

Cartoon Saloon as Mythopoeic:
Reimagining Irish Mythology through Animation

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ABSTRACT

Cartoon Saloon, an Irish animation studio based in Co. Kilkenny, Ireland, explores themes of liminality, urbanization, and coming of age in its trio of Irish folklore-themed films. *Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, and *Wolfwalkers* each explore Irish identity, folklore, and community through different time periods and spaces to create truly Irish animated films. Each film explores the tension between folklore and Christianity, urban and rural community, and the challenges of coming of age in various ways through the lens of Irish folklore. By communicating these themes in animated films, Cartoon Saloon centers indigenous animation work in a country that has lacked an indigenous industry and uses the flexibility of animation as an art form to address Ireland's history and mythology through the writing, music score, and animation style of the three films. Cartoon Saloon stands at the forefront of a new revitalization of Irish culture reminiscent of the Gaelic and Celtic revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through their dedication to preserving and exploring Irish mythology, art, history, and language via an emergence of an indigenous Irish animation industry.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Cartoon Saloon, an Irish animation studio based in Co. Kilkenny, Ireland, has released a trio of films centered on Irish folklore. These films explore Irish history, mythology, and tradition through several time periods and explore themes of liminality and coming of age. *Secret of Kells*, the first film, explores the Abbey of Kells and the creation of the Book of Kells through the eyes of Brandon, a young monk learning to find his place in the Abbey. He encounters a fairy girl and learns that there is more to his world than the Abbot had taught him. The second film, *Song of the Sea*, is set in modern times and tells the story of Ben's adventure to save his sister, who is half-selkie. The final film, *Wolfwalkers*, explores Kilkenny during English occupation through the adventures of Robyn, a young English girl who is turned into a wolfwalker and learns about the magic present in the Irish countryside. Each film explores the tension between folklore and Christianity, urban and rural community, and the challenges of coming of age in various ways through the lens of Irish folklore. Cartoon Saloon stands at the forefront of a new revitalization of Irish culture reminiscent of the Gaelic and Celtic revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through their dedication to preserving and exploring Irish mythology, art, history, and language via an emergence of an indigenous Irish animation industry.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Modern Irish Animation	8
Chapter Two: <i>The Secret of Kells</i>	18
Chapter Three: <i>Song of the Sea</i>	27
Chapter Four: <i>Wolfwalkers</i>	38
Conclusion	50
REFERENCES	57

Introduction

Irish animation studio Cartoon Saloon remediates Irish mythology through a series of three animated films that use liminality to convey complex themes of coming of age, culture shifts, colonialism, and urbanization.¹ By communicating these themes in animated films, Cartoon Saloon centers indigenous animation work in a country that has lacked an indigenous industry and uses the flexibility of animation as an art form to address Ireland's history and mythology through the writing, music score, and animation style of the three films. Additionally, Cartoon Saloon's international success as a small, indie animation studio creating Irish-centered films speaks to growth and diversification within the animation industry as a whole; given animation's history as a media form, this diversification and mainstream success reinvigorates the industry as a whole and paves the way for more indie studios to be taken seriously moving forward. Cartoon Saloon, a small studio in Kilkenny, Ireland, has been acknowledged by critics, awards shows, and audiences. Cartoon Saloon uses distinctly Irish culture, themes, history, and art styles to decolonize their animation industry and create a distinct animation industry that competes against Disney's dominance despite their small size. Three films, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), *Song of the Sea* (2014), and *Wolfwalkers* (2020), referred to as the "Irish Folklore Trilogy" by Cartoon Saloon, emphasize Irish folklore and mythology and use liminality to explore various tensions throughout the films.

¹ Liminal spaces are associated with ambiguity, disorientation, and otherness. Similarly to the idea of the uncanny valley, where something seems almost human but not quite fully human in a disorienting or uncomfortable way, liminal spaces can seem normal but are often a transitional space. They are often described as thresholds, which is a phrase commonly associated with the boundary between our world and the world of the fae ("Liminal", Merriam-Webster).

While various forms of moving pictures have existed for hundreds of years, animation as we think of it today was popularized alongside the invention of cinematography in the late nineteenth century. Disney was the first studio to release full color animation due to their partnership with Technicolor in 1932 and Disney has remained a dominant force in the animation industry since. Professor Paul Wells of Loughborough University, who has written extensively on animation, notes that “animation, in some ways, has become synonymous with Disney and thus other kinds of animation and other important film-makers in the field have been further neglected” (*Understanding Animation* 3). For a long time, both the animation industry as well as much of the commentary regarding animation have centered around Disney and reasonably so, given its massive cultural impact within much of Western animation and culture. Disney has set the standard for Western animation for decades through innovation, quality, and quantity. However, by ignoring indigenous animators such as Cartoon Saloon and other culturally influential animation styles, studios, and communities, we flatten the discourse and neglect large swaths of diversity within the industry.

Animation allows for a wider range of artistic styles that makes it an ideal medium for communicating liminality and complexity when telling a story; animators can decide to use traditional cultural art styles as inspiration or develop personal, unique styles. Paul Wells notes that “to animate, and the related words, animation, animated, and animator all derive from the Latin verb *animare*, which means ‘to give life to’...this largely means the artificial creation of the illusion of movement in inanimate lines and forms” (*Understanding Animation* 10). Therefore, animators give life to inanimate drawings to produce the illusion of life and movement. Facial expressions can be exaggerated for comedy and fantasy worlds can be created without extensive computer effects overlaid on live action film to varying degrees of success. In many cases, this

smooth integration of fantastical elements or visuals in animated films that cannot be performed in live action allows for a greater suspension of disbelief and immersion for the viewer. Wells explains that “animation can defy the laws of gravity, challenge our perceived view of space and time, and endow lifeless things with dynamic and vibrant properties” (*Understanding Animation* 11). In some specific animation industries, such as Japanese anime, certain animation styles become characteristic of the genre, even becoming widely recognizable tropes or references within the industry as a whole. For instance, Japanese anime is often recognizable by the large eyes and small mouths of their female characters or the use of flower-filled backgrounds to indicate feelings of love and infatuation.² These visual tropes are sometimes appropriated by American animation as a nod to other animation industries; since the style is not predicated on a specific physical location, person, or aesthetic, it is easier to reference other styles or build upon other styles. Voice actors provide the vocals for characters and because they are not on screen, the voice they create does not need to match their physical presentation. Christina Vee, a 33-year-old American voice actress, has voiced fiery female teenager Sailor Mars, a talking pig, and a twelve-year-old boy over her career.³ In live action film, a young boy would have to be cast for young boy roles. This requires children to enter the entertainment industry and requires acting skills that may be difficult to achieve at younger ages. In animation, a talented voice actor can perform a variety of roles throughout their career, adjusting their voice to each character from years of experience regardless of their physical presentation.

In addition to having greater flexibility in aesthetic than live action film, animation has become more accessible in our growing digital culture. For budding animators, there are apps

² Japanese anime is one of the few animation industries that does not mirror Disney and the Western animation style, retaining a distinct cultural tone that sets it apart from other animation styles.

³ Sailor Mars from *Sailor Moon*, Hawk the pig from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and Killua Zoldyke from *Hunter X Hunter*.

and other programs available for tablets that allow people to begin drawing and animating at younger ages and then they can upload their creations to apps like TikTok and Instagram which share their creations with the world. This mirrors the shift found in many other industries, where the old guard of the industry do not control the market as strongly as they used to. This expansion of accessibility comes with an expansion of diversity in both creators and creations. Indie animation like that produced by Cartoon Saloon can create more unique storylines or bend genres in a way that large animation companies such as Disney might not take a chance on or do not feel fit their image. Disney films have a distinct style that they maintain in their animated films and there are topics that Disney does not consider “family-friendly” enough for their audience; this leads to the censorship or avoidance of certain topics such as homosexuality and a flattening of animation and writing styles to maintain the status quo that audiences expect from the company.⁴ This has led to the sanitization of traditional fairy tales such as Grimm’s Fairy Tales in order to make those folk tales and traditional stories “family-friendly” by Disney’s current standards. These adaptations of fairy tales from non-American cultures often lose their distinct cultural flavor as well; Cartoon Saloon embraces their Irish roots to create films steeped in Irish culture in a way a Disney adaptation of the same story likely would not.

In her essay “Literacy, Culture, and Creativity in a Digital Era,” Martha Pennington discusses the shifting cultural milieu in this new, digital era.⁵ Pennington opens her essay by explaining that:

Online connectivity and digital affordances “flatten” the world, in the sense popularized by Thomas L. Friedman (2005) of “leveling the playing field” by putting resources within

⁴ While Disney has begun to hint at some LGBTQ+ representation in their films, it is either heavily coded in the subtext or is relegated to side characters with minimal screen time.

⁵ While this article addresses teaching specifically, the argument is also pertinent to scholarship.

reach of more people. At the same time, they provide myriad opportunities for creating new playing fields, thus introducing the potential for innovation and “deleveling” within equality of opportunity. New affordances of digital media make creative resources available to more people and have spurred innovation and powered up creativity in the new digital playing fields. (Pennington 259)

There have been many studies that show that young adults enjoy watching shows where they see their own identities represented, and Morgan Ellithorpe and Amy Bleakley in their essay “Wanting to See People Like Me? Racial and Gender Diversity in Popular Adolescent Television” found that media may “offer adolescents a chance to explore their racial and gender identities and the meaning of their group memberships by selecting content with characters that match their own identity groups,” which is vital to their development (Ellithorpe and Bleakley 1435). Likewise, viewers from non-American countries would benefit from and enjoy seeing indigenous animation which speaks to their cultural myths, art forms, and spaces. In order to view more authentically diverse media which represents a wider range of cultures and experiences, there must also be an increase in creators and studios beyond the western dominance of Disney and the many smaller studios that Disney has purchased.

To this point, with the increased innovation and creativity that Pennington describes, we have also seen an increase in diverse authors who are being published not just in traditional print literature but who are gaining traction in fields such as film, television, video games, and more (Erigha 2015, Hogan 2018, Hunt and Ramón 2020). In 2015, Maryann Erigha noted that:

New changes in technology and the ubiquity of digital media could potentially disrupt patterns of inequality in Hollywood... Snow (2001) discussed the promise that digital technology holds for greater diversity of sources of cultural production...Guins (2008)

found that artistic practices in the digital domain offered more diversity online than traditional media studios provided...Jenkins (2006) discussed the convergence of film, television, and the Internet having positive results for digital media grassroots production that enables a democratization of media industries with everyday people contributing to producing culture. (Erigha 87)

While Erigha was finding evidence of diversity stagnation in Hollywood with little improvement, she believed non-traditional media, which could include online publishing, indie developers and publishers, and the rise of streaming and sharing platforms such as YouTube and Netflix, would lead to an increase in diverse content outside of the mainstream industry. Cartoon Saloon's most recent film, *Wolfwalkers* (2020), was released through Apple's streaming platform; this allowed Cartoon Saloon to have an immediate international release that was not predicated on theaters picking up the movie for showings. This recognition and growth of non-traditional media that is outside of Hollywood will benefit indie animation studios that have the ability to pursue unique forms of animation and media that have the potential to explore indigenous themes and styles that might be less successful in mainstream media. However, in order for diversity to truly flourish and expand within the animation industry, eventually there will need to be larger studios that can compete with monoliths such as Disney; while the expansion of indie animation is a strong first step, I hope that more investors will put money towards diverse creators who are writing and animating a wider variety of storylines so that companies like Disney can no longer monopolize the industry.

