

MYTHOLOGICAL & FOLKLORIC REFERENCES IN SONG OF THE SEA



Foto: SF Film

By director Tomm Moore

For Song of the Sea I wished to craft a modern fairytale borrowing characters and themes from the ancient tradition of the Seanachai – traditional storytellers. The tradition is an oral one, with each seanachai having his own take on the ancient stories and often inventing new stories, riffing on themes and events from earlier traditional tales.

As a living tradition, the stories need to evolve and grow to suit the audiences they are being created for, and it is in this spirit that Will Collins and I borrowed and referenced the old stories to create a modern one for today's audiences.

It is in reference to these storytellers such as Eddie Lenehan and Eamon Kelly that we created The Great Seanachai who has to keep all the stories in his hair to prevent him from forgetting them.

At one point we developed an overarching fairytale structure and background to how all the characters ended up where they are when Ben and Saoirse encounter them, but we felt as we worked thru various drafts of the script that we didn't want to be overly literal and explain everything about this fairyworld and leave plenty for the audience to ponder and invent for themselves afterwards.

Much like Hayao Miyazaki's work focuses on characters we can all relate to, who inhabit a world often inspired by Japanese animist traditