring the definition of and distinction between groups, it becomes difficult to establish who is the Other. *Wolfwalkers* presents characters and themes akin to Anglo-Irish literature, but responding to their lived experience as earlier writers did theirs, the directors rework Irish tropes for a contemporary audience. By presenting historically inspired narratives, the film shows new perspectives on character development, utilising child heroes in a way that differs from earlier approaches. Representations of colonialism and English-Irish duality from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature are re-imagined here, influenced by post-nationalist thinking and the efforts of a transnational team of artists targeting an international audience. There are also elements of the film that reflect postcolonialism and orientalism, complicating the film's depictions of Irishness. An analysis of *Wolfwalkers* demonstrates that otherness is highly subjective, and when Robyn and Mebh cross the boundary between their two worlds, they reject the illusion of difference.*

**Keywords:** *Irish folklore, animation, Cartoon Saloon, post-Otherness, Anglo-Irish Literature.*

## I. Introduction

Cartoon Saloon is an Irish-based animation company best known for its trilogy of films - *The Secret of Kells* (Moore and Twomey 2009), *Song of the Sea* (Moore 2014) and *Wolfwalkers* (Moore and Stewart 2020) - that rework themes and tropes of Irish folklore (Malone 2021). The films have achieved considerable critical success, including Oscar nominations, placing an emphasis on Irish folklore and mythology but aiming for an international audience and involving the expertise of a transnational creative team. Although each of the films engages with themes of Otherness, placing a

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strong emphasis on familiar Irish tropes and folkloric influences, in this paper we consider a post-Otherness reading. Focusing on the central characters of the third instalment, *Wolfwalkers*, the two young girls Robyn and Mebh, we aim to demonstrate that through developing a sense of resonance (Rosa 2019), how these characters achieve a greater sense of validation (Honneth 1995), ultimately overcoming the principal villain, and gaining recognition for who they are.

Creative historical fiction involves the reworking of established ideas and stories, sometimes engaging in revisionism, to engage with a contemporary audience.<sup>2</sup> As with many authors, film directors Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart are responding to contemporary issues from their own perspective. Works such as Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy reveal as much about contemporary Irish society, the anthropocene, and the impact of globalisation as it does about the historical periods in which they are set. Although explicitly representing a narrative that engages with Irish and English conflict, *Wolfwalkers* is a post-nationalist film that reflects moves towards post-Otherness in contemporary Irish society and literature. Further developing Honneth's (1995) principles, *Wolfwalkers* demonstrates the representation of care, respect and social esteem. An emotional concern for the well-being and needs of the young girls underpins the audience response to the plot. Influenced by contemporary gender politics, there is a reflection on equity-based rights, which refers to the recognition of Robyn and Mebh's equal, basic rights and dignity. While there is a stratification of power in the period represented in *Wolfwalkers*, the film presents a story of achievement-based social esteem, which recognises the girls' achievements at a time when their characters were not only diminished by their social class but also by their sex. Throughout the film, the challenges are shared by all living creatures, not just one group of humans.

In this paper we provide an overview of the film and examine the historical contexts that inform its narrative. We seek to contrast the narrative approach in *Wolfwalkers* with the representation of otherness in Anglo-Irish and other early twentieth century literature in the English language and demonstrate the abandonment of binaries that underpin the construction of otherness. We focus in particular on the representation of children as protagonists, demonstrating how their affinity with and empathy for each other dissolves any sense of otherness. While the depiction of characters as animals or with animal characteristics reflects common tropes of otherness, particularly whereby the other is represented as monstrous, in *Wolfwalkers* the distinction between man and animal is diminished and ultimately it is a man who is the monster.

## **II. *Wolfwalkers*: Narrative and Context**

*Wolfwalkers* is an independent animated film directed by Irish directors Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart for the production company Cartoon Saloon involving a transnational team of collaborators. It tells the story of an English girl, Robyn Goodfellowe, who has arrived in the town of Kilkenny with her father during a period of colonial conquest in Ireland. She encounters Mebh, a spirited young girl who lives in the forests. Robyn's father Bill is tasked with exterminating the wolves, bringing him into conflict with Mebh who is an enchanted wolfwalker, a human who possesses

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, older stories and literature may also be read in the context of contemporary lived experience. As Anna Diamond reflects in relation to the novel *Dragonwings* (1975), which tells the story of a young Chinese boy who migrates to the USA at the turn of the twentieth century, themes of "racism, discrimination, and the anti-immigration attitude of the nation" reflect the hostility and divisiveness of the 2020 US Presidential elections.

the power to take the form of a wolf while their human bodies lie sleeping. Robyn and later her father become transformed into Wolfwalkers after being bitten. Their initial identities as hunters is overcome by empathy for the hunted and they join the wolfwalkers at the climax of the film. A reading might suggest that, much like a phrase used to describe Norman invaders, Robyn and her father become 'more Irish than the Irish themselves'. Nevertheless, it is unclear which group is the Other, with both sides orientated in a Saidian sense.