By analyzing, researching, and discussing the work of indigenous and indie animation studios such as Cartoon Saloon, scholars can emphasize that their content is valuable and worth studying and supporting. While money is a large influence on what succeeds and fails in the

industry, scholars can support these new forms by treating them as worthy of scholarship.

Therefore, there needs to be more scholarship looking at indie animation specifically with an emphasis on indigenous studios that are uplifting their traditional cultures, art forms, and history.

The first chapter will delve into the history of animation in Ireland, both through indigenous Irish animators and the American animation presence in the country and, ultimately, the exit of American animation studios and the growth of Cartoon Saloon. This chapter explores the history of animation in Ireland to provide context for Cartoon Saloon's cultural importance. Further chapters will explore the mythological and historical contexts for each film as well as analyzing the art styles that set Cartoon Saloon films apart from other Western animated films. This will outline the folklore that inspires each film, the historical context for certain plotlines and themes, and explores how Cartoon Saloon uses liminality as a throughline in its films. Contextualizing these films within the history of the animation industry in Ireland as well as illuminating the mythological inspirations behind the films reveals how the Cartoon Saloon films give voice to the burgeoning indigenous Irish animation style that Cartoon Saloon is nurturing through these projects.

Chapter One: Modern Irish Animation

Cartoon Saloon is a studio born out of a liminal space. For many decades, the Irish animation industry was a robust part of Ireland's economy but it was dominated by American studios such as Sullivan Bluth. These studios were built in Ireland but helmed by Americans instead of Irish animators and they did not create films that were Irish in style, inspiration, or subject matter. They largely copied Disney in their style and approach to animation which prevented Irish animators from building an indigenous industry of their own. Before these studios moved to Ireland, there were a handful of burgeoning Irish animators that paved the way for Ireland's industry; however, they lacked formal education or support, which limited their abilities and success. Scholars have done some work to acknowledge the history of these animators and it is important to continue to call back to the people who first embraced the concept of Irish animation.

In his article "Re-animating the Past: An Irish Animation History" Thomas Walsh argues for a centering of indigenous animation studios and productions when looking at Ireland's animation industry history. Walsh acknowledges several indigenous Irish animators as being central to the growth of an indigenous Irish animation industry, including James Hogan, Aidan Hickey, and Tim Booth. Photographer James Hogan is "credited as producing Ireland's first piece of animation...using model-making and stop-frame techniques" potentially as early as 1907, although it has not been definitely dated (Walsh 2018: 137). Hogan's work was experimental and rather than focusing on narrative, it was simply focused on exploring the possibilities of the technology by recreating the town of Youghal's main street and clock tower.

There was no one for Hogan to learn from; he experimented with his newsreels to create the short film and was Ireland's first foray into indigenous animation.

Aidan Hickey's work as an animator, scriptwriter, and director in the 1970s and 1980s is "notable for its attempt to develop an indigenous, commercially viable animation practice in a climate that lacked training and resources for large scale studio productions" (Walsh 2018: 140). Hickey had training as an art teacher before pursuing animation. He then took an animation course at Hornsey College of Art in London in 1972, which exposed him to traditional animation training in a way that Hogan lacked access to. Hickey is known for his "cut-out process" which "emerged as one indigenous alternative to the orthodox, hand-drawn and cel-traced aesthetic that signified the commercial cartoon of this period" (Walsh 2018: 140).⁶ Interestingly, in his 2009 article "Drawing conclusions: Irish animation and national cinema," Liam Burke does not cite Hogan and instead cites Aidan Hickey in the 1970s as the beginning of Irish animation.⁷ In an interview with The Irish Film and Television Network, Hickey describes Ireland's early animation field as "just a cottage industry at the time and it was very much a personal choice to get involved. I was aware of animation in the big bad world outside but it was never clear at all how we could slot into that. Opting for animation was a very isolating choice and I don't know how long I could have gone on with it, in that simple form" (Warren). Hickey witnessed the rise and fall of the American animation studios in Ireland although he was never directly involved with the studios. Hickey continued to create his cut paper short films in his small studio but described the closure of the American studios as "...a shattering blow - most obviously for the

⁶ Cut out animation is a form of stop-motion animation using flat characters, props, and backgrounds cut from materials such as paper, card, stiff fabric, or photographs. Traditional animation, also known as hand-drawn or cel animation, refers to animation where each frame is drawn by hand. Traditional animation dominated the animation industry until CGI (computer generated imagery) became widely accessible to animation studios.

⁷ It is unclear whether Burke is unaware of Hogan or whether he does not consider Hogan an animator.

people who were working there. They had built their lives and careers around that work. Many of them had families and believed themselves to be in a secure and growing business. Then, suddenly it was all over” (Warren). Hickey produced his most recent piece of animation in 2005. Most recently, he has pivoted back to his painting roots by serving as president of and exhibiting with the Dublin Painting and Sketching club each year.

Tim Booth, originally an illustrator, is known best for his adaptation of fellow Irishman W. B. Yeats’ poem “The Lake of Inisfree” in his film, *The Prisoner* (2012). He graduated from Trinity College in 1964 and remains active in the industry today as a comic artist for the fanzine *Spaceship Away*. In “Re-Animating the Past: An Irish Animation History,” Walsh notes that “*The Prisoner* can be viewed as a precursor to the animated literary adaptation of the post-Bluth period,” referring to films such as *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea* by Cartoon Saloon (Walsh 2018: 144). In *The Prisoner*, we see Booth use animation as a form of political and cultural statement much more than Hogan or Hickey had, as well as a surrealist art style. Walsh notes that:

Booth takes the central dialectic between idealised rural living and grim urban existence, and uses it to both satirize Yeats’ romantic pastoralism, and also to criticise Ireland’s urban modernity, using the transformative nature of the animated form to capture the daydream-like quality of the original text. Booth’s main strategy is to juxtapose image and text; the high culture of Ireland’s 19th century Literary Revival, represented by Yeats’ poem, is brought into a critical relationship with the pop-culture aesthetic of a science-fiction comic book. (Walsh 2018: 144)

Booth wants viewers to engage with and critique Irish culture by using Yeats, one of the foremost figures in twentieth-century literature and a cornerstone of Irish literary culture. Walsh

uses the above examples to prove that an indigenous animation culture does exist in Irish history and is worth studying. However, despite there being evidence of a burgeoning animation field in Ireland, he also argues these early animators lacked access to the funding, training, and other resources needed to sustain a competitive, commercially successful animation field. This is seen in Hogan's lack of formal training, and Hickey and Booth's pivot to animation later in their careers from other art forms with minimal traditional training. Additionally, in his interview with the podcast *Meet Your Maker*, Hickey spoke about the difficulty of entering the animation industry particularly because his initial London job search coincided with the Winter of Discontent (Geraghty "Aidan Hickey"). Funding remains a major issue for any film studio but especially animation studios, where multiple artists must be hired for each film; it can take anywhere from four to seven years to produce most full-length feature films with animation. That length is increased for smaller production teams that cannot afford to hire larger animation teams, which means the payout for animated films comes much later than for most live-action films.

For historical context regarding the resurgence of Irish animation within Ireland, we must look back to an American animation studio, Sullivan Bluth Studio, which was based in Ireland during the 1980s and 1990s. Sullivan Bluth Studios was an Irish-American animation studio that was active in Dublin from 1979 to 1995 which produced films including *The Secret of NIMH*, *The Land Before Time*, *All Dogs Go To Heaven*, and *The Pebble and the Penguin*; it is worth noting that none of the studios major films had Irish cultural themes or references, despite being based in Ireland's capital. In the podcast *Meet Your Maker*, Sullivan Bluth co-founding animator John Pomeroy explains how Sullivan Bluth Studios came to be in Ireland:

He [Morris Sullivan, CEO] had looked at not just our economy, but at our business model and he thought for a better future, maybe what we need to do is approach a foreign government and see if they would be willing to host us starting and implementing an animation industry in their country. So he put out feelers to countries in Asia, countries in South America, and Europe, and the most favorable one that came back was from the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) in Ireland. (Geraghty “Don Bluth in Ireland”)

In the middle of working on *American Tail*, Sullivan Bluth Studios opened in 1986 in Dublin; *American Tail* was ultimately completed in Dublin. Don Bluth’s first studio, the Bluth Group, went bankrupt in 1984 (hence the search for a better financial model) which led to Bluth merging his studio with Morris Sullivan’s to create Sullivan Bluth Studios.⁸ Sullivan Bluth Studios served as an extension of the Disney animation model. While live action films have dominated the film industry as a whole, Paul Wells argues that the success of Disney “put animation on the map” (*Understanding Animation 3*). However, Disney dominating the animation industry can also be viewed negatively, as its dominance has “ghettoised the form in itself by overshadowing its early history and creating an orthodox style” (Wells, *Understanding Animation 3*). While Disney’s success in animated films has lent respect and energy to the industry, it has also created a uniform style and approach to animated films that eliminates the opportunity for unique or indigenous styles of animation to thrive. Disney’s dominance in the West arguably kept stellar animated films from studios such as Studio Ghibli from gaining traction with Western audiences because “animation...has become synonymous with Disney,”

⁸ There is disagreement between the dates given in *Meet Your Maker* and those found in public records of the studios. Some sources state the studio opened in 1985, while the podcast cites 1986 as the opening year for the studio. The podcast implies the studio opened during the winter, possibly explaining the confusion.

neglecting other studios and filmmakers (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 3).⁹ Sullivan Bluth follows this pattern during its time in Ireland.

When Sullivan Bluth Studios entered the scene, they provided a more structured environment for Irish animators rather than the “small cottage industry” that had existed previously (Walsh, “Re-Animating the Past” 147). Bluth and his colleagues left Disney to open the studio and brought a very traditional, American-style animation to Ireland. While Sullivan Bluth Studios was instrumental in supporting the nascent Irish animation industry through heavy local recruitment and support in the creation of an animation course at Ballyfermot College of Further Education, they also produced films which felt functionally and artistically similar to its major competitor, Disney. They did not produce films which utilized indigenous Irish culture or animation styles; while there was not a robust or distinct Irish animation style, there was a burgeoning industry that could have been nurtured and supported rather than ignored. Alongside Sullivan Bluth Studios, Murakami Wolf and Emerald City also opened; Murakami Wolf animated *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, another film without any inclusion of Irish culture despite being animated in Ireland by Irish animators. Emerald City, known for producing one-hour specials based on classic novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *The Call of the Wild*, was founded by American Al Guest and Canadian Jean Mathieson, “clearly emulating the Sullivan Bluth model” (Burke, “Drawing Conclusions” 188). However, this pop of studios did not last long. Sullivan Bluth closed after financial difficulties and poor box office rates, with Emerald City closing soon after. Murakami Wolf downsized to Fred Wolf Films, which remains open despite several rough patches.

⁹ Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation studio whose films have garnered international acclaim, particularly in regards to films spearheaded by founder Hayao Miyazaki such as *Spirited Away* (2001), which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Picture.

When Sullivan Bluth Studios closed its doors in 1995, it was just a few years later that Cartoon Saloon opened in 1999. Paul Young, Tomm Moore, and Nora Twomey, the founders of Cartoon Saloon, met while at the Ballyfermot Animation College which Sullivan Bluth Studios had helped to establish.¹⁰ While they started the studio with the concept for *The Secret of Kells* already in mind, the movie was not put into production until the 2000s and was finally released in 2009 to wide critical acclaim. Their second feature length film, *Song of the Sea*, was released in 2014, and *Wolfwalkers*, their third film with Irish inspirations, was released in December 2020. Additionally, Cartoon Saloon has received four Academy Award nominations for their films and they have developed and produced several short films and television series as well. They currently employ approximately 300 animators and are a success story within the field of animation, both in Ireland and abroad (Pollock 2020). They started much smaller than one might assume by their present success. In an interview with the podcast *Meet Your Maker*, Moore explains that “we had this slightly even more naive business plan of making a feature film on the back of ecards,” an early Flash-based animated online card that could be emailed to people in the early 2000s (Geraghty “Cartoon Saloon”). Even though Moore, Young, and Twomey had the benefit of attending Ballyfermot Animation College, the closure of the American animation studios meant that acquiring funding and other support for their initial feature film was a long process.

The emergence of an indigenous animation style allows for studios to create and engage with a narrative of national identity and cultural history in both writing, theme, and art style.

Walsh argues that Irish animation “demonstrates a frequent and vigorous use of the animated

¹⁰ Tomm Moore will be quoted the most in this paper as he seems to be the public face of Cartoon Saloon; while there are a few interviews with Young and Twomey, Moore speaks the most about the work the studio does, particularly in reference to the “Irish Folklore Trilogy” of films.

form to interrogate notions of contemporary Irish identity and the relationship between history, tradition and a modern Irish hegemony” (Walsh 2018: 147). Cartoon Saloon is at the forefront of that movement, emerging onto the scene as an indigenous animation studio soon after the collapse of the Americanized studio, Sullivan Bluth. Although it took them a few years to secure the resources needed to complete their first feature length film, Cartoon Saloon opened with the idea for a truly indigenous film which would be animated by Irish animators and focus on Irish themes, particularly themes of tension between new and old traditions. This is particularly impressive given the high production costs and length of time needed to create a feature-length animated film even for larger studios with more robust budgets. Cartoon Saloon’s existence and subsequent success can be seen as a reclamation of the industry from a colonizer by a colonized, indigenous group, which emphasizes the themes of Irish tradition and culture in their films.

Walsh argues in an article reflecting on Cartoon Saloon that Ireland is a colonized nation that has achieved post-colonial status, which has led to Irish culture being “indeterminate” and “in-between;” he says that “This state of ‘in-betweenness’ suggests an ambiguity, hybridity and fragmentation at the heart of Irish identity...” (Walsh, “Re-Animating the Past” 136). There are aspects of Cartoon Saloon’s films which, arguably, illustrate and respond to this fragmentation, or liminality, which we will explore in later chapters. Walsh also argues that Cartoon Saloon’s films speak to an “Irish visual arts tradition, drawn from Celtic artefacts...[seen] in more contemporary Irish animated texts such as *Brendan and the Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014), that seek to evoke a particular sense of ‘Irishness’” (Walsh, “Re-Animating the Past” 135). It is unclear if Walsh believes Cartoon Saloon created this style. In *Animation and America*, Paul Wells outlines how “the Disney Studio effectively colonised the field of animation,” which forced indigenous animators to constantly be in conversation with the

perception of animation that Disney created due to its international cultural influence (Wells, *Animation and America* 45). If, as Albert Memmi states in *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, the “most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community,” then it is imperative for scholars to recognize the indigenous Irish animators that came before the insertion of the American partner studios even if there were not many indigenous animators because the introduction of the American influence prevented the potential for the budding indigenous industry to grow (Memmi 91). It is also imperative to acknowledge that Disney need not be the monolithic cultural influence that it purports itself to be if these indigenous animators and their creations are properly acknowledged. This gives the colonized “cultural and social responsibility” which is stripped away by the colonizer (Memmi 91). Walsh’s assertion of “in-betweenness” speaks to Ireland’s move to reclaim their colonized past, of which Cartoon Saloon’s films are a cornerstone. As Cartoon Saloon creates films which claim indigenous Irish culture, they actively decolonize their native animation field.

Liam Burke further explores the success of Cartoon Saloon’s films, specifically in regards to whether a traditional, hand-drawn film could be successful both at home and abroad. Written before the release of *The Secret of Kells*, Burke notes that the “majority of *The Secret of Kells*’ key animation took place in Ireland, with 35 animators working from Cartoon Saloon at the peak of production,” and that the film rejects Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) for a “highly stylized and intricate” hand-drawn animation (Burke, “Drawing Conclusions” 190). Bringing in Paul Wells, Burke cites him as stating that “many studios worldwide have insisted upon using their own indigenous fine arts traditions, mythologies, and cultural imperatives in order to differentiate their own work from what may be regarded as a diluted form of American artistic and cultural imperialism” (Burke, “Drawing Conclusions” 190). Wells cites the way

Chinese animation uses calligraphic styles, Czechoslovakian animation uses marionette and puppet animation, and Russian animation uses cut-out animation (Wells, "Drawing Conclusions" 2). *The Secret of Kells* certainly differentiates itself from other animated films of the time through its avoidance of CGI and stylistic choices reminiscent of the actual Book of Kells and illumination. This historical context reinforces the idea that Cartoon Saloon stands at the forefront of a new revitalization of Irish culture reminiscent of the Gaelic and Celtic revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through their dedication to preserving and exploring Irish mythology, art, history, and language via an emergence of an indigenous Irish animation industry.

Chapter Two: *The Secret of Kells*

The Secret of Kells is the first film in directors Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart's "Irish Folklore Trilogy" and it focuses heavily on the tension between Christianity and magic as well as the wild and the more "civilised" abbey. This tension plays out through the main character's coming of age story as he learns to challenge the way he has been raised and begins to explore the wild, magical forest beyond the abbey walls. The forest acts as a liminal space where he encounters magic for the first time; this liminality allows him to cross between worlds and learn from both of them as he grows into adulthood. Released in 2009, this Academy Award nominated film was animated by *Cartoon Saloon* and was the studio's first feature film. French studio Les Armateurs and Belgian studio Vivi Film partnered with Cartoon Saloon to produce the film however, the majority of key animation took place in Ireland with director Tomm Moore being a Cartoon Saloon founder, indicating a strong creative influence from the Irish studio.

The Secret of Kells focuses on Brendan, a young boy living in the Abbey of Kells under the oversight of his uncle, Abbot Cellach. Abbot Cellach is stern and mainly focused on building a large wall around the Abbey to protect it from Vikings. One day, Brother Aiden and his white cat Pangur Bán arrive at the Abbey, carrying a beautifully illuminated but only partially completed book that he refers to as the Book of Iona because it was started on Iona and completed at Kells, a fellow member of the Columban 'familia' of monasteries; Brother Aiden recruits Brendan to help him complete the illumination, which leads to Brendan leaving the Abbey and exploring the forest beyond the wall.¹¹ There, he meets the fairy girl Aisling and

¹¹ Here we see Cartoon Saloon acknowledge the complexity of Ireland's history through the incorporation of international elements such as the Viking invasions, the shift of the book from Iona to Kells, and Christianity as a transplanted religion. These external influences are acknowledged as both international and national in the film,

encounters the pagan deity Crom Cruach. As Brendan and Aiden work on the book together, the Vikings approach the Abbey, eventually breaking through the wall and wounding Abbot Cellach in their attack.¹² Brendan, Aiden, and Pangur Bán flee the Abbey with the book under the protection of Aisling in the form of a white wolf. Eventually, Aiden and Brendan complete the book, now renamed the Book of Kells, and it is entrusted to Brendan upon Aiden's death; Brendan and Pangur Bán return to the Abbey and show Abbot Cellach the completed Book of Kells, reuniting the family at the end of the movie.

Cartoon Saloon's release of *The Secret of Kells* and its critical acclaim revitalized the Irish animation industry. Liam Burke, in a 2009 review of *The Secret of Kells*, notes that the loss of American animation companies in the mid-1990s led to the death of Irish animation in feature productions despite "animated feature films [once being] a prominent Irish export" (Burke, "Brandon" 40). Despite being a prominent export, however, these films had nothing distinctly Irish about them; it was simply a byproduct of outside studios rather than something specific to Ireland. Burke describes past Irish animated films as not being connected to Ireland or Irish culture; this marks *The Secret of Kells* as a stark contrast to prior Irish animated films since as Burke states, "in choosing our greatest national treasure for its inspiration, the film draws both literally and figuratively on its national identity" (Burke, "Brandon" 40). It is interesting that Burke ties the Book of Kells to a national identity while the film illustrates the cultural mixing of the Book of Kells. Burke also notes that the film's emphasis on protecting the artistic beauty of Brother Aiden's illuminated manuscript parallels Cartoon Saloon's choice to use traditional, hand-drawn animation rather than CGI animation that has largely overtaken the animation

which will be explored more later in the chapter. See Herbert *Iona, Kells, and Derry* for more information about Kells and the monks.

¹² There was a real Abbot Cellach at Kells (Herbert 68).

industry as a whole. This dedication to a traditional, hand-drawn style can be seen as paralleling a dedication to keeping indigenous stories alive through the films. At the end of his review, Burke argues that *The Secret of Kells* “proves that Irish animation does not need to pander to global pressures demanding cultural ambiguity and digitally-rendered polygons” (Burke, “Brendan” 40). This particularly strong endorsement of what Cartoon Saloon achieved with this film shows that *The Secret of Kells* resonated strongly with people who understood Irish culture and the Irish animation industry, however, the film also did exceptionally well internationally for being so culturally-tied and created by such a small studio. This implies that Moore and the Cartoon Saloon team were able to achieve a balance between giving *The Secret of Kells* a distinctly Irish tone with its appeal to international, non-Irish audiences.¹³

With an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature and nine other wins at other awards ceremonies, the first film from Cartoon Saloon immediately put the little Irish studio on the map within the international animation industry. Several critics likened the film to Hayao Miyazaki’s films, another director who is world-renowned for his hand-drawn animation skills and use of Japanese culture and mythology in his animated films, making it an apt comparison. Additionally, Miyazaki has worked on several Japanese adaptations of beloved Western media including *Gulliver’s Travels Beyond the Moon*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Howl’s Moving Castle*; his adaptations of Western media embrace international elements in distinctly Japanese versions, creating a work that is liminal in its identity in similar ways to the Cartoon Saloon films.¹⁴ In a longer piece published later in 2009, Burke was hopeful that

¹³ Unfortunately, there are no interviews reflecting on the reception of the film within Ireland, nor are there articles discussing the film’s success at home versus abroad.

¹⁴ Miyazaki’s version of *Howl’s Moving Castle* differs greatly from Diana Wynne Jones’s series in a way that honors the English origins of the novel yet incorporates distinctly Japanese themes. Most notably, Miyazaki centers the main tension on a violent war with a neighboring country that does not exist in the original novel; themes of war and its consequences are frequently found in both Miyazaki’s work and Japanese anime in general.

“perhaps sometime in the near future, the film representing Ireland at the Academy Awards will come from drawing on a national identity” (Burke, “Drawing Conclusions” 191). While *The Secret of Kells* may not have won Best Animated Feature the year it was nominated, it certainly garnered attention for the burgeoning studio and Irish animated film industry while staying true to its Irish roots. This is doubly impressive given Cartoon Saloon’s identity as an indie animation studio with less funding and support available to them in order to produce high quality, detailed animation and well-written scripts the way larger, more financially successful studios like Disney have.

