A Critical Examination of Otherness in Cartoon Saloon's Irish Folklore Trilogy

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Declaration of Authorship

We, the undersigned declare that this thesis entitled ‘A Critical Examination of Otherness in Cartoon Saloon’s Irish Folklore Trilogy’ is entirely the author’s own work and has not been taken from the work of others, except as cited and acknowledged within the text.

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Abstract

Old stories are repeatedly retold and reworked. They are used to explore social issues, represent political movements, and reconnect us with the past. This thesis critically examines how Irish mythology and folklore have been reworked by Irish filmmakers to tell new stories, focusing on Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy. *The Secret of Kells* (2009), *Song of the Sea* (2014), and *Wolfwalkers* (2020) demonstrate how old myths can be effectively brought into the present to address modern issues. This process has multiple effects, enriching an audiences' understanding of Irish identity and allowing filmmakers to explore Ireland's past and present in new ways. The animated films by Cartoon Saloon are contextualised in relation to the development of the Irish animation industry and compared with other examples of Irish and international cinema to gain a sense of how the trilogy fits into the history and development of Irish film, as well as changing representations of Irishness. Divided into two parts, this interdisciplinary dissertation provides a theoretical underpinning that incorporates literature from beyond film studies, drawing from the perspectives offered by different disciplines, and a historical overview of Irish animation. The second part focuses on Cartoon Saloon, demonstrating the applicability of archetypal theory to the trilogy, and focusing on themes of nature, solitude, women characters, and queer identities. The dissertation demonstrates how the studios reworking of myth to explore otherness differentiates Cartoon Saloon's films from the conservative and traditionalist Irish films of the past, firmly establishing the trilogy as an example of modern, post-nationalist Irish cinema.

Keywords: Irish cinema, animation, Irish mythology, folklore, Cartoon Saloon, otherness

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Glossary of Irish Names

Aidan	Meaning ‘little fire’ or ‘fiery’, derived from the Celtic god of the sun, Aed.
Aisling	Meaning ‘dream’. Also the name of a genre of Irish poetry from the 17th century.
Bronagh	From *bronágh*, meaning ‘sorrow’.
Cellach	Meaning ‘war’ or ‘strife’, anglicised as Celsus.
Colm Cille	Also called Colmcille or Columba, was a 6th century Irish abbot who founded the Abbey of Iona.
Conor	Meaning ‘lover of hounds’, derived from Conchobhar, the name of a mythological king of Ulster.
Crom Cruach	Old Celtic god of Ireland associated with fertility; according to folklore, his worship was ended by St. Patrick.
Lug	Also called Lugh, he was a mythological Irish king of the Tuatha dé Danann. His name survives in the Celtic festival of Lughnasadh.
Macha	An Irish goddess and an aspect of the triple goddess of war, the Morrígan.
Manannán mac Lir	Meaning ‘Son of the Sea’, is an Irish god of the ocean.
Mebh	Also called Medb or Maeve, she was a mythological warrior-queen of Connacht, appearing most notably in the Irish myth of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.
Morrígan	A triple goddess of Irish myth associated with warfare, death, and the crow.
Pangur Bán	Meaning ‘white Pangur’, the name of a 9th century poem written by an Irish monk about his cat.
Saoirse	Meaning ‘freedom’.
Seanchaí	The word for travelling storytellers in medieval Ireland who would request food and shelter in exchange for entertainment.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1.Background and Inspiration

For as long as I can remember, animation and cinematic storytelling have fascinated and excited me, and, like many others of my generation, it heavily influenced my perspective on Irishness. In secondary school, a TY film project about the dangers of bullying and its solutions was my first chance to get involved in proper short film production, and this only strengthened my determination to go on and study cinema at third level. Since then, I have participated in several short projects, larger factual pieces, and I continue to engage in filming and editing work in parallel with my PhD research. Participation in film studies and freelance work has maintained my engagement in both theory and practice, giving me a critical dual perspective into both 'how' and 'why' in filmmaking as I engage in analysis. My fascination with how cinema shapes our self-perception and understand of the 'Other' has become an integral part of my research journey.

Alongside an early obsession with filmmaking and creative storytelling, my upbringing in Co. Meath, known as 'the Royal County', in reference to its folkloric past, meant that I have always been surrounded by the remnants of ancient Irish heritage. On clear days, the distant stone piles of the Loughcrew Cairns, said to have fallen from the satchel of a hag as she jumped from hill to hill, are visible from my bedroom window. Living so close to heritage towns and ancient sites, Irish folklore has imprinted itself upon me and only fed my keen interest in Irishness and the ways we perceive it. Other branching interests of mine, including how scholars like Joseph Campbell (1949) or psychoanalysts like Carl Jung (1970) sought to break down and understand the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves tie strongly into my interest in myth. This emerges in film studies discourse through the application of archetypal theory to films such as *Star Wars* (Indick 2004; Palumbo 2014).

Concurrently, my observation of and fascination with politics both at home and abroad reminds me of how the distant past, as well as our ever-shifting interpretation of it, shapes who we are today. The rise of extremism and nationalism in places like the United States (LaFrance 2023), England (Ebner 2023), Italy (Amante d2023), and India (Mansoor 2023) is a phenomenon that I have been closely following and has informed my reading of folklore films. Recently, the shift towards nationalism across Europe has also caught up to Ireland, manifesting as anti-immigration protests, right-wing extremism, and violence against police (McDermott 2023). Despite Ireland's historical experience with conservative and nationalist ideology, political unrest and protests have challenged a singular understanding of how Ireland and Irish society are perceived.

Scholars like David Hopkin (2012) have considered that myth and nationalism go hand-in-hand, frequently citing the exchange between the two. I believe a move away from strictly nationalist readings of mythology is important and necessary, and Irish identity in a more global and postnationalist sense has factored into my analysis. The work of Richard Kearney (2002) and Kevin Wetmore (2005) provide valuable insight in this regard, both highlighting the foundational role that mythology plays in the creation and reinforcement of social hierarchies and political narratives. Using the *Star Wars* franchise as a case in point, Wetmore argues that myth criticism and analysis often views mythology through a narrow lens, failing to consider how social conditions may shape mythology and vice versa. Some political structures and social standards rely upon myth for a sense of legitimacy and historical precedent (p.95), a fact that must inform our understanding of mythological reworking. Kearney similarly identifies the intermingling of history and fiction as not only a means of cataloguing historical data and making it more digestible for a particular audience, but also as a way of providing a people with their own founding myth. Illustrated through Rome's foundation narrative, Kearney posits that the suggestion of heavenly or esoteric origins (Rome's mythic founder, Romulus, was the son of the god Mars) can grant a

community a sense of profound legitimacy and importance (pp.84-85). My analysis to follow, while considering Irish nationalist identity, concludes that cinematic reworkings of myth are remarkably capable of connecting us with the unfamiliar – facilitating engagement with the Other – and that mythology has the power to break down old barriers as much as reinforce them. Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of Irish Studies, my thesis considers perspectives from the fields of cinema studies, folkloristics, and Irish cultural studies. Emma Radley's contributions to the *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies* (2020) are notable here; she considers Irish film and media in the context of Irish Studies, noting the challenges around field-building and focusing on the concept of national cinema. Her subheadings are directly relevant to my study: in 'On being true to one's place', Radley questions the identification of 'Irish' film in a transnational mediascape, a subject I explore throughout the thesis. Her examinations of ecocriticism and the relationship between representation and the physical environment (p.383) reflect Chapter 6 of my thesis, and 'Industry Studies' parallels Chapter 4 of my study. 'Mediated Identities' includes a focus on sexuality and gender, reflected in Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis. Taking an interdisciplinary approach provides a more thorough understanding of the Folklore Trilogy and its place in the Irish film landscape.

I first encountered the work of Cartoon Saloon in 2009 with the release of their first feature-length children's animation, *The Secret of Kells*, directed by Tomm Moore. This was a formative moment, igniting my fascination with mythology and Ireland's mysterious, folkloric past – having been exposed to Irish myth only in the form of dry school lessons up until that point, it was quite a different experience seeing folklore brought to life through animation. The film's premiere would elevate the Kilkenny-based studio to nationwide as well as international recognition, but this was certainly not their first foray into the world of Irish animation. As detailed in Chapter 4, the studio, established by Paul Young, Nora Twomey, and Tomm Moore, would spend its first ten years producing short animations and television series, aimed at both a domestic and broader global audience, building up a team of

animation talent from across Europe. Moore, one of the studio's Creative Directors, would play a pivotal role in developing the nature-oriented and mythology-inspired narratives and artistic style that would come to define Cartoon Saloon, having directed or co-directed most of the studio's feature productions over the years. Twomey has been similarly invested in the development of some of the studio's most acclaimed work, such as being co-director on *The Secret of Kells* and playing a solo directorial role on *The Breadwinner* (2017) and *My Father's Dragon* (2022). Over several decades, Cartoon Saloon has drawn heavily from native Irish identity – *Anam an Amhráin* (2013) was an Irish music series developed for TG4, and the Irish landscape has greatly influenced works such as *Song of the Sea* (2014) and *Puffin Rock* (2015 –). However, the studio has also constructed a transnational identity and production model over time, closely working with European partners and hiring creatives from an array of backgrounds. They have developed links with studios in France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and have worked closely with musicians from across Europe, most notably the French film composer Bruno Coulais. Today, the studio embodies much of what defines modern Ireland, blending indigenous myth and environmentalist messaging with a focus on producing films for international audiences and benefiting from a multi-national, multi-ethnic team of artists and writers.

1.2. Initial Arguments and Approaches

The reworking of indigenous mythological places, people, and events on screen has been a foundational pillar of Irish storytelling for over a century. Developing my interest in filmmaking and folklore, this doctoral thesis critically considers how ancient Irish stories have been incorporated into our national cinema.[1] I focus on Kilkenny-based studio Cartoon Saloon and their animated trilogy consisting of *The Secret of Kells* (2009) (TSOK), *Song of*

[1] For more on the concept of 'national cinema', particularly in the context of Irish cinema, see Barton (2004).

the Sea (2014) (SOTS), and *Wolfwalkers* (2020). These films serve as examples of indigenous success, recognising their growing international links and involvement of collaborators outside of Ireland. To contextualise these films, my research includes a critical engagement with the history of Irish filmmaking and the animation industry, changes in the interpretation of mythology over time, the impact of nationalism and globalisation, and Ireland's modern identity in an international context, all providing context for a textual and narrative analysis of the films which is the key focus of the thesis. While it is grounded foremost in film theory, this thesis is foundationally interdisciplinary and draws from the field of folkloristics so as to better understand the material being reworked. The process of reworking itself is also critical to understand – the concept of folklore gaining a "second life" through interpretation and adaptation was developed by Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko (1990; 1991) who had a fascination with regional folk tradition and medicine and the ways in which they develop over time. As he describes it, folktale's second life emerges from its reinterpretation in new contexts or the recycling of folkloric material in a place and time that differs from the original context (1991, p.42). Leading on from Honko's second life, this thesis also considers ethnomusicologist Micheál Ó Súilleabháin's (1981) writings on 'reworking'. While he explored reworking in the context of music composition, his work is nevertheless useful in constructing a definition of that process.

This thesis is interested in how stories of old have the potential to be reinterpreted across time, given new meaning in fresh contexts. This transformative power has been attributed by writers like Joseph Campbell to the notion of universal themes, character types, and narrative beats. Campbell's writings on myth are addressed throughout this research, particularly in the context of film adaptation where he has arguably projected most of his influence. Campbell's notion of universality implies that certain ideas remain relevant regardless of time or place, transcending geographical distances, and are shared across the world between disparate cultures. It is a simple idea that was foundational to *The Hero with a*

Thousand Faces (1949) in which Campbell interpreted the narratives and characters contained within mythological and religious texts, concluding that all stories derive their structure from a singular, shared heroic myth – the hero's journey or *monomyth*.

The creation of new stories by *reworking* old material is an integral focal point of my thesis, as opposed to the conservation of folkloric traditions or the retelling of myths through adaptation. Reworking occurs in a variety of contexts, but Ó Súilleabháin's definition is of particular interest; a process that creates new from the old, discarding old elements and acquiring new ones as required (1981, p.83). From an Irish music perspective, he sees this as a natural process, an ongoing rejuvenation of artistic practice that echoes the evolution of language. Ó Suilleabháin incorporated elements of jazz and Western Art Music into his arrangements and performances of Irish traditional music, reworking music from the dance tradition and exploring compositions by Irish composers including Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738). Contemporary changes in society, along with foreign influence, are cited by Ó Suilleabháin as key factors in reworking, and as Ireland moves towards a new identity characterised by European cooperation, globalisation, and modern technologies, it is a phenomenon that must be understood in any analysis of Irish cinema. Alternate definitions are important to consider, such as Daithí Kearney's (2022a; 2022b) argument that, in the context of dance and theatre, reworking is a deconstruction of heritage to identify key motifs that may be used in new artistic works. The use of these old elements is applied to create something that resonates with contemporary sensibilities. Considering the reworking of folklore for literature and film, Sara Helen Binney (2018) similarly argues that it is a process which allows artists to critically reflect on older cultural elements. This can come in the form of subversion or parody, or it may be utilised to relive a romanticised past and construct fantastical settings. In the Irish short film *An Scéalaí Deireanach?* (2002), director Desmond Bell explores the decline of old storytelling methods and the emergence of new ones, contrasting the modern cinematic artform with the fading oral traditions from which many

Irish folktales first emerged. Bell's interview with the archivist and storyteller Seán ÓhEochaid blends the oral recitation of old stories with audio-visual storytelling and depictions of modern Ireland, capturing the essence of folkloric reworking as the knowledge of an older generation is passed on through contemporary technology. There is nevertheless a sense of loss in the decline of certain cultural practices like orality, and while new modes of storytelling bring with them the potential for greater immersion and a wider reach, they can never fully capture the feeling of the older, fading traditions. In consideration of children's animation, the reworking of myth is a common method for creating heroic narratives and strange otherworlds (e.g., *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988)). The filmographies of some of the most prominent animation studios in the world – Studio Ghibli, DreamWorks, Disney – are filled with material that draws significantly on folklore. Finally, reworking in any form is also vital for allowing audiences to engage with aspects of intangible cultural heritage that could otherwise feel unfamiliar and distant. It bestows a degree of relevancy, a resonance with contemporary concerns and discussions to these magical characters and fantastical places. As David Wyatt notes, "our localized existences can be made to assume a deeper and more satisfactory meaning" (cited in Silvio and Vinci eds., 2007, p.2). Representing not just the first foray into Irish feature-length animation, Cartoon Saloon's "folklore trilogy" seeks to construct and promote an Irish mythological identity that global audiences can relate to engage with.

Folklore has ideological importance in culture, and studying it offers a means of archiving a peoples' history and developing an identity. Requiring critique, Joseph Campbell's concept of the 'monomyth' (1949) and the work of George Frazer (1890) that engages with a comparative study of religions remain relevant, demonstrating shared narrative elements across different cultures. Building on Honko's work (1990), Diarmuid Ó Giolláin (2013) refers to the adaptation of myths across the years, transforming the source material without losing the integral/original meaning. Daithí Kearney has applied this approach to the

examination of folklore in Irish theatre (2017) and Irish dance (2022b), demonstrating an ability to engage an international audience in local stories and traditions. In examining the trilogy, it can be understood how Irish filmmakers have borrowed from and revitalised their own cultural heritage. While academia has engaged with Irishness on screen (see Barton 2004; Negra 2006; and Ging 2019), I have identified a limited amount of scholarship on the role of folklore in Irish cinema, and animation in particular. In this thesis, I critique the relationship between film and society, deconstructing the folkloric tropes present in key texts and evaluating their roles in the narratives. In this context, deconstruction describes the process by which I will isolate certain folkloric tropes and evaluate their origins, histories, and meaning so as to gain a better understanding of the role they serve in contemporary narratives.

An overview of the presence and use of folklore in Irish films before Cartoon Saloon provides context for my study. In particular, and informed by recent scholarship, I have found it important to examine how folklore in film has contributed to perceptions of the landscape and Irish identity. Ruth Barton (2004) argues that Ireland's past and landscape have been romanticised, especially in children's cinema. This form of storytelling has been criticised as inauthentic and examining it grants insight into the history of nationalism on screen. An understanding of Ireland's national identity over the decades is therefore vital for discussing how Cartoon Saloon has revaluated Ireland's image at home and abroad. As is demonstrated in the chapters to come, Cartoon Saloon's trilogy has shown the potential for future reworkings of myth, transforming Irish identity in the eyes of domestic and international viewers.

In examining the trilogy, I ultimately demonstrate how filmmakers integrate mythology into their narratives for contemporary audiences, utilising mythology and folklore to explore themes of present-day significance and to critique social, cultural and political meaning. The central theme that everything revolves around in this thesis is otherness – that sense that something or someone is alien in some way, unusual and often unpleasant. For

something to be othered, it is contrasted against everything that is recognisable and comforting, taking the shape of the monstrous and embodying everything that is rejected. In its development, this thesis demonstrates how otherness in Cartoon Saloon's work, alongside the work of past filmmakers, is depicted and deconstructed using mythological material from generations ago. These films present communities and ways of life that are utterly opposed to one another only to then break down those boundaries, revealing hidden connections, and redefining relationships. In a broader sense, I subscribe to the idea that cinema, at its simplest, is about seeing ourselves in the Other.

There are many avenues down which Irish mythology, and its reworkings for the screen, may be deconstructed and critiqued. The changing shape of Irish myth in film over the decades, a process that is ongoing and active, further complicates research into this area. Consequently, scholarship into the field of Irish folklore film remains incomplete, underscoring the vital need for a research study like this.

1.3. The Folklore Trilogy (2009 – 2020)

The Secret of Kells (2009), *Song of the Sea* (2014), and *Wolfwalkers* (2020) are the products of a single studio, and while their narratives may not take place within the same canon, they share striking thematic, structural, archetypal, and symbolic similarities. There is also a conceptual development moving from a focus on adaptation to reinterpretation and reworking. Furthermore, each film builds on ideas discussed in the previous one, allowing for these works to be interpreted as their own standalone narratives or as a single, cohesive project developed over an eleven-year period. Taking over a decade to develop and representing the first animated feature to be produced by a homegrown Irish studio, Cartoon Saloon's *The Secret of Kells* sets the groundwork in many ways for all films in the trilogy.

The Secret of Kells depicts the adventure of Brendan, a young boy living in the early Christian settlement of Kells, driven by a rebellious urge to understand and explore the world around him. The film follows the well-trodden narrative of the young hero: Brendan is burdened by menial labour, restrained by the only community he has ever known, and he yearns for any outlet through which he can pursue his artistic creativity. Despite the overbearing commands of his uncle, Abbot Cellach, Brendan's encounter with a wise old monk called Aidan inspires him to finally leave the abbey and journey into the vast, dark forest that surrounds his town. There he discovers a powerful and ancient magic, tied to the land itself, in the ethereal form of Aisling, a childlike woodland spirit. Though worlds apart in many ways, the bond they form allows Brendan to create beautiful works of art, bringing the magic of the forest to the pages of the Book of Kells. The friendship they share is enough to eventually overcome the threat of Crom, a malicious force living deep in the woods, bringing hope not only to Aisling's mystical realm but also to the people of Ireland. In the years after his adventure, Brendan travels far, spreading the word and the art of his manuscript to all that will see it. Even his old uncle finally sees the light, and the legacy of the Book of Kells is guaranteed for generations. Ultimately, it is a story about worlds coming together for the betterment of all, distinctive traditions combining to create wonderful works of art.

Major conflicts and key thematic elements that come to define the trilogy originate from this piece, such as the clash between tradition and modernity, the natural world's struggle to live on in the face of human expansion, and the discovery of transformative or enlightening magic. The protagonist Brendan comes to define Campbell's archetypal hero, a character type that recurs throughout all three narratives. A disobedient and disruptive child, restrained by existing hierarchies and expectations, ventures into the wilderness to uncover their true identity. In Brendan's case, without a true father to guide him, he finds comfort in the company of a mysterious monk from a far-off land; Brother Aidan not only opens the door to Brendan's journey of self-discovery, but he also gives the boy a fundamental purpose in

completing the Book of Iona. The familiar, embodied by the community of Kells, gradually gives way to the dangerous, exciting, and othered realm of the forest. Here, he meets his new mother figure, Aisling, who marks the trilogy first exploration of the divine mother goddess in Irish myth, a figure who is developed in the narratives to come, both as a villain and a hero.

Song of the Sea is the trilogy's second feature-length reworking of Irish folklore, constructing an entirely new narrative out of disparate elements of myth. It is set centuries later than *The Secret of Kells* but examines many similar ideas and contains recurring tropes. The story explores the hidden world of fairies and folktales through the awestruck eyes of two children, Ben and his mute sister Saoirse. They have spent their whole lives in isolation, confined to the shores of a small stony island. When Saoirse seemingly almost drowns after being called to the sea by a mysterious force, their stern grandmother drags the siblings away from their lighthouse home, off to the city where their sense of alienation only intensifies. From there, Ben and Saoirse's journey to escape and return home quickly becomes a lot more complicated, and the children are swept up in an adventure to save the world of the fairy folk from the cruel owl-witch Macha. Encountering figures previously thought to be mythical, Ben slowly comes around to loving his quiet sister, accepting his role as her mentor, her protector, and her friend – Saoirse faces her own shocking revelation as the girl discovers her very real connections to the ocean, and her selkie abilities to transform at will. With newfound confidence, acceptance, and magical prowess, the children finally face down the owl-witch, return to the island, and bring new hope to the ancient world of the *sídhe*, discovering in the process an appreciation for their family and their lighthouse home. Though very much set in the modern day, the story blurs the lines between old and new, known and unknown – as a half-human, half-selkie, Saoirse represents the very best that both worlds have to offer.

The hero's drive towards freedom, and the war between the familiar and the unfamiliar that eventually leads to their reconciliation, play central parts in the story of Saoirse and Ben. The young Saoirse who realises her wondrous magical potential as a half-

human, half-seal creature walks in Brendan's footsteps as she ventures beyond the supervision of any adult into a world where childish innocence and old Celtic fairies reign supreme. Even more overtly than its predecessor, *Song of the Sea* repeatedly critiques the rapid modernisation of Ireland at the expense of ecology and the natural landscape. Ancient burial mounds are enclosed within roundabouts, sweeping green vistas are interspersed with pylons and rubbish piles, but beneath it all there still exists a hidden, albeit weakened, supernatural otherworld. Where Aisling represented the only female character in *The Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea* conversely explores femininity and mythological female power in a variety of ways that complement and contrast with one another. The elderly Granny, at once stern and loving, is a mirror image of the insidious owl-goddess Macha who pursues the very destruction of the supernatural world, and Saoirse herself is a heroic youth caught between two worlds. The film, like the one that came before, would go on to be nominated for an Academy Award, resonating with audiences across the world, and its successor would not only match these achievements but supersede them.

The final instalment in the folklore trilogy, *Wolfwalkers* takes the idea of the inquisitive young child crossing the boundary between worlds and brings it to medieval Kilkenny. Robyn, an English girl living in Ireland and the daughter of a wolf-hunter, finds herself drawn into the forest as an escape from the mundanity of town life. There she meets Mebh, an enigmatic "wolfwalking" wild girl with the power to shapeshift and a feisty attitude, fascinating Robyn and quickly drawing her into an existential conflict between man and beast. Igniting her journey of self-discovery, Robyn soon clashes with her own father and the oppressive Lord Protector, forced to choose between the liberation of the Irish woodlands and her own family. The evolving bond between Robyn and Mebh, two heroines fighting oppression, eventually culminates with a spectacular battle between humans and wolves, decimating part of the forest and threatening to wipe out the wolves entirely. Echoing its predecessors, the film's ultimate theme of empathy and compassion with the Other reaches its

climax as Robyn's own father learns to embrace the wolfwalkers, suggesting a hopeful future where old traditions may live in harmony with new ways of life.

Wolfwalkers was released on Apple TV+ at a time when debates regarding the future of the natural environment, women's rights, and queer identity were at the forefront of public discussion. Through these thematic lenses, critics and audiences deconstructed and ultimately heralded the film as Cartoon Saloon's most successful animation to date (see Ide, 2020). As the final chapter in the trilogy, *Wolfwalkers* naturally continues the portrayal of the heroic youth, caught along the barrier between worlds, trapped in a conflict where the fate of the supernatural realm coincides with the child-hero's Journey of self-realisation. Providing audiences with the most captivating heroic girls of the trilogy, the young English wolf-hunter, Robyn, enters the forest against the commands of her father and meets a feisty forest spirit in the form of Mebh, a girl who is deeply reminiscent of the Aisling character in *The Secret of Kells*. Robyn's adventure reflects Brendan's in the sense that she allies with the forces of nature to combat and ultimately defeat a hierarchical and close-minded society, and along the way she learns the art of transforming into a wolf at will, echoing Saoirse's ethereal powers. Not only is the importance of the Irish landscape and nature emphasised here more than anywhere else in the trilogy, environmental concerns clearly informing Cartoon Saloon's vision, but female mythological archetypes continue to dominate the narrative and give way to intriguing and entertaining heroes. In the chapters to come, the key themes that define this trilogy – conflict, identity, women, and nature– are evaluated and understood in the broader context of Irish cinema and the ways in which mythology has been reworked before.

By critically examining Cartoon Saloon's three feature films through the lens of reworking, understanding it all as a decade-long project to bring Irish folklore into the 21st century, Irish mythology's place in modern Ireland can be better understood. It reflects not just what elements of Irish myth resonate most with contemporary audiences, but the potential for future mythological reworkings in creative arts practice.

1.4. Chapter Outlines

My thesis constitutes eight chapters, divided into two sections. The first section comprises four chapters, the first providing an overview of the aims, objectives, and motivations for my research. Chapter 2 presents a literature review, outlining some of the principal theoretical approaches and provides a foundation for the chapters to follow. Chapter 3 seeks to understand the use of myth in contemporary filmmaking and engages with international trends. Chapter 4 provides a historical overview of the development of the Irish animation industry, giving context for the emergence of Cartoon Saloon and the development of their filmography. The second section of the thesis, comprising Chapters 5 – 8, focuses on the folklore trilogy specifically, engaging with major themes that ultimately tie back to the reworking of myth and its applicability to depictions of otherness. Finally, Chapter 9 presents the conclusions of my research, and in it I highlight opportunities for further research development and the cross-disciplinary benefits of this study.

Chapter 2 provides a Literature Review that engages with relevant studies on folklore and mythology, national identity, archetype theory and the idea of "universality" in storytelling, among several other core themes that will become important later in the thesis such as nature and women. In this chapter, I critically engage with important subcategories of otherness, often informed by an Irish perspective, identifying a shift from postcolonial to postnationalist motives, and recognising the nationalist causes that have shaped the reworking of folklore in the past. Scholarship in the area of Irish national cinema and folkloristics provides a starting point from which to understand how Irish myth evolved over the course of the 20th century, and how its relationship with the film medium changed. This leads into discussions of Irish cinema as a transnational endeavour, the impact that globalisation has had on depictions of social issues by Irish filmmakers, and how this ties into the reworking of

myth and the examination of the Other. Specifically, scholarship on the influence of feminism in cinema is considered, asking how archetypal women both relate to and diverge from the mythological counterparts in modern Irish films. Our changing relationship with nature, the prevailing environmentalist narratives of recent years, are also considered in terms of how we associate Irish myth with the natural landscape.

In Chapter 3, I focus on literature discussing international animation, particularly the globally-successful animated works of Disney Studios. Myth and folktale from an animation perspective is examined in greater depth, demonstrating how the American entertainment giant has, over the decades, engaged with folklore on screen. Textual analyses of Disney's work in this chapter, as well as other animated productions in which folklore is reworked/adapted for modern consumption, include a study of Disney's live-action *Mulan* (2020) and how it compares to its animated predecessor and the Chinese folktale it originated from. Disney's two adaptations of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, both live-action and animated, also provide international examples to compare to Irish animation, grounding Cartoon Saloon in a broader tradition of animated reworkings.

Refining the study of animation further by focussing specifically on Ireland in Chapter 4, I evaluate the attributes of "Irishness" as it is depicted throughout 20th and 21st century cinema. I also take into consideration the ways in which otherness informs and even defines what Irishness is. This chapter first considers the uncertain and experimental origins of Irish animated cinema, the innovations that drove it forward, and the role, if any, that reworkings of myth played at this time. Irish animation's history is divided into periods in this chapter, partly considering the impact of Don Bluth's arrival in Ireland the gradual emergence of a fully-fledged industry. The evolution of Irish animation into a professional, cohesive sector during the late 20th century leads into discussions of post-Bluth era indigenous animation, and the emergence of Cartoon Saloon as a major animation producer in modern times.

In Chapter 5, I return to concepts of universalisation, monomythic archetypes, otherness in the hero's journey, and contemporary reworkings of old archetypes, examining ideas like heroic initiation, child heroes, and otherworlds in greater detail. These concepts are applied to the folklore trilogy itself, breaking its characters down into archetypal categories, comparing them with mythological figures, and considering how much the trilogy deviates from prior interpretations of Irish myth. By establishing the Trilogy's connections to these concepts, this chapter also examines how the films adhere to or challenge tropes in Joseph Campbell's writings. Figures like the young child who ventures into the unknown, or the overbearing father archetype, are considered in this chapter.

Through the process of deconstructing Irishness and its constituent elements, understanding the multitude of ways in which myth and otherness tie into it, it becomes apparent that landscape and the natural world play a vital part in Ireland's sense of identity. For this reason, nature's portrayal in the folklore trilogy is the focus of Chapter 6. Nature as an extension and defining feature of the Irish nation is considered through the purview of the pastoral tradition and heritage film, poetic and cinematic genres that tie Irish identity to the land. There is also a consideration of the aesthetics in the visual representation of nature, particularly the symbolic illustration of trees, forests, and water. I analyse the concept of wisdom and transformative power sealed away in the natural world, things that can only be uncovered by exploring the unknown. Furthermore, the transformative powers of wolfwalkers and seal-women, creatures prominent throughout Irish mythology and Cartoon Saloon's reworkings, inform my discussions of otherness and nature. Central to this chapter, and an idea that recurs throughout the thesis, is the endless conflict between nature and mankind, the struggle of the environmentalist cause, and the rise of urbanisation at the expense of the natural order. All these elements show how Cartoon Saloon establishes nature as a mystical Other, then proceeds to breakdown the barrier between the othered and the familiar to promote a deeper appreciation for the natural world.

In Chapter 7, I critically engage with the subject of women and female identities in the folklore trilogy, an idea that ties strongly into Irish depictions of nature and nation. Cartoon Saloon continues the long cinematic tradition of adapting mythological goddesses to personify the landscape and national identity, from the childish forest spirit Aisling to the frightening crone as symbolised by Macha. The anthropomorphising[2] of the Irish land, and the concept of an "Ireland" itself, as some Great Mother, fierce warrior queen, or ethereal maiden is an artistic practice dating back centuries. Inheriting the legacy of the poets, stage writers, and folklorists that came before, I compare Cartoon Saloon's depictions of womanhood alongside older examples from cinema, and I determine that, while many traditional characteristics are retained in the trilogy's female figures, Cartoon Saloon ultimately challenges and redefines ancient archetypes.

Following closely after the previous chapter's considerations of gender and otherness, I consider a queer interpretation of the folklore trilogy in Chapter 8. The theme of transformation and monstrousness, touched on in prior chapters, are given attention, discussing them through a queer lens and comparing the trilogy's "monsters" to those of Irish myth. A queer reading of *Wolfwalkers'* child heroines proves helpful in understanding how the trilogy's portrayal of women feeds into the central theme of otherness. I discuss *Wolfwalkers* in particular, a film that has widely been interpreted as a queer narrative since its release, a story that succinctly combines themes of otherness, transformation girlhood, and nature, behaving in many ways as a culmination of the trilogy's overall message.

1.5.Conclusion

The real power of mythology and folk tales is derived from their constant reinvention, the capacity for centuries-old archetypal characters, narratives, and thematic ideas to capture

[2] Giving human characteristics to something that is not a human.

the imaginations of generation after generation. The reworking process, be it intentional or natural, has allowed the stories of Celtic warrior queens, heroes like Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill, and tales of "the Good People" to endure into the modern era. Far from serving as simple children's fairy stories or the curiosities of a distant past, myth continues to shape our communities, our national identities, and the stories we tell each other today. Just as Brendan in *The Secret of Kells* wanders beyond the safe confines of the abbey, discovering a hidden mythology that inspires him to create beautiful illuminations, Cartoon Saloon reaches into the distant past, illuminating its own colourful worlds and characters with techniques both traditional and novel. The folklore trilogy, blending modern concerns and animation technology with some of the earliest tales that came to define Ireland, represents its own Book of Kells.

The antiquity of these stories and characters – as exemplified in the writings of Campbell (1949), Booker (2004), and Tatar (2021) – their ability to transform over the ages, allows mythology an unprecedented degree of malleability, and the potential to form the foundations for modern nation states. Scholars like Hopkin (2012) and Wetmore (2005) have claimed that myth and nationalism will frequently work in tandem, co-opted to provide legitimacy to a nation-building project or provide political ammunition against opponents. The exploration of an Other, one of the central pillars of storytelling around the world, is one of the most potent ways to affirm a national or cultural identity. As highlighted in the works of Said and Bhabha, emphasised from a mythological perspective by writers like Hopkin, the Other is as much about defining what we are as it is about what we are not. It is a tool for constructing social narratives about ourselves. Like all tools, the Other can be utilised constructively and destructively, used to connect audiences through the revelation of some deeper shared purpose or mutual understanding, or used to cement boundaries and ferment interpersonal, international, and intercultural tensions. Modern media in its various forms – radio, television, film, theatre, music – is one of the most relevant conduits for expressing and

exploring otherness, depicting aliens and Others as we see fit and reinforcing (or destabilising) the public's view of the Other and themselves.

My research turns to the distant past, to the very foundations of Irish storytelling and Irishness itself – our ancient myths and folklore – with the goal of understanding how otherness has historically played into depictions of Irish identity. Concurrently, I look to the present and future of otherness in storytelling, critically examining three Irish films from an emerging animation industry, produced by a studio that exemplifies the global connectivity of contemporary Ireland. I have already touched upon how Cartoon Saloon's output frames the Other and what that can tell us about Irishness on screen today, and this idea will be explored in greater depth throughout this thesis. I lean on the writings of Kearney, who has considered the possibility of a postnationalist, globalised Ireland and suggested that a "mongrel" identity has always been a part of Irishness (1997, p.247). He identifies the European Union, and Ireland's place in it, as a driving factor towards a Europe of "shared sovereignty" and the gradual disintegration of nationalistic politics and culture (Ibid. p.178). Recent developments in Europe, from the election of far-right figures in Italy and Belgium to growing tensions over immigration in Ireland, suggest that the path to greater unity and diversity is not a straight line. Put another way, Irishness exists in a kind of hard-to-define "liminal" state, as described by Desmond Bell (1991), which makes it difficult to resolve within the wider European community (p.94). Bell suggests that, unlike other nations such as Britain, France, and Germany, Ireland's colonial history saw the island take a radically different course, one defined by a "procession of non-events" and "failures" – the lack of an industrial revolution, an enlightenment squandered by colonial exploitation, and a famine that drove tens of thousands overseas (Ibid. pp.91-93). A postnationalist perspective on Cartoon Saloon and wider Irishness helps to articulate Ireland's inbetweenness and its fractured national identity, but this paradoxically places Ireland in a unique position in Europe. Therefore, I have taken a balanced approach towards the interpretation of Cartoon Saloon's work, informed partly by an

international context, and partly by the regional and historical distinctiveness of Irish cultural identities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1.Introduction

A critical approach to otherness in Irish cinema, even within the limited scope of three films, demands engagement with film studies, cultural analysis centred around postcolonial perspectives, Irish history, folklore, and mythology. Depictions of the Other from any period come with dense cultural context, political intricacies, and controversy, requiring careful planning and a limited focus. This chapter lays out the key areas of study that will inform this thesis, dividing the analysis into three core subsections and outlining the boundaries of the study. As indicated in the introduction, this study is informed by Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), and the concept of otherness, which remains relevant due to the emergence of new-Orientalism and the Bush II era campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, or 're-orientalism' as described by Lisa Lau (2009) in relation to Southeast Asia. Moving away from the geographical focus of Said and other post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, it examines constructions and representations of Irishness. Therefore, theoretical studies of otherness will be relevant all throughout the literature review, and authors like Said and Bhabha will receive frequent attention.

The folklore trilogy, analysed in later chapters, demonstrates many tropes from Irish folklore and the influences of cultural nationalism and post-colonialism but informed by recent studies, this thesis argues that the films present new ways of representing otherness that are less concerned with valorising Irishness while being unequivocally Irish in their subject matter. Scholars including Ruth Barton (2004; 2020), Diane Negra (2009), and Martin McLoone (1999; 2000) develop engagement with the concept of national cinema in an Irish context, which further informs a reading of the trilogy. Critical also is an understanding of cultural and ethnic identity and how this is incorporated into animated works.

With Campbell's writings providing a foundation from which to expand, analyses of myth and nationhood develop into a discussion about the role of archetypes in mythology and film. These figures, each being symbolic of a range of ideas and inhabiting a powerful space within the political and cultural psyche, are defined in terms of their usefulness for filmmakers who seek to promote a narrative that either reinforces or deconstructs the status quo. This where the nationalist and postnationalist trends undergone by Irish cinema over the 20th century come into sharp focus, in particular the role that female archetypes have played in depicting Ireland and Irishness. Research into the development of a post-independence Irish cinema, as well as other national cinemas across the world, reveals several key ingredients for the construction of identity, among them being the reinvention of myth for the purpose of legitimising modern political movements and regimes, and the use of myths and folktales to discuss contemporary issues. Many filmmakers have been influenced by Campbell's publications (Palumbo, 2014; Clayton, 2011), including *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1948) and *The Power of Myth* (1989), the latter gaining a widespread audience through its accompanying television series. This highlights the vital importance of understanding Campbell's monomyth model both in terms of its strengths and weakness; more recent scholars have challenged Campbell's narrative model and his descriptions of traditional archetypes, like Maria Tatar (2021) who brings a feminist perspective to Campbell's theses, confronting and questioning archetypal portrayals of women. Considering Tatar and others, the literature review contemplates women in mythology and folklore as they are represented on screen, and the implications of certain key female tropes that are relevant to the folklore trilogy.

From national identity and the exploration of women in myth, the final cornerstone of this chapter is the relationship between the Other and nature. How nature imagery, from barren landscapes to dense forests, is utilised and tied back into myth reveals a great deal about a filmmaker's political intentions and priorities, informing a reading of their work.

Nature has been foundational to Ireland's perception of itself and plays a pivotal role in Cartoon Saloon's filmography. Nature's magical presence down through centuries of Irish mythological storytelling has translated into the cinematic format on many occasions, not only in the form of sweeping vistas and rolling hills but also as animal companions and isolated locales. The section relating to these many forms of nature in film, and the part it plays in our heritage, concludes with a consideration for nature's position in relation to the city. The changing face of Irish nationhood, our shifting relationship with the Other, and the evolution of the role that women play in society, has coincided a great deal with Ireland's industrial growth and urbanisation. The question arises as to how films have balanced the rural and urban, how authors have approached the conflicting characteristics of those two worlds, and where Irish cinema goes from here.

Although the three films examined in this study are by an Irish-based animation company, they are created by a transnational team influenced by globalisation and the commercial animation industry. Critical to understanding the creative processes and influences on animation development and reception, is the impact of the larger studios, notably Disney and Pixar. To this end, the concept of 'Disneyfication', which emerges from disciplines including tourism studies, provides a lens by which to examine the literature as well as Cartoon Saloon's trilogy.

2.2. Folklore and National Identity

Folklore scholarship over the centuries has sought to identify the key characteristics of folktales, how they perpetuate and change, and its findings have frequently intersected with the construction of national and cultural identity. This provides a critical lens of analysis through which Irish cinema, and the pursuit of a strong Irish identity over the past hundred years, can be examined. Hopkin (2012; 2018) argues that the field of folkloristics emerged

alongside revolutionary movements, such as that in France, which sought to legitimise themselves. New nations attempted to ground themselves in history by studying and promoting a popular culture, a culture of 'the People' (Hopkin, 2012). British historian Eric Hobsbawm (2012) describes the emergence of such cultural and national characteristics, posing as ancient practices and beliefs when they are in fact a product of modern times, as the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm, 2012). It was this utilisation, even weaponisation, of centuries-old customs, symbols, and stories that so strongly linked folkloristics to nation-building in its formative years as a field of study (Hopkin, 2012). Hopkin even goes as far as to call folklore a "handmaiden of nationalism" (Hopkin, 2018, p.45). Ó Giolláin, writing extensively on the subject of Irish folklore and nationalism, similarly compares folklore to history, as both fields have seen enrichment by non-academics, but there is one key distinction: history, when studied accurately, favours no ideology; folklore has a strong "ideological weight" (Ó Giolláin, 2000, p.2). Ó Giolláin, like Hopkin, stresses that folklore's abundance in political and cultural symbols gives it the potential to be utilised by modern movements (Ó Giolláin 2000, pp.1-2). A large part of Ó Giolláin's interest in Irish folk tradition is its capacity to change and survive, but contemporary circumstances will dictate what elements of folklore are more likely to persist, and even the process of conservation is fraught. When approaching folklore, the observer must at the very least be cognisant of the biases they invariably hold; as Ó Giolláin argues, recitations or conservation efforts "unavoidably represent modern projects of romantic mythologising … capitalist exploitation, [and] national mobilisation" (2013, p.41). He concludes that society's move towards individualism, commercialism, and globalisation make it harder than ever before to rigidly define folklore or assign traditions to specific communities.

Despite its early connections to nationalist movements, David Hopkin identifies another side of folkloristics. Despite its capacity to be used for conservative purposes, emphasising the distinct cultural differences between regions and nations, he recognises

folklore's universalist qualities as well. Myth and folklore transcend national boundaries, and the mythologies of peoples share links with each other, like languages. The relationship between folkloristics and nationalism, therefore, is complicated and folklore studies can transcend it, emphasising the similarities between cultures rather than differences (Hopkin, 2012). Ó Giolláin similarly discusses the inherent sense of community that comes with folk tradition, a feeling of mutual affinity and coexistence that persists for thousands of years through countless iterations. This makes it far easier for folklore to be utilised for promoting a communal existence as opposed to an individualistic or antagonistic way of life (2018a, p.48). This is particularly relevant in the context of Cartoon Saloon as the studio seeks to engage with an international audience through the Folklore Trilogy. In a similar manner to how folklorists gradually realised folklore's universalist potential, Irish cinema of the late 20th and early 21st centuries gradually shifted towards an outward-looking, self-critical perspective. This is reflected in the way that the films of the period reworked folklore and myth, and this shift from national cinema to post-national cinema will be explored in detail throughout this section.

Myth and folklore played a role in the process of constructing an Irish identity that is bound to an idealised rural heritage. Anne Markey (2006) states that Irish folklore was associated with an ideal rural past that represented true national identity. Folkloristics of the early Republic placed an emphasis on the Gaeltacht as Ireland's beating cultural heart, described by Ó Giolláin as "the Gaelicisation of Irish folklore", and such efforts to collect folktales coincided with attempts to revitalise the Irish language. Eamonn de Valera's government issued the Irish Folklore Commission a grant of £3,000 yearly for the collection and publishing of traditional oral stories – folkloristics was a strong tool for developing identity after independence (Markey 2006).

Two parallel arguments are presented in the literature. One suggests the abandonment of folklore in the construction of a modern Irish identity, an identity grounded in the global

community and defined by its contributions to Europe and the world. The other argument highlights the potential for developing a second life for folklore, reworking older stories into new narratives that are communicated through the medium of cinema. Despite its struggle to survive through famine and colonial devastation, Ó Giolláin is optimistic about the survival and adaptation of Irish folk traditions. Highlighting Ireland's highly globalised economy and disproportionately strong cultural weight across the world, he points out that representations of Gaelic Ireland are recognisable to a large number of people, only fuelled by the popularity of exports like Riverdance and the official recognition of the Irish language at a European level (2018a, pp.37-40). Whatever future Irish folk tradition may have, it is likely to be heavily shaped by Ireland's expanding relationship with wider Europe and the international community.

2.3. Archetypes and the Theory of Universality

Joseph Campbell's seventeen-stage monomyth theoretically describes the key narrative beats and characters that can be found throughout the cultures of history, an idea inspired partly by the work of Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung in his study of archetypal characters. It also shares similarities with Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp's breakdown of folkloric narrative structure; his model, which he wrote about some years after Campbell, contained thirty-one steps or "functions" (Propp 1968). The monomyth concept also harkens back to Diarmuid Ó Giolláin's writings about the reinvention of Irish mythology and folklore – the universality of myth as described by Campbell is one explanation for how centuries-old stories can achieve a second life.

Campbell's model details a universal quest following the growth of the hero as they face down trials, receive guidance, confront great rivals, and eventually become whole. This "stripping of the ego" has been compared by Liam Butchart (2019) to Jung's process of

'individuation' whereby the participant, transitioning beyond self-absorption and self-destructive tendencies, confronts their darkest traits and transforms into an "individual" (Butchart 2019). Campbell himself described the ultimate goal of this process, to become a "master of the two worlds"; the hero gives up any attachment to fears or hopes, pays no more heed to personal limitations, achieving "the great at-one-ment" (Campbell 1949, pp.204-255). The monomyth has influenced the study of myth and folklore for decades and it has profoundly affected how modern narratives, like those in cinema, are broken down and analysed.

Contained in its seventeen steps, numerous characters emerge in the monomyth as archetypes; representations of key concepts and aspects of the hero that must be confronted and integrated on the path to wholeness. In his examination of archetypes, Greg Singh (2014) states that from Jung's perspective, archetypes were symbolic of deeper psychological frameworks, universal across society, completely unavoidable and present in the experiences of every human being. Campbell described a variety of archetypes, from the Goddess who embodies the ultimate test for the hero "to win the boon of love" (1949, p.99) to the father who presents the hero with an "ego-shattering initiation" (1949, p.110). The shadow, both to Jung and to Campbell, represents the hero's repressed and ignored traits, an entity that is at once opposite to and part of the hero. These characters are not mere symbols, they contain layers of meaning derived from centuries of storytelling. One of the most important archetypes Campbell described as a "protecting power of destiny", manifesting as a wizard, a hermit, a smith, or a shepherd; the mentor presents the hero with advice, powerful gifts, and support as they venture into the unknown (1949, p.59). This mentor figure is described by William Indick (2014) as a guide towards enlightenment and maturation, and once the mentor has fulfilled their role, the hero takes their place – the mentor is a vital part of the journey, but the mentor's death is just as important (Indick 2012, pp.49-51).

Campbell drew from the work of Jung who also found the concept of universal narratives and archetypes drawn from a collective subconscious compelling. Liam Butchart (2019) makes the point that Campbell's monomyth, and its references to archetypes, allow some synergy with Jung's process of 'individuation'. This process involves the gradual stripping of the ego, a transcendence beyond self-absorption and self-destructive behaviours, the transformation into an 'individual'. Most of a hero's journey is spent competing with the 'shadow', the ultimate embodiment of the hero's darkest traits, and the overcoming of the shadow is symbolic of the hero's maturation (Butchart 2019).

In cinema and wider storytelling, otherness does not always have to be represented negatively. According to Mike Alsford (2006), the heroes of myth can themselves embody a kind of otherness, something that simultaneously sets them apart and holds them back. This aspect of mythological heroism has made its way into modern storytelling, and he points to superheroes as a good example. With their inherent and fantastic talents, this kind of character is able to transcend the boundaries of mundanity, being a protective force for a community that may not fully accept them. Despite embodying the ideals and fears of humanity, this hero is still an outsider, a paradoxical figure (Alsford 2006, pp.33-35). Alsford argues that it is part of the hero's struggle to come to terms with this inner Other; sometimes the hero has to adapt, sometimes their community adapts (Alsford 2006, pp.23-25). Roni Natov (2017) agrees that a protagonist can, to some extent, be described as Other. Specifically, she demonstrates that child characters can highlight some of the positive traits of otherness. Disobedience of authority or the defiance of commonly held views within the community represent a kind of "child power", and narratives featuring child-heroes are a good way, according to Natov, of exploring themes of subversion and reconciliation between communities (Natov 2017). In this case, the character's spiritual journey is one of reconciliation with the Other and with their own people. However, while otherness can be a source of strength for characters, it just as

commonly fuels the alienation, dehumanisation, and infantilisation of certain national or ethnic communities in cinema.

The central archetype of the monomyth is certainly the hero themselves, consistently referred to by Campbell as a male – according to Terri Frontgia (1991), the journey from boyhood to manhood was thought of by Campbell as a rite of passage, just like the hero's quest, something undertaken willingly. In this way, Frontgia explains that choice is central to the hero's path to enlightenment and mastery. This understanding of narrative structure and character types has impacted cinema theory in a variety of ways, and Campbell's monomyth model can be applied as much to Irish mythology as it can to Irish cinema. The Great Mother is a key archetype in Irish storytelling and can be traced all the way back to Irish myths of the goddess as representative of the land, the rivers, and the hills. Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (1999) describes this divine figure as a source of plentiful harvest and motherly protection, and the association between archetypal woman and the land recurs in characters like Brigid, or Saint Bridget, who shares similarities to other Irish land and sovereignty goddesses according to Lisa Bitel (2002). This includes, Bitel states, Brigit's power over nature and her connection to the landscape, including her ability to temper wild animals and instruct them to do her bidding.

Archetype theory has influenced a wide range of fields, from folkloristics to psychoanalysis to marketing, forming the basis for how theorists like Campbell (1949), Frye (1957), and Thompson (1977) interpret mythology and folklore. Chang et al. (2013) describes myths as reflective of how our ancestors saw the world, mythologies contain important information about their values and fears. Barrett seems to agree, seeing the hero (in this case, the chaste warrior), by far the most prominent archetype in myth and storytelling, as a symbol of the individual overcoming great fear; as universal fears can never truly be overcome, the hero is often presented as superhuman, indeed inhuman at times (Barrett 1989, p.43). The heroic myth, the tale of the hero facing challenges and tests, can be found

throughout world mythology, alongside other universal mythological frameworks such as the explanatory myth or the animal myth (Thompson 1977, pp.3-6). Just as much as these ideas are applicable to literature, poetry, and theatre, these interpretations of archetype theory can easily be applied to film as well, offering a method for deeply analysing how characters can connote certain feelings and concepts. Maria-Elena Doyle (1999) describes how these universal archetypes of Irish myth went on to influence 20th century literary works, referring to character types such as the lover or goddess, and more unconventional types like the Queen or Warrior. However, the concept of the passive feminine deity, a motherly archetype as old as the land, was among the most popular and transformed into a representation of Ireland and Irish nationalism. Alongside this, the heroics of male archetypes became a central focus (Doyle 1999). As much as the mother became an embodiment of the nation, masculine heroes like Cú Chulainn became representative of the Irish spirit and revolution. Barton describes how, throughout the 20th century and leading into the 1990s, the archetype of the masculine hero was a common fixture, and as the century went on, the relationship between nation and male hero became more complex. Referring to Kevin Liddy's short film *Horse* (1993), Barton points out how the violence of the protagonist is compared with the glorified heroics of myth; the main character, Michael, circles the statue of Cú Chulainn in the General Post Office, itself a symbol of uprising and violence. The statue depicts the hero defiant, preparing to take on his enemies, and Barton questions the representation of such simplified, glorified archetypes of heroism. She suggests that this reduction of men and women to archetypes burdens characters with symbolic meaning at the expense of any resemblance to real people, to "lived experience" (Barton 2004). It is a dehumanising process that Gloria Alpini (2005) argues leads to the creation of stereotypes, particularly within the context of female portrayals in mythology and modern storytelling.

Due to their focus on male characters and characteristics and neglect of female characters, Campbell's monomyth and his interpretation of archetypes have been subject to as

much scrutiny as praise – today, his descriptions of female archetypes in particular have received no small amount of criticism. Frontgia highlights how Campbell and his predecessors focussed on the heroics of male warriors, going back to Campbell's argument that the path of the hero is comparable to that of the boy entering manhood. Due to the "conditions of life", he suggested, men were far more likely to take on the heroic role out in the world; women in turn were reduced to primarily sexualised archetypes, like the virgin, the muse, or the lover (Frontgia, 1991). Alpini places these archetypes within the "female fantastic", old-fashioned modes of representation that present women as irrational and supernatural, a picture of women as seen by male storytellers. Years after the publication of his seminal text, Campbell continued to argue that the male hero's role was strongly distinct from the heroine's and that, by virtue of his biology, he was more likely to become a worldly hero (Frontgia 1991). Even decades after *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* saw publication, writers like Booker insisted on a distinct masculine value and frequently refer to the hero as a "he" by default. Over time, contradictory voices have highlighted the inherent shortcomings of this narrative/archetypal model. Tatar (2021) has provided extensive analyses of the mythological heroine, not necessarily rejecting Campbell's thesis, more so enhancing it, and broadening the social scope of the "hero's/heroine's Journey".