The choice of Kilkenny is important. Although chosen in part because of director Moore's connection to the town, the history of the town and surrounding area is pivotal to the storyline. In *Wolfwalkers*, the character of the Lord Protector may be interpreted as Oliver Cromwell, who besieged Ireland at the end of the 1640s. The winter campaign of 1650 brought him to Kilkenny, which had been the capital of the Catholic Confederacy since 1642 and was already an established Anglo-Norman city with the prominent Kilkenny Castle serving as the seat of the powerful Butler family.

There is contrast in the visual representation of each space, with the town of Kilkenny often represented with geometric straight lines akin to mediaeval town maps, with greater fluidity and diversity of shapes in the woods. The contrast between these two spaces is underlined by the desire of the English to gain control over and place order on the forest, destroying the wildlife and exterminating the wolves. There is a third space between town and woodland that is more open. The climax of the film involves English soldiers moving destructively through the woodland, eventually confronting the ethereal Moll and Mebh, mother and daughter, surrounded by wolves. Yet throughout the film the forest is presented as a safe place with the town being a place of danger.

When she first appears, Robyn is wielding a crossbow and has a pet falcon, a hunting bird, on her shoulder. She is pretending to be hunting, firing bolts around her house instead of attending to domestic duties. When her father Bill enters, the masquerade ends, and she returns to housekeeping. In contrast with the masculine characteristics of the physically large hunter, Bill demonstrates a tender, caring demeanour towards his daughter. The absence of a mother character requires Bill to take on a maternal role and his character reflects the literal meaning of his name - a good fellow. Nevertheless, he is definite in his actions, replacing her hood with a maid's bonnet and in a later scene insisting that she serve as a maid in the household of the Lord Protector. Symbolically, donning the outfit of a maid and conforming to convention highlights her rebelliousness and otherness.

Parallel to the narrative of Robyn and her father, the story presents the character of Mebh wandering wild in the forest. Her mother's body is in a state of sleep while her wolf form is trapped by the Lord Protector in his house. Without a father, Mebh is almost alone, save for the wolfpack. She longs for the safe return of her mother and is fearful of the townspeople. The visual representation of Mebh, using curved shapes and unkempt hair is not unlike 19th century stereotyped images and she is contrasted with Robyn, who despite some rough edges and loose hairs, has more correct deportment and plaited pigtailed.

At the narrative's midpoint, Robyn and her father fall into a depressing, stringent, and dehumanising routine. The greys and browns of the city take over from the vivid colours of the forest as the dejected father and daughter are dragged away in opposite directions. Robyn is fully subsumed by her work as a maid, cleaning and housekeeping tirelessly in the company of many other women, but rarely speaking to any of them. Bill is reduced from a wolf hunter to a mere footman in the Lord Protector's army, nameless and faceless. The heroine becomes unfamiliar even to herself, and her identity is at risk of annihilation. Visually, the film highlights the sheer

oppression and hopelessness of the scene, intimidating stone architecture rising up around the characters like prison walls, thin windows allowing very little light through, and dark clouds gathering. The other men and women, soldiers and maids, do not smile, and they are almost identical to one another. In this world, individual identity is only a burden, and Robyn and Bill's fellow townsfolk have already given in. The danger presented to us is very clear - if Robyn and her father decide to do the same and conform, they will lose what makes them unique.

### III. Otherness and Irish literature

Otherness has been a central trope in literature in Ireland but as Ireland moves from being a colonial, to post-colonial and increasingly multi-cultural society, the representation of otherness requires revision beyond traditional binaries of Irish(ness) and British(ness). The characters of Robyn and Bill pre-empt the development of a nineteenth century Anglo-Irish identity and instead represent soldiers who went native and assimilated into Irish culture in earlier periods. The narrative of *Wolfwalkers* pre-dates the emergence of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, which in turn inspired a body of nineteenth and twentieth century literature that, to the fore amidst its themes, engaged with class divisions based on Irish and Anglo-Irish or British identities. Nevertheless, the tropes of a stratified society that seeks to orientalise the native Irish and inhabitants of the Irish countryside are evident. Furthermore, the choice of two girls as protagonists has parallels in the writings of several women writers including Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Elizabeth Bowen, and the pair of Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin (Somerville and Ross), who engaged with the role and identity of women during the fin de siècle.