Even in the short synopsis above, Tomm Moore’s references to Irish culture, history, and mythology are clearly present. The most prominent reference is the Book of Kells, an illuminated Gospel manuscript. Addressing the cultural mixing of the Book of Kells, Farr explains that:

During the fourth to seventh centuries, the gospel text, like the rest of the Bible, was brought to the Celts of Ireland, Britain, Wales, and Scotland and to the Anglo-Saxons in a language foreign to them, a circumstance crucial to the development of verbal and visual interpretive forms with which they overlaid and surrounded Scripture...Many of the visuals and graphic features of the Book of Kells and other Hiberno-Saxon luxury gospel books not only reflect this cultural mixing but also indicate the participation of gospel manuscripts in the emerging medieval Christian world (Farr 13–14)

Farr states that “the inland monastery most likely was intended to provide safekeeping for members of the Ionan community and its treasures,” which is seen in the film when Brother Aiden flees to Kells, hoping to keep himself and the Book of Kells safe (Farr 25). Historically, the majority of monks from Iona moved to Kells in 811 to escape Viking raids. According to F. J. Byrne, the Vikings “first incursion on to the Irish mainland occurred in 798” and Byrne notes

that “the Irish annalistic notices of Viking attacks are not colored by any undue shock or rhetoric. They are quite coldly matter-of-fact” regarding the horrors of the atrocities committed in the attacks (Byrne 609). The Book of Kells, when referenced by modern media, acts as a symbol of cultural mixing that is tied to the introduction of Christianity in Ireland. The Book of Kells, therefore, serves the same purpose in the film: because it is a holy book that cannot be completed without materials such as iron gall ink that require ingredients from beyond the walls of the Abbey, it physically blends Christian illumination with the wild magic of the forest. The book occupies a liminal space, being both part of Ireland and not through this mixing. *The Secret of Kells* also blends both Christian and pagan art themes through illumination as well as the frequent use of Neolithic spiral patterns.

These Neolithic spirals have been found on medieval manuscripts and Iron Age objects and are used in the films to signal pre-Christian Ireland spaces, characters, or themes. Cartoon Saloon mimics these spiral patterns throughout all three movies and they are used particularly heavily in *The Secret of Kells* juxtaposed with the illumination style of the other animation. More specifically to Irish history, these spirals can be found at Newgrange, a 5,200-year-old passage tomb built by Stone Age farmers according to its website. One of the megalithic symbols engraved on the stones in and around Newgrange is the Tri-Spiral, which bears a striking similarity to the spirals used in the Cartoon Saloon films. Cartoon Saloon uses this Megalithic symbol in the films to imply a connection to pagan or wild magic. They are seen when Aisling first shows Brendan around the forest as they climb through the trees and the trees throughout the forest are inscribed with spirals and traditional Celtic knots, such as the Trinity Celtic knot. Cartoon Saloon uses this symbol throughout the three movies but in *The Secret of Kells*, they

clearly denote the spirals as symbolizing pagan magic and the “otherness” of crossing into liminal spaces and wild areas.

By using a historical artefact like the Book of Kells within the movie, *Cartoon Saloon* grounds the film in magic realism. The use of both a real location, the Abbey of Kells, and a historical object, the Book of Kells, firmly ties the film to reality while incorporating fantastical elements which reference traditional Irish mythology to blend myth and history. As Lynn Ramey explores in the article “Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and New Media in *The Secret of Kells*,” incorporating the Book of Kells within the world of the film requires multiple levels of interpretation and remediation of the original text.¹⁵ Ramey explains that:

The medieval manuscript provides at least two very distinct media—the text of the book and the illuminations that remediate the text. Further complicating matters, the medieval illuminations are not transparent illustrations of the adjacent text. When the text and the image seem to be doing two different things, it poses a dilemma for a filmmaker who may be forced to choose between remediating either the text or the images, but not both at the same time. As a result, the book in the film is not identical to the material book sitting in the Trinity College library in Dublin, Ireland. The book in the film is a simulacrum, a distorted version of the original (Ramey 114).

Through remediation, aspects of the original text may be lost or misunderstood. At the same time, remediation can revitalize old texts and reimagine old stories for new consumption. In many ways, all three of the *Cartoon Saloon* films discussed in this thesis remediate Irish mythology to revitalize aspects of Irish culture which have been lost or given less attention in recent years. In Moore’s desire to create a specifically Irish animation, he reaches for a piece of

¹⁵ Remediation, as defined in Ramey’s paper, is remaking an old form of media into a new form of media, i.e. remaking a book into a movie.

art firmly entrenched in Ireland's mixed culture: the illumination in the Book of Kells. This gives the film Christian themes without being overtly biblical, as well as allowing the film to negotiate between its Irish cultural base and its appeal to an international audience. By remediating this art in the film through both the physical book within the story as well as the magical imagery such as Brandon climbing through the illuminated illustrations of the book, Cartoon Saloon reappropriates the illumination art traditional to Ireland's Book of Kells to reimagine the mythology and stories of the Viking invasions, abbeys, fairies, and Crom Cruach in a way that speaks to both Irish and international viewers.

Brother Aiden's cat, Pangur Bán, is a reference to a cat in an anonymous ninth-century Irish poem. This poem is the inspiration for the white cat Pangur Bán in *The Secret of Kells*. Heaney notes in his translation notes that many Irish authors have translated "Pangur Bán," and that Heaney himself knew "by heart Robin Flower's version" that Heaney describes as "more like a children's poem" (Heaney). The poem is extant in the Reichenauer Primer and has eight verses of four lines each about a scholar and his white cat, each attending to their own work.¹⁶ The idea of a white cat catching mice while "I / Focus my less piercing gaze / On the challenge of the page" clearly parallels the Pangur Bán in the movie who accompanies Brother Aiden as he works on illuminating the manuscript (Heaney). The Gaelic name of Crom Cruach signals to the audience that this character is from Celtic folklore even though they may not be personally acquainted with the myth itself.

The Secret of Kells is a beautifully animated film but the storyline is simplistic compared to other mainstream animated feature film releases. With a run time of one hour and fifteen

¹⁶ A digital image of the poem in the MS is available here:
https://web.archive.org/web/20070708135214/http://www.rz.uni-potsdam.de/u/lingtri/schulheft/pics/Reichenauer_Schulheft_1verso_2recto_k11.jpg

minutes and a straight-forward plotline, this film is accessible for young audiences but may not have enough complexity to keep adult audiences invested in the film. Due to the simplistic nature of the story, much of this film's impact comes from the complex visuals rather than the writing. The fact that *The Secret of Kells* was a contender for Best Animated Film despite this simple storyline speaks to the quality of animation as well as the potential excitement of international audiences regarding Celtic mythology in film. Cartoon Saloon's following films, *Song of the Sea* and *Wolfwalkers*, retain the high-quality animation but have more robust, complex storylines that show continued growth from Cartoon Saloon as a studio. Additionally, these complex plotlines allow Cartoon Saloon to explore several of the themes set up in *The Secret of Kells* and build a better picture of the studio's overall message in its work. This is not to say, however, that *The Secret of Kells* does not communicate a clear theme, however.

The Secret of Kells speaks to the dangers in ignoring or not understanding the benefits of the old traditions. In the film we see Abbot Cellach close the abbey off from the forest around it, severing their ties to the pagan magic present in the forest which attempts to subvert the liminal potential of the space. That pagan magic is shown to be necessary to complete their holiest of books, the Book of Kells, when Brother Aiden needs Crom Cruach's eye to complete his illumination work. Brendan must cross the threshold of the wall and enter the woods, a liminal space, in order to grow and change. Liminal spaces can be places of growth due to their ambiguity and Cartoon Saloon uses this theme to create magic spaces that are adjacent to the reality audiences are familiar with to engage with the magic realism genre. The Christian symbol of the film, the book, essentially cannot exist without the inks created from items from the forest as well as a part of a pagan deity. The walls, meant to protect the abbey from Viking invaders as well as the dangers of the magical forest, cannot stop the invaders from destroying the abbey.

Abbot Cellach's efforts are in vain, leaving him alone and dying before Brendan can return with the completed book, led by the fairy Aisling back to his home. The Book of Kells can also be interpreted as a symbol of Christian colonization and its existence at the end of the film indicates the continued existence of Christianity in Ireland. Christianity survived the tragedy at the Abbey through Abbot Cellach, Brendan, and the Book of Kells, however, Aisling's confirmed existence at the end of the film shows that the indigenous magic of the land has survived as well. While conversion can have similar effects to invasion, the conversion illustrated in this film leaves space for the continued existence of the fae and magic.¹⁷ There is still magic and a connection to the land and its indigenous traditions for those who look for it, like Brendan does. If one remains open-minded and intentionally embraces the old traditions, they can retain that connection and as Brandon does, benefit from their understanding and relationship with the pagan traditions.

¹⁷ In the context of this thesis, "fae" will be used as a catch all to refer to a broad range of fairy folk and magical creatures.

Chapter Three: *The Song of the Sea*

The second film in the “Irish Folklore Trilogy,” *The Song of the Sea*, was released in 2014. This movie embraces the concept of liminality most immediately in the form of Saoirse, a young selkie child; she is both human and fae and this tension is the crux of her character. Additionally, Cartoon Saloon again explores the liminality of coming of age through Ben, Saoirse’s older brother. Finally, *Song of the Sea* delves into the tension between rural and urban spaces to critique modernization and its disconnect from Ireland’s cultural roots. Each of these tensions are amplified by the magical realism of the movie which places humans and modernity in immediate conversation with the rural, indigenous themes of the fairy folk and their struggles. As a mythopoeic piece of media, this film uses a combination of animation styles to further illuminate the mythology it draws from in order to retell the story for modern audiences.

Song of the Sea opens with a few lines from “The Stolen Child” by William Butler Yeats, spoken by Bronagh, the mother of the main characters: “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”.¹⁸ Drawing from myths of selkies and the dramatic scenery of Ventry Beach, *The Song of the Sea* follows ten-year-old Ben and his younger sister, Saoirse, as they unravel her muteness and magical abilities as a selkie. Ben blames Saoirse for the loss of his mother, who disappeared the night Saoirse was born, and his frequent hostility towards his sister is unaddressed by his heart-broken lighthouse keeper father, Conor. After Saoirse finds her seal coat and is found swimming in the middle of the night by Conor’s mother, she takes both children with her to the city because she feels Conor cannot properly care for his children

¹⁸ The use of Yeats, a main figure of the Irish Literary Revival, emphasizes the film's themes of Irish reclamation.

anymore. Ben and Saoirse run away from their grandmother's house and meet several fairies along the way who believe that Saoirse, as the last selkie, must sing the Song of the Sea and save their brethren. Macha and her owl minions serve as the magical antagonists for the film; she is responsible for turning the fairies to stone and Macha sends her owls to try and prevent Saoirse from reuniting with her coat so she can sing the song. While travelling, they come face to face with Macha and help her move past the trauma which caused her grief and desire to turn the other faeries to stone. With her help, Ben and Saoirse return to the lighthouse and find her coat so that Saoirse can sing and help the faeries break free of the stone and return to Tír na nÓg. When given the choice by her mother, Bronagh, to come with her to Tír na nÓg, Saoirse gives up her selkie coat to remain with Ben and Conor.