In a broader sense, scholars like Douglas Cameron and Douglas Holt (2010), and Greg Singh (2014), criticise the general concept of archetype theory: for Cameron and Holt, treating characters like archetypes reduces them to an easily understandable set of descriptors, placing them into a box that severs them from their cultural and historical context. Singh suggests that, far from providing a fundamental understanding of characters, archetypes provide only a rudimentary interpretation that essentialises and reinforces gender roles for both men and women. As highlighted earlier, the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* provides a differing perspective, suggesting that the magnification of certain traits can reveal deeper truths. In this way, archetypes may serve in educating us rather than spreading disinformation,

much like how a satirist will employ exaggeration in political cartoons. Be they harmful or insightful, a great deal of cinema today (particularly Hollywood) finds these archetypes useful; they are easily recognisable and can serve as shorthand for complex ideas, but Singh warns that the result of this is a dumbing down of reality and the formation of dangerous stereotypes.

The monomyth structure itself and its supposed universal nature have been subject to criticism. Clayton (2011) argues that Campbell and Propp's approaches to storytelling emphasise the universal aspect at the expense of local context, presenting an ahistorical understanding of myths, folktales, and modern stories. Within Campbell's writings, world cultures are reduced to cliché, referring to and conjoining Congo "witch doctors" with Eskimo fairy tales and the sonnets of Lao-tse as if all were equivalent and fundamentally interchangeable. Clayton also states that Campbell's monomyth skews towards Western ideas of "happy endings" and the heroic defeat of villainy through individual effort. Campbell's theory regarding the ways in which we tell stories may not adequately reflect the myths and folktales that came before, but like a self-fulfilling prophecy, it has impacted modern storytellers and filmmakers. In this sense, while it is important to keep critiques of his universal narrative structure and archetypes in mind, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* remains a valuable tool for deconstructing and interpreting cinema. The concepts of a monomythic narrative structure and archetypal characters is applied to the folklore trilogy itself, and explored in greater detail, in Chapter 5.

2.4. The Monomyth and the Movies

As is evident in the critiques of Campbell's theory, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has gradually lost favour in academic circles, but the same cannot be said for its reputation among storytelling practitioners in Hollywood. In 1988, decades after his seminal publication,

Campbell featured in a popular PBS documentary series entitled *The Power of Myth*. Here he further explored the ideas surrounding the monomyth and discussed the role of folklore in modern society. A lot of the same ideas that define the hero's journey, including the role of archetypes and its overlaps with Jungian individuation, make a return in these interviews, and the series was notably filmed in California at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch. The location of choice tells a lot about Campbell's relationship with the film industry, and while she is critical of his work, Sue Clayton is also careful to point out Campbell's seismic influence on 20th century filmmakers and writers, particularly in the US where productions have sometimes treated the monomyth as a step-by-step guide (Palumbo, 2014; Clayton, 2011). George Lucas was so enthusiastic about Campbell's theories that he went as far as to invite the scholar to his ranch for a viewing of the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983). Writer and producer Dan Harmon has pointed to Campbell as an influence as well, and Stanley Kubrick is known to have read Campbell's work too. Clearly, the idea of a universal hero, and the tropes making up a consistent hero's journey narrative, provide an extremely attractive model for modern storytellers, despite the scepticism it is approached with in academia.

Campbell's version of the hero and his monomyth structure are foundational to this thesis for this very reason; his theories have gone on to heavily influence writers and directors in television and cinema, informing a generation of Hollywood film production. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is observed by doctoral researcher Katherine Grocott (2012) as coming at just the right time so as to have maximum impact on the production of American movies in the latter 20th century (p.46), reaching a height in the 1970s with the start of the blockbuster era. Writing in the context of the *Star Wars* franchise, Mary Henderson (1997) highlights how Lucas' sci-fi epic emerged at a time of uncertainty and political instability in the United States – most notably, the horrors of the war in Vietnam had disenfranchised many young Americans and severely damaged America's reputation overseas. It set the scene for a population who sought clear distinctions between good and evil in their entertainment and

yearned for an optimistic, idealistic view of the future (p.198). For better or worse, the Campbellian monomyth lends itself easily to heroic narratives in which good prevails over darkness, and this historical background, combined with Lucas' interest in mythology and spirituality (Bill Moyers 1999), made the monomyth an attractive model for Lucas to base his cinematic vision on. Another figure who helped to popularise Campbell in the film industry at this time was Christopher Vogler (1992, 2017), a man who, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, worked for the Walt Disney Company on productions like *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Hercules* (1997). In his capacity as a consultant and story analyst, he produced a seven-page memo entitled *A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1985) in which he strongly advocated for the use of the monomyth in the development of characters and scripts, rewriting Campbell's ideas in the language of screenwriting and film production (Vogler 2017, p.12). He was far from the first to apply a structure and methodology to screenwriting, but the memo quickly entered circulation, taking on a life of its own and soon getting the attention of writers and producers all over Hollywood. Two such individuals were Paramount's Dawn Steel and Disney's Jeffrey Katzenberg, the latter mandating that his executives read Campbell's original publication alongside the memo (p.14).

In the years after Vogler's translation and circulation of the monomyth throughout the industry, he would go on to consult for other studios like 20th Century Fox and Paramount, further developing his own conception of the monomyth. Throughout the production of the television series *Star Trek* (1966 – 1969), individuals like D.C. Fontana and Gene Roddenberry applied Campbell's theories to their storytelling (p.17), and Lucas' other blockbuster series, *Indiana Jones* (1981 – 2023), was influenced by the Campbellian monomyth in its narrative structure and presentation. The financial and critical success of these franchises only solidified the monomyth's reputation as a repeatedly successful (and profitable) formula for film development. Vogler's short memo would eventually be

expanded into a full publication titled *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1992). As much as Campbell's influence in cinema is celebrated by Vogler and Lucas, the critiques levied against the monomyth in academia are just as pertinent when applied to Vogler's "writer's journey." Vogler's application of Campbell's theories to his work as a story analyst in Hollywood, verifying the suitability of manuscripts based on how closely they aligned with the monomyth (Vogler 2017, p.12), shows how easy it is for certain practices to become mandated fixtures of the Hollywood production apparatus. Once the monomyth became one such fixture, any deviation or rejection of Campbell's theories could threaten the perceived viability of a script. Indeed, Vogler frames modern examples of anti-heroic narratives, such as the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011 – 2019), as "exotic" and "only interesting experiments", acknowledging the thrill of such endeavours though ultimately concluding that the monomyth remains unchallenged and unshaken (p.17). Regardless of its numerous sceptics in academic circles, the monomyth remains dominant in the minds of film practitioners and can be difficult to avoid when working in the industry. Its influence across Hollywood and beyond has ensured that today, film criticism still needs to address Campbell's monumental impact and consider his legacy.

2.5.Archetypes and Otherness on Screen

The connection between modern media forms and archetype theory is well-trodden territory. Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson (2001) argue that if archetypes evoke certain instinctive feelings in an audience – the Ruler/Creator evoking stability, the hero/Outlaw representing risk or mastery etc. – then brands and products can learn from this, evoking similar emotions. Michael Faber and John Mayer (2009) describe a kind of "neo-archetypal" theoretical framework, emphasising the evocative nature of archetypes and the power that archetypes have in conjuring unconscious associations. They developed a list of archetypes

that are shared between different theoretical frameworks, including the hero, lover, jester, caregiver, ruler, shadow, etc. (Faber and Mayer 2009, pp.308-309). These archetypes can be so easily applied to film theory as film and myth share key commonalities: they are both symbolic narratives that reflect our perception of the world, making films a fantastic way of finding and analysing archetypes in modern culture (Chang et al. 2013) – cinema offers modern audiences a chance to engage with and experience subconscious associations, what Jung would have called the collective unconscious. From an analysis of literature on different archetype models, the following eight archetypal characters seem to be the most prominent: hero, shadow, mentor, herald/dispatcher, ally/helper, guardian (at the threshold), shapeshifter, and jester/trickster. Later in Chapter 5, these archetypes are compared with their counterparts in the folklore trilogy, and a select few like the hero and shadow are examined in depth.

Otherness and its connection to ethnicity in cinema has evolved over time, as described by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2009). They argue that cinematic depictions of race and ethnicity usually support the status quo, reinforcing white privilege and only offering surface-level concessions in terms of minority representation. Hollywood encourages moviegoers to relate to white protagonists most of all, the result being that whiteness is so prevalent as to be invisible. Anything distinct from whiteness, they state, is othered, and a key example is the Indigenous American in cinema. Early stereotypes and depictions reduced these communities to savagery, associating them with a primitive past. Horses, saloons, and cattle drives all came to be symbolic of civilisation moving into the west, and natives stood in the way of progress. By the 1980s and 1990s, as opinions were shifting across the US and the world, the idea of the primitive "Indian" died out. It was replaced with the "positive" Noble Savage archetype, a character holding transcendental knowledge. This othering can be just as damaging and misinformative, but it was far more palatable to white audiences (Benshoff and Griffin 2009). In *Mapping the Imaginary: The Neverland of Disney Indians* (2013), Prajna Parasher

describes how the depiction of "Indians" in *Peter Pan* (1953) is surface level, relying on stereotypes of Native American "culture", clearly designed for a white audience who have their own assumptions that Disney does not wish to challenge. They are painted deep red, are big and bumbling, and wear headbands and braids. Peter, having rescued one of their own, is celebrated by the Indians; Parasher argues that this is reflective of a tendency to portray natives as welcoming to those who have "conquered" them. In this case, the Other is considered inferior in a variety of ways, but the Noble Savage archetype is hardly any better. With a focus mainly on Irish history and literature, the theme of race in Ireland is explored in more depth in Malcolm Sen and Julie McCormack Weng's (eds. 2024) collection entitled *Race in Irish Literature and Culture*, particularly chapters 1-2 which highlight the use of heritage, myth, and politicised histories in creating a sense of racial cohesion and cultural identity. A central focus of my thesis is not only the question of what defines an Other, what function it can serve, and how it is manufactured, but also the possibility of transcending the boundaries between self and Other, recognising the Other's arbitrary categorisation and moving towards a "post-otherness". Here, the line between 'them' and 'us' is blurred to the point of meaninglessness, a process explored thoroughly in the context of *Wolfwalkers* (2020) by Malone and Kearney (2023).

2.6. National Cinema

National cinemas constitute a significant part of how modern nation states define and reinforce their cohesive sense of self, telling stories of a people's origins (mythical or otherwise) and giving justification to the continued preservation and celebration of their culture. More broadly, cinema can be used to critique nationhood, face down difficult politics and or social concerns, and indeed there is ongoing debate over the representation of race and gender throughout cinema's history. The national cinema of Ireland in the early decades of the

20th century encouraged, for the most part, a conservative and romantic image of the island and its peoples' way of life. This idea of a traditional, rural Ireland was often attached to the rugged, untamed landscape of the west, entrenched in a mythicised past that Barton (2004) describes as paradoxically "antiquarian and revolutionary". From the 1930s on, cinema served as a crucial element in the Irish government's construction of a distinct, nationalist identity, and depictions of an ancient land and heroic Irish rebels fed into this nationalist conception of post-independence Ireland (Kearney, 1988; McLoone, 2006). Estelle Epinoux (2011) provides a definition of nationalist ideology that adequately describes Irish cinema of this time; the assertion that a people of a certain geographical location share a kind of fraternity, bound by their distinct culture and history, and that their location is a kind of homeland. De Valera's government followed this assertion through their commissioning of Irish language documentaries, such as *Oidhche Sheanchais* or 'Storyteller's Night' (1935), and films that familiarised Irish audiences with a traditional, Catholic view of the nation. At the centre of this enterprise was the collection, study, reworking, and manipulation of folklore to assist in developing – and justifying – that identity.

Moving into the 20th century, folklore's potential for nation-building would inevitably make its way into cinema. The Irish Free State and later the Republic, in the pursuit of a new identity that would lead the country into the future, looked to the distant past. The post-colonial project to define a new Irish identity led to the promotion of the Gaeltacht, a small and diminishing region of the country, as representative of the whole of Ireland. It was a new characterisation of Irishness that implied ancient origins. This perspective influenced the works of writers Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde who sought to revitalise Irish culture, and it was a project that inspired the collation local folktales and the teaching of Gaeilge (Hopkin, 2019). Irish films of the time would embrace a glorified image of the revolution and an idealistic view of western Ireland. Paradoxically, this veneration of Irish rural life was inspired by British colonial views of a fantastical Ireland (Brereton, 2016; Barton, 2004), and

yet the same image was utilised by Irish nationalists to imply the distinctiveness, even superiority, of Irishness compared to Englishness (Barton, 2004).

Cinema can play a role in the promotion or repudiation of nationalist ideas and the construction or rejection of national identities. In *Irish National Cinema* (2004), Barton writes that Ireland's literary revival forged a version of Irishness that was both "antiquarian and revolutionary", an idea that soon made its way into the nation's works of cinema. Viewing the development of Irish cinema through the lens of nationalism and post-colonialism, she argues that Ireland's nation-building project began as a pursuit of modernisation, eventually regressing into conservatism (Barton, 2004). This new Irish identity, as described by Martin McLoone (2006), manifested in national cinema from the 1920s onwards as a "narrow and restrictive" culture. In his *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (2000), he points to early works like *Man of Aran* (1934), a documentary filmed on the Aran Islands, as an example of how this form of Irishness strongly associated itself with the rugged landscape and traditional ways of living. It imbued itself with a vague mystique that was increasingly being associated with life in the west (McLoone, 2000). Similarly, Conn Holohan (2015) argues that early 20th century Irish poets, writers, painters, and filmmakers envisioned an Ireland that is now famous across the world: a land of bright cottages scattered about the countryside, a strong symbol of Ireland's traditional values (Holohan, 2015, p.14). This is also evident in Irish folk theatre (Kearney, 2013) and prominent in the development of an Irish tourism industry in the 20th century; Barton describes a kind of "heritage tourism" that emerged with the intention of taking participants to a particular time rather than a particular place (Barton, 2004).

Ireland's image as an island of rural quaintness, defined by a sacred past, continued into the second half of the century with films like *Mise Éire* (1959), a film illustrating Ireland's revolution and achievement of independence. Nature is incorporated in the film's opening, focussing on ocean waves coming into shore, washing footprints away: 'erasing the

stain of colonial occupation' (Barton, 2004). The air of glory, rural simplicity, and myth would gradually erode, however, and by the 1980s and 1990s, films like *Korea* (1995) and *Broken Harvest* (1994) were revisiting and reinterpreting Ireland's troubled past (Barton 2004). Filmmakers like Mike Newell and John Sayles, directors of *Into the West* (1992) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) respectively, countered the trend and continued to use folkloric imagery to reinforce conservative ideas about Ireland, but a kind of post-nationalist cinema was on the rise. With it came a new way of interpreting and using folklore.

McLoone argues that the gradual shift in the way that Ireland, and the world, view Irishness was partly a result of increased economic growth and social change towards the end of the 20th century – a period of reinvention for the country (McLoone, 2006). Irish cinema by this time came to portray the nation and the people in challenging ways, becoming a "cinema of national questioning". It is defined in part by its new focus on urban life, its critique of mythologies surrounding rural Ireland, its examination of social and political failures in Ireland, and a reimagining of the portrayal of women. He describes how films like *Reefer and the Model* (1988) and *High Boot Benny* (1993), both directed by Joe Comerford, depict bleak landscapes, a far cry from the edenic green pastures of prior decades, the latter even portraying a distorted image of the mythic Mother Ireland; here she is an ex-drug addict and ex-prostitute (McLoone, 1999). Barton describes how films like *The Outcasts* (1982) began to rethink Irish folklore too; the natural and supernatural merge, as they did in earlier films, only the land and the rural community are in no way whimsical. Superstition leads to intolerance, and the rural folk are in no way connected with old wisdom, instead they are prone to violence. References are made to Irish myth in this new, distorted environment, and the film's intertextuality – its incorporation of disparate folkloric elements to tell a new tale – completely recontextualises Ireland's mythic past (Barton, 2004). *Maeve* (1981) is described by Jessica Scarlata (2014) in similar terms: characters are given mythological names in a modern context, and the image of ancient stone ruins becomes associated with nationalism in

the film. These ruins, while echoing ideas of mythic heroism, embedded in the landscape, they are in a kind of "stasis" – frozen in time, nationalism is incapable of engaging with present-day Ireland (Scarlata, 2014, p.49).

Holohan similarly argues that the image of Ireland as a homely cottage shifted to that of open spaces in the city, such as in *Goldfish Memory* (2003). Irish cinema was acknowledging that the city, once condemned as separate from pure Irish traditionalism, had become Ireland's new home, it's new identity (Holohan, 2015, pp.18-19). Even following the Celtic Tiger, Patrick Brodie (2016) observes how films like Gerard Barrett's *Pilgrim Hill* (2013) take a far more cynical approach to rural life than *Man of Aran* ever did. This dichotomy between urban and rural comes up when Giovanna Tallone examines the literature of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, a fiction writer and folklorist who allows myth to influence her work. Ní Dhuibhne's stories incorporate mythological elements, such as in *The Pale Gold of Alaska* (2000) which alludes to selkies. Ní Dhuibhne's work is highly intertextual – it references and incorporates mythological imagery, symbolism, and ideas to tell new tales. The author blends these elements with references to modern Ireland, sometimes setting her stories in cities (Tallone, 2017, pp.160-161). She acknowledges the urbanisation of the island without decrying it.

Benshoff and Griffin detail how Hollywood's treatment of Irish ethnicity has shifted in a similar way to that of Indigenous Americans: once depicted as idiotic and unkempt, the Irish "Bridget" transformed into the spunky, happy-go-lucky "Colleen". Just because the social landscape changes, that does not mean the fundamental depiction of minorities changes with it. Negra's *The Irish in Us* (2006) focusses specifically on how Irish identity is perceived both within and without Ireland. She describes a kind of "enriched whiteness", the idea that Irish ethnicity is somehow "guilt-free" and untainted by the colonial heritage of other European nations, thereby taking on a kind of whimsy or innocence (Negra, 2006, p.11). It is born from idealistic visions of Ireland as a mythic place, a perception that inspires the idea of

the so-called “plastic Paddy” but is as much the product of Irish nationalists captivated by an imagined pre-colonial history as it is the creation of Irish Americans captivated by a romanticised heritage. The oversimplification of ethnic and cultural identity, reducing Irishness down to a select few icons and identifiers, is understandably attractive, not only from an emotional standpoint but also practically as artists are always looking for shortcut methods of getting ideas across to the audience/consumer. Archetypes, and by extension simplified caricatures, are an easy way of compressing all the complexities of identity down into easily digestible representations. In cinema, and across the arts more broadly, the true complexity of the world cannot ever be captured, and a degree of compression will always be necessary. As with the compression of a digital image however, an over-reliance on these methods leads to distortion, and eventually the image becomes entirely separated from the source.

The depiction of Irishness in the domestic cinema industry has been just as controversial. Ruth Barton discusses how the early 20th century depictions of Irishness in the work of Irish authors and poets appealed to a romantic, rural ideal. These writings, she suggests, were influenced by peasant traditions but the intended audience was typically metropolitan (Barton, 2004). Examples include the hardworking peasant farmer, living off (and supposedly in tune with) the land itself, tying “genuine” Irishness to the landscape. His farm, by extension, is littered with the symbolic paraphernalia that defines romantic Irishness: rolling green hills, cattle, and sheep, thatched rooves, and pre-industrial farming implements. The bog, the remote village, and the stunning cliff faces overlooking a rocky beach further speak to “Irishness” both in Ireland and abroad. A carefree attitude, the harmless troublemaker, devout Catholicism, and red-haired “colleens” make up only a few more entries in the lexicon that popular media will refer to whenever it depicts Ireland and its people. These tropes are evident not only in Hollywood depictions of the island, but also in the works of indigenous filmmakers; Cartoon Saloon’s folklore trilogy is rife with this symbolic

language, relying on it as much as it renounces it. The irony is that even in critically addressing and subverting these symbols, their ubiquitousness is only reinforced. Some scholars have presented the argument that this swing of the pendulum from nationalism to post-nationalism was, in some cases, far too extreme (Holohan, 2015; McLoone, 2006; Negra, 2002). Holohan suggests that the abandonment of Ireland's sense of "home" in the cottage has left Irish identity "placeless" and in a sense of disorientation. Shifting cinematic interpretations of where Ireland's centre lies, and the leap from isolation to openness and integration within the wider world, is cause for both celebration and concern (Holohan, 2015, p.21). Irish cinema, in its shift towards a more global outlook, using folklore not to celebrate Irish identity but to critique it, only runs the risk of distorting our understanding of the past even more. McLoone (2006) voices his own unease: "has something precious been lost?" In *Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger* (2002), Ging claims that this disavowal of Ireland's past, now more in favour of "cosmopolitan modernity", was a regressive move rather than an innovative and constructive one. She argues that Irish cinema should be more critical of global culture and less willing to abandon a distinct identity – a balance ought to be found between being progressive and being distinctly Irish (Ging, 2002). In recent years, Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy has provided a potential avenue down which Irish cinema, and the reworking of Irish folklore, can reinvent itself in a globalised world while perpetuating the sense that Ireland is different.

The use of mythology and folklore as an element of Irish cinema depends on mythology and folklore's potential to evolve and remain relevant in new places and new eras. Alan Dundes (1980) has approached the topic as a process of "transmission", folktales contain knowledge and wisdom that is passed from one generation to the next, and other scholars like Stith Thompson have reached similar conclusions. Thompson, in *The Folktale* (1951), suggests that folklore fundamentally seeks to build on what has come before (Thompson, 1951, p.4). In that way, folklore and myth's potential for "reworking" can be viewed as

foundational to its survival, a process by which myths retain relevance just as how a species will adapt to its environment. This is a process that can be observed across Irish cinema, but it is most noticeable in the films that seek to tackle our changing relationship with national and cultural identity. There are many examples in Irish cinema that draw upon or utilise folklore and they do so in different ways. Cinematic productions such as *Into the West* (1992) did not adapt Irish myths wholesale, they were not based on earlier works, rather they reinvented elements of myth to create new narratives. Films like these used old tales as a means of reinforcing new ideas about Irish identity, implying that this identity had ancient precedent and connections to a mythic past. In chapter 3, the use of myth to depict and question contemporary identities informs the methodology of the thesis, and this concept is useful in determining what key research questions to ask.

2.7. Reworking the Old

Archetypes, as discussed earlier in the chapter, are not eternally fixed, rather their depictions are strongly influenced by the time and place in which their stories are told. The same can be said for myths and folktales in general and many are appropriated to serve a political or social function at different points in history. Irish mythology in particular has been ever-changing, originating in oral tradition where heroes, adventures, and trials would morph with every recitation.

The mythological archetypes or heroic narratives of Irish lore can be traced back to the oral tradition which persisted for centuries prior to Christian, and later English, influence in Ireland. Even as late as the 19th century, orality survived in scattered communities as a remnant of pre-colonial Ireland, and through it the Irish language endured. This increasingly "hidden Ireland" where folktales remained in circulation by word of mouth would naturally serve as a major inspiration to the Irish nationalists and romanticists of the late 19th – early

20th centuries; writing in 1925, Irish writer and politician Daniel Corkery described this temporarily frozen, geographically declining space as one of the last refuges of "Irish Ireland" (1925, p.22), a direct counter to the fertile, thriving country of Anglo-Ireland. In these places, the old poetic and oral traditions remained intact and untouched by alien interference, mostly in the poor peasant communities of west rural Ireland which the law strained to reach. Corkery and other nationalist writers of the era saw the reclamation and revival of the Gaelic language as one of the integral pillars of the Irish nation state, the primary means of solidifying any modern conception of Irish identity, and orality played a part in this revival. Writing more recently on the subject of orality and its connections to modern perceptions of Irishness, David Lloyd describes the mouth and the spoken word as signifiers of Irish racial and cultural identity (2011, p.3). Whether stereotypically – the Irish as a poetic and loose-lipped people – or based more so in the factual history of oral storytelling, Lloyd considers how oral expression remained important to the Irish long after other Western communities had abandoned it. Similar to Corkery, Lloyd recognises the revolutionary potential contained within oral tradition, a practice that long predates capitalist, colonial society and allows for the same idea to perpetuate in radically different forms from one speaker to another. He therefore considers the transition from oral to literary culture a component of Ireland's modernisation during the 19th and 20th centuries (2011, p.4), a decline that was in part encouraged by colonial authority and accommodated the arrival of a more homogenous Irish identity.

With so few written adaptations prior to the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, oral practices meant that the initial versions of myths (and the identities of their original orators) were easily lost. Consequently, they took on a ghostly quality, shapeless and extremely malleable. The same is true of Christian doctrines and biblical myths which emerged in the decades and centuries following the death of Jesus, doctrines which did not become fixed until active efforts were made to either canonise them or declare them apocryphal; even then,

hundreds of distinct denominations exist today, exemplifying how difficult it really is to force stories to stop evolving. The way a community or a nation perceives itself, and the stories it tells about itself and others, evolve naturally over time, the same stories serving different functions as social and political concerns develop. The question of "authenticity" is pertinent in discussing Cartoon Saloon's reworkings of myth; the Folklore Trilogy explicitly conveys a concern for the environment and the fading of old traditions, ideas that speak loudly to the contemporary world. In retrieving old mythological tropes and reviving them for the screen, redefining elements of the source material to accommodate modern audiences, it is an open question as to how much the films can truly be called "authentic".

Anglo-Irish writers of the *fin de siècle*, such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, saw in these mythological characters the potential to shape an Irish future by looking back to a mythicised past (Kennon and Ní Bhroin, 2011, p.7). Figures like Oisín, Cú Chulainn, and Fionn Mac Cumhaill were reworked for contemporary consumption, but originating from an era in which violence was commonplace and warfare was glorified, Kennon and Ní Bhroin highlight how heavy alterations to mythological archetypes and stories ran the risk of them losing their "colour and vigour." (Ibid, p.8) In a country where Catholicism dominated socio-political debate and national identity for much of the 20th century, these pagan supernatural figures would also have to undergo serious transformation so as not to undermine the status quo (Ibid, p.9). The myths and heroes of modern Irish retellings were far more a product of contemporary concerns than anything else, and earnest "authenticity" was as difficult to achieve as it was arguably undesirable.

The reworking of mythic archetypes brings to light the question of "authenticity" and how much it should be pursued, respected, and adhered to. Kennon et al.'s warnings about the pursuit of contemporary resonance at the expense of "colour and vigour" echo the concerns of conservationists and film directors alike. However, if archetypes and the narrative journeys they undergo are indeed subjective, susceptible to morphing over time, authenticity quickly

becomes a matter of perspective. The Irish artistic and nationalist movement that began in the late 19th century, known today as the Celtic Revival, saw expansive efforts to retrieve fading traditions, restore the Irish language, and inspire a new generation to combat colonial rule. Celtic myths reworked by poets, playwrights, and literary authors constituted the bedrock for a new cohesive Irish identity separate from Britishness, and supposedly justified the formation of a free Irish state. Precolonial Gaelic Ireland became, to these revivalists, not a historical fact so much as a spiritual ideal towards which the nation should strive. Ó Giolláin highlights how this idea of an untouched heritage, a glorious past, directly mirrored the alternative vision of Gaelic Ireland as a representation of violence, primitiveness, and backwardness (2018a, p.33). In both cases, authenticity was not the priority – the construction of a political narrative was. The Revival's nationalist representations of myth may draw considerable criticism today, but they are no less accurate or authentic than a queer, feminist, or ecocritical reworking of Irish mythology. This is compounded by the reality that most "authentic" accounts of Irish myth originate from the writings of Christian scholars from the sixth and seventh centuries (Kennon and Ní Bhroin, 2011, p.9).

Regina Bendix (1992) reflects at length on the eternal pursuit for authenticity, a vague concept that has become so elusive that it is now a kind of "plastic word", a concept so dense in meaning that it ends up conveying very little. Nevertheless, she attempts to define it, describing the search for authenticity as a search for a "spiritual essence" by which to describe a people, a culture, or a nation (pp.104-106). Citing the folkloristic practices of the German Grimm Brothers as an example, their work transformed into a potent symbol for the 19th century pursuit of a German national spirit. Though the brothers argued that authentic folklore could only be retrieved from the diminishing places where old languages still thrived and the oral tradition persisted, their publications were aimed towards a distinctly *bourgeoise* readership; upper class political and academic fascinations with folklore did not derive from a genuine appreciation for the "folk", rather it came out of efforts to unite the dozens of

Germanic duchies, principalities, and kingdoms under a single, modern identity (pp.109-110). In this way, folk tradition served a kind of nostalgic function and helped to construct a vision of an imagined past. These efforts to ground contemporary ideas in the past so as to legitimise and give form to them heavily reflects the efforts of post-independence Irish scholars and politicians. It exemplifies how, even when these stories do not change, the context they are presented in is changing all the time.

Writing about the revival of folklore and its survival into the modern day, Ó Giolláin is similarly concerned about old notions of authenticity and how they shape the reworking process. To him, an "authentic" reworking of Irish folklore and tradition is not possible to achieve, let alone desirable, and this is for various reasons: a traditional society without interference from the outside has, in his words, always been "a scholarly construct" (2013, p.41). The culture of individualism embedded in modern Irish society likewise encourages a diversity of cultural practices and artistic tastes. Combined with increasing immigration and the diversification of the Irish people, any old definitions of "tradition" must inevitably be questioned and redefined (pp.44-48). As individualism and commercialisation radically change the way we engage with culture, Ó Giolláin argues that the notion of an "authentic" Gaelic tradition is not useful in contemporary discourse. It distorts the conversation and grounds it in outdated language – instead, the changes that have shaped our modern world should inform new definitions of place, nationality, and class (2018a, p.37), all of which would be unrecognisable to folklorists of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Efforts to academically assess, commodify, and scientifically understand folklore, a practice that has entirely changed our relationship with these stories over time, has resulted in the compartmentalisation of mythic stories into subsets or types, giving rise to such theories as the monomyth. So disconnected from the root source, clinical attempts to perfectly preserve this material have arguably only made it even more unrecognisable to its orators. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne's *The Types of the*

Folktale (1961), originally published in 1910, a colossal compendium of story types and archetypes found across the world. Later translated and expanded on by Stith Thompson, it presents folktale types as brief entries in a long numerical list entitled the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index (ATU). One example among hundreds is the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, condensed down to a two-sentence description and designated ATU-410. While this approach has its benefits, notably in comparing vast amounts of stories and identifying similarities between them, it raises the question as to whether authenticity is truly just textual or if stripping away any musical, theatrical, ritualistic, or oral elements results in the "spirit" of the folktale being lost. Alternatively, the process of commercial adaptation can also have a huge transformative effect on these stories and characters, first manifesting as compendiums but later as theatrical, televisual, and cinematic adaptations. Just as how the definition of "hero" changes with time, how authentic a reworking is to contemporary life should be just as much, if not more, of a consideration than authenticity to any distant past where social values were vastly different. Respect for the "original" voice of these stories is important, not only for the purpose of conservation but also so that the experiences of past generations are not forgotten, but the enduring survivability of archetypal figures is primarily thanks to their capacity for variation and regeneration.

The figure of the warrior queen, for instance Ireland's mythical Queen Maeve or, more famously, Britain's historical Boudicca, has transformed completely into a rallying symbol for modern feminist activism. Despite having fought the Romans two millennia prior, Boudicca has taken on a powerful contemporary resonance, a beacon of raw female strength, determination in the face of patriarchal oppression, and sacrifice in the name of a revolutionary cause (Barnett, 2023). Cinema has also afforded storytellers the ability to remake old stories, with the recent example of *African Folktales, Reimagined* (2023), a Netflix-Unesco anthology of short films produced by African filmmakers, mostly women, with the intention of confronting the dangers faced by contemporary women in countries like

Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda (Kimeu, 2023). Here, mythology and ancient archetypes serve a very different kind of nation-building or 'nationalist' project. In postcolonial states that still struggle to create safe and equitable circumstances for everyone, reworking mythology is seen by some indigenous filmmakers as one way to respond.

2.8.Postcolonial Approaches

Discussions about the progression of Irish national identity over time and the reworking of cultural elements invites a consideration of postcolonial discourse. It is a field that informs many of the thesis' key discussions, including Ireland's changing relationship with the environment and the role of women in Irish storytelling, comparing past with present and acknowledging the traditional power structures that shape Irish society. Colonialism is first and foremost the practice of domination (Keretli 2021, p.112), a dynamic between suppressor and suppressed whereby a territory and its people and culture are made subservient to another, typically via political, economic, and military means. If colonialism is defined by the power structures that exist between colonised and coloniser, then postcolonial theory critiques the ways in which pre-independence structures influence the present and explores the new power structures that emerge after liberation. When Luke Gibbons (2002) utilises postcolonial theory to describe the reinvention of Irish culture, he views it through a psychological framework (Gibbons 2002, p.110). This is because, he argues, the power discrepancies and legacies of oppression that are carried on long after the retreat of the coloniser play a significant role in the social and psychological development of a people. Gibbons' postcolonial studies highlight how top-down power structures took new forms post-independence and continued to reshape themselves, as did methods of combating them (p.112). Therefore, the significance of the dominator-subordinate (or familiar-other) dynamic in postcolonial states plays a powerful role in how the nation views itself through culture,

politics, and art. The legacies of such power structures, and how they do not dissolve so much as take new forms, links strongly into the thesis' central theme of otherness. How we approach the Other, either as a foe to ward away or a new ally to integrate with, is reflected in the postcolonial struggle for and against power. The question of old paradigms giving way to new ones or transforming so as to maintain potency similarly reflects postcolonial discourse, making it a crucial lens of analysis in the following chapters.

The conservative and insular trajectory of the Irish state following independence dominated Irish screens for decades, and its subsequent evolution serves as an interesting case study into how these narratives can gradually erode, and how this erosion is reflected in the development of popular media. While writers like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett sought to deconstruct established narratives and move away from conservative, insular visions of Ireland, it was the romanticised ideals of artists and politicians who believed in a kind of Gaelic rehabilitation of Ireland that dominated the discussion for some time. Declan Kiberd (1995) comments on this nationalist yearning for a return to a utopian pre-colonial era, one where the magical, traditional ways of Irishmen and women were yet to be tainted by an encroaching occupier. Among the political elite, Michael Collins and Eamonn de Valera fell into this category, and major folklore-inspired artists such as W.B. Yeats displayed occasional support for it. Aside from its detachment from the reality of precolonial Ireland, and issues surrounding its compatibility with a rapidly evolving social and technological landscape, Kiberd sees fundamental flaws in this vision of the Irish past and future. Centred around a return to the supposed source of Irishness itself, such an endeavour would be difficult as few sources remained; centuries of occupation had rendered the Irish language almost extinct, and the traditional ways of prior generations lived on only in a few remote communities on the far west of the island. The promises of national sovereignty and the quest for a cohesive Irish identity also proved alien to those very same islanders. Kiberd remarks on the disinterest shown by Blasket islanders towards the Easter Rising and how natives like Muiris Ó

Súilleabhain wrote about feeling strangely disconnected from the rest of the country (1995, pp.286-287). A revolution that had begun in the far east of Ireland now sought to identify itself with the far west, with an emphasis on the Aran and Blasket islands, and the complexities of Irish identity were becoming clear – there was no single Irishness, but this did not stop politicians and artists pushing that dream of a Gaelicised Ireland.

A paradox of national Irish cinema was its use of Irish stereotypes to reinforce a distinction between itself and its former coloniser – stereotypes that had, at one point, been popular among wealthy British tourists visiting the island when it had not yet gained independence. Ireland as isolated, rugged, and notably fringe and "other" despite its proximity to the heart of the empire. These stereotypes, as identified by Barton and Patrick Brereton (2016), were used to reinforce not only Ireland's difference from Britain but also the supposed superiority of Irishness compared to Englishness. This variety of post-independence nationalist cinema is considered by Barton to be typical of post-colonial nations seeking to find legitimacy and establish an identity, a grand narrative, for themselves. Another phenomenon she identifies is that of the internal struggle between competing visions of nationhood – in the film industry, this came in the form of widespread censorship, and so the noble pursuit of a postcolonial/precolonial identity came at the expense of individual liberties. A third paradox thus emerged: the revolutionary idealists of one generation became the conservative idealogues of the next. Kiberd remarks on how the English expectation for Irish peasants to conform to a caricature translated into Ireland's postcolonial vision of itself (1995, p.288), reflecting Said's theory of how a colonised or otherwise subordinate people, exposed to othering depictions of themselves, will gradually have their own sense of self eroded and reshaped (1979, pp.324-325). Understanding postcolonial theory allows for a deeper interrogation of how Irish films – in the case of this thesis, the Folklore Trilogy – exist in relation to their historical context. Lauren Scanlon and Satish Kumar (2016), as well as seminal authors like Bhabha (1994), see postcolonial discourse as one that rejects restrictive

or binary perspectives on the past in favour of nuanced analysis that permeates borders, grants a voice to all sides, deconstructs stereotypes, and explores the darker, less romantic aspects of nation and culture (Scanlon et al. 2016, p.2). In particular, crossing and blurring the boundaries between coloniser and colonised is paramount. In the move towards a more outward-looking, postcolonial perspective, Scanlon and Kumar have highlighted how Ireland's "transnational" identity has partly become one of identifying with those that are dispossessed and oppressed, explaining the solidarity that exists, for example, between Ireland and Palestine. In its deconstruction of colonial narratives, postcolonialism is defined by a "mutuality" where the ongoing discourse between colony and coloniser, and the blurred lines between the two, allow for the intermixing of cultures and the emergence of new ones (Scanlon et al. 2016, pp.2-3).

Among the cinematic works of the period, perhaps no other media best exemplifies this than American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), presenting the lives of Aran islanders in documentary format, thereby giving the impression that it was a reliable and unbiased perspective. Subsequent revelations about Flaherty's producing and editorial practices would throw this reliability into question (Carney, 2012), but the film nevertheless stands as one of the best audiovisual representations of what Irish nationalists in the 1930s and '40s were attempting to achieve. Writing in the context of music and dance, Deirdre Ní Chonghaile (2014) describes how remote islands like Aran became the fixation of nationalist romantics, and how Aran natives became the very definition of "Irish". The Aran islanders rarely had a say themselves, and their own traditional music and dance saw very few commercial releases; the idea of what they represented was far more important to the nationalist cause than what these places and peoples were truly like.

The nationalist glorification of pre-colonial Irish arts and customs informed government policies in the following decades and remained popular as late as the 1950s. In 1953, Gael Linn was established as an independent body for promoting the Irish language in

indigenous media, an organisation that remains in place to this day and continues to operate on the community and national level. What came next was a cultural and artistic phenomenon that in many ways carried on the legacy of *Man of Aran*, both in its documentary format and its overt patriotic messaging. *Mise Éire* (1959) was, in an objective sense, a feature-length audiovisual retelling of the events leading up to and during the Irish revolution, labelled by John O'Flynn as the first major televisual narrative on the history of modern Ireland (2022, pp.100-101). In a deeper sense, it was a continuation of the Irish romanticist mission to reinforce Irish cultural pride and nationalist ideals, drawing from a variety of musical and visual symbols that Irish audiences would be very familiar with. Seán Ó Riada's incorporation of traditional melody and song, weaving a musical narrative that evoked feelings of loss and hope for the future, tied strongly into the overall theme of an oppressed people rising up and overcoming the odds, returning to their natural state of freedom. O'Flynn describes one of Ó Riada's pieces for the film, *Roisín Dubh*, as reference to the archetypal image of Ireland as a woman and a musical allegory that reflected the traditional *aisling* poem in its format (2022, p.101). As Ó Giolláin (2018b) indicates, Gaelic poetry and oral stories were being used for overtly political purposes as far back as the 17th century, and *aisling* poems frequently illustrated a woman of mythological connotations lamenting the deaths of her countrymen, foretelling the ultimate liberation of the Irish people (p.138). Evidently, pre-colonial traditions and artforms have served political and nationalistic purposes for some time, even long before a postcolonial nation state was established.

By now however, counternarratives were emergent, and a new postnationalist vision of Ireland would start to take over. As a worldview that denied the complexities of identity and the nuances of Ireland's colonial past, this ardently patriarchal and clerically dominated vision of Ireland unravelled. A postcolonial project continues among Irish filmmakers and artists in Ireland, seeking to redefine Irish identity in the context of Europe and the wider world. This approach is not without its issues, and there remains the question of how best to

situate Ireland internationally without losing a sense of what makes Irish experiences significantly different than others.

As the 20th century continued, economic growth and major social changes within the Republic began to reflect in the cinema of the time. The 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic shift in how the nation perceived itself; in Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982), political violence and paramilitarism are shown to be horrific and darkly seductive, gradually stripping the humanity away from the film's protagonist. It is a film that Richard Kearney, in his book *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture,* argues deconstructs and deromanticises the archetype of the heroic rebel; innocents die, and the Irish ballad 'Danny Boy' is recontextualised by the film in a way that almost mocks the heroic "call to arms" (Kearney, 1988). Jordan was not alone – films like *Broken Harvest* (1994) and *Korea* (1995) insisted on revisiting Ireland's troubled past and further films like *High Boot Benny* (1993) departed from peaceful, pastoral depictions of the Irish landscape (Barton, 2004; McLoone, 2006). Projects like this gradually transformed Irish cinema from one of nationalism to one of self-reflection and questioning (McLoone, 2000) – a distinctly postcolonial character, signified by the deconstruction of romantic, conservative narratives, was taking over.

Postcolonialism, as it came to influence Irish filmmakers and storytellers in general, granted a new lens of analysis for those seeking to understand history and create an Irish identity for the future. The film industry was far from the only source of postcolonial counter-narratives; John McDonagh (2003) has demonstrated how the poetry of Brendan Kennelly has sought to question and subvert national narratives and poetic norms. In his mission to find cultural "authenticity" and provide a "postcolonial" vision of Ireland, the poet identifies voices that contradict established understandings of Irish identity and Irish history. He goes as far as to explore the controversial figure of Oliver Cromwell, a figure in Irish history who in many ways has come to represent British rule pre-independence, in a way that emphasises the complexity of history and breaks dominant, nationalist narratives. It is a process that takes

place within a liminal space, refusing to conform to one agenda or the other, destabilising boundaries that shaped Irish identity throughout the 20th century (McDonagh, 2003). This movement away from a monolithic perspective, uncovering untold stories and refusing to impose a single voice on everyone, came to also define the Irish postcolonial cinema of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Economic and social changes throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries partly fed into this shift towards postnationalist and postcolonial interpretations of Irish identity, but another factor was Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC). This was eventually incorporated into the modern-day European Union (EU), a major step onto the European and global stage. Kearney (2002) has argued that while this process did reshape Irish identity, the relation between Irish cinema and Europe at large had existed long before that, a relationship built on the cultural exchanges between the island and the continent. Epinoux (2011) agrees to an extent, but she also emphasises the cross-cultural interactions between Ireland and the UK, and Ireland and the US, over the past few decades. In the 1990s, some Irish film festivals took place in the United States and across Europe, allowing Irish culture and identity to be distributed further and discovered by foreign audiences. Epinoux highlights the 1994 Irish film festival that took place in Lincoln Centre, New York, as being among the most important of these (Epinoux 2011) – insularity gave way to openness and international exchanges that allowed Irish film to thrive in a new era.

2.9.Irish/Transnational Identities in Cinema

While European integration reshaped understandings of Irish identity and Ireland's place in the world, co-productions between Irish and other European production companies became more frequent. Neil Jordan's *Ondine* (2009) starred Polish actress Alicja Bachleda-Curuś and was distributed in the French and Romanian as well as English languages; its

soundtrack was composed by Icelandic musician Kjartan Sveinsson. However, from 2009 on, the animated films of Cartoon Saloon, based in Kilkenny, accentuated this even further: *The Secret of Kells* (2009) was an Irish-French-Belgian co-production, co-produced by French filmmaker Didier Brunner and written by French-American screenwriter Fabrice Ziolkowski. In an essay published in *Redefinitions of Irish Identity: A Postnationalist Approach* (2010), Carmen Llena has highlighted that, between 2001 and 2003, Ireland ranked highest in the Globalisation Index, and provides a degree of scepticism when it comes to the benefits of this new postnationalist Ireland. Llena warns that a loss of diversity and greater conformity is the cost of joining the "global village", but also warns of going in the extreme opposite direction. There is a difference, Llena suggests, between the celebration of national and cultural traditions and the outright distrust of the Other that comes with nationalism and racialism (Llena and Nordin, 2010). Thus, it can be argued that as Ireland continues to develop its identity in international arenas, and as Irish cinema keeps evolving, a careful balance ought to be maintained between nationalism and postnationalism.

Matthew Brown (2006) critiques literature on postnationalism, including that of Kearney, but accepts Kearney's understanding that 'it signals another way of seeing things, which transmutes linear history into a multiplicity of timespans' (Kearney, p.65). Brown asserts that postnationalism 'needs to critically investigate rather than serve as a neutral term of accommodation for the interactions between regional and cosmopolitan forms of identity (2006, p.93). Postnationalism becomes a description of the potential future of Irish identity and Ireland's cinematic reworkings of myth, allowing for a critical investigation into the shortcomings of nationhood without necessarily abandoning it (Brown, 2006, p.104). Desmond Bell similarly warns against a complete move away from national and regional concerns, shifting the focus away from a distinct Irish cultural identity and towards Europe's "metropolitan centre" where Irishness is not so easily intelligible (1991, p.90). While Ireland's neighbours share a common imperial, industrial, and enlightenment history,

Irishness is defined in part, according to Bell, by the "stigmata of imperialism" and its colonial traumas (1991, p.91). In 2024, Ireland has a unique position in Europe. It is the only country in the EU, aside from Malta, with English as the national language, the *lingua franca* of Europe and much of the world, placing it in a position to effectively engage and cooperate with any fellow member state. Simultaneously however, it is also a country where the majority of the population do not fluently speak their own native tongue. Ireland is so distinct as to reject either a solely nationalist or postnationalist interpretation, existing in a middle place that demands, as both Brown and Bell argue, a balanced approach.

The question as to how to maintain a balance between local/national and global/international demands may come in the form of "glocalisation", a blend between globalisation and its supposed reverse, local identity. Global and local agendas do not necessarily have to be at odds, as implied by Rosa Casademont (2008). Cinema as one of the major "cultural proxies" by which ideas and values cross borders, a kind of communal or social artform that brings people together, is certainly well-suited to sharing Irish identity with audiences from other nations. Just as European and American culture influences Ireland, Irish filmmakers have the power to do the same by distributing their films to foreign markets. Brown's description of postnationalist theory not as an alternative to nationalism but as a description of the contemporary issues and tensions within national, regional, and international identities (2006, p.93) proves useful in this thesis' approach to the subject of Irishness and Cartoon Saloon.

The Irish film industry, alongside the work of Irish artists in a variety of fields, has seen a dramatic shift in its scope and outlook over the past few decades. From an insular and conservative identity that reinforced existing stereotypes to a cinema that increasingly seeks to break free from the image of a simple, rural island nation, postnationalist perspectives have come to redefine what it means to be Irish. The postcolonial project to construct a new identity following on from independence has also seen a massive shift towards global

perspectives, but as 21st century Irish artists move away from a Hiberno-centric worldview, caution must be applied in ensuring that the Irish voice is not lost (see also, Kearney, 2021). Brown identifies author John Banville as 'the postnationalist exemplar, insofar as many of his influences are European while, at the same time, he shades and gives texture to this landscape with regional flourish' (2006, p.97). There is the possibility of an Irish cinema that simultaneously promotes Irish culture and appeals to international viewers, depicting the Irish experience as representative of broader human experiences while avoiding the temptation to feed into foreign expectations about what Ireland is like. The process of "glocalisation" is one that Irish filmmaker, like those at Cartoon Saloon are already engaging with, setting Irish cinema down a path that explores postnationalist ideas while retaining a sense of Irishness. The studio arguably incorporates the regionality espoused by Hume (Kearney 2002), the universality of Campbell and the romantic Irishness of Yeats.

2.10. Women and Nationalism

The role that portrayals of women play in the construction of cultural and national identity, and the ways that women are treated in cinema, has already been noted – the woman has been illustrated in many archetypal forms for generations in Ireland. Ó hÓgáin's (1999) descriptions of land-goddesses, the protective Mother deity, or the Virgin connects to the woman's relation to nature in myth. The conflation between womanhood and the natural world has inspired writers and filmmakers in modern Irish history, right up to the present day, and it has formed a basis for other cinematic interpretations of women. In *Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint* (2011), Brian Wright describes this tradition of constructing nature-goddesses when he discusses one of Ireland's most iconic figures: Brigid or Saint Bridget. Brigid's supposed mother, the Mór-Ríoghain (Or Morrígan), a triple deity of war, was a goddess of protection who spurred on her followers in combat and could see into the future,

also having strong links to the landscape. However, while her parentage had connections to war, Wright argues that Brigid is considerably gentler. Her links to nature are numerous, such as her connections to cattle, animals that were not only symbols of wealth but also played an important role in Druid festivals. She also had connections to fertility and, like her mother, to the land (Wright 2011, pp.25-29). The role of such goddesses was a nurturing one, protecting their people and providing bountiful harvests.

In other realms of nature, women were just as important. Michael Witzel (2015) describes how waters and rivers have often been attributed to goddesses across the Earth. Many rivers throughout the Indo-European world derive their names from such goddesses, and in India, for example, the sustenance that rivers provide represents semen or milk (Witzel, 2015). Ó hÓgáin takes a similar view: the 'mother-goddess' is a key archetype in Irish myth, almost all Irish rivers have female names. Irish goddesses were linked to the rivers, as were Celtic goddesses across Europe – the Marne in France, derived from Matrona ('divine mother'), or the aquatic Dánu of Sanskrit literature, related to the Irish Danu – these Celtic and Indo-European traditions all point to women having a nurturing role as nature deities (Ó hÓgáin 1999, pp.64-66).

As Valerie Estelle Frankel (2014) describes it, there are three variations on this nature goddess that can be identified throughout Ireland and the world. Dividing deities into a triple form, such as the Morrígan, has been a phenomenon in myth throughout history, and Frankel argues that the triple-archetype of the Maiden-Mother-Crone is a common one. All three forms have connections to the land in some way. The Maiden represents youth and energy, also embodying purity and hope; the mother is caring, providing sustenance and supernatural gifts; the crone, the end of the triad, has lost the abilities that her counterparts symbolise but she holds great wisdom and ancient knowledge (Frankel 2014, pp.173-174). Leading into the modern era, as Ireland sought to rebuild a sense of identity during and following the

revolution, artists turned to mythology for inspiration and the old tendency to equate women with the land extended to the Irish nation.

The woman as a powerful nationalistic symbol is discussed by Maria-Elena Doyle (1999), both for the ways that it was embraced by writers and poets in the early 20th century, and the ways in which it was fought against. Individuals like W.B. Yeats, Alice Milligan, and Edward Martyn contributed to the depiction of male heroics, and women in their writing were either villainous like Milligan's Grania,[3] or in need of protection like Deidre.[4] Through these writings, the image of a docile motherly deity embodying Irish identity and the land became popular. While Irish myth does accommodate such a reading, Doyle argues that some mythic figures, like Maeve[5] or Grania, provide the possibility for 'models of independent action' (Doyle 1999). Writers like Gregory and Gore-Booth sought this alternative representation of women, and throughout the fight for independence, women in the arts and politics did their best to emphasise the need to empower both Irish men *and* women. The fight for national autonomy seemed, to many women, an opportunity to rewrite social norms and expectations, and the battle for women's suffrage was seen by writers like Countess Markievicz as inherently tied to the question of independence. Kiberd relates how this feminist drive, reflected in the establishment of groups like *Cumann na mBan* (The Society of Women) which was a sister society to the Irish Volunteers, ultimately came into conflict with the ideals of male revolutionaries who saw the act of rebellion as a chiefly masculine enterprise (1995, pp.395-396). Here we see how, once again, the views of the nationalists reflected those of the coloniser far more than they would care to admit, and that Ireland's national identity was far from cohesive or singular in its ambition.

[3] In myth, Gráinne was betrothed to Fionn mac Cumhaill, but she fell in love with Diarmuid Ua Duibhne instead, eloping with him.
[4] Among the most well-known female figures of Irish myth, Deidre is a tragic character who loses the man she loves and is forced to marry Conchobar mac Nessa.
[5] Maeve, or Medb, is a warrior-queen in Irish myth and a sovereignty goddess.