There are also resonances with the writings of Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), particularly in relation to India. In both *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *Kim* (1901), Kipling presents children as protagonists who overcome challenges presented by the worlds they live in. Kipling's work is addressed by post-colonial theorist Edward Said (1978) but Said arguably fails to recognise the complexity of identities that Kipling not only wrote about but which he himself embodied (Scott, 2011). Kipling encountered various cultures in his travels throughout Asia, broadening his understanding, although he remained an Imperialist. Reflecting the realisation that the 'formerly "distant Other" is now proliferating inside Europe, fostering a state of "post-Otherness," where "multitudes of minorities" increasingly thrive in European cities' (Ndikung and Römhild, 2013, 214), the appearance of characters in *The Secret of Kells* suggests a multicultural community, something that is absent from much of Irish literature that sought to essentialise the Gaelic native and Viking/Norman/English invader. *Wolfwalkers* suggests the presence of a third group in Early Modern Ireland whose identity is not based on Irishness or Englishness, which has dominated Irish literature and discourse for much of the twentieth century. Traditionally presented as a fairy folk, such as *na daoine sídhe* in the earlier film *Song of the Sea*, *Wolfwalkers* engages with the concept of the werewolf. Such a trope has been applied to explorations of adolescence, gender and sexuality, racial and social politics, disability and addiction (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver, 2012), much of which can be read in this film.

Kipling focuses on male characters while *Wolfwalkers* presents two girls and raises questions about gender roles. Writing about Irishness and womanhood, Thomas Tracy seeks to demonstrate that nineteenth-century attempts to impose British culture on Ireland and the representation of Irishness as the antithesis of an idealised British national identity was based on "a general inability to see Ireland and the Irish through anything other than a colonial lens". Tracy draws upon Said's *Orientalism*, identifying

Ireland as Britain's 'first colony'. Whereas his focus is on how the British "wrote" Irishness in the nineteenth century", *Wolfwalkers* is directed by Irish directors who represent a confident, globally connected, post-Celtic Tiger generation of creative professionals for whom the British Empire is a historical memory. Nevertheless, Tracy's work and Anglo-Irish literature provide a useful foil, particularly when examining women characters, presented by Cartoon Saloon in the twenty-first century, caught between lingering cultural nationalism of the twentieth century and an emerging post-nationalism. This is most evident in the refusal to demonise Robyn and her father despite their Englishness but the distinction of Mebh from the Irish townsfolk.

A prominent trope in *Wolfwalkers* relates to domesticity. Pointing in particular to the work of Edgeworth, Tracy notes 'the conceptualization of anti-domesticity as a type of moral contagion' (5). Unlike Anglo-Irish authors who associate this contagion with Gaelic Irish, both Mebh and Robyn reject domestic roles. Furthermore, Tracy notes:

In arguments made before several Parliamentary and Royal Commissions, including one which led to the formation of Britain's national police force, these commentators directly and persistently equate Irish anti-domesticity with physical and moral contagion, and the utilize the motif of anti-domestic Irish mothers breeding their children to a life of crime to argue for either the quarantining or expulsion of Irish immigrants from Britain's rapidly industrializing cities (2009, 5).

Like Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), *Wolfwalkers* foregrounds a character intent on overturning normative gender roles, a trope that is evident in much Western literature and remains topical in the present. Whereas *The Wild Irish Girl* argues for greater equality between Britain and Ireland and between men and women, reflecting the author's identity as a woman and Irish Unionist.

Turning to later twentieth century Irish writers, a reading of *Wolfwalkers* might find similar parallels with the playwright Marina Carr, whose contemporary, rural, and family-based plays "abound in references to Irish folklore and myth and evoke realms the dead, the supernatural, and the pre-Christian world of fairies - piseogs and the Sidhe" (Sihra, 2005: 134). Although not as developed as Carr, through the narrative focus on two young girls, *Wolfwalkers* explores the meaning of womanhood and "issues of gender and sexuality crucially resist the monological nationalist, masculinist, colonial, and postcolonial issues of identity and history that have tended to dominate Irish dramatic narratives over the last century" (ibid). As Sihra highlights in relation to Carr's plays, 'woman' is defined by the role of 'mother' in the Irish Constitution, which also makes reference to her role within the home, an article that is the subject of current debate and discourse. Due to the absence of the mother character, Robyn in particular is expected to undertake domestic duties. In sharp contrast with the 'normal' family unit in Irish culture, the character of the single parent becomes normalised in *Wolfwalkers* as both principal characters have only one parent. By presenting both a single mother and a single father, the film provides an element of balance. As Burgess highlights in *Fatherhood Reclaimed*, fathers have an important role in educating and, referring to British feminist Patricia Hewitt, the father-daughter bond should be celebrated at the same level as the mother-daughter bond (1998: 30).