Tomm Moore's inspiration for *Song of the Sea* was the realization that Irish folklore was being preserved only through a capitalistic lens for tourism purposes rather than cultural purposes. While visiting Ventry Beach, Moore spoke to the woman who owned the cottage he stayed in and she told him that "A young fisherman had started killing seals, blaming them for the falling fish stocks...she said that wouldn't have happened years ago because people had kinda respect for seals and she kinda reminded me of the selkie stories and the belief that seals might be the souls of people lost at sea" (Geraghty "Cartoon Saloon"). The loss of connection to folklore was a melancholy topic for Moore, who began to imagine a new project that could address things he did not have time to address in *The Secret of Kells*. Moore explains in the podcast interview that "the folklore that was being forgotten about the seals was part of the reason why the seals were being killed. We're just losing more than just stories, we're losing folklore and we're losing tradition...it's respected, but only through the lens of capitalism...We're losing a certain wisdom" (Geraghty "Cartoon Saloon"). He also notes David Thomson's book

The People of the Sea as inspiration, in which David Thomson reflects on the stories he was told as a child in Scotland including stories about selkies. Thomson discusses stories from both Scotland and Ireland in his book, illustrating the prevalence of this story in the area as well as its ties to cultural mixing in the area. With this theme in mind, *Song of the Sea* takes a step forward from *The Secret of Kells*: if *Kells* is about the initial warnings and dangers of completely cordoning oneself off from nature and paganism, then *Song of the Sea* moves viewers to present day so they can see the aftermath of continuing down that path. Additionally, *Song of the Sea* addresses themes of modernization that call back to Moore's commentary on capitalism dominating the way people view traditional folklore and culture. Modernization is inherently tied to the growth of capitalism and while the film does not directly engage with capitalistic themes, its addressing of modernization speaks to this issue more broadly.

The main mythological influence for this film is the story of the selkie. Selkies are fairy creatures that can turn into humans when they are on land; while on land, they have a seal coat that they must keep with them because if they lose their coat, they cannot return to their seal form. Selkies exist in a liminal space where they are neither seal nor human but a bit of both. In *The People of the Sea*, David Thomson recounts several selkie stories he was told as a child in Scotland, including a time that he and a fisherman had to kill a seal that the fisherman said was a selkie. While the book explores various stories about fairy folk relating to the sea, it is told in the form of personal anecdotes and reflections. It makes sense that Thomson's lively stories of his time on the Scottish coast as a child and his other travels would have sparked Moore's imagination after speaking to the woman in Ventry Beach. A common selkie story is one where a fisherman falls in love with a selkie and marries her, forcing her to stay on land by hiding her coat. Once she finds her coat again, she runs back to her home in the sea. The relationship

between Conor and Bronagh as well as Conor's refusal to give Saoirse her coat mirrors this traditional selkie story, although Bronagh seems to stay with Conor of her own free will given that she is wearing her white seal coat in the opening scenes before she returns to the sea. Saoirse, as a half-selkie, has the power to turn into a seal with her coat but lacks a voice when separated from it even though she lives comfortably on land. It remains unclear whether Bronagh begins to fall ill while pregnant with Saoirse and therefore returns to the sea or if she gives up her place on land to give Saoirse a coat; audiences are led to believe that Bronagh dies in the early part of the film and only find out later that she fled into the sea after giving birth to Saoirse and leaving Saoirse's coat with her. This ambiguity makes it unclear why Bronagh had to leave once Saoirse was born when she had remained on land after Ben was born. While the ambiguity does leave questions about the mechanics of the world building, it may be Moore's nod to the often non-consensual nature of selkie stories without painting Conor in a negative light or simply an attempt to make the original myth more family-friendly. Bronagh, like Saoirse, is a liminal character who spends time in both worlds and by the end of the film, each of them must choose one world to remain in, forcing them out of that liminal space between both worlds. While Bronagh appears to remain on land of her own free will, this approach still allows audiences to clearly see that Bronagh cannot remain with her family without the implication that she was trapped.

Selkie stories take after the tradition of the swan maiden, another female fairy who can transform from an animal to a human and back again. This is a traditional folklore tale type; seals show up several times in the Stith Thompson Motif Index, including "seal man," "speaking seal," "helpful seal," "marriage to seal," and "humans descended from seals"; the first three are distinctly tied to Irish myths in the Index but all of these pertain to many selkie tales

(Thompson). In her book *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*, Barbara Fass Leavy describes her subject as “the interplay between stories about a fairy captured by a mortal man and forced into a tedious domestic existence...the stories of supernatural spouses...seem to be *about* the freedom from cultural necessity” (Leavy 11). By exploring the swan maiden stories through a gendered lens, Leavy illuminates the patriarchal themes in the texts; the swan maidens exist outside the patriarchy but are often forcibly brought into the patriarchal system through trickery and the stealing of their coats. While these gendered themes seem to be less prevalent in *Song of the Sea*, we do see hints of the original gendered nature of the mythos through Conor’s deep grief leading him to trap Saoirse rather than give her freedom; this decision implies that if Conor could take and hide Bronagh’s coat to keep her from leaving, he would. If these stories are about freedom from cultural necessity, Bronagh leaving her family can be interpreted as her inability or refusal to play her role as mother figure and raise Ben and Saoirse or a return to her prior family, as we know little about her true motivations and past. As Bronagh is a full selkie, her rejection of her role as mother may parallel her identity as a selkie; as fairy folk, she cannot fulfill the proper role of “woman” in the patriarchal system because she is inherently “other.” Additionally, she cannot remain in the grey area of liminality as liminal spaces are places of challenge and growth rather than spaces where one remains for long periods of time. As it is unclear why Bronagh left her family to return to the sea and did not return until Saoirse sings her song at the end of the movie, it is difficult to draw clearer conclusions about her and Conor’s relationship or her role as a more traditional interpretation of the selkie woman who marries the land-dwelling human. Most selkie stories and swan maiden stories lack consent from the fairy folk maiden and while that is not included in this film, it is difficult to ignore that common theme when referencing this folklore tradition.

Two of the largest specific references to Celtic mythology are Macha and Mac Lír.¹⁹ Macha, whose character design is very similar to the grandmother's character design, is cast as the mother of Mac Lír, who is designed similarly to Conor, the lighthouse keeper. The voice actors are mirrored for these characters as well. In the opening scene, Bronagh sings a lullaby to young Ben while images of Mac Lír, the story of the selkie, The Great Seanacháí, and Macha's owls turning fairies to stone rotate around the small family; this foreshadows the main events of the film and is understood to be the mural Bronagh has been painting on the nursery wall, implying that she is sharing these stories with Ben just as she has shared the story of the selkie singing her song and returning to the sea. The visual similarity of the mythical figures to the two human characters both connects the more liminal magic world to the human world as well as draws a clear, intentional parallel between the dynamics of the characters. Macha is pained by her son's sadness so she strips away everyone's emotions, including her own, which ultimately turns the fairies to stone. Mac Lír spends most of the movie as the large island near the lighthouse where his mother turned him to stone many years ago. She believes she is doing the fairies a favor by removing their emotions and saving them from their pain in much the same way the grandmother thinks that moving the children to the city will help them.²⁰ Mac Lír, on the other hand, allowed his grief to overwhelm him much as Conor allows his grief to drive him to drink and not take proper care of his children. By directly connecting the reality and the mythology through the storylines, Cartoon Saloon emphasizes the continued relatability and importance of knowing the traditional stories. This parallel speaks to the idea that those who do

¹⁹ There are several characters named Macha referenced in Irish mythology and they are often associated with motherhood, such as the Macha referenced in a pre-tale to the *Táin* who curses the men of Ulster for making her race the King of Ulster's horses while pregnant with twins. This Macha is also a fairy woman.

²⁰ While Mac Lír's grief is not explained in the film, this is possibly a reference to the myth of the Children of Lír, where his children are turned into swans.

not know history are doomed to repeat it. Macha's curse is broken when Ben and Saoirse help her remember her emotions by breaking the jars she had trapped them in. Once she regains her emotions, she realizes the error of her ways and aids Ben and Saoirse on their way home just in time, as Saoirse has grown deathly ill since being separated from her coat.

Song of the Sea, despite being the second movie, falls chronologically last out of the trilogy with *Wolfwalkers* in the middle. Thematically, it also explores the logical conclusion of the themes acknowledged in the other two films. In the *Secret of Kells*, Brendan survives to the end of the movie with a completed Book of Kells because of the assistance of Aisling and the eye stolen from Crom Cruach. While *The Secret of Kells* avoids demonizing either the pagan magic or the Christian monks, the abbey is negatively impacted due to Cellach's stubborn closed-mindedness, symbolized by the wall around the abbey. This parallels the wall around the town of Kilkenny in *Wolfwalkers* and their separation from magic, which will be explored more in the next chapter. By the time Ireland has reached the era of *Song of the Sea*, magic does not exist within the world. There is no more need for simple walls between the civilized land and the wild magic of the liminal spaces: humans have civilized the land so much that the fairies are relegated to tunnels under sewer lids and sneaking through town. Liam Burke attributed this theme to an economical root commenting on Celtic Tiger Ireland, explaining that:

Using the structure of the road movie, Moore illustrates this theme through an urban/rural divide with Dublin depicted as a Dickensian slum replete with impenetrable fog and burnt out cars while the closer the protagonists get to their coastal destination the more lush and magical their adventures become...Unsurprisingly, as a traditional animator in a digital world, Moore gravitates towards stories of artists trying to keep ritual alive...in doing so his films maintain a cultural nationalist dichotomy... (Burke, "Swan Song")

289).

This reading centers on an author-focused viewing of the film and its potential response to an economically-driven Ireland is an interesting lens through which to view the film through. However, Tomm Moore does not speak about this inspiration in most interviews, instead choosing to emphasize the selkie story and his trip to Ventry Beach as the focus of the film's beginnings. This reading does serve to emphasize the general theme of anti-urban sentiment that implies rural settings have a closer tie to traditional Irish mythologies than the cities do, which is paralleled in *Wolfwalkers* as well. The lighthouse, in its rural setting, is closer to the wild magic of the selkies and the sea; thematically, the grandmother brings the children to town farther inland which separates them from this magic - both the land magic of Mac Lír's island and the specific selkie magic of Saoirse's coat. In *The Song of the Sea*, the ocean becomes the liminal space instead of the forests of *The Secret of Kells* and *Wolfwalkers*. In the ocean, Saoirse finds her voice and can swim with the seals, embodying her true identity as a selkie. It is where Bronagh disappears, returning to the ocean to become a selkie once again, and it is where Mac Lír's island is found.

One of the few other magical spaces is the cave that The Great Seanacháí lives in which is filled with water to connect him thematically to the sea; he is a forgetful fairy with hair which holds his memories and the spirals can be seen on the wall when he connects with his magic. The word *seanacháí* refers to a keeper of traditional lore and stories, and The Great Seanacháí's hair holds the stories of the fairy people in the film. His character mirrors Ferry Dan in design and much as Ferry Dan guides people across the sea, The Great Seanacháí guides Ben towards his sister when she is missing. The cave as magical space or entrance to the Otherworld calls back to Crom Cruach's cave in *The Secret of Kells* as well and is seen again in *Wolfwalkers*; both caves

become spaces of challenge and growth for the characters as they move forward on their paths. The Great Seanacháí also shows Ben the story of Mac Lír and how he cried an ocean after experiencing great tragedy until Macha's owls took away his suffering, turning him to stone. Mac Lír then becomes recognizable as the large island just beyond the lighthouse. The Great Seanacháí's cave, which feels like it could be part of the sewer system under Ireland but also not, keeps The Great Seanacháí safe from Macha's owls.²¹ However, his connection to his magic is still degrading; regardless of what Macha is doing, the strength of and connection to magic seems to be fading even for the fairies. Since The Great Seanacháí symbolizes memories and carries the traditional stories, he can be read to symbolize the people's forgetting of those stories. He even expresses frustration at Conor for taking away Saoirse's coat because, as a human, he does not understand the harm he is doing to Saoirse by keeping her from her coat. Conor's lack of understanding of the fairy people as well as his fear lead him to cause more harm to his children even when he tries to protect them because of either his ignorance of the stories or his conscious ignoring of them. If the people of Ireland are forgetting their connection to their traditions, perhaps that is why The Great Seanacháí is weakening even without Macha's interference.