As troubling as archetypal Mother Irelands or mournful Aislings would come to be viewed by feminist writers in later years, the issue of depicting women in nationalist art and literature was nuanced. Without many avenues of self-expression, some nationalist women like the poet Eavan Boland saw these archetypes as a way by which women could leverage some influence, albeit at the cost of their personhood. In *Intelligibility, Gender, And The Irish Nationalist Imagination* (2013), Tes Slominski discusses the double-edged sword of embracing the nationalist view of Irish femininity, a practice that at once liberated women and confined them to a very particular type of revolutionary action. By 1900, the image of Ireland as a sorrowful widow, dark haired beauty, or caring mother had been solidified in the public consciousness, a symbol that would be hard to upend, but women in the arts saw this as an opportunity to behave as "good nationalists" without being viewed as a threat to the social order, seizing the chance to speak out and perform (pp.3-4). Even here though, women in music, literature, and other art forms struggled to walk the fine line between the right kind of rebellion and the wrong kind – those who did not entirely conform to the idealised, youthful, beautiful archetype could not hope to achieve widespread attention (p.4). The pursuit of a new Irish identity that emphasised equality, reflecting the liberties that women enjoyed under pre-colonial Breton Law, would evidently be in vain, conventional modes of femininity continuing to be imposed decades after independence.

From the very start, the concept of a passive woman representing Irish national identity had its critics, but it would remain a popular approach. Barton (2004) explores how this depiction made its way into cinema, sometimes portrayed as a struggle between opposites, the "masculine" England versus the "feminine" Ireland. The depiction of women came with variations – the innocent girl as an object of love, or the older mother protecting her children – but at its heart, it was the same practice: the gendering of the nation. At the centre of this new interpretation of women was their role in the family unit – the mother/wife

came to embody Mother Ireland or the Virgin Mary in the home, devoted to maternal duties and often holding power in the domestic setting (Barton 2004).

The following decades saw the image of the woman as representative of nature, the supernatural, and the nation brought under severe scrutiny from a scholarly as well as artistic perspective. Alpini (2005) argues that while the portrayal of women as exalted and primordial can be liberating in some ways, it ultimately serves to reduce women to a fantastical, othered form. These characters are unrealistic, a universalisation of womanhood that women cannot see themselves in (Alpini 2005). Attempts to make depictions of women less about nature and the nation and more about realistic, lived experiences became increasingly prevalent as the 20th century closed. The same myths and folktales that had been used to deify, and alienate, Irish women were now reinterpreted for more progressive purposes. Returning to Brigid, Bitel (2002) highlights that, while her connections to pre-Christian deities are tenuous, the Irish goddess/saint has nonetheless been increasingly seen as a symbol of heroism in a society which disenfranchised women. In a similar way, Jessica Scarlata (2014) writes about how conflations between women and nationhood have been turned upside-down and used to explore women's issues by films like *Maeve* (1981) and *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1990). Both films explore feminism's relationship to repressive and nationalistic patriarchal hierarchies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, examining the potential for greater autonomy. In both cases, the state is not a protective mother figure; it is very much defined by the will of men at the expense of women's safety and liberty. While prior depictions of women had been used to celebrate the state and its history, films of this era began to depict women's stories in ways that challenged historical narratives and societal frameworks (Scarlata 2014).

Describing the emergence of this women's cinema, Ruth Barton (2004) describes *Mother Ireland* (1988), a documentary directed by Anne Crilly in which Irish women were interviewed about their feelings regarding the equation of nation and motherhood. The documentary revealed mixed feelings among participants, some women suggesting that it was

a positive recognition of the woman's role as a mother. However, other women labelled the tradition as "ridiculous or oppressive" – women's voices were finally being heard and the harmfulness, even absurdity, of the 'Mother Ireland' archetype was coming to light (Barton 2004). While *Hush-a-Bye Baby* explored the plight of young women in Ireland, Orla Walsh's short film *The Visit* (1992), goes further and provides optimistic closure, suggesting the potential for change. Barton describes how this short film follows the pregnancy of its protagonist, Sheila, after an affair. At the end, she comes to a "point of self-discovery", deciding that she will keep the baby. It is a powerful realisation of independence and individualism amid a restrictive and judgemental society.

[Adapted from the 'Disneyfication and Modernising myth' chapter]

There is a great deal to learn from the development of how women are depicted in film over time, but this development similarly took place in Irish theatre, interrogating women's roles through the lens of reworked mythology and the place they occupy in society. The playwright Marina Carr provides various examples of this, and her work from the 1990s in particular uses myth to challenge established understandings of Irish motherhood that had once been reinforced by those very same myths. In The Mai (1994), the traditional and romantic Irish mother-figure, an archetype familiar to an Irish audience, was controversially subverted through mature humour and parody. One such example is the character of Grandma Fraochlán, an irreverent centenarian who Melissa Sihra (2005) equates to the revered archetype of Cathleen Ní Houlihan, only Carr's Cathleen is boisterous and somewhat cruel, makes explicit remarks and rejects the role she once played as a mother – she expresses regret over having reared children instead of pursuing her own ambitions, a cross-generational predicament that reflects in the Mai herself (p.139). Carr's plays repeatedly approach the question of Irish women's autonomy as one defined by existential crisis and mental/physical trauma. Death is prevalent throughout her work, and the struggle for equity and fairness is often framed in terms of mythology; inversions of celebrated Irish archetypes throws into

question the purpose that modern adaptations of myth serve and what consequences they bring. The 20th and 21st century plight of Irish women is similarly depicted by her in terms of tragedy, reflecting ancient Greek epics that Carr has taken inspiration from time and again throughout her career. The transformation of the female body into a symbol of nation is reflected in The Mai's depiction of its protagonist and her struggle, confronting stereotypes about motherness and wifehood (Hill, 2009, pp.44-46). In this instance, the burdensome symbolism that comes with the 'Irish Mother' image functions not as a comforting signifier of national freedom or rebellion. Instead it is a hereditary prison for the play's heroine, the weight of past centuries of gendered expectation dictating what a woman ought to be. Grandma Fraochlán herself partially embodies this reality with her memory reaching far back into the distant past, her presence a constant reminder of crushing tradition and the long shadow of past generations. Just as how mythology itself is inherited, intergenerational notions about the ideal Irish woman have a catastrophic effect on the Mai's psyche, split between personal ambitions and the harsh reality of life in the conservative Irish midlands. The women of the story are, as Shonagh Hill (2009) details, gripped by romantic expectations and repeatedly perform their roles as Irish homemakers and mothers (p.48). The Mai herself dedicates her time to the construction and perfection of a dream house, hoping that her husband returns from his long absence. While her husband, Robert, may have been free to escape his unhappy life and go out to seek a new one, the heroine has no such opportunity. His casual abandonment of the family, relegating the Mai to take care of their children alone, is emblematic of how old tradition and myth may be a source of liberation and inspiration for some, and a source of restraint for others. The narrative builds up to the ultimate tragedy with the Mai's decision to commit suicide, a twisted attempt to retake control over her own body. Set in an era when Irish feminist calls for greater bodily autonomy seemed to be faltering, the play confronts the nationalist legacy of Irish myth and storytelling, presenting the process of

mythological reworking or the perpetuation of tradition as one that can, at times, have dire consequences.

Carr is not alone in her experimentation with Greek tragedy for the purpose of exploring Irish societal shortcomings. Maria Chacón (2015) touches on how Irish writers and artists have frequently drawn from myths beyond the island, reworkings of Greek drama serving as a means of speaking out against injustices. Yeats considered Greek drama in antiquity to have achieved perfection, drawing from it frequently in his own tragedies during the Irish Literary Revival (p.60), and Chacón considers Carr's exploration of Greek tragic themes in plays like The Mai and Marble (2009) to be a distinct continuation of that tradition. Marble is a potent example of this, replacing The Mai's conservative, rural setting with a nameless, modern city, and examining four individuals as they grapple with ramifications of a dream that one of them had. The dream in question involves Art having sex with his friend's wife, Catherine, in a marble room – the dream and the marble setting is argued by Chacón to echo modern society's obsession with an imagined ancient era, one of classical adventure, disconnected from the monotony of modern life (Chacón, 2015, p.65). For Catherine in particular, a mother and a wife, the dream appeals to her desire for meaning in a country where following expectations results in her misery, and defying those expectations and abandoning her family are considered monstrous acts. Nevertheless, Carr's women are passionate about escaping the mythological frameworks that dictate their lives and seek to construct their own myths whatever the cost.

The reduction of marginalised groups and female characters through otherness remains an issue today, just as it was decades ago. While stereotypes have evolved from largely negative depictions, treating groups as inferior and unsophisticated, to portrayals that emphasise innocence and ancient wisdom, it remains the case that certain groups are othered. Films like Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* challenge this constructed otherness and suggest a future of mutual respect and cooperation without the need for a dominant party. Across the

trilogy, characters of radically different backgrounds aid and align with each other, the boundary between hero and mentor blurring as both sides learn from the other. *Wolfwalkers'* Robyn and Mebh prove ultimately to be the solution to each other's problems, rescuing each other from the perils they endure. The savage native/civilised newcomer dynamic that so often dominates traditional depictions of indigenous peoples in fiction is not overtly present in these works. Rather a more sophisticated exchange of ideas built on mutual trust and respect serves to progress Cartoon Saloon's narratives, drive character development, and address conflicts.

Internationally, there is a growing discourse centred on the rights and identities of indigenous peoples, which is reflected in different manifestations of culture including film. A prominent early example is the Disney film *Pocahontas'* (1995), in which the representation of indigenous people relies on generic "Indianness" and appeals to a white, Western view of race (King et al, 2010). Disney's portrayals of race have increasingly become less overt, more coded so as not to offend, avoiding topics that cannot be romanticised. Indigenous people are either portrayed positively in such a manner that their race is not important (King et al., 2010, pp.15-21). The Algonquian people in the film are depicted as entirely admirable, wise, and in touch with the land. Pocahontas herself, essentially standing in as a representative of her people, is the innocent virgin daughter of the tribe's leader; the Algonquians may be likeable, but they have a mystique that reinforces their otherness. In other words, while techniques and intentions may have changed, the fundamental message has not – these groups are still different from "us". Michelle Anjirbag (2018), in her critical analysis of *Mulan* (1998) and *Moana* (2016), argues that Disney's adaptations of non-Western myth and folklore often decontextualise these stories, westernising and universalising them to such an extent that "authenticity" is lost. In both cases, the crew participated in field research and were informed by experts and natives, but Anjirbag claims that this was just to construct an air of authenticity, more of a marketing decision than anything else. Both films make use of

instantly recognisable, stereotypical imagery, and interestingly, one Chinese viewer of *Mulan* remarked that "only foreigners could make this kind of film. It wasn't like watching the Chinese story of Mulan" (Anjirbag, 2018, p.235). Anjirbag argues that Disney's adaptations of myth and folklore beyond the US can be read in the context of colonialism. Just as how Said described the domination of the Occident, Disney is so pervasive that its adaptations become the default version of the folktale they originate from. This form of cultural domination, deciding how the world views the Other, means that characters like Moana and Mulan are transformed into Disney "princesses" (Anjirbag, 2018). The concept of "Disneyfication", the reduction of complex cultural elements into standardised character types that are easily accessible to a wide audience, is explored in more detail in Chapter 3, followed by an overview of the Trilogy's women in Chapter 7.

2.11. Nature as Heritage

Perceptions of nature and geographical connection have changed throughout Irish history and our relation to the land has increasingly become more distinct as it has been altered by physical, social, and political factors. Since the rise of industrialisation and the migration of the masses into large towns and cities, there have been Irish artists and writers who have sought a return to their roots, associating the landscape with idyllic visions of a simpler past.

Nature's romantic depiction, its supposed connection to the supernatural and a mysterious past, can be traced all the way back to Irish mythology and folklore in which the land is anthropomorphised and granted profound divine power. Indeed, as will be observed in this section, Irish cinematic portrayals of the land have often incorporated mythological and folkloric elements in a process reminiscent of Honko's second life of folklore. This style, pursued with the intention of promoting a return to old values and traditions, is dubbed

"heritage cinema", films defined by their nostalgia and depiction of nature as edenic (Barton, 2004). More often than not, this serves a political function as much as it does an aesthetic one, reinforcing the sanctity of cultural tradition, promoting a distrust of modernisation and urban society, and granting an almost spiritual air to its rural settings. In an Irish context, heritage cinema views the pastoralism of the island's western reaches as emblematic of a simpler, better time in Ireland's past, one of hard work, a connection to nature, religiosity, and geographic isolation.

The concept of the land as a nurturer, nature as a comforting source of vitality and growth, recurs throughout myth. Ó hÓgáin (1999) gives extensive examples, including the pre-Christian belief that the sun and the land represented 'Father' and 'Mother' respectively; the Daghdha embodied light and the sun was symbolic of his eye, while the "land-goddess" was linked to the Earth, supplying corn and milk. Both were providers, a combination of male and female parental deities acting for the wellbeing of the people (Ó hÓgáin 1999, p.110). The process of light giving sustenance to the land and its crops is described by Ó hÓgáin as a kind of impregnation, nature personified. He elaborates on the female deity in particular, describing the goddess Anu as a "mother of the Irish gods", a food provider and, in some texts, a personification of Ireland and the Earth. The two 'paps of Anu' on the Kerry-Cork border were so named for their resemblance to breasts, reinforcing the image of an anthropomorphic and divine landscape (Ó hÓgáin 1999, pp.64-66). In contrast, John B. Keane's novel *The Field* (1990) depicts the landscape through a more masculine, patriarchal view. The book's male protagonist, a farmer who has toiled on his share of land for decades and whose family has maintained it for generations, considers his labouring to be evidence of his ownership over the land.

In the same manner as poets like W.B. Yeats who relied on pastoral images of a "timeless, perfect, and untouched" fairy realm (Potts, 2018), Irish cinema of the early 20th century provided Edenic depictions of the landscape, idyllic images of the west, and romantic

visions of the distant past. Post-independence, this was viewed as particularly important as nationalists sought to return to some form of pre-colonial Irishness. Either as tradition or heritage, the landscape has played a key role in the Irish pursuit of a long lasting, cohesive identity, and while this pursuit manifested as literary, theatrical, and musical works for centuries, the cinematic artform has provided a unique way of depicting Irish nature, intricately combining the aural with the visual.

2.12. Nature and Heritage in Cinema

Approaching cinematic portrayals of Ireland from the perspective of landscape, Patrick Brereton (2016) points to how films like *Man of Aran* use nature and the natural landscape as device for reinforcing a certain kind of cultural and national identity. In these instances, rural Ireland is a nostalgic place, something to be returned to (Brereton, 2016, p.48). While the portrayal of Aran contrasts heavily with more idyllic depictions of nature in the pastoral tradition – the island is as a rugged and brutal test for its inhabitants – it nevertheless serves to idealise the simple life and provide an attractive escape from the monotony of daily urban existence. Luke Gibbons (1987), among other writers like Brereton and Potts, highlights *The Quiet Man* (1952) as another example of the pastoral in cinema, one that imagines a plentiful and happy life in rural Ireland. Its construction of the Irish landscape, and life within it, as a romantic fantasy again indicates links to ideas of escape and freedom that are integral to the concept of the pastoral. However, as the decades went on and these conservative images of Ireland experienced greater scrutiny, the pastoral tradition underwent a transformation. One example of this in the context of Irish folk theatre is Siamsa Tíre, which received a positive reception throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Kearney 2016) but experienced criticism in the 1980s for their romanticisation of Irish rural life (Tóibín 1987).

The depiction of rural Ireland as a restorative place, at the expense of the city, continued right up to the final years of the 20th century with films like *Into the West* (1992) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), presenting the landscape as a place of child-like fantasy and freedom. *Into the West* depicts Mary, a mother figure with the mythical power to transform. She is strongly linked to the ocean during the opening and final scenes of the film, and her presence is felt throughout as Tito and Ossie traverse the vast wilderness of western Ireland. Barton also points out that Newell's *Into the West* and Sayles' *The Secret of Roan Inish* both link the sea to the theme of rejuvenation and rebirth; Ossie is rescued by his mystical, ghostly mother as he drowns in the waters of the Atlantic, and Fiona retrieves her baby brother from the selkies. In both cases, water is a magical and mysterious element of nature (Barton 2004). The name Ossie itself echoes that of Oisín, a figure in Irish mythology who travelled across the sea to the 'Land of Youth', Tír na nÓg. Older depictions of the ocean, such as in *Man of Aran* (1934), similarly depict the water as equal parts life-giving and threatening; the islanders of Aran survive on the bounty of the sea, but the tempestuous waters can just as easily kill. This is a testament to the duality of nature and water-sites in Irish myth and folklore, as described by Alain Chouinard (2010). Rivers and lakes are a source of healing in myth, linked to benevolent goddesses and acting as thresholds between this world and mysterious lands like Mag Mell. However, there were often two sides to these places, and rivers and lakes could also be realms of darkness where dangerous beasts resided (Chouinard 2010). Irish cinema has approached water-sites in ways that directly tie into Irish mythology's deification of rivers and seas.

Throughout the decades, Irish cinema has also equated the natural landscape with the west of Ireland, a supposedly untamed wilderness, untouched by the urbanisation and industrial development of the east. In this way, nature and the western wilderness have become visual shorthand for the past, a simpler time disconnected from the woes of modern society. Barton sees these portrayals – western vistas, fields and cottages, the ruins of ancient

monuments – as elements of a wider romanticisation of the rural past, a "real Ireland" that has dominated Irish cinematic history. She gives examples like *War of the Buttons* (1994) and *Broken Harvest* (1994); the landscape is tranquil and quaint, ruins lose their troubled historic connotations, and long shots of vast countryside are accompanied by traditional music. McLoone (2019) describes landscape as a "passive marker" of identity, something that has always been there, but over the centuries we have attached meaning to it. The landscape and the people are equated (like how Nordic people, living in mountainous regions, may be considered hardy), and films like *The Quiet Man* and *Man of Aran* use this meaning to capture mysticism in their illustrations of western Ireland (McLoone 2000).

Not all filmmakers considered these pastoral retreats to represent the cultural heart of Ireland; from the 1970s on, argues Barton (2019), romantic Ireland was losing its appeal. Films like *Poitín* (1978), *The Field* (1990), and *Korea* (1996) presented harsher rural places, patriarchal and conservative, a far cry from promises of liberation and spiritual enlightenment. Indeed, Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997) was ruthless in its deconstruction of romantic pastoral ideas, literally blowing up the Irish countryside in its finale – a dramatic example of what Potts refers to as "Black Pastoral". The pastoral tradition is not without its flaws: its depiction of the rural working class is ahistorical and oversimplified, failing to address the brutality of living in nature and the harsh toll of pre-industrial life.

Despite criticism from some quarters, a number of Irish artists continued to see the value in this particular tradition and argued fervently for it. Pastoralism comes with various positive connotations such as the promotion of a humble lifestyle and a deeper respect for the natural world. Seamus Heaney claimed that pastoral was effective at critiquing social issues, reconciling opposites, and providing much-needed escapism (Potts, 2011). In a similar vein, Terry Gifford (1999) has observed pastoral's meditative benefits as a tradition of retreat, a means of disconnecting from the overwhelming complexities of modern urban life. Reflecting on it from an environmentalist perspective, pastoral's tendency to observe nature through its

interactions with humans can have the effect of anthropomorphising the natural world. However, pastoral has prevailed in recent decades precisely because the tradition embodies humanity's complex relationship with nature; as environmentalist discourse becomes more prevalent, pastoral can only become more relevant.

The pastoral tradition's ability to adapt, turning into a tool of social and environmentalist discourse, is evident in the Irish films of recent years. Pastoral is also useful for recognizing the faults both in urban and rural places, Barton identifying *The Young Offenders* (2016) as a popular example of both the Irish city and the Irish countryside being depicted as flawed. This in turn allows for a greater understanding of these spaces and how to improve them. Despite critics pointing to its use as a tool of conservatism, pastoral's inherent interest in nature has meant that artistic works in that tradition have in some ways been ahead of their time. Terry Gifford (2016), examining instances of pastoral around the world, has argued that concerns about deforestation, pollution, and the destructive expansion of cities has been a part of the pastoral tradition for a long time.

The pastoral is a useful concept through which to discuss environmentalism, and if, as Brereton suggests, cinema remains one of the best mediums through which to discuss the environment, then pastoral cinema naturally holds immense relevance today and should be explored by Irish filmmakers in the future. Crucial to note is that the work of Cartoon Saloon is unafraid to explore humanity's destructive and careless attitude towards nature as much as our capacity to live in harmony with it. A continuation of the pastoral tradition in all forms, particularly on screen, is not only possible but necessary for its ability to provide comfort and escapism, as well as for discussions moving forward that pertain to humanity's mixed relationship with nature.

2.13. Urbanisation and New Approaches to Nature

A key element of Heritage Cinema in Ireland, apart from its reworking of mythological elements and promotion of tradition, is its deeply negative view on urban Ireland. While the brooks and glens may signify magic, tradition, and the wisdom of the past, audiences are led to believe that the cities of the east have lost that character. *Into the West* (1992) depicts the city as something to flee from, grey and decaying with towering apartment buildings that offer little privacy; the only escape is "the old ways" that reside in the west. This approach, however, is flawed as it does not account for the benefits and disadvantages of both rural and urban life; according to McLoone, the city can represent pollution and alienation, but it also signifies progress. Indeed, the "old ways" of rural Ireland may be more natural, more "human", but they also encourage conformity, social and political conservatism, and the rejection of new ideas (McLoone 2000).

In recent decades, Irish cinema has seen a shift: while the demonisation of urban development and the glorification of nature has not gone away, filmmakers have questioned and criticised this outlook. Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997) literally blows romantic Ireland to pieces with a nuclear bomb in its dramatic finale. In *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1990), the pregnant protagonist, Goretti Friel, faces discrimination in Catholic Derry and flees to the Donegal Gaeltacht for solace. The rural landscape as a refuge is a common idea in Irish cinema, but one scene in particular breaks this apart: sitting on the beach, racked with anxiety, shots of Goretti contrast with images of soothing waves. The idea that nature provides solitude and calm is entirely deconstructed (McLoone 2000).

Finally, even the idea that humanity's connection with nature runs deep, that we have a supernatural relationship with the land and the sea, has been deconstructed in recent years. Analysing these works through the lenses of nationalism and postcolonialism is useful, but scholars like Pietari Kääpä (2014) and Benjamin Thevenin (2013) have also suggested an

ecocritical reading. For Kääpä, the field of "ecocinema" calls for a new interpretation of nature's relationship with humans; films made with the intention of being ecocinema will approach the natural world in ways that do not place the human experience at the centre (Kääpä 2014). Anthropocentric and anthropomorphic perspectives, taken for granted by genres like Heritage cinema, are critically approached in such films, and ecocinema also offers a lens through which films like *Into the West* or *The Secret of Roan Inish* can be understood. Thevenin focusses on the work of Studio Ghibli when he utilises ecocritical theory, arguing that Miyazaki's films capture the imagination through their blending of mythology with modern, multicultural worlds, essentially creating "modern myth" (Thevenin 2013, pp.149-150).

Echoing theories of otherness that are based on binaries, Thevenin suggests that films like *Tarzan* (1999) or *The Lorax* (2012) present environmental issues as a clash between irreconcilable ideologies – good versus evil – and the problem with this approach is that audiences are left with the impression that these problems, and humanity's relationship with nature, are not complicated (Thevenin 2013, pp.156-157). His ecocritical conclusions mirror a lot of the issues found in Heritage cinema and Irish films that portray the purity of nature and rural life clashing with an uncompromising urban Ireland. Brereton (2016) considers the potential in Irish cinema to reevaluate how we relate to nature, promoting more constructive, environmentalist messages. He argues that cinema remains one of the best mediums to explore the balance between humans and nature (2016, pp.49-50); it can depict the rural and urban landscapes as multi-layered by utilising the rich symbolism we have attached to the land over the centuries and millennia.

The complexity of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is an example of environmentalist messaging that seeks to move beyond the simple binary narratives. The characters in the story are complicated, the forest's inhabitants have different opinions on how to take on the destructive humans. The climactic conflict between human industry and ancient nature does

not resolve the situation either. Losses are suffered on both sides of the battle, and little is achieved either way, with the narrative urging the audience to take up the fight themselves (Thevenin 2013, pp.161-162). While ecocritical theory is just one way of interpreting cinema, it is useful for understanding Irish films that deal with nature, wilderness, and urbanisation. Barton and McLoone demonstrate how, through the reworking of myth and the promotion of nationalist ideas, Irish films have romanticised and anthropomorphised nature in the past. Recent films, notably the work of Cartoon Saloon, show a movement away from this worldview, and Brereton and Thevenin provide an alternative approach to nature. It is an approach that could be used to educate viewers on real issues faced by nature in Ireland, to force us to reevaluate our relationship with nature, and to encourage environmentalist action.

Irish cinematic interpretations of nature have promoted romanticism in past decades, but recent films have challenged this notion and presented alternatives to the lush green vistas of western Ireland. Cartoon Saloon, while leaning at times into the traditional romanticisation of Irish nature, mostly prefer more complex depictions of nature, questioning humanity's relationship to it, and with that perspective comes the potential for environmentalist cinema that promotes a productive message of conservation and respect for the natural world. Further ideas relating to otherness and nature are considered in Chapter 6, with concepts of the monstrous and transformation within nature explored in Chapter 8.

2.14. 'Disneyfied' Approaches to Women and Nature

The reworking of myth is a common practice in film and animation, with some of the largest animation studios in the world engaging with mythological material regularly. Disney and DreamWorks are two such examples that produce reworkings of myth for a global viewership, but with such a wide and diverse audience in mind, the stories that Disney tells are often standardised in their narrative progression, themes, subject matter, and style. The

process of "Disneyfication", as coined by Richard Schickel (1968) in his book *The Disney Version*, is defined as a cinematic restructuring of older literary or folkloric materials into commercially viable products for modern consumption. The concept of a "Disneyfied" product has taken root in academia, extending into the study of tourism (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998), sporting events (Descamps and Vivier, 2020), and even architecture (Souther, 2007). For the purposes of appealing to as a broad a consumer base as possible, a Disneyfied animation will typically take an older fairy tale or historical event, reorganise it into a three-act structure, exchange moral ambiguity for a more black-and-white dynamic, and offer the viewer a clean, happy ending. Schickel describes the process as being at odds with eclecticism, instead adhering to a single, recognisable visual style and form of storytelling (p.237).

As a cinematic style that brings sound and motion to illustration, allowing for infinite possibilities whereby setting, costume, and scale are limited only by the artist's imagination, animation is strongly positioned to challenge norms and amplify the voices of underprivileged communities. This potential is harnessed in animations such as *Persepolis* (2007), which unflinchingly tackles the story of a young rebellious woman living in Iran during the traumatic Iranian Revolution. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) serves as a similar example of the animation medium tackling serious and mature issues, like the violent destruction of the environment and humanity's complex relationship with nature. A cursory browse of the highest grossing animations of the past few decades, however, will also reveal a trend of highly polished, typically Western films that follow a standardised structure. Though not inherently problematic, and often tackling serious issues like discrimination, the filmographies of major studios like Walt Disney have been subject to extensive critique for their formulaic approaches to characterisation and narrative (Anjirbag 2018, Kujundžić 2019). However, Martin J. Manning (2016) views Disneyfication as a kind of metamorphosis of the source material, taking on an optimistic tone that, at times, is not even present in the original

(p.346). The natural result is a film that appeals to a wide variety of audiences, offending as few sensibilities as possible, and in the case of features like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) or *Cinderella* (1950), becomes more widely known than the original folktale.

One of the best examples of the studio's formulaic narrative approach comes in the form of the classic Disney villain, a cartoonishly sadistic and malicious character pitted against the hero, driven by a simple motive like greed or bigotry, and inevitably meeting a grisly end. When the need arises, the Disneyfication process will heavily alter the hero and villain's depiction to fit into this good-versus-evil format, as is the case with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). If a villain is altogether absent from the original material, they will be added, as can be seen in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Nada Kujundžić (2019), in her critical analysis of Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), describes this construction of a clearly defined morality as often accompanying a love interest (almost always heterosexual) and magical helpers (pp.54-56). The result altogether is a musical, comedic, and romantic reinvention of a centuries-old tale, and Disney is not alone in this kind of adaptation by far; DreamWorks' *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) and Don Bluth's *Anastasia* (1997) also fall into this category.

The reasoning behind such an approach to animation, condensing local heritage into universally appealing productions, neutering it of any sharp political commentary or uncomfortable characterisation, is not entirely, if at all, malicious on the part of big Hollywood studios. First and foremost, profitable ventures will always require a degree of adaptation to appeal to mass audiences. Therefore, as Michelle Anjirbag (2018) highlights, films like *Mulan* (1998) will use universally recognisable symbolism to ground audiences in the setting, however truly accurate that symbolism may be. *Mulan*'s opening sequence makes use of stylistic dragons, calligraphic credits, and a sweeping view of the Great Wall of China, all rendered in that familiar 2D cell-shaded style of Disney animation (Anjirbag, 2018, p.8). The ancient Chinese ballad that the film is based upon is treated as such because, from an

American perspective, this is what audiences expect to see. Another reasonable, though arguably cynical, justification for Disneyfication is that it allows for audiences to experience "foreign" and "other" cultural elements in exciting ways that are nevertheless digestible for Western audiences. The result is a story, like *Mulan* or *Moana* (2016), that treats its mythological and culturally distinct backdrop as more of an aesthetic than anything else; what Anjirbag calls "seasoning" that is scattered atop the foundation of the Western hegemonic status quo (Anjirbag, 2018, p.3). Disneyfication does not only have to be driven by capitalist incentives however, but it may also have an ideological basis. This may be the reinforcement of gendered archetypes, for example, like the benevolent and submissive princess, or the whitewashing of historically complex events like the colonisation of the Americas as is depicted in *Pocahontas* (1995).

Whether used as a technique for enticing broad demographics or as a means of reinforcing certain political values, the Disneyfied animation has been scrutinised for decades and, at worst, likened to a form of cultural domination whereby indigenous voices are drowned out. Regardless of justification, Anjirbag argues that films like *Moana* are decontextualised to such a point that authenticity is lost. Appeals to authentic storytelling and aesthetic, such as Disney's insistence that vigorous research went into the production of *Moana*, are ultimately more of a marketing strategy than anything else, Anjirbag claims (pp.2-3). While the song that Maui sings when he first encounters Moana might pay lip-service to Māori mythology, and though his tattoos may be an attempt to emulate traditional designs, 'You're Welcome' is nonetheless a recognisably American song both in instrumentation and lyrical structure (Anjirbag, 2018, p.12). Though not explicitly an attempt to hijack overseas customs and cultural identity, reshaping it for new purposes, there are clearly power dynamics at play whereby local interpretations of folklore are superseded by Disney's adaptations. Folkloric characters like Mulan who has played a part in Chinese folk tradition for generations, or even real women like Pocahontas, are transformed into Disneyfied princesses,

commodified as children's toys, and become the authoritative version of their respective tales. The seven dwarfs did not originally boast wildly distinct and quirky personalities in the Grimm Brothers' fairy story, and a tale once notorious for its unsettling atmosphere transforms into a light-hearted, even romanticised adventure (Manning 2016, p.346). Similarly, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* was not accompanied by a singing lobster or talking fish. The inclusion of these elements is understandable given the intention to appeal to young children, but the Disneyfication of Germanic folktales and old fantasy stories frequently occurs at the expense of the original source material. Disney's Americanised reinterpretations become so recognisable that any other retelling, past or future, cannot avoid being compared to them even if they came centuries beforehand.

The saturation of Disneyfied folklore and fairy tales over the years, both within Disney's repertoire and from across the world, has not only attracted extensive and serious criticism, but has also experienced increasing parody and subversion over the years. What Schickel himself described as a "shameless process" (p.237) has most notably been deconstructed and ruthlessly mocked in DreamWorks' *Shrek* series (2001-2010), a quadrilogy of comedies poking fun at traditional black-and-white villainy, singing princesses, and heroic quests. *Shrek 2* (2004) overtly challenges the idea of a handsome prince who sets out to rescue his beloved, as the titular ogre who is forced to inhabit the role of hero finds it uncomfortable. Conversely, Prince Charming, who aesthetically fills the role perfectly, is substantively as far from heroic as one can get and displays an arrogance, cowardice, and selfishness that place him comfortably alongside the worst Disney villains. Cristina Bacchilega's (2013) analysis of anti-Disneyfication in cinema reveals, however, that breaking free from the formula can be harder than expected. Disney's own attempt at self-satirising in *Enchanted* (2007), beginning as an over-the-top animated feature before hard-cutting to live-action comedy, starts strong but gradually devolves back into that same formulaic structure before culminating in the traditional Disney happy ending (Bacchilega 2013). Despite the challenges faced by

filmmakers attempting to break free from the formula, however, smaller studios have made attempts to produce culturally authentic and narratively nuanced feature-length films.

Considering the similarities and differences between the two studios and the ways they approach otherness; Disney's animation provides a useful subject for cross-comparison with Cartoon Saloon. Disney presents one of the best and worst examples of mythological reworking for animated cinema, at once highly commercially successful and widely distributed while engaging in a form of reworking that has been widely criticised for overly simplifying its source material. Cartoon Saloon's Folklore Trilogy presents a refreshing example of an indigenous studio reinterpreting local heritage, projecting their own voice onto the world stage. The studio frequently coordinates with foreign production teams and artists, bringing a strong multicultural dimension to their work, but their artistic style and Folklore Trilogy are nevertheless predominantly inspired by Irish cultural heritage. However, elements of Disneyfication are present even here in the three films' standard narrative structure. It reminds us of what is perhaps Disneyfication's most concerning side-effect: the potential for Disneyfied adaptations to influence how other cultural groups view themselves and their own identity. It is a process that continues to be criticised from many perspectives, including feminism, environmentalism, and postcolonialism, criticism that has only been exacerbated by Disney's recent foray into live action remakes. These adaptations of adaptations are even further removed from the source, even more distant from the original meaning and thematic contents of the folktales they share their names with. For this reason, it is imperative that Disneyfication continues to be examined critically, and it is more important than ever for indigenous animators tell their side of the story.

According to Chris Hall (2015), the work of Studio Ghibli, a Japanese production company, places nature's relationship with humanity at the centre; *Spirited Away* (2001) explores this during a scene where the young protagonist helps to cleanse a polluted river-deity of manmade waste. David Whitley (2012) identifies a variety of American films that

emphasise humanity's connection to nature and anthropomorphise the natural world. *Bambi* (1942) and *Pocahontas* (1995) approach non-human nature in highly unrealistic ways, and *Brother Bear* (2003) depicts a human protagonist in animal form. Whitely expresses concern that such cartoonish approaches to nature, featuring animal characters that feel more like humans in fur suits, can undermine a film's depiction of the natural world and mislead audiences. It is a critique that applies similarly to Irish depictions of nature, and Benjamin Thevenin (2013) argues that an over-emphasis on natural beauty and anthropomorphism treats the natural world as a stylised exhibit, something to consume as a beautified product. A "cutified" or personified nature has the potential to alienate viewers from "real" nature (Thevenin 2013, p.155), demonstrating the risk that comes with adapting myth and folklore to cinema. In the substantive chapters to follow, particularly chapters 6 and 7 which approach nature and women in more detail, consideration is given to these issues. While reworking can easily be seen as a progressive activity, reshaping old stories to accommodate contemporary sensibilities, it is an artistic practice fraught with the risk of over-simplification and decontextualization.

2.15. Conclusion

Research regarding the adaptation/reworking of myth, the perception of otherness, and the construction of identity is plentiful, and applying these perspectives to Cartoon Saloon's work has already revealed the studio's place in the history of cinema, both domestically and internationally. While the trilogy reshapes elements of mythology and folklore to highlight modern issues, resembling how Mike Newell's *Into the West* utilises folkloric imagery and themes to explore the plight of Irish Travellers, forthcoming chapters demonstrate how Cartoon Saloon avoids outright romanticisation, favouring a more nuanced and multi-layered approach. In this way, the trilogy is distinct from the "heritage cinema" of the past and drifts

away from nationalist interpretations of Irishness, navigating towards a postnationalist Irish identity. However, Irish identity in modern Europe remains difficult to classify, reflected in the studio itself which draws from distinctly Irish stories (stories previously utilised to reinforce national identity) but reworks them to discuss universal issues that transcend borders. The studio is also ethnically diverse, drawing from talent across Europe, positioning it in a state of liminality not dissimilar to Irishness itself. This reality necessitates an understanding not only of the development of Ireland's national cinema and folkloristics, but also of Ireland's moves towards modernisation and the dissolution of boundaries, its political significance in Europe more broadly, and its cultural connections to places like Britain and the USA. While folklore may have been applied in the past to reinforce national boundaries, it proves to be just as capable of dissolving them.

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides context for the examination of how Cartoon Saloon's productions relate to the creation of national and cultural identity in cinema. The application of otherness in the construction of identity has been ongoing for centuries across the world, and by understanding this process and its dangers, filmmakers can construct an inclusive and forward-looking Irish identity through myth. Research undertaken so far has reshaped the thesis, from a broad overview of Irish cinematic identity to a more focussed analysation of how a single studio's work is redefining Irishness. As highlighted in the section regarding work undertaken to date, this research has informed two essays that will, in time, make up a larger examination of Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy.

Cartoon Saloon's varying explorations of otherness, both within and beyond the folklore trilogy, are grounded in the depictions of nationhood and Irishness that came before. The evolution of "Irishness" in animation over the decades reveals how socioeconomic and demographic shifts has fundamentally altered how we perceive ourselves and others. Among these depictions of Irish identity, understandings of nature have evolved, shifting from rural and romantic conceptions of an eternal, unchanging landscape to questions surrounding

environmental collapse and how to connect with nature in an increasingly urbanised nation. The role of women, too, has fundamentally reshaped how we view Ireland as a state and a society. Cartoon Saloon's work has emerged during a period when this cultural transformation is in full force, and the remaining chapters will consider the roles that nature and women play in the trilogy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1.Introduction

Drawing from the literature laid out in chapter 2, the key concerns of this thesis Irish identity and nationalism, otherness and its various manifestations on screen, nature and how it pertains to both identity and otherness, and the depiction of women. These core themes inform a research methodology that is highly interdisciplinary, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of Irish studies, while remaining focussed at all times on the central idea of the Other which ties these disparate themes together. In this chapter, three key questions are first established to provide a framework from which to expand and develop the methodology. These questions are simple and thoroughly informed by the existing literature established in the previous chapter, outlining my approach towards understanding the Folklore Trilogy in its historical and mythological contexts. The questions to consider are: 1) how does Cartoon Saloon rework Irish folklore and mythology for animated cinema? – 2) what are the primary ways by which otherness is depicted in the trilogy? – and 3) what can be learned about modern conceptions of Irishness from the mythological elements that are reworked by the trilogy? As chapter 2 outlines, three key themes recur throughout Irish cinema and the study of Irish identities on screen: nationalism and its strong ties to Irish myth and folklore, women and their use as a symbol of nationhood, and the natural landscape as an embodiment of Irish pastoral heritage and traditionalism. These three themes share extensive overlap with the concept of the 'Other' – Irish nationalism has, in the past, defined itself in part by what it opposes, women necessarily are treated as Others when they are transformed into icons of the state and the Irish spirit, and the supposed otherness of the natural world informs its depiction as a realm of edenic innocence, of spirits and gods, and of ancient wisdom. The recurrent importance of these three ideas inform the methodology as it is laid out here, and the structure of the thesis overall.

This chapter also aims to explain fundamental theories and definitions that drive the methodological process of my research, including the critical lenses of archetype theory, nationalism, feminism, environmentalism, and queer studies. Otherness too, which has been explored in pre-existing literature in the previous chapter, will be explained and defined in terms of the role it serves in the thesis, and the definitions provided by writers like Said and Bhabha are useful in this respect. Finally, this chapters closes with an overview of the methodology's interdisciplinary character, examining why certain theoretical approaches were chosen and in what chapters they play a substantive part.

3.2.Key Questions

A close reading of the literature leads to several key questions that can be applied to the work of Cartoon Saloon and guide the structure of the thesis. These questions form a basis by which to understand the trilogy's relationship with its mythological inspirations, its place in the wider Irish animation industry, and the role the trilogy plays in interpreting and presenting Irish cultural identity. The first of these questions is *in the context of the developing Irish animation industry, how does Cartoon Saloon rework Irish mythology for animated cinema?* This question has multiple components, firstly requiring an understanding of how Irish filmmakers have adapted myth in the past and framing Cartoon Saloon's work within this context. The stylistic and narrative similarities between the trilogy's films and the myths they reference are evaluated, and more importantly, the stylistic and narrative differences are identified. These differences show how the trilogy reworks myths for modern times, prioritising those elements that have the most resonance with contemporary issues. This research question also demands a cross-comparison between the trilogy and other animated reworkings of myth, such as those produced by Disney, asking what role the medium of animation itself may play in the reworking process. Chapter 4 in particular

focusses on the Irish animation industry, providing a broader context for Cartoon Saloon's work.

The second key question this thesis considers is *what are the primary ways by which otherness is depicted in the trilogy?* This question first requires an understanding of the various forms that otherness can take in media, what they represent, and how they manifest in the three films. Otherness is central to this thesis' analysis, and so the substantive chapters each focus on a different depiction of otherness in the trilogy. The role of myth in the depiction of the Other is crucial to understand, providing greater insight into how myth can be reworked so as to stay relevant or address contemporary concerns.

The final key question is *what can be learned about modern conceptions of Irishness from the mythological elements that are reworked by the trilogy?* This raises the subject of how a nation or people choose to see themselves and others, and which elements of their history/heritage they emphasise or hold in special regard. Analysing which elements of myth specifically are reworked by the trilogy, and what elements of those myths are prioritised or discarded, can give an clearer picture as to how Irish artists see themselves and their country. A better understanding of the most pressing modern concerns can also be derived from an analysis of the trilogy, identifying recurrent themes or character types that speak to contemporary issues. Again, otherness plays a role in this analysis, and the main ways in which it is depicted by the trilogy can give an insight into how Ireland perceives itself and others.

3.3.Methodological Approach

Central to my exploration of folklore and cinema are in-depth interpretations of Cartoon Saloon's three folklore films and the critical analysis of the Folklore Trilogy as a whole. A critical approach to artistic material involves the investigation of a text, in this case

an audiovisual one, for the purpose of understanding its meaning or significance in a broader public context, with stylistic taste and consideration for historical context often playing a factor in the analysis. In his book *Research in the Creative and Media Arts* (2019), Desmond Bell describes this as an exegetical or explanatory process, often with the intention of conveying the interpretation to an interested audience (p.12), and critical interpretation or a "theoretico-critical" approach remains a common way of interpreting media within academic circles (p.18). Specifically, I engage with what Bell describes as the "contemporary theory of artistic discourse" (p.172), with deconstruction as a core component of the critical and evaluative process. In this context, deconstruction involves the in-depth investigation of a text and its components, drawing out key signs and concepts for the purpose of understanding how they work together towards a unified theme or idea.

As part of this methodological approach, the artwork or text is treated as highly subjective and the plasticity of the text's meaning requires a consideration for a variety of competing, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. As Bell states, this post-structuralist interpretation of art treats the text as a semiotic system, a collection of signs that hold subjective or context-dependent significance (p.172). In essence, the "truth" of the text is treated as something that can be constructed differently by different readers, reducing the significance of the authors and their intentions in favour of an interpretive lens of critique. What this means for my methodological framework is that a model of communication between artist and audience is not heavily engaged with in this thesis; this research focusses on an artistic analysis of the trilogy, prioritising the historical and mythological context of the films. This subjectivity is prioritised for two key reasons: first, ancient myths are central to the way the trilogy constructs its narratives, characters, and themes, reinterpreting old myths in new contexts. Understanding the reworking of myth – applying old material to themes of contemporary resonance that would be unfamiliar to the original authors of those myths – necessitates an interpretative approach and an appreciation for the formlessness of a text's

meaning. Second, the thesis' focus on otherness requires an appreciation for subjective experience and differing cultural perspectives; depending on their personal background, an audience member can view the trilogy's treatment of otherness differently than other viewers. One of the most dramatic example of this is the reception that *Wolfwalkers* (2020) received from the LGBTQ+ community who saw the film as an allegory for queerness. Though completely unintended by the studio itself, many queer viewers saw their own experience in the struggle of the film's protagonists. This especially unique interpretation of otherness, one that may be unintuitive to some moviegoers and obvious to others, is examined in detail in Chapter 8 of the thesis. This consideration for otherness and its various manifestations also helps answer the thesis' second research question, exploring the primary ways in which the films confront otherness.

Expanding on my critical approach to the trilogy, semiotic analysis is helpful in examining and understanding the films' imagery. This assists in determining how all films rework Irish myths and folktales, integrating elements from older stories into new narratives, and whether this process of reinvention was successful. Central to my research methodology is the study of mythological symbology and archetypal characters, necessitating a semiotic approach. Semiotic theory treats religion, art, culture, and general human interaction as sign systems (Cullum-Swan and Manning 1994, p.466), collections of symbols encoded with meaning such as the language of road signs or the mise-en-scène[6] of a theatre production. As such, the medium of communication, be it visual or aural, is treated as a "text" to deconstruct. The base components of a text, its signs, can be expressed in any way, and may signify something directly (a loud crash could indicate an accident), or the connection between signifier and signified could be entirely arbitrary (gender symbology, national flags etc.). The categorisation of signs has been defined in various ways but Roland Barthes' (1970)

[6] Referring to the arrangement of props on a stage, the blocking of characters, and the scenery design.

breakdown of semiotics into five codes provides a useful model for film analysis. These codes are:

- Hermeneutic – elements that are unexplained and require elaboration or context. This is a common component of storytelling, engaging readers/viewers/listeners and is typically introduced with the promise of a revelation later (p.76). Proairetic – elements of the text that imply further action to come, building suspense.

- Semantic – elements that suggest further or additional meaning, like double-meanings, via indirect connections or implied connotations (p.8).

- Symbolic – codes that Barthes argues represent a conflict between opposing symbols, signs that may indicate something by themselves but, when combined, produce a deeper meaning; thesis and antithesis come together to produce a synthesis. An example would be the portrayal of a forest contrasted against manmade machinery or waste, signifying humanity's complicated and often destructive relationship with the Earth.

- Cultural – a code that points to a specific body of science or information (p.20), signs deriving meaning from collective contained human knowledge.

This framework covers many types of sign, but other approaches condense the semiotic codes even further; the model described by Betsy Cullum-Swan and Peter Manning (1994) defines three categories: denotative, connotative, and mythological (p.467). Film semiotics approaches the "language" of cinema in a similar way, with the caveat that, unlike a spoken dialect or a written text, film signs can come as visuals, audio, spoken word, and music. Warren Buckland (2008) distinguishes film semiotics from linguistics in a number of ways; film, like other artforms, is a one-way communication system, unlike language where intercommunication plays a large role (p.91); films are also distinct in that a shot or scene cannot be directly compared with a word or sentence (p.100). While individual words contain

inherent meaning without the need for context, studying a single shot requires an understanding of the broader narrative and the shot's place within it, becoming context-dependent. The importance of context in semiotic analysis is also recognised by Cullum-Swan et al. (p.465), highlighting the paradox whereby signs may be reliant on real-world knowledge in order to evoke meaning but any single analysis will often be problematic; there is always another way of seeing things (p.469). Barthes himself writes about appreciating the "weaving of voices" (Barthes 1970, p.20), the possibility for any text to be interpreted in a multitude of ways depending on the interpreter. Semiotic approaches are often highly subjective, and so if any conclusions are to stand up to scrutiny, substantive evidence must be provided, and context accounted for. A semiotic approach also assists in identifying key and recurring mythological motifs for the purpose of answering the third research question, identifying what myths the trilogy returns to over and over again, if any.

The folklore trilogy represents a cohesive project in which recurrent themes are introduced and developed upon. In this case, Bonnie S. Brennen's (2017) definition of media case studies is useful: "texts" or literary/visual constructions that provide insight into wider cultural artefacts, symbols, and traditions in society, a way of understanding how we perceive and depict ourselves (pp.204-205). Bound by a particular time, location, individual, or activity, case studies are a research strategy that allow for the triangulation of multiple sources to understand wider phenomena (Priya 2020). Qualitative analyses, which are utilised throughout this thesis, provide insight into the characteristics and processes of a wider phenomenon by focussing on one specific aspect of it, and in this way, case studies partly serve a 'descriptive' purpose, as discussed by Arya Priya. Furthermore, case studies can serve an 'exploratory' function, giving insight into a previously under-documented area. Case studies are necessarily limited in scope, and so they are most effective when clear boundaries have been established prior to analysis.

As part of the case study analyses, and forming an important aspect of the research process, textual analysis provides a method of deriving meaning from the trilogy and cross-comparing the films' thematic messaging. In the following chapters, the three films are subject to narrative break down, character profiling, and symbol identification, as well as considerations for the cultural context of the films, the historic and geographic references they make, and the myths they draw inspiration from. The meaning codified within audio, visual, and narrative elements of the texts is used to infer meaning, just as how the arrangement of furniture on a set or the colour of a character's clothing can carry metaphorical implications (McErlean 2018, p.56; McKee 2003, p.4). The historic and mythological context of the texts provides a basis by which to understand these elements, as highlighted by McKee (2003) who points out that differing contexts (culture, religion, nationality etc.) can radically alter the meaning of a text. Textual analysis is a highly subjective process, and so considering the Irish cultural and folkloric context of the trilogy is vital in making sense of it. This means only limited consideration is given to the studio itself, and the thesis does not rely heavily on an authored approach where the director's/artist's intentions inform the analysis. As McKee (2003) indicates, textual analysis is more interested in the meaning that can be derived through considering an artwork's cultural context, acknowledging that there may be preferred readings of a text but there is no objective approach (p.67). This post-structuralist style of analysis will be critical in sections like Chapter 8 where a queer lens is used to understand how *Wolfwalkers* depicts otherness. The theme of otherness itself demands a post-structuralist approach to the texts as the idea of an 'Other' is so often subjective, requiring heavy consideration for the text's social, geographical, and historical context.

In film studies, analyses of individual texts or small collections of related texts can provide insight into the wider cultural and industry environment from which they emerged. Eric Smoodin (2007) writes about the proliferation and usefulness of the case study format, highlighting not only the importance of understanding the interrelationship between film texts

and their associated production notes, studio memos etc., but also the importance of historical contextualisation (p.18). Case study research can involve piecing together a diverse network of primary source material, including personal correspondence between production staff, newspaper/magazine interviews, government policy documentation, archival materials, and other industry records, all tied back to the original film text and providing explanations for artistic choices. Case studies do not have to be exclusive to textual analysis either; they can focus on a specific production studio, an individual director or producer, a production practice, a genre or subgenre, or a time period. Due to the flexibility of this approach and the ease with which it can be applied to film analysis, my thesis relies on the case study model to understand Cartoon Saloon's work. Although critics of a case studies approach question the generalisation of findings, Cartoon Saloon represents a prominent example of Irish animation that demands interrogation.

There are varying definitions of the term trilogy and Perkins and Verevis (2012) recognised the plasticity of the term. Noting that 'within the broad category of sequels and series, the film trilogy is a form that is practised and perceived as distinct, and the chapters in their edited collection *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches* (2012) provide a variety of examples. Some exemplify the continuation of a story across three films, which may be a planned, tripartite exercise (p.4), and has seen great success in Hollywood with films that follow a singular, epic-scale narrative (e.g., *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *Star Wars* (1977-1983), *The Matrix* (1999-2003)). Some trilogies may only be connected by a loose tonal or thematic thread, alluding briefly to each other's narratives and characters such as Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours* (1993-1994) or Sergio Leone's *Dollars* trilogy (1964-1966). Conversely, the folklore trilogy falls into a third category, similar to Deepa Mehta's *Elements* Trilogy, each entry narratively separate from the rest but united by a strong thematic undercurrent. Like Ingrid Bergman's trilogies that contributed to defining Swedish national

cinema, bridging the divide between national and auteurial (ibid., p.13), Cartoon Saloon exemplify an independent, auteurial approach.

Close readings of the three folklore films and analyses of their scenes, symbols, and characters facilitates my methodical breakdown of their mythological elements. These elements are then considered in the context of the trilogy's core themes, like otherness. The ways in which these elements are used to discuss key ideas are compared to the ways in which Irish myth has been reworked in the past, placing the trilogy in a historical and as well as global context. In categorising each film's components, the thesis takes a formalist approach; data relating to all films has been collated in a table, noting timecodes and scenes.

