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*Song of the Sea*: A "Stolen" Irish Moment for Every Viewer

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*Song of the Sea*: A "Stolen" Irish Moment for Every Viewer

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Olivia Jane Volarich, B.A., Emory University, 2015

Advisor: Amy Aidman, PhD

An abstract of

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Film and Media Studies

2016

## Abstract

*Song of the* Sea: A "Stolen" Irish Moment for Every Viewer By Olivia Jane Volarich

The following is a study of the 2014 film *Song of the Sea* directed by Tomm Moore. As a classically animated children's film, it is apparent that the filmmakers at the small, independent production studio, Cartoon Saloon, took great care in the crafting of an artifact that stayed true to Celtic culture and heritage. The filmmakers incorporated elements from their own national experiences, as well as numerous sources of Celtic fairy tales, folklore, iconography, and film. The product is a exemplary children's film that delivers an authentic message to viewers in comparison to the mainstream children's films popular today.

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*The Stolen Child*
W.B. Yeats

"Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berrys
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim gray sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob

Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than he can understand."

**Introduction:**

My entire life I have been drawn to the sea. I like to think that in another life I grew up on the coast and spent all my time in the water. I always enjoyed the Disney films like *The Little Mermaid*, and *Finding Nemo* that were set under the sea. After watching countless documentaries about aquatic life, like *Blue Planet* or *Planet Earth*, I developed a dream-like, colorful, tranquil, and ultimately, safe version of what the ocean would be like in my imagination.

The first time I saw the trailer for *Song of the Sea*, I was absolutely enamored with the underwater sequence where the little Irish girl first transforms into a selkie, a magical being that is a seal in the ocean, but sheds its coat to walk on land as a human. It seems like director Tomm Moore was able to precisely capture what I *wanted* the sea to be like in my mind. The color palette is the array of turquoises and blues that I gravitate towards; they were strikingly bright, but with soft and glowing pinks, yellows, and purples illuminating the undersea life. And with the compositing techniques used to create each frame within the film, the glowing white lines that were etched into the whale, jellyfish, and countless other animals gave the sequence an overall feeling of safety and tranquility, and at the dame time wonder and adventure.

I immediately decided to keep tabs on the film simply by checking in on it via search engines, and the Cartoon Saloon webpage. When I learned of its Oscar nomination, I was ecstatic. After learning of the film's subsequent loss to Disney's *Big Hero 6*, I was not entirely surprised that such a *different* animated film, at least in my mind, did not win. At this point, though, I still had not seen the film! It was not

until the early summer of 2015 that I finally watched *Song of the Sea* in my sister's home. Within the first 30 seconds of the film, the opening score slowly crept its way into my mind with the sounds of the descending plucking of guitar strings, but not before Lisa Hannigan's calm voice is heard reading a verse from *The Stolen Child*; I already had goose bumps. Then as the Gaelic lyrics began swirling in my head, and I saw the opening shot of the lighthouse, almost as if the watercolor scene was backlit from a light board, the film wrapped itself around my heart into a vice-like grip. It was so beautiful that it hurt. I was completely enamored with this story about two siblings on an adventure of self-discovery where they reconnect with their family through song and story, and ultimately, are able to save the magical races that live in their seaside home. More than once, and certainly early on in the story, I found myself holding back tears, and by the end of the film I was so confused by all of the emotions I was feeling that I had to watch it again.

This narrative first begins to unfold in a short sequence where the viewer is introduced to a young boy, Ben, painting with his pregnant mother, Bronach, his dog, Cú by his side. Connor, the father, joins them to tuck Ben in as the family is happily anticipating the arrival of a new baby. In the middle of the night, Bronach suddenly leaves their lighthouse home, with hair turning white, and in her place leaves the new baby girl, Saoirse. In the scene that follows, it is revealed that Bronach has seemingly passed, leaving in her wake a devastated Connor, a mute Saoirse, and a resentful Ben. The negative feelings Ben has toward Saoirse are extremely apparent. Saoirse, however, seeks a connection with her brother. Connor's mother, Granny, arrives on the island to celebrate Saoirse's sixth birthday

where, after a quick appraisal, she promptly deems the status of the small family "disgraceful". That night, after an unsuccessful birthday party, Saoirse finds her selkie coat for the first time. Saoirse is half selkie as she was born to a selkie, Bronach, and a human, Connor. A selkie is a magical creature that is born as a seal to the sea, and has the ability to shed their coat and walk on land as a human. These people always feel a pull to the sea, as their natural state is as a seal in the water. Saoirse ventures down to the water where she transforms into a seal, as this is her first time being united with her coat since she was born. Her magical night is cut short when Granny finds her washed up on shore, seemingly having caught a cold, and overcome with fear and worry, decides to bring the children back to live with her in the city. Ben loudly resists as Connor helps to pack up Granny's car. He is especially distraught that Cú must stay behind at the lighthouse. As soon as the children are put to bed at Granny's, Ben sneaks out, with Saoirse on his heels, to reunite with Cú.

Here, the children's adventure begins on Halloween night as they set off through the city, and eventually across the damp Irish countryside. Along the way they meet the Deenashee, a group of fairies in search for the last selkie alive, to help send all of the magical folk back to the "other world", their home across the sea. Soon they find out that it is only Saoirse and her song that can save all of the fairies that had been turned to stone by the evil owl witch Macha. Just when it seems that Ben and Saoirse might be able to work together to make it home, Saoirse is captured by Macha's henchmen-like owls, and Ben finds himself taking direction from the Great Seanachaí, an old storyteller from Bronach's stories. The Great Seanachaí

helps Ben to reconcile his feelings for Saoirse, which in turn allows him to find the courage to rescue her from Macha. Eventually, the witch realizes her magic has done more harm than good, and helps the children quickly return home. Ben conquers his fears and dives deep down into the water to retrieve Saoirse's coat, to the point where he nearly drowns. Saoirse, having been separated from the sea and her coat for too long, is very near death until Ben retrieves her coat with the help of the seals. In the end, Saoirse is united with her coat and sings her song. The climax of the film comes after her song sends all of the magical folk across the sea, and Bronach appears before her family to take Saoirse with her. The film concludes with Saoirse making the decision to stay a human and live with Ben and Connor, and the family must say goodbye to Bronach once more.

With the conclusion of the film, I found myself feeling so many different emotions, and left with many questions. Why did I feel devastated, yet oddly free after seeing this family lose their mother, yet again? Why did it feel like I had been absorbed into this watercolor world that was beautiful and bright, yet cold and damp at the same time? *How* did Moore and his production team achieve this beautiful aesthetic, while still skillfully telling a story of grief and despair that could be understood by even the youngest child, and could leave an adult trying to tease out the deeper meanings within the narrative?

In attempting to answer the question of *why Song of the Sea* is so unique, I found that for many popular critics the film was quite unlike the children's films they were accustomed to reviewing. The film just seemed so *different* for a large portion of viewers. Popular critics attributed this to the fact that Tomm Moore

makes a point to take the *time* to tell a story with his films. In the diegesis of *Song of the Sea*, it feels as if the viewer is encouraged to, "breathe deeply, savor moments of silence and beauty, and open the door to wonder and mystery" in the damp countryside of North Western Ireland (Greydanus). It is also noteworthy that for a film that is heavily based on the devastating loss of a family, and the subsequent trauma a child experiences from losing their mother, critical reviews suggest that the film took them on an extremely pleasant, if not spiritual in some sense, journey. Robbie Collin of *The Telegraph* said, "every scene of Tomm Moore's beautifully drawn, Oscar-nominated animation feels like a warm hug at bedtime…the films of Tomm Moore are like a trove of gemstones in the hill behind your house. Finding them is instantly life-improving, but the thrill of discovery comes with the comforting sense that they've been with you forever". This review in particular taps into the pastoral nostalgia that Moore is able to bring to life within his films, especially in *Song of the Song* where running away from home across the Irish countryside, one might be able to find magic behind a bush nearby. Still, "life improving", "enchanting", and "warm" are sentiments echoed across reviews.

It is repeatedly pointed out, as written in *Variety* and *The New York Times*, that Moore utilized traditional 2-D animation in such a way that tells not only a compelling story, but also brings the characters to life in a poignant way. Additionally, one of the most striking elements to the animation is the soft, swirling, color palette, and watercolor backgrounds within each frame. The intricacies of the background, and details of the added lines over the landscapes create a lavish and immersive image, while the characters themselves are so simple that, "they could've

been cut-and-pasted from a newspaper comic strip….There's a lot more subtlety and range of movement to Ben and Saorise than is immediately apparent, and…Moore also employs an understated motif of swirling, circular lights, giving the whole movie both an illuminated quality and a sense of cyclicality" (Murray, *The Dissolve*). The manner in which artistic director Adrien Merigeau executed Moore's vision with beauty and fluidity renders the film's stunning appearance. The animation uses lines of varying widths which is quite unlike the uniform style of line known as *ligne claire* seen in many mainstream comics and cartoons. With the combination of a sea-themed, watercolor palette, lavish backgrounds, and wisping tendrils, along with archaic carved lines composited together to create a graphical picturesque storybook in which viewers can immerse themselves, and will soon find that they are craving more time to explore every nook and cranny on screen with the passing of each frame.

In terms of the resonance of the story: the stab of Bronach's sudden departure and the following resentment that Ben develops towards Saoirse are quite visceral, reflected in the storm clouds that gather around the lighthouse. As with the cyclicality of the animation, there is a satisfying symmetry within the narrative. The events in the real world are mirrored by those in the magical realm, paralleling the duality of a half magical child born by a selkie and a human father. This affords the children the ability to move seamlessly between the fairy world and real world. This sort of duality between worlds, as well as characters that appear in both worlds, is a repeated theme throughout the film. Throughout their adventure, a theme emerges that, "the importance of freely accepting all of our emotions, even

sadness and sorrow. Only then can we live a fully realized life" (Lawrence, *Empire*). In encouraging the audience to accept their emotions, the film moves delicately but purposefully from pain to acceptance, and from anger to love.

The soundtrack of the film is distinct, drawing upon inspiration from traditional Irish folk music with collaboration between composer Bruno Coulais and Irish folk band Kila. With Gaelic lyrics inspired by the poem "The Stolen Child" from Irish poet and writer, W. B. Yeats, the score is at once ethereal and mythic, almost spiritual. In playing along with the importance of song and spoken-word storytelling, oddly, the character who has the power to set the fairies free, Saoirse cannot speak, but initially, she can play her shell flute, supporting the importance of this near forgotten oral tradition. Although Saoirse cannot speak, she can still use the power of song to protect herself and her brother. Once she finally finds her voice, and is able to set the magical folk free, we see the power of oral tradition in this mythology and culture, as suggested by Moore in multiple interviews.

And finally, the last area of focus within most reviews shifts to the brilliance and freshness of director Tomm Moore's work. With his second feature film, and second Academy Award nomination, Moore has carved out a unique space within the animation world. Now firmly established as a purveyor and protector of his Irish and Celtic roots, he is also a pioneer in using new techniques within classical hand-drawn animation to give a new look to an old form of the medium. Much like in *The Secret of Kells*, Moore plunges even further into his native folklore, and this time he sets his magical, intricately woven tale in a more recent backdrop, while still using archaic Irish iconography as reference points for his elaborate visuals. As Peter

Debruge of *Variety* notes, "Moore's work delivers on various other levels, asking formula-fed animation [audiences] to open their minds to a more poetic experience….The idea isn't to shoehorn local legend into a comfortable Disney formula, but rather, to find the appropriate animated style through which to communicate his culturally specific narrative traditions". Much like the receding practice of hand-drawn animation in present day children's films, Moore attempts to rekindle the importance of spoken-word myth within the story of the film by showing that it can play a large part in one's identity and one's connection to their past, as well as their environment. Thus, he creates a global, pan-generational appeal that will whisk the viewer away into an immersive experience that delivers a deeper message to its audience. As Simon Abrams of *Roger Ebert* puts it, "[the film] was clearly made by people who aspire to make smarter, and more fulfilling children's films, stuff that will stay with viewers, and leave them better for it".

My own reading is that the film is a magical experience that will take the viewer on an emotional journey unlike any children's film before. It is clear that this film understands the child audience to an extent, yet never patronizes them, and at the same time is able to resonate on a deeper level with the adult viewer. The deep Celtic roots that have such a strong influence in the film, coupled with the delicate yet striking visual imagery creates a parallel between the magical world and real world that effectively communicates the grieving process to viewers of all ages. The damp, sprawling country seaside of Northwestern Ireland is a, "place where stories can be written on strands of hair, and a sigh of a seashell can call you home"

(Catasoulis, *New York Times*). This is a film that continuously keeps giving to its viewers, in an unselfish and honest telling of a tragic, yet beautiful tale.

As soon as the film begins, it is clear that there is something distinctly mythic about it: the slow picking of the guitar strings in the score accompanied by violins and soft tinkling of piano keys, combined with the verse from W.B. Yeats' poem telling the viewer to come away "to the waters and the wild", with a fairy, and then the unfamiliar and flowing Gaelic words. The film almost pulls the viewer in with an enchanting lullaby, and drops one into the glowing memory of Bronach and young Ben. From there the swirling colors continue to mystify as the children set out on their journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and rebirth.

I found it quite striking how much reproductive imagery was in the film; especially fused into the environment and landscapes. What was Moore trying to communicate by embedding this imagery into this story about a child's grief? My research led me to explore the composition of the line itself within the animation and I was struck by multiple shapes and patterns repeated throughout the film. Soon, I tumbled down into a rabbit hole of Celtic mythology, and began to see just how deep the roots of the film are. Not only was the story inspired by mythology and folklore, but Moore used stories from his own life, and his own relationship to his Irish heritage to blend together a story that is distinctly Irish, yet maintains a universal appeal. How is this duality able to coexist in such a harmonious way that it could be understood and interpreted by the youngest child, and adult viewer from any country? Was this not the goal of such huge players in children's films like *Disney*, mass appeal? Why then, does this film feel so distinctly *different* than a

Disney film, as multiple reviewers suggested above, when it had a familiar story line, and tropes that have been used before: one of the main characters being not of this world (Ariel the mermaid, and Saoirse the selkie), a child goes on adventure of self-discovery and his subsequent rebirth (*Pinocchio*, *Hercules*), there is an evil witch, and an absent mother. And finally, *Pixar* had already given Celtic mythology its best effort with the 2012 film *Brave*, which won the Best Animated Feature at the 85th Academy Awards in 2013. In promotional teasers for *Brave*, the filmmakers say that the prospect of the film was exciting because it was, "the idea of *Pixar* doing Scotland". They agree that these lands are steeped with myth, legend, and magic, but how did they falter? It feels like *Brave* does not resonate as deeply with the viewer as *Song of the Sea*, I will return to this contrast later in my argument, but it is most important to note the phrase, "*Pixar* doing Scotland". That is exactly it; they were passing Celtic culture through the *Pixar* lens.

In taking a closer look at Celtic culture and heritage that is expressed deeply in its folklore, I found vast sources of inspiration from which the production team drew. These inspirations make the film distinctly Irish. The team also used universal tropes like the template of "the Hero's Journey" as theorized by Mythologist Joseph Campbell. By invoking the nature of the siblings' relationship, the animal sidekick, and the list goes on, to create a pan-generation and universal appeal. *Song of the Sea* absorbs and enchants them with its dazzling visual style, and in doing so it is able to communicate a more authentic feel than mainstream children's films familiar to American viewers, which are steeped in a culture of commodification. Ultimately,

the film tells a terribly sad story about loss and trauma while leaving the viewer with a message about the resilient nature of children and families.

In the following pages I will untangle the deep roots of the film, and the messages it carries, while examining how *Song of the Sea* is a quintessential example of a text that is steeped in and true to a particular culture and heritage, while expressing the universal sorrows of loss and resilience in a stunning filmic form aimed at captivating children and adult audiences.

## Chapter 1: Down the Rabbit Hole; Roots and Deeper Roots

### *Creation and Aesthetics*

Director Tomm Moore began working on the concept of *Song of the Sea* in the early months of production on his first feature, and Oscar nominated animated film, *The Secret of Kells*. The production team at Cartoon Saloon was already quite familiar with Celtic mythology and it was influencial in their work. The Irish studio, based in Kilkenny, creates animated film and television features, and provides illustration, design, as well as film and TV production services. Along with being known for the film feature *The Secret of Kells*, it is also known for the successful cartoon series, *Skunk Fu!*, a series about a kung fu hero named Skunk who protects his homeland by practicing the teachings of Panda, which was nominated for a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Children's Award in October 2008. The studio began as an informal partnership between a group of animators, brought together by Paul Young and Tomm Moore in 1999. Now, it has grown into a critically acclaimed and award winning animation and design studio known for its particular aesthetic and subject matter, as well as its treatment of sensitive and emotionally taxing concepts for the child viewer (Cartoon Brew).

Cartoon Saloon produced *Song of the Sea* in co-production with multiple European partners including Melusine Productions in Luxembourg, The Big Farm in Belgium, Nørlum in Denmark, and Superprod in France. The film received additional support from The Irish Film Board, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, TG4, Section 481, Eurimages, Luxembourg Film Fun, Wallimages, Centre du cinema et de

l'audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Danish Film Institute, West Danish Film Fund and Danish Radio.

It was when Moore was on vacation with his family that the core idea of *Song of the Sea* was sparked. Moore and his son were walking along a beach in the west of Ireland, and noticed a large number of seals that had been killed on the beach. The story goes that a local woman told them that the fishermen were killing seals out of frustration due to the fall of fishery stocks. She said it wouldn't have happened years ago when there was a belief system that deemed seals sacred because they were the souls of people lost at sea, or even actual selkies. Upon returning to Cartoon Saloon, Moore reflected,

> "…it made me think about how mythology and folklore links people to the environment and to the culture around them in a way that was being lost. That became something I wanted to explore in *Song of the Sea*. That belief system didn't have to get fossilized into tourist shop trinkets, but could be reimagined and retold in a way that links us to the world around us. Kids relate to animals very well…Kids feel a real kinship to the environment and the natural world. We seem to reject that and let go of it. When you look at mythology, it all deals with transforming into animals, becoming more immersed in the [natural] environment. That always interested me about mythology, how it links humans and animals and shows how they can easily live together" (AWN).

The link to the environment is one of the main themes throughout the film, and also the lines on the animator's page, and then on the screen within the frame, itself can be connected to nature. *Song of the Sea* delves deeper into the rich Celtic folklore of

which *Kells* seemingly only skimmed the surface. In fact, Moore meant for *Song of the Sea* to be a sort of spiritual follow-up to *Secret of Kells*; the two films arising from the same place of inspiration.

The film took over five years to make. While still working to finish *Kells*, Moore was able to roughly outline the characters and story of *Song of the Sea*. Along with Adrien Merigeau, who at the time was a background artist on the *Kells*, and became the art director in *Song of the Sea*, Moore began working on some concept art as production was winding up on *Kells*. In 2009, the two put together a conceptual trailer, which they used to help pitch the idea to investors. The first three years of production consisted of getting investors and financing in line, writing the script, storyboarding and creating concept art, as well as working on the music, as the team created an original score for the film. In October 2010, with the financials secured, the studio set to work fulltime on *Song of the Sea*. The animatic and pre-production artwork was completed in late 2012. The actual production lasted for 18 months until mid-2014, followed by the film's release in December.