By the end of the movie we see a complete, hard separation from the traditional magic of Ireland when the fairies and other magical folk like Bronagh return to Tír na nÓg.²² This is presented as a final separation, as Ben and Saoirse will not be able to see their mother again, implying that the crossover to Tír na nÓg is not reversible. This is foreshadowed as early as the opening scene, where Bronagh paints a mural of the selkie singing her song to take the fairies back home before turning back into a seal herself. This outcome shows that humans have

²¹ Traditionally, caves were liminal spaces in Irish folklore.

²² This bears thematic parallels to the end of *Lord of the Rings*.

become so disconnected from the land and its magic that they have lost it forever, permanently cutting themselves off from the possibilities of liminality. Conor's role as the fearful, controlling father who wishes to keep Saoirse safe by separating her from her coat and her magic parallels Abbot Cellach's insistence on the abbey walls being built, ostensibly to keep Brendan and the other monks safer. Conor chooses to separate Saoirse and the family from magic in the same way Abbot Cellach does, ultimately mirroring the overarching theme that separation from magic does not actually prevent harm in the films. It is unclear whether Conor knew that keeping Saoirse's coat from her was causing her muteness; most viewers would likely assume that Conor was unaware that he was handicapping his child, although the history of lack of consent and masculine control within the selkie and swan maiden folklore tradition give a potentially darker possible interpretation here especially given that Conor seems to know enough to have hidden the coat in the first place. Saoirse, as a half selkie, is "other" like her mother was and therefore somewhat outside of the traditional systems of human society; depriving her of her coat keeps her under control and prevents her from knowing and understanding her innate "otherness." She is a liminal being that is separated from liminality, forcing her to choose in a way that cuts off part of herself. This continues to emphasize the idea that the more modern world that Ben and Saoirse have been born into is simply too disconnected from its traditional folklore for the fairies to remain; between the mistrust of humans like Conor and the general modernization of the land, they can only stay through the stories passed on to Ben and Saoirse with the hope that the children will eventually pass the stories on to their own children or other loved ones in the future.

Song of the Sea, when approached as the final film of the trilogy chronologically, shows the logical conclusion of the film trilogy's interpretation of Ireland's slow shift away from Irish mythology and paganism. All three films juxtapose paganism and the wilderness alongside

Christianity and/or modernization, illustrating the tension between these two sides via liminality in different ways. When modernization is paralleled with capitalism as a theme, there is a clear commentary stemming from Moore's earlier comments about the commodification of Irish folklore versus the belief and desire to keep the folklore alive from a cultural stance. *Song of the Sea* is set in our present, or very close to it, and shows a nearly complete disconnect from magic and a lack of understanding or respect for magical creatures and mythology. Given Moore's inspiration from the story of the seal killings near Ventry Beach, it can be assumed that Moore is concerned about Ireland's lack of connection or dying connection to its traditional mythology. This gives the final scene, where Bronagh is separated from her family and magic leaves the land permanently, a very melancholy feel. While Saoirse can now speak, she also had to give up her coat, her selkie identity, and her magic in order to do so and to stay with her father and brother. Ben and Conor must finally accept the loss of Bronagh and while they seem to be in a healthier place to process that grief by the end of the film, they still cannot have Bronagh in their lives even though she is alive. Despite being a somewhat happy ending given that Saoirse does not die as she might have had she not retrieved her coat in time, there is still a theme of loss. We see happy times for the small family in the future, but they cannot include Bronagh nor can Saoirse embrace both aspects of her identity - human and selkie; she must choose one, just like her mother.

Chapter Four: *Wolfwalkers*

Cartoon Saloon's most recent film, *Wolfwalkers*, has the most explicit anti-colonial theme of the three films. *Wolfwalkers* is also the final film in Moore and Stewart's "Irish Folklore Trilogy." This film returns to the liminal space of the forest as a place of growth and connection to magic and nature. There is tension between the wild space of the forest and the "civilization" of Kilkenny as the town grows, needing more farmland to sustain itself. Additionally, the main character comes of age in a society that does not fit her personal desires, forcing her to look outside the town to the forest for a space where she belongs. *Wolfwalkers* refines the themes of the prior two movies to reinforce Cartoon Saloon's focus on the importance and power of liminal spaces and events to spur growth and embrace complexity.

Set in Kilkenny in 1650, presumably in the winter following the Siege of Kilkenny.²³ The tone in the town is one of forced occupation; it is readily apparent that the residents of Kilkenny resent the English people who have moved to the town, including the main character Robyn Goodfellowe and her huntsman father, Bill Goodfellowe.²⁴ Rumors swirl in town of the strange wolf pack in the woods and the wolfwalkers who lead them; wolfwalkers are indigenous Irish people who can transform into wolves while they sleep, returning to their human form when they awake. Robyn sneaks out of the town to help her father hunt the local wolf pack and meets Mebh Óg MacTíre, a wolfwalker.²⁵ Mebh and her mother, Moll, are the last wolfwalkers in their pack

²³ Tomm Moore, co-director of the film, is a Kilkenny native. Cartoon Saloon is also based in Kilkenny. An account of this siege can be read in "Cromwell in Ireland. VII. The Siege of Kilkenny" as published in "The Irish Monthly."

²⁴ Robin Goodfellow is another name for Puck, a malicious fairy or demon in English folklore. It is unclear if this is an intentional reference, but it could speak to how the Kilkennians view Robyn and her father negatively. See *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* ed. Donalf Haase for an exploration of Puck in folklore.

²⁵ *Mac tíre* is the medieval Irish term for wolf, meaning "son of land." Reworking the term as a personal name adds to the wolf imagery as well as acting as a historical linguistic nod.

and they lead the local wolfpack.²⁶ The unnamed Lord Protector, clearly meant to be Oliver Cromwell, drives the main conflict of the film; he wishes to eradicate the pagan Irish traditions, including the local wolfpack and the wolfwalker rumors.²⁷ Mebh and Moll wish to move the pack, but before they can do so, the Lord Protector captures Moll while in her wolf form. Mebh, scared to strike out without her mother, becomes trapped in the woods with their pack as the town cuts down more trees and Bill attempts to capture them. Bill and Robyn do not believe the legend of the wolfwalkers at first; Robyn is accidentally bitten by Mebh while in her wolf form when they first meet, however, and becomes a wolfwalker herself. This causes what Sam Adams of *Slate* describes as “a version of double consciousness in which she is both indigenous and colonizer” (Adams). This crossover allows her to empathize with Mebh and see the colonization efforts of the Lord Protector more clearly. The Lord Protector speaks of “pagan nonsense” and how “this wild land must be civilized,” even going so far as to tell Moll that he will “tame [Moll] just like I will tame this land” (*Wolfwalkers*). The movie culminates in a final standoff between Robyn and Mebh in wolf form against the Lord Protector and his men, alongside a recently bitten Bill. Bill shifts into his wolf form for the first time to protect his daughter and joins the wolfwalkers, a clean conclusion to his character arc as the huntsman. In his wolf form, Bill kills the Lord Protector and the movie ends with the now slightly larger wolf pack happily curled up in their cave. Later, we see the pack travelling through the countryside in search of a new home, farther away from Kilkenny and the other towns.

The forest outside of Kilkenny acts as another liminal space; it treads the boundary between civilization and wild magic. This mirrors the wilderness of the forest in *The Secret of*

²⁶ The actress playing Mebh has both an Irish vowel and grammar mistake in her performance; it is unclear if this is a scriptwriting error or due to the actress’s age.

²⁷ Oliver Cromwell sought to eradicate wolves from Ireland in real life as well. He systemically hunted wolves with the help of professional wolf hunters. The last native wolf was killed in 1786 in Co. Carlow.

Kells and the ocean and countryside of *Song of the Sea*. Similarly to *The Secret of Kells*, the wall which surrounds the town is meant to be a barrier from the wild magic and liminality of the woods, however, just as Abbot Cellach's wall fails to keep either magic or the invaders out of the town, the walls around Kilkenny cannot prevent Robyn from encountering the wolfwalkers. This is due, in part, to the town's continued destruction of the forest to expand their farming land, which threatens the safety and privacy of both the wolf pack and the wolfwalkers.²⁸ Bill Goodfellowe is brought in to hunt the pack because the wolves pose a threat to the livestock and the villagers and it is deemed necessary for them to be hunted to extinction with no regard for the fact that the people of Kilkenny are invading the wolves' territory.²⁹ As the characters move deeper into the woods towards the cave the wolfwalkers and their pack live in, there are drawings and symbols that represent pagan traditions and culture. Here, we see Cartoon Saloon return to their repeated indicator of magic: the swirling Neolithic patterns that often glow in the presence of magical creatures and people. In *Song of the Sea*, these stylized spirals glow in Saoirse's presence because she is a selkie and in *The Secret of Kells* they glow when the fairy Aisling is nearby; in *Wolfwalkers*, they glow when Mebh or Moll are nearby or using magic, and later they glow when Robyn is nearby to signify her new magic powers. Cartoon Saloon, through the three films, has created a visual shorthand for indicating magic within their films with the repeated use of this Neolithic spiral; this symbol becomes a signature element in the films, which makes the symbolism more comfortable and recognizable even when Cartoon Saloon engages with a new folklore story.

²⁸ Historically, Ireland was heavily forested. These forests were cut down for farming; this increase in farming was directly related to England's colonization of Ireland which emphasizes the anti-colonial themes in this film. While we cannot blame this entirely on the English, they accelerated the process (Kelly 389-390).

²⁹ In many medieval cultures, wolves were hunted due to their threat to livestock. Deforestation would encroach upon the wolves' territory and the cleared area would be used for livestock and crops, creating tension between the human population and the wild animals.

The revival of the wolfwalkers through the transformation of the Goodfellowes stands in direct opposition to the English occupation of Kilkenny and the Lord Protector's desire to begin to "civilize" the pagan land he has conquered. This parallels the Norman Conquest of Ireland in the late 12th century when Anglo-Norman's invaded Ireland, placing Ireland under English occupation that impacted Ireland's agricultural landscape similarly to what is depicted in *Wolfwalkers*. While the people of Kilkenny themselves are uncomfortable around the wolfwalkers, it is a discomfort born of respect for their power whereas the Lord Protector is aggressive and threatened by the existence of something he cannot control. Because the wolfwalkers are explicitly tied to a dying paganism in the film which has already been pushed out of Kilkenny into the woods, this finale stands as a rejection of Christianity as well in light of the Goodfellowes ending. The ending speaks to themes of magic versus order as well as wild versus civilization because the happy ending for Robyn and her father is to leave Kilkenny and join the wolfwalker pack. While Mebh treats Robyn with suspicion at first, they quickly become friends, especially once Robyn embraces her new identity as a wolfwalker. Once Robyn and Bill embrace their identity as wolfwalkers, rejecting the civilized nature of the town and the English colonizers by extension, they are welcomed to the pack by Mebh and Moll with open arms, ending the film with a tone of rebirth and new beginnings that signal hope for the dwindling wolfwalkers. The villainization of the Lord Protector paints the colonization of Kilkenny in a negative light; the townsfolk are portrayed poorly for following him and not trusting in their local traditions but the Lord Protector pushes on with his plan to kill Moll and the pack even when others in the town fight back or no longer agree. The Goodfellowes' rejection of their native ties in exchange for a connection to the indigenous culture of their new home may be a reference to the Goodfellowes assimilating into Irish culture similarly to how soldiers stationed

at Hadrian's Wall who remained in Ireland after their position was done as well as the English who came to Ireland after the Norman Conquest chose to embrace Irish language and culture. Ultimately, the ending shows a respect for the indigenous culture and a vested interest in the preservation of the folklore through the continued existence of the wolfwalkers despite the Lord Protector's attempts to have them killed.