Although both protagonists are young girls, this has not prevented a queer reading of the film. While director Tomm Moore has acknowledged and welcomed queer readings of *Wolfwalkers*, he has stated that the film had not originally been

conceived as a queer narrative<sup>3</sup>. There is a sense that Anglo-Irish literature also explores queer relationships but does so in an ambiguous manner, such as in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), in which the character of Freke dresses in men's clothing. This is not dissimilar to the representation of Robyn in *Wolfwalkers*, dressed in almost Robin Hood like costume. However, a queer reading is beyond the scope of this paper.

#### IV. Abandoning Duality and Binary Oppositions

An analysis of *Wolfwalkers* can be informed by an understanding of developments in literature in Ireland over the past century, particularly where Irish and English identities are juxtaposed in the creation of Otherness. In their examination of Irish writing, Richard Cairns and Shaun Richards point to “. . . the reality of the historic relationship of Ireland with England: a relationship of the colonised and the coloniser” (1988: 1). They recognize that the identities of colonised and coloniser have been made and remade through their relationships and that authors have been critical agents in the creation of identities, stressing “the linkages between writers and political and social movements” (McCarthy, 2007: 313). Literary criticism is also influential and Cormac McCarthy's consideration of the influence of Edward Said on Irish criticism carefully illuminates the key approaches of seminal authors in this field including Cairns and Richards, Colin Graham, and Declan Kiberd. It is important to recognize how, as much as authors may develop new perspectives, literary criticism has also embraced different views. Kiberd's approach to the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), who was the focus of Said's (1988) notable essay on Irish literature, and John Millington Synge (1871–1909), moved towards a recognition that these authors were “capable of mobilising a progressive dialectic between past and present, with a view to moving into a better future” (McCarthy, 2007: 324). This progressive dialectic is also evident in *Wolfwalkers*, albeit that the conflict between nations is transformed into a battle between man and nature, reflective of the anthropogenic challenges of the twenty-first century.

Just as Anglo-Irish writers Bram Stoker (1847-1912) and Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) did when addressing concerns about syphilis in Irish society or describing the consequences of the War of Independence for the Irish Ascendancy in *Dracula* (1897) and *The Last September* (1929) respectively, directors Moore and Stewart are engaging with the concerns of contemporary society – climate change, gender roles, migration and assimilation. They present an alternative to the colonial development of Ireland that eventually leads to forest clearances and more intensive farming practices. Although not on the scale realised in England, there is ultimately urbanisation and industrialisation in Ireland but there remains a romantic connection to a rural past. It perhaps echoes the end of Franz Fanon's anti-colonial text *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he writes:

Let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something other than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature... we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man (1963/2001: 255).

*Wolfwalkers* concludes not with the victory of one group over another but rather the emergence of an alternative, where the former hunter and hunted are part of the same

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<sup>3</sup> See Brown, T. 2020, 'How *Wolfwalkers*' Filmmakers Pushed the Expressive Potential of Hand-Drawn Animation' in LA Times [online]. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-12-31/wolfwalkers-animation-tomm-moore-ross-stewart> [retrieved on 2023-06-20].

tribe. There is a Fanonesque desire that questions what it means to be human, giving dignity to the creatures that are less, or perhaps super-human.

A desire for a sense of home and belonging is evident in both Anglo-Irish literature and the films of *Cartoon Saloon*. It shifts from the private and endangered space of the big house to the small village threatened by emigration, to the forest, a metaphor for the world in the anthropocene at a time of climate change, threatened by destruction. Unlike much of the canon of literature in Ireland through the twentieth century that engaged in a critique of imperialism and colonialism through the representation of Anglo-Irish relations, *Wolfwalkers* foregrounds environmental concerns and the future of humanity over the differences between groups within society. Ecological destruction affects all humans regardless of class, ethnicity or other identity markers. There is constant change but despite the different identities of authors and characters, there is a shared connection to home. Rather than remote, orientalist homes, these places are located physically side by side, within Ireland, reflecting the similarly close locations of the islands of Ireland and Britain. While orientalism has been applied through postcolonial readings of Irish literature, whereby the depiction of Irish characters mirrors those of the East in the critical theory of Said, the representation of characters in *Wolfwalkers* is less about emphasising difference and instead representing comparisons with more subtle differences. The romantic message seeks to move from ethnic division to idealise a hybrid or mongrel entity, not native but in which people share a world view with respect for nature.