Archetype theory provides one lens for analysis. Scholars like Mary Kidd (2016) and Gloria Alpini (2005) see archetype analysis as a practical means of identifying damaging and restrictive stereotypes in modern media and storytelling overall. While archetypes to Kidd are a useful means of getting distilled information across to an audience quickly (there are inherent associations that come with the hero and villain), this can lead to certain groups being broken down into a collection of easily recognisable, albeit insensitive and misleading, stereotypes. Stereotypes are specific to certain cultures and often evoke negative feelings, such as associating African American identity with stereotypical thug or gang member characters (Kidd 2016, pp.26-27). In increasingly multicultural societies, these kinds of archetypal portrayals in cinema and popular culture reinforce divisions and fuel tensions. In a similar way, Alpini examines how women are deconstructed into archetypes such as the Great Mother, the Virgin Goddess, or the Femme Idéale or Femme Fatale (Alpini 2005). In these ways, archetype theory provides one way of understanding how modern media depictions are affected by cultural beliefs and how those portrayals feed back into cultural perceptions. In my application of archetype theory to film analysis in Chapter 5, several of the Trilogy's characters are directly compared with their mythological counterparts, giving a sense of how these figures may change or remain the same over generations. This semiotic-archetypal

approach helps specifically in confronting the thesis' first research question, providing an explanation for how the trilogy goes about reworking old material for new contexts.

My close reading of the selected films is supported by reference to scholarship in the areas of Irish national cinema, narrative and archetype theory, and Irish mythology and folklore. Research regarding the relation between otherness and nation, ethnicity, landscape, and gender is critically considered to provide context for analysis. This provides details on what scholars have said in the past about the benefits of folkloric adaptations/reworkings, and how myth and folklore fit into modern storytelling. This desk research has demonstrated that mythology and folklore is a useful framework for discussing universal themes that are relevant today, specifically otherness. To a lesser extent, I compare the use of myth and folklore in areas such as Irish theatre, music, dance, and literature with cinematic reworkings in order to demonstrate broader cultural trends in Irish and international artistic practice.

3.4.An Interdisciplinary Perspective

My thesis employs a multidisciplinary approach, reflecting the various overlapping focusses of Irish studies, from the fields of musicology, mythology, society and politics, history and colonialism. I draw on the work of archetype theory to better understand the trilogy's elements within a mythological context, relating them back to the stories that inspired them. This thesis benefits from the work of theorists across the worlds of dance (Mendoza 1998; Kearney, 2022b), music (Ó Súilleabháin, 1981), stage performance (Motherway and O'Connell (eds.), 2022), the literary arts (McDonagh, 2003; Walter 2013), live action cinema (Barton, 2004), and feature-length animation (Connolly, 2005; Walsh 2011). Myth routinely serves to inspire the work of native artists as they strive to capture their own distinctly Irish voice. With the reworking of folklore as its focus, concepts like archetypes – recurring characters throughout storytelling that hold strong symbolic meaning –

as well as "universality" – the idea that similar themes, motifs, and narrative structures occur again and again throughout history – are vitally important to address. Seminal works, like *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949) , will be cited as a starting point from which the thesis will expand to cover more recent evaluations of narrative and archetype theory. The seventeen-stage "monomyth" defined by Campbell describes the key narrative beats and characters that can supposedly be found within every story, every myth and folktale. Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung's study of archetypal characters was a significant influence on Campbell's analysis. The thesis of universal truth contained within stories is by no means restricted to 20th century philosophy, however. Richard Kearney, in *On Stories* (2002), highlights the term *mimesis*, an idea dating back to antiquity and the teachings of Aristotle, as a process of reenacting and exaggerating reality so as to reach a deeper, universal truth (p.131).

The monomyth concept shares similarities with Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp's breakdown of folkloric narrative structure; his model contained thirty-one steps or "functions" (Propp 1968). This concept is also reflected in Diarmaid Ó Giolláin's (2013) writings about the reinvention of Irish mythology and folklore – the universality of myth as described by Campbell is one explanation for how centuries-old stories can achieve a second life. Though far more recent, Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004) draws heavily from the work of Campbell, broadening the monomyth but nevertheless relying heavily on the idea that all stories come from the same source, adhere to the same fundamental laws, and are shaped and reshaped by common patterns of human thought (p.13). It is a testament to the enduring power of this simple idea that, decades after the work of Campbell, Jung, and Propp, it continues to resonate with authors, filmmakers, and academics alike. The influence on filmmakers such as George Lucas is detailed by several authors including Palumbo (2014) and Sue Clayton (2011), while Ken Sloane (2023) extends the applicability of an archetypal reading to the *Alien* movie franchise.

Relating to the concept of character types, the central theme of otherness is an undercurrent that informs every chapter regardless of what theoretical approach is being used. The works of Edward Said (1978) and Homi Bhabha (1994; 2013) provide useful insight into how identities are constructed, often incorporating elements of folklore and mythology, utilising and even weaponising otherness at times as a means of solidifying identity or delegitimising others. While the question of identity is important in my research, identity or a community's sense of self is not just defined by what it *is* – identity can emerge out of a sense of difference, what a community is *not*. In his book *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhabha describes how the creation of an Other helps communities to differentiate themselves from neighbours or potential competitors. It is a paranoia and aggression projected "outwards" onto distant cultures, nationalities, religions, or otherwise, and it aids in keeping the community cohesive and stable. The Other is often treated as a common enemy (Bhabha, 1990, pp.229-300). Writing along similar lines, Kearney sees the formation of an Other as an effective means of galvanising national identity and uniting disparate peoples, pointing to British nationalism as an example where a mirrored "Hibernian 'other'" served as an external enemy, a potent unifying factor (2002, pp.97-98). Here, the Other is used to embody strangeness, imbuing the national narrative with a sense of safety and familiarity, a kind of protection against the dangers of the 'outside' world. Similarly, Said sees otherness as the invention of a dominant culture seeking to reinforce its own identity by distancing itself from a subordinate group. In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), he describes how the Other is created out of irrational feelings of superiority, it is a false image of weakness treated as though it were reality, and he uses the West's perception and portrayal of the East or "Orient" as a key example (Said 1978, pp.65-67). Put simply, Said defines the Other as separate and opposite. Modern interpretations have built off of this definition, such as Roberto Gelado and Pedro Sangro Colón's analysis of the role that modern media plays in the construction and reinforcement of otherness. The portrayal of the Other in Hollywood cinema, they argue,

reinforces stereotypes, de-individualises members of that community, and affects the way that millions see the world (Colón and Gelado, 2015). Ireland presents a particular challenge, as described by Joseph Lennon (2004) in his examination of Irish orientalism and the changing meanings ascribed to othered representations of Irishness.

Both Said and Bhabha articulate their concerns about the politicisation of the Other and its use in the cultural sphere, and how groups or individuals respond to being othered. Said's critiques of the ways in which the West has firmly established its sense of self and purpose, defining itself in terms of what it is not, provides a valuable model that can be applied to the folklore trilogy and the dynamics that exist between characters in those films. In this context, the Other (or 'the Orient') is not a singular entity, rather it is the culmination of centuries of depictions of 'the East' as exotic, dangerous, different, and primitive, gradually forming the larger picture of a place and people who are incompatible with, and framed in opposition to, Western values. Said illustrates the Other here as a vital component of the European sense of self, as a distant lesser that makes Europeans appear "superior" by comparison (p.7, p.257). National and cultural identity in this case is reliant on its positionality with regard to a "them", an Other that is not always hostile but is necessarily illustrated as crude and incapable of governing itself. There is a paradox of Said's conceptualisation in relation to Ireland whereby the basis of othering drawing on 'superiority' (p.65) is challenged by the orientalisation of Ireland. In examining orientalism, such as the case of Yeats' 'Celtic orient', many have sought a better understanding of Ireland (Lennon, 2004; Graham, 1994).

There is much overlap between my analysis of the Cartoon Saloon trilogy and the ideas of Bhabha who sees the Other as a "principle of identification" by which the self is defined in terms of what differentiates it from other subjects (1994, pp.51-52). The concept of difference is integral to this thesis, marking Bhabha as a key author who work will serve as a guide moving forward. His concept of hybridity in particular is informative, defined in his

paper *In Between Cultures* (2013) as a liminal form of identity that exists at the point where opposing cultures meet, a blending of communities where power may still be unequal but standard binary representations break down. It is as much a form of identity as it is a means of survival for the colonised or the suppressed minority, and it forces us to question just how fragile concepts of otherness may be in spaces where the Other cannot be easily distinguished from the self. With the work of Said and Bhabha in consideration, and understanding otherness in the context of how it assists in the construction of identity, this thesis defines 'the Other' as a figure that embodies ideological opposition and functions as a mirror image to its counterpart. The Other is highly subjective, and one character's 'self' can be seen by another character as 'other', and vice versa, creating a dynamic or conflict between opposing identities. By extension, 'othering' is the process by which a character or place is imbued with characteristics that the self finds repugnant or anathema to their own values, thereby reinforcing the self's sense of identity. 'Otherness' in this way becomes the quality of being different or opposite to another, and through the process of interaction and familiarisation, the quality of otherness may be deconstructed and lost. This not only makes otherness highly dependent on context, but it also means that an 'other' can only be defined if a 'self' or 'familiar' is first identified.

Another important disciplinary lens, particularly in relation to chapters 5 and 6, is post-nationalism and post-colonialism, reflecting how the films relate to and differ from Irish folklore films of the past. Though mythological narratives and otherness have been closely connected to nationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, an understanding of post-nationalism and its application to film is also required in my thesis. David Hopkin has suggested that the field of folkloristics emerged alongside revolutionary movements, such as that in France, which sought to legitimise themselves. New nations attempted to ground themselves in history by studying and promoting a popular culture, a culture of 'the People' (Hopkin, 2012). British historian Eric Hobsbawm (2012) describes the emergence of such cultural and national

characteristics, posing as ancient practices and beliefs when they are in fact a product of modern times, as the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm, 2012). It was this utilisation, even weaponisation, of centuries-old customs, symbols, and stories that so strongly linked folkloristics to nation-building in its formative years as a field of study (Hopkin, 2012). In Ireland, where folklore was once a revolutionary weapon used to secure independence and distinguish the island from its imperialist neighbour (Barton, 2004; Brereton, 2016), after Independence Irish mythology across all mediums was utilised to reinforce a new, conservative status quo. This would continue well into the 20th century but, as the nation modernised and old power structures like that of the church disintegrated, those same ancient tales would be reinterpreted by artists to critique old paradigms and reinvent Irish identity in a European context (McLoone, 1999, p.28). Irish myth and folklore came to redefine Irishness in a more global and liberal sense.

The evolution of Irish folklore cinema, from the origins of the Irish state to the Celtic Tiger era and beyond, is an integral area for discussion in my thesis, helping me to understand the work of Cartoon Saloon in a historical context and the development of the Irish film industry. For a century, the work of Irish filmmakers, commercial and independent alike, has played an essential role in the construction of a distinct national Irish identity, gradually reshaping Ireland's image of itself and in turn becoming one of the island's major cultural exports in the 21st century. The adaptation of historical events (*Michael Collins* (1996), *Black '47* (2018)), depictions of the struggle between rural and urban (*Into the West* (1992)), explorations of religion and faith (*Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), *Calvary* (2014)), and the reworking of folklore (*Ondine* (2009), *The Hole in the Ground* (2019)) have all come to define the Irish cinematic identity in recent decades. The shortlist of nominees for the 2023 Academy Awards proved beyond a doubt the increasing cultural impact of the Irish film industry not just at home but abroad; *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) in particular made headlines when it became the first Irish-language film in history to make the list, although paradoxically

the film is based on an English text and is not based on folklore. For the purposes of exploring the folklore trilogy in-depth, understanding it as an Irish production as well as a commercial product with worldwide appeal, it is integral that the success of the industry is deconstructed and understood.

The political weight of folklore is immense and challenging. The legendary hero Cú Chulainn, defender of the province of Ulster, wields immense symbolic significance in both the nationalist and unionist communities of Northern Ireland (Goalwin 2019), reworked to meet the demands of a particular identity narrative. Characters such as Cú Chulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhail dominated the mythology and folklore retold through the 20th century, alongside female figures such as Queen Mebh and Deirdre of the Sorrows. Despite their centrality, it is the men who are iconic although there have been efforts to elevate characters such as Granuaile, for example with the Broadway musical *The Pirate Queen* (Boubil and Schönberg, 2004), and St Brigid, with a new national holiday, in the 21st century and productions such as *Brigid, Lady of Light* (Simpson, Kearney and Commins, 2024). The reworking of old characters and ideas reflect moves towards post-nationalism, harkening back to the universal ideas of Campbell and others but maintaining a local/Irish identity, which can be commercially and artistically successful. It is a testament to the malleability and broad appeal of Irish mythology that it can continue to exist in new forms, interpreted in endless, occasionally contradictory ways.

My research also considers how depictions of the landscape reflects reworkings of myth, the construction of national and cultural identity, and otherness. This is done partly by discussing portrayals of nature in ‘heritage cinema’ and ‘ecocinema,’ two types of environmentally-oriented film that serve distinct purposes. The former, defined by Ruth Barton (2004) as a cycle of Irish films associated mainly with the 1990s, looks back to an edenic construction of past Ireland, defined by rural landscapes, communities surviving on the fringes, and pre-industrial pastoral nostalgia (p.148). Heritage cinema serves a distinctly

nationalist purpose, defining the nation in terms of its oldest traditions. Ecocinema looks in the opposite direction, toward the future, and asks how we may integrate nature back into our industrialised lives, typically promoting a strong environmentalist message. It manifests in films across the world, from Italy to China, underlining the universality of environmentalist anxiety. Ecocinematic critique, Kiu-wai Chu (2016) indicates, will often consider things such as the portrayal of animals, pollution, sustainability, and post-humanism (pp.11-12). At its heart, it considers human-related environmental issues; in heritage cinema, nature is eternal, and humans are shaped by it; in ecocinema, the natural world is far from invincible, violently shaped by human interference. This disciplinary approach is very important in chapter 6 where nature and its connection to Irish identity is highlighted and explored.

Furthermore, my study embraces a feminist approach informed by gender studies, discussed in detail in Chapter 7 where female archetypes of the past are contrasted against their contemporary equivalents in the folklore trilogy. In the context of Irish cinema, discussions of gender and feminist critique have featured in the works of Ruth Barton (2004, 2020), Debbie Ging (2019), and Susan Liddy (2020), all three highlighting the profound role that rigid gender roles played in the formation of modern Irish identity, the development of the Irish arts and film industry, and the way women have been depicted on Irish screens for almost a century. Ging identifies a tendency in early Irish cinema for men to be illustrated as autonomous agents while women primarily served a passive, symbolic role (2019, p.389), a dynamic that, despite the passing of decades, continues to reverberate throughout society. Liddy similarly highlights the misogyny embedded in 20th century Ireland, comparing it to persisting inequalities in the Irish film industry today (2020, pp.18-20). The sacred ‘Mother Ireland’, nation and landscape personified as a great goddess, may in some cases serve to reinforce traditional women’s roles. In other cases, she represents a new age of feminine power and self-determination. A contemporary feminist reading underpins much of the research in chapter 7, connecting the films to their contemporary cultural context.

A feminist reading of the trilogy is influenced by social and political movements such as 'Waking the Feminists' (a campaign that surged to prominence in 2015-2016 in response to the Abbey Theatre's 'Waking the Nation' programme which heavily underrepresented female writers in its selection of plays (Liddy, pp.22-24)), as well as being influenced by recent scholarship that has focused on the representation of women in theatre (Hill, 2019) and film (Ging, 2019; Liddy, 2020). Critically, Maria Tatar's (2021) critical response to Campbell, which is outlined in Chapter 2, provides a feminist examination of the monomyth. In subsequent decades, the image of the woman as a representative of nature, of the supernatural, and of the nation has been questioned and deconstructed in scholarship and filmmaking. Gloria Alpini (2005) argues that while the portrayal of women as exalted and primordial can be liberating in some ways, it ultimately serves to reduce women to a fantastical, othered form. Cartoon Saloon's depictions of Aisling and Saoirse adhere to the deification of women to an extent but also contain multi-layered characterisation. They reflect humans with strengths and weaknesses and despite their wisdom, they are secondary characters. *Wolfwalkers* (2020) went a step further and depicted two female protagonists in Robyn and Mebh.

Progressing from the study of women on screen, my readings will also be informed by the work of queer theorists who have sought to understand cinema in ways that defy the binary biological models prevalent in society, most important when examining queer otherness in chapter 8. Tyler Bradway and E. L. McCallum (2019) trace queer theory back to the feminist and gay liberation movements of the late 20th century, defining it as a way of "thinking sideways" that is transverse to heteronormative narratives (pp.3-5). Seeking fundamentally to breakdown limits and expose the fluidity of identity, queer theory questions the normalised hierarchal structures in our lives, particularly in relation to sexuality and gender, placing the emphasis on that which does not fit in – the Other. As Serdar Küçük highlights, it is not just people who can be queer; physical spaces in films can serve as places

of queer liberation and refuge, contrasted against the repression and inequality of the familiar world (2020, p.97). In this way, queer theory also reveals the discrimination prevalent in day-to-day life, framing the queer experience as a search for escape in the Other. Tying into the idea of struggle, Sarah Ahmed's (2011) research has also proven beneficial; she identifies a variety of themes that persist throughout queer narratives, including the archetype of the 'unhappy queer' and the notion that the depiction of struggle and oppression are realities that ought to be addressed in queer media (p.160). Studies in queer theory have frequently referred to the works of two seminal authors whose work is considered foundational. One is Michel Foucault (1976) who described modern conceptions of sexuality as the result of Victorian-era repression, the normalisation of heterosexuality at the expense of any other identities. The other is Judith Butler (1990) who expanded on the idea of social pressures influencing our behaviour, theorising that all identity, including queerness, is performative. Therefore, the necessity of considering queer theory when discussing otherness in the folklore trilogy is apparent, and queer interpretations of otherness are applied to the films in Chapter 8.

Conducting research through multiple theoretical lenses, such as semiotics, post-colonialism/nationalism, and environmentalism, creates a strong outline for breaking down the texts, specifically in the context of otherness and how it pertains to identity. The result is that my research contributes to a variety of academic fields and disciplines, helping to build an understanding of how Irish mythology and folklore is rejuvenated through cinema and made relevant to a contemporary international audience.

Chapter 4: Animated Irishness

4.1.Introduction

An area of the Irish media industry that has long been overlooked by scholarship is Ireland's disproportionately large animation sector. Cartoon Saloon is a significant contributor to this industry, having been propelled to international recognition by its folklore films, but other major animation producers include Brown Bag Films, Boulder Media, and for a time Sullivan Bluth Studios. Irish animation's relationship to themes of national identity, otherness, and the reworking of myth is a complicated subject with decades of history to consider, and a thorough understanding of where Cartoon Saloon fits into this history will be integral. This chapter outlines the emergence and development of the Irish animation industry, recognising outside influences from the UK and the USA in particular, with considerations also for the impact of continental European and amateur film. The use of the Irish language is evident, even from a listing of films, providing an explicit Irish identity reference for many projects, and the influence of Sullivan Bluth Studios remains prominent up until the 1990s. The development of an Irish animation sector provides context for the emergence of Cartoon Saloon as a producer of Irish cultural material and an agent for folkloric reworking in the modern day. The aesthetics of the folklore trilogy, not only in terms of Irishness but also how these films deal with otherness, are traced back through the 20th century to the origins of Irish animation. Although identified as an Irish-based studio engaging with Irish themes, Cartoon Saloon is also a transnational enterprise, part of a global industry, and the embodiment of a "new Ireland" whose identity is grounded as much in international cooperation as it is in centuries-old regional folk tradition.

Over the past century, Ireland has enjoyed a rich and expanding live-action cinema industry, and from independence onwards, the medium of television and film has been recognised as an important component in the construction and reinforcement of a strong

national and cultural identity. The same cannot be said of any animated form of media in Ireland which, for the first half of the 20th century, remained largely unexplored by amateur and professional filmmakers alike. Consequently, studies into the history and influence of animation in Ireland remain sparse, and while some filmmakers like the Horgan Brothers did experiment with animation through the 1900s (Connolly 2005; Walsh 2018), anything resembling an animation *industry* came far later. It is this chapter's goal firstly to determine when that industry began, what shapes it initially took, and how it came about. John Gleeson, a tax partner at Saffery Champness who specialises in the film sector, has boldly claimed that the Irish animation industry is likely the largest per capita in the world (Pollock 2020), with Irish animators producing world-class work. A contextual analysis of the industry and its humble beginnings, therefore, helps in understanding Irish animation in its modern form, a sector growing rapidly by the year and achieving international recognition.

Despite its relative youth compared to giants like Disney, the history of the Irish animation industry is complex; American animator Don Bluth's impact on Irish animation is significant, throwing into question the authentic "Irishness" of the industry in its early years. Furthermore, the production of animation in Ireland has not seen a steady proliferation over the decades, rather it has undergone periods of both exciting activity and stagnation. To better compartmentalise the industry's historical development, this chapter is divided into three "eras"; first, the arrival of American artists like Don Bluth and the establishment of several animation courses, laying the groundwork for everything to come. Second, the post-Bluth period which saw talented animators fail to find much work, but also led to the emergence of a strong Irish voice in the industry, an industry no longer defined by Hollywood modes of production or style. Third, the rise of feature-length Irish animation, spearheaded by those at Kilkenny-based studio Cartoon Saloon, and the exposure of Irish animation to global audiences. This broader picture tells us that Ireland's animation industry is as much a product

of foreign influence as it is of indigenous creativity and ambition, raising broader questions about Irish cultural and national identity.

4.2. The Early Industry and Uncertain Origins

The early history of Irish animation is poorly documented with little record existing of animated productions for much of the early 20th century. James Horgan's animated experiments represent the earliest projects. An innovative photographer and newsreel filmmaker, Horgan would exhibit his work publicly and build his own cameras, as well as develop his own process of recording and printing film alongside his brother. His simplistic stop-motion animation of the Youghal Clocktower, walking about and twirling like a dancer, is described by Thomas Walsh (2018) as a kind of "trick film." Like Georges Méliès' fantastical work, this variety of early animation functioned as a kind of magician's illusion, highly experimental and seldom without a narrative (Walsh, 2018, p.138). This was in no way the beginning of an industry, rather it was animation for its own sake, a point expounded upon by director Steve Woods who, at the Galway Film Fleadh in 2002, dubbed it "pioneering" but nevertheless a false start in the history of indigenous Irish animation (Connolly, 2005, p.83). It is a useful demonstration, regardless, that pre-Bluth Irish animation was largely defined by experimentation, explored by non-professional and amateur animators and thereby unrestricted by industry standards.

From here, animation was not a priority for Irish filmmakers who preferred the live-action form. From the beginning of the century to around the 1950s, there were few if any animated works. Paul Farren bluntly defines the state of Irish animation during this period as a "desert" (2002, p.12). There was a moment during the 1940s when renowned German filmmaker and director of the first animated feature, Lotte Reiniger, produced a collection of Irish language shorts. The National Film Institute had commissioned the work, a small

number of animated fables aimed at the Irish youth (Farren, 2002, p.12; Walsh, 2018, p.141). However, Maeve Connolly (2005) critically highlights that the shorts seem to have simply been purchased from the Canadian Film Board and dubbed in Irish – yet another false start. The 1950s, however, marked a gradual turning point, slow at first, with the 1956 Bord Fáilte animated short, *Beau Geste*, taking on a humorous tone and encouraging tourists to visit the island. Closely following this, the 1958 short *Tá na Báid*, produced by George Morrison, incorporated experimental animated elements. Walsh parallels the burdening animation of this time to the rapidly transforming Irish cultural and technological landscape, animation as a kind of by-product of modernisation. From here, Walsh claims, animation slowly became a more obvious way of depicting Irishness; given the ambiguity and liminality at the centre of Irish identity, an art form like animation that excels in depicting hybrid forms and instability is ideal (Walsh, 2018, p.135-136). Indeed, from this point forward, Irish animated works only became more frequent and, with the establishment of RTÉ in 1966, opportunities for budding animators gradually expanded.

Moving forwards from the 1970s, something that can truly be defined as an industry starts to take shape. Figures like Aidan Hickey, Tim Booth, and Steve Woods, pioneers in indigenous animation, would push the medium further (Burke, 2009, p.187; Farren, 2002) and Woods in particular would establish Animu, an organisation dedicated to representing Irish animators in the wider film industry. It was at this time that, with the prevalence of television broadcasting, cultural imports from the United States and Britain increasingly revealed the potential of animation, from feature-length cinema to children's television productions. While the widespread exposure to these external cultural products could be interpreted as a threat, upending indigenous artistic identity and style, Walsh describes it as a largely positive process, one that in fact had the opposite effect. The exposure to new forms of media, namely animation, had the ability to "reactivate" the storytelling potential inherent in more traditional practices; the power of animation redirected to reflect local identity (Walsh, 2018, pp.141-

142). This concept is apparent in Irish animated media of the era, particularly in Jimmy Quinn's filmography. *An Baile Beag* (1975–1979), a stop-motion children's series set in an idyllic rural village, encapsulates the most romantic visions of traditional Irishness, complete with a petite corner shop, Garda station, and 'Oifig an Phoist'. Quinn Films would go on to adapt Irish history and myth to screen, brought to life through the power of stop-motion animation. *Lug na Lacha* (1980) followed the adventures of the titular magician in his many encounters with the sinister Balor the Bad, and Quinn would also contribute animated inserts to *Bosco* (1979–1987). For a time, the storytelling tradition that had thrived in the literary form had found a new home in the world of animation, however much it may have been restricted by budgetary and technical limitations.

The animation of the 1970s and 1980s existed during a period of rapidly shifting domestic circumstances; the recession of 1980–87 and the subsequent collapse in living standards only exacerbated the limitations felt by animators. Nevertheless, filmmakers like Aidan Hickey continued to experiment with the form, his *An Inside Job* (1987) overcoming the physical restraints of cut-out animation through strong dialogue and voiceover (Walsh, 2018, pp.142-143). Another notable figure of the time, illustrator Tim Booth had no formal animation training, experimenting himself with animated drawings and eventually producing *The Prisoner* (1984), one of his most noteworthy works. The 10-minute short reinterprets W.B. Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' dragging the Celtic romanticist poem into the modern era and exposing it to no small ridicule. Walsh highlights the surreal power of animation to render entirely new worlds through Booth's use of a science-fiction comic book aesthetic. Despite humorously subverting Yeats' utopianisation of rural Ireland, *The Prisoner* also utilises animation to reinforce Yeats' original message about modernity, using striking futuristic imagery to critique Ireland's rapid modernisation (Walsh 2018, pp.144-146). While innovative, even avant-garde, one thing that Irish animators of the period lacked substantially was a professional education in animated filmmaking. It was also an indigenous "industry"

that produced few commercially viable products, let alone anything that would gain international attention. From the mid-1980s on, this was going to change.

By the 1980s, Irish animation was no longer in its infancy, having slowly taken form under the guidance of indigenous filmmakers, but it could barely be described as a booming industry either. Across the Atlantic in the US, as feature-length family animation *An American Tail* (1986) was mid-way through production, director Don Bluth and his business partner, Moris Sullivan, turned their attention to Ireland. Urged on by financial difficulties, Sullivan Bluth Studios outsourced inking and paintwork to its new workforce in Dublin. It was a move made all the more likely by the Irish government's cultivation of an economic environment ideal for animation production. Tax incentives and lower wages were combined with the direct efforts of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) to attract American studios with generous grants (Burke 2009, p.187; Connolly 2005, pp.82-83; Walsh 2018, pp.133-134). Consequently, by the time of their next production, *The Land Before Time* (1989), Sullivan Bluth had entirely relocated to Ireland. Alongside Bluth, other prospective Americans included Murakami Wolf who, from the 1980s on, produced the animated *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987-1996) in an Irish-based studio. The release of these features and series, while also attracting further investment to Ireland, served to catapult Irish animation to global notoriety. In only a few years, Irish animation had gone from an indigenous and technically limited artform to a fully-fledged industry providing commercial products for international consumption. This came to be a double-edged development: on one hand, the domestic animation of prior years, defined by a distinctly Irish aesthetic, found itself uprooted by the expertise and efficiency of Hollywood-style studios. On the other hand, however, Bluth and his contemporaries brought a degree of professionalism and experience to Ireland that, in the long term, would serve to only strengthen indigenous Irish animation.

Sullivan Bluth's arrival in Ireland had initially been accompanied by an influx of American animators and artists, but as new productions began and studios settled into new

premises in Dublin, it became apparent that a domestic workforce had to be trained. Liam Burke (2009) describes in detail Bluth's efforts to develop his new Irish studio, specifically through the creation of Ireland first course in animation at Ballyfermot College (Burke 2009, p.188). The course – still active to this day and producing highly qualified animators on an annual basis – functioned essentially as a factory. Internships were offered to students by Disney and graduates often went straight to work at studios like Bluth's or Wolf's, and a new generation of Irish animators became accustomed to well-established animation methods. As Farren (2002, p.12) and Walsh (2018, p.35) both indicate however, graduates were trained mainly in American-style forms of Hollywood animation, although the emergence of a competing course in Dun Laoghaire promoted more of an experimental European-style and encouraged students to pursue arthouse animation (Burke 2009, p.188). Initially attracted to Ireland by economic initiatives, however, Don Bluth would eventually make the decision to leave Ireland for different financial reasons. Employing a strategy that involved selling rights to production companies in order to fund new projects, Sullivan Bluth gradually found their model to be detrimental in the long-term (Farren, 2002, p.12). It was a revelation that would result in the studio ultimately leaving, taking with them many of their most skilled artists. For a period of almost a decade, Ireland's animation industry had exploded into life, fuelled by professionals who carried with them the commercial astuteness and industrial efficiency of the American animation sector. From the mid-1990s onwards, that crutch had been snatched away, leaving a diverse and highly trained animation industry to pick up the pieces and learn to define itself. Many of these animators subsequently retrained in new media production at Arthouse Multimedia Centre for the Arts on government-funded training programmes.

4.3. The Post-Bluth Industry and New Identities

The withdrawal of American animation companies throughout the 1990s, Sullivan Bluth's exit among the most impactful, along with the mass downsizing of American-associated studios, suddenly left a labour force of highly skilled animators without clear direction. An industry that had sprung up from humble beginnings in a matter of only a few years was now facing a decline, but this was not to last. This did in fact represent an opportunity for some filmmakers, a chance to redefine the national animation landscape. Energised by the ongoing output of world-class courses in Ballyfermot and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, new and indigenous companies like Magma, Monster and Terraglyph came onto the scene (Connolly 2005, p.83). This coincided with the rise of an increasing entrepreneurial culture, invigorated by a booming Celtic Tiger economy. It was a culture of independent artistry that, as Connolly points out, saw the growth of a thriving animation community, initiatives like the Irish Animation Festival allow animators to promote their work and draw attention to the industry. So too was the industry learning to advocate for itself with Steve Woods and Cathal Gaffney, among others, using platforms like Animu to lobby for animation financing schemes. Eventually, in 1995, the Irish Film Board agreed to establish Frameworks, a program that assisted in funding animated shorts (Burke 2009, p.188; Connolly 2005, p.84). The IFB would also go on to fund one-off projects, allowing for a truly indigenous voice in Irish animation to take shape in the form of a professionally educated workforce and financially viable industry.

One notable animated work, partially funded through the IFB's initiatives, was Steve Woods' *Ireland 1848* (1997), animated using photographic stills and edited to imitate early cinema. In a mockumentary style, the film claims to depict footage of the Irish populace in the grip of the Potato Famine and reflects the fact that an experimental vision was still alive in the post-Bluth industry. Connolly argues that strong themes of memory resonate throughout the work, comparing it to other avant-garde animations (Connolly 2005, p.85), but it also reflects

a larger trend in the animation of this period. The immediate post-Bluth period was in a sense marked by a post-colonial endeavour to create and promote a clear Irish identity. One that eschewed not just the Hollywood modes of animation and storytelling that had seen such prominence in prior years, but also rejected past romantic visions of Irishness, presenting a clearer and more complex understanding of Ireland's history. Walsh sees the post-colonial status of Ireland as a topic that reverberates throughout Irish film; no longer was the past used to imagine an edenic and traditional Irishness, instead it would be navigated carefully and reworked to discuss contemporary social issues (Walsh, 2018, p.144). Reaching back into historical events, modern Ireland could better be articulated, a process that allowed Irish animators to define and better grasp what it meant to be Irish in a post-colonial sense.

Advertisements and short films continued to dominate the sector of animation as the 20th century drew to a close, and not only did they come to define domestic Irish animation, they began to also represent the country on the international level. Just as the 1970s and 1980s had seen British and American animation become a part of everyday Irish media consumption, Ireland's indigenous animation was now travelling overseas. In 2002 alone, *Fifty Percent Grey* (2001), directed by Ruairí Robinson, and *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2001), directed by Cathal Gaffney, were nominated for the Academy Awards, representing Ireland in the 'Animated Short Film' category. Studio titans like Pixar naturally proved to remain dominant as *For the Birds* (2000) took home the award, but the publicity alone was priceless. As Burke notes, director Robinson received notoriety for his work and went on to direct the anime adaptation of *Akira* (2011), while *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* became a household name domestically, getting released as a DVD anthology (Burke 2009, p.188). It was becoming evident that animation, carving out a niche for itself in the wider film industry, was highly effective at exploring and articulating Irish identity. It was perhaps inevitable that the Irish Film Board, taking notice, would adapt to promote Irish animation on a global level. Recognising the cultural and financial potential of the sector, the industry moved towards

producing “market-responsive” graduates who could compete with the very best in commercial animation (Walsh 2011, p.93). From this new generation of students at Ballyfermot College emerged directors, producers, and artists that would further push the industry’s boundaries like never before.

With Ireland’s integration into the European Union on an economic and political level, and deepening ties with the continent leading to a looser understanding of national boundaries, this period saw greater cross-collaboration between Irish and European filmmakers. This was partly out of economic necessity as the relatively small Irish market limited the funding and profit potential of native production companies; as Caitriona Noonan (2024) points out, this also shaped the way that funding bodies like the IFB (later called Screen Ireland) approached investment in the industry, prioritising above all the funding of productions that harboured market potential. One example she gives is Screen Ireland’s increasing interest in funding horror films, or “dark folklore”; the traditionally lower production budgets associated with horror cinema provide a chance for relatively new filmmakers to make a healthy profit and demonstrate success (p.26). Noonan highlights how, starting in the early nineties and leading to today, Screen Ireland’s funding strategy has been to identify and promote Irish talent rather than develop a distinctly Irish cinematic identity (p.27). The market potential of such talent across Europe and the world was a driving factor in this decision, and the strategic support provided to the animation/VFX sector positioned Ireland to achieve a greater economic advantage overseas. For Irish animators, it was no longer enough to be an artist, they had to be entrepreneurial.

The production of feature-length Irish animation had, until the late 2000’s, reached its peak during Bluth’s time in Ireland. The time, resources, and manpower required to fulfil such projects, let alone see them garner international and commercial success, meant that the post-Bluth era mostly saw short, concise animations in production. The few features that were produced, such as the work of Magma Films, appealed to the broadest possible audience. *Niko*

& the Way to the Stars (2008), an Irish co-production, necessitated considerable investment for its computer animation and, as Burke points out, this in turn necessitated that its target demographic be as wide as possible. The animation was released as a family adventure film, echoing the work of Disney or DreamWorks with its light-hearted script and anthropomorphic animals (Burke 2009, pp.189-190), but nothing about its narrative or style speaks to a distinctly Irish identity. In an international market defined primarily by American and British styles, to pursue a distinctly Irish style would be a risk. This turn in indigenous animation reflected the long shadow that Hollywood has historically cast upon Irish film funding policy and frameworks, necessitating productions that can reach as broad an audience as possible (Noonan 2024, p.24). However, one studio consisting entirely of Ballyfermot graduates would endeavour to take that risk and release a markedly Irish animated feature the very next year. Established in 1999 by Paul Young, Nora Twomey, and Tomm Moore, Kilkenny-based Cartoon Saloon, like the pioneering animators before them, would reveal new possibilities contained within the animated form. Up until 2009, the studio had slowly created a name for itself producing children's media such as *Skunk Fu!* (2007-2008) which aired on British as well as Irish television screens and would be translated into several languages (Barrett 2020). Another key animation of theirs, *Celtic Maidens* (2003), directed by Twomey, overtly drew its inspiration from Irish culture and poked fun at the concept of beauty contests like the Rose of Tralee (Connolly 2005, p.91). It was in 2009 however that the studio would finally rise to national and international prominence with a story pulled straight from the pages of Irish mythology and a visual style that was indisputably native to Ireland.

4.4.The Modern Industry and Animated Irishness

Existing on the boundary between medieval and modern, indigenous, and international, Cartoon Saloon's first feature project underwent a long production process,

originally entitled *Rebel*, then *Brendan and the Book of Kells*, before finally settling on *The Secret of Kells* (2009). Despite its lengthy gestation period, the intent to create a distinctly Irish animation style using hand-drawn techniques, directly inspired by the swirling Celtic artwork of the titular Book of Kells, had always been at the heart of the project. This was not only the first instance of Irish mythology being reworked for the feature-length animated form, but it would also indicate the industry's transition into a new era in which a concern with Irish identity would be balanced with transnational cooperation. In one sense, it is a confident embrace of traditional Irish visual arts, with a hand-drawn style that imitates the reliefs of Celtic artefacts and early Christian manuscripts, what Walsh identifies as an overt attempt to capture "Irishness" (Walsh 2018, p.135). Similarly, Ciara Barrett (2020) identifies a "distinct Irish cinematic voice" in the film which, despite its strongly Catholic subject matter, manages to transcend traditional and conservative visions of Ireland (Barrett 2020, p.247), an animation for a post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. In this way, the film succeeds at capturing a strong sense of Irishness, reflecting the changing social conditions of the country through its avoidance of the historical nationalist narrative (O'Brien 2011, pp.35-36), and indeed the depiction of a multi-ethnic cast only reinforces the idea of a reinvigorated Irish cinematic identity. However, it was not only in terms of subject matter that *The Secret of Kells* exemplified a shift in Irish animation; the film's technical elements and production process could also be seen as distinctly Irish.

The decision to pursue a hand-drawn animated aesthetic immediately placed *The Secret of Kells* in a category of its own. One that, by virtue of the animated medium, put it in an ideal position to tackle questions of national and cultural identity. Without the necessity for locations or large crews, animation provides a more accessible and flexible mode of production than live-action typically does, and while live filmmaking may require the construction of sets, the worlds and characters of animated features can be sculpted into any conceivable shape. This breadth of freedom, as Maria O'Brien (2011) argues, is greatly

conducive to the depiction and deconstruction of contemporary social issues, allowing for a wider array of possibilities (O'Brien 2011, p.35). With the freedom of modern animation comes another advantage, that is the creation of a unique visual style that can become attached to the identity of the nation and its animation industry, just as anime has become synonymous with Japan. It is a concept that Barton (2019) engages with, during her interrogation of the industry in her chapter *Animating Ireland*, heralding the invention of a new national style in the wake of Cartoon Saloon's *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea* (2014). Throughout development, Cartoon Saloon also consisted entirely of Irish animators, writers, and artists, and the majority of animation work took place in Ireland (Burke 2009, p.190). In these respects, Moore, Twomey, and the wider team were not dissuaded by the idea that in order to appeal to broadest possible demographic, any strong sense of a distinct local identity had to be toned down. Some of the soundtrack, too, was provided by the Irish folk group Kíla. This did not mean, however, that foreign involvement was not a key part of production. In fact, as a transnational co-production, *The Secret of Kells* embodied another core element of modern Irishness: its global voice.

Cartoon Saloon's embrace of pan-European cooperation was the result of a decades-long process to incorporate Ireland into the wider European community and restructure its identity in the wake of neoliberalism and globalisation. The Bluth-era of the industry had undoubtedly left its mark and, while its visual style is striking, *The Secret of Kells'* narrative still falls in line with the traditional Hollywood format. O'Brien identifies a certain "hybridity" in the text, one that carefully balances its unconventional animation style with mainstream story structure and characterisation (O'Brien 2011, p.36). After decades of commercial and arthouse Irish animation cultures working largely independently of one another, Cartoon Saloon's first feature film symbolises a compromise between the two. Even the animation style cannot be called wholly "Irish"; the studio worked in tandem with teams in France, Belgium, Hungary, and even Brazil (Burke 2009, p.190; O'Brien 2011, p.34), a

result of the limited funding available in Ireland and the necessity to pursue financial backing from a multitude of sources (O'Brien 2011, p.34). Further emphasising the integral part that foreign industries played, Moore admitted in an interview that, in the pursuit of a distinctly Irish voice, he studied how other European countries had carved out their own styles of animation (Ramey 2014, p.117). Ironically, the film that proved how internationally successful an animated reworking of Irish myth could be would not have been possible without European partnership. Thus the studio was forced to walk a very fine line – Maria O'Brien (2011) highlights how the film simultaneously exploited its roots in Irish myth to attract domestic investment and explored these roots in broad enough terms so as to appeal to international audiences and distributors in "universalist terms" (p.34). The result was an animated production which represented a fluid Irish identity, appealing to overseas viewers through its casting (Brendan Gleeson is an internationally recognised Irish actor), narrative (the heroic child seeking liberation is not a tale unique to Irish myth), and language (the script contains very few instances of Hiberno-English[7] and Gaeilge is spoken rarely). Nevertheless, it received significant funding from the IFB and RTÉ, making it an excellent example of what O'Brien describes as a "cinema of compromise" (p.38), and this would set the tone for Cartoon Saloon's future work.

Cartoon Saloon's filmography may have represented a turning point in 2009, continuing to represent Ireland internationally to the present day, but the early 21st century saw a multitude of new production companies emerging. Jam Media, Boulder Media, Kavaleer, and Brown Bag Films, among many others, have all been contemporaries of Cartoon Saloon, Brown Bag in particular making a name for itself in the realm of short films and television cartoons. *Granny O'Grimm's Sleeping Beauty* (2008) for instance, is a comedic adaptation of the eponymous fairy tale in which the studio pursued a style that blended 3D and 2D computer animation. The short would receive accolades internationally with an

[7] Hiberno-English collectively describes the words, phrases, and grammar that are unique to Ireland, sometimes also called "Irishisms".

Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Short Film in 2010. It also benefitted from funding schemes provided by RTÉ, the IFB, and the Arts Council, demonstrating the expansive network of financial supports for animation that had developed by the end of the 2000s. What *Sleeping Beauty* also illustrates is the long-running tendency in Irish animation, and Irish filmmaking in general, to reference older poetic or literary material, often in order to address modern social issues. This intertextual approach, as Connolly argues, indicates a high level of literacy among Irish animators, pointing to examples like *An Bonnán Buí* (1995), based on the classic Irish-language poem, and *From an Evil Cradling* (1999) based on the book by Brian Keenan. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2002) blends its adaptation of the 14th century story of the same name with an art style that is itself an animated homage to the work of Harry Clarke, the famous Irish stained-window artist (Connolly 2005, pp.79-80). More recent examples include Brown Bag's *Angela's Christmas* (2017), based on the Frank McCourt children's story, a holiday tale set in 1910s Limerick, and the later features of Cartoon Saloon which further rework Irish mythological and folkloric material. This all serves to further exemplify the inbetweenness of animation in Ireland, at once on the fringes of technological advancement while simultaneously reaching into the past, sometimes going back centuries, in its search for inspiration.

Continuing throughout the 2010s, Irish animation as an industry would not slow in its exponential expansion, becoming a major sector of the film industry. Between 2009 and 2019, its annual production activity multiplied fourfold, reaching €180m by the end of the decade, and prominent studios would expand their workforces dramatically. One of the most striking examples is Cartoon Saloon which went from a production team of 12 in 1999 to a team of over 300 by the release of *Wolfwalkers* in 2020 (Pollock 2020). This is not only helped by the sheer quantity of highly skilled animators graduating yearly, but also by the rise of content streaming, making Irish animation more easily accessible to global viewers than ever before. *Wolfwalkers*, made available on Apple TV+ in 2020, is a recent example of this new foray

into digital distribution. Like its predecessor, *Wolfwalkers* walks a line between seeking international recognition while remaining grounded in a distinctly Irish identity. As another transnational animated production, one that explores decidedly Irish myths and themes, it highlights the continuous tension that exists between national and international commitments.

As is standard for Cartoon Saloon, various companies and artists from across Europe collaborated with the Irish-based studio, notably the Luxembourg-based Melusine Productions, French composer Bruno Coulais, Norwegian singer-songwriter Aurora Aksnes, and various British actors. The production's roots in several regions allowed for wider access to funding initiatives, and the film benefited from investment by the Luxembourg Film Fund, Screen Ireland, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), and the Novelle Aquitaine Fund from France. Creative Europe's 2014-2020 MEDIA Programme, designed to finance the development and distribution of audiovisual projects across the continent, supported 22 Irish companies during its lifetime, including Cartoon Saloon in 2014 and 2018 (Creative Europe 2024). The studio's production methodology and custom software have also benefited from funding schema in the past, notably an R&D grant from Enterprise Ireland which assisted in the creation of a streamlined development pipeline. The output of this was a more efficient production model, customised software to accommodate the studio's specific requirements, and later on an experimental VR experience inspired by *Song of the Sea* (Enterprise Ireland 2018). This reveals the double-sided consequence of receiving large grants from state and private organisations; funding schema have helped Cartoon Saloon expand its reach into new areas and experiment with emerging technologies, but the priorities of these funding bodies have shaped the studio as a result. The origin of funding will inevitably have a sizeable impact on what projects are pursued and by what means, giving outside organisations financial leverage over the direction that the studio takes. This can be observed in schema provided by the BAI or Screen Ireland which frequently encourage studios to produce material that resonates with indigenous heritage or is filmed in Ireland (Screen Ireland's Nationwide

Additional Production Fund rewards filmmakers who shoot in parts of Ireland beyond a radius of 65km from Dublin, encouraging production in more remote areas of the country). This brings a new layer of complexity to Cartoon Saloon's continuous balancing act between its national and international interests, with the priorities of various funding bodies informing development at any given time. Despite this challenge, transnationalism has clearly become an integral component of Cartoon Saloon's financial model, a blend between national and European funding initiatives that supports the studio throughout the process from early development to release.

In terms of its financing and production, *Wolfwalkers* is very much an embodiment of Patrick Brodie's (2016) analysis of the Irish cinema landscape in the 21st century – a "point of reference within larger transnational aesthetic and financial networks" (p.30). Furthermore, as Brodie points out, it is becoming increasingly harder to make sense of cinema within a purely national context (p.31), and this is true of *Wolfwalkers* which, like *The Secret of Kells*, is inspired as much by standard Hollywood tropes and narrative structure as it is shaped by indigenous folklore. This international framing could not be made clearer with the pivotal relationship between the characters of the native Irish Mebh and English newcomer Robyn, the tension and conciliation between them being a major component of the plot. Indeed, Cartoon Saloon's films in more recent years have strayed entirely away from Irish inspiration and folkloric reworking, an example being *My Father's Dragon* (2022) which is based on the work of an American children's author. However, in an increasingly internationalised context, Brodie highlights one way in which Irish cinema can still maintain an identity, one characterised by the island's unique postcolonial heritage (p.93). *Wolfwalkers* certainly does this, but even then, it is an identity defined by Ireland's historical interactions with other countries, emphasising just how difficult it is for Irish filmmakers to entirely separate themselves from their "Europeanness". As a beneficiary of funding schema across Western Europe however, Cartoon Saloon shows how globalisation can be a boon to indigenous

filmmakers, and transnational collaboration has the potential to enhance, not diminish, Ireland's filmmaking and animation potential.

Regardless of the exciting possibilities, Irish animation continues to face major challenges, some of which are very new, others having plagued the industry since its conception. Filmmaker Paul Young points to streaming not only as a major boon for the animation sector, but also as a platform that demands perpetual content production, forcing some studios to prioritise quantity over the development of new and original intellectual properties (Pollock 2020). Ruth Barton points to a far older issue that continues to stress animators; the need to negotiate between the distinct requirements of international investors, audiences, and the promotion of a unique local identity. Animated media may allow for storytellers to "destabilise or question paradigms," granting Irish animators the power to capture their cultural identity and redefine it (Barton 2019, p.43), but things are not that simple when there are also commercial interests to consider. Ultimately, Barton distinguishes between global Irish animations, which tend to be financially successful, and animations that explore distinctly Irish themes which achieve critical appraisal but do not typically make a profit. It is a balance that even major animation studios continue to struggle with; all three of Cartoon Saloon's Irish folklore films, despite critical success, failed to make their money back at the box office. This presents a challenge that animators must overcome if future productions based on a distinct Irish identity are to become more commonplace.

Out of all challenges faced by Irish animation to date, there is one that reflects poorly on the film industry as a whole, and it is the persisting dominance that men hold as directors, artists, producers, and writers. Like film industries the world over, there continues to be an enormous disparity in terms of gender, with well under half of the Irish productions between 2011 and 2017 having a female protagonist. In that same period, the proportion of completed productions funded by Screen Ireland that had a female writer was 21%; this fell to 17% for films with female directors (Barrett 2020, pp.239-242). This vast disparity, Barrett argues, is a

major setback to the promotion of a strong Irish identity in cinema; allowing male voices to remain dominant presents a skewed picture of the nation, and such films are often more likely to objectify the female body and prioritise the development of male heroes (Barrett 2020, p.239). The output of the animation industry, however, provides some hope as to the future of gender parity; from its inception, director and producer Nora Twomey has played a significant role in Cartoon Saloon. Co-directing *The Secret of Kells*, and later solo-directing *The Breadwinner* (2017), she is just one example of the rapidly rising number of women in the animation sector. The latter film in particular follows the story of Parvana, a young girl in Kabul who is forced to take on a secret identity as a boy to provide for her family. The film, directed more towards adults than any of Cartoon Saloon's other works, directly tackles themes of female oppression under the harsh rule of the Taliban. Animation's ability to depict gender in an assortment of visual styles, diversifying the depiction of women, is highlighted by Barrett as a reason for why the sector is generally quite progressive. This, combined with the establishment of the Irish wing of Women in Animation in 2014, has led to female representation and ownership in animation coming close to fifty-fifty in recent years (Barrett 2020, pp.240-241). Additionally, being separate from the live-action medium, animation is less beholden to the patriarchal standards that have had decades to establish themselves in the far older live-action industry. Ultimately, Irish animation has seen rapid moves towards equality over the 2010s and into the 2020s, placing it in an advantageous position over other types of filmmaking. As the industry continues to evolve, it is on course not only to better depict Irishness but also to redefine it.

4.5. Conclusion

The story of the Irish animation industry, at its most fundamental, is one that reflects the broader postcolonial project among filmmakers to develop a contemporary Irish identity,

one that draws from the local as much as the global. This contextual analysis of Irish animation and its beginnings, whether one traces it back to the arrival of Don Bluth, the work of Hickey and Booth, or Horgan's dancing clocktower, has provided a better insight into the ground-breaking animated work of today. The Youghal animation in particular shows that, while an industry would not arise until long after Horgan's art, the experimental and often humorous character of Irish animation materialised as early as the 1900s.

The amateur nature of the pre-Bluth animation landscape, in its refusal to align with more conventional methods and subject matter, contrasted sharply with the economic gloom and social conservatism of the 1980s. While Ireland was yet to fully open up and adopt a global identity, animators gladly embraced international inspiration, drawing from British and American cultural imports to make animation their own. A breakdown of the filmographies of Steve Woods or Jimmy Quinn reveals that as the country slowly modernised, incorporating new technologies and ideas, indigenous animators stood at the very forefront of the process. At this time, another key characteristic of Irish animation became abundant – the use of literary or historical references for the purpose of comparing and ridiculing both past and present shortcomings. Tim Booth's *The Prisoner* provides a powerful glimpse into such a tradition. The rise of Hollywood modes of production that accompanied Sullivan Bluth's establishment in Dublin can be understood as a setback in some respects, disrupting the natural evolution of an indigenous albeit non-professional/amateur animation industry. A more accurate interpretation, however, points to the experience that these studios brought with them alongside sophisticated artistic techniques that infused Irish animation with the power to express itself in innovative ways. The commercialisation of Irish animation, similarly, ought not to be lamented. Without fostering such a mindset, the international success of Irish animation may not have been possible.

Moving into the modern day, the industry has grown to encompass a skilled workforce in the hundreds; from a stop-motion clocktower produced as a cheerful experiment to

animation studios that now compete against world-renowned names like Disney. Irish animation has also become a fixture of European and world television, distributed by the likes of the BBC, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network, and certainly the rise of streaming platforms has already been taken advantage of by savvy, market-conscious studios. Regardless of the accomplishments that have been made in such a dizzyingly short amount of time, the journey of animation in Ireland very much remains unfinished. It faces issues related to workplace equality, the insatiable appetite of streaming consumers, and the ongoing struggle to balance regional identity with overseas appeal. This last problem, one that has faced Irish animators from the start, has shaped the industry for decades. Foreign and indigenous elements blend, sculpting a hybridised animated identity, suggesting that the quest for an authentic, modern Irishness will always involve the intermingling of the local and international. It is a reality that is reflected in the studio make-up and production practices of Cartoon Saloon, a company that is as much inspired by indigenous heritage as it is reliant on transnational cooperation. This inevitably brings up the question of a postnationalist Irish identity, and the extent to which postnationalism can be used to interrogate Irish society and identity in the 21st century. The hybridised nature of Irish film going back decades indicates that a certain transgression of national boundaries has always been a defining quality of Irish artistry. The economic underdevelopment of the island in the early 20th century also necessitated the foreign import of skills, technology, and ideas, laying the groundwork for an animation sector that, in the present day, is as much a foreign creation as it is a domestic one.