Many critics pointed out the film itself has a unique aesthetic that is quite different from what most mainstream viewers are accustomed to seeing or expect from a children's film. Moore and his team had a directed intention in creating their aesthetic, which is evident within multiple interviews with the director; they certainly wanted it to be different from something that one might see from Disney and PIXAR, for example. They wanted to keep the storybook, flat design look—*not* volumetric like Disney, which can sometimes get too close to the uncanny valley (the idea that an entity that is drawn or computer generated reaches a point where

it too closely resembles photorealism, and thus the viewer is made more conscious of its artificiality). With the techniques the team used, the film looks like a picture book illustration come to life, but somehow not flat in the sense that it is lifeless.

In order to achieve this look, the team used TV Paint, a French software, and Anime Studio Pro. The software let them create subtle digital 2D animation that could be added to other media. Each sequence would be a composite of hand-drawn animation and then lines added in digitally. The goal was to yield rich backgrounds and relatively simple characters that could express a range of intense emotion despite their simplicity. All the backgrounds started with a watercolor wash, then the lines were added on paper, and then everything was combined on the computer to create an organic hand-drawn aesthetic resulting in a new fluidity seen in the movement of characters, the environment, and magical entities. An example of this can be seen early in the film when Ben is drawing while sitting on the overturned dingy, and Saoirse climbs up behind him. After Ben pushes Saoirse off the boat and into the sand, she sits alone looking out to sea. Next there is a wide shot that shows the kids, Cú, and the seals as they peek up out of the water. In examining the movement of the wave itself, the line of water is exaggerated by the white line accents composited on top. This combined with the light blue lines composited on top of the water color wash, which is meant to represent the ocean, brings the sea to life, as well as the seals that are gently bobbing in place as they look back as Saoirse. The movement of the lines within the frame creates an effect that gives the viewer the idea that nearly every line is alive and its own entity. The watercolor used throughout the film produces a sense of the wetness or dampness that is a constant

in West Ireland due to the heavy rain. The sea proved itself to be quite a challenge to animate, as nearly every wave is individually drawn in and then brought to life. The team was able to do this quite successfully and produced a sea that looked like a subtle animated painting. The visual language of the film, meaning the art direction like the shape, line, color, and even in coordination with the soundtrack all form a symbolic language to help tell the story of the film.

As discussed above, the film combines its strikingly graphical and two-dimensional qualities, with a strong design sense that is rich in texture, but also uses the fluidity of the hand-drawn line to, like the sea, create organic shapes that spiral and circle out to create a different sense of movement within the frame. This style of movement is one of the elements of animation that sets Cartoon Saloon apart from other animation studios and their signature aesthetic styles. An exemplary sequence that depicts this style is Saorise's first transformation with her coat. The lines, shapes, and colors are delicate and soft, following the soilse (pronounced "sulcha"), which are the little dancing lights the children follow, and are based on numerous carvings in an old stone known as the Cochno ring markings, which will be investigated in detail later. There are intricate details within this sequence, yet everything works together in fluidity. As Saoirse swims past the other sea creatures, the overlapping of colors, like the transparency of the jellyfish juxtaposed against the background of swirling seaweed, and the intricate white lines illuminating the deep navy of the whale contain this fluid line that continues to dance, stretch, and evolve.

Even the opening sequence of the film uses this style: the first shot of the film shows the lighthouse with its bright gold beam of light circling, and bathing the entire scene in a pinkish, yellow hue. In contrast to the dark watercolors of the night scene, the composited white and light blue glowing lines that are overlaid on top of the background give the image a dream-like quality. Because these are some of the first images in the film, the circular patterns, and swirling tendrils are able to set the tone and leave some lasting images that resonate. With all of the circular imagery, like the turning circle behind Ben's head as he is tucked into bed and hugs his mother's shell, it is like a little bubble of time, which is meant to emulate the safety and security of the womb. The film actually returns to this circular composition multiple times as a reference back to the opening sequence in which Ben feels this sense of protection and safety with his mother. There is certainly something about this sentiment one associates with the womb that Moore and the production artists honed in on, and were able to capitalize on throughout the film. The womb is seen as a space that provides a safe haven. The illustrators portrayed the essence of what it means to still be connected to, and protected by one's mother.

CGI is inherently a very plastic form. The frame of a character can be moved through a sequence like a puppet. There is something to be said about the affordances of this new technology, though the new medium's limitations are bound to that of the computer, unlike the hand-drawn line where the limitations are simply the animator's mind. However, the duality that the plastic art forms, and by extension the animated form, have shows an inherent connection to nature and their artistic creation. There is a primal nature embedded into the production of art.

This speaks greatly to the aesthetic processes used in creating *Song of the Sea*, as well as the motivation behind that creation, and the overall message the film delivers. Moore's feature films are able to set themselves apart from mainstream CG children's form because of their return to the classic 2D hand-drawn animation, and the subtle, smooth style favored by Cartoon Saloon. With hand drawn animation he is able to achieve visual images that only 2D can possibly hope to create.

### *Inspirations*

Tomm Moore has referenced multiple modern artists that his team drew inspiration from in terms of style of line used in composing the visual aesthetic of *Song of the Sea*. Contemporary artists such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky inspire these spectacular visuals.

Paul Klee, a Swiss-German painter is known for his highly individual style. He was influenced by Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism, but his pictures are difficult to classify. Klee was a natural "draftsman" who experimented with, and eventually became deeply involved in, color theory, which he wrote about extensively. His work reflected his dry humor and sometimes a childlike perspective as well as his personal moods, beliefs, and musicality. They were also meant to speak to a certain sense of freedom that modern artists found as they departed from classical styles of art. Klee worked in many different media including oil paint, watercolor, ink, pastel, and etching, which he often combined into one work. Many

of his works, specifically their titles would reflect his dry humor and varying moods, sometimes even political opinions. Frequently they allude to poetry, music and dreams.

He and his colleague, Russian painter Wassily Kandinksy both taught at the Buahaus School of Art, Design and Architecture. Kandinsky is credited for painting one of the first purely abstract works. He was also influence by music, writing that, "music is the ultimate teacher". He was influenced by theosophy, which is the system of esoteric philosophy concerned with seeking knowledge of the mysteries of beings, nature, and divinity, along with the perception of a coming New Age, which is a common theme among Kandinsky's first seven *Compositions* (the formal titles of his masterpieces, often accompanied by a Roman numeral). He wrote about the "artist as a prophet", drawing from biblical stories like Noah's Ark, Jonah and the whale, Christ's resurrection, as well as other stories like the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in the book of Revelation, Russian folktales, and the common mythological experiences of death and rebirth. Though he never attempted to portray any one of these stories as a narrative within his pieces, Kandinsky used their imagery as symbols of themes like death, rebirth, destruction and creation.

Utilizing these artists was especially apparent because of Moore's return to classical hand-drawn animation, and thus was able to incorporate multiple visual and thematic elements from classical Celtic mythology, and his own Irish heritage. One of his main foci was that classical mythology often includes the transformation of a character into an animal in order to become more immersed in the environment. This is a narrative trope that is stressed within Moore's films, and can

be seen in *The Secret of Kells* as well as in *Song of the Sea*. Moore has been quoted saying he feels very strongly that it is important to reinforce to children that losing folklore from our everyday life means losing connection to our environment and culture (Cartoon Brew).

Moore cites what is known in Ireland as the "Celtic Tiger" years, which was a time of economic growth that we can infer are very close to the years when the film is set (most apparently are the walkman, Granny's old radio, the character's style of dress, as well as the construction in Dublin). It can be inferred that the film is set in 1981 in the opening sequence, and then late October 1987 because of Ben's use of a Walkman-type tape player rather than an MP3 player. In fact, Moore was 10 years old at the time, and he decided to use this transitional time for Ireland, when it was between the economic recession of the 1980's and the new wealth of the Celtic Tiger era. During this time the economy of Ireland from the mid-1990's to the mid-2000's experienced a rapid, "real" economic growth fueled by foreign direct investment, and a subsequent property bubble which rendered the "real" economy uncompetitive ("real" is contrasted with "nominal", meaning "real" is adjusted for inflation, as in "real wages" or "real GDP"). For countrymen that experienced these years, it was apparent that Irish society was losing touch with the environment and its culture, according to Moore's memories of these years.

In terms of communicating this visually within the film, Moore stated that "it was a case of trying to match inspiration from old carvings and rock art with the touchstones of modern life. Especially in Ireland, where past iconography and modernization overlap frequently…folklore and superstitions serve functions

beyond entertainment, or quaint stories for tourists. They bind people to the landscape, and that is being lost" (Cartoon Brew). This sort of societal climate change had a great influence on Moore's inspiration for the story of *SotS*. He says that with the influence of technology in the world, today, individuals live in little bubbles, which shape how one sees the world, allowing people to be ignorant to larger problems. This is one of the key messages the film communicates to its viewers. The film argues that people must accept themselves and their families for who they are, and in order to do that it is crucial to remember and celebrate a shared past, history, and culture; and in doing so people are able to become connected with where they came from, and the environment, and therefore to each other. As a storyteller Moore can broaden the way people think about the world. And as he says, "while we may not change anyone's mind, we may hopefully be a part of the slow chipping away at indifference" (Cartoon Brew). It seems that old media have a way of connecting the storyteller on a deeper level with the viewer or listener particularly because of their ties to older forms of storytelling, like the oral tradition stressed throughout *Song of the Sea*.

Moore has stressed that throughout the production of his films that he consciously focuses on the message he wants to convey to the audience. With influence from Moore's own childhood, Irish folklore, culture and history, the message is different than those of mainstream children's films. When talking about the role that film plays in influencing our next generation, and children's identity and comprehension, Moore says,

> "I actually think making movies for kids is more important because they shape you. I watch so many movies as an adult and forget about most of them instantly, but those I saw as a kid left a deep impression. So we have a huge responsibility when we make movies aimed at kids to say something they need to know, instead of just distracting them with fart jokes and talking animals" (Cartoon Brew).