Rather than Kipling's India or Fanon's Africa, *Wolfwalkers* is set in Ireland, which was equally orientalist by British colonists and press, perhaps best exemplified in *Punch* magazine, a publication that provides insights into the "opinions and sensibilities of its predominantly middle-class English audience", capturing "aspects of the colonial tension felt between England and its closest overseas colony, Ireland" (Scott, 2020: 1). In contrast with the characters of Kim and Mowgli in *Kim* and *The Jungle Book*, who Kipling represents as lone individuals torn between two worlds, *Wolfwalkers* offers a third, shared future that is neither Irish nor English but implies an esoteric alternative that is heavily influenced by folklore and mythology.

*Wolfwalkers* represents a changing representation of colonialism that embraces humanist philosophies and seeks to reduce a fear in the Other. There is, as Said notes in his 2003 preface to his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978) "a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion" (xiv). In *Wolfwalkers*, the latter is represented by the Lord Protector, but the film concludes with the former. As Said expands:

Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. (2003: xxii)

Concluding his seminal reading of Irish literature, *Inventing Ireland*, Kiberd recognises that Irishness is not a seamless garment but rather "a quilt of many patches and colours" (1996: 653). Still limited to Irish and English identities, he states: "No one element should subordinate or assimilate the others: Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo, each has its part in the pattern" (1996: 653). The communication between Robyn and Moll represents a desire to engage with characters from a different culture but ultimately it is the transformation of Robyn and her father,

who join with the Wolfwalkers to overcome the army of the Lord Protector, that represents the ultimate humanist message of the film.

## **V. Children as and Negating Other(ness)**

The narrative of *Wolfwalkers* focuses on two protagonists, the young girls Mebh and Robyn, who are drawn from two different backgrounds. Mebh is represented as an Irish girl living in the woods amongst the animals – her second name *Mac Tíre* literally translates as ‘son of the land’ but is also the term for a wolf in the Irish language. We later understand that she is a wolfwalker with shapeshifting abilities. In contrast, Robyn is an English born daughter of a hunter living in the town of Kilkenny, which is under English rule. Both girls are daughters of single parents, further complicated by the absence of Mebh’s mother for much of the film. Both Mebh’s mother and Robyn’s father want what is best for their children but whereas they are willing to sacrifice themselves and succumb to the demands of society, their children rebel and do not accept the expectations set out to them. Rather than a romanticised late nineteenth century understanding of childhood and innocence based on inexperience, *Wolfwalkers* represents a return to an earlier understanding evident in Blake and Wordsworth that points to the root meaning of innocence as “openness to the injuries risked in a full life” (Kiberd, 1996: 103). Both Robyn and Mebh risk all in pursuit of what they believe is right and fair.

There are many examples of child protagonists in literature. Borrowing from Said (1978), Robyn may be a ‘liminal’ character similar to Kipling’s *Kim*, living between two cultures but so too is Mebh, reluctant to abandon the forests and perhaps more akin to Mowgli in Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. Mebh also reflects aspects of the character Kim, who is an orphaned vagabond - Mebh’s mother is trapped and therefore absent, meaning the Mebh roams freely. Kipling has been critiqued for legitimising Empire (Said, 1978; Parry, 2014), as well as being racist and having an aversion to interracial mixing (Scott, 2011, p.306), but David Scott presents an interesting critique of Said’s interpretation of Kipling’s literature that is useful here. Kipling recognised that “western civilization is a devastating and a selfish game” (1920, p. 247), thus opening an opportunity to recognise different perspectives. As he states in his poem *The Ballad of East and West* (1889): “But there is neither East nor West, / Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, / though they come from the ends of the earth”. Rather than strong men, *Wolfwalkers* presents the audience with two strong-willed girls who find friendship in each other.

The focus on and representation of children in *Wolfwalkers* exemplifies another rejection of convention. In his examination of childhood in Irish literature, Declan Kiberd notes that “All through the nineteenth century, the Irish had been treated in the English media as childlike – ‘broths of boys’ veering between tears and smiles, quick to anger and quick to forget – unlike the stable Anglo-Saxon” (1996: 104). Although Mebh undoubtedly demonstrates some of these qualities, they are also evident in Robyn. Neither girl fully belongs or conforms to the identity of their community but rather than being Othered, they find resonance in each other, developing mutual respect and incorporating aspects of each other’s characteristics or personality. Mebh lives amongst the wolves but is human; as a girl Robyn is expected to fulfil a domestic role but wishes to be out hunting in the woods like her father. Robyn values the companionship of her falcon over other children in the town, which leads her to nature and friendship with Mebh, ultimately rejecting a life in the town. Robyn later becomes bitten, thus becoming a Wolfwalker. Reunited with her mother, Mebh’s rough edges soften.



Whereas children in much of the literature of Yeats are “reduced to an expendable cultural object”, (Kiberd, 1996: 104), infantilizing native culture, in *Wolfwalkers* we encounter children from different cultural backgrounds. Demonstrating that children are shaped by their culture and milieu, the film also suggests that children are better than adults at challenging the status quo and changing their ways for the better in spite of their cultural background. The rebellious child is less likely to bow to those in power – such as Bill’s desire to submit to the will of the Lord Protector – and instead desires to do what is right.