Chapter 5: Archetypes and the Contemporary Resonance of Myth

5.1.Introduction

Old archetypes are repeatedly revisited in television, film, theatre, and literature, changing their function, and even transforming entirely as their historical, cultural, and political context changes. This chapter expands upon ideas presented in Chapter 2, principally Campbell's conception of the monomyth and archetypal characters, the hero as an individual underdoing transformation, the Other as something internal and external to the hero, and the nature of mythological reworking. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 examined these ideas more broadly and theoretically, applying them to world cinema as well as understanding them in a cross-disciplinary sense, in this chapter they are examined specifically in the context of Cartoon Saloon's outputs. This chapter aims to demonstrate how the depictions of the child hero and his/her trials align with or defy the decades-old monomyth model as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Subsequent theorists have provided new ways of understanding this model, from feminist perspectives (Alpini, 2005; Tatar, 2021; Clayton, 2011) that expand the scope of what a hero can be to more nuanced interpretations of the Other as a force for positive change and as a component of the hero themselves (Alsford, 2006; Natov, 2017). The mechanisms underpinning the reworking of folklore are broken down and evaluated as a revitalising force for national identity, cultural movements, connections to the past, and societies' hopes for the future.

The notion of universal and easily categorisable narrative types is a convenient one, but contemporary theorists point to a few issues with this approach. In Chapter 2, Clayton's concern with the westernised nature of Campbell's monomyth was discussed, along with her critique that an emphasis on universalised archetypes only disconnects myths from their local and historical context. Campbell's monomythic structure is used here as a means of understanding how the trilogy's characters relate back to their Irish mythological archetypes,

and where they stand in relation to one another. Where it is important, deviations from the monomyth are identified in this chapter, particular in the case of the trilogy's female characters who tend to be more multifaceted than the monomyth would traditionally give them credit for.

Three aspects of the monomyth will take precedence, each of which will serve as a lens through which the trilogy's structure can be understood. In the first section, I examine the relevance of the monomyth in relation to child characters, focusing on stories that demonstrate the heroism of the child, rites of initiation and the transformation of the individual, conceptualised in relation to Carl Jung's theory of individuation. Jung's influence is clear throughout Campbell's writings, and the process of the hero's journey echoes the individuation ritual's transformative purpose, a psychological journey whereby self-understanding is gradually achieved. The second section engages with concepts of otherness and inversions in these three stories, archetypal properties that are foundational to both Jung and Campbell's respective theories; confronted with the dark or otherwise rejected elements of the self, the hero must come to terms with the Other and either defeat or integrate it. Countless stories present this dichotomy between self and Other, us and them as two characters or communities in opposition to one another. The inversion covers similar territory, though it may represent the hero/self's direct counterpart, for good or for evil, and can be representative of the darker aspects of a particular archetype (i.e., the Dark Mother as opposed to the Goddess).

5.2. The Eight Archetypes

Since the conception of a theoretical collective human subconscious inhabited by dozens if not hundreds of archetypes, pioneered first in psychology and later in narrative theory, a large number of archetypal models have emerged. Breaking characters down into

sets of easily digestible types, each defined by a small set of traits and symbolic connotations, these models frequently place special focus on the hero and inherit Jung's concept of the shadow. For the purpose of applying archetype theory to the trilogy, a standard set of eight archetypes as described by Vogler (2007) will be utilised – crucially, there is no objectively accurate set of character types, and so several characters in the trilogy, if not all of them, possess the traits of multiple archetypes. Cartoon Saloon also makes frequent use of subtypes like the father (which could be described as an aspect of the shadow) and the mother (an aspect of the ally). Vogler's set has been selected because of its conciseness and applicability to Campbell's monomyth; its archetypes are the hero, shadow, mentor, herald/dispatcher, ally/helper, guardian (at the threshold), shapeshifter, and jester/trickster (see Addendum B for a detailed breakdown of these archetypes as compared against the folklore trilogy's characters).

ARCHETYPE	**CHARACTER/S**
Hero	Brendan Saoirse Robyn and Mebh
Shadow	Abbot Cellach Macha The Lord Protector
Mentor	Brother Aidan Aisling Robyn and Mebh
Herald	Brother Aidan Granny
Ally	Aisling Na Daoine Sídhe Moll

Guardian	Aisling Na Daoine Sídhe
Shapeshifter	Macha Bill Goodfellowe
Trickster	Aisling Mebh

Figure 1 – Table of Archetypes

The trilogy's heroes share much in common and can very easily be described in terms of Campbell's monomyth. A certain disconnection from their own community and a streak of rebelliousness is key to the hero's success. The hero of myth, according to Campbell, is one that suffers from a "symbolic deficiency", as does their community at large. This deficiency can only be overcome if the hero chooses to leave the mundane, explore the unknown, and return with the boon that will save their people (Campbell 1949, pp.29-30). *The Secret of Kells* explores a society that seals itself off from the world and the consequences for Brendan on a personal level – *Song of Sea* goes further, examining a world that has completely forgotten about its ancient past and moved on, while *Wolfwalkers* takes this to its logical conclusion in the form of outright conflict between the "normal" world and the otherworld.

In the three instances, there is a tension that only the hero can resolve. Their "deficiency" – manifesting as a lack of purpose or direction, a recent loss, a life filled with hardship – is intertwined with the inner conflict of their community; this is the opinion of Campbell, but Donald Palumbo (2014) also reflects on this crucial connection between the macrocosmic and microcosmic. Using *Star Wars* (1987) as a case study for his exploration of the monomyth – a film that so closely follows Campbell's formula that it could be seen as the monomyth itself put to screen – he highlights the authoritarianism of the Empire's galaxy as directly reflective of Luke's own feelings of entrapment on Tatooine (pp.22-23). This perspective is a useful way of understanding Cartoon Saloon's heroes and heroines: when we first encounter Brendan, he is giving chase to a goose that escaped the monks, and we see him

in his element. Running, leaping, and diving across town, he is young, naïve, and playful, single-minded in his determination to catch the bird and retrieve its precious feathers for writing and illumination. His beaming smile and carefree persona is infectious, and some of the adults join in on the chase (00:02:25); a monastery is the last place one would expect this excitement, but Brendan's presence in Kells clearly breathes life into the abbey in a way that only a child could. His exhilaration turns to calmness as he finally catches the goose, and gently he reassures the animal and plucks a single feather. In an instant we realise that this is the hero of our story, determined and unafraid of a challenge, but equally empathetic and easy-going. The moment is short-lived; no sooner does Brendan finally win the chase than the mood shifts with the arrival of his uncle, Abbot Cellach, and the illusion is broken (00:05:12). Brendan's fun and games, however much joy they may bring to the monks, are seen by the abbot as nothing but a distraction from building Kells' walls, a task vital to the settlement's defence. Looming over the congregation with a stern expression, Cellach is everything Brendan is not – cold, expressing only the least bit of emotion, and while the boy lives in youthful innocence, the abbot lives in constant fear. Brendan is hardly given a chance to explain himself, and the abbot dismisses him by changing the subject: "Brendan, where are those plans I asked for?" The childishness that defines Brendan's character is out of place here, and by the end of the first scene, we understand the heroic challenge that the protagonist faces. He desires liberation in a community that values conformity and obedience; he wants to enjoy his carefree childhood in an abbey where is expected to act like an adult. He is an Other within his own world.

Vanessa Crosby (2005) and Roni Natov (2017) both agree that the hero can be called 'Other'. In Mike Alsford's (2006) writings on the universal qualities of the hero, he points to superheroes as the best such example. With their inherent and fantastic talents, superheroes can transcend the boundaries of the familiar, a protective force for a community that may not fully accept them. Alsford concludes that the hero is a paradoxical figure, risking everything

to protect a status quo that nevertheless treats them as an outsider, an anomaly (pp.33-35). Ultimately, the hero is a symbol of reconciliation with the Other and of redemption (Campbell 1949, pp.30-31), serving not only to right the wrongs inflicted upon their people, but to also address the contradictions within themselves. In the process, the hero faces challenges both within and without their community. Imprisonment is a common theme throughout the trilogy, and all of its major heroes/heroines face it at some point. Robyn is enclosed within the walls of Kilkenny, forced to pursue her role as a scullery maid where she is viewed as nothing more than a dispensable servant, a part of a larger machine that was not designed to serve girls like her. Saoirse and Ben are confined to their grandmother's dull and dreary city home, expected to learn proper etiquette and behave like responsible, mature children. At the soonest opportunity, the pair escape onto the streets, looking for a way home. Brendan, after a series of arguments with his uncle over the completion of the Book of Iona, a task he becomes obsessive over, is locked up in a cellar and left by himself. Seeing Brother Aidan, a newcomer who inspired Brendan to rebel, as a threat to his authority, Cellach demands Aidan leave Kells after the winter. Cellach will trust Brendan with freedom once "there is nothing left here to distract him." (00:44:23) Brendan and Aidan's rebellious creativity, their intrinsic otherness, frightens Cellach almost as much as the oncoming Northmen.

As Campbell and others writing about the monomyth's archetypes have argued, the hero will achieve nothing without initial encouragement. Vital to Brendan's success as a hero is his education by the kindly Brother Aidan, a monk who has travelled far to seek refuge in Kells and brings with him an exquisitely detailed manuscript. The mentor archetype is an embodiment of the hero's destiny, a reassuring tutor (Campbell 1949, p.59), and William Indick (2004) compares the mentor to the Jungian archetype of the wise old man, offering the hero knowledge about themselves that will help them confront their darker aspects (Indick 2004, pp.49-51). This inner journey, called 'individuation' by Jung, is a process whereby the hero incorporates the shadow, or even becomes it, thus achieving internal wholeness (Jung

1924, p.470). The function of the mentor, therefore, is to realise the full potential contained in the hero, to help them come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses, then to finally step aside to allow the hero to carve their own path. The trilogy treats the mentor as a highly flexible figure, one that can take many forms throughout the hero's adventure. Robyn and Mebh function as each other's mentors in *Wolfwalkers*, exchanging knowledge about their worlds and bringing out the best in each other. Similarly, Brendan benefits from the wisdom of two mentors, Aidan the illuminator and Aisling the forest spirit. The former arrives as a kind of Herald to mark the beginning of the hero's journey, introducing Brendan to the book that will soon become his fixation, and provides a powerful outlet through which Brendan can express his wild curiosity and creativity. Previously a rebel without much of a cause, Aidan provides Brendan with something to fight for in a community that is quickly losing the art of illumination. One of the final sequences of the film, a montage showing Brendan's growth as an illuminator throughout his childhood and into adulthood, see him accompanied by Aidan every step of the way. When the time comes for Aidan to finally pass on, Brendan is prepared to take his place as a master illuminator, a preacher, and a mentor to future generations.

The second major mentor of *The Secret of Kells*, a far more elusive figure, is a childish forest spirit who transgresses the boundaries between many archetypes. As mentor to Brendan, she serves a vastly different purpose than Aidan – while the old monk from Iona works in the scriptorium, providing philosophical and artistic lessons for the young hero, Aisling is the very embodiment of the untameable forest, and there Brendan learns about the inner workings of nature and the magic it contains. Neither Aidan nor Aisling could complete the book of Iona alone as they only possess half of the story, and neither mentor can enter each other's domains. Aidan requires the help of Brendan retrieving materials from the woods, and Aisling cannot enter the tower of Kells itself, requiring Pangur Bán to do so for her, reiterated by the lyrics in the soundtrack and the line 'You must go where I cannot' (00:46:27). Brendan stands at the intersection between both worlds and benefits from both

perspectives – a reconciliation of the two worlds – making him the only one capable enough to illuminate the sacred chi-rho page.[8] Aisling provides a different kind of guidance than Aidan in that, unlike the Christian brother's structured lessons, Aisling and Brendan explore the forest at their own pace, the lesson developing organically like the forest itself. Aisling's mentorship is less about knowledge and more about developing Brendan's intuitive understanding of the natural world. Aidan teaches Brendan discipline in creating beautiful works of Celtic art, while Aisling encourages him to embrace his wilder instincts. The challenge, and gift, that Brendan faces as a hero is knowing how best to balance these lessons, finding peace within himself in the process. What makes him special is his capacity to hear the whispers of the ethereal forest and translate them into written words and eye-catching illustrations for the benefit of others.

Aisling is special not only for the unique knowledge she can provide as mentor but also for how she takes on various archetypal roles. While faithful to Campbell's monomyth structure in some regards, the trilogy frequently allows characters to fill multiple roles in the hero's journey, often undergoing their own transformations and evolving from one character type to another. Tricksters like Aisling and Mebh play games with the hero, serving as their allies while simultaneously challenging their boundaries and testing their patience. Though Robyn is a well-rounded character with some understanding of basic etiquette, Mebh has had barely any human interactions throughout her life and proves to be as unpredictable as a wild wolf. As a heroine herself, she pushes the very limits of archetype theory to breaking point; facing imprisonment by the Lord Protector and failing to rescue her mother Moll from captivity, Mebh lashes out violently at the assembled crowd in Kilkenny and threatens revenge on them all (01:12:17). It is a far cry from how we have seen her behave in the forest and it shows the hybridised nature of her character – an underdeveloped young girl, she can switch quickly from jovial ally to vicious trickster in no time, from heroine to antiheroine.

[8] The Chi-Rho page of the Book of Kells is an intricately detailed depiction of the biblical Evangelists, angels, and animals. It makes use of elaborate spirals, interlocking swirls, and other Celtic imagery.

The role of trickster or jester shares similarities with another unpredictable figure, the shapeshifter, an archetype that can undergo its own metamorphosis alongside the hero, and even become a hero of their own. Transformations are numerous throughout the folklore trilogy, and shapeshifters are in abundance, but two key examples are the owl-witch Macha in *Song of the Sea* and Robyn's father, Bill, in *Wolfwalkers*. In Macha's case, the fluidity of her form, resembling both an elderly woman and an owl, mirrors her moral complexity and eventual reformation. Her plan to seal the *sídhes'* emotions away has a twisted sort of kindness to it, challenging the heroes, Ben and Saoirse, to question their own perception of things and consider giving in. Ben reluctantly refuses the offer to have his emotions captured and contained, igniting a rage in the elderly woman which eventually subsides when she is forced to face her own troubled emotions and come to terms with them. The owl-witch's journey from villain to ally is as a direct result of the hero's ability to restore hope and reconcile opposites, opening the door to redemption for all characters. It is a change that proves vital as well, as Macha helps the children return home, making the shapeshifter integral to this particular story. The shapeshifter proves equally important in Bill Goodfellowe's case; he is a domineering father who once helped the Lord Protector keep Robyn in line but, when he is faced with the possibility of losing his daughter forever, he is forced into metaphysical transformation mirroring a change in his attitude and outlook. With the division between father and daughter widening, his transformation from antagonist to ally is punctuated by his physical change from man to beast. Becoming a wolfwalker, the very thing he was tasked with killing, his role as shapeshifter proves vital for the heroines' ultimate victory. It is Bill who makes the killing blow against the Lord Protector, confirming his transformation from villain into a hero of his own. The recurring prominence of the shapeshifter throughout the trilogy, explored later in this chapter with the father archetype, indicates that change and redemption are central to these films and their examination of otherness. The privilege of individuation is not unique to the hero; in Cartoon Saloon's

worlds, every archetype is a kind of shapeshifter and the boundaries between archetypes are always unstable.

5.3. Initiations, Individuations, and the Child Hero

Cartoon Saloon's heroes take a specific form throughout the folklore trilogy. The child hero, an outsider in their own community who does not fully understand the system they live under, and by virtue of this has the power to transcend it, is central to all three films. As a studio which consistently targets young audiences, bringing Irish myth and folklore to new generations, their focus on the adolescent hero first and foremost allows children to connect and sympathise with their journey. The child hero is also well suited to exploring the complex dynamics between old and new Ireland, between a distant otherworld and a familiar mundanity. This is by virtue of the child's lack of maturity and innocence, not fully absorbed into the culture that surrounds them yet and still prone to rebellious curiosity. The child hero's journey, tied to their development as a person and the achievement of knowledge that is beyond even an adult's grasp, is also defined in part by the child's reconciliation with an otherness that the adults around them refuse to accept. Crosby describes childhood in fiction as deeply symbolic of "paradisal innocence", a spiritual experience that is lost as adulthood approaches and that adults yearn for. The child archetype then, as a kind of othered hero possessing a deeper spiritual understanding of the world, is the only one who can traverse the boundaries between worlds. Crosby points to C.S. Lewis' depiction of Narnia, a wondrous realm only accessible to four children, as a good example (Crosby, 2005). Brendan's journey into the forest could only have been undertaken by him, the heroic youth who still has some grasp of the world beyond the walls, a unique connection that Abbot Cellach clearly lost touch with long ago. In the trilogy at large, childhood is not only symbolic of innocence, but it also represents an earlier stage in history where people were more in touch with the natural

world. Natov similarly argues that qualities such as bravery and defiance are a "child power", along with an unrelenting disobedience of authority. Narratives featuring child-heroes are a good way of exploring themes of subversion and reconciliation (Natov 2017). Indeed, Brendan, Saoirse, Robyn, and Mebh's rebellious attitudes are only solidified as their stories go on, consistently rejecting their superior's commands for the sake of undergoing heroic initiation.

Brendan, Saoirse, Robyn, and Mebh all share a striking resemblance to each other. Visually, their common characteristics include a large head and big eyes, a common way of depicting youth in animation which dates all the way back to Disney's early work, and child-like features can also inspire affection in audiences (Forgacs, 1992, pp.364-365), more easily creating a connection between the viewer and protagonist. All four protagonists also consist of simple shapes, granting a greater recognisability and memorability to their designs, and making it easier for children to replicate the characters in their own art. On a deeper level, all four face challenges in connecting with their parents/guardians and their people, feeling 'other' in some way. All of them find solace in a magical world, completely separated from the oppressive mundanity of everyday life. It is also true that all four begin at an immature or underdeveloped stage and, as their journey progresses, they transform (sometimes literally) to become wiser than the adults around them. This wisdom rescues not only the magical otherworld, but also serves to enrich the mundane and resolve the child hero's inner and familial conflicts. In the context of heroines, Tatar recognises a thirst for knowledge, a transgressive curiosity, and a prying nature to be significant components of the rebellious woman hero, highlighting how, despite living in a world which so often celebrates curious thinking, we are often discouraged from it if it leads us to disruptive conclusions (2021, pp.153-154). We find that across the folklore trilogy, the most curious characters are also typically our protagonists, their insatiable drive to explore and question the world they live in

incurring the ire of parental or authoritative figures. Curiosity appears to be a major defining trait of the hero in these films.

The folklore trilogy follows in the footsteps of Studio Ghibli's animated folklore reworkings, including *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Spirited Away* (2001), and *Ponyo* (2008), all directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Ghibli's films often fixate on child heroism in the context of the supernatural and mythological. These traits and behaviours are reflective of Alsford's description of the hero as Other, and Brendan exemplifies much of what Alsford describes; though he is not at all a Superman figure, he risks his own wellbeing for the protection and betterment of others, even if the community he lives in does not accommodate his childish ways. He is the only hope for Kells and yet he is separate from it at the same time – he must venture beyond Kells and into the forest that he fears to save himself and his people. His constant clashes with Cellach create a tension that is not fully resolved until the very final scene (01:10:11), and unlike the monks he has befriended, Brendan is full of questions about the world. Robyn similarly clashes with her own father, defined by a childish curiosity and sense of adventure that places her in a uniquely heroic and transgressive position. These characters exemplify the central tenet of the child hero – the hero as a rebel.

The hero's journey in particular separates the hero from other characters in the films. Their communities are often represented as conservative and unchanging, sometimes explicitly resisting transformation. In contrast, the hero defies the norm and undergoes a prolonged, often painful, series of trials that lead to change. For Brendan, his community has purposefully isolated itself behind walls, and apart from his mentor Aidan, he is the only one who shows an interest in the forest beyond. We are initially encouraged to fear the woods as much as he does – foreboding music, shadowy undergrowth, and gnashing wolves creating a picture of a place that is as mysterious as it is uninviting. From the start, the forest is unknown, very clearly the realm of the "Other", and carrying a part of the Other within himself, Brendan is instinctively drawn to it. On the boy's journey, the forest is a place which

he returns to many times, exploring it with Aisling and developing his confidence. This playground of colour, the plants curling into spirals reminiscent of Celtic symbols of life, can be thought of as an external representation of Brendan's creativity, imagination, and youthfulness. Far from being a place of death as we are initially led to believe, it is a place of opportunity, of spiritual learning, of inner and external exploration, and a world in which the creative, rebellious Other is actively embraced and celebrated. This is a stark separation from the drab, dark walls of Kells, an isolated abbey that represents everything pulling Brendan down. Below, note the stark visual differences between the forest and the abbey, one vibrant with lush greens, yellows, and reds, the other monotone with sharp pale light and dark blues. The forest's sprawling roots and branches intermingle smoothly to create intricate patterns, implying that these symbols are inherent to nature itself. In the dark tower, crude and jagged signs are etched into the walls; the harmony of the forest is absent here, instead symbols jostle for space on the crowded walls, violently stabbing into each other.

Figure 2 – Brendan explores the forest (00:26:27)

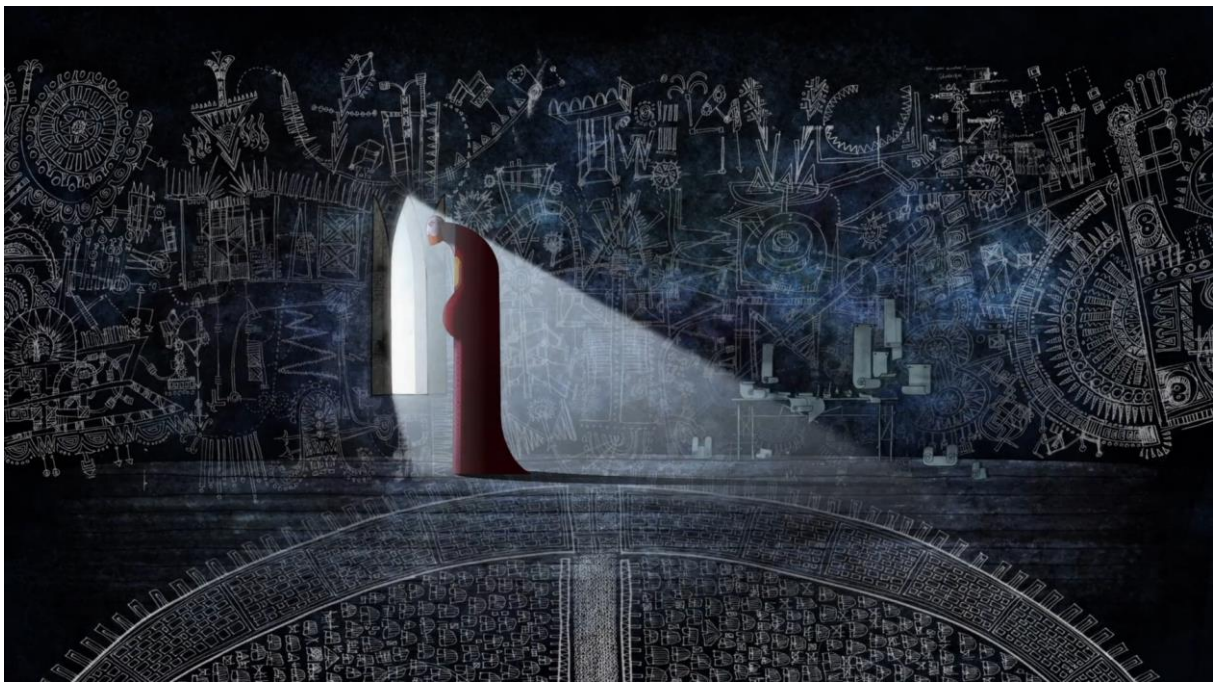

Figure 3 – Cellach alone in his dark tower (00:09:40)

Song of the Sea similarly juxtaposes the known and the unknown in the form of the human and natural worlds, and the boundary between the two can only be traversed by its child heroes. Within the context of the film, Ben and Saoirse's heroic roles take on profound significance, reflecting both the hero's departure from the ordinary world (a process that begins when the children are ripped from their home by Granny, but only garners a supernatural significance when they encounter na Daoine Sídhe[9]) and their transformative return with newfound wisdom and power (symbolised by Macha's conversion and the children's flight back to their lighthouse home). The children's society, as portrayed in the film, is detached from its ancestral myths and narratives, gradually upending the natural order and desecrating it with the discarded waste of modern industry. The forest which the children venture into is littered with garbage, and the adults they encounter seem disinterested or unaware of the magic around them; their father rejects this world altogether, locking the children's mother's sealskin coat away in a chest (00:15:30) and later throwing it into the sea (00:20:50). This social and internal separation from nature resonates with the frozen state of the otherworld itself which is systematically being turned to stone by the goddess Macha and

[9] Literally meaning "fairy people", they represent the first otherworldly encounter the children have together, and this marks Ben and Saoirse's complete transition out of the familiar world.

her owls. In the face of this dual-crisis, Saoirse represents a new hope, simultaneously connected to the two worlds but nevertheless a stranger in both. Her muteness sets her apart from people, creating friction within her own family, but also hinting her status as a bridge between the mundane and the magical. Just as the hero often grapples their own distinctiveness, as seen in Brendan's story, Saoirse's monomythical journey is defined by her discovery of, and eventual integration with, her extraordinary heritage. Saoirse's connection to the formless sea and to water, a recurring motif throughout *Song of the Sea*, further cements her function as a child heroine who transcends societal confines and collapses rigid boundaries.

The final film in the trilogy takes a great deal of inspiration from its predecessors and follows the struggle of two child heroes as their worlds gradually, violently collide. *Wolfwalkers* depicts a colonial community which only ever interacts with the nearby forest when woodcutters go out to destroy it or when wolf hunters cull its inhabitants. *Wolfwalkers* draws from local folklore in its depiction of half-human, half-wolf protagonists, and its confrontation with colonial expansion is one uniquely inspired by historic Anglo-Irish conflict. Robyn and Mebh's friendship does not just represent a reconciliation between familiarity and otherness, it is a revolutionary message about intercultural acceptance during a time of colonial domination. These ideas have the potential to be missed or downplayed if these narratives and characters are treated as mere manifestations of larger universal archetypes. In using the monomyth as a theoretical lens for understanding the trilogy, it is important to balance this with the unique cultural background of the films and their inspirations. Otherwise, the distinct local resonance of these stories and their conflicts can be missed.

At the heart of the three films, the hero's journey represents a rebirth for the protagonists and their communities, a gradual transformation from ignorance to realisation. Along the way, allies support the hero with encouragement and special gifts, challengers

attempt to throw the hero off course, and the hero themselves must struggle with their innermost fears and desires. While Brendan's quest may be one to complete the Book of Kells and restore hope for humanity, it is equally one of personal fulfilment. In *Song of the Sea*, the individual's quest is inextricably linked to members of the wider family unit, while *Wolfwalkers* presents an existential crisis for a whole society/species, reflecting contemporary concerns of the Anthropocene.

5.4. Others, Inversions, and the Otherworld(s)

Fundamental to the inner and external conflicts of the hero, and thematically foundational to the monomyth, is the differentiation between a familiar 'mundane world' and an unfamiliar 'other world'. Manifesting either as a supernatural place, a mysterious figure, or a foreign society, the Other is difficult to confine to a single archetype. It can be a threat to the hero's way of life, an opposing and destructive yin to the protagonist's yang. Otherwise, it may be a suppressed element of the hero or their community, a darker aspect of the hero that must be confronted, accepted, and incorporated or overcome. The Other can function as both simultaneously, thereby making it difficult to draw the line between these archetypes. This also means that the Other is at once an internal/personal and external/otherworldly threat, further complicating its definition. As detailed in Chapter 2, Said (1978) approaches otherness as a concept without a rational basis, an invention of a dominant culture seeking to reinforce its own identity by distancing itself from a foreign and supposedly subordinate group. This Other may be affiliated with weakness, irrationality, violence, and inferiority, and what is key is the assumption that this familiar/other boundary is perceived as entirely natural (Said 1978, pp.65-67). The Other is separate, opposite, and allegedly irreconcilable.

The vilification of or distant fascination with the Other is reinforced strongly by media, and the industry of filmmaking, specifically the Hollywood model, is an example of

this (Colón and Gelado 2015). The portrayal of the Other in ways that reinforce stereotypes, de-individualise members of certain communities, and encourage a sense of superiority can easily infiltrate culture and affect the way that millions see the world. Even positive portrayals of otherness can be harmful; the depiction of an innocent and primitive Other, far from civilisation and living in a more "natural state", can lead to the idolisation of the Other as a free individual in touch with long lost wisdom, a "noble savage" (Kroflič, 2007). In terms of Campbell's 'hero's journey', positive portrayals of the Other might include the supernatural mother who assists the hero in her capacity as an ally, and the otherworld itself may function to strengthen the hero and allow them to explore repressed aspects of themselves. The Other could be an invading force (such as *The Secret of Kells*' Northmen), a supernatural destroyer or oppressor (*Song of the Sea*'s Macha), or an outright inversion of the hero (in *Wolfwalkers*, Robyn and Mebh function as each other's foils and mentors).

The Secret of Kells balances its depictions of otherness between those Others that are threatening and those that are constructive and friendly, portraying the forest spirit Aisling as a *sídhe* in touch with something beyond the monks' understanding. At the same time, she avoids some of the most clichéd elements of the supernatural nature goddess, becoming a kind of protagonist herself and, while supporting Brendan, nevertheless remaining independent of him throughout the narrative. By the end, there is no sense that one side has "won" over the other, and the two heroes solemnly part ways. The otherness of the forest in the film is complex, it is as beautiful as it is threatening, and Brendan must learn to master this otherworld by facing the Other in all its forms. The relationship between Kells and the forest is reminiscent of Said's description of othering. Abbot Cellach offers nothing but warnings about the world outside the walls, highlighting its dangers and encouraging Brendan to avoid it. The forest, as far as Brendan is aware, is a disorderly, vicious, unholy place that holds nothing of value. The only thing separating Kells from destruction, and the only thing protecting civilisation, is the wall that Cellach obsesses over. When Brendan's obsession with

the Other manifests, the boy is scorned. Even characters living in Kells that may be described as Other from a racial perspective, such as Brothers Tang or Leonardo, still work towards a common goal. The monks of Kells, however diverse they are racially or ethnically, accept a status quo and do not rebel as Brendan does. It is Brendan's exploration and acceptance of the world beyond the walls that truly makes him stand out from the rest and transforms him into the archetypal hero. In this way, the hero's connections to and conflict with the Other is what defines him as heroic.

Cartoon Saloon's depictions of the Other frequently lean on the conflict between human civilisation and the untamed wilderness. In these cases, the Other is a location, another place far away that little to nothing is known about. Places of natural beauty recurrently take on the characteristic of otherness in the trilogy, home to all kinds of unfamiliar things; the rejected, the feared, and the unknown. In Campbell's monomyth, a threshold must be overcome so as to enter this place, and in all three films, this boundary is distinctly between a civilised society and an unconquered nature. *The Secret of Kells* and *Wolfwalkers* explore this in the form of the forest, a tangled place where order gives way to disorder and roots, trees, and streams make it difficult to traverse (00:25:50). *Song of the Sea* does feature rural and woodland scenes, and a subtle magic exists in these places, but it relies far more heavily on the ocean and the island as isolated places of otherness. The cavern also functions as an abode to otherness; Crom's layer is hidden deep within a sheltered ruin, the esoteric Great Seanchaí wiles away his days in a watery cave, and Mebh's wolf clan hide deep behind a waterfall. Clear comparisons can be drawn between all these places and the Celtic conception of an ethereal otherworld, and in their essay entitled *Mythologising Ireland* (2011), Kennon and Ní Bhroin define this mythological location as a supernatural realm often depicted as an island, as a place beneath the sea, or as a world far below the surface. These places host an overabundance of food and, just as Campbell warns, it can be difficult for the hero to leave once they have arrived (Kennon and Ní Bhroin 2011, p.12). The heroic Oisín is perhaps Irish

myth's most prominent example of this; the son of Fionn, he ventures far across the ocean alongside the beautiful Niamh and is so overcome by the otherworld's (Tír na nÓg's) beauty that he forgets himself, not leaving for hundreds of years.

The tale of Oisín suggests to us that, apart from being physically disconnected from the world of mortals, Tír na nÓg or the otherworld also exists in another time, or out of time entirely. While living out his marriage to Niamh in that paradise, he does not age at all, and generations pass without him noticing. Apart from its spatial separation from the familiar world, there is the sense throughout the folklore trilogy that these mysterious otherworlds exist beyond time. The Other is heavily associated with spaces that represent the past in these films; na Daoine Sídhe reside deep inside a cairn where ancient architecture and modern amenities blend together erratically, as seen in Figure 4 below (00:32:12),[10] and Aisling's first confrontation with Brendan takes places in the middle of a stone circle as seen in Figure 5 (00:21:55).[11] In these places, characters reconnect with a past that they hardly knew existed, relive old memories, and participate in traditional rituals. There is a strong connection between physical and temporal disassociation, and they can be one and the same (Kennon and Ní Bhroin, 2011; Ronström, 2021). For a peripheral place, such as an island, to be so far removed from the rest of civilisation naturally means that its inhabitants will do some things differently. In this way, travelling to the remote places of the world is a kind of time travel, and the Trilogy's many variants of the Other act as conduits between a troubled present and a forgotten past. Part of the hero's quest in these films, in their pursuit to understand and accept that otherness, is to restore cultural memory along with it and heal the divide between generations.

[10] Typically believed to be a place of burial, cairns are large mounds of stone and earth that are numerous across the island of Ireland and wider Celtic Europe.
[11] Stones circles are similarly common across Ireland, Britain, and Europe, consisting of upright megaliths (large stones) placed in a circular formation and believed to have served a spiritual function.

Figure 4 – Inside na Daoine Sídhe's mound (00:32:38)

Figure 5 – Brendan enters the ancient stone circle (00:22:04)

As an ally or otherworld for the hero to confront, the Other is a useful way of understanding how Cartoon Saloon's characters grow and change over the course of their journeys. An equally significant element of the Other, and one that Campbell and Jung focus on heavily, is the idea of a 'shadow' or 'Inversion', a destructive or domineering force that threatens to upend the hero's progress and whose defeat is vital. Booker (2005), drawing

heavily from Campbell, defines the journey of the hero as one of coming into the light, seeing both worlds clearly, and in order to accomplish this, the darkness has to be confronted.

Otherness plays a central role in Campbell's monomyth, but the role of women in these narratives is confused and problematised if Campbell's theories are solely relied upon. Be they vindictive or benevolent, the folklore trilogy's female archetypes frequently veer into supernatural territory and are in part defined by their otherness. This is not unusual given the role of some women in the monomyth, such as the protective goddess, or the integral role that female deities play in Irish myth. Aisling, as a personification of the forest, functions consequently as a direct inversion of the society that Brendan knows, a female Other that Brendan confronts and comes to admire. Their growing friendship over the course of the film is indicative of Brendan's gradual reconciliation with the Other inside himself. Robyn undergoes a similar transformation in the company of the wild forest girl Mebh, learning how to wolfwalk with her and eventually embracing Mebh's world and way of life. In both instances, these girls are almost personifications of the otherworld itself, but just as this has to potential to infuse these characters with an otherworldly power, it can also easily restrict their potential for nuanced characterisation and expressiveness. The woman or girl as "Other" is explored by Tatar at length across the many literary and cinematic archetypes she evaluates. Depictions of the feminine Other as a trickster or monster, she suggests, can lead to empowerment, but they can also veer into toxic territory, pursuing her own selfish goals to such an extent as to undermine and even kill those around her. One example she gives is the role of trickster/antiheroine that Ava plays in the story of *Ex Machina* (2015), an inhuman consciousness that turns on her creator, leaves the main protagonist to die, and escapes to create her own life in human society (pp.271-272). She is an iteration of the Other that the hero fails to associate with or comprehend, an example of the female Other turned villainous.

The restrictive othering of femininity, the portrayal of women as mystical, weak, and irrational, is something that Aisling's character avoids for the most part. She is a strong and

heroic figure, relying on Brendan far less than he does her, and in fact she saves his life on many occasions, jokingly taunting him with "saved your life, second time today." (00:27:33) She serves the role of heroine throughout, deriding Brendan and supporting him in equal measure. Their relationship is like that of a brother and sister, built on mutual respect without the need for one party to be dominant. This friendship embodies what it means to have a healthy understanding and appreciation for the Other. Just as Aisling helps Brendan retrieve his berries for illustration and frees him when he is imprisoned, he helps her cleanse the forest of evil by overcoming the destructive Crom. By the end, both worlds have essentially combined.

The monstrous Other is not restricted to depictions of femininity in the Trilogy. Kearney's definition of the monstrous in a folkloric context is useful here. Monsters, strangers, and deviant shapeshifters have been among the most common ways to portray the Other down the centuries, entities that, by their very nature, defy the established order. These forces can be portrayed as terrifying, reminding us of our own insecurities and flaws, a manifestation of our unconscious fears (Kearney, 2003, pp.3-6) – *Ex Machina's* Ava is a robotic antihero who preys on our modern anxieties about AI and runaway modernisation. The line between female Others, the natural world, and monstrous forms is rarely clearcut in the trilogy – Macha is as much animal as she is a goddess, blending the image of a witch, a grandmother, and a fierce animal. Monstrous qualities and animality evoke a fearlessness or uncontrollability that is typically expected to be concealed (Estévez-Saá et al. 2020, p.129), characteristics that define *Song of the Sea's* interpretation of Macha. For Brendan, this is true of Crom Cruach who embodies oppression and chaos, a mythical reflection of his patriarchal uncle. The beast, a vast serpent, is defeated only when the boy comes to terms with his own doubts. Among monsters, the serpent is common in Irish as well as wider world mythology, sometimes manifesting as a treasure-guarding dragon (as depicted in the Norse legends of Scandinavia), a worm to be overcome by great heroes (like the Irish péist which was, more

often than not, portrayed as female, or the dragon that Fionn Mac Cumhail had to overcome in his youth), or even a representation of indigenous religion and tradition (as seen in the apocryphal tale of St. Patrick who, casting the serpents from Ireland, secured Christianity's place on the island for centuries to come). However, just as Crom is a form of the monstrous Other, Kearney (2003) recognises the friendly Other in the form of the god or goddess. Again, we turn to examples such as the forest-dwelling Aisling who can transform into an ethereal beast at will and commands the beasts of the forest. Saoirse and Mebh, both wielding the power to transform into animals, take on their own overt monstrousness, albeit one far less intimidating than Crom (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed analysis of Robyn and Mebh's monstrousness). Ultimately, reconciliation with these monsters can only be achieved when the hero confronts and embraces or slays them.

This final element of the monstrous Other, the necessity for the hero to confront and accept it, often leads in these films to the realisation that the monstrous was always an element within the hero themselves. Brendan's confrontation with Crom feels like the final clash between the young boy and the patriarchal forces that have held him down; the boon that is ultimately retrieved, the eye of the serpent itself, is what allows Brendan to fulfil his own personal destiny in completing the Book of Kells. As a young heroine struggling both literally and figuratively to make her voice heard, Saoirse's realisation of her monstrous form is what leads her to discovering the wider realm of the *sídhe* and her fateful place in it. Robyn and Mebh, in their escapades in the forest and the city, face no external beasts as Brendan does but rather discover it within themselves. The monstrous is transgressive, blurring the line between humanity and nature, natural and unnatural, and it asks us to consider how truly distinct the hero is from the Other they face off against. It is not a simple kind of archetype, rather it evades easy categorisation by virtue of its anomalousness, bringing to light the subjective nature of archetypes. Sometimes, one story's monster can be another's hero; the Lord Protector and Macha may be viewed from this perspective, pursuing their own rigid

moralities to such an extent that villainy and heroism blur together. Both commit foul crimes and refuse the rights of others, but Macha is driven by a conviction to rescue all *sídhe* from suffering and the zealous Cromwell believes to his dying breath that he has been fulfilling his role in accordance with God's plan. At its core, the Other breaks down boundaries and threatens rigid hierarchy. It forces us to question the familiar, and doubt everything we are told. If archetype theory helps us to understand the characters of myth, the Other serves only to complicate them.

5.5. The Father as Shadow and Shapeshifter

Just as the trilogy infuses its female characters, mothers and daughters, sisters and forest spirits, with a kind of nature magic, placing special emphasis on the mythological significance of the mother, fathers play a profound role. The three films position the father in a complex position between light and dark, at once protective and destructive, quiet but forceful – the father is repeatedly portrayed as an dark archetype of oppression, the ultimate opposition to the child hero. A major stage of Campbell's monomyth is the Atonement with the father, the point at which the hero meets their ultimate challenge, confronting that which is the source of power in the narrative. It does not have to male, but Campbell describes it in terms of a terrifying father, an initiation at the conclusion to the hero's development (1949, p.110). The father is, at once, an immensely powerful Other/shadow and is the final barrier to the hero's reconciliation with themselves. Drawing on much of Campbell's thesis, Booker (2004) condenses the dark Other into several archetypes, including the Dark Father who is dominant, authoritarian, and overbearing. He believes himself to be all-knowing and righteous, and his command over the hero in the beginning of a story may be very strong. This figure is notable across all three animated films – Brendan's uncle Cellach is patriarch over all of Kells, and his insistence on control and order strikes fear into all the monks – Ben

and Saoirse's father may be good-natured at heart, but his actions certainly disrupt the hero's progress, trapped in his own vicious struggle with the family's past – finally, Robyn's father spends much of the narrative serving his Lord Protector as a reluctant soldier and hunter. The Lord Protector's authoritarian attitude projects itself onto Bill's own actions and words, and he becomes a 'Dark Father' because of his allegiance to the system.

As with the trilogy's overall exploration of the Other and its moral complexity, the father character is no different in terms of his paradoxical, sometimes deeply sympathetic nature. His concern throughout the three narratives is to uphold the existing order of things, fearful of the alternative that he does not understand. This can manifest as a support for an oppressive regime, as with *The Secret of Kells* and *Wolfwalkers*, but also as a desperate bid to keep his family safe and stable. All three films feature troubled families, lost without their matriarch and governed by emotionally distant patriarchs. In these situations, the family represents something precious to the father, something he believes it is his duty to protect, and when the child hero inevitably seeks something greater or recognises a flaw in the system, a heated tension is generated. Cellach's wall around Kells, Conor's decision to throw the selkie coat into the sea, and Bill's refusal to allow Robyn to enter the woods all show the lengths to which the father will go to protect his own, either from vicious outsiders, a heartbreaking past, or wild animals. Cellach, Conor (and to an extent, Macha), and Bill are parents who position themselves as misunderstood allies to their children, but their containment of the hero necessarily prevents the heroic initiation from taking place. Without confronting these dangers, the hero cannot fulfil their destiny, retrieve the boon, and save their community, therefore sending the hero and the father on a collision course. This is why, across the folklore trilogy, the father embodies the ultimate dark shadow to be overcome, a symbol of patriarchal dominance, overprotectiveness, and ignorance.

The father as foil to the child hero is first introduced with Cellach and Brendan's troubled relationship, strained by the boy's fanciful outings into the forest and the abbot's

desperation to complete Kells' walls by winter. They clash on various occasions, culminating in Brendan's imprisonment, their mutual trust and respect reaching an absolute low. At this stage in the narrative, Brendan has already ventured into the woods several times, deep into his path of initiation and with eyes wide open to the possibilities within nature. He is no longer able to be controlled or convinced to settle for what he has, posing an extreme threat to the status quo and – from his uncle's perspective – the stability of Kells' community. Fearing the very worst of the forest, Brendan's imprisonment is not an act of maliciousness but a desperate final attempt by Cellach to protect his nephew, further complicating the father-son relationship that strenuously exists between the two. Cellach's rage is also directed towards Brother Aidan who, up to now, has co-opted the position of father figure in Brendan's life; seeing the newcomer as a threat to the community and his own authority, Cellach demands that Aidan leave as soon as possible. Where the depiction deviates from traditional monomythic descriptions of the father is in Cellach and Aidan's tense confrontations and their opposing visions of the father archetype; one assumes Campbell's patriarchal figure, the other functioning more like a close ally of the hero.

Like Cellach, the character of Conor in *Song of the Sea* lives an isolated life, is a single parent, and perpetually struggles to shelter his children. Echoing Brendan's rebelliousness, Ben and Saoirse desire more than the small island they are trapped on, driving them towards conflict with their father. He is a grieving husband, longing for the wife he lost many years ago. We are initially led to be believe Bronagh passed away, but it is revealed over time that she was a selkie, a mythical creature from under the sea, and when Saoirse was born, Bronagh had to return to the ocean. As a consequence, Conor does his best to hide Saoirse's heritage from her, sealing her sealskin coat away in a chest for fear that she too will leave him. His inability to trust his daughter with her own destiny is ultimately what pushes her to seek it out by herself, putting her in harm's way. The film also depicts a character who functions as a supernatural dark father – Macha, the owl-witch, similarly refused to allow her

son to confront his own inner conflict, sheltering him from his grief by turning him to rock. She contradicts Campbell's description of the father to an extent, a female figure taking on a traditionally male archetypal role. Like Cellach and Conor, she also undergoes her own dramatic transformation, thanks to the heroes, at the journey's end, shapeshifting into a powerful ally and benevolent parent.

Bill in *Wolfwalkers* plays a far more profound role as father and shapeshifter than either Cellach or Conor, with more screentime devoted to his character and a much more substantial part to play in the narrative. Consequently, there is more time for the audience to develop sympathies for him, but out of all the trilogy's fathers, he also commits some of the worst acts. Living in fear of the Lord Protector, Bill can accept terrible things if he thinks it will protect himself and his daughter, Robyn. He endeavours to slaughter the wolves around Kilkenny, he assists in the containment of Moll, and he tries to capture Robyn's friend Mebh when she attempts to free her mother from captivity. Even if it means straining his bond with his own child, he believes the sacrifice is worth it, and as time goes on, the two drift further apart into different worlds, becoming incoherent to one another. In this sense, Bill embodies everything that Robyn tries to escape from – conformity, obedience, and violence – he is functionally the shadow to her heroine. The fathers of the folklore trilogy, much like the heroes, undergo their own metamorphosis in conjunction with, and often initiated by, their children. Transformation is a prime focus of the films, be it physical or psychological, and all these fathers come face-to-face with the truth of their destructive actions eventually, seeking forgiveness from their child. Their reward is the reconciliation of the family and a reunion with their children; Cellach comes to the end of his life clinging to a piece of parchment illustrated by Brendan, treasuring it. Brendan's return to Kells, and to his uncle, allows Cellach to finally make peace with the things he did, and to realise that his own mission is complete (01:12:00). After everything, the walls may have failed but Kells still survives eternally in Brendan's illuminated manuscript. Conor, similarly, has a moment of final

reconciliation when he confronts his wife, Bronagh, and comes to terms with losing her. Bill's shapeshifting from shadow to ally is among the most dramatic, turning him into a last-minute unlikely hero and vanquishing the Lord Protector himself. The fathers experience a special initiation, emerging from the other side as heroic players in the story, allies to their children, and reformed moral actors, becoming reborn as the fathers they were meant to be.

5.6. Conclusion

Campbell's monomyth theory, for as much as it has undergone revaluation and revision over the decades, remains a foundation model for understanding why filmmakers design their narratives the way they do. While the concept of archetypal universality and the psychoanalytical theories it derived from remain divisive subjects, they have nevertheless shaped how many screenwriters and directors have approached the storytelling process. Archetypes also provide a useful method by which to compare contemporary characters with their historic equivalents or counterparts from other national/regional cinemas. This is especially useful when discussing Cartoon Saloon's folklore-inspired films, narratives that draw heavily from archetypal and mythological material, and this chapter has outlined the key archetypal figures that the studio returns to again and again. Identifying figures like the Great Mother (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7), the heroic Youth, and the father in the trilogy in terms of their archetypal function helps to ground the films in a deeper cultural context, relating them back to mythological counterparts who carry similar symbolic weight. Teasing out the recurring archetypes and symbols of the trilogy also helps to identify the core ideas that Cartoon Saloon returns to again and again.

The narrative of an immature child undergoing intense individuation, exploring a world long overlooked by adults and learning truths that their elders ignore, is central to the folklore trilogy at large. Often, Cartoon Saloon's child heroes are the key to solving a great

crisis, overcoming conflict, or unearthing a long-lost secret, placing the child in a position of heightened significance and appealing to younger audiences in the process. By associating myth and nature with child heroics, the trilogy also frames these concepts as possessing a sort of innocence or naivety, enhancing the escapist mystique of the otherworlds they portray. Child archetypes are also, by virtue of how little they understand the world of adults, rebellious and strange, making them excellent channels through which filmmakers can explore otherness. In sharp contrast, the father has been shown in this chapter to be an Other of a different sort: dominant, unyielding, even threatening, fatherly archetypes are as much a source of wisdom as they are rigidly opposed to change and a barrier to the hero's ultimate reintegration with otherness. Cartoon Saloon returns time and again to this intimidating figure, parental mentors of an older generation who encapsulate the established order of things and try to pass on historic prejudices to their children. Their fathers are cold, closed-off, emotionally vulnerable, and terrified of the Other contained within their own children. They embody a unique challenge for the hero, and the reconciliation with the father represents a powerful moment of victory for the hero in all three films. An overview of the trilogy as a study in archetypes, while ultimately just one way of understanding the films, shows just how complex their interrogations of otherness can.

Chapter 6: Into the Woods: The Role and Depiction of Nature

6.1.Introduction

Irish cultural identities, both on the regional and wider national levels, have been shaped heavily by peoples' interactions with and reliance on the natural world. The Irish landscape, and the ocean that surrounds it, have inspired Irish Celtic artwork for thousands of years. Myths of ancient *sídhe* tied to their mounds, gods and goddesses taking the form of beasts, and women emerging from the waters to live on the land are prevalent. As an island, partially cut-off from the rest of the world, and as a society heavily reliant upon agrarianism until only recently, a relationship with nature (be it for better or worse) has stood as one of the foundational characteristics of "Irishness" for generations. When Irish mythology is incorporated into modern films, it often coincides with an aesthetic focus on the landscape, explorations of the dichotomy between urban and rural life, and some form of environmentalist messaging. Throughout the history of Irish art and storytelling, from early oral recitations to contemporary animated cinema, the magical figures of Irish folk tradition have been intertwined with nature, practically one in the same.

When Cartoon Saloon approaches the world of Irish mythology with an aim to capture its essence and rework it in modern form, the study of nature and how it relates to these tales is always at the forefront. In companion books and behind-the-scenes articles produced by the studio, it is clear that all three films in the trilogy, thematically and aesthetically, relied upon a deep understanding of the Irish natural world. In *The Art of Wolfwalkers* (2020), emphasis is placed on the swirling, spiralling designs of the forest environments, tree trunks and hills forming immense circular shapes, an exaggerated imitation of the rugged and almost chaotic shapes of real forests. Indeed, studio fieldtrips were a significant part of the preproduction process (Solomon 2020, p.13), and wildlife ambiences captured in nature by the crew went a step further towards achieving an authentic sense of the Irish wilderness.

This chapter examines in detail the studio's various depictions of nature over the course of the trilogy, the ideas they associate it with, the visual and auditory methods by which the environment is captured, and how it is tied back into Irish mythological elements and themes of otherness. The first section focuses on one film in particular, *Song of the Sea*, in which the ocean plays a central role in the development of the narrative, as well as the literal and figurative transformation of its main protagonist. Here, Cartoon Saloon's illustrations of nature are considered in relation to concepts of isolation, wisdom, growth, and change. Through its discussion of the natural world, touching on a variety of themes like otherness, environmentalism, femininity, and the reclamation of past knowledge, the film constructs an elaborate picture of Irish identity. *Song of the Sea* contrasts modern Ireland, its busy cities where nature is given little room to breathe, with an alternative identity that values the natural world and the stories of the past. Despite continuing industrialisation and the failure of existing systems to tackle environmental crises, activist movements like Extinction Rebellion are getting louder. In many cases, these movements are spearheaded by younger Irish people. The transformation of the character Saoirse is more than just a personal process, it is an optimistic vision of a new generation who embrace nature and neglected aspects of their heritage. The film itself is an example of such a transformative process; mythology reworked to suit modern issues and remain relevant in an Ireland that the storytellers of centuries past would barely recognise. Nature does not just come to symbolise a hidden world of magic and myth, it is inherently tied to the Ireland of the past, implying that as time goes on, we appear to drift only further away from our ancestral roots.