***Mythological Influences***

Moore used key figures, known widely in Irish Mythology, to bring to life some of the main characters in *Song of the Sea*. Macha is actually known as an Irish goddess. The city Emain Macha, or "Twins of Macha", was named after her and stood as the capital of ancient Ulster, the northernmost of the ancient provinces of Ireland. The most widely recognized identity of Macha is from the tale where she appeared from the otherworld at the doorstep of a humble farmer. The story goes that she helped him grow abundant bounty from the land and soon they fell in love and she became pregnant. Macha warned the farmer not to boast of her powers to others, but sure enough when the farmer visited the Assembly of Ulster, he challenged the king to race his most impressive horses against Macha, for he was certain she would win. Macha, dragged before the king, begged him not to force her to compete due to her pregnancy. The king was certain, though, that he would win due to her handicap of being pregnant, and forced her to race. Macha beat the king's horses with ease,

however, she went into labor upon crossing the finish line. Macha gave birth to twins: a girl named Fial and a boy named Fall. The effort killed her. With her last breath, she cursed the men of the province to "become as weak as women" when invaders came upon their lands, for nine generations (Monaghan 306). Moore used the role that grief and anger can play in a mother's life from this myth to help bring to life the owl-witch from his story. In other renditions, Macha is generally associated with horses, bounty, and loss.

The giant Mac Lir is based on Mannanán Mac Lir who was an Irish god of the ocean. He never lived on land, but instead made his home somewhere in the ocean on an island known as Mag Mell, "plain of honey", Tír Tairngiri, "land of promise", or even Emain Ablach, "island of apples", which is connected with the Arthurian Otherworld of Avalon. Mac Lir was a master of shape shifting, quite popular among bards, and would travel across the sea faster than the wind. Originally, he was not one of the Tuatha dé Danann (translated to the "People of the Goddess Danu"), whom were the most important deities of ancient Ireland, but by the 10th century, he was fully integrated into the belief system. Mac Lir was quite popular in the oral tradition, and because of the long survival of the Manx "tongue", many of the stories of the sea god survived on the Isle of Man until relatively recently. In many stories, the god is associated with an isolated isle, an influence, which we see in *SotS*.

The Great Seanachaí was based on the "seanachie", or storyteller. This Irish folkloric figure was important in rural Ireland up until the late 20th century. He was similar to the bard, and memorized history and myth of the people of Ireland, however his only appearance was within folkloric stories. The seanachie would spin

yarns that were based in the "material" of the stories though they would become degraded over time and distance. Instead of spinning yarn, in the film the Great Seanachaí's hair contained all the numerous stories of both the living people, their pasts, and the magical beings.

Ultimately, the film is not only rooted in Celtic folklore, but also in many universal aspects of mythology. As a small, but still significant example, the universal meanings of the characters' names play into the symbolism of their roles in the film: Saoirse means freedom, Ben meaning son, and Bronach means sadness. Moore has cited the work of Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist, and his study of the hero's journey as a template to which he modeled Ben's journey. Campbell introduced the concept of the monomyth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, originally published in 1949. Campbell uses modern psychology in unison with his understanding of comparative mythology to help outline the concept of the hero's journey, which is a broad framework for myths with the hero who goes on an adventure, finds himself in a decisive crisis and wins a victory, and then returns home changed or transformed.

Campbell describes 17 stages of the hero's journey, thought not all monomyths necessarily contain all 17 stages explicitly, sometimes a myth may only focus on one of the stages, or the plot unfolds in such a way that the stages appear in a different order. The stages are divided into three sections, or "acts": departure, initiation, and return. In the departure the protagonist, or the hero, living in an ordinary world receives a call to go on an adventure. The hero is often reluctant to follow the call, but is helped by a mentor figure. In the next stage, the initiation, the

hero begins the traverse to the "other world", or the unknown. Here he will face trials and tasks he must complete, either alone or with assistance from companions. Eventually, the protagonist will arrive in the "innermost cave" where the climax of the tale occurs and he must face the main obstacle or enemy. Once the task or enemy has been vanquished, the hero gains an "award" of sorts and returns to the ordinary world. Finally, in the return, the hero travels back between the other world and the ordinary world with his "treasure", which he may use to benefit himself, and his fellow man. The hero himself has changed because of his journey, usually gaining wisdom to help to overcome weakness, or some sort of spiritual power over both worlds.

Moore talks about Ben going through this cycle during his adventure in the damp foothills of Ireland. Granny forces the kids to move to the city with her after finding Saoirse washed up on the shore. She also forces him to leave his best friend and loyal dog, Cú behind. This is the catalyst that sends Ben on his adventure. He starts off believing he is simply trying to get home in order to reunite with Cú, but then once Saoirse decides to follow him with the shell, their journey takes a turn. When the children meet the Deenashee and Ben is essentially "assigned" the quest of reuniting Saorise with her coat, Ben's adventure begins, as does his traverse of the other world. Ben goes through a stage in his departure that Campbell calls the "Belly of the Whale". Here, the belly of the whale represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. By entering this stage, the person shows willingness to undergo a metamorphosis. Campbell says:

> "…the idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died. This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again" (Campbell xxi).

The visual imagery within the film strongly aligns with the metaphorical journey Ben experiences. When Cú pulls him into the holy well, he is reluctantly dragged downward, leaving the real world behind and falling deeper into the magical world. When he surfaces and climbs into the coracle, which is a lightweight boat traditionally used on Ireland's River Boyne, that he has arrived in the other world; the water is glowing, the stone fairies open their quizzical eyes, and the twinkling lights form a protective sphere around him, glowing very strongly even though Saoirse is not present. After speaking with the Great Seanachai, Ben follows his family's story hair strand, and before emerging from the cave, he has to face his failed promise to his mother. Ben initially drops the strand, and the memory stops, reluctantly he picks it up and watches. Here, Ben revisits his own trauma of losing his mother, and is able to process it. By allowing himself to cry and accept those feelings about it, Ben begins to understand why he has this massive resentment towards Saoirse, and is then prepared to face the ultimate trail: rescuing Saoirse from Macha. As Ben begins his ascent to the surface of the forest, the imagery within the caverns echoes this sentiment of rebirth. The passageways look like fallopian

tubes, and as the cavern opens for Ben, it looks strikingly like a birth canal. And finally, Ben pokes his head out of the tree when he reaches the surface, essentially being reborn by the earth, or magical world, itself.

After saving Saorise, Ben's passing through Campbell's framework becomes a bit muddled. Once the kids and Cú make it back to the lighthouse, Ben faces Connor and opposes him on the correct point of action to take in regards to Saoirse's health. This step could be similar to Campbell's "Atonement with the Father". Ben shows his father that he has overcome his resentment of Saoirse by risking his life and discarding his life jacket and diving into the water to find her coat, however there is no true atonement between Ben and Connor. By overcoming his own fear of the water, and showing how much he cares about Saoirse's safety and finding the courage to brave the "dangerous" waters, Ben becomes a hero. This atonement could occur in the last minute of the film where Connor says to his children, "It's as though I've been asleep all these years…I'm so sorry."

And Ben responds, "I know dad". It seems that in uncovering and accepting the secret behind his mother's departure, because she is a selkie, and Saoirse's half-selkie nature, Ben and Connor can connect on a positive emotional level once again.

When Ben dives down into the depths, he uses his last breath to reach the locked chest with the coat. Once he retrieves it, with help from the seals or the "other world", Ben experiences an "Apotheosis" as Campbell would suggest. This is where the protagonist dies a physical death—Ben seems to lose all air, and Connor must rescue him and pull him out of the water—and the hero (in this case Ben) moves to a state of divine knowledge, love, and compassion. This is also the stage of

"the Ultimate Boon" where the ultimate achievement or goal of the quest occurs. Connor brings Ben to the surface with Saoirse's coat, and Cú places the coat upon a dying Saoirse. The stage of the "Magic Flight" where, "the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world" could be when Macha becomes the redeemed villain and helps the children return to the lighthouse by giving Cú the magical wind hounds to lead them home (Campbell xxi). On the other hand, this stage could also be when Saoirse transforms into her seal form after being reunited with her coat, and she takes Ben on a ride under the sea, with Connor and Cú in tow. Though these two examples occur at different times in the story, they both represent this flight. After the "Magic Flight" in the Return stage, Ben's journey departs from Campbell's framework only slightly in that Ben does not pass through the final outlined stages as described in the monomyth. When Bronach appears to bring Saorise back to the otherworld with her, the power of choice ultimately rests in Saoirse's hands, as opposed to the hero's, Ben's. However this crossing over between the two worlds could represent Campbell's stage titled "The Crossing of the Return Threshold", or "Master of Two Worlds". Ultimately though, because Saoirse decides to stay human, and Bronach must leave the family for forever, the two worlds become untangled.

In tracing the path of Irish myth in the film, and then the universal structure of the monomyth, the film uses numerous examples of folklore and faith-based art found within the environment throughout Ireland. The stone statues the fairies are turned into are based on the Boa Island figures found in Northern Ireland. These anthropomorphic, hand-carved statues can be found in the Caldragh graveyard from

the Early Christian period in Irish history, around 400-800 AD. The stone figures are generally accepted to be the likeness of pagan deities.