The actions and experiences of the girls place them at odds with the world they inhabit. Robyn does not accept the role defined for her by society and rejects her community’s attitude towards nature and the wolves. Although she expresses some curiosity about the town, Mebh is very much at home in her environment, but her woods are threatened by modernity. Both girls rebel against the situations they find themselves in. They demonstrate great love for their single parents, who face difficult decisions in order to protect their children. The climax of the film involves Bill experiencing resonance and shapeshifting to belong. Rather than being the other, the *Wolfwalkers* provide "validation of identity through belonging to a group with which we resonate or through a deep understanding and acceptance of otherness."

## **VI. Animals, Monsters and Transformation**

Comparing post-colonial and post-national engagements with Irish history provides an interesting challenge. Recognising that imperialism begins earlier in the English-speaking world than elsewhere, pointing to the ceding of Ireland to Henry II of England by the Pope in the 1150s, Said states: ‘From that time on an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were a barbarian and degenerate race’ (1994: 266). *Wolfwalkers* continues this trope in the character of Mebh, but she is not like the rest of Irish who live in the towns or work in the fields. Rather than attempting to domesticate Mebh, the narrative presents an attempt to domesticate the English Robyn, who resists and rebels, desiring to engage with the wild in an almost Yeatsian fashion as she goes “To the waters and the wild, With a faery, hand in hand”.

Amidst the waters and the wild, Robyn encounters the enchanted wolfwalkers. The monstrous or the grotesque is a quality often attributed to the other, reinforcing its moral distinction from everything that is familiar and justifying separation from it. Kafka’s evaluation of the grotesque as a shadow that must remain in the otherworld (as expounded upon by Matthew Powell (2008)) is a practice that the Lord Protector, and Kilkenny at large, heavily rely upon to maintain their sense of identity and civilisation. For the Protector in particular, his superiority to the wolves and the forest defines his very purpose in life and drives him to colonise the island of Ireland. For Phillip Bernhardt-House (2008), the monstrous is a powerful symbol of transgression; it is illogical and supposedly unnatural, it refuses to conform to categorisation, and he points to the werewolf as a figure that blurs the line between man and beast (159). While some monsters can be tamed, as the Lord Protector believes, others defy the status quo just by virtue of their existence and must be destroyed. In these ways, the familiarity and “superiority” of Kilkenny is reliant in part on its relationship to the othered forest. When Robyn first transforms into a wolf in the middle of the night, she is taken aback by her own monstrousness and becomes unfamiliar entirely to her own father. Communication between them is made impossible as she can no longer speak, and what follows is a cat-and-mouse chase through the streets and across the rooftops of Kilkenny as Robyn attempts to flee the bloodthirsty townsfolk. In these moments, we are placed in the position of the

monster, privileged with the ability to see the humanity in it, and we, alongside Robyn, come to realise that monstrous and the otherness are highly reliant on perspective. The film is quick to highlight the incoherence of such ideas by making it apparent to us, in this tense scene alongside others, that anything can be a monster, and anything can become familiar. From Robyn's perspective, the town rapidly takes on a grotesque appearance of its own – ruthless, murderous, and blind. The scene concludes with Robyn's confrontation with Moll, and the realisation that the wolfwalkers are just as human as anyone else. Robyn's quest becomes one not just of familiarisation with the other, but of dissolving any perception of difference at all. Otherness, as it becomes apparent to her, is just an illusion.

The utilisation of animals and animal symbols to explore the human condition is extremely common throughout world mythology (Campbell 1949). Exploring bestial archetypes in fables and folktales, Powell sees it as an opportunity to step back and examine our humanity from an objective perspective; to see the world entirely anew and full of fresh potential (130), much as how the audience is allowed to literally see the forest through Robyn's eyes. Humans can become othered for cultural, religious, political, or racially-motivated reasons, but the anthropomorphising of animals accentuates that distinction, forcing us to recognise discriminations that we may take for granted and exposing otherness in a new light.

By playing off this tension between human and non-human, between what is "the self" and what is "not the self," Kafka is able to explore the ontology of otherness that clarifies the space between self and other. This space is critical to maintaining notions of self and identity. Kafka uses the grotesque as a means of illuminating the surrounding shadows that are not oneself and that allow for definition of self. The grotesque becomes, for Kafka, a device for explaining those aspects of reality whose very existence must remain in shadow in order to maintain a coherent and sustainable reality. Unlike Kafka however, it is arguable that the *Wolfwalkers* and Mebh in particular are not presented as grotesque at all - if anything, it is the Lord Protector who is the beast.