One of the central myths *Wolfwalkers* likely pulls from is the Fenian Cycle, a complex narrative tradition following the adventures of Finn and his *fiana*.³⁰ A simplistic reading which Joseph Nagy qualifies in his book *The Wisdom of the Outlaw* identifies Finn as the "hero outside the tribe" as pulled from Sjoestedt, which has thematic parallels to Mebh's identity as an outsider to Kilkenny and its people (Nagy 10). Finn was a *fénnidi*:

In early Irish literature, the fénnid usually appears as a figure living and functioning outside or on the margins of the tribal territory and community (the *tíath*). He pursues a life of hunting and warring, generally in the company of other fénnidi, who together form a *fian*...what appears to lie behind the lives of most so-called fénnidi and *fiana* is an archaic formulation of life beyond the bounds of society (Nagy 18).

Mebh and Moll also live outside of what could be considered their tribal territory or community - the town of Kilkenny. While some of the citizens of Kilkenny know of Mebh and Moll, there is a sense of fear or distrust of the two based on their status as outsiders. Some of the townsfolk remember the stories of the wolfwalkers and treat their existence with a distant respect but even the farmer who is saved by Moll at the beginning of the movie does not do much to help them when they are kidnapped and threatened by the Lord Protector. Mebh and Moll hold power that

³⁰ *Fiana* is often translated as "band of warriors."

is foreign to the townspeople and their strangeness becomes a threat, especially when associated with the wolfpack that steals the town's sheep.

While Mebh and Moll are a very small *fianna*, it is possible that their pack was once larger especially considering the traditional of female warriors within *fianna*; Mebh is also considered the pack leader in Moll's absence, indicating a biological leadership line similar to how Finn takes over his father's *fian*. It is noted in some research that *fianna* could be as small as "three, five, nine, or twelve members;" Mebh and Moll alone are rather small in terms of being able to defend themselves as the film illustrates, but the addition of Robyn and Bill put them on the small end of *fian* size while still being within tradition (McCone 13). Additionally, the members of Finn's *fian* are also thought of as hunters, making the woods the hunter's domain. In this lens, Bill is welcomed into the space but is also a threat to the space; while Finn and his *fian* do interact with magical folk, they treat them with respect and give aid when requested. Finn works with the fae and is therefore welcome and respected in their space whereas Bill breaks the code, so to speak, by hunting those he should not hunt. This lens also illuminates Robyn's characterization. As a young girl, hunting is not a proper occupation for her within the bounds of Christian English society (or likely even by Kilkenny standards) and being outside of 'civilization' gives her freedom from traditional gender roles and expectations. Her desire to become a hunter like her father implies a sense of connection to the traditions of the Fenian Cycle as a young person who does not fit the confines of traditional society.

In addition to referencing the Fenian Cycle, the werewolves of *Wolfwalkers* are likely also a reference to an anecdote recorded by Gerald of Wales regarding werewolves found by a priest in Meath.³¹ The priest is approached by a wolf who explains that:

³¹ Moore is from the same part of Ireland that this story takes place in.

There are two of us, a man and a woman, natives of Ossory, who, through the curse of one Natalis, saint and abbot, are compelled every seven years to put off the human form, and depart from the dwellings of men. Quitting entirely the human form, we assume that of wolves. At the end of the seven years, if they chance to survive, two others being substituted in their places, they return to their country and their former shape (Gerald of Wales 44).

The wolves then prove their Christianity to the priest and request that he provide last rites to one of the werewolves who is dying. Gerald of Wales follows this story with some musings regarding the morals and ethics surrounding this story, questioning “if any one should slay this animal, would he be called a homicide?” (Gerald of Wales 46). The werewolves are ultimately declared men, similarly to “those monstrous births in the human species of which we often hear,” due to their rationality and mortality (Gerald of Wales 46). This is deemed as a miracle possible of God, just as God had turned a Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt in the Old Testament. Gerald of Wales centers this story in a Christian lens but it speaks to the intersection of mythology, or folklore that is not tied to a purely Christian origin, and the conversion of Ireland to a Christian country. There is tension in the way Gerald of Wales debates and reflects on whether or not these werewolves would count as men (or humans); he and the others in the story are unsure whether they are humans and therefore deserve the grace of God, emphasized by the priest’s initial hesitance to perform the final rites until the werewolf is stripped of her pelt and proven to be human underneath. Additionally, the concept of the wolf pelt being removable rather than some form of full bodily transition parallels the selkie coats; the werewolves in this story can remove their pelt to regain their human form just like the selkies can.

The Lord Protector emphasizes order and propriety in the town of Kilkenny; he finds it strange that Robyn had not begun to work with the other women and sent her to work once she attempted to cross into the forest. Mebh, with her raucous energy and wild magic, stands in opposition to the strict piety of the Lord Protector. This speaks to the tradition of delinquency in werewolf stories that Kim McCone explores in his article “Werewolves, Cyclopes, Díberga, and Fíanna: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland.” McCone argues that “the Irish *fian* had important economic and social functions” and is an example of the “association of wild young warrior-hunters that can be linked in various ways to systems of age grading” (McCone 22). Additionally, the melding of Robyn and Mebh’s families into one pack mirrors Nagy’s note that “Finn combines the major characteristics of his father and maternal grandfather, figures who are opposed to one another in life but are reconciled in the person of their descendent, Finn” (Nagy 19). The adults, Bill and Moll, are unlikely to change their views of the opposing side on their own. Bill sees his hunting and loyalty to the Lord Protector as the way of the world; as a rule-follower, Bill seeks the Lord Protector’s approval to guarantee safety and stability for him and his daughter. Moll, on the other hand, views leaving the forest and running away as the best solution to Kilkenny’s encroachment on their territory. However, their children are able to see past their innate differences in order to become friends and learn to work together. The descendants blend both cultures through the bringing together of their families to create a new pack.

The Fenian Cycle is also tied to stories of werewolves, which further ties the wolfwalkers into the Fenian Cycle tradition. McCone notes that “evidence relating to werewolves in the medieval Latin and vernacular literature of Ireland has been assembled by Reinhard and Hull and I have argued elsewhere that the word *luchthonn*, associated with various warriors as a proper

name or epithet, meant ‘wolf-skin’ and referred originally to this werewolf aspect of the fian-member” (McCone 16).³² The idea of werewolves or shape shifting is often tied to a battle frenzy or moment of intense rage in the warrior. Ralph O’Connor returns to the idea of Finn as the ‘hero outside the tribe’ and notes that in Irish and Norse mythology that references these battle frenzies, there is a “link between anger and physical distortion, a similar monstrous ancestry and a similar intimacy with cognate supernatural patrons" (O’Connor 235). While these frenzies can be useful in battle, they can also be destructive and are represented in different lights based on the story and which culture it comes from. Mebh can be interpreted as Robyn’s supernatural patron given that her bite is what turns Robyn into a wolfwalker; additionally, she resembles a wolf in human form with sharper nails and stronger physical abilities. However, the wolf form in *Wolfwalkers* is somewhat decoupled from the traditional idea of warrior rage; the wolfwalkers only shift when they are asleep, not through fits of anger. While their wolf forms are used in battle and the aid of the wolf pack fits the thematic elements of the strength of a *fian*, the shift itself is never tied to an emotion, just the state of sleep. This could be a thematic change to better suit a children’s film, as a film focused on the warrior frenzy type of shape-shifting would likely call for a darker storyline if it was to be the main focus of the film. Having the wolfwalkers shift when they sleep is more family-friendly and also plays into broader stories of werewolves in regards to shifting during the full moon or at night.

Each of the Cartoon Saloon films are coming of age stories; the main character of each film sits in the liminal space of pre-adulthood and must confront their childhood innocence and growing independence over the course of each film. In both *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*, the main characters must begin to think for themselves outside of what the adults around

³² This parallels the seal skins in *The Song of the Sea* and other selkie myths.

them say and do in order to grow and mature by the end of the film. *Wolfwalkers* features some coming of age themes as well as Robyn begins to confront the realities of what her father does as a hunter and other more adult themes like working during the day instead of staying home. At the end, however, Robyn and the rest of the wolfwalkers flee farther into the countryside, freeing her from work obligations or the other signifiers of adulthood shown throughout the rest of the film.

Nagy notes that:

Fennidecht also appears in literature as a *rite de passage* for youths undergoing the transition from childhood to adulthood....For the young member of society, like the wronged member of society, is peripheral to it and vulnerable in it: fennidecht formulates the “marginality” or “liminality” of the young and the abused, providing them with a protective context and relieving society...of the responsibility of caring for these “misfits” (Nagy 21).

Here we return to the concept of liminality but in a new light. Not only is the forest itself a liminal space where Mebh and her pack can exist outside the bounds of Kilkenny’s society, Mebh and Robyn themselves are liminal due to their ages; they are young and abused in various ways, as Nagy frames it, and they find freedom and safety in the woods rather than in the town. Rather than be constrained by the strict gender roles of Kilkenny, Robyn can be truer to her nature as a wolfwalker. As noted earlier, Robyn’s desire to be a hunter and enter the woodland space draws her into the Fenian Cycle traditions. Not only does she defy gender expectations by desiring a masculine job as a hunter, she also wishes to spend her time amongst the wild nature of the woods, encountering wild animals but also the potential for fairy folk and other magical interactions. Robyn and Mebh choose to exist in the liminality of the *fian* by remaining

wolfwalkers and leaving Kilkenny rather than attempting to integrate into the town and its traditional roles.

Wolfwalkers, with its focus on rejecting colonization and the embracing of traditional indigenous Irish culture, is the clearest statement on Cartoon Saloon's reclamation of animation for indigenous Irish use. Similarly to *The Secret of Kells*, the walls around the town symbolize a separation between the town and the forest; this is also a separation and often fear of the magic within the forest. We also see the cave as a magical space once again when we enter the wolf den where Moll's body is kept for most of the movie. The cave is engraved with the Neolithic spiral patterns and is where the climax of Mebh's emotional growth occurs as she struggles to save her mother's life at the end of the film. Both Mebh and Robyn, as co-protagonists, have climaxes at the end of the movie: Mebh's is in the cave, signifying her role as the indigenous representative, while Robyn's climax is her fight against the Lord Protector, representing her role as colonizer and her ultimate rejection of her original culture in favor of the wolfwalkers and indigenous Irish culture. Despite the Kilkennians seeming to have lived near the wolfwalkers for some time, they exhibit a distrust of the wolf pack and fear at the loss of their sheep. This fear and separation is amplified by the meddling of the Lord Protector, who goes so far as to hire Bill Goodfellowe to kill the wolves so they will no longer be a nuisance. The Kilkennians' resistance to trusting the wolfwalkers echoes the themes of *Song of the Sea* in the implication that the Kilkenny townsfolk have forgotten or forsworn their indigenous traditions and relationship with the wolfwalkers. Instead of viewing the wolfwalkers as a part of their culture that should be protected, they only see the wolf pack as a threat to their livestock - not unlike the fisherman who killed the seals off Ventry Beach because they were hunting fish in the area.