Another inspiration Moore drew from were the Concho ring markings. The Cochno Stone in West Dunbartonshire depicts what some consider the best example of Bronze Age "cup and ring" carvings in Europe. The stone was initially discovered in 1887 by Reverend James Harvey on a piece of farmland near what is now the Faifley housing estate on the edge of Clydebank. It is covered in over 90 carved indentations, also called "cups", as well as grooved spirals, a ringed cross, and a pair of four-toed feet. History researcher Alexander McCallum has suggested multiple interpretations for the carvings: some think that it is a map showing other settlements in the Clyde Valley. However, McCallum says that, "…as far as the symbolism goes, some believe it's a portal, of life and death, rebirth, a womb and a tomb—people believed in reincarnation, so they would go into the earth and then come out again" (Brown). These concentric circles were used to denote fairy forts and tombs or old magical areas, which is much like how Moore utilized the designs in *Song of the Sea*. According to Moore, these can be both good and bad omens.

Moore drew inspiration from other Irish artifacts. The holy well that Saoirse and Ben take refuge in was based on what is known as a dolmen, cromlech, portal tomb, portal grave, or quoit. This structure is a type of single-chamber megalithic tomb, usually consisting of two or more megaliths supporting a large flat horizontal capstone. Dolmens were usually covered with earth or smaller stones to form a tumulus, but in many instances that covering has been weathered away, leaving only the stone "skeleton" of the burial mound intact. Often times these tombs create

still wells, which become holy pilgrimage destinations. These structures represent a mix of Catholicism and older Pagan beliefs, which can be seen in the film when Ben is dragged down into the well. There is a clear transition from Catholic symbols to Pagan symbols. The earth has almost overtaken the tomb due to the large tree it was built around. The tree in the holy well, also called a rag tree, is adorned with strips of cloth. These bits of clothing were often tied to trees like this in hopes of accessing the power of the holy well on behalf of the garments' owners. This is sort of reversal of the New Testament stories about healings worked through Jesus' garments or through handkerchiefs and aprons carried away from Saint Paul.

Inside the small structure there are a number of large Marian statues and smaller images of Jesus, Mary, and various saints, along with rosaries and other religious paraphernalia. From the roof, bunches of dried flowers hang; there are eyeglasses, a crutch, and liquor bottles which are most likely tokens of prayers for the owner's illness.

Moore also drew inspiration from the secret old Irish language known as Ogham, pronounced "AHG-m" or "OH-ehm". Ogham was carved and read from bottom to top and served as an alphabet for one of the ancient Celtic languages. Current understanding is that the names of the main twenty letters were also names of 20 trees sacred to the Druids. A 15th century treatise on Ogham, *The Book of Ballymote*, confrimes that ogham was a secret, ritualistic language. As reviewer Steven D. Greydanus of Crux Now (a Catholic news source) puts it, Moore's integrated "two worlds divided by [a system of religious belief], but sharing a common aesthetic heritage", within the film, and

> "…in the world of this film, Irish Christianity is now ancient, but still coexists with the lingering memory of elves and fairies. Not far from a Gothic church adorned by statues of the Blessed Virgin, one might discover—perhaps on a tree-covered roundabout—a fairy fort with stone figures representing the fair folk called the Deenashee (*na Daoine Sidhe*, "the people of the mounds")….Ben has inherited music, art, and stories. Saoirse, who doesn't speak, doesn't remember her mother, but she has inherited something even more remarkable, connected with her mother's nautilus shell flute…Moore depicts the cultural legacy of Catholic piety and pagan imagination…as simply part of the landscape, much like grazing cows, electricity pylons (or transmission towers), or a statue of Molly Malone".

These structures that are intertwined with the environment are very similar to the fairy mounds within the film. In fact, throughout the Celtic lands, there are traces of a race even more ancient than the Celts these are the people of the Megalithic civilization who lived around 5000 B.C.E. These people built the dolmen tombs, which were discussed earlier.

Though little is known of these people, the incoming Celts recognized the importance of their structures, and, "reinforced it with tales of fairies who lived within the barrows and under the dolmen arches…more often ancient barrows were said to cover diminutive cities where the fairies danced the endless days away. Walking past such mounds at night or on the turning points of the year (Beltane on May 1 and Samhain on November 1) was considered very risky" (Monaghan 176). This sort of integration with the environment and myth encourages the sentiment within the film that magic is all around. And in the film, on Halloween night (which

is near the transition period of Samhain) the veil between the two separate worlds becomes much thinner, and the two intertwine.

Many do not know, in fact, that Halloween is a very old Celtic tradition. And on that night in 1987, which is when the film is supposed to take place, Moore was a child celebrating Halloween, and there was a huge storm that scared all the children. Moore said that the parents comforted all the frightened children by telling them the howling winds were simply the fairies returning home across the sea. Here, Moore integrates stories from his own childhood into the story of the film. He uses the central theme within classical mythology of returning and becoming more immersed in the environment. Moore feels that getting back in touch with the enviornment needed to be stressed to children, and influence land and seascapes can be seen in *The Secret of Kells* and, certainly in *Song of the Sea*.

Moore is quoted as saying that it is important to reinforce that losing folklore from one's everyday life means losing the connection to the environment and culture. As Greydanus observes again, ""the story's mythic themes become a metaphorical meditation on the numbing power of grief to sap us of vitality and a sense of connection to the world". Bronach, the mother, attempts to instill the same lessons within Ben. There is a theme of loss within her stories, and in accepting that loss and moving on, that loss becomes its own story. The passing on of stories and histories and memories is what is sacred, and what is vanishing from society. Through the character of Bronach, Moore suggests that song and story are one of the best ways to release and accept one's feelings, and allow one to connect with oneself by learning about and associating with one's past.

***Irish Literature & Folklore***

Along with Irish iconography, the production team utilized Irish literature and folklore in the same way that traditional literary devices are used in cinema. In contemporary Irish literature, the representations of Irish women's identities are riddled within discourses of paternalism and exclusion, which are found frequently in Irish literature. The identity of an Irish woman is often analogous with a maternal role where the relationship between mother and child is brought to the forefront of the narrative. Similarly, the child's relationship to the mother and how it changes and evolves over time is also often a focal point within the narrative. The stories focus on the role the mother plays in shaping the identity of the child. Often there is a dying mother, on her deathbed, with her child making her promises, which the child then realizes are impossible to live up to.

These tragic tales largely permeate Irish folklore, as well. The tales of the selkie, a half-seal, half-human being, are often tragic love stories. In fact, Ireland, itself, is represented as a woman. She is referred to as Mother Ireland. The mother is a strong and powerful force. She is the protector and one that upholds safety within the domestic sphere. Often in Gothic literature, the image of a threatening, consuming, and monstrous mother recalls the fear of absorption by the pre-oedipal mother, which is the state before the child realizes they are a separate being from their mother. It would be as if the safety of the mother could be seen on an

oscillating scale, where if she is a monstrous mother, she could be so smothering and all encompassing that she would become grotesque because of her "consumption". These ideas about the mother also lend themselves to the duality that is at play throughout the film. The interplay between the two worlds, the dual identities of characters, the melding of past and present, of pagan and Christian beliefs, as well as the plastic/graphical qualities of the film's animation are all a part of the duality motif.

Moore has referenced the inspiration from David Thomson's book *The People of the Sea*. In fact, the final sequence with Bronach and the whole family was drawn directly from the book. Originally published in the 1950's, Thomson visited the remote seacoasts of West Ireland in search of legends about selkies as these stories were still part of the living folk tradition. Thomson noted that in the 1940's the tradition of these stories began to die out. The education system began to pressure children to speak English as opposed to Gaelic, and the radio ousted traditional oral entertainment such as song and storytelling. Thomson writes stories about this time that he saw disappearing. The book is a collection of selkie tales that are steeped in their native environment: the remote windblown, damp coast, smoky little cottages, and seaside villages.

Thomson writes himself into the chapters, however he does not simply retell the stories, he brings the storytellers, themselves, to life. In the final chapter of his book, the selkie tale ends with a description of how the seals were fond of following the ferry. The seals would follow any boat in a single file line, and when they came to the beach after a member of the community passed away, "…the seals came out of

the water and were there on the beach, and they were keening and lamenting all together till the funeral was done" (Thompson 207). This can be seen as the inspiration in the last sequence of *SotS* when the family is washed up on shore, and the seals are surrounding them, and they watch and listen as Saoirse sings her song. The scenes of the seals following the ferry or forming a barrier around Cú as he swims are similar to this tale. Thompson demonstrates how folklore is integrated into the day-to-day lives of these Irish people within the book, and how they are still very immersed in the environment. One other large inspiration for the film was the poem *The Stolen Child* by W.B. Yeates. A small excerpt from the poem is actually read by Lisa Hannigan, the voice of Bronach, in the opening of the film. This poem echoes the themes of childhood innocence and returning to nature. In the film the fairies, or the Deenashee, repeatedly call Ben, "human child".

Additionally, the Gothic genre often incorporates the Freudian psychoanalytic model. The process of repression involves the rejection and subsequent suppression of troubling impulses and desires. The concept of repression closely relates to the suppressed 'family secret' frequently found within the Gothic narrative: like the secret of Bronaugh being a selkie, and by extension Saoirse, too. Whereas the Gothic 'family secret' manifests in the guise of a vengeful ghost, repressed desire assumes the form of the uncanny person or object. This can be seen in Bronach is as an ever-present entity, perhaps the dancing lights within the film, guiding her children through their journey. Freud's analysis links the uncanny to the domestic setting of the home. According to Christoph Grunenberg, "the uncanny describes the return of repressed events, memories, and fantasies—

the encounter with one's own most intimate fears…" which will be discussed further in the section on Sergei Eisenstein's theory on the hand-drawn line.

***Filmic Inspirations***

In terms of filmic inspirations, Moore has talked about films such as *The Little Prince and the Eight Headed Dragon*, which tells the story of a god in the form of a young boy whose mother has died. He is deeply hurt by this loss, but his father tells him that his mother is in heaven now. He decides to set off to find her with his companions: a talking rabbit and gentle giant. Eventually, he comes to meet a princess and they become friends. Soon he is infatuated with her, not only because he thinks she is so beautiful, but also because she looks like his mother. The princess's family tells him how they had to sacrifice their other seven daughters to an eight-headed dragon. Because of his love for her, he vows to protect her and her family because of his infatuation. The themes from this film like the loss of the mother, the protection and love for a young princess, and the dangerous quest are also seen within *Song of the Sea*.