The blending of man and beast to facilitate narratives about identity crisis, otherness, and rejection date far back into ancient mythology, the monstrous embodying the summation of everything that society finds vulgar, unnatural, and unlawful. Mediaeval stories of vampires and werewolves often had a contagious component, and pivotal works of Victorian horror centred around fear of infection and contamination at the hands of a supernatural being taking the shape of a human but altogether rejecting human identity. Bram Stoker's classic *Dracula* got down to the nub of the issue: a bite from a malignant host transformed a poor victim into a horrible creature, catatonic during the day but ravenous at night for a blood meal. When the victim turns, there comes with the change the curse of immortality, and depending on the film adaptation, a dramatic and grotesque physical change comes with it. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) has similarly captivated readers for generations with its image of a vile monster capable of inflicting ungodly harm with ease, and yet as the beast struggles to come to terms with its body and purpose, we are confronted with the unsettling question of whether it possesses real personhood. The pop-cultural icon of the werewolf complicates things further, flipping back and forth between man and hound on a whim. The legendary tale of the Wolves of Ossory, an Irish folktale situated near Kilkenny itself and likely serving as inspiration for Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers*, depicts two Irish werewolves with the capacity to speak, and even the desire to receive holy communion, reflecting the dominance of Roman Catholicism in 19th and 20th century Irish society. Not only can a beast communicate like any other human here, but it can also follow moral teachings

and potentially even possess a soul. Thus, the monstrous, as an icon of otherness and everything that society rejects, may counterintuitively serve to undermine hierarchies and divisions if approached in the right way.

The utility of the monstrous in deconstructing otherness has made mythological creatures like the werewolf potent symbols for social change and the representation of disadvantaged groups. The werewolf in particular has been used to explore queerness in film for decades, such as *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) or the Canadian feature film *Ginger Snaps* (2000). *Wolfwalkers* itself, upon release, was quickly interpreted by online audiences as its own kind of queer narrative, queer viewers seeing its two heroines as lesbians. The character of Lois Farquar in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* considers romantic nationalism and as Patricia Coughlan writes, at the beginning of the novel she is desperate to escape. Unlike much Anglo-Irish literature, *Wolfwalkers* provides an alternative means of escape into a third life, one that is neither English nor Irish.

## VII. Otherness Deconstructed

No other scene in the film emphasises the liberation of the forest and the unity between the two girls as the “Running with the Wolves” sequence, which incorporates a variety of different visual styles and motifs. The scene expresses visually and narratively the power that comes with embracing the other. Mebh teaches Robyn how to make the most of her new wolf form, telling her to close her eyes and see the world through her touch, smell, and hearing. The audience experiences Robyn's perspective, seeing a world of colour that was previously invisible, and followed swiftly by the whole pack of wolves, the girls run and jump freely through the woods, exploring their heightened abilities. In the presence of the other – and indeed, allowing herself to take on the other's shape – Robyn is allowed access to a literal and figurative view of the world that was previously alien. Her fear of the other completely leaves her as she comes to understand it, and as the audience's point-of-view character, we too are encouraged to see the forest not as a dangerous and mysterious place but one where the laws and expectations of Kilkenny do not matter. The scene also solidifies the connection between liberation and nature; the twisting branches and trunks of the forest become a playground for the girls, the wolves become their companions, and the rain that falls is a refreshing and comforting break in the excitement. While for the townsfolk, nature is a resource to extract or a barrier to overcome, the montage confirms what Robyn has slowly been coming to terms with; it is an otherworld with as much depth and knowledge contained within it as the town, and it is not as primitive as the Lord Protector would have her community believe.

Mebh too experiences a transformation. Avoiding the townsfolk at all costs, fearing their intentions, and holding a grudge ever since they captured her mother, her friendship with the ‘townie’ Robyn leads to the realisation that they are not so different. Exposure to the other in both cases reveals the absurdity of putting up barriers between the two worlds, and it becomes all the clearer why these barriers must be stripped away. As the film progresses, we see how the disconnection between the other and the familiar, and the ongoing pursuit to keep those barriers up, is what drives the narrative to its inevitable final battle. When coexistence is rejected as a childish idea, the only option left becomes a fight for survival and a zero-sum game where either the forest or the town must perish. *Wolfwalkers* does not simply present reconciliation with nature and the rejected other as a personally gratifying experience – it is a necessity, lest both worlds collide and create misery for each other.