Like *The Secret of Kells*, the wall cannot keep the magic out; Robyn is bitten and turns into a wolfwalker in town and the Lord Protector imprisons Moll in an attempt to control her, inviting havoc into the town as Mebh tries to save her mother and Robyn and Bill wrestle with the morality of what the Lord Protector has ordered. Despite the Lord Protector's attempt to separate the town from the liminal magic of the forest, Robyn and the wolfwalkers bring the liminality into the town because they themselves are liminal creatures, capable of shifting from human to animal and back again. Ultimately, Bill and Robyn reject their ties to England and integrate with the wolfwalkers, indicating a rejection of colonization and embracing of the indigenous ways of their new home. Robyn is able to see through Adam's concept of double vision to understand the harm of her role as colonizer once she is forced to experience the prejudice the townsfolk exhibit towards the wolves and, by extension, the wolfwalkers. When confronted with the difficult choice of rebelling against the Lord Protector or attempting to save Moll's life, Robyn chooses courage and fights to protect her fellow wolfwalkers in an act of resistance against Kilkenny's colonization. This also acts as a rejection of the traditional gender roles that Robyn is almost forced into during her time in Kilkenny and, by extension, a rejection of the Christian power structure of the town. The Lord Protector, as the symbol of colonization in Kilkenny, dies alone and is clearly the antagonist of the story, painting the English occupation of Kilkenny in a firmly negative light. As the final film in the trilogy by release order, *Wolfwalkers* builds on the themes and symbols of the first two films to create a firm statement about the importance of preserving and protecting Ireland's indigenous culture and folklore through the embracing of liminality and complexity.

Conclusion

While each of the three movies in the Cartoon Saloon trilogy have distinct plot lines, time periods, and artistic styles, they create a thematic statement regarding Ireland, liminality, and culture. When interpreted by release order, as the prior chapters have focused on, there is a clear commentary in the films regarding the tension between Christianity, modernization, and indigenous folklore and beliefs. *Wolfwalkers* stands as the culmination of those themes, with the film utilizing visual shorthand and references that have been repeated through all three films to communicate its themes more strongly because of the groundwork laid in the prior movies and those familiar with the films will see these patterns grow over the course of the movies. When the movies are arranged in order of time period rather than release date, they move from early Irish history and the beginning of Christianity's dominance in Ireland to mid-colonization and the increasing tension between colonizer and colonized, to modern-day Ireland. This amplifies themes of rural versus urban spaces and modernization. In *The Secret of Kells*, Cartoon Saloon sets up the early stages of tension between Christianity and wild magic, as outlined in Chapter 2. If we view *Wolfwalkers* as the second movie within the timeline, there is a continuation of the tension and an escalation: there is still a wall between the Irish people and the wild land, but in *Wolfwalkers* there is an active attack and move to eradicate the wild, pagan magic present in the liminal forest rather than just a separation from it. This move towards eradication is not fully successful by the end of the film, given that the wolfwalkers and the pack survive, but they do leave the Kilkenny area, creating a larger separation between the "civilized" town of Kilkenny and their indigenous roots. Finally, *Song of the Sea* is the final film in the timeline and is set in present-day Ireland. Here, we see the final outcome of the tension between embracing liminality

or rejecting it: by the end of the movie, the fairy people leave Ireland permanently, severing the connection between the Irish people and their indigenous magic and traditions and eradicating the liminality of the fairies as well as Saoirse's fairy identity that tethers her to the liminal magic of the fairy people. This tension is also mirrored in the animation styles in the films as well through the blending of CGI and hand drawn animation.

Each film moves away from a Disney-style of animation to create a unique art style that is heavily culturally influenced; this lends credence to the argument that Cartoon Saloon, even as a small indie studio, is working to create a distinct Irish animation industry by setting itself apart from western animation. Paul Wells discusses the realism of Disney animation:

...within animation it is useful to locate the 'hyper-realism' of the Disney films as the yardstick by which other kinds of animation may be measured for its relative degree of 'realism'. In other words, the animated film may be defined as non-realist or abstract the more it deviates from the model of 'hyper-realism' located in the Disney film...

(*Understanding Animation* 25).

All three Cartoon Saloon films can be considered abstract and non-realist by this definition. In *The Secret of Kells*, the art style is heavily influenced by the illumination style of the Book of Kells in order to illustrate the Christian themes of the film. *Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, and *Wolfwalkers* each utilize the spiral patterns seen in the films to indicate spaces or people with a connection to the pagan magic shown in the films. There are visual signs, such as the Neolithic spirals, which Moore and the filmmakers use to signal spaces and people that have a connection to magic and indigenous beliefs as compared to the more familiar look of the Grandmother's modern house in *Song of the Sea* or the small cottage that Robyn lives in with her father in *Wolfwalkers*. Fans of older Western animation, before the CGI era, will not find the hand-drawn

animation style of the Cartoon Saloon films too unusual and the more modern settings or familiar historical settings such as the Abbey will feel recognizable and comfortable to viewers whereas the use of the swirls, illumination-inspired art style, or dream sequence-like segments will feel more distinct from mainstream Western animation and highlight their use to indicate the otherness of magic and indigenous pagan beliefs.³³

Most interestingly, by starting with *The Secret of Kells* and choosing to imitate the distinctive illumination art style of the actual Book of Kells in their animation, Cartoon Saloon speaks back to Ireland's colonized state directly through their art. It is a reappropriation of a Christian historical symbol used to tell a distinctly indigenous story. Farr states that:

The Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elite who controlled textual and artistic production created in the medium of manuscript decoration visual and graphic interpretive figures and signs to link indigenous society with a prestigious, authoritative international system, Christianity, as well as to make Christian text and Latin language relevant to themselves and their tradition of learning. The gospel book served both as object of interpretation and interpretive object (Farr 14)

If the original Book of Kells interprets Christianity as a bridge between the indigenous pagan society and Christianity itself, then *The Secret of Kells* serves the same purpose in reverse. Using visuals and signs that link the Christian themes of the film and, by extension, modern Ireland, to the indigenous magic of the land, Cartoon Saloon creates their own interpretive object.

Additionally, they take the knowledge learned from the American animation studios and animators, the colonizers so to speak, and utilize that knowledge to create their own animation which remains distinctly Irish while using Western techniques. While this interplay is most

³³ While very little is known of these indigenous beliefs, this lack of information allows Moore to craft stories with more freedom in order to emphasize certain themes or messages.

obviously visible in *The Secret of Kells*, all three films wrestle with tension between Christianity and/or modernity and indigenous magic, meaning that all three films become interpretive objects of the complex relationship Ireland has as a post-colonial state. In many ways, Ireland's identity as a post-colonial state is itself a liminal space. By creating *The Secret of Kells* first, it illuminates this theme and makes it more visible in the proceeding films so that those following it can use this visual shorthand that is already established to represent the same themes in a way that is immediately recognizable to audiences who have seen all three.

Returning to Walsh's idea that Irish culture is in-between due to its post-colonial status, we can see Cartoon Saloon working to create a solidified narrative or image of Irish culture through these three films even as it embraces this liminality. Maria O'Brien touches on post-colonial themes in her analysis of *The Secret of Kells*, explaining that:

Fundamental to the construction of the nation of Ireland as a concept, is the telling of its stories that both represent the nation to its own people and others and are instrumental in constructing the image of the nation. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most prominent post-colonial theorists, terms this the "narration of the nation" (Bhabha 1990a). For Bhabha, colonialism and post-colonialism are fundamental to an understanding of the shaping of modernity and thus the concept of the nation (O'Brien 34).

Cartoon Saloon has utilized animation as a way to retell the stories which aid in the construction of Irish culture and identity. By moving through the three distinct time periods, Cartoon Saloon narrates the nation's history from the perspective of their folklore; while the movies include historical elements, they lean heavily on magic realism in order to emphasize the importance of the folklore they engage with rather than pure historical accuracy. Despite not being strictly historically accurate though, the films still do a good job of exploring some of the major events

of Ireland's history, including the Viking invasions and the importance of Christianity, in a way that is accessible for children and people unfamiliar with Irish history. This allows Cartoon Saloon to create a clear narrative for their concept of the nation.

Through the animation as well as the script writing, Cartoon Saloons "Irish Folklore Trilogy" engages with themes of anti-colonialism and indigenous history to explore Ireland's complex relationship as a post-colonial state still wrestling with the degradation and loss of indigenous tradition in the face of Christianity and colonization by England. Each protagonist must blend their Christian or modern upbringings with the folklore they encounter. These protagonists act in opposition to most if not all the adults around them in order to do so and come of age through the process of embracing both aspects of their world. Their status as a young adult coming of age places them in the liminal space of pre-adulthood, neither child nor adult, and allows them to see the situations more clearly than others around them. As the films move through the three time periods, they explore the impact on indigenous tradition by utilizing both Christian art styles such as illumination as well as more traditional hand-drawn art that draws symbolism from Irish history.

When viewed through this thematic lens, the finale of *Song of the Sea* is a melancholy look at Ireland's indigenous traditions: the fairies must leave permanently, separating magic from the land due to modernization. In the world of the film, modern day Ireland is not a place they can live anymore. Given *Song of the Sea's* inspiration from the killing of seals off the coast, this darker theme seems to fit with the idea that modern Ireland is killing off its traditions. However, if Ireland remembers its stories, perhaps there can be a happier ending. The woman Tomm Moore spoke to about the seal killing stated that the killings would not have happened if people still respected the old stories. If Ireland's traditions, myths, and stories can be kept alive

through films such as the “Irish Folklore Trilogy,” perhaps all is not lost. These films serve as cautionary tales as to what happens when people separate themselves from their indigenous roots and illustrate how those traditions and stories are still important, even when they are pushed away. While each protagonist ultimately benefits by embracing both cultures in each individual film, which emphasizes the benefits of keeping the folklore alive instead of allowing Christianity and modernization to completely take over, the thread of all three films together implies that colonization and modernization are strong enough forces that people have failed to balance them by embracing and nurturing their connection with their indigenous culture by embracing the complexity of liminality.

Despite this potentially negative interpretation, Cartoon Saloon is nurturing a connection with the traditional folklore by creating these films, speaking back at the outcome shown across the three movies. These films retell indigenous folklore in ways that are understandable and accessible to modern audiences, spreading the stories so that more people are familiar with mythological figures such as Macha and Crom Cruach, although they may not be the most traditional interpretations of said characters. This mimics the Disney model, which has proven to be successful, and applies it to Irish material to create a storyline that feels fresh. This relatability and accessibility keeps the stories alive, potentially reinvigorating both Irish and non-Irish people's interest in the folklore and exposing them to stories they may not have heard otherwise. If the seals at Ventry Beach are being killed because the locals no longer know the old stories, perhaps a film like *Song of the Sea* will remind them of the selkie stories. These films cannot reverse the long-standing impacts of colonialism but they can work to spread knowledge of the indigenous mythology so that it will not completely die off. Retelling Ireland's folklore is important because it keeps the stories alive; the act of retelling and keeping the stories alive is an

act of rebellion and dedication to indigenous culture and history. The trilogy is also aimed at children, potentially instilling a love of and interest in their native mythology at a young, impressionable age which may inspire a lifelong love of keeping these stories alive. Cartoon Saloon reclaims the Irish animation industry from colonial control, both by being a fully Irish studio as well as creating content which is directly tied to their Irish heritage and folklore, making Cartoon Saloon the first truly indigenous Irish animation studio. The mythological and historical contexts for each film are steeped in Irish history and use a combination of hand-drawn and CGI animation, distinguishing the films from major American competitors. By rejecting the standard American model in favor of the artistry of hand-drawn animation and the cultural ties of Irish mythology, Cartoon Saloon remediates Irish history to create a new piece of media that is both distinctly Irish yet clearly influenced by the complexity of Ireland's history. The films themselves act as liminal spaces where the boundaries between Irish culture and international influence are combined, explored, and reflected upon. By exploring these stories in modern animation, Cartoon Saloon as a studio is reinvigorating a truly indigenous Irish animation industry which seeks to tell indigenous Irish stories through a unique art style that serves to keep these traditions alive in a new way that is accessible to modern audiences.

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