After this, the chapter considers how the Trilogy approaches solitude and isolation in terms of their relation to the natural world and the landscape. Not only does this provide a clear overview of how Cartoon Saloon's characterisation of nature has evolved over time, but it also allows for a deeper discussion about Irish identity in the context of "islandness". Being

geographically separated from the rest of Europe, Ireland's inherent otherness and the othering experience of seclusion within nature are also key focal points in this section.

6.2. On the Fringes of History: Nature in *Song of the Sea*

Cartoon Saloon's *Song of the Sea* (2014) is, in many ways, a successor to *The Secret of Kells* (2009). On one level, aspects of Celtic artwork and nature imagery reflect in the animation style, and they both follow the journey of a heroic youth realising their inner potential and the power of nature. *Song of the Sea* carries on exploring the ideas and motifs of its predecessor, containing prevalent nature and environmental themes. *Song of the Sea*, like the film that came before it, is unafraid to depict nature in all its complexity, beauty, and danger, and very often the supernatural is treated as just another aspect of the world. The story draws from a well of Irish mythological symbols to explore the natural world and Irish identity in a modern context; nature and the Ireland of the past frequently blend, treated as one in the same, and their shared plight is almost handled as a singular issue.

By examining nature's portrayal from four perspectives – escapism and isolation, the feminine, adaptability and survival, and transformation – the aim is to fully understand the film's message regarding the loss of a connection to nature and the effect that such a loss has on Ireland's modern identity. By examining these themes in relation to one another, the broader message of the film may be understood. *Song of the Sea* treats these difficult themes with a complex narrative that is not commonly found within children's animated cinema.

6.3. Escapism and Solitude

The key themes of escapism and sacred isolation are deeply linked with each other throughout the film, and their respective symbolism often blends and intersects, moulding a

complex characterisation of the natural world. Alain Chouinard (2010) discusses the use of nature imagery to explore such themes in the work of Irish writer and filmmaker Neil Jordan, particularly the ever-changing waters and their connection to rejuvenation, sustenance, and freedom. The Irish mythological symbolism of the ocean and rivers, teeming with benevolent goddesses and entrances to supernatural paradises like Mag Mell[12] and Tír fo Thuinn[13], serve to inspire writers like Jordan today. The vastness and irrationality of the ever-changing waters serves as a tempting escape from the claustrophobic busyness of modernity, so distant from nature. Cartoon Saloon's *Song of the Sea* carries on much of this symbolism: from the beginning, Saoirse[14] has a clear connection to the water outside her home, drawn to it by a mysterious force. Just as Jordan's characters seek the ocean as a refuge, eager to reconnect with nature, Saoirse dives in without considering the consequences.

Saoirse's eagerness to embrace the water is driven by the stress, confusion, and disempowerment of everyday life: her mother died in childbirth, her brother Ben blames Saoirse for the tragedy, and her father Conor struggles to bring up the two small children. The ocean is a place she can feel free and utterly disconnected from those struggles, almost like crossing the boundary into another world. Saoirse's discovery of the ocean's power on her birthday signifies that, for her character, the ocean will be a source of comfort and enlightenment that will guide her into maturity; a coming-of-age experience (00:16:30). However, just as Chouinard's (2010) analysis reveals a darker side to water-sites, home to dangerous creatures where those same goddesses of healing could also represent destruction, Saoirse's connection with the ocean is double-edged. Her first experience with it is too much, she comes to the point of drowning before her family drags her back onto the beach. The ocean in this film is tempestuous and unpredictable, an untameable force. Stephen Royle has written extensively on the topic of island cultures, and in his *Islands: Nature and Culture*

[12] Meaning "Plain of Joy" – Mag Mell was a pleasurable afterlife, comparable to Greek myth's Elysium or Norse myth's Valhalla.
[13] Meaning "Land under the Wave" – it is one of the names for the Irish mythological Otherworld.
[14] Saoirse's name means "freedom" in Irish, reinforcing the driving desire of her character.

(2014), he examines how, to the "islander", the ocean is a protective boundary as much as it is a dangerous and impenetrable entity.

The image of the island is as important to this film as the ocean, representing a distinct but related concept; isolation as a source of freedom and enlightenment, a gateway to new perspectives, has been explored throughout fiction and philosophy for centuries. Biblical characters like Elijah or Jesus discovered great knowledge and solace in the wilderness, the former in his cave, the latter in the desert. The Prophet Muhammad received his revelations from God in a cave on Mount Hira, and the concept of Zuhd in Islam (Arabic for "detachment") describes a simple, pious life, separate from material comforts. Other Eastern religions, like Buddhism or Taoism, consider an ascetic life to be virtuous; this can be as basic as simplifying one's diet, or as extreme as seeking meditative isolation from society. Irish mythology itself explores this concept, from Oisín's journey to Tír na nÓg to Cú Chulainn's mastery of combat on Skye. Royle's work reveals that the isolation of islands can make them strong containers of customs and culture that might otherwise have been lost on the mainland. Cultures like those of the British Isles, he writes, can be varied and unique in the stories they tell, the music they play, and the languages they speak. These insulated peoples can often develop a closeness to the land, a deeper appreciation and respect for it, such as the Mi'kmaq First Nation whose myths were deeply entrenched in the landscape, viewing their island as the place where a great deity, Glooscap, rested his head (Royle 2014). Dina Iordanova (2010) similarly examines the sacred, insulating properties of islands as they are portrayed in Gaelic cinema; the islands that surround Scotland, often romanticised as secluded and dangerous lands yet untouched by civilisation, are described as the last refuge of customs and languages that have long since vanished elsewhere (Iordanova 2010, pp.156-157).

A strong depiction of these ideas in *Song of the Sea* can be found in na Daoine Sídhe, three cheerful figures who perhaps represent the last remnants of their kind in an Ireland that is increasingly distant from them. They seek refuge on the fringes, hidden in a mound that is

trapped on the 'island' of a roundabout, surrounded by a grimy, bustling city (00:31:53). While the decay of the cityscape is unflattering, broken windows and scattered rubbish, the mound's ruinous state betrays a history dating back millennia. When the children step inside, there is a sense of entering another world, and here the *sídhe* sing and dance, celebrating a life that has long since disappeared elsewhere. Saoirse and Ben find solace here for a short time, and the warm lighting evokes a sense of protection, sacred isolation from the cold urban streets (00:33:56). Ben later encounters the Great Seanchaí, an ancient figure who retains the knowledge of generations past, living in solitude in a vast, beautiful cavern (00:49:56); the film's repeated conflation between isolation and the supernatural harkens back to the views of Royle and Iordanova.

Irish poet, author, and philosopher John O'Donohue explores the enlightenment and protection found through isolation in a different way, placing a spiritual significance on it, but his conclusions are similar. In a secluded valley, under a "private sky", the beauty and knowledge of nature may be rediscovered (O'Donohue 2011, p.107) – the landscape as a container of memory and wisdom. This concept culminates in the film when Saoirse fully realises her selkie heritage, diving into the ocean without any fear of death, and together with Ben and Conor, she travels to Mac Lír's island (01:17:48).[15] The looming spectre of modernity is not present here at all, just the shore, the cliff face, and the ocean, making up an image of the landscape that might as well be set a thousand years ago. In Figure 6, the visual isolation of the two islands can be seen, both small and secluded, with the closer of the two being Ben and Saoirse's home. The image of a lonely cottage sitting on the crest of a huge cliff only further reinforces the image of quiet solitude. The discovery of this peaceful isolation, coupled with the complete achievement of freedom when Saoirse's song liberates the *sídhe*, leads to the emergence of Tír na nÓg itself, within reach if Saoirse's chooses to swim there. The ocean becomes a gateway to another realm, the mystical island becomes the

[15] Manannán mac Lír ("Son of the Sea") is an Irish mythological warrior and god associated with the ocean.

ultimate symbol of escapism and isolation. Saoirse's bold choice not to go there is a heroic display, evidence of how much she has matured over the course of her journey.

Figure 6 – Ben and Saoirse's island home (00:06:46)

6.4.Femininity and the Goddess

As previously mentioned, Irish myth contains a variety of feminine deities closely connected to the water, and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin's (1999) work provides a more detailed understanding of this. Just as how the Daghdha has links to the sun and, in Ó hÓgáin's words, is a kind of "Father" deity, the land is embodied by a "Mother". The flowing waters of the river are comparable to living-giving milk, and the blending of the father's light and the mother's sustenance are described by Ó hÓgáin as an "impregnation" (Ó hÓgáin 1999, pp.110-112) – the connection between the land and the mother archetype, nature and the feminine, is made abundantly clear in this image. Ó hÓgáin elaborates, suggesting that patron goddesses of poetry like Edar, and the goddess Brighid who represents a variety of crafts, all point back to the general theme of sustenance and motherly care (Ó hÓgáin 1999, pp.111-113). Brian Wright, focussing on Brighid specifically, agrees, seeing her connections to cattle and other animals, as well as her importance as a fertility deity, as indicative of Brighid's ties

to nature (Wright 2011, pp.28-29). This relationship between the Irish mythological feminine and the natural world is not overlooked by *Song of the Sea*, it is celebrated and explored in detail.

Valerie Estelle Frankel (2014), writing about the role of female deities in world mythology, describes one model for understanding the divine feminine; the triple-goddess, she posits, can be found far back into antiquity. The Greek goddesses of the seasons, the Horae, were broken into triads; Indian myth places importance on the Creatrix-Preserver-Destroyer triad; and Irish myth divides the Morrígan[16] into a triple-goddess of war. *Song of the Sea*'s three representations of the divine feminine – Saoirse, Bronagh, and Macha[17] – resemble another triad that Frankel discusses: the Maiden-Mother-Crone (Frankel 2014, pp.173-174). Saoirse's role in the film, as a kind of innocent youth, is to rescue not only herself but the world of *sídhe*, a realm that blends the natural with the supernatural. As half-human, half-selkie, she partly embodies this world and represents its purity, fragility, and future. The Maiden, as Frankel describes her, is a youthful vessel of energy, embodying the potential for growth and maturity into the mother. Similarly, Saoirse's growth throughout the film eventually leads to her full potential being unleashed; her music is all that is required to rejuvenate the *sídhe* and rescue them.

Saoirse's ability to completely reshape herself into an animal is perhaps the most blatant depiction of her links to nature. While she does show a fascination and instinctive kinship with nature and the supernatural during the film, it is not until she fully embraces the ocean and her heritage that she truly becomes one with this fantastical world. While she embodies the potential for the *sídhe* to survive into the future, her mixed heritage also indicates the possibility for humanity to coexist with nature. It is reminiscent of Chris Hall's (2014) examination of the "intermediary" nature spirit in Hayao Miyazaki's animated work,

[16] The Morrígan, or *Mór-Ríoghain* ('Great Queen'), is an Irish mythological figure linked to war, fate, and death. She is sometimes separated into a trio of sisters, Badb, Macha, and Nemain.
[17] As one of the Three Morrígna, Macha is linked to war, death, and the foretelling of doom.

films that similarly blend myth, modernity, and nature. The intermediary is an entity that acts as nature's representative, communing with the human characters, posing either a threat or the potential for cooperation. These entities, like Totoro or the river god of *Spirited Away (2001),* often take on a distinctly nonhuman form; Saoirse's becoming the seal can be read as a completion of her transition into the nature spirit, the intermediary form. Saoirse, in summary, is a kind of youthful nature goddess embodying hope, purity, and peace.

The mother archetype is a key figure in Irish and world myth with connections to fertility, motherhood, the landscape, and the water. The second figure of Frankel's female triad, the mother, is best represented though Bronagh, a character whose distant presence is felt all throughout the film. As the deceased selkie mother of Saoirse and Ben, Bronagh already has strong connections to the supernatural and the ocean, and her appearance on the shores of Mac Lír's island, at the point when the entire world of the *sídhe* is transformed and reinvigorated, only reinforces this (01:23:29). The memory of Bronagh is what connects Ben and Saoirse over the course of their journey, giving them comfort, and the magic seashell, one of her few remaining items, both symbolizes the supernatural and the ocean. While her physical appearance is fleeting, she has time to bring the other characters to tears with her warm, motherly words, and she offers Saoirse the ultimate boon, a chance to live in Tír na nÓg. She is a source of supernatural gifts and sustenance, contrasting sharply with the final archetype of the triad, the crone.

Macha, a figure in Irish myth connected to the Morrígan, is portrayed as multi-faceted in the film, a character who changes dramatically throughout the narrative. Frankel's "death-crone" represents the end of the triad, a figure both revered and feared; without youth or the gift of fertility, she instead holds a powerful wisdom. According to Frankel, this concept of a knowledgeable feminine deity posed a threat in patriarchal societies, and so she is considered as monstrous as she is motherly. Wise old women, like the Sphinx or Medusa, were malformed into monsters to be slain by mythical heroes (Frankel, 2014, p.174). *Song of the*

Sea draws the audience in with the promise of a similarly despicable crone, a mother who turned cruel and transformed her own son into stone. Macha's counterpart, Granny, poses a comparable threat with her dismissive coldness and perpetual scowl, and the visual similarities between them are illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. Macha's connection to nature, unlike that of Saoirse or Bronagh, is a sinister one, manipulating wildlife to hunt down the children and turning the *sídhe* to rock. Ben's encounter with her is a tense moment (01:00:50), portrayed in Figure 8, and the subsequent chase scene sees Macha reshape entirely into a screeching monster.

Figure 7 – Granny (00:21:46)

Figure 8 – Macha manipulates Ben (01:03:20)

However, the film does not perpetuate the tradition of the monstrous crone that Frankel describes, and Macha ultimately undergoes a wondrous transformation into an ally. Even the revelation of why she turned her son to stone, to end his suffering, indicates to the audience that *Song of the Sea*'s examination of the divine feminine is intricate and sometimes unconventional. The film's representation of nature has multiple layers, and each of these layers takes time to dissect and thoroughly understand, but all are deeply connected with one another.

6.5.Adaptability and Survival

The natural world, as we have seen so far, is represented in a plethora of colourful ways and tackles a variety of themes. All these manifestations throughout the film share commonality, they portray nature and the supernatural to be on the fringes of Ireland, threatened by encroaching modernity. The possibility of adaptability in this new world, and by extension the survival of forgotten knowledge, is a third element that must be unravelled if the film's portrayal of nature is to be understood. *Song of the Sea* depicts nature as a source of renewal, healing, and life, the journey itself is one of renewal for the characters as they seek

to overcome their grief and the overwhelming oppression that surrounds them. Saoirse can only find her voice, literally and figuratively, by traversing the natural and supernatural landscape of Ireland, a transformative experience that grants a new perspective. Angélica Varandas (2019), in her own analysis of the film, highlights how the story is set during Halloween, a period when the boundaries between the mortal world and that of the dead are at their weakest, the perfect time for such a transformative journey.

The first true glimpse we get of the hidden supernatural world is deep within the mound of na Daoine Sídhe, after Saoirse and Ben escape from Granny's home (00:29:10). They live modestly in isolation, restricted in their movements when they do leave the mound, as demonstrated when they disguise themselves. The three *sídhe* are surrounded from all sides by a noisy city, and the image of a mound entrapped by a roundabout is reminiscent of the controversy surrounding the M3 motorway, the proposal for a bypass that was criticised for running too close to the Hill of Tara. Despite the concerns of activists who argued that local fauna would be disturbed, and the archaeological complex would be "invaded", the plans eventually went ahead (O'Brien, 2003).

The film does not portray the situation as ideal, but the *sídhe* still cheerfully sing and dance, carrying on the traditions of their people in a new environment. Na Daoine Sídhe are not entirely vulnerable, they have an inner strength that allows them to adapt to a world that has forgotten them, but the audience is left under no illusion that this can go on forever. This environmentalist message, about the expansion of urban Ireland at the expense of history and nature, is strengthened through the anthropomorphising of nature as the *sídhe*. By giving the natural world a face, humanising it, Ursula Heise (2014) argues that the audience is far more likely to sympathise. *Song of the Sea* frequently conflates the natural with the supernatural, using folkloric and mythological imagery to personify the plight of Irish nature and tradition, and the possibility for survival.

The themes of adaptation and survival continue when the children venture out into the countryside, they eventually happen across a neglected, overgrown holy well (00:45:15), shown in Figure 9. Ben carries Saoirse with care through bushes of nettles, indicating the growing affection he has for his sister. Despite the well's decrepit appearance on the outside, the candles within are still lit, and it is here that Saoirse recalls a traditional treatment for Ben's sore legs; she plucks a bunch of dock leaves and rubs them on his stinging wounds. For such a simple scene, it is deeply significant. Depicting two young children practicing traditional medicine, huddled in a comforting religious setting, surrounded by the rural landscape, the film suggests that old Ireland will survive through to the next generation.

Figure 9 – Ben and Saoirse share a moment in the holy well (00:45:36)

In addition to exploring the portrayal of the landscape as a container of memory and tradition, Iordanova (2010) discusses how Gaelic films have depicted the interactions between generations. She cites *Seachd: The Inaccessible Pinnacle* (2007) for its portrayal of an elderly storyteller passing on his knowledge to a younger man. Soon after the holy well scene, *Song of the Sea* explores a similar interaction as Ben encounters the mythical Great Seanchaí. The Seanchaí has been so isolated, and grown so unnaturally old, that his behaviour is almost alien, and his memory is not what it used to be. Despite initial appearances, he is a wise figure

who gives Ben the knowledge required to rescue Saoirse from Macha. The memory of ages long past survives in the fibres of his white hairs, like the ancestral memory of the Irish people, retained by the Seanchaí and surviving in Ben. It is a symbolic passing of the torch from one generation to the other, and a hopeful image at the hero's lowest point.

The climax of the film depicts the full realisation of nature's living-giving, restorative properties, and the true power of adaptability and survival. Saoirse's pivotal transformation into a seal, deep within the ocean, can be read as a kind of rebirth on her birthday, having fully embraced her heritage, the natural world, and the realm of the *sídhe*. The power of water as a rejuvenating agent is examined by Witzel (2015) in his essay *Water in Mythology*; the ability for water to clean and restore strength has inspired the universal motif of water as a cleanser and transformer. He mentions the *Kumbh Melā*, a Hindu ceremony located where the Ganges and Jumna rivers meet, which attracts those who wish to cleanse themselves of *karma* in the fresh waters. The Christian ritual of baptism is similar in the way it connects water to spiritual cleansing and the revitalization of the soul (Witzel 2015).

The dying world that audiences witnessed over the course of the film now survives in Saoirse, the ultimate representation of adaptation. This hopeful idea is reinforced through the image of Tír na nÓg and the possibility of travelling there. It is a place where the people and traditions of a once suppressed Ireland can live on forever. Just as how the Seanchaí passes wisdom on to Ben, Saoirse inherits the gift of transformation from her mother and the wisdom of the natural and supernatural worlds. Her ultimate decision not to travel to Tír na nÓg with Bronagh suggests the possibility for tradition and myth to live on in modern Ireland, and the potential for nature and humankind to coexist. This form of survival, one of cooperation and mutual benefit, is examined by Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann (2011) in their own detailed analysis of animated cinema. Films such as *Bee Movie* (2007), they argue, pose a positive message for younger audiences about respect for nature and cooperation with the natural world rather than exploitation of it. The consequences of competition rather than

collaboration are made apparent, depicted as being destructive for both parties. *Song of the Sea* fits into this category of children's cinema, illustrating a dire message with a hopeful conclusion. It reassures audiences that the survival of nature and the adaptation of age-old perspectives is possible if you are willing to fight for it.

6.6.Solitude in the Folklore Trilogy

The universal narrative of the hero venturing into the unknown world, separated from everything they understand, is explored in the three animated films that make up Cartoon Saloon's Irish folklore "trilogy". In the first instance, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), the central character Brendan enters the forest against his uncle's wishes, discovering a realm of natural beauty and peril. *Song of the Sea* (2014) similarly follows the young Saoirse and Ben in their exploration of a vast and deadly otherworld, ultimately realising truths about themselves. Finally, *Wolfwalkers* (2020) depicts a clash of cultures, with the central character Robyn Goodfellowe growing into a new body and literally seeing her world through new eyes. The idea of wisdom attained through isolation and solitude pervades these modern stories as much as it did their mythological source material.

This section examines how Cartoon Saloon's three reinterpretations of Irish myth and folklore depict solitude and its advantages to the development of the main characters, positing that solitude is treated by these films as a key requirement in the pursuit of a more fulfilling life. The pitfalls of this kind of message are also examined, and it is suggested that Cartoon Saloon successfully navigates these issues, resulting in a message that modern day audiences can relate to. Brendan, Saoirse, and Robyn's journeys mirror each other with respect to their portrayal of the natural world and the rediscovery of truths hidden deep in our past. It is argued here that at the core of these messages is solitude both physical and mental – through solitude, reconnection with nature is possible, wisdom can be attained, and transformation can

occur. Cartoon Saloon's trilogy therefore presents solitude, a scarce resource in an increasingly busy and urbanised world, as the path to personal enrichment.

If the utility and contemporary relevance of Cartoon Saloon's depiction of solitude is to be determined, the practicalities of achieving solitude today, the challenges faced when seeking it in modern Ireland, must be addressed. Geographers Nigel Thrift and Rob Kitchin (2009) argue that solitude and seclusion are harder to achieve today than ever before. Cheap and fast transport, by land, air, or sea, means that disparate regions can be linked together, immense wildernesses can be crossed with ease. Modern forms of communication and entertainment, such as the television, radio, telephone, and the internet, have minimised and even eliminated distance altogether. However, centuries-old teachings about seclusion can, and must, be reworked to fit into this new setting. Elements of these old teachers should be reinvented and incorporated into modern narratives, adjusting where necessary to account for a changing world. In his research exploring the methods by which old traditions can weather upheaval and modernisation, ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon (2015) advocates for "resilience" in a move towards sustainability, specifically with regard to music. To him, the integrity of musical practices and knowledge is retained, but it changes when necessary to remain relevant in the modern world (pp.157-158). This argument applies as much to mythology, folklore, or old understandings of solitude as it does to musical traditions. Irish musician Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (1981) similarly describes "reworking" as the creation of "new music out of the old". Reworking is defined by him as the gradual adoption and discarding of traditions, the natural adaptation of cultural elements over time, and to Ó Súilleabháin, it is a vital process for the survival of tradition and cultural practice (83). It is posited here that Cartoon Saloon's three folklore films effectively demonstrate how, through reworking and the acknowledgement of modern circumstances, solitude can still be portrayed in a way that modern audiences can relate to and learn from. Rather than fighting against

modernity, stories promoting transformation through solitude can adapt, just as how mythology and folklore is adapted to screen.

6.7.Nature and Solitude

Separation from the distractions of modern life, the attainment of solitude, has the potential to encourage new ways of thinking, particularly the realisation of one's place in the wider world. Demonstrated in the films of Cartoon Saloon, this benefit of solitude ties into a greater appreciation and understanding of nature, whether one seeks separation deep within the forest, underground, or out at sea. It is a concept that has been explored extensively: when Irish poet John O'Donohue (2011) described the sun as "the eye and face of God" (56), the implication was that the sacred and spiritual can be found in nature. By absorbing oneself in the natural world, transformative wisdom can be achieved. This ecological engagement is a message that resounds throughout all three of Cartoon Saloon's Irish folkloric reworkings. In stories that depict the natural world as a source of wisdom and personal growth, it is not uncommon for the protagonist to become separated from the familiar and find solace in a hidden realm – C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001), and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) are well-known examples.

This separation from distraction, seclusion within a world where nature and the supernatural blend, reflects the teachings of philosophers and religious leaders who argue that solitude, particularly within nature, is the path to enlightenment. In his *Meditation and the Bible* (1988), Aryeh Kaplan writes from a Judeo-Christian perspective, arguing that *hitbodedut* (the Jewish practice of self-isolation) in part requires physical isolation to aid in achieving internal seclusion. In limiting one's perceptive faculties, one's mind is opened up to the divine, and an effective way of achieving this is to contemplate the scale, beauty, and complexity of Creation. The vastness and diversity of the sea, the awe-inspiring immensity of

the night sky – Kaplan describes the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Maimonides who suggested that prophets became shepherds because they sought a quiet and contemplative life surrounded by nature (5-10). Isolation within the natural world, therefore, can not only be a source of enlightenment, but it can also be a means of connecting to something greater than oneself.

The power of nature is central to the stories presented in Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy: Brendan realises this power on his many outings into the forest, a mysterious place separated entirely from the security of Kells. Saoirse and Ben grow closer together, maturing on a journey that takes them through fields, woodlands, and a world beneath the sea. In the untouched forests of medieval Ireland, disconnected from the people and society she knows, Robyn bonds with a wild girl called Mebh and is exposed to a completely new way of living. In all three cases, the protagonist finds this untamed otherworld alien and even frightening, but as they encounter supernatural allies, they soon become far more at home in sacred isolation. Nature exists on the outskirts in these films, pushed aside by the urban world, by industry, by a civilisation that refuses to acknowledge the power and wisdom contained in the natural landscape. Brendan, Saoirse, and Robyn's adventures represent a rediscovery of lost worlds and the personal growth resulting from it; Robyn is the most extreme example, choosing to live in the forest by the end, literally becoming an animal.

The trilogy's sympathetic depiction of nature is intertwined with its promotion of a life in simple solitude, oceans and forests acting as a doorway into spiritually enlightened realms. In a similar vein to O'Donohue, Henry David Thoreau, the American naturalist, poet, and transcendentalist, made the case for a life surrounded by nature in his seminal work *Walden* (1854). His solitary excursion into the woodlands of Massachusetts lasted for two years, of which he wrote that "my nearest neighbour is a mile distant … I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself." (126) As a transcendentalist,

Thoreau's philosophy was that humanity is at its best surrounded by nature, living simply, and being self-reliant – a philosophy that is evident in the films of Cartoon Saloon's trilogy.

Nature as an all-encompassing entity, a vast living world, is what grants it a certain sense of power – even divinity – throughout art, philosophy, and religion. This feeds into the idea that solitude within nature opens the door to such power. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2013) has questioned why it is that nature, particularly vast and wild landscapes, are so often linked to the divine. Deep forests, immense mountain ranges, dry deserts, they all evoke romantic ideas because, to Tuan, the mind is not distracted by questions of survival here; survival is impossible, and instead these places demand a more "playful and intellectual" approach (29-30). Holy mountains, such as Mt. Athos, Greece, which plays a significant role in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, have been the home of sheltered monks through the centuries. The spiritual journey of pilgrims who go to Athos follows the path that Gregory of Nyssa laid out: purification from egoism, enlightenment by the Holy Spirit, and union with God. These immaterial stages have their own geographical correlatives; entry into the desert beneath the mountain, ascent to the mountain wrapped in fog, and entering into the thick, dark clouds (43-44). The landscape and the path to spiritual enlightenment blend so much here that they become one in the same.

In *Song of the Sea* in particular, the ever-changing and unpredictable landscape of the ocean becomes a source of natural power – Saoirse immerses herself within it, representing a complete breakaway from the known world and an embrace of the vast natural world. Tuan's descriptions of humanity's relationship with the ocean bears similarities to this. In the Bible, God created the world first as an ocean, and then gathered the waters "unto one place, and let the dry land appear" – for centuries, the ocean has been seen as primordial, chaotic – so distant and unexplored as to be incomprehensible (2013, p.53). Such perceptions have led to literary and cinematic interpretations of the ocean as the abode of supernatural creatures and hidden knowledge. Humanity's interpretation of the landscape as both threatening and

enlightening is effectively utilised by Cartoon Saloon in their depiction of nature as a wise, albeit harsh, teacher. On his first excursion, Brendan is led by Aisling through the woods, making their own path through dense undergrowth and across streams, and along the way she shows him all manner of natural phenomenon (00:25:50). Here, he learns from experience, seeing first-hand the forest in motion. Excursions into nature can be interpreted here as a learning experience. Therefore, solitude within nature can lead not only to growth, but also to a new understanding and respect for nature, an increasingly important insight in an age where the beauty and stability of nature is threatened by human activity.

Mental solitude is a direct counterpart to physical isolation, just as important but much harder to achieve. Sarah Shaw (2006) explores the dual nature of solitude and seclusion from the perspective of Buddhism, referencing the Pali canon, an early Buddhist scripture. In the *Itivuttaka*, a collection of the Buddha's teachings, the Seclusion Sutta makes a distinction between physical and spiritual isolation. It recommends seeking out "empty places" for meditation. By "disregarding sense pleasures", the truth can be seen, and the mind can be calmed (Shaw, 2006, pp.23-24). The *Samaññaphala* Sutta goes on to describe how solitude is found at "the roots of a forest tree, a mountain cave or a mountain cleft, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, or a heap of straw in the open air" (pp.69-70). *The Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, and *Wolfwalkers* all align with this interpretation of solitude; physical solitude is given huge credence, be it Mebh's cave behind a waterfall or the Seanchaí's secluded lair. Such locations often have wondrous properties, and these scenes take place so far from civilisation that they could be occurring at any point in history. Figure 10 demonstrates Mebh and Robyn's quiet solitude, far from the woes of Kilkenny, as they sit atop a large tree root overlooking the town. From here, the town seems distant and harmless, and its rigid visual characteristics are framed within and contrasted against the vibrant woodland. An issue arises here, however, because while physical solitude – surrounding oneself with nature – is desirable, it is often not possible or practical.

Figure 10 – Robyn and Mebh in the forest (00:34:20)

The trilogy's strong emphasis on external isolation is understandable given the nature of the medium, internal isolation is far more difficult to portray. However, in an era when most of the population of Ireland live in large towns and cities, physical separation is difficult to achieve. In busy urban landscapes punctuated with sound pollution, rising populations, and long working hours, the necessary time and resources required to seek out solitude in nature are not abundant. The implication that solitude demands long, intense periods of external seclusion is not a message that modern Irish people can garner practical utility from. Modern circumstances demand an alteration to the ways we depict solitude and nature on screen. It is possible to incorporate older ideas, according to writers like Ó Súilleabháin (1981), and in fact necessary; he argues that "reworking" old ideas and traditions is a central element of creativity because circumstances are always changing. Ó Suilleabháin writes about reworking in the context of musical traditions and language, but the process of reworking applies as much to the films of Cartoon Saloon, a trilogy inspired by the folktales of centuries past. Titon similarly examines "adaptive management" (2015, p.179), the process of consciously altering artistic traditions to ensure their resilience and continued relevance. This process is often experimental, but it is vital if old traditions and teachings are to survive cultural and

societal upheaval through the ages. These films move beyond promoting external isolation, touching on a deeper inner solitude that is not entirely dependent on external surroundings.

There are moments in all three films where external and internal isolation blend together, where solitude appears far more accessible. *The Secret of Kells* gives an example of this: when Brendan finally faces Crom Cruach, it is a battle in a bizarre realm where neither up nor down exist. It is entirely physically disconnected from the rest of the forest, Ben and Crom swimming about surrounded by twinkling Celtic patterns (00:50:30). The fight is so surreal that it could easily be happening in Brendan's head; it is his artistic abilities that eventually help him to defeat the dark god, not his physical strength. While the forest is a powerful image of isolation in the film, the realisation of Brendan's inner strength climaxes in this abstract space.

Wolfwalkers too places an emphasis on Robyn's mental space, putting the audience in her head at times by showing her point-of-view in wolf-form (00:45:40). Scenes like this, utilising the power of animation to explore abstract spaces, emphasise the characters' internal state as much as their external surroundings. While the forest, the ocean, the cavern, and the island all provide invaluable solitude for the protagonists, they ultimately serve as catalysts for an internal process that involves the forging of friendships and the overcoming of personal doubts. It is vital that this internal solitude is emphasised as much as external solitude, something that future filmmakers can consider.

6.8. Wisdom in Solitude

If solitude within nature can lead to deeper insights about oneself and the world, solitude can be interpreted as a source of wisdom and a tool for rediscovering knowledge. It is an idea that can be explored through Cartoon Saloon's three films – the attainment of wisdom through isolation. This process, building inner strength or unearthing secret knowledge in

solitude, is promoted by a number of religions, and referenced throughout world mythology. Examples include the Prophet Muhammad who sought isolation to attain revelations from God, similar to the Biblical figure Moses who climbed Mount Sinai alone to receive the Ten Commandments. The concept of *Khalwa* in Sufism, referring to "solitude", is the act of seeking complete isolation to learn from a mentor and become more in touch with the presence of the divine. A similar Eastern tradition, *Chilla*, is an act of repentance and seclusion for forty days and nights, mostly performed in parts of India and the Middle East. Christian hermits and Tibetan monks are among the many other examples in which religious practitioners seek isolation and detachment. As described by Shaw, the Buddha refers to "ten fruits" born from the contemplative life, including isolation and simplicity; seclusion brings joy and happiness that pervades throughout the mind and body of the practitioner. Seclusion leads to concentration which builds confidence and the "unification of the mind" (69-70). This very much emphasises the internal aspects of solitude, its potential to lead to personal discoveries, and as argued earlier, it is important for this internal process to be discussed as much as external solitude.

Solitude as a source of wisdom can be explored in the context of Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy too; the films' treatment of solitude bears some similarities to wider world mythology. Brendan's journey in the first film, reflects a kind of departure, initiation, and return, a journey of personal development. The forest and its many secluded locations, like the treetop where Aisling reveals the berries to him, are places where Brendan can face and embrace his curiosity and creativity, characteristics he was encouraged to suppress in Kells. At the abbey, Brendan was a kind of outsider, struggling with internal feelings of otherness in a regimented community. The forest, as a kind of Other in itself, provides an opportunity for him to express himself and integrate these suppressed qualities. By the end of the film, he has become a teacher and a wiseman, the author and illuminator of the Book of Kells. Having become Master of the Two Worlds, he has achieved a kind of internal unification. It is clear

example of how entering into solitude, in this case retreating to the forest, leads to the discovery of wisdom and knowledge that can be applied to improve one's life.

Ways of achieving solitude beyond retreating into nature can provide audiences with an understanding of how to apply it in their own lives. Repeatedly, solitude is connected to a 'simple life', a separation from desires through which happiness and wisdom are attained. Comparing Western and Eastern considerations on isolation, King-Kok Cheung discusses Chinese poet and recluse Tao Qian's appraisal of simple homes, far from civilisation and distracting worldly possessions, wherein is contained the "utmost moral power" (2013, pp.65-66). These gifts of solitude – moral teachings, connection with the divine, the rediscovery of old truths – are presented in the three animated films, much as how Irish mythology and folklore refers to isolation. Cú Chulainn, one of the most famous Irish mythological characters and a heroic figure in Irish myth, received his combat training far from the luxuries of civilisation, on the Isle of Skye, and the hermit Tuan mac Cairill lived a simple life alone, but he offered endless knowledge to visitors regarding the fantastical history of Ireland. In these examples from both Ireland and abroad, it is evident that wisdom and knowledge are linked to solitude, and solitude can be achieved through living a simple life with few distractions.

The potential for lost knowledge to be regained through solitude also ties into the idea of solitude as a source of personal fulfilment, a tool for rediscovery. The portrayal of enlightenment and knowledge gained through isolation is a characteristic of Gaelic cinema that David Martin-Jones (2010) examines in detail. In such films, this wisdom may be portrayed as past knowledge that has been sealed away, waiting to be rediscovered. When found, ancient knowledge has implications for the present, the distant past has the power to shape the future; *An Ìobairt* (1996) portrays ghostly apparitions emerging from the landscape, images of Druidic sacrifice blending with the modern day (Jones 2010, pp.163-164). Similarly, *Seachd: The Inaccessible Pinnacle* (2007) explores the passing of memories and

stories from one generation to the next. Old wisdom is attained and understood on the protagonist's lonely journey. The Grandfather who tells these stories is himself revealed to be centuries-old, a mythic figure in his own right just like the story of Tuan. Secluded natural spaces as containers of historic wisdom are a recurring idea in the folklore trilogy. Brother Aidan teaches Brendan that there is more wisdom to be found in the forest than in any books, and the Great Seanchaí's lair is a repository for all the ancient wisdom in history, locked away in a cave, from which Ben learns about Macha's tragic story and Saoirse's past. This ties into the role that *seanchaí* – travelling storytellers/historians – have served throughout Irish history, maintaining an oral tradition while spreading knowledge. As demonstrated, solitude can be a way of retaining or protecting old knowledge and tradition – retreating into solitude allows for that knowledge to be rediscovered.

The characters of Cartoon Saloon's films venture into isolation, either willingly or unknowingly, and the experience changes them for the better. Threats and obstacles in the known world have solutions in the unknown world; these can be material boons such as the berries that Brendan needs to finish the Book of Iona/Kells. By far one of the greatest gifts of isolation however, as depicted in the films, is friendship and acceptance. Allies within the secluded otherworld both serve as companions and mentors, like Aisling, a native of the forest in *The Secret of Kells* who rescues, teaches, and plays with Brendan; apart from being a guide, she is the friend that he never had back in Kells. In *Song of the Sea*, multiple friendly mentors and allies emerge from the unknown world to guide the children, such as na Daoine Sídhe who not only teach the protagonists and the audience about the supernatural, but they also provide light-hearted entertainment. Mebh, although untamed and beast-like, is the kind of reliable mentor that Robyn could never have found back in the town, even helping Robyn to discover the ability to transform.

These experiences elevate the protagonists to a new way of seeing the world, and while the presence of a friend or mentor may seem antithetical to the concept of isolation,

some worldviews consider it a vital component. Tao Qian, in his extensive writings about hermitage and life in the countryside, emphasised the importance of providing for one's family. To him, being in the presence of friends, children included, does not prevent one from finding solace in seclusion but rather contributes to it (Cheung, 2013, p.68). Seclusion does not always have to mean loneliness and complete disconnection from the world, sometimes it can just be a modest and minimalist lifestyle. Paul Salmon and Susan Matarese (2014) write of "solitude in community", arguing that social interaction is an effective buffer against stress. They point out that, while Henry Thoreau may have spent years in relative solitude, he was surrounded by a supportive network of friends. Thoreau claimed that solitude can be achieved in communal settings: "The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervis in the desert." (1854, p.131) He went on to describe how his life in solitude consisted of the occasional visitor, and he welcomed them: "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." (Ibid. p.135) This positive message, found at times in all three films, provides a realistic and attainable goal for modern viewers, relating back to the need for practical advice as discussed in the previous section.

So far, the benefits of solitude have been discussed, the rewards gained from retreating to seclusion or favouring a lifestyle comparable to that of our ancestors. The rediscovery of ancient wisdom, such as the knowledge and stories gifted by the Great Seanchaí to Ben, encourage us to disconnect from the present and look back to the past for guidance. Thrift and Kitchin (2009) describe the contentment that comes from such a pursuit: young people seek to distance themselves from the communities where they grew up; artists pursue distance from distractions and find solace in isolation; self-imposed exile can provide benefits like protection. Distance and seclusion can also define geographical regions and identities, insulating peoples from danger or massive political upheaval occurring elsewhere. However, distance and isolation can also lead to a loss of contact between friends or can mean that some

communities are unable to benefit from innovations happening far away. Remoteness can create adversity and myopia; it can put one at a disadvantage. The multi-faceted nature of solitude must be considered if it is to be effectively understood. There is always the potential for it to be a regressive act, not a progressive or enlightening one – the Folklore Trilogy illustrates the power of isolation from the world, but critically, characters do not remain there permanently. In *The Secret of Kells*, Brendan writes down the wisdom he found in the forest, spreading it far and wide for the people of Ireland to see. *Song of the Sea*'s Saoirse similarly decides not to go into everlasting isolation in Tír na nÓg, remaining with her father and brother even if the separation from her mother is heartbreaking. *Wolfwalkers* shows us how pure isolation is unsustainable, Mebh and the wolves of the forest forced out of their comfortable solitude by encroaching colonisers. Quietude can, at times, also be incredibly harmful – when Robyn opts to fall silent in the face of oppression to ensure that she and her father are not punished, it only drives her into deeper despondency. In other words, the benefits that might be gained from isolation or quietude are highly context-reliant; the act of solitude in one instance might demand bravery (i.e., Brendan's excursion into the forest) but in a different context, could prove destructive (i.e., Macha's decision to isolate uncomfortable emotions and ignore them).

Simple living is also far from idyllic; it may provide isolation, but it presents its own challenges. Tuan provides a counterpoint to Tao Qian's veneration of the simple farmer's life, arguing that the escape from rural agriculture and the rise of populations in cities meant that the backbreaking work of farming could be avoided by most people (2013, pp.120-122). Evidently, a balance must be found between retreating into solitude and returning to everyday life. The pursuit of a simple life with few to no luxuries can be venerated to such an extent as to be harmful and misleading. In Cartoon Saloon's trilogy, some characters do discover that balance: Brendan may enjoy the seclusion of the forest, but the knowledge he gains must ultimately be brought back to his own people. He does not become a recluse, he becomes a

travelling teacher, spreading wisdom for all to hear. Saoirse similarly decides to remain with Ben and her father in the end; the secluded otherworld is a container of much wisdom, but she realises she cannot stay there forever. Solitude is a process, a means to attaining personal growth and wisdom, not the end itself.

The complexities of solitude and isolation are evident in the writings of other geographers. Stephen Royle (2014) may celebrate the insulative nature of islands in his work, but he is not unaware of the dangers of extreme isolation. Cultures can be preserved for centuries, but failure to communicate with the outside world can also result in self-destruction – he points to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and its unique culture, shaped by isolation. The complete seclusion of the islanders led to the development of ancestor worship and the construction of hundreds of moai, monolithic statues. One theory for the lack of trees on the island is that the people of Rapa Nui exhausted all resources. By the time that settlers arrived, the island's population had shrunk significantly, and clan warfare was widespread. Extreme isolation has the potential to mould and insulate utterly unique cultures and religions, but failure to communicate with the outside through trade and the exchange of ideas can also set societies back. It is clear that a careful equilibrium has to be maintained when applying solitude, either on the scale of entire cultures or individual lifestyles.

Arguing for the abandonment of modern circumstances and returning to some mythical "greater" time, utilising mythological source material to romanticise nature and the ancient past, can quickly become a regressive and harmful message. Therefore, any reworking of myth that advocates for the virtues of isolation must find a balance, promoting the wisdom of the past and nature without glorification. Titon argues, in his writings about adaptive management and sustainability in artistic traditions, that one of the purposes of adaptation is to account for weaknesses and adjust accordingly – depictions of solitude are vulnerable to becoming regressive and harmful, therefore modern reworkings of these ideas ought to be conscious of the pitfalls (Titon, 2015). *The Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, and *Wolfwalkers*

are good examples of this approach in action: the outsider protagonist may gain a great deal from their seclusion, but they bring their own strength and wisdom with them into the unknown world. Brendan, Saoirse, and Robyn all undergo internal growth, but these outsiders ultimately rescue the worlds they have discovered, giving as much as they gain. These films depict an exchange of ideas and worldviews between past and present, between humanity and the natural world. The implication is that, through the practice of seclusion, the past is something to learn from but not entirely return to; modernity and the city have the potential to evolve and should not be abandoned. Nature and the supernatural is also portrayed in a multifaceted way, full of as much terror and violence as it is wisdom and hope. Crom Cruach and Macha, both primary antagonists, are examples of this.

Cartoon Saloon's folkloric trilogy, in their exploration of solitude and the wisdom that it provides, are progressive rather than regressive. They depict the discovery of hidden truths within isolation as life-changing moments for the young protagonists, leading to maturity and open-mindedness; as worlds collide, they blend and benefit from each other's experiences. This process ultimately leads to a dramatic transformation, both physical and mental, born from the wisdom attained in solitude.

6.9. Transformation through Solitude

Throughout the trilogy, the wisdom and self-improvement that is achieved by the heroic characters eventually leads to a complete transformation, either physical or mental. This transformation is the third and final benefit of solitude that is discussed here, and as with the two prior examples, the trilogy successfully incorporates and reworks old ideas regarding transformation through solitude. It is important to remember that while Saoirse or Robyn may undergo extreme bodily transformation, it is ultimately reflective of a deeper internal process. While Cheung is clear that Tao Qian's perspective on isolation is distinct in many ways from

that of American writer and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson, they share a common understanding that isolation leads to an immense inner transformation. For the Chinese poet, this meant finding a deep self-respect while attaining humility in the knowledge that any individual is just a small part of a vast natural order. For Emerson, a close friend of Henry Thoreau of whom he shared many transcendentalist beliefs, solitude leads to connection with the divine and the realisation of one's immense potential, a kind of transcendence (Cheung, 2013, pp.68-69). Similarly, Cartoon Saloon's three folkloric reworkings depict solitude as a source of personal and physical transformation, all the while leaning more in favour of Tao Qian's worldview. Isolation within the supernatural world, disconnected from all that is familiar, first and foremost matures the young characters.

This is most prevalent in *Song of the Sea* as Ben and Saoirse's relationship, starting out as a childish sibling rivalry, grows into a deep mutual affection and urge to protect each other; a coming-of-age story. Isolation also leads to the discovery or development of skills: Brendan's retreat into isolation results in artistic abilities that defeat Crom and complete the Book of Iona/Kells; Saoirse does not just discover her voice, she sings, and her song transforms the dying world of the *Sídhe*; Robyn masters her new form as a wolfwalker, harnessing transformative powers to defeat the Lord Protector's forces. This maturation and achievement of great feats, the transformation of the characters into heroes of myth, is only possible due to the solitude they all underwent.

This discovery of inner talent not only lends to hope in the external world, overcoming terrifying foes and protecting forgotten realms, it often represents the culmination of these characters' arcs and the completion of their path towards self-acceptance and self-cultivation. Again, it is a story that harkens back to Cú Chulainn in isolation, training with Scathach and developing combat skills that would be useful throughout the rest of his life. Fionn mac Cumhaill, another well-recognised hero of Irish mythology, was brought up in secret deep in the forest of Sliabh Bladma. Here, his isolation served as protection against those tracking

him down, and in the forest, he learned how to hunt and fight. These cases of secluded self-improvement are also reminiscent of *chilla katna*, similar to the Eastern practice of *chilla*, in which an advanced practitioner of classical Hindustani music goes into extreme isolation for weeks to hone their talents. Throughout the world, solitude is not just seen as a source of wisdom, it provides an opportunity to reshape oneself entirely. In the case of Brendan, his transformation leads to Brother Aidan's eventual irrelevance; once the boy's mentor, Aidan is replaced by his own student. Brendan goes on to show the Book of Iona (now the Book of Kells) to the people of Ireland, passing on the wisdom he attained (01:07:29). It is a heroic transformation that William Indick (2004) describes as vital to the progression of the hero's journey. The hero learns much from the mentor, only to replace them in time – in this case, it demonstrates how solitude is a means of achieving immense personal transformation.

Song of the Sea deals with the tempestuous landscape of the ocean, itself a powerful image of transformation. Chouinard (2010) describes the transformative and healing properties of water in Irish myth, and how it is interpreted in the works of Neil Jordan, something that can be applied to Cartoon Saloon's films and *Song of the Sea* in particular. To Chouinard, the ocean's "irrationality" and refusal to conform to any specific form, its complete isolation from the reliable shape of the land or the claustrophobia of the city, makes it a powerful embodiment of transformative processes. It is a strong motif in *Song of the Sea* because it inherits centuries-worth of meaning. The ocean as a symbol of shapeshifting and the ever-changing world, when reworked by Cartoon Saloon, becomes a means of visually demonstrating the potential for self-reinvention. The depiction of physical transformation as a whole, be it into a seal or a wolf, is utilised in the trilogy to visually represent a process that might otherwise be difficult to portray, like how surreal imagery is used to show internal isolation and place us in the mind of the characters. In Figure 11 below, the solitude of the ocean with its calming shades of blue and soft spiralling imagery helps to visualise Saoirse's

tranquil state of mind. Separated from the worries of the rest of the world, and drifting through the sea without a care, this is a safe place for her to explore herself and her powers.

Figure 11 – Saoirse transforms into a seal (00:17:40)

External seclusion may be more difficult to achieve for some people, but transformation is ultimately portrayed by these films as an inner process. It is the result of an appreciation for one's place in the world, the achievement of self-respect, and the cultivation of relationships. Just as how meditative practices and connection with the natural world can improve one's mood and mental wellbeing, these films depict isolation and solitude as sources of personal transformation. Brendan, Saoirse, and Robyn go on isolated journeys, physically moving through supernatural spaces and taking on literal threats, and the audience is encouraged to seek out a similar, albeit far less literal, journey.

6.10. Conclusion

Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy, through the revitalisation of mythical characters and imagery, was an attempt to promote Ireland's past as a source of guidance in the present, to embolden appreciation for nature, and to provide answers to an audience seeking meaning in a

rapidly changing world. Through examining nature's portrayal in the film from these four perspectives, it has been demonstrated that the loss of a connection to nature and the effect that such a loss has on Ireland's modern identity is a central message within *Song of the Sea*. The landscape of the ocean, an embodiment of untamed and untouched nature, provides relief and comfort for the protagonist. It is a message that can resonate with audiences in a world where stress, uncertainty, and mundane routine are abundant; *Song of the Sea* presents the natural world as the ultimate means of escapism. The practice of seeking out isolation in nature, a source of enlightenment, is endorsed through depictions of the hidden Daoine Sídhe, the hermit Seanchaí, or the isle of Mac Lír that is so far from the mainland, it might as well have been in another time.

The coming-of-age journey that leads Saoirse into the unknown is made possible when she embraces her heritage and links to nature, an archetypal Maiden with powers and knowledge that are drawn from the natural world. By extension, the personification of natural forces as feminine characters harkens back to Irish mythology and only further implies the potential for human connection with nature. The film provides an optimistic vision of a forgotten heritage and a subsiding natural world that are not yet lost; despite a rapidly changing Irish landscape, the old Ireland survives on the fringes, available to those who seek it out. The ocean, as an agent of cleansing and change, once again plays a role in presenting this message, it is the place where Saoirse ultimately learns who she is through literal and metaphorical transformation. That final theme, the depiction of transformative processes leading to rebirth and the rediscovery of wisdom, ties into the overarching idea of renewal and hope for a better future.

The connective tissue of these various themes is the portrayal of solitude in the trilogy, both in its external and internal forms. The three films, each expanding on the previous in thematic and narrative complexity, lean heavily into the idea of solitude as a source of personal growth, vital in the pursuit of a more fulfilling life and, as the films would imply, a

deeper resonance with the natural world. It is not surprising that security and wisdom is so often associated in the trilogy with isolation and reclusiveness – Campbell's monomyth, and its many subsequent iterations, place special emphasis on the hero's retreat into the otherworld. Nature, or more broadly the unfamiliar realm, is equal parts dangerous and beautiful, a place of refuge from the troubles of the familiar world, and it is within the world of isolated otherness that the journey of individuation begins. In all three films, the familiar world and its inhabitants are in peril, and the solution can only be found by journeying beyond the boundaries of known territory; solitude does not just function as a trigger for self-rejuvenation, it becomes a heroic act, a step towards salvation. While this line of thinking can lead to certain shortcomings, notably a reluctance to accept change or a dismissal of outside innovations, it has also been shown that these films navigate the issues associated with solitude in the modern world carefully, ultimately providing an outlook that is both practical and forward-looking.

Far from being the first stories to promote self-isolation, these three films are the inheritors of a millennia-old tradition in which religious fables, myths, philosophical essays, and art have celebrated the personal benefits of solitude and seclusion. Solitude as a path to connection with the divine, a spiritual or meditative experience, is carried on in Cartoon Saloon's animations, the supernatural always hidden but accessible if one seeks it out. The implication that enlightenment can be tapped into in the depths of a forest, beneath the sea, or on a secluded island urges the audience to look to nature for solace, a message that also lends to an environmentalist reading of these films. While there is the danger of overemphasising external isolation and glorifying a fictional version of the natural world, these films successfully urge the viewer to look beyond that, implying that external isolation is merely the gateway to a far more valuable internal process.

Solitude can provide more tangible benefits than esoteric wisdom or some appreciation for nature; skills and self-cultivation, developing a strong respect for oneself, are

depicted as benefits. The presence of allies is also less of a distraction and more of a necessity in the pursuit of fulfilment. Solitude is additionally portrayed as the key to unlocking guidance from the past, a way of connecting with one's heritage and the history of the land. Far from suggesting a return to some earlier state of existence, the exchange of ideas between past and present in these films, particularly between characters like Brendan and Aisling, is a progressive and constructive message. The final result of seclusion, a self-rejuvenation that is depicted in these films as a dramatic transformation or the attainment of great powers, is something that audiences can strive for within their own lives. While taking on a fantastical and highly stylised form, exploring mythic places that feel a world away from the regimented, industrialised world in which we live, the Trilogy's message about seclusion is one that has rung true throughout the centuries, and continues to do so.The natural world, both throughout Irish myth and across the Trilogy, is not a force to be dealt with lightly or understood easily. It is paradoxical in many respects, changing shape constantly and behaving erratically, yet remaining an eternal presence in the world. It provides powerful boons to the heroes and heroines of these stories, and simultaneously poses a great risk to their survival. Knowledge contained within nature is precious, timeless, and vital to the progression of the narratives, often revealing a deeper truth about reality, yet this wisdom is extremely dangerous to seek out and often hidden away, far from civilisation. Finally, humanity is undoubtedly a part of nature, and we are shown the power that comes with reconnecting with it (undergoing profound transformations in the process) – however, nature in the Trilogy is also treated as a great "Other", a direct counter to the Irish society that we know, and one that hides away on the fringes of Ireland, far from easy to access. In exploring the various attributes of otherness, the Trilogy relies heavily upon nature imagery, animal symbolism, and mythological interpretations of the Irish landscape.