Another film Moore has cited that influenced *SotS* is Mike Newell's *Into the West*, which is a classic film for Irish viewers. The story follows two young boys whose father was "King of Irish Travellers", and who's mother died during the birth of the second son. The boys' grandfather is an old story-telling traveler, much like the Great Seanachi, who regales the children with Irish folk-tales and legends. The

boys discover they are being followed by a beautiful white horse called Tír na nÓg, which means Land of Eternal Youth. The Land of Eternal Youth is just one of the names for the Otherworld, which is a supernatural realm of everlasting youth, beauty, health, abundance and joy in Irish folklore. The Tuath Dé, or the gods of pre-Christian Ireland, reside in this realm. In echtrae (adventure) and immram (voyage) folktales, various Irish mythical heroes visit Tír na nÓg after a voyage or an invitation from one of its residents. They reach it by entering ancient burial mounds or caves, or by going under water or across the sea. Many of the mythic Irish entities from this film are reused within *SotS*. One example is the concept of Tír na nÓg, which is the realm of the magical beings where the fairies return to across the sea. The main characters also lose their mother, the grandfather figure within the narrative is a great story-teller, and the inclusion of Irish landscape like fairy mounds, caves and wells, and travel under the sea can all be connected to the narrative of *SotS*.

Even the film *The Night of the Hunter* had its influence on the inspiration for *SotS*. *The Night of the Hunter* blends a pastoral setting with dream-like creatures, fantastical characters, imperiled children during a river journey, a wicked guardian/adult, and salvation and redemption in the form of an old farm woman. The film is composed to feel like a child's nightmare, including the anxiety one might feel the difficulty of keeping a secret, and a magical journey to safety, and all told from a child's point of view. It also accentuates the contrasting, elemental dualities within the film: heaven and earth, male and female, light and dark, good and evil,

knowingness and innocence. As noted, duality is an integral theme in *Song of the Sea*.

*E.T.* also inspired Moore. E.T. is an alien who becomes sick because he is far from home and not where he should be, like Saoirse and her coat, reuniting with the sea. In addition, *The Wizard of Oz* depicts the same parallels between the farm hands Dorothy is familiar with, and the people she meets in Oz. Very much like the characters Ben meets in his adventure that resemble humans in his real life.

The rabbit hole of inspirations Moore and his production team drew from seems to only continue to grow deeper. The aesthetic style was not only influenced by modern and expressionist artists known for their groundbreaking styles, but also by the folklore, mythology, and iconography of Ireland. The numerous literary and filmic resources the team drew upon were able to enrich the breathtaking visuals while playing a huge role in shaping the narrative. Thus, the product is extremely rich in Irish authenticity. In large part, Moore's nationality afforded him the opportunity to shed light on this mythological folklore that is so steeped within Irish culture and society.

After taking into consideration these numerous literary, cinematic, iconographic, and temporal inspirations, it is important to distinguish how *Song of the Sea* functions and behaves separately from the large collection of mainstream films familiar to American viewers, especially those made during the Disney Renaissance during the late 1980's and into the 1990's.

## Chapter 2: Finding Meaning in Authenticity

### *Contrast*

In a collection of essays in the book titled *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* multiple scholars demystify and deconstruct the Disney "magic" and lay bare the films' messages about gender, race, class, and politics. The collection of essays suggest that Disney films can be seen as a cultural pedagogy, and so the scholars examine the way that the Disney studio has appropriated and transformed classic literary texts and historical events and has assimilated them to a distinctive "American" ideology, emphasizing the values of "democracy", "technology", and "modernity".

Jack Zipes recounts the literary history of European fairy tales in order to show that Disney was only the latest in a long line of authors, folklorists, playwrights, and illustrators to rework traditional folk tales, retaining, and discarding elements that reinforced (or contradicted) key ideological themes. He points out that when children or adults think of some of the giants in classical fairy tales, today, like *Snow White* or *Cinderella*, the images that comes to mind stem from a *Disney* film, book, or other piece of merchandise, *not* by the description offered from the tales' original creators (21). By creating this picturesque ideological perspective on the fairytale, Disney became a power player in the industry with a near monopoly on the majority of children's entertainment. By using the newest technological innovations in animation, he was able to capitalize, "on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo…The great

"magic" of the Disney spell is that he animated the fairy tale only to transfix audiences and divert their potential utopian dreams and hopes through the false promises of the images he cast upon the screen" (21-22). Essentially, Disney was able to project a certain standard of ideals woven into his characters and adaptations of stories that upheld the political and social status quo of the time to the viewer.

During this time in animation, the process was commodified so that an artist would utilize "ghosts" after they had drawn in the key lines within the frame, and the "ghost" artist would go in and finish the drawing. This sort of process was meant to help the studio turn out features in an efficient manner to capitalize most on time and effort. Instead of a viewer being able to pick out each animator's specific style, there was a uniform aesthetic adopted by the corporation. Ultimately, as Zipes notes:

> "…there is something sad in the manner in which Disney "violated" the literary genre of the fairy tale and packaged his version in his name through the merchandising of books, toys, clothing and records. Instead of using technology to enhance the communal aspects of narrative and bring about major changes in viewing stories to stir and animate viewers, he employed animators and technology to stop thinking about change, to return to his films, and to long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms" (40).

And here is where Moore's work departs from Disney, and perhaps achieves exactly what Zipes is getting at. With *Song of the Sea* the production team utilized new styles

within animation to afford themselves a style unfamiliar to viewers; they created a new experience for the viewer not only visually, but in subject matter, as well.

These scholars illuminate the idea that Disney's trademarked innocence and magic are not reducible simply to a blend of nostalgia, technological wizardry, gender caricatures, and a sanitized version of reality. Instead, they represent a much more intricate ideology embodying conflicting messages, which defies simple summary and serves to mystify power relations and to reinforce traditional gender roles. When thinking about these findings in relation to *SotS*, a viewer would be able to find a similar sense of pastoral nostalgia, but other than that, the film departs from the subject matter and ideologies upheld by the Disney canon.

An interesting contrast brought to light in *Song of the Sea* is the integration between old spirituality, with the fairies and spirit world, and new Catholic faith, depicted in the scene of the holy well where Ben and Saoirse take refuge. There are also clear messages of the value of family, and finding courage to fortify the bonds between family members. The story is complicated by the fact that in the end, it is Saoirse who has to make the *choice* to stay with Ben in the human world. The story is heavily rooted in one's connection to family and past history, and culture, which is something that Disney and PIXAR have tried their hand at on multiple occasions. In considering the different cultures these big players have tried to represent, they miss their mark completely because they pass it through their commercial lens. Like the creators of *Brave* distinctly said it *is* PIXAR "doing" Celtic mythology, or it *is* Disney "doing" Han Dynasty folklore.

*Brave* marketed itself, and its teen princess Merida, as an entirely new take on the Disney Princess, and the sort of princess fairytale one might expect. Merida certainly did not want to get married and follow in her mother's, the queen Elinor's, footsteps. This mother-daughter story, after Merida takes strides to change her fate by seeking the help of a witch who turns her mother into a bear, is quite similar to those touching reunion stories between a mother and daughter like *Freaky Friday*. In the classic princess storyline, which should be Disney's expertise, the main characters often find themselves immersed in a new and fascinating world that is starkly juxtaposed against the "real world". This is found in *Beauty and the Beast* when Belle arrives at the castle, also in *The Little Mermaid* where one of the original songs of the film is titled "Part of Your World". There is a clear delineation between two different worlds. In *Brave* there is very little, or arguably no other world that Merida travels to. Certainly the magic of the witch is other worldly, as is Elinor's transformation into a bear, but it does not create the enchantment of a dazzling alternate reality that dissolves anxiety. The film attempts to take mythic icons from Scottish folklore and seamlessly integrate them into the PIXAR world.

Comparing *Brave* to *Song of the Sea*, the first, and perhaps most notable, difference are the aesthetics. In *Brave* we do see the seals of each clan, Merida and Elinor playing a harp and lyre, the small silver charm on Merida's necklace, as well as the beautiful landscapes of Scotland. But unlike *Song of the Sea* the intricate details are not stressed to the viewer. The viewer is not pulled in with *Brave* to further explore the tapestry her mother wove for her, because there is nothing especially mythic about it, or any element to suggest there is something deeper to

glean from the design; something else to *see*. When Merida hands the witch her carved silver necklace, the carving does not appear to have any significance. With *Song of the Sea* each and every bit of carved rock, drawn picture, or rolling hill is presented as something that is inherently unique and quite special to Celtic folklore. For example, the fairies' circular door of their fairy mound has words scratched on it. Along with the words, "Feic off" there are other phrases that are not recognizable to a mainstream audience, but a viewer might try to understand before the fairies emerge from the mound, or the children enter. Similarly, the nautilus shell that Bronach gave to Ben clearly has great sentimental value, though the object, itself, is something so simple.

In terms of being to true to Celtic roots, *Brave* drew upon certain Scottish mythology and aimed to show how "legends are lessons that ring with truth". The film succeeded in getting this message across, but ultimately it was about a princess who felt alienated from her mother. Merida was so different from who her mother wanted her to be that in attempting to change her mother's ideals, she ended up physically changing *her* into a bear. Ultimately, it was the emotional journey they went on together to transform her back in a human that allowed them to reconnect emotionally. The film ends with a family reunion, and the princess has more time to decid for herself who she will marry. It feels like the filmmakers took elements from the mythology they thought would play well through the PIXAR lens, and diluted those down by creating an illusion of what Scotland *should* look like for the mainstream viewer. *Brave* is an excellent example of a culture that becomes romanticized when passed through the machine that is Disney's PIXAR. In contrast

to *Song of the Sea*, especially after going over the countless influences the filmmakers used, a more authentic telling of this culture emerges. Moore chose to include bits of trash and imperfections along the countryside of Ireland. He chose to take the tragic selkie tales and spin a story of grief that communicates one of the most unimaginable traumas a child can experience: the loss of their mother. All of this, coupled with the organic and primal nature of the drawn line, which will be investigated in the next section, *Song of the Sea* achieves and communicates an emotional depth and understanding that *Brave* does not.