Robyn and Mebh both function as the ideal conduits for change in their society, and they alone wield the power to break down barriers and reconcile the two worlds. The child as an agent of change is not an uncommon idea; Roni Natov (2017) points to the child-hero as a source of positive otherness, and a capacity to understand and embrace the other in a way that no one else can, calling it a kind of “child power” (78, 105). As ‘immature’ individuals without considerable life experience, the girls are positioned in such a way as to defy the community of Kilkenny, and they are not weighed down as much by the conventions of their place and time. When the Lord Protector brings Moll, Mebh’s wolfwalking mother, onto the stage in front of the common people and promises to tame her and slay the rest of the wolves, the ensuing frenzy serves as a climax to many of the film’s conflicts. Mebh finally reveals herself in full to the people of the town, promising them vengeance, and Robyn makes the choice in the heat of the moment to align herself fully with the wolfwalkers. Climbing on stage and standing between herself and her father, she refuses to let him kill Moll and urges him to take her side. Bill, the Lord Protector, and the commoners act out of fear, seeing the death of the wolves and the forest as a necessary sacrifice to ensure the regime’s continued success; Robyn and Mebh are just as frightened, but they act in spite of this fear, understanding that there is another way that allows both worlds to coexist.

As child heroes, Robyn and Mebh are inquisitive and ‘underdeveloped’ in their understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, as well as being far more comfortable letting their emotions run free as opposed to the adults of the film who maintain an air of coldness. Confronting her father and crying for him to see the truth, Robyn drives Bill into his own kind of personal crisis, forcing him to confront his own feelings. The child here is not only willing to embrace the other within themselves, but they also act as a catalyst for the transformation of the adults around them. Natov does have some concerns about the archetype of the child hero as the sole liberator of their community, placing the child in a position where they must sacrifice everything and become responsible for saving their parents, their society, and their world (5). Nevertheless, the child in their wild innocence remains a powerful symbol of otherness as a heroic power, one that Cartoon Saloon is very familiar with.

As highlighted earlier, a significant characteristic that reinforces their otherness is Robyn and Mebh’s girlhood in the face of patriarchal persecution. From the start, Robyn’s position in society is one dictated to her; she cannot be a hunter like her father, she cannot speak out or rebel, and she has a very limited selection of jobs available to her. By virtue of being a girl, she must dress, act, and work as Kilkenny expects. In our first introduction to her, the friction between her ambitions and place in society are succinctly displayed; she wields a crossbow one minute, running about the house with her falcon at her side, and the next her father arrives to drag her back down to reality. His insistence is not malicious, in fact he laughs and jokes with her as he tenderly replaces her hood with a maid’s bonnet and gently insists on her conformity. Her othering is not shown to be unreasonable or unusual, rather the opposite; it is simply a fact that everyone including her father accepts, entirely natural and unquestionable. Later, when Robyn confronts her father in the evening to assure him that the wolfwalkers are not a threat, he cuts her off almost immediately. Communication between the two breaks down, they become separated physically and emotionally. The reinforcement of gendered roles as well as the rejection of the other not only strengthens the divide between town and forest, but it also fractures relationships within the very walls of Kilkenny. These scenes, set in the one place where Robyn should feel most liberated – her own home – exemplify just how isolated she is among her own people. It is an isolation that can only be remedied by pushing further into the realm of the other, finding safety among those that are also rejected.

In a strange way, she feels the least othered when she has fully embraced and surrounded herself in the otherness of the wilderness beyond the walls.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

The animated folklore trilogy from Cartoon Saloon reworks Irish folklore and familiar tropes but moves away from an overt expression of Otherness, facilitating a post-Otherness reading. It follows Colin Graham's rejection of Edward Said's emphasis on binarisms to seek to understand the greater complexity of modern Irish society. For the main protagonists, Robyn and Mebh, there is evidence of synchronous resonance whereby both characters speak with their own voice and retain independence but also recognise their relationality. For Robyn's father, there is a response/reaction resonance as he is faced with the challenge of protecting his daughter in opposition to his perceived sense of duty, becoming alienated from his community and ultimately contributing to the death of his community's leader, the Lord Protector. The transformation of various characters diminishes a sense of otherness and aligns almost all of the characters with a shared sense of humanity.

Although set in a historical era during the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland, the narrative of *Wolfwalkers* creatively reworks folkloric ideas to address contemporary concerns of identity. These are as much about individuality, diversity and assimilation as they are about a specific ethnic or national identity that excludes those who do not conform. Being comfortable in your own skin and finding a place to belong in the company of others are central tropes in the film, prompting a consideration of a post-Otherness reading. Foregrounding environmental concerns, *Wolfwalkers* presents a story of the need for all creatures to live in harmony and respect nature. Rather than creating division by constructing otherness, humans must embrace a childlike curiosity about people they encounter. We must look through the eyes of others to understand different perspectives and learn to live together. By allowing resonance, all characters' identities are recognised as valid.

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