Cartoon Saloon's depictions of nature and the Other within nature are equal parts optimistic and tragic. The struggle between modernity and untamed Ireland is a constant

throughout the films, one of the main throughlines that links all of them together, and we follow the struggle of the heroes as they seek to reconcile this conflict and perhaps save both worlds from each other. *The Secret of Kells* suggests that the realms of nature and humans, despite obvious differences, have a great deal to learn from one another. The Book of Kells in this instance comes to symbolise the synergy between nature and human, old and new, pagan and Christian, and its message gives hope to people across Ireland. *Song of the Sea*, despite presenting contemporary Irish society in terms of its urban sprawl and lack of concern for the environment, also depicts a secluded world where the magic of nature persists, and hope remains for the *sídhe* who rely heavily on the continuation of that magic. The contrast between nature and humans is most overt in *Wolfwalkers*, where the violent clash between the Lord Protector and the wolves culminates in nature's victory, and the two young heroines Robyn and Mebh travel over the horizon, in search of a new home. Conversely, the future of the natural world remains uncertain by the end of the Trilogy – despite their friendship, Brendan and Aisling eventually part ways, meeting only briefly one last time, many years later. As the *sídhe* recover from Macha's oppression at the end of *Song of the Sea*, they gather to fly away across the ocean, crossing a threshold that will remain closed forever more and separating them from the rest of the world. Finally, Robyn and Mebh's triumphant departure at the conclusion of *Wolfwalkers* is bittersweet; they have won the battle against the Lord Protector today, but we know that the eventual fate of the native Irish Grey Wolf was extinction.

Ultimately, this chapter only examines Irish mythological nature motifs and archetypes from a few perspectives, considering their relevance to otherness, transformation, heroism, and national identity, alongside the overt environmentalist ideas of the Trilogy. The topic of nature within Irish folk tradition and modern Irish cinema remains an elusive one, taking many forms and changing shape to accommodate all manner of political, social, and cultural commentary. Nature has been applied to discussions of national identity, romanticised

in nationalist literature and film, but *Wolfwalkers* also shows us how the struggle of the natural world can echo the fight against colonial occupation and for the liberation of women. What the folklore trilogy ultimately teaches us is that nature, unable to speak for itself, may be adapted to support just about any idea, and acts as a powerful conduit through which we can discuss anything. Its broad usefulness can be applied to encourage isolation, conservative nationalism, and political subjugation – alternatively, nature imagery can be used effectively to make the world a better place, revealing the dysfunctional elements of our society and dissolving the barriers that exist between us and the perceived "Other".

Chapter 7: The Woman as Other

7.1. Introduction

In describing the various manifestations of nationalist, historical, and heritage narratives in Irish folklore cinema to date and the forms in which nature is presented throughout the folklore trilogy, a component that recurs frequently is the image and archetype of the woman. Symbolically, women have played a central role in the construction of a cohesive Irish identity for generations, female archetypes standing as powerful icons of the state and its people. Long before a coherent and united Irish identity evolved, goddesses, princesses, and queens were a recurrent fixture in Irish mythology, personifying the forces of nature. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a national mythology similarly drew from ideas like the benevolent mother goddess or beautiful maiden to reinforce the distinct identity of the island, to rally support for self-governance, and to grant a sense of continuity between ancient Ireland and the modern Irish state.

The woman as a symbol of Ireland – as a heroic, rebellious, or sorrowful 'goddess' – has a lineage going back centuries; in one of its earliest iterations, Queen Medb (or Mebh) of Connacht is a ferocious and combative warrior-queen, a goddess in her own right, and a mythological ruler of ancient Ireland. Perhaps more than any other mythic figure, she is easily reshaped for nationalist purposes: as a fiery monarch, she naturally embodies the concept of legitimate sovereignty, and indeed Miranda Green (1992) defines Medb as a sovereignty goddess. However, her symbolic association with Ireland goes further, as she is promiscuous and dominant in all her relationships, evoking the image of a fertility deity (Green, 1992, p.148), connecting her to Ireland the landscape as much as Ireland the sovereign territory. In Medb's most notable appearance, in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge,* she raises an army and leads them to war. It is easy to see how the warrior-queen could be so effectively connected to the concept of a sovereign Ireland willing to fight for its freedom. The Mebh of the folklore

trilogy is no different, fiery and combative, dominant in all her exchanges with friends and foes alike. *Wolfwalkers*' Mebh declares a war of her own, leading the woodland forces against foreign settlers, resonating with the ancient warrior-queen rushing into battle. As an icon of the uncolonised forest and the spirit of an Irishness that remains untamed, Mebh is as much a sovereignty archetype as her mythological ancestress.

Later iterations of the "woman as Ireland" trope include Róisín Dubh (anglicised as 'Dark Rosaleen'), a poetic nationalist symbol who frequently embodies hope for Ireland in its darkest times. Recurring throughout Irish poetry and songs across generations, her earliest form is in a love poem from the 18th century (McMahon and O'Donoghue 2004, pp.708-709), a troubled period in Irish history that saw ideas of republicanism emerge in force following the French Revolution and Wolfe Tone's famous failed rebellion that became a symbol for resistance. The trilogy's girls, notably Aisling and Saoirse, both represent hope in dark times. The former is a forest spirit who acts as an ally to the hero in a time of invasions and raids, the latter representing the final hope for the world of the *sídhe* as their realm, and the memory of old Ireland, is frozen into stone. In both instances, poem or song is granted extreme significance, a channel for restorative and liberating magic. Aisling's sorrowful poem helps her to free Brendan from his imprisonment by Abbot Cellach, and Saoirse's song is the catalyst for the *sídhe's* liberation, a song she struggles to find throughout the journey, reminiscent of Ireland's own difficulty in reclaiming its indigenous language, its 'voice'.

The following sections critically examine the manifestations of the woman in Irish myth and modern film, examining how Cartoon Saloon's work both aligns with representations that have come before and potentially breaks away from old traditions. The Irish crone, hag, or *cailleach,* who shares great similarities with the modern conception of witches, is approached as a paradoxical figure in this chapter, like how the 'monstrous' and the wolf will be described in Chapter 8. The section on the crone is organised chronologically, detailing her emergence in ancient Ireland as a seasonal and land deity, followed by her

dramatic shift towards dark magical practices and trickery during the medieval period, culminating in her contemporary "revival" as an empowered, even feminist, archetype. She is in many ways an excellent example of the attributes associated with women throughout Irish mythology and, more recently, Irish folklore cinema – thematically connected with nature, powerful in her own right, and above all, mysterious. The other sections, discussing heroines from queer and feminist perspectives, place far greater emphasis on the women and girls of the trilogy, drawing from the discussion of the crone and connecting it to similar figures like Mother Ireland. Out of the various angles from which the mythological and folkloric woman is examined, her function as a kind of Other reveals just how contradictory she can be. Immensely powerful and in touch with the very landscape itself, the mother or crone nevertheless have been described from a male perspective for centuries, only recently becoming figures of women's liberation and autonomy.

7.2. The Crone in Irish Myth and Folklore

Throughout the extensive mythos of magical Irish monsters, gods, and *sídhe*, female figures play a powerful role, from the land goddesses that nurture and provide sustenance to the selkie residing in her hidden, underwater home. Few, however, possess such a contradictory nature or fluctuating reputation as the elderly crone. The third aspect and culmination of the Triple Goddess, the crone or hag archetype embodies a complex combination of ideas; she is wisdom and knowledge, and she represents the summation of a woman's entire life. Conversely, she is also death, the cessation of life's experience (Kravets et al. 2020). Such goddesses are not hard to find across the world. The Hindu deity Kali is at once a protector and destroyer; the Baba Yaga of Slavic folklore dizzyingly veers between a maternal figure in some stories and a child-eater in others; and the goddess Hecate of ancient Greece exists on the boundaries between the mortal and divine worlds, literally personifying borders and crossroads. The crone of Irish myth is no different and Károly Káli-Rozmis

(2020) emphasises her many manifestations as a goddess, a creature, and a fairy. She is never relegated to any particular form. Similarly, Káli-Rozmis highlights the crone's moral complexity, embodying death but not necessarily evil. That sense of moral ambiguity and unsettling otherness pervades many iterations of the archetype, from older warrior women to wailing banshees.

All three aspects of the Triple Goddess can, to varying extents, embody Ireland. The mother, a protective nurturer, most commonly takes on this role. However, writers like Patricia Lysaght in her *A Pocket Book of the Banshee* (1998) make the case for an elderly woman who embodies the soul of the Irish landscape and people. The *bean sídhe* or "fairy woman" exhibits the qualities of this mythic crone succinctly, such as her links to nature by virtue of the ability to transform into a raven, a crow, even a hare or a weasel (Káli-Rozmis 2020, p.3). Sometimes, there are many banshees, each connected to a distinct Irish bloodline, and upon the death of a family member, they mourn and wail to signify the tragedy. In other cases, she is vengeful, returning from the dead to seek justice for some wrong done in life. Káli-Rozmis describes how some banshee can be beautiful, but are more often mysterious, veiled, and hag-like with long, grungy hair. Her immortality could also hint to divine origins, as Lysaght argues (1998, pp.20-22); aspects of the Morrígan such as Macha or Badhbh, warrior deities associated with death, share strong commonalities with the banshee. It is clear from this single example of the banshee that the Irish mythological crone takes on a dense variety of forms, behaviours, and meanings. She is a part-woman, part-creature, part-deity who reflects elements of the ghostly and the fairy-folk.

The old crone archetype of early Ireland is not restricted to the banshee. Her numerous cousins reveal a rich tradition of depicting and understanding the elderly aspect of the Triple Goddess. Cassandra Eason (2011) lists, for instance, the three Celtic Hags of the seasons who wear veils, tell the future, and closely embody the natural order. The Cailleachs, similarly, take on the form of powerful earth goddesses, transforming into cats and even trees or stones

(Eason 2011, pp.180-181). These symbolise a counterargument to the 19th and 20th century literary tendencies to depict Ireland as a beautiful and youthful maiden. The move away from the multi-faceted hag, towards a more narrow and typically negative interpretation of the figure, began as Káli-Rozmis argues (2020, pp.4-5) with the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. As Christian belief blended with mythology to create new folklore and tradition, the roles of female archetypes changed. Some were adapted, others rejected altogether, and the inevitable result of this was a darker and more devilish crone.

With the advent of Christianity in Ireland, a culture of worship towards a male deity and his son gradually upended the mother goddess from her position as matriarch. While some elements of native Irish belief were altered and incorporated into the Christian worldview, others would be outright rejected, as Maclaran, Kravets and Stevens (2020) highlight. The crone, with her profound connections to the landscape and sacred wisdom, would be among those archetypes, transforming into a symbol of wickedness and chaos over the centuries. While characters like Badhbh, who embodied something sinister and blood-thirsty (Káli-Rozmis 2020), had once represented just a small part of the crone's enigmatic identity, these themes now came to encapsulate her. Through this process, the medieval archetype of the ugly old hag would lay the foundations for the modern conception of the witch.

Consigned to superstition and local folklore, the Irish crone nevertheless retained a grip on the imagination of Irish elites and peasantry alike all the way up until the 19th century. In his detailed exploration of the history of Irish witchcraft, Andrew Sneddon (2015) points to how these tales coexisted with official Church doctrine, blending with beliefs in spiritual elements such as angels and demons. The result was a hag that changed appearance over the generations, a tradition that evolved and so retained its relevancy; while the wave of witch trials that subjugated women across Europe in the Middle Ages rarely affected Ireland in a similar way, a firm fear of witches was nevertheless a core aspect of everyday life

(Sneddon 2015, pp.2-3). Dark magic and association with the Devil became the hag's practice, and figures like Gerald of Wales, who notably wrote about other folkloric monsters like werewolves, warned of her ability to transform into a hare, robbing the milk of peasant farmers by sucking it from the teats of his cows. The conception of a hag who not only practiced devil worship and inflicted curses but also was just a general nuisance to society, making the lives of everyday peasantry a misery, became a genuine concern (Sneddon pp.9-11). While philosophers and theologians speculated about her otherworldly interactions with Satan, common people were far more terrified of her capacity to steal hard-earned produce like milk or butter. Despite social and economic divides, however, the Irish crone survived for centuries, no longer an elderly embodiment of the earth, but a conspirator with all things unnatural and unholy.

There were not merely economic or religious reasons to fear the witch – the anxiety surrounding women, particularly those who stepped out of line or failed to live up to expectations, was also an integral ingredient. Sneddon goes on to describe how, by the early modern period, our contemporary understanding of the witch had fully manifested, fuelled by a "powerful hatred" of elderly women (p.60). During the 17th century, accusations of witchcraft were disproportionately levied against older women and by now Ireland was seeing its own trials take place, like the case of Nellie Dunwoody who was drowned for her alleged supernatural powers (Sneddon 2015, p.120). The hag evoked not only fear, but also disgust, vilified and ostracised for her otherness. That popular disdain for unconventional women like the crone, lacking the beauty or fertility of other goddess archetypes, played a strong role in shaping the witch of the medieval to early modern periods (Maclaran et al. 2020). This tendency, born from a culture of patriarchal dominance, would ultimately face a backlash as women sought greater freedom, opportunities, and representation.

The belief in positive magical practice, used to cure ailments and find lost livestock, may have been overshadowed by the dreaded spectre of witchcraft, but it survived throughout

the Irish medieval and early modern periods in the form of the "cunning-folk". These benevolent kinds of wise men and women may have found themselves at odds with Church doctrine at times, but Sneddon describes a long history of respected charmers and healers. People would approach these local practitioners to cure cattle, foretell the future, and provide supernatural medicines (Sneddon 2015, pp.124-129). Among them were the *lucht pisreóg* (enchanters), *doctú irí na síofraí* (fairy doctors), and *mná feasa* (wise women); indeed, the belief in folk who possess the "gift", or superstition surrounding the seventh sons of seventh sons, continues in some rural Irish communities into the modern day. Even some scattered stories about the banshee (her positive form being called *bean tighe*) continued to suggest a more benevolent housekeeper spirit or protective fairy woman (Káli-Rozmis 2020, p.3). All of this demonstrates that when counter-cultural movements throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, spurred on by feminist action and facilitated by the fading of superstitions, sought to reimagine the crone, there was some precedent for it. The crone or witch as a revitalised feminist icon continues to serve a political function, shaped by modern Irish writers and activists, but she also harkens back to her multifaceted and morally vague pre-Christian ancestor.

From narrow-minded fear and vilification to an elder woman possessing immense positive power, the crone has become a symbol for not only wisdom, but also liberation and rebellion. Spiritual movements like Wicca continue to challenge patriarchal conceptions of the goddess archetypes, and Maclaran et al. highlight a series of powerful attributes that have come to define the modern crone figure. She is grounded and stern, unafraid to chastise her children and remind us of mortality. She is not a silent and submissive woman, rather she lashes out angrily at injustices, refusing to be courteous or obedient. She has a sense of humour, but contrastingly wields a sharp tongue, and she holds a deep understanding of the natural world. Finally, she is fond of the company of other women, forming "Crone Circles", a kind of safe space in which life experience and support is exchanged, a sacred and non-

hierarchical coven (Maclaran et al. 2020, pp.1107-1109). Here we find many of the core characteristics of the mythic crone goddess: a contradictory personality, vast and hallowed knowledge, and a spiritual connection to the land. There are also, however, themes that resonate deeply with modern anxieties: the need for social interconnection, the increasing relevance of discussions around nature, the search for personal and spiritual meaning in an impersonal and secular world, and the overcoming of discrimination. Like the Greek Hecate representing borders both physical and immaterial, the crone has transformed into a figure of liminality. Both ancient and contemporary, comforting and frightening, the elderly third aspect of the Triple Goddess may have changed considerably over the centuries, but an enticing otherness remains at the heart of her nature.

7.3.Feminising the Archetype

Throughout Cartoon Saloon's folklore trilogy women and girls play a prominent part in the trilogy, starting with the forest spirit Aisling, and their importance is only reinforced as the trilogy develops. The significance of female archetypes in Irish mythology, like the Great Mother or the *Cailleach Beara* (old hag), is reflected in Cartoon Saloon's work, resulting in a series of complex female characters. This section aims to demonstrate that in their endeavour to bring Irish mythology to screen, Cartoon Saloon not only remained faithful to the fundamental meaning of these archetypes, they also simultaneously adapted these archetypes to create engaging female characters for the modern era.

Archetype theory is central to this paper's analysis of the folklore trilogy and its female protagonists. Campbell's concept of the monomyth provides a foundation from which to expand on these character types and how they fit into today's culture. More recent theorists and critiques of Campbell's work of course provide deeper insight, such as Valeria Frankel's (2014) writings on the goddess in myth and storytelling and her research regarding the triple-

goddess; maiden-mother-crone. This female triad provides a great deal of insight into the functions that female archetypes have served throughout the centuries; the mother is tackled in the first section of this paper, reflected in the character of Aisling; the crone is considered alongside the antagonist of *Song of the Sea*, Macha; the final section considers the hero archetype, but manifested in the form of the young girls Robyn and Mebh.

Critiques on Campbell's descriptions of female archetypes are equally important to consider. Frontgia (1991), in her examination of stereotypes and the female hero, argues that while Campbell does give examples of heroines on occasion, his monomyth is centred around male protagonists and assumes that the role of the active hero is almost exclusively a boy/man. When the girl/woman is heroic, she is presented as distinct from the male, serving her own heroic role in one of the few restrictive archetypes available to her: mother, virgin, lover, and muse are examples (1991, p.15). The reduction of the heroine to these simplistic, symbolic roles pales in comparison to the glorious, world-saving feats of the hero, and another concern issued by Frontgia is Campbell's insistence that the boy's journey towards manhood is a voluntary one. The girl's journey towards womanhood, however, is biological and therefore occurs without her input, whether she likes it or not (1991, p.16). This clearly strips the heroine of any agency, independence, or sense of self-determination, and it is an issue that has been present in Irish and world cinema for decades.

The goddesses of Irish myth frequently embody the natural world in some way, be it the forest or the ocean or the rivers; wielding such great creative power, they are nevertheless relegated to passivity. Alpini (2005) argues that the Great Mother and archetypes like her are no promise of authority or freedom for women, nor are they substitutes for the realities of complex and varied female identity. The reinforcement of the "female fantastic", the complete mystification and othering of the feminine, is to her a stranglehold on creativity, a reflection of patriarchal tendencies in storytelling that ought to be shattered. As is shown in the following three sections, such a break away from tradition is reflected strongly in Cartoon

Saloon's folklore trilogy, three films that provide insight into how female archetypes can be completely reinvented.

7.4. Aisling and the Great Mother

The Secret of Kells (2009) marked the beginning of a decade-long project to create animation inspired by Irish mythology, bringing new meaning to elements of folklore that had existed for centuries, and many of the character-types it explores would be developed upon later in the trilogy. It centres on the character of Brendan, whose name may be connected with St Brendan the Navigator. While Brendan, the brave youth seeking meaning beyond the walls of the secluded monastery, undoubtedly serves as the film's hero, the character of Aisling plays a significant part in the form of deuteragonist, nature goddess, and resembles the 'Great Mother' of myth. As an archetype that has manifested in Irish and world cinema for decades, Aisling's mysterious, warm, and magical character at once carries on the tradition and reinvents it. The name Aisling not only means 'dream' in the Irish language but is also the name given to a form of Gaelic Irish poetry in which the poet dreams of his country as a beautiful woman. When Campbell wrote about the mother, a cosmic force that tests and strengthens the hero, he often relied on an assortment of characteristics to describe her – protective, nurturing, a "great symbol of life" (1949, p.101). The Great Mother, fundamentally, is a feminine incarnation of the natural world. Others, such as Slominski (2020), have critiqued the nationalist appropriation of this archetype in Irish history and politics of the 19th and early 20th centuries and it is not evident in *The Secret of Kells*.

While powerful, even godlike, the mother's function has rarely been an active or heroic one. From early Irish cinema, such as films like *Knocknagow* (1918), to those of *Into the West* (1992), *Some Mother's Son* (1996), and *The Butcher Boy* (1997), the Great Mother has persisted as a figure of warmth, self-sacrifice, and passivity, serving a secondary part in

features dominated by male protagonists. For Ging (2019) and Barton (2004), she is best considered a figure "burdened" by symbolism, reduced to a personification of the nation, nature, and motherhood, often written from the male perspective. While wielding the potential, as a character of great power, to carve out her own path and behave more actively, she has nevertheless acted as a tool to reinforce the traditional social order. In reference to wider world cinema, Rikke Schubert uses the term "archaic mother" to describe this common character-type linked to natural forces and nationhood, primordial in essence (2014, pp.173-174). Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), where the protagonist acts as steward of nature and an innocent embodiment of an ancient culture, is one such example. Mexican cinema's concept of the selfless mother, a sacred symbol of the nation, putting her sons and husband before herself, is another. Bollywood's docile mother as goddess lacks individuality with few to no ambitions of her own – these cinematic instances of the Great Mother have dominated screens for decades, but as with Campbell's writings, they have incurred extensive critique and gradually evolved to become far more complex.

From our very first encounter with her, Aisling challenges traditional perceptions of the nature goddess. Brendan's curious foray into the forest leads him to a circle of standing stones, a place where worlds collide, and it is here that he meets Aisling for the first time. She is strange, uninviting, immediately showing hostility and demanding that he leave (00:23:40). The two confront each other and Brendan stands his ground, even as she threatens to unleash the wolves on him – here she retains the mother's characteristic links to nature and a strong aura of mystique, indeed she is never given a proper backstory and many questions are left unanswered about her character. Her standoffish attitude is immediately compelling, and as the scene goes on, the two connect over a shared lack of a mother figure in their lives; Aisling has a human side that she reluctantly reveals throughout the film.

She may be an ancient spirit with the power to command nature, but her otherness quickly gives way to something more familiar. Her youthful appearance and connection to the

wild Irish landscape are initially evocative of the beautiful maidens depicted in the *aisling* poetry of the 18th century. It was a poetic genre, as Katharina Walter (2013) points out, that often personified the Irish nation as a woman, a process that she argues politicised motherhood and depersonalised female identity. While sharing a name with the genre, Cartoon Saloon's Aisling provides a different approach to the depiction of Irish goddesses and female spirits, reflecting a reworking of mythological tropes.

Aisling serves as her own active and independent character and retains the mother's protective role, rescuing Brendan on several occasions. Far from Campbell's (1949) understanding of the mother as a mere test for the hero, she also has her own motivations and fears. Unlike the woman that becomes the "boon of love", Aisling never turns into a prize for Brendan to win, rather she is his snarky, confident ally – theirs is a platonic love and a mutual trust. Cartoon Saloon's first exploration of a female folkloric character does not simply fall in line with what had come before, a mystifying mother figure reminiscent of Alpini's 'female fantastic' (2005), and that first encounter between Brendan and herself, deep in the forest, represents an important shift in the depiction of women in Irish folklore cinema. While some aspects of her character remain troubling – she is, notably, the only female character in the film with speaking lines – she largely deviates from an archetype that had become overused and out of touch with reality. This is an achievement as, according to Frontgia (1991), archetypes such as this can become so overused as to feel safe and familiar – to break away from that, as Cartoon Saloon did, is impressive and was a sign of what was to come in later instalments.

7.5.Macha and the Crone

Just as Aisling represents the Great Mother or nature goddess in her benevolent form, *Song of the Sea* (2014) offers an interpretation of her darker side in the form of the character

Macha. If the mother figure is a comforting and protective force, a symbol of life, the hag or crone embodies the monstrous, evoking death. When Campbell refers to her, he frequently describes an agent of destruction, an antagonistic force for the hero to face. Psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung, Schubart writes, similarly viewed the archetype of the mother as a duality; the "good" mother who understands her place subservient to the father, and the "bad" Mother who has ambitions to take his place as controller. From a patriarchal perspective, the mother poses a terrible threat as a powerful feminine force (2014, p.173-174). The character of Macha, the primary antagonist of the film, fits this description in a variety of ways, inheriting centuries-worth of symbolic baggage associated with the crone, and yet her depiction goes on to subvert the archetype, just as Aisling's did.

In Irish folklore, Macha is part of the Morrigán (the Great Queen), a triple goddess linked to war. The other aspects of the Morrigan are Badb and Nemain. Macha is associated with both the raven and horses and she herself had three components, reflecting maternal reproduction, agriculture and sexual fertility. The triple-goddess culminates in cronehood, a stage lacking the youth of the virgin or the fertility of the mother; she is no longer a bountiful source of life, rather she consumes and destroys it. Our first exposure to Macha in *Song of the Sea* is the folktale that Ben tells Saoirse about how she turned her own son to stone. As the film goes on, we see Macha's magic in action, enveloping the *sídhe* and draining them of their life force. Surrounding Macha is an oppressive aura of death, but for such an overwhelming villain, we do not actually see her until the film's final act. This absence, Macha manipulating events from the shadows, reinforces the image of a terrifying crone goddess, and her mystique feeds into a characteristic of the crone as Frankel and Schubart describe it: her otherness, the sense of the homely turned uncanny (Schubart 2014, p.172-173). Frankel describes this archetype as a "child-killer" (2014, p.176), and indeed Macha pursues the child protagonists obsessively like the Queen in *Snow White* (1937) who transforms her body to resemble a hag, or the aging Mother Gothel in *Tangled* (2010) who uses Rapunzel's hair as a way of living

forever. The crone's age is, in these instances, an element of what makes her horrific. Even the Cailleach Beara, a divine crone of Irish myth, laments over her lost youth in the medieval poem *The Lament of the Hag of Beara*. However, while Macha's depiction lures the audience into believing they understand her character, recognising the archetype for how it has been portrayed countless times before, Ben's eventual confrontation with her is a pivotal scene with a surprising twist.

Figure 12 – Ben emerges from the cave to see Macha's house in the distance (00:59:41)

Ben approaches Macha's home, a rustic house resting on stilts above a lake, a perpetual storm cloud looming above (00:59:41) – it evokes the Grimm fairy tale image of the witch's lair hidden deep in the forest, as can be seen in Figure 12. When he finally meets Macha face to face, the shadowy, life-stealing villain of the film, we are presented with a home resembling Granny's house in the city. Macha herself bears a striking resemblance to Granny, a well-meaning character whose incessant mothering had driven the children to run away. Macha's story, as she explains to Ben, mirrors Granny's genuine albeit overbearing love: her son Mac Lír had been so stricken with grief that she had turned him to stone, and her terrible campaign to transform all sídhe to rock was merely a way of protecting them from sorrow and pain. She does not hate or threaten Ben, she bears no antagonism at all, and she

offers him the same fate. As the scene progresses, she grows increasingly insistent before transforming into a hideous beast and pursuing Ben up to the attic (01:03:46). At the height of her fury, it is Saoirse's song that finally releases Macha's emotions and makes her realise the terrible error of her actions. Once the destructive hag, she now becomes a powerful ally and benevolent goddess, abandoning her overbearing attitude. She is a rare instance of the crone undergoing a transformative arc, a privilege typically reserved for Heroes. The scene demonstrates her humanity by giving a rationale for her behaviour and concluding with her conversion.

A disadvantage of archetypes is their tendency to reduce characters to mere vessels for certain ideas, such as the crone as a symbol of death and decay. Alpini (2005) warns that this process of archetyping can strip characters of their humanity, and Frankel (2014) similarly considers archetypes like the crone to be unrealistic, patriarchal distortions of women's identities. Aisling remained truthful to the mother archetype while simultaneously reinventing it. In a comparable way, Macha retains much of the symbolism attached to the crone while simultaneously humanising her. However, her reform demonstrates an alternative approach to reworking myth that Cartoon Saloon adopts in all three films. Frankel suggests that the crone can be interpreted differently, that there is an inherent beauty that comes with age; Macha represents a more sophisticated approach to the third aspect of the triple-goddess, one that marks a shift away from traditional depictions of women just as Aisling did. The process of reinterpreting, humanising, and empowering female archetypes would see its greatest success in the final film of the trilogy, the culmination of a decade-long project to rework mythology for a new era.

7.6.Robyn, Mebh, and the Heroine

With every instalment in the trilogy, the role played by women becomes more significant, culminating in the female-driven narrative of *Wolfwalkers* (2020) that features two young girls, Robyn and Mebh, as dual-protagonists. The film brings together many of the thematic elements that were introduced in prior films, like the mythological association between women and nature, and the blossoming friendship between Robyn and Mebh is by far the most well-developed relationship between two female characters in the trilogy. We are first introduced to Robyn, a young English girl who has come to Ireland with her father to hunt wolves, and immediately she resembles Brendan. Both characters feel trapped in a small town, surrounded by adults who do not sympathise with their desire for freedom, and both discover liberation deep in the forest. It is there that she meets Mebh, a wild native with the power to shapeshift into a wolf, and Robyn's own transformation into a wolf over the course of the film allows her to fully embark on a heroic quest of self-discovery.

Aisling and Macha resemble traditional female archetypes, but Robyn and Mebh deviate most from Campbell's original description of the hero's journey. Maria Tatar (2021) has expressed concerns with the heavily male-focussed hero's journey that continues to influence storytelling in the West today. She echoes the concerns of Frontgia and other critics of the monomyth, highlighting the archetypal heroine who lacks voice or agency, a side character in another person's story. The woman of myth, Tatar says, is restricted to the domestic world (if we are to evaluate such myths from Campbell's perspective), spinning and weaving while her husband/son/father performs feats of great heroism (p.28). It is the man, in other words, who dictates the course of history, while the woman stands to the side as merely a witness. The reality is more nuanced, and as a relatively recent production, *Wolfwalkers* represents a shift that has only just begun in Irish cinema.

The superhero genre has seen a huge surge in popularity in recent years with productions based on DC and Marvel comics. Cinematic universes consisting of dozens of entries have been following a simple but highly effective narrative structure based strongly on the monomythic format, and Houman Sadri (2014) argues that while the monomyth is a factor in why these films are so successful, they are restrained by its insistence on male heroes. He suggests that, as the heroic archetype has evolved to become more gender neutral, Campbell's monomyth has not evolved with it. Sadri indicates that the monomyth, because it is grounded in myths originating from largely patriarchal societies, is itself inherently patriarchal and must be radically reworked (2014, pp.4-6). In a similar manner, Ging laments that Irish filmmakers have not yet fully embraced the female-centred narrative; while films like *Once* (2006), *Out of Here* (2013), and *The Other Side of Sleep* (2011) hint at a shift, the Irish female protagonist has yet to reach the same cultural ubiquity as her male counterpart (2019, pp.402-403). One year after Ging's publication, *Wolfwalkers* indicated a turn away from male-centred storytelling in film; Robyn and Mebh both deviate dramatically from the virgins and muses of past films, closely resembling the active male hero.

Mebh herself shares a name with one of Irish mythology's most prominent and intriguing female figures: Queen Medb of Connacht, featuring in the Ulster Cycle, is depicted as a strong-willed and cunning ruler. A powerful warrior-queen, she mirrors the feisty and unyielding young wolfwalker. Mebh's last name, Óg Mac Tíre ('Young Wolf'), emphasises her strong connection to the forest. It is interesting that Cartoon Saloon chooses *mac tíre*, one of the oldest ways of saying 'wolf' in Gaeilge and a word with mysterious origins, to describe the girl. As a half-animal steward of the forest possessing ancient and magical abilities, she never loses the aura of mystery that draws Robyn in when they first meet. Robyn's nature is similarly hinted from the very beginning – her full name, Robyn Goodfellowe, is occasionally used as a nickname for the Puck, a nature spirit in English folklore. The Puck's Irish counterpart, the Púca, can shapeshift at will just as Robyn does throughout the film. The girls'

unlikely friendship not only transcends the English-Irish rivalries seen elsewhere in the film, but it also represents the meeting of two mythologies that, ultimately, share more commonalities than differences. Reconciliation and the healing of broken bonds are a significant part of these two heroic journeys.

After a series of trials and tests that embolden their friendship, not least Robyn's discovery of inner power through her ability to "wolfwalk", the two girls are finally separated. Having roused the suspicions of the Lord Protector, the dictatorial antagonist of the film who seeks to eliminate the wolves, Robyn chooses to return to the town and stay there, abandoning the friendship she has developed with Mebh. Not to be deterred, and eager to rescue her mother who has been imprisoned, Mebh discovers Robyn working as a scullery maid. The two have a heated confrontation – Robyn refuses to help Mebh rescue her mother out of fear – and it is the strongest test of the friendship so far (01:05:01). The scene demonstrates the conflicting interests of two girls from entirely separate worlds, both unhappy with how the world has treated them, but crucially Mebh is the one who refuses to submit. Robyn, as a young girl living in a medieval city, has heavy expectations weighing down on her, and Mebh, as a heroine who refuses to abide by any social expectations, is deemed savage, she is hated and feared. The same optimism and inquisitiveness of Brendan is reflected in Mebh who is the very image of confidence, even in the face of impossible odds. Frontgia notes that, just as the hero's quest sees him achieve great knowledge and power, the heroine wins strength and authority (1991); it is a journey of maturation, a transformation from youth to experience, that Sadri similarly argues is just as applicable to women as it is to men (2014, p.5). This pivotal scene is followed up by the Lord Protector's public proclamation that he will hunt and kill every wolf in the forest, putting Mebh's mother on humiliating display (01:09:02). Mebh attempts to free her mother, and the ensuing fight sees the wild girl barely escape. Her blind determination comes with the painful realisation that she must fight for her

way of life; once a cheerful and innocent forest spirit, akin to Aisling, Mebh now threatens vengeance on the whole town and flees in rage.

Robyn undergoes a simultaneous, albeit slightly different, change. The Lord Protector chases after Mebh, ordering Robyn's father to kill the mother wolf. Just as he prepares to do so, Robyn stands in his way. Having witnessed the whole confrontation, this moment is the height of Robyn's journey towards active heroism, the instant where she finally is forced to choose between the two worlds, and her decision is to follow her desire for liberation. Schubart identifies the "daughter" variant of the heroine, a character whose path is one of transformation: the daughter, she says, has masculine and feminine qualities, taught to use weapons and to protect herself by her father, and these characteristics strongly match Robyn. Schubart also points out the importance of "masquerade" for the daughter – the costume is an important element of her character, like how the superheroine uses a disguise – and indeed Robyn has many guises. At her most subjugated and dejected, she wears a scullery maid's outfit and performs a servant's duties, but fully liberated, she takes on the appearance of a wolf. Even the animation style used to depict her shifts as her character evolves, her linework becomes looser, rougher, and wilder as she is exposed to Mebh's world (00:48:17). In Figure 13 below, this visual "wildness" can be seen in the emergence of loose linework, and the character's bones are visible,[18] evoking a sense of artistic freedom or honesty where the artist's rough sketch work is not erased after the fact but embraced. In the forest, not only are the characters free to be themselves, but the artist too is liberated from the well-established conventions of animation practice.

[18] Bones are rough guidelines made by the artist to assist in drawing, typically erased afterwards. In this case, the bones are left in as a visual artefact of the artistic process.

Figure 13 – Robyn takes wolf-form for the first time (00:47:47)

This scene is also the moment when Robyn finally stands up to a loving but domineering father-figure, a move that ultimately leads to a closer bond between the two. Frankel and Maureen Murdock (1990) both argue that reconciliation and the healing of family bonds is a central element of the heroine's journey, and Murdock's reinterpretation of the monomyth from a female perspective culminates in a union between the heroine's conflicting inner aspects. Reflecting this, *Wolfwalkers* ends with both Robyn and her father, and Mebh and her mother, uniting to form a single family, venturing into the unknown together. Two worlds combine and union is achieved for both of the heroines. It is a finale to a film, and a trilogy, that veers far away from the folkloric reworkings and adaptations of the past, just as how Disney's animated features have increasingly given "princesses" stronger and more complex roles over time. Sadri may believe that Campbell's monomyth suffers from a fundamental and archaic preference for male heroes, but he also points to media like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) as an example of how the structure can be dramatically altered to suit modern circumstances. Superhero films have also undergone a massive shift since their resurgence in the early 2010's, superheroines achieving greater and greater notoriety – *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Widow* (2021), and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

(upcoming) are good examples of films featuring strong, active heroines. It is a trend that has only just begun and continues to reshape our understanding of archetypal representation through films like *Wolfwalkers*.

The folklore trilogy increasingly challenges the idea of a distinctly masculine monomyth as it goes on, granting Aisling, Macha, Robyn, and Mebh a level of autonomy that makes them equal to, or at times superior to, the male characters in their stories. Robyn's heroism very much takes place in the outside world and involves confrontation with societal forces that expect her to remain in the home, subservient to the Lord Protector's patriarchal, colonial regime.

7.7. Conclusion

Cartoon Saloon have indicated that their project to rework Irish myth has concluded, but their folklore trilogy demonstrates strongly that modern interpretations of mythology that place women at the forefront are not only possible but can captivate audiences worldwide. While Campbell's theories have dominated the discussion surrounding archetypes ever since *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* was published in the mid-20th century, subsequent writers have made clear that such archetypes are neither entirely accurate nor fixed in place. Though Campbell's work acts as a vital starting point, archetype theory's insistence on universality has been questioned time and again. Rather than telling us something about the inherent quality of stories, it is more useful to approach the monomyth and archetypal models as one way by which stories may be understood. Through the character of Aisling, the Great Mother transcends her eminent but submissive position, reshaped into a deuteragonist with layered complexity and ambition. Likewise, Macha presents a crone that evades comparison with the malevolent child-eaters of Grimm's fairy tales, opening the door to more sophisticated depictions of an archetype that plays so many important roles in Irish mythology. Finally,

Robyn and Mebh embody two kinds of heroines that challenge the patriarchal paradigm of Campbell's male hero, demonstrating that the heroics of the female do not begin and end with motherhood.

The depictions of Aisling and Saoirse signify a strong representation that, while adhering to the deification of women to an extent, also contain multi-layered characterisation; they are people with strengths and weaknesses, not anthropomorphised concepts. *Wolfwalkers* (2020) went a step further and depicted two female protagonists, Robyn and Mebh; one challenges the depiction of English/Irish relations as adversarial, the other gives depth to the archetype of the nature-goddess. While the portrayal of women in Irish myth and cinema has excluded the lived experiences of real women in the past, Ireland is currently undergoing a reinvention of identity. Heroic narratives and archetypes previously associated with masculinity are increasingly being feminised, and the idea that heroic figures may be men or women has gained a great deal of popularity. Mythology's women are also being reinterpreted through cinema, granting them greater depth and autonomy, and giving a voice to Irish women in cinema.

Chapter 8: Transformation and Queer Readings of the Trilogy

8.1. Introduction

A recurring theme throughout the trilogy and exemplified by the analysis presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this dissertation is that of transformation. It is a concept closely linked to the ideas of freedom and escape, the divine feminine in myth, and adaptation. Transformative processes are present throughout Irish mythology and folklore: the children of Lir were turned into swans by their jealous stepmother, Aoife. The reclusive Tuan mac Cairill was reincarnated as several animals over the course of Irish history, such as a stag, a boar, and a hawk. When Fionn mac Cumhaill first met his wife, she had been turned into a deer by a druid; later, their son Oisín travelled to Tír na nÓg for centuries and, on his return, rapidly transformed into an elderly man and died. This tradition is carried on in a variety of ways by Cartoon Saloon, ultimately serving a message about personal growth and the ways in which Ireland has reshaped itself.

This chapter will focus on transformation in its various forms, drawing from Chapters 6 and 7 where transformative processes were integral to the hero's development and the liberation of the magical otherworld. Two forms of transformation are highlighted specifically; the selkie, a folkloric creature resembling a mermaid that can transform at will from a woman to a seal, and the werewolf, an internationally recognisable cryptid with deep roots in European folk storytelling. Each provide differing meanings around transformation and may be read as serving different purposes, and all three films in the trilogy utilise transformation as a symbolic fixture of the worlds they portray. Wolves, synonymous with the untamed land, equal parts loyal and dangerous, are tied to the characters of Robyn, Mebh, and Aisling. The latter heroine takes on various shapes across the centuries, associating transformation with rebirth and immortality. Just as how myths may need to change in order to remain resonant with the modern world, characters change shape in the trilogy as a

necessity for survival. These analyses culminate in an examination of *Wolfwalkers* from a queer perspective, a term and subject area embedded in modern day sociopolitical discourse yet nevertheless granting us new perspectives on very old stories.

8.2.Selkies and Transformation

Transformation is central to the selkie myth that is the basis for *Song of the Sea.* It is a type of tale that describes a woman, closely linked to the sea, who can transform into a seal using her sealskin coat. *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (2019) describes one such folktale where a man called Tom Moore kidnaps a selkie and makes her his bride. She longs for the freedom of the ocean and ultimately escapes back to it, a common theme in such stories (Bacchilega and Brown 2019). The film is clearly inspired by this kind of story and its motifs, drawing from its themes of escapism, the mythological feminine and its connection to nature, and transformation as a kind of liberation. Varandas (2019) agrees when she compares the flight of Bronagh at the beginning of the film, and Saoirse's transformation into a seal at the end, to the folktale of the selkie, and placing Saoirse's transformation in the context of healing. The ultimate realisation of Saoirse's transformative abilities, and the discovery of her voice, represent the culmination of her journey. The embrace of her half-human, half-selkie heritage not only heals Saoirse and her family, but it also frees and transforms the *sídhe* into joyful immaterial beings (Varandas 2019). Here, transformation is linked to Saoirse's coming-of-age, her development as a confident character and ideas regarding healing and spiritual cleansing.

Witzel's (2015) analysis of water symbolism in mythology points to, among many things, water's constant association with healing and revival. As discussed in the previous section, the ocean, rivers, and wells are places which world mythologies and religions treat as sources of rejuvenation. Comparably, Saoirse undergoes a dramatic rebirth in the ocean, both

physically and spiritually. Witzel comments on how many mythologies also describe the ocean as a place where the gods and the world itself was born; the Indian *Rigveda* suggests that the world was formed from a primordial salt ocean, and a Mesopotamian creation myth asserts that the gods were born from intermingling salty and fresh waters, a watery abyss called *Apsu* (Witzel 2015). The ocean as a place of rebirth and spiritual transformation is elaborated on by Chouinard (2010), describing how the ocean's transformative properties are dualistic. While characters may undergo cleansing and be reborn in the water, it can also disconnect them from the world and the people they have left behind. *Song of the Sea*'s portrayal of transformation is similarly multifaceted, exploring the idea that not all change is positive.

Some transformations in the film are far from desirable; Macha believes that healing can only be achieved by shedding one's emotions, literally becoming as hard as rock. This kind of transformation is entirely unlike Saoirse's rebirth in the ocean; while Saoirse shapeshifts after embracing her full identity, Macha's transformations can only happen by shunning one's own identity. The owl-witch turns *sídhe* into inanimate stone, even reshaping her own son to merge with the land itself, becoming an island. This transformation into lifeless stone, the loss of oneself, is symbolic of Ireland's loss of identity; when the *sídhe* transcend their stone forms, it can similarly be interpreted as the rediscovery and rejuvenation of Irish identity and the natural world. Expanding on this, the connection between the landscape and transformation throughout the story is extensive. The ocean, as an ever-changing and unpredictable force of nature, is a suitable symbol of change. Rural Ireland sits on the boundary between the industrial city and the untouched wilderness, a blend of both worlds. Its vast, open fields clash with winding roads and towering pylons, indicative of the change that Ireland has undergone socially and culturally. Mac Lír, the son who Macha froze out of pity, is indistinguishable from the landscape, having become a rocky islet.

These examples all indicate the varied ways in which transformation is dealt with in *Song of the Sea*. The shapeshifting of the self, both psychologically and physically, is only one example, alongside the transformation of national identity and the landscape. Just as how a character can shapeshift over the course of a story, like how Ben warms to Saoirse or how Macha embraces emotion, the film asks its audience to consider how Irish identity has changed over the decades and centuries. By portraying the natural world and the distant past in the way it does, *Song of the Sea* depicts a form of Irish identity closely linked to nature and mythology, one that celebrates the past as much as it does progress.

8.3. Werewolves and Monstrous Nature in Irish Myth

The wolf is prominent in Irish folklore and provides a plethora of interpretations and potential stories to explore, from queer narratives to horror stories. Interestingly, the Irish mythological and folkloric wolf almost always overlaps with idea of transformation, a theme that profoundly impacts the course of the folklore trilogy and its characters. The Celtic view of nature is one that is deeply multifaceted, simultaneously inspiring fright and awe, and is often convoluted and contradictory – as a nature motif, the Irish mythological wolf is perhaps one of best examples of this.

The wolf as a supernatural creature, manifesting in both benevolent and malevolent forms, appears throughout European mythology, from the divine wolves of Norse myth that chase the sun and moon across the sky to the malign and cunning wolves of Germanic fairy stories. Irish mythology and folklore play host to a wide selection of these beasts, from mighty dogs accompanying heroes to men capable of transforming into canids, motifs that resonate throughout all three films in the folklore trilogy. In a broad sense, dogs and wolves have held great symbolic significance in Ireland for centuries. Philip Bernhardt-House (2010) describes this in detail, claiming that canids of one variety or another appear in all of Irish

mythology's cycles; great heroes were associated with canine features, like Cú Chulainn who was named after a mighty dog he had slain, and it was not uncommon in some narratives for a dog to be born at the same time as a hero (p.21). The Fianna, a band of mythic warriors from the Fenian Cycle of Irish myth, are also closely connected to dogs and hounds. Fionn mac Cumhaill himself was the master of two mythic hounds, Bran and Sceolaing. While the dog is domesticated and friendly however, its wild counterpart is the wolf. Bernhardt-House, alongside other writers like John Carey (2002), describe how "wolfing" was a phrase associated with outlaws or bandits, the act of pillaging and terrorising. Similarly, Matthew Beresford (2013) identifies a tale in which an Irish clan, opposed to the Christian teachings of St. Patrick, howled at him like wolves. Irish canids are associated with great feats but also possess a darker side, lurking in the wilderness and turning hostile at a moment's notice.

This idea of the wolf or dog as a force of nature recurs in the trilogy, notably in *The Secret of Kells* where wild dogs accompany Aisling as she moves through the forest, seemingly protecting her or under her spell. As a spirit of the woods, she is capable of taking animal form, and becoming a dazzling white wolf is her preference. In Brendan's encounters with the wolves, they are instinctively vicious and treat him as a foreign threat, infringing upon their territory – Aisling mimics some of their characteristics, running on all fours and behaving unpredictably. It is interesting to note that she has lived for thousands of years, and persists long after Brendan has grown up, remaining unchanged both in terms of her characterisation and spiritual power. In this case, the wolf is not just a symbol of nature's strength and danger, it also comes to represent the unchanging and eternal essence of the forest and the landscape overall. Here, nature is treated with great reverence; the wolves existed long before men arrived in Ireland, and they are connected to a deep and ancient power that we can never understand.

Just as wolves are prominent throughout Irish myth, so is shapeshifting, and the two frequently overlap. Carey describes a word for this: *conricht*, a blend of the Irish words *cú*

(meaning dog or wolf) with *richt* (shape/guise), and it is a trope that manifests in several stories. Bernhardt-House remarks on examples such as the character of Mongán mac Fiachna or the Morrígan in her encounter with Cú Chulainn in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, both of whom take many shapes including that of a wolf (pp.128-132). In her *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf* (2014), Leslie Sconduto identifies a similar phenomenon whereby characters may will themselves into the bodies of wolves, leaving their human forms behind, and any injuries their canid forms took would manifest on their human body (2014, p.34). All of this would suggest that the wolf of Irish myth and folklore was considered to be deeply connected with humans, even a kind of reflection of humanity, tying back to the idea of dogs being deeply associated with heroes. The wolf in these tales can be considered a reflection of a character's inner wild nature. The wolf as a heroic symbol and an ally manifests notably in *Song of the Sea*, at the very climax where Macha calls forth two ethereal giant hounds. The heroes are guided back home by the dogs, with Ben's pet dog Cú taking flight alongside them.

The werewolf of modern literature and film is typically linked to the horror genre, informed by relatively recent interpretations of the creature, and indeed Bernhardt-House describes one old Irish term, *ferchú*, which is linked to hounds and implies fierceness. However, the werewolves of Irish myth and folklore retain a surprising amount of self-awareness when they undergo their transformation and, in many cases, are even benign. One such genre of story describes a protagonist who is turned into a wolf against their will, embarking on a quest to reverse the curse and sometimes befriending a king along the way (Bernhardt-House 2010, p.135). This encompasses a wide variety of werewolf depictions in Irish myth; the werewolf as a victim, not a vicious killer; a kind-hearted creature seeking an end to their curse, not as a bloodthirsty monster; an intelligent figure, not a wild beast. A medieval genre of fiction called "mirabilia" (Ibid, 2010, p.179), lists of wonders and miracles, would occasionally make mention of werewolves lurking in the Irish woodlands, inspired by local folktales. Gerald of Wales and Gervais of Tilbury are both cited as key examples of men

who wrote narratives of this sort by Caroline Bynumn (1998). Stories of fantastic beasts and wonderous miracles, a literature of entertainment. Destabilising the boundary between reality and fiction, these tales depicted sympathetic werewolves, men and women who had become wolves against their will and retained rationality. Despite their monstrous transformation, some werewolves retain their sentience and personality.

The area of Ossory, near Kilkenny, is cited in several contexts as a region linked to werewolf-ism. In some cases, this ability to transform that defined the members of the "tribes of Osraige" was a curse inflicted by a saint (Bernhardt-House 2010, p.228), in other cases it was hereditary (Ibid, p.179). Of all these wonderous medieval stories, Gerald of Wales' 12th century account, contained within his *Topographia Hibernica*, is by far the most commonly referenced. The story depicts a priest travelling from Ulster to Meath, spending one night in a forest when he suddenly comes across a speaking wolf. The beast describes how he and his wife were once human but, as the result of an old curse put upon Ossory, one man and woman must leave the community every seven years to live in exile and become wolves. The male wolf requests that the priest give his wife the last rites as she is very poorly, and the priest reluctantly obliges. It is significant for several reasons: firstly, the werewolf in the story is intelligent and human-like, so human-like as to be able to speak. Sconduto (2014) argues that this key element of the Ossory werewolves emphasises their dual nature as both man and beast, a symbol of opposition between one's inner and outer nature. Secondly, the tale reinforces the Irish mythological concept of the werewolf as a victim, not a predator, and associates werewolves with exile. When the morning comes, the werewolf thanks the priest by safely guiding him through the forest. Unlike the werewolf of modern horror cinema, this creature is friendly.

This concept of the friendly werewolf is presented as the main focus of *Wolfwalkers* in which two heroines take the shape of wolves in their pursuit of liberation and self-determination. Here, the wolf becomes not just a symbol for nature and reconnection with it,

wolves also stand in as representations of those who are persecuted, demonised, and rejected by society. In this instance, to take the form of a wolf is to be released from the confines of social pressures and expectations, pursuing a new path in close tandem with the natural world. It is freedom that comes at a cost but promises a kind of rebirth and a greater sense of meaning. Another interesting feature of some folktales is their description of the werewolf form as a kind of "skin". The outer layer peels back, revealing the person trapped within, emphasising the duality and humanity of the beasts, and resonating strongly with *Wolfwalkers*' approach to wolves. Carey (2002) suggests a connection between this and other magical skins and garments throughout Irish mythology, and indeed it is reminiscent of the selkie. While the wolves of Ossory have come to embody Irish mythological werewolves in general, becoming by far the best-known example of them, they represent just one side of the creatures. The wolf of Irish mythology and folklore is multi-faceted, occasionally vicious and occasionally benign. Transformation can occur for a variety of reasons and in all kinds of ways; it can either represent great strength or a terrible curse. Research that focusses specifically on the attributes of the Irish werewolf is scarce, leaving much to be discovered about this deeply complex mythological creature.

8.4. Queering the Archetype

Upon its worldwide release in late 2020, *Wolfwalkers* marked the end of a decade-long project to rework Irish mythology for the present day, utilising old stories to tackle modern themes that began with *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and was further expanded in *Song of the Sea* (2014). Within a month of its release to global audiences, *Wolfwalkers* became the subject of lively discussion among LGBTQ+ viewers who saw their own stories reflected in the ideological and existential struggle of the film's child protagonists. A trilogy that had tackled themes of environmental destruction, female empowerment, hostility between cultures, and

reconnection with the distant past was now being analysed through the lens of queer analysis, transforming the two protagonists into queer heroines. Unlike Irish folklore films of the past, Cartoon Saloon's work navigated away from a conservative outlook to more diverse and inclusive ideals, allowing writers and reviewers to interpret the trilogy's final instalment as a progressive queer allegory (Brown, 2020; Puchko, 2020).

