

# Song of the Sea

(2014, Tomm Moore)

## Component 2: Global Film: Narrative, Representation and Film Style

### Focus Area Narrative

#### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

##### Sequence 1

Leaving the island (21:20 - 28:20)

##### Sequence 2

Macha's lair (59:20 - 1:04:45)

#### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Two of the film's key motifs feature in a long shot of Ben and his father arguing. The first is a spiral, which denotes the mythical or magical elements of the story, and, in the form of the shell, Ben and Saoirse's connection to their selkie mother. The second is the way imagery from the mythical world mirrors that in the real world. There is a mural on the wall, which shows the petrified form of Mac Lir, a giant turned to stone, and in front of it the slumped figure of Conor, their poses almost identical.
- Sequence 1: Most of the 'cinematography' in the film is like that of a live action film, with a range of shots used to tell the story. There is some composition that stands out, though. The shot of Conor knelt by Cú the dog is the same shape as the island as Ben watches it recede from the ferry. This again makes the link between personal feelings, the landscape and mythology. The MS of Ben being pushed into the car by Conor's huge hands, which then change – from shoving to opening for farewell – emphasise Conor's size and strength compared to his son, and the conflicted feelings he has for his children.
- The MS of the budgie in its cage is

symbolic of the children's status with Granny: safe yet also imprisoned.

- Sequence 2: Establishing shots of Macha's house on stilts, surrounded by thunderclouds recall images from other folk tales (e.g. Baba Yaga from Russian myths, or more recently the dark towers of Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*). As Ben approaches there is a repeated use of low angle POV shots to make the house look intimidating, combined with high angle shots of Ben to suggest powerlessness. MS of Ben against the enormity of Macha later again suggest that he is weak compared to her.
- The cinematography, however, doesn't posit Macha as a typical villain. There are numerous POV shots that help us empathise with her and suggest that she isn't a traditional villain. Combined with her dialogue, the impression we get is that she is more misguided than 'evil'.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- Sequence 1: Weather plays an important part in the film. Here, it has the function of the 'pathetic fallacy' where environment reflects the inner states of the characters – so the rain expresses the sadness of the characters separating. In the second sequence emotions are literally connoted by weather stored in Macha's jars.
- Throughout the film, nature/magic is denoted by circular shapes, whilst modernity and human culture is shown with squares and triangles. The ferry and jetty, then later the city, are shown with sharp and pointy shapes. However, within the city there are also domes and circles, indicating that even in this modern landscape there is magic to be found.
- Sequence 2: The spirals in the storm above Macha's house and on the petrified Sidhe (fairies) denote strong magic; but in contrast to this, Ben wears his 3D glasses and a cape, looking like a modern superhero or *manga* character come to battle the witch.
- There are lots of similarities between the shapes used to show Macha and Granny. Plus

her home looks almost identical to Granny's, even down to the radio and teacups.

- The jars of 'emotions' that litter Macha's house contain different weather-forms, again making a link between human (or faerie) emotions and the environment.

### Editing

- Sequence 1: There is classic use of match-on-action and shot-reverse-shot to tell the story, and the latter to create empathy with the characters. Ben, Saoirse and Conor's emotional responses are all clearly shown as they leave their island home. On the drive to the city, there are cuts between the passing landscape and Ben's hand-drawn map. After a while, these cutaways stop and the 'real' landscape is superimposed onto Ben's map, suggesting a fusing of reality and imagination that ties in with the theme of mythical and real world intertwining.
- Sequence 2: Most of this scene is a mixture of match-on-action and shot-reverse-shot. These show Ben and Macha's POV and emotional response, building empathy with both of them, again suggesting Macha isn't the traditional villain we may expect. During the chase up the stairs there is again a combination of these two techniques, creating excitement and suspense whilst making us empathise with both protagonist and antagonist – this is unusual in children's animated films and challenges the dualism of most Disney films.

### Sound

- Sequence 1: Granny's dialogue emphasises one of the film's themes: emotional repression, and the difference between adults and children. "I know what's best," and "No tears in my car or in my house" show the adults' insistence on suppressing grief and upset that is mirrored later by Macha the Owl Witch.
- The music as they travel is gentle Irish folk music. This reinforces the national identity of the film, whilst the plucked-guitar suggests journeying, with a haunting pipe suggesting something supernatural. As they arrive in the city, this music gives way to the sound of car horns and chattering voices.
- Sequence 2: There are lots of parallels between Granny and Macha in the sound as well as visuals in this scene. The radio is playing the same song that was Granny's 'favourite' and her dialogue also echoes some of Granny's: "Emotions... nasty, terrible things... If

someone could take away that pain, would you let them?" is a more extreme version of what Granny says in Sequence 1. As she starts to chase Ben, her repeated "Let me help you!" turns sinister, whilst still suggesting Macha is misguided rather than evil.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Representation of age: throughout the film adults are portrayed as emotionally stunted, repressing their grief or other negative feelings. They try to act in the 'best interest' of the children (Granny sending the children to bed at 4pm, Conor throwing the selkie coat away), but this actually damages the people they care about. By contrast, the children are 'in touch' with their feelings and the mythical realm. Ben seems on the border between the two: his 3D specs and Walkman (and annoyance at his sister) suggest he wants to enter this 'grown-up' world, but he is still child enough to experience the magic.
- Representation of Ireland: the nation is portrayed as a land where 'modern' reality (the film seems set in the 1980s) is intertwined with its mythic past. Like the director's previous film *Book of the Kells*, this movie seems to be reclaiming Irish heritage from stereotypes, showing the beauty and resonance of folklore and traditions and how they can mesh with a modern culture (shown by the Sidhe who live in a city roundabout)

### Historical

- The film has much more in common with the films of Hayao Miyazaki (especially *Spirited Away*) than Disney or Pixar animated films. Similarities can be found in the visual style (watercolour hand-drawn images made fluid by CGI), the absence of dualism (there doesn't seem to be any wholly 'good' or 'evil' characters, both antagonists and protagonists are complex and flawed) and the child's eye view of the world.
- Coincidentally, in the same year, Pixar released *Inside Out*, which would be a good comparison as that also features a quest across a challenging landscape to acknowledge negative emotions.

**PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Narrative**

- In a number of ways, *Song of the Sea* follows the ‘Hero’s Journey’ identified by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*. Campbell identified what he termed a ‘monomyth’: an underlying narrative structure that connects all stories from Greek myths through Shakespeare to Hollywood blockbusters. The stages of the Hero’s Journey are below.
- To what extent does the narrative of the film follow this structure? Example: Stage 5, ‘Crossing the Threshold’ could be Ben plunging into the sacred well and into the world of the faerie, where he enters Stage 6 – meeting the Great Seanachai and his beard of stories, who becomes his ally. Confronting Macha is the ‘Ordeal’ at Stage 8.
- But not all stories are the same – they would become boring and repetitive. When does the film’s narrative deviate or challenge this structure? Example: Who is the ‘Mentor’ at Stage 4? The faerie who try to steal Saorsie into their underground home offer some advice – are they mentors or obstacles? And it could be said that Ben and Saoirse ‘Cross the Threshold’ into a magical world a number of times, then re-emerge into the normal world for a period of time.

**The Hero’s Journey**