***Meaning/Analysis***

A large theme that has repeatedly arisen while investigating the deep roots of *Song of the Sea* is the film's inherently mythic and primal feel; both in terms of visual aesthetic and narrative subject matter. There are clear links between child and animal, animal and mother, the mother and the environment, and the environment and the child. The circular motif communicated in the visual aesthetics of the film is also woven into these major roles at play in the narrative because it seems like each of entities listed above are interconnected: the mother gives birth to the child, the earth gives birth to animal and man. In attempting to unpack the relations of each of these entities, it was necessary to investigate the representation and the role of the child within film.

In the book *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales*, Karen Lury explores the representation of the child within film and childhood in relation to

memory. She also draws a relation between child and animal because of their primitive nature. The child as a "savage" or animal recurs frequently within children's films, often drawing connections between a child and an animal or the environment.

The idea of the child as an animal is clearly depicted in *Song of the Sea*. Saoirse has a connection to this primitive stage that children are often associated with because she is half seal and half human, which depicted a clear link between child and animal. The connection Moore establishes between man and animal, and man and environment is clear.

In illuminating the link between children and the environment and the primal, a parallel can be made between Bronach as the mother, and the environment, or Mother Earth. The central theme of the film deals with the childhood trauma of losing one's mother. In this case, the mother is physically absent, but emotionally, spiritually, and subconsciously present. The film also exhibits elements from the children's gothic genre with the way the idea of the "mother" is incorporated in multiple aspects of the narrative. The gothic genre embraces tropes like: the role of the mother, a special family secret, sibling relationships, children coming into young adulthood, and rebirth. In *Song of the Sea* the landscape reflects material imagery, specifically in the sequence of Ben's rebirth. It looks as if he is climbing out of the womblike tubes of the caverns of the Great Seanachai. This was a conscious effort that can be interpreted as a way to implicate Ireland, and by extension the earth, *is* the mother. The sea in this film is portrayed in two ways: a terrifying and dangerous unknown, and on the other hand a wondrous,

safe, womb-like retreat. These can be seen as two approaches one could take towards living one's life.

The next link in the chain is to investigate how the role of the mother fits into primal nature. The mother is often closely aligned with psychoanalytic film theory, and established film theorists like Julia Kristeva have grappled with these themes, especially in terms of the concept of the primal mother in the mode of a psychoanalytic framework. Kristeva's writing centers on the term "abject", and how it connects the viewer with an archaic mode of thought. Her definition of "the abject" also lends itself to the duality, as discussed above, which is a repeated motif throughout the film. In her book titled *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, she defines the term "abject" as that which exists before what is known as the symbolic order, it is neither object nor subject, or as she says it, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). The abject, therefore, marks what she calls a "primal repression", one that precedes the establishment of the subject's relation to its objects of desire and of representation, before even the establishment of the opposition, conscious/unconscious. Instead, she points to the moment in psychosexual development where a border emerges of separation between human and animal. She describes this separation on two levels: first on the level of archaic memory in that, "by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals, or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (12-13). This level of archaic memory suggests that primitive societies were greatly tied to animals, so as a collective, humans share a close link with animals until there was a

distinct separation made in modes of thinking. On the level of individual psychosexual development, the abject marks the moment when the young separate from the mother, recognize a boundary between "me" and other; between "me" and "(m)other". The abject is then a reestablishment of the "primal repression"; it is that which "disturbs identity, system, [and] order…what does not respect borders, positions, [or] rules" (4). So in individual psychosexual development the abject is the failure to recognize a distinction between self and mother. *Song of the Sea* is tapping into this archaic connection to the mother where a child can seamlessly move between magic and reality, land and sand.

And even more interesting, for Kristeva, the abject is closely tied to art and religion, which she sees as ways of purifying the abject. She says, "the various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion" (17). According to her, modern literature explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to break down, and where people are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic binaries as self/other and subject/object. Art, literature and film, all products of man, help to explore the separations established on levels of archaic memory and psychosexual development which the abject breaks down. Thus, media can help a viewer or reader to reestablish a connection within this time where people exist with this primal repression, and have yet to identify the symbolic order, and are operating within an archaic state, where there is still a close connection to the mother. There is not yet an understanding that "I" am a separate functioning entity from "her". In *Song of the*

*Sea*, "the abject" is the natural, primal, and untamed essence of this archaic space, which is deeply connected with the animals in the environment.

Within the film, there is an underlying theme of this primal mother, and the notion of returning to this mother, or at least geting back in touch with one's origin. There are multiple visual representations that suggest this circular linkage between the mother, the environment, and animals such as: the fox with her pups, the badger and her sleeping cubs, Bronach when she is pregnant and gives birth as a seal in the sea, even Macha as an owl reuniting with her giant son, Mac Lir. As mentioned, this sentiment is mimicked in the reproductive imagery drawn into the landscapes, even the repetition of the womb-like circular designs Moore uses on multiple occasions. There is a distinct and deep connection between this archaic, primal state, and visual representation through animation.

The creation of art is a practice that allows viewers to reconnect with an archaic mode of thinking, often through the exploration of heritage and culture. Hand-drawn animation is a medium that is truly only limited by the mind of the artists, and thus affords the creator infinite possibilities. The early film theorist Sergei Eisenstein conducted a study in which he asserted that there was a distinct connection between the practice of art and distinct archaic forms of thought. He was not able to publish his essays before his death, but in the book *Eisenstein on Disney* editor Jay Leyda presents his collection of essays. In the section titled, "Disney as a Utopian Dreamer" translated by Oksana Bulgakowa, Eisenstein writes that he is entranced with the growing establishment of Disney animation, and his groundbreaking technique in the plastic form.

Eisenstein describes Disney's form as one that exists in a continuous state of self-dissolution; actively resolving and/or dissolving into its own parts and elements. This sort of plasmatic property is one based on the elements of origin: water, fire, air, and earth, and functions within a form strictly dictated by a line's contour. As he says, "the line is the form's limit, but this line is constantly in motion": stretching and extending (Leyda 116). He stresses the plasticity of the line with the ability of being easily shaped and molded. Because animation, and by extension the drawn line, is not confined by photorealism, animators have a freedom to create a world that is not governed by the laws of nature. Thus, metamorphosis is a foundational property of this form, and it is that, "which embodies the essence of art, here understood as a deeply mythological activity" (116). In describing the link to early mythological thought, he resituates man within an archaic form of thinking; a time where man was still deeply connected with animals and the environment, or as he found, "the relations between humans and nature still followed an archaic model; one deeply rooted in ritual" (117).

With these assertions, Eisenstein wrote that Disney could literally draw a line, or a border, between horror and laughter; separating the mythological from the rational, in life as well as in art. Disney's works resonated so much with Eisenstein because he saw that there was a certain freedom in the ability, an infinite amount of possibilities the drawn line afforded, to the expression of the relationship between people and nature. Eisenstein continues by suggesting that the body itself is the basis for all art, especially in this primal state, "bodily fluids and excretions (blood, urine, excrement) are the basis of the color scale", which is eerily similar to

Kristeva's idea of the abject (117). For her, these bodily excretions are what defines us a human, it is that which sets us apart from a corpse. Thus there is an important link between the body and the creation of art: without the body, there is literally no entity to create art. So here, the artist or creator can take the fluid body as a model for the structure of the line, rather than that of the skeleton. In this way, the form of a line can be analyzed for its plasmatic, polymorphous shape that is having, assuming, or passing through many or various forms or stages.

An excellent example of this idea would be to consider the line that makes the shape of a character in *Song of the Sea* in comparison to that of a the frame of a character in a Pixar film like *Brave*. In *Brave* the character is a puppet that is programmed to move in specific sequences and bound to the limitations of computer programming, whereas a drawn character is more fluid.

Ultimately, Eisenstein suggests that the drawn line has such an impact because of its, "utopian promise of liberation from ossified form, the way it offered the possibility of a state of eternal becoming"; in that it allowed for a new perspective on the relationship between human and nature (117). Moore's compositions within the film further echo the connection between human and nature, moreso than Disney, because of the manner in which he portrays the characters in relation to the background, or scene that surrounds them. The nature surrounding the characters often has even more intricate details than the simplistic outlines of the characters' features. For example, when Ben is in the forest before approaching Macha's tree house, he climbs out of an elaborate tree with spindling roots and colors and lines that ebb and flow. Visually it is clear that Ben is emerging

into the surface of the forest, but the composition suggests something deeper. Additionally, the manner in which Moore chose to construct the tree he emerges from suggests a link between nature (the tree), and human (Ben). The tree almost literally gives birth to Ben; his ascent from the depths of the cave follows this idea, as well. It seems that Moore uses the composition to communicate the interconnectedness of man to earth, and furthermore, the composition communicates the affordances that art can give to man and his relationship with the earth.