This section applies methods of queer analysis to Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* to better understand its heroines as queer figures, leading to the argument that the film exemplifies how the heroic archetype may be interpreted through a queer lens. It also posits that *Wolfwalkers* shows how elements of mythology and folklore, stories originating centuries ago, can be reworked to become relevant to modern queer experiences. Central to queer analysis is the reinterpretation of texts that may not have originally been intended for queer readings, moving these texts beyond heteronormativity to discuss the lived experiences of queer people and challenge the systems that alienate and marginalise them (Bauwel et al. 2008). Tomm Moore, director of all three films in the folklore trilogy, has personally acknowledged queer readings of *Wolfwalkers*, stating that the film had not originally been conceived as a queer narrative but that he welcomes such interpretations (Brown 2020). In this sense, queer theory can also be described as post-structuralist (Bauwel et al. 2008), rejecting the notion that a text must be read in a particular way, opting instead for the view that a text can be understood from a variety of angles regardless of authorial intent. This opens the way for a queer interpretation of the film's two protagonists, Robyn Goodfellowe and Mebh Óg MacTíre.

This section deconstructs and analyses the characters of Robyn and Mebh within the context of queer theory. This is achieved by separating the analysis into three categories: first, the challenges and oppressive structures restricting the freedoms of Robyn and Mebh are understood, the Lord Protector's repressive regime and the social expectations weighing down on the girls is examined. Second, Robyn and Mebh's liberation from that regime, the

blossoming of their close bond and Robyn's exploration of her newfound transformative abilities, is understood in the context of queer analysis. Third, the reconciliation with the Other is deconstructed, the resolution between the old and the new, between the worlds of the town and the forest, between Robyn and her protective father. These three concepts – oppression, liberation, reconciliation – have been selected because, whether they are read through the lens of queer analysis or not, they are fundamental to the text. The film's overt commentary on Irish colonial history, framing the plight of the heroines as adjacent to and deriving from the greater threat of British imperial domination, is also addressed in the sections to come. As Gülten Keretli (2021) points out, describing Irish history cannot make sense without acknowledging the island's long and brutal colonial past (p.114) – the same can be said for *Wolfwalkers*, as a breakdown and interrogation of the film's narrative and themes must inevitably address its colonial historicity. Whether *Wolfwalkers* is deconstructed as an ecological allegory, a feminist work, or an attempt to reconcile with Ireland's colonial past, these categories are relevant. While cognisant that allegorical depictions of queerness are subject to critique and can serve to "other" queer characters, this paper nevertheless demonstrates that *Wolfwalkers* reveals the potential for Irish folktales to simultaneously remain relevant in a changing world and to tackle themes of modern resonance.

8.5. Queer Persecution

Within the first few minutes of the film, *Wolfwalkers* effectively establishes the challenges facing its dual female protagonists, Mebh Óg MacTíre and Robyn Goodfellowe – for Mebh, it is an existential plight that threatens to destroy her forest and her way of life. The first shot of the film is of an axe swinging into the air, promptly slicing into the trunk of a tree, scattering a flock of birds. Woodcutters from the nearby town of Kilkenny tear through the woodland, eventually confronting the ethereal Moll and Mebh, mother and daughter who

are surrounded by wolves. The overarching conflict of the film, the destructive struggle between man and nature, is laid out plainly and the woodcutters flee in panic at the sight of the shapeshifting wolfwalkers. Despite this minor victory, Moll, Mebh, and the audience know that the woodcutters will soon return. Throughout the film, and the wider folklore trilogy, the wilderness is contrasted heavily with the town and the city; old versus new, freedom versus order. As an outsider and a deviant in the eyes of the townsfolk, Mebh's struggle to survive is mirrored by Robyn's own circumstances.

Robyn's first scene encapsulates everything that will define and challenge her character (00:05:30). When we first encounter her, she wields a crossbow, a pet falcon on her shoulder, and she fires bolts around the house as if we have caught her mid-training. The entrance of her father, however, Bill Goodfellow, breaks the illusion for the audience and for Robyn – his role is to hunt wolves, and her role is merely that of a housekeeper. As they banter back and forth, Bill tenderly removes her hood and replaces it with a maid's bonnet – it is a subtle yet significant detail. When Schubart (2014) writes about the different categories of cinematic heroines, one she identifies is the "daughter", an archetype defined by her dual masculine-feminine nature. Brought up by a father figure, the daughter learns how to use weapons and "masquerade" is an important aspect of her character. The use of costumes is reflective of how a superheroine will shift between disguises. Robyn's role has been decided for her in Kilkenny, but she does not so easily accept it – as soon as Bill leaves, she violently tosses her broom and bonnet to the ground, pulling her hood back up. She resolves to disobey her father even further, venturing out into the bustling city to follow Bill into the forest. Society may view her as a subservient housekeeper, but she sees herself as a brave hunter.

LGBTQ+ audiences have placed the dual struggle of Mebh and Robyn in the context of queerness, seeing in the film their own struggle to be accepted for who they truly are. For this reason, the girls' narratives are deconstructed and examined in the context of queer theory, an approach that, according to Sofie Van Bauwel et al. (2008), seeks to reveal and

challenge the heteronormative hierarchies that dominates all of our lives, normalising heterosexual identity and hegemony. It is a hierarchical framework that impacts us all, not just a minority. Robyn successfully articulates the archetype of the queer heroine in a society that eschews her true identity – Campbell (1949) described the hero as a character who suffers from a "symbolic deficiency" in the early stages of their story, a person of great talent restrained by their own people (pp.29-30). Mike Alsford's (2006) description of the hero as the Other within their own community is just as relevant to Robyn. In this place, Robyn's dream of becoming a hunter is not possible – Mebh's struggle to be recognised and respected as an equal by the townsfolk is equally out of reach.

Part of what fuels Robyn's otherness is her tomboyish attitude, conflicting strongly with conventional codes of femininity and deviating from prototypical girlhood. "Boyishness" is not at all exclusive to lesbianism, but it is a characterisation that Yuka Kanno (2020) argues has been used as shorthand for young lesbian characters in films like *When Marnie was There* (2014). Typically, old myths and folktales would reinforce gendered behaviours and societal roles – Dallas Baker (2010) has described how many fairy stories were used to reinforce conventional modes of femininity in the past, stripping women of their agency and transforming them into objects to be won. Similarly, the concept of the girl who is forced to repress the elements of her that society despises, to shun queerness and be afraid of it, is "a tale as old as time" according to Dikaia Gavala (2019). Despite tapping into Irish myths and folktales from centuries ago, inspired by stories from an era where heroine characters were far outnumbered by their male counterparts, *Wolfwalkers* illustrates two young girls who bravely face down expectations and demolish them.

Placing *Wolfwalkers* alongside previous animated films that inspired queer analysis, comparing Robyn and Mebh to other characters that have been queered, is useful for understanding the facets of a queer heroine. *When Marnie was There* (2014) by Studio Ghibli is a piece about a young girl who meets a strange and ethereal friend, their bond gradually

blossoming over the course of the story. Anna, the young protagonist, refuses to conform to traditional gendered expectations, carrying a tomboyish attitude just as Robyn does. When she encounters Marnie, the two agree to keep their meetings a secret – from the start, we are led to understand that there is something unconventional about their bond. It is strongly reminiscent of Robyn and Mebh's first encounter in the forest – theirs is a forbidden relationship, even dangerous. Over the years, Disney princesses have increasingly gained agency in their own narratives, deviating from the traditional prince-and-princess format, suggesting queerness. Gavala describes *Frozen* (2013) as a suitable example, the story of a woman whose powers are both wonderous and life-threatening to her and those around her, forcing the princess into social alienation. Elsa's powers are suppressed, evocative of the repression of sexuality, and her journey leads her to gradually embrace those abilities and realise her true self. No prince arrives to save the day, and Gavala goes as far as to argue that Elsa may be the "first queer Disney princess" (2019). Similar examples of queered heroes include Merida from *Brave* (2012), a princess who outright rejects the expectations imposed on her as a young woman and seeks respite in the wilderness, and *Luca* (2021), the story of two young boys who wield the power to transform into sea monsters. *Luca* is particularly similar to *Wolfwalkers* in its depictions of a young boy encountering an outgoing friend who encourages him to explore his "monstrous" identity – like *Wolfwalkers*, it inspired a great deal of interest within the LGBTQ+ community upon release, and like *Wolfwalkers*, queer readings of the film became so prominent as to garner the attention of the director.

Like queer films of the past, *Wolfwalkers* depicts a world hostile to queerness. Throughout the story, the city of Kilkenny is a place of suppression, greyness, and traditionalism – the law is enforced strictly, and everyone has their own predetermined function. Robyn is only respected or acknowledged insofar as she fulfils her role as a housekeeper, a maid, and an obedient servant. As the film goes on and she gradually realises her true potential, tapping into the wolf that lives within her, the fear and hatred felt by the

community towards her worsens. Her first transformation scene at night is followed by a prolonged and intense chase through Kilkenny (00:46:00), her fellow townsfolk and even her own father attempting to catch and kill the girl. The first time that her inner self is shown publicly, the townsfolk converge on her. It is a depiction of an oppressive, conversative world that may intimidate queer audiences, but queer theorist Sara Ahmed strongly argues in favour of such an approach. For her, queer theory must be "hopeless" – it must refuse to be optimistic and to put the past behind us, focusing instead on injustices and encouraging disenfranchisement with the world we live in (Ahmed 2011, pp.160-161). In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), throughout chapter 3 (pp.88-121), Ahmed discusses the facets of an archetype called the "unhappy queer", a figure who does not personify hopes for the future, rather they are downtrodden, considered "wretched" by the world. The risk of depicting a happy queer, she says, is that we lose sight of the unhappiness and unfairness that exists in the world. *Wolfwalkers* depicts a medieval Kilkenny where queer ambitions and hopes are dead, where girls like Robyn either accept the status quo or are rejected by their people, even their own family. For Mebh, the risk is even greater – by virtue of her otherness as a wild native girl and a wolfwalker, her mother is caged, and her wolf kin are slaughtered. To explore and embrace their true selves is an act of revolution, and as the film goes on, the risks to Mebh and Robyn's lives only intensify.

Robyn and Mebh's revolutionary queerness brings them face to face with the Lord Protector, a direct reference to Oliver Cromwell who is a deeply controversial figure in Irish colonial history. He is depicted as the undisputed dictator of this society, levying strict orders and speaking of quelling distant rebellions, a man fixated on lawfulness above all else. Sitting atop a horse, looming over the characters, his obsession with hierarchy is made clear from the start. This society is one in which characters like Robyn are othered and ostracised, wolfwalkers are considered monsters, but as the narrative goes on, the Lord protector reveals himself to be the true monster – his methods are brutal and cruel, he lacks all empathy for the

young girls. This is not the Macha of *Song of the Sea* (2014) who reveals herself to be a misunderstood antagonist, transforming into an ally of the heroes by the end; the Lord Protector is cold-blooded and achieves no such salvation. When Said (1978) described the Other, he observed it from a Western perspective, positioning the "Occident" as the othered group. Just as how *Wolfwalkers* contradicts the traditional Irish-versus-English dynamic by depicting two young girls, cultures apart, united by the magical abilities, the film also turns otherness on its head, asking its audience to consider the Lord Protector as the true "other". His harsh and exclusionary ideology is alien, his cruelty makes him almost inhuman. His perspective on nature and the natural order is twisted to serve his fundamentalist religious and authoritarian views, and like homophobic movements in the world today, he weaponises nature as an argument against queerness. It is evocative of Michel Foucault's description of how sexuality and sexual identity was regulated throughout society, beginning in the 19th century, in his seminal *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976). As a homosexual man himself who wrote extensively about power and its relation to "truth" and the production of knowledge, Foucault's work has heavily inspired queer theorists over the decades. He describes how heterosexuality was normalised through canonical and civil law, how nature was utilised as an argument against perceived "perversions". Homosexuality, and similar sexual identities, were dismissed as "contrary to nature", and heterosexual marriage became sacred (pp.37-39). Knowledge and the "truth" about nature were contorted to create rigid power structures that regulated sexuality and othered queerness, a practice reflected in the Lord Protector's Kilkenny.

At the centre of the persecutory atmosphere in the film, and fundamental to *Wolfwalkers*' themes of oppression and conflict, is Cartoon Saloon's animated Kilkenny, a location that is intrinsically tied to the legacy of colonialism in Ireland. The city is depicted as a place where colonial authority is embedded and projects itself out into the rest of the island, soldiers standing at every corner and English flags hanging from the walls. The puritanical

Lord Protector, a folkloric figure in his own right, represents an opposing force to that of the wolves in the forest – nevertheless, his absence would render the reworking of Irish mythology incomplete. As Keretli (2021) highlights, the tale of British colonialism lends itself to fantastical depiction, like a grim fable with fantastic characters (p.112), such is its monumental impact on the postcolonial Irish sense of self. The Lord Protector is transformed in the film from a historic figure to a mythic embodiment of the colonial process itself, blending the film's historicity and fiction into one. He is from a critical period in the histories not just of Ireland but the British Isles as a whole; the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639 – 1653) represented a tumultuous era of protracted conflict across England, Scotland, and Ireland, a sequence of intertwining rebellions and civil wars. Following the victory of Oliver Cromwell's parliamentarian forces in the English theatre in 1649, and the execution of king Charles I, the Irish theatre was left devastated. Dublin was under the control of the parliamentary army, but over 80% of the island was hostile to Cromwell's regime. What followed was a conquest, led personally by the soon-to-be proclaimed "Lord Protector", that resulted in the tightest colonial stranglehold any English ruler had ever achieved in Ireland (Keretli 2021, pp.116-117). Cromwell's campaign was defined by ruthless bloodshed, followed by the mass confiscation of land and the incorporation of Ireland into the unitary "Protectorate" or Commonwealth in 1650. In less than a year, Cromwell had firmly ingrained himself into the Irish mythological landscape as a figure symbolising mass death and colonial subjugation. With a legacy like this, it is easy to see why he is the film's embodiment of colonial persecution, a personification of the immense systemic forces that Robyn and Mebh must overcome.

Though it is not without its shortcomings, the mythologising of Irish history has its benefits from a storytelling perspective. British colonial expansion was about more than extermination or land acquisition, it was the subsuming of one story over another, a new mythology uprooting and replacing the old one. As was discussed in the previous section,

wolves represented not only a fixture of the Irish ecosystem but also played a significant symbolic role in Irish storytelling tradition; the Lord Protector's ambition to eradicate the wolf population is at once allegorical of humanity's relationship with nature and of the colonial destruction of indigenous culture. In this way, the film recontextualises its historical basis, transforming postcolonial Kilkenny into a nexus for the film's core themes – intercultural conflict, colonial oppression, gendered discrimination, and environmental desecration. The struggle between man and nature, the suffering induced by oppressive patriarchal laws, and the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland are equated and blended together to create a new myth for the modern day.

The persecution that Robyn encounters is one that ultimately forces her to rebel, not to submit, and her desire for liberation drives her into the nearby forest. Forests have been utilised in the trilogy's past to represent a place of freedom and transformation; *The Secret of Kells* (2009) depicts a rigid society ruled over by a zealous patriarch, a society that drives the young Brendan to seek solace in nature. Just as how he encounters the mysterious Aisling, Robyn discovers an untamed girl, her direct opposite who embodies everything she wants to be. Only through Robyn and Mebh's bond is the oppression of the Lord Protector eventually overcome, and it is that bond and that magical forest that is discussed next.

8.6. Queer Liberation

Robyn's first excursion into the woods represents a moment of no return for her character; just as how Brendan was exposed to a completely foreign world in the depths of the forest, encountering the mysterious Aisling, Robyn is exposed to the healing power of the wolfwalkers. She is also bitten, infusing her with the transformative magic of the wolfwalkers and sealing her fate as one of them. Her crossing of the boundary between city and forest – Campbell's hero venturing deep into the otherworld from which he will retrieve the boon – is

not just a transgression of physical borders. It is a transgression of her society's rules and standards, a rejection of the Lord Protector's authority. Her journey from the city into the forest echoes Elsa's flight to the mountains, it is the moment that she becomes a heroine. She is a character who follows in a long line of what Baker describes as "disruptive" non-heteronormative women found throughout fairytale lore, "monstrous" women who defy social conventions and speak with their own voice (2010). Mebh jokingly calls Robyn a "townie" throughout the film, defining her as a citizen of that cold, restrictive world, but as she comes to embrace the forest as a home and her wolf form as her true body, Robyn retorts that "I'm not a townie, anymore."

If Kilkenny embodies the restrictive social hierarchies and standards that weigh the queer heroine down, the forest embodies queer liberation. It is a place in which Robyn is free to explore and experiment with her new wolfwalker abilities, where she is not afraid to be herself. In this sense, the forest can be read as a "safe space" where the two heroines can recuperate, exchange affection, and howl at the moon without fear of reprisal. More than this, the forest is a place in which resistance thrives, and resistance, as Bauwel et al. (2008) argue, is at the core of queer theory. This period of the film, in which Robyn and Mebh explore the forest and themselves together, aligns with the stage of the monomyth that Campbell described as the "initiation", a phase containing trials and the build-up to the retrieval of the boon. During this process, the hero undergoes "initiatory conquests and moments of illumination", aided by a variety of allies and magical items (Campbell 1949, p.90). Robyn and Mebh both have their own ambitions – "boons" to retrieve – and it is within the wilderness that they discover how best to pursue those ambitions and win. It is a phenomenon prevalent in animated films, with such examples as *Brave*'s (2012) Merida who seeks the forest's comfort after rejecting a betrothal that was forced upon her, or *Tangled*'s (2010) Rapunzel who flees a domineering mother-figure. Noel Brown (2021) highlights these as examples of the 21st century heroine asserting herself (p.131), but it can just as easily be

extended to represent the queer heroine seeking liberation and pursuing the path of initiation as described by Campbell.

It is significant that the forest represents a place of queer liberation while the city can be interpreted as embodying heteronormative power structures. Throughout much of the 20th century and leading into the 21st, queerness has been associated with unnatural urges, as the "other", while heterosexuality has been naturalised. A queer reading of *Wolfwalkers* turns this dynamic on its head as it is the natural world that liberates and empowers queerness. Robert Azzarello (2008) examines the parallels between queer theory and environmental studies, arguing that our understanding of sexuality and nature have both been constructed and politicised. Just as how our understanding of the natural world has evolved over time along with our conception of what is "natural", he argues that heteronormativity has been made natural at the expense of queerness which becomes unnatural. *Wolfwalkers* demonstrates that it is important to present audiences with characters that fly in the face of these assumptions, that challenge and break our understanding of the natural/unnatural, the familiar/other. If the forest is a queer space, a queer reading of *Wolfwalkers* can go as far as to associate heteronormativity with the fragile artificiality of the city – it is homophobia, not homosexuality, that is unnatural.

The relationship between Robyn and Mebh blossoms and thrives in the space of the forest. In Kilkenny, there is no room to run and jump and climb, and a wild native girl like Mebh has no place there. In the city, the two must keep their queer bond a secret, but in the privacy of the woods, there are no taboos. There is an intimacy and mutual reliance that develops between the two, but the uncertainty surrounding their fate puts their relationship in a precarious position. Gavala (2019) and Brown (2021) both identify how non-heterosexual relationships have grown in prominence in animation over the years; Nickelodeon's *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) culminates in a scene reminiscent of two female lovers walking into the sunset, and *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Inside Out* (2015) all place relationships between

female characters at the forefront. Much like those examples, *Wolfwalkers* depicts a bond between two girls who are worlds apart in personality and temperament. This strong contrast between female characters, Kanno argues, has been used throughout the history of cinema to suggest lesbianism without outright stating it – extreme opposites behaving as foils for one another. Robyn and Mebh are of distinct ethnicities, one is a "townie", and the other is wild, one is cautious, and the other is reckless, and most significantly of all, Robyn gives the impression of being an average girl while Mebh is akin to a forest spirit. Kanno points out that spectrality, that ethereal quality that makes Mebh feel otherworldly, indicates displacement and has been utilised many times to hint at queerness in film. It is an archetype that Kanno calls the "ghostly lesbian". This monstrous spectre has manifested in film around the world in many forms and in this case, it takes the shape of the supernatural wolfwalker, a shape that Robyn gradually comes to embrace in the forest.

It is not uncommon to find the "monstrous" and the queer combined. Both elicit disgust in society and are fiercely rejected. In fairytales and folklore throughout the ages, the monstrous queer, often manifesting as a kind of beast, is pitted against heteropatriarchal order according to Baker (2010). While the monstrous can serve to utterly demonise queerness, accentuating its otherness, it can also be utilised for the opposite purpose, forcing readers/viewers to question their understanding of nature and asking audiences to consider alternative perspectives. This is especially the case for a film like *Wolfwalkers* which places the "monsters" at the centre of the narrative. In the case of Robyn and Mebh, their queer monstrousness resembles a wolf, strongly echoing the centuries-old myth of the werewolf. Bernhardt-House identifies the werewolf as a powerful symbol for queerness due to its hybridity, at once human and animal, transgressing established boundaries – the werewolf, by its very nature, contradicts and threatens to upend the status quo (2008, p.159). Werewolves are often depicted uncontrollable and unnatural, inflicted by a curse, and violent depictions of werewolves have been used in the past as allegories for sexuality and lust, such as *Ginger*

Snaps (2000). In that instance, a young woman is bitten and gradually transforms against her will, her monstrous conversion coinciding with her maturation into womanhood. Bernhardt-House highlights the clear risks that come with depicting queers as werewolves; the idea of a curse or disease that spreads, reminiscent of sexually transmitted diseases, and the concept of an inner monster that, if unleashed in public, threatens to cause destruction and death (p.173). However, *Wolfwalkers'* beasts are notably separate from the classic cinematic werewolf of past decades, reminding us more so of the benevolent, self-controlled werewolf of some medieval stories, as described in Chapter 5 where the wolf motif is broken down in detail.

Wolfwalkers takes the figure of the werewolf, a trope capable of othering and dehumanising queerness, and turns it into a symbol of queer liberation. Where the monstrous can be used as a restrictive and demoralising allegory for queer identity and sexuality, Robyn and Mebh's monstrousness sets them free. When portraying queerness in such a way, caution needs to be applied to ensure that the queer does not come across as alien and that audiences are not put off by the characters' transformation. *Wolfwalkers*, when analysed through a queer lens, reveals a very effective depiction of the queer liberated by monstrousness, not restrained by it. This liberation ultimately leads to a reconciliation with the Other, peace between the two worlds, and Robyn and Mebh's relationship not only liberates themselves but also those around them.

8.7. Queer Reconciliation

The quest to find liberation in a wonderful otherworld, to meet magical allies, to defeat the great evil and in so doing resolve conflict with the shadow, is a story reflected in Campbell's monomyth and in fairytales throughout the world, culminating in the reconciliation of the two worlds. It is a process of individuation that *Wolfwalkers* reinvents, shifting away from the heteronormative tale of a prince or male hero rescuing the damsel,

instead telling the tale of two young girls rescuing each other. For Robyn, it all builds up to the moment when she decides to truly stand up to her father and decides to fight for the survival of the wolves. In this moment, she not only decides to fully embrace the life of the forest, to stand defiant in the face of this brutal regime, she also forces her father, Bill, to make his own choice. The strength that she has built up, fuelled by her relationship with Mebh, is powerful enough to rescue not only herself but the ones around her. For Mebh, as much as for Robyn, it becomes an existential battle for survival as the Lord Protector commands that the forest be burned to ash and the wolves be slaughtered. The myths and fairytales of old, Baker (2010) notes, sometimes conclude with the monstrous queer being punished and destroyed. In its traditional form, the fairytale would maintain and enforce strict gendered boundaries between what is considered normal and what is considered abject or Other – very often, a fairytale would end with a heterosexual marriage – but *Wolfwalkers* defies this convention. The queer and the monstrous are not proven to be wrong, they are lifted up to heroic status and granted the ultimate victory.

The reconciliation between dark and light, Self and shadow, the mundane and the magical worlds, a revelation that marks the end of the hero's quest, is no less present here. Baker argues that the queer monstrous figure, by virtue of its refusal to conform to categories and its simultaneous normality and abnormality, has the potential to collapse and reconcile binaries. Robyn and Mebh, being wolfwalkers, possess the power to be human and animal at once, and Robyn in particular is a hybrid product of the two worlds, city and forest. Their relationship ultimately destroys the barrier between what is considered "normal" and "abnormal" by the townsfolk, thus converting Bill and destroying the Lord Protector. The queer Other, in this case, blurs boundaries and serves as a vehicle for revitalising reconciliation. The conversion of Bill is particularly significant: indoctrinated and frightened into submission by the Lord Protector, his transformation from wolf hunter to wolfwalker is perhaps even more dramatic than the transformation undergone by either of the heroines.

At the start of the film, it is easy to see the similarities between the tyrannical Lord Protector and Robyn's father, Bill. Both men readily accept the established hierarchy of society, both hunt and kill wolves, and both act as forces of oppression that disenfranchise and hurt the two young heroines. However, as the narrative goes on, it becomes clear that Bill is almost as much a victim of this system as his daughter is. Bill does not participate willingly, rather he accepts society's cruel structure to ensure that he and his daughter are allowed to stay together. He is no ally of the Lord Protector either, feeling the dictator's wrath on multiple occasions. Figure 14 below demonstrates the oppressiveness of the Lord Protector's regime, coming at a point in the narrative when both Bill and Robyn seem to have given up all hope for change. Their small forms are dwarfed by towering grey walls, the only light is pale and cold, and father and daughter are separated from each other, dragged to opposite sides of the screen for their morning duties. While Robyn reaches out one last time, Bill gives up entirely, telling her it is "for your own good, lass." (01:03:20) Ahmed describes the queer child as an "unhappy object" for some parents, mothers and fathers who reject their child's queerness not out of contempt but out of fear that their child will suffer because of their identity. She describes the struggle between the father who wants the best for his daughter and the daughter who demands to be accepted for who she is (Ahmed 2010); it is a battle fought throughout *Wolfwalkers* between Robyn and Bill, one that culminates in a dramatic confrontation on the eve of the final fight. Robyn steps between Bill and the caged Moll, preventing her father from killing the wolfwalker. He is forced to make a choice that many parents must make – to be steadfast in his beliefs and remain tied to the Lord Protector, or to abandon those ideals and embrace his daughter's queerness. Bill finally makes the choice to align with Robyn and Mebh, to break free from his own chains. In the end, it is neither girl who makes the killing blow against the Lord Protector, it is Bill himself.

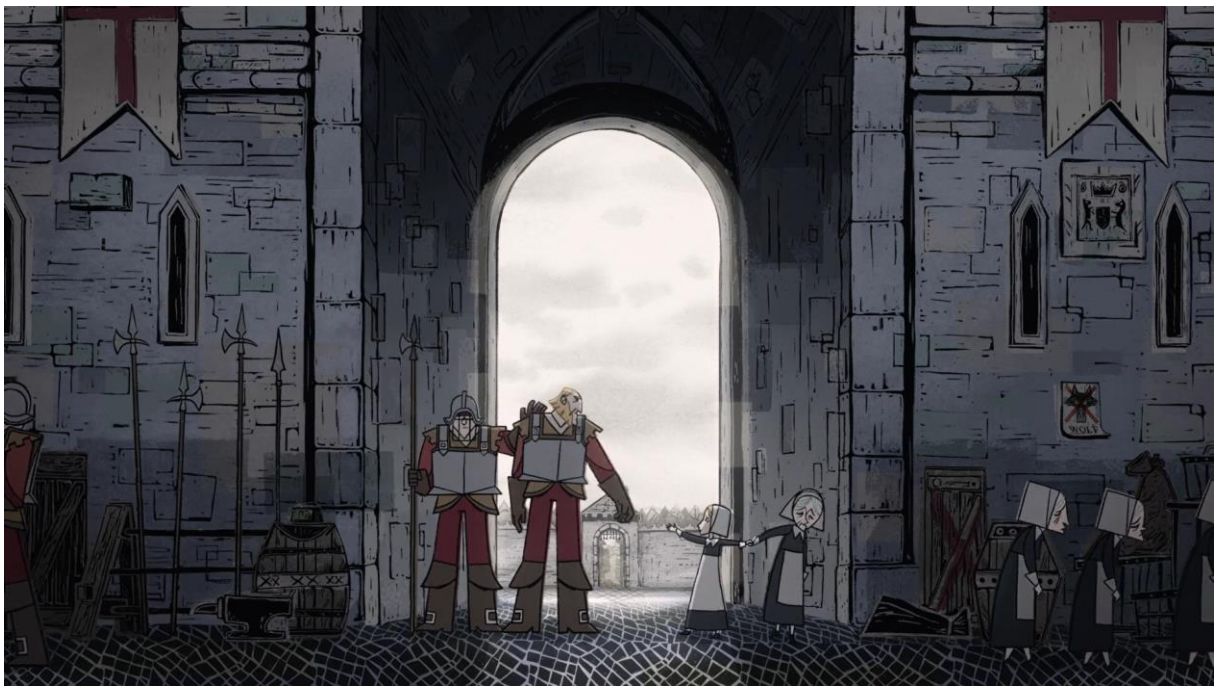

Figure 14 – Robyn and Bill go to their separate duties (01:03:20)

Family plays a large part in the film's depiction of reconciliation, and the girls' queer heroism serves to not only reconnect old familial ties but also create new ones. Valeria Frankel (2014) and Maureen Murdock (1990) both argue that the reconciliation of the family, or the forging of a new family, is a central element of the heroine's journey. Broken familial ties are healed in the film; Mebh is reunited with Moll, the mother who had been captured and tormented by the Lord Protector, and Robyn and Bill finally see eye to eye. This union of characters reflects the inner unification of the heroines' inner aspects, reconciliation achieved personally and interpersonally. For Murdock, this aspect of reconciliation is particularly important as the father represents the heroine's first male role model, his approval can serve to invigorate her, and his dismissal can wound or even paralyse her. Frankel similarly sees the father as a powerful force in the heroine's life, a tyrannical figure to be overcome (p.99). In the final scene of the film, both pairs of characters have merged to form a united family – mother, father, and daughters – bound by their shared shapeshifting abilities (01:37:00). They journey far into the wilderness, that place of queer transformation, to find a new home. It is the ultimate image of familial reconciliation and underscores the total victory of the queer monstrous.

Observing the film through a queer analytical framework, *Wolfwalkers* tells us much about the reconciliatory power contained within queer heroines. Their ability to completely redefine the heroine's journey, allowing heroines to take centre stage and becoming the main driving force for change within their own lives. As a new way of telling or reading stories, queerness can also play a role in the reworking of old folklore; as Baker argues, queer theory has the capacity to "invigorate" storytelling practices within the fairytale genre. Too often are close relationships between female characters assumed to be purely platonic, sisterly, thus eliminating the potential for queer heroines to emerge, erasing queerness. Deconstructing films like *Wolfwalkers* through queer theory is vital for not only giving queer audiences a voice in popular media, but also for tapping into that transformative, liberating, and reconciliatory power that queer heroines provide.

8.8. Conclusion

Cartoon Saloon may not have intended to tell the story of two queer heroines when they set out to produce *Wolfwalkers*. However, as with other "queer" animated films like *Frozen* and *Luca*, LGBTQ+ audiences have transformed Robyn Goodfellowe and Mebh Óg MacTíre's journey into an allegory for queer liberation. Through the application of queer theory, it has been demonstrated that elements of Irish mythology and folklore can be reinvented to become relevant to modern queer experiences, and to create compelling queer heroines. The oppressive atmosphere of the city, as depicted in the film, effectively encapsulates how heteronormative structures and rigid social hierarchies persecute and restrict the freedom of queer individuals. The roles thrust upon both girls – Robyn as a maid and Mebh as a monster – constrict their freedom and ultimately push them to seek greater meaning and recognition. The Lord Protector, and to a lesser degree Bill Goodfellowe, have been interpreted here as patriarchal figures who serve to enforce such a system, one of whom

eventually undergoes his own transformation and the Other, clinging to outdated societal standards, refuses to change and ultimately perishes. As the old system perishes, a new life starts for the heroines and their parents.

The concept of the hero undergoing a powerful initiation after entering the unknown world has been useful in understanding Robyn and Mebh's development as queer characters. Within the "safe space" of the forest, a place where queerness can thrive and the inner abilities are realised, Robyn's queerness is made manifest when she physically transforms into a wolf. It can be understood as simply the latest iteration of the queer werewolf trope, the queer as "monstrous" and liberated from harsh social constraints. While depictions of the queer as monstrous can serve to other and even demonise and dehumanise queerness, *Wolfwalkers* successfully avoids comparing queerness with sheer animalistic desire or uncontrollable destruction. As with some werewolves from Irish mythology, Cartoon Saloon's wolves retain their intelligence when they transform. Just as Campbell's monomythic arc concludes with reconciliation and an ultimate confrontation with the shadow, Robyn and Mebh undergo immense personal growth, their queer relationship ultimately serving to free both themselves and the ones they love from tyranny. These queer heroines eventually create a new family, embrace a new life, finding acceptance for who they truly are rather than hiding their queer nature and being ashamed of it. It is a message, whether intended or not, that has inspired LGBTQ+ audiences in Ireland and around the world. As all forms of queerness continue to gain greater recognition and better representation in the coming years, *Wolfwalkers* can serve as a pivotal example of the queer power contained within myth and folklore.

What Cartoon Saloon produced, however subversive, were just three animated children's films that could easily represent a flash in the pan of female representation in folklore films. What the trilogy signifies is the potential for these archetypes to be pushed further and for reworkings of mythology to continue experimenting with new modes of

representation. It is a process that will not happen naturally, and it is a momentum that needs to be maintained consistently. Schubart indicates that there is no way of knowing, and no guarantee, that any female character type will be popularised to the point that she becomes an archetype, but active recirculation through new stories is one way of achieving it. The three films analysed here pushed the process of reworking female archetypes forward considerably, and it is the task of future filmmakers to continue developing these and other archetypes.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Between 2009 and 2020, Kilkenny-based animation studio Cartoon Saloon produced a trilogy of films inspired by Irish mythology and folklore, a trilogy that reworked ideas from centuries-old stories and introduced them to modern audiences. From *The Secret of Kells* (2009), a mythicised retelling of how the Book of Kells was created, to *Song of the Sea* (2014), an interpretation of the selkie myth, and *Wolfwalkers* (2020), a fantastical exploration of Ireland's colonial past, the "folklore trilogy" uses old material to create something new. Cartoon Saloon's filmography has and continues to fit into a wider Irish storytelling tradition, one that, celebrates and relies upon the reworking of indigenous mythological and folkloric narratives. Numerous examples exist over the decades of traditional Irish tales and characters incorporated into new media forms or brought to life on screen, and Irish language cinema in particular has seen a greater presence internationally in recent years. However, the work of Kilkenny-based studio Cartoon Saloon and their animated trilogy is uniquely positioned as an example of indigenous animation appealing to international audiences and Irish folklore reworked for a new Ireland. A critical engagement with the history of Irish filmmaking and the animation industry, changes in how mythology is interpreted and used over time, the impact of nationalism and globalisation in Ireland, and the attributes and issues that define modern Irish identity have all helped to contextualise Cartoon Saloon, grounding them in Irish social concerns, local culture, and international trends.

Folklore has been closely connected to ideas of national identity and regionality (Hopkin 2012), however an understanding of post-nationalism and its application to film has been equally vital. The work of Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (1990), and Richard Kearney (2002) provides insights into how national identities are constructed in a global context, and how globalisation can reinforce or deconstruct ideas of nationhood. Ireland's status as an EU member, as well as heavy influence from the United Kingdom and United

States over the past century, should also inform any evaluation of Ireland's identity in the 21st century. This makes postnationalist theory an effective means for understanding how the animation sector developed as it did, and why it is this way today. Critical examinations of Cartoon Saloon's work similarly need to be conscious of how postnationalism effectively describes modern Irish cultural identity while remaining cognisant of Ireland's unique position in Europe. The folklore trilogy, in discussing universal concerns like equality or environmentalism, does not completely abandon the nationalist sentiments of prior Irish folklore films. Rather it incorporates ideas like Mother Ireland and the landscape as memory into its discussion of these ideas, recontextualising them. In this way, this thesis is also applicable to wider international film studies and provides an insight into how society can engage with critical issues through the arts. As a whole, myth and folklore in all their forms play a pivotal role in shaping identities, granting them a sense of legitimacy, precedence, stability, and a connection to the land, among many other things. From the film industry's perspective, the advent of Creative Ireland has placed an emphasis on the island as a creative hub and, by linking with other pillars of the programme, creates opportunities for engagement with Irish themes.

This research, in contextualising Cartoon Saloon both in Ireland and abroad, reveals how their productions in particular relate to the creation of national and cultural identity. The application of otherness in the construction of these identities has been ongoing for centuries, and understanding this process is integral to understanding its benefits, its pitfalls, and the methods by which filmmakers may construct inclusive and forward-looking messages through myth. The preceding evaluation of otherness and the manifold forms it can take underlines just how central this concept is to the creation (and questioning) of Irishness, cinema's confrontation with contemporary societal issues, and how we relate to ourselves, each other, and our past. Theorists like Joseph Campbell (1949) have argued that approaching these stories from the perspective of archetype theory and narrative structure can grant insights into

the nature of human psychology and development. Though numerous critiques of his work and alternative theoretical frameworks have been presented in this thesis, his writings remained an important part of how otherness was understood. His arguments regarding the universality of myth, the reusability of old archetypes, and the deep thematic connections between modern and ancient stories tied strongly into the overall argument that myth can and should be reworked for contemporary purposes. Though outdated in several respects, such as its descriptions of the heroine archetype and its heavy emphasis on Western styles of storytelling, *The hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) has undoubtedly left a powerful mark on world cinema and storytelling in the present day. This is as much the case for the Irish film and animation sector as it is the case for Hollywood.

Cartoon Saloon recognises that there are a variety of worldviews, none of which are necessarily superior to any others. Despite its similarities to Disney, both being animation studios adapting mythology and folklore for a young, general audience, Cartoon Saloon is separate from its American counterpart in many ways. The trilogy's message, celebrating diversity and cooperation, is antithetical to the idea that some communities are "Other", a far cry from works like *Pocahontas*. Though the studio's animated depictions of heroes and dark Others may deviate from Campbell's conception of those archetypes at times, they nevertheless remain true to the spirit of those Irish mythological figures. Macha remains an intimidating and powerful deity, but her character is granted depth; Aisling serves a heroic role in her own right yet still harkens back to the image of the nature goddess or Mother Ireland. If archetypes are changeable and can represent anything to anyone, there is no reason why the monstrous cannot also be heroic, and indeed Robyn and Mebh's journey in *Wolfwalkers* illustrates this to us. Kennon et al. (2011) describe the plight of younger Irish generations in particular, generations that grew up in the post-Celtic Tiger era, and how they might perceive Irish myth moving forward (pp.16-17). Old nationalist stories no longer resonate with a generation defined by economic crisis, pandemic, a climate emergency, failing

institutions, and social justice movements. In such uncertain times, without faith in political institutions or Church doctrine, mythology, as Kennon et al. argue, is a "force for cultural stabilisation" and a means of strengthening social and personal identity (p.17). Old interpretations of romantic archetypes have become outdated and old stories need to be retold. While Cartoon Saloon is far from the first or last, or even most successful, examples of mythological reworking in Ireland, it is a valuable case study for a number of interesting discussions surrounding myth in the post-Celtic Tiger era, the role of women in a society where the Church is no longer dominant, and the ways that children's media tackles social and political issues. More than anything, the folklore trilogy reveals some of the ways filmmakers can restore a sense of purpose and meaning to old archetypes in their efforts to modernise myth.

Cartoon Saloon's approach to nature and women, much like its discussion of nationhood and Irishness, relies strongly on its depictions of otherness. Through the reworking of mythical characters and imagery, there is an attempt to strengthen appreciation for nature, a feeling of connection to the natural or 'other' world, and to provide answers to audiences seeking a sense of stability in a rapidly changing Ireland. In a time when the island is being influenced by so many external cultural, political, and environmental ideas, this sense of a "return" to a simpler or more naturalistic identity can be tempting and comforting. The embrace of the Other, and even incorporation into it, through isolation, solitude, exploration of nature, and escape into the country are themes that are far from new to folklore film. While these messages can fall into the trap of encouraging a rejection of liberal ideas, heightened nationalism at the expense of progress, and greater fear and discrimination, it has also been shown that the Trilogy navigates the otherness in the modern world with caution. Nature is as much an ally to us as it is a threat, something that ought to be respected but does not provide all the answers. In all three of the Irish folklore films discussed, the forest, the cave, and the

ocean are equally sources of wisdom and peril. The Other comes in many forms and not all of them are friendly.

From the perspective of otherness and women, Cartoon Saloon's work signifies the potential for female archetypes – the mother, the crone, the heroine, and the monstrous queer – to be pushed further than before and for their otherness to be reevaluated as a source of moral complexity, heroism, rebellion, and transformation. This process of archetypal reworking and the expansion of women's roles in film will not happen naturally, as discussed in Chapter 6, but the folklore trilogy presents to us a number of ways by which previously passive or underrepresented female figures can be revitalised. The three films analysed here have pushed forward our understanding of these archetypes in an Irish context, showing us how many ways the goddess, the hag, and the female spirit or heroine may be represented in an Ireland that is no longer dominated by conservative social values. Otherness, from this point of view, might be a source of stereotypical or traditional representations, but it can also be a source of great empowerment and liberation.

This thesis' findings are not exclusive to readings of Irish identity on screen and may be applied to regional and national identities the world over. The overlap between distinct national cinemas has also been addressed at length throughout the thesis, comparisons being made between screen depictions of Irish mythology and the ways that other cultures have brought their mythologies to film. Cartoon Saloon's reworkings echo the efforts of Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki who has striven to renew Japanese folkloric elements in animated form with great international and financial success. Disney's animated reworkings of myth and folklore, problematic or otherwise, have also provided useful case studies for comparison between Irish and American depictions of identity in film. It is worth noting that there are also similarities between depictions of Irishness and indigenous Americans on screen, manifesting as a focus on the landscape, the portrayal of a western rural tradition clashing with industrial expansion from the east, and ecological themes. Just as Edward Said's theories surrounding

orientalism have subsequently been applied to other postcolonial regions and depictions of otherness, the ideas presented in this thesis provide a useful basis from which one can analyse a variety of other cultures and mythologies in cinema. However, caution always must be applied when attempting to make a one-to-one comparison between regional identities; as critics of archetype theory point out, every culture is shaped by distinctive historic and geographical circumstances, and consideration for these circumstances should take precedence over the reduction of identities into easily categorisable traits.

Chapters 6 and 7 especially demonstrate the cross-medium applicability of many of the ideas discussed throughout the thesis, as Cartoon Saloon's animated works are compared and contrasted with live-action productions. The concepts of otherness and Irishness, Irish national identity, ecological destruction, women's liberation, and monstrousness each transcend the boundary between artistic forms, and the analysis of folkloric reworking in particular has been applied for decades to the fields of cinema, ethnomusicology, theatre and dance, poetry and literature, and tourism with a great deal of cross interaction. The multidisciplinary nature of this thesis has been demonstrated numerous times, from comparisons between "heritage" live-action films like *Into the West* (1991) and the comparably modern animated folklore trilogy, to considerations of how the history of the Irish animation industry coincides with Ireland's sociopolitical and industrial development throughout the late 20th century. Understanding folklore films through the lens of otherness is a methodology that can be applied across the cinematic medium, regardless of genre or style – indeed, animation is especially suited to cross comparison with other mediums as it stands at the intersection between audio design, music, song, digital artwork, and even traditional practices like sketching and painting.

Animation was not the primary focus of this research, rather it provided a useful foundation for articulating how the Cartoon Saloon folklore trilogy reworked mythical elements for the purpose of exploring themes of contemporary resonance. However,

something that became apparent throughout the research process was the dearth of writing with regard to the Irish animation industry and its outputs, demonstrating the potential for extensive future investigation. This is despite the industry representing a prominent part of the Irish media sector today. The history of the animation industry, and the various experimental and commercial forms it takes, has largely been overlooked in Irish academia to date, with some exceptions like Ruth Barton (2019) who dedicated a single chapter to the development of the national animation industry, which has not been followed up by any major publications on the subject. There is an argument to be made that, far from just being another branch of the Irish film industry, Irish animation has grown to the point of constituting a sector in and of itself. Cartoon Saloon is a significant player in that sector, but they are not the only one, and this thesis ultimately only focussed on three of their feature productions. There is much room for expansion into the subject of Irish animated cinema, and as the industry continues to grow rapidly, the necessity for that research will only become greater.

This thesis presents us with an overview of what future reworkings of mythology and folklore can look like and the key themes that Irish mythology can best be applied to. It is a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in Ireland, the evolution of cultural identity, and the capacity of art to engage with critical issues and shape our collective imagination. Ultimately, mythology and cinema share the distinct goal of allowing readers and listeners to connect to, and see themselves in, the Other. While leaving expansive room for improvement and only touching upon the vast possibilities of folklore film, Cartoon Saloon's work exemplifies the timeless and transformative nature of mythological and folkloric narratives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of Characters

CHARACTER	FILM	DESCRIPTION
Brendan	*The Secret of Kells*	Primary hero of the film, living in early settlement of Kells. He journeys into the forbidden woods to discover the secret to completing the Book of Iona and to defeat the old god Crom Cruach.
Abbot Cellach	*The Secret of Kells*	Brendan's stern uncle and the abbot of Kells.
Brother Aidan	*The Secret of Kells*	A monk who travels from the ruined abbey of Iona to seek refuge in Kells. He becomes Brendan's friend and life-long mentor.
Aisling	*The Secret of Kells*	A forest spirit who aids Brendan in fighting Crom and completing the Book of Iona.
Pangur Bán	*The Secret of Kells*	Originally Brother Aidan's pet cat, Pangur becomes close to Brendan and Aisling and helps them on their journey.
Crom Cruach	*The Secret of Kells*	A dark, ancient god who resides in a ruined shrine deep in the forest.
Brothers Tang, Leonardo, Assoua, Square	*The Secret of Kells*	Minor allies of Brendan who work at the abbey of Kells.
Saoirse	*Song of the Sea*	The heroine of the film, she secretly has selkie powers inherited from her mother. She is mute, and her journey is one of self-empowerment and coming to terms with her dual nature as half-human, half-selkie.
Ben	*Song of the Sea*	Saoirse's older brother, he blames her for the loss of their mother and treats her poorly. Over the course of their journey, he grows closer to his sister, becoming her ally.
Conor	*Song of the Sea*	Saoirse and Ben's father, he is a single parent struggling with the loss of his wife.
Bronagh	*Song of the Sea*	Saoirse and Ben's mother who is thought to have died. It is revealed that she was in fact a selkie and had returned to the sea after Saoirse's birth.
Granny	*Song of the Sea*	Saoirse and Ben's domineering grandmother and Conor's mother. She brings the children to the mainland after Saoirse nearly drowns in the sea.
Macha	*Song of the Sea*	An owl-witch who serves as the main antagonist to Saoirse and Ben, she threatens to turn the *sídhe* to stone but eventually converts.

Daoine Sídhe	*Song of the Sea*	Lug, Mossy, and Spud are fairy folk residing in a mound who play music and impart knowledge on Saoirse and Ben.
Great Seanchaí	*Song of the Sea*	An ancient storyteller who holds memories in the fibres of his hair, he gives Ben important knowledge on his journey.
Mac Lír	*Song of the Sea*	Macha's son, he is a colossal man who she turned to stone so that he could escape the sorrow he felt.
Robyn Goodfellowe	*Wolfwalkers*	A young girl he travels from England to Ireland with her father. In Kilkenny, she is an outsider and is treated poorly by both native Irish and her cruel ruler, the Lord Protector.
Bill Goodfellowe	*Wolfwalkers*	
Mebh Óg MacTíre	*Wolfwalkers*	A young wolfwalking girl who has the power to transform into a wolf. She lives in the forest and allies with Robyn to overthrow the Lord Protector's regime.
Moll MacTíre	*Wolfwalkers*	Mebh's mother, she is a wolfwalker who is imprisoned by the Lord Protector and later serves as an ally to the heroines.
The Lord Protector	*Wolfwalkers*	A cruel and rigid leader of Kilkenny who is devoted to his god and to the protection of the town at all costs. He is a reference to the 17th century figure Oliver Cromwell who served as Lord Protector of England and conquered Ireland.
Seán Óg	*Wolfwalkers*	A minor ally to Robyn, he is a woodcutter who is punished by the Lord Protector.

Appendix B: Table of Archetypes

ARCHETYPE	CHARACTER/S
Hero	*Brendan* embodies the standard monomythic hero who travels beyond the safe confines of their community, into the dangerous otherworld, to retrieve the boon that will save themselves and their people. *Saoirse* undergoes a dramatic transformation over the course of her story, enduring a harsh and strenuous process of individuation where her journey towards finding a voice coincides with her efforts to heroically save the world of the *sídhe*. *Robyn* and *Mebh* serve as dual heroines who mutually encourage and support each other's heroic development; though coming from different communities, their struggle is against the common enemy of an oppressive Kilkenny ruled by the Lord Protector, and both undergo a process of heroic transformation in the space of the forest.
Shadow	*Abbot Cellach* is a domineering force in the settle of Kells, and a more immediate threat to Brendan than Crom Cruach or the Northmen. His overbearing and distant attitude represents everything Brendan opposes, and it is the abbot's oppressiveness that ultimately drives Brendan away from the town, into the woods. *Macha* serves as Saoirse's primary antagonist and, while Saoirse seeks to come to terms with her heritage and past, Macha encourages the children to let go of those things. As Saoirse's direct opposite, Macha sees sorrow and suffering as weakness; Saoirse conversely grows as a character despite the loss of her mother. *The Lord Protector*, like Cellach, is a domineering and patriarchal leader, serving a rigid moral code, whose actions pose a threat to the hero's chances of reconciling with the Other. While Robyn and Mebh may see strength in allying with those who are different, the Lord Protector treats otherness as a threat.
Mentor	*Brother Aidan* guides Brendan towards completing the Book of Ionas/Kells and introduces the boy to the magical world of the forest. His mentorship eventually transforms Brendan into an enlightened, travelling preacher. *Aisling* serves a mentoring role for Brendan throughout much of his journey, introducing him to aspects of the forest he never knew about and heroically rescuing him when he is in need. *Robyn* and *Mebh* serve as each other's mentors, providing knowledge from both of their worlds and strengthening each other's heroic development as a result.
Herald	*Brother Aidan* heralds the coming of the hero's journey when he introduces Brendan to the Book of Iona. This revelation serves to inspire the hero to seek out enlightenment and transformation. *Granny* arrives to lift Saoirse and Ben away from their home, bringing them far away to the city, thus inadvertently starting their heroic journeys. She also presumably is the first character to introduce the children to the world

	beyond their familiar lighthouse home.
Ally	*Aisling* serves as Brendan's closest ally and friend throughout his heroic journey, serving multiple archetypal roles and eventually parting ways with him once his journey is complete. Na Daoine Sídhe are Saoirse and Ben's first proper introduction to the magical world of the fairies, and the knowledge they impart sets the two children on their way to becoming heroic figures and saving the *sídhe* from destruction. *Moll* serves a minor role as an ally to Robyn and Mebh; her imprisonment is an initial driving force for the heroines, and she fights alongside the girls in the final battle.
Guardian	*Aisling* plays the role of guardian at the threshold by marking the first obstacle that Brendan faces in the otherworldly forest. Her interrogation of Brendan is what decides whether he passes deeper into the woods or not, and the two first meet in an ancient stone circle, a boundary location between the mortal and magical worlds. Na Daoine Sídhe serve a similar role to Aisling, standing at the boundary between the city and the strange otherworld that Saoirse and Ben need to enter. Like Aisling, they are also encountered in an ancient place that has historically been considered a threshold between the familiar and magical worlds; a burial mound.
Shapeshifter	*Macha* undergoes a dramatic transformation when she confronts Saoirse and Ben; initially antagonistic, their fight culminates with her experiencing a revelation and renouncing her cruel methods. In this way, she transitions from shadow to ally. *Bill Goodfellowe* undergoes a transformation similar to Macha, starting as a domineering figure whose controlling attitude is fuelled by his fear of losing his daughter. When he is forced to choose between Robyn and the Lord Protector, he experiences a powerful change, becoming an ally to the heroines.
trickster	*Aisling* serves a semi-heroic role and is an ally to Brendan, but she is also strange, unpredictable, teases him, and ultimately parts ways with the hero rather than aligning with him permanently. *Mebh* is far from an antagonistic character, but her jokes, jeers, and fiery temper put her at odds with Robyn on a few occasions. These conflicts serve ultimately to strengthen their bond.