With regard to the portrayal of animals within animated film, Disney often anthropomorphizes his animal characters like Maid Marian of *Robin Hood*, or Timon and Pumba from *The Lion King*. Eisenstein is very excited with the way Disney attributes human traits to his animals because it lends itself to a time when mankind projected his own soul onto his surroundings, a time before we understood "science" (119). Here he brings up the idea of animism, or the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena—also known as the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe. With animism, it only makes sense that early humans gave human elements to animals attributing it to the idea that every entity has a soul or will power, much like how the concepts of Totemism and Darwinism (the theory of the evolution of species by natural selection) evolved from animals. Therefore, through the act of animating a cartoon drawing, the animator is literally bringing the drawing to life. Eisenstein asserted that hand-drawn animation, "…is practically a direct manifestation of the

method of animism…in this way, what Disney does is connected with one of the deepest features of the early human psyche" (119).

As humans, the simplest explanation for giving something life is if it moves: life is expressed through movement, when something moves, it is deemed alive. In Latin, "anima" means the soul, and in connection to movement with an animated cartoon, *if* it moves, *then* it is animated; and it moves by means of an internal, independent, impulse of will. So when viewers watch a Disney animated film, they *know* the images seen onscreen are not *real*, nor can they exist in their world, but they *sense* that they are real and living. Why else does the viewer cry when Bambi's mother is shot? But there is a stark difference in viewing *Song of the Sea*: the images seen on screen *do not* let the viewer forget that they are hand drawn, or that they are in fact pictures moving across the screen. The viewer still *feels* the movement of the line, and senses that these children are in danger, or that the wind is ruffling their hair, but in a different way because the manner in which the line is constructed invokes imagination and perceived reality as opposed to photorealism or live action. The film continually draws attention to, and asks the audience to recognize, that this is hand-drawn, 2-D animation. Even the compositing techniques Moore's team utilized further separates *Song of the Sea* from the look and feel that mainstream consumers are used to expecting from animated films. The images presented are at once graphical, like what one might expect from a printed comic, and attest to the idea that, "…the line is a powerfully versatile instrument. It…is in the manipulation of line that the formal signature of individual style and graphic virtuosity is most

eloquently expressed" as animator and film scholar Eddy Von Mueller would suggest (Mueller 95).

Moore's work also evokes the elements of origin laid out by Eisenstein, as if his films' color palettes were inspired by earth in the *Secret of Kells*, and water in *Song of the Sea*. But it is not simply the color palette, it is the architecture of the line that seems to portray each of these individual elements along with the skillful use of color. When for example, he creates a wave, it is what one might imagine a wave to look like if it were described in the spoken word of a story from a bard. When Disney draws a wave, they want it to look like a photograph of a wave. When Moore constructs a wave, it is recognizable as a wave, but it looks more graphical, distinctly mythic and straight from the imagination as opposed to being tethered to photorealism.

Additionally, the manner in which Moore chose to animate movement within *Song of the Sea* was labor intensive, like most drawn movement, however he used compositing techniques to multiply elements, like the waves, for example. Thus within hand-drawn animation, "motion is simultaneously simplified and liberated…[but] motion in animated films tends to be even more minimized than form and color", due to the necessity of ease of replication (102-103). Wherein a studio hoping to commodify the graphical image for profit, like Disney, might attempt to empty the frame of excess detail to mimic the amount of visual information afforded by recorded cinema, Moore and Cartoon Saloon *emphasize* movement and detail within the frame (Mueller 107).

The elasticity and fluidity that the drawn line afforded Disney gave each of his images the ability to exist, "dually: as a collection of lines, and as an image which grows out of them" (Leyda 124). Similarly, Moore uses both the graphical and plastic modes of animation to produce his images. Where the graphical calls to mind the printed page like that of a comic, the plastic mode recalls older media like that of the "fine arts"; those considered elite like sculpting and painting (Mueller 108). Where there is a simplistic bobbled-headed boy with bulging eyes, Ben standing with his mother's shell in hand, there is also a bleeding blue watercolor sky, constantly shifting as the blotted clouds stream past. There are also intricate carved details within the textures of the railing, and seagulls flying overhead, all while maintaining simplicity in the forms of Ben and Cú.

It is amazing what the hand-drawn line has afforded animators in the past, but with the utilization of new technologies, *Song of the Sea* presents much more intricate images. By returning to hand-drawn animation, Moore realizes this connection and the potential of the medium. With the drawn line's infinite potential to take on any shape, and create any movement or action, an animated cartoon, then, represents the essence of animism and totemism (the belief in which either human, or group of humans, is thought to have a spiritual connection or kinship to another physical being, such as an animal or plant). These archaic modes of thought not only resonate with the medium, but also with the thematic qualities of the narrative. Man's connection to the environment is visually represented distinctly in the compositions such as the sea, the fox, the seal, or even the lighthouse. This

connection is also communicated through the *form* of each line itself, every splash of color, and therefore the animation style throughout the entire film.

**Conclusion:**

For many viewers, *Song of the Sea* is a unique film with an inherently *different* feel than mainstream children's films. The film delivers a deeply emotional lesson to children, especially in comparison to the formulaic Disney and PIXAR cannon. This personal and authentic message, which is evident from the influence of Moore's Irish roots and childhood, is a condition of the terms in which the film is created. Though Moore and Cartoon Saloon utilized a vast team of independent studios, there is a stark difference between the production behind *Song of the Sea* as compared with big budget mainstream films that are recognized from giants like Disney and Pixar. With Moore's freedom as an independent filmmaker to pursue the necessary groups to fund his more personal follow up to *Secret of Kells*, he was able to instill the same potency of Irish folklore into *Song of the Sea*.

Without the pressure to conform to a specific "look" that contemporary audiences have come to expect from animated features, Moore created a film that digs deeply into the emotions of grief and loss that delivers a message, resonating with today's audience, as evidenced by critics. Coupled with a beautiful 2-D aesthetic, tranquil color palette, and revolutionary compositing process; *Song of the Sea* is an entirely different experience than mainstream U.S. children's films released in recent years. The affordances of independent production are astronomically different than that of larger corporations because the independent company does not have to make its decisions based on the framework put in place by the larger corporation. An independent company can make decisions with more flexibility and

not necessarily have to focus on upholding the trappings of a specific, world-recognized, iconic brand like Disney.

Moore has created a film about the human condition: humans bottle up emotions and ignore them because they are too overwhelming. In order to move forward, move on, one needs to accept feeling these emotions, and confront these feelings, by reconnecting with one's past and the environment. In *Song of the Sea*, this is echoed through Bronach's stories where the themes of loss need acknowledgement in order to become part of one's past history, and therefore its own story. It is that passing on of stories and history and memories that engrain in humans who they truly are, and where they came from. Song and story are ways to release one's feelings and help one to reestablish a connection with self and past. Ben uses his mother's stories to come to terms with his loss, like when he realizes that Macha is no more than a confused and sad mother, and so we can parallel Bronach with that of "Mother" Ireland; especially when she says, "remember me in my stories", and by extension the earth, itself. Ultimately, the earth, sea, and planet itself is the mother.

This film is about the nature of human beings today: people bottle up our emotions and hide them via constant distractions, especially with the use of technology. This is not directly addressed in the film, but Moore has been quoted as saying that one of his concerns is how people have come to live sealed off in their own closed bubbles of a world due to technology. The film supports reconnecting with the environment, humans' primal nature, and reestablishing a true connection with cultural heritage, to return to a more natural state of living. The overall

message the film embraces is that humans need to first accept their feelings and get back in touch with themselves and their heritage and then return to, and reestablish respect for the environment: return to the true mother. The film suggests a need to return to a simpler time, and for children to not keep their faces glued to screens. The message stresses that the world, as a whole, needs to remember Mother Nature, the *land*, the *earth*, and that it is *where* the human race came from. This is a story that young children will understand, and at the same time will resonate strongly with adults.

A soul-touching film like this is the product of Celtic mythology because Moore wanted to illuminate his Irish roots, but it is also so much more than that. Like Joseph Campbell identifies the pan-mythic hero and his cycle, a model that can be applied to nearly any story from any country, *Song of the Sea* unites our collective identities and understanding of what is myth. *This* is what makes the film distinctly un-Disney like, or anti-mainstream. When Disney creates a feature, they capitalize on, or mine other cultures into their brand by changing things indiscriminately: they pass the mythology through their commercial agenda. Whereas *Song of the Sea* is a collectively honest telling of a story that is both familiar, in the sense of the hero's cycle and children's films' themes, but also new and different.

*Song of the Sea* departs from trivial boundaries typically seen within children's films by embracing folkloric roots and melding them together with a contemporary family melodrama. The film also has a distinct *look* and *feel* that differentiate it from mainstream children's feature. The duality at play throughout the film exhibits a fusion of past and future; aesthetically it is way to bring a new

look to an old medium, with familiar fairytale tropes, told in a way that dances between what we recognize as the real world and the unknown magical fairy world. The duality of Moore's compositions also connects with themes within the story of the film. Consistently, the world the movie portrays is like two sides of a coin. There is the magical world and the real world, which become increasingly entangled as the children venture further on their quest to find Saoirse's coat. Real life characters are echoed in magical characters met on the journey.

The film is a product of where the director came from, and where the team came from. The deep roots within the film *are* the roots of this group of people, but more importantly, it is also a collective telling of a story that through its mode of animation, mode of production, has been understood and recognized globally. The actual animation techniques used to create a unique aesthetic set it apart from Disney, and from other popular children's films. It is a story that grapples with the tremendous tragedy and grief of a family, but very specifically seen through the eyes of a child. For a child, losing a mother is one of the most horrific things imaginable, and for this film to be able to tell that story in such a visually entrancing aesthetic, it sharpens the potency of the loss of this family.

*Song of the Sea* is a distinctly Irish film, presenting unfamiliar mythic, folkloric, and cultural territory to mainstream viewers, and yet it grows from this foundation to arrive at a destination of a much wider, global breadth. Ultimately, the film delivers a spellbinding tale that digs deeper into the emotional understanding of classic folklore, and asks more of the viewer in order to find its moral messages.

With its unique visual aesthetic, *Song of the Sea* is a film that stands out among children's films by telling an authentically Irish tale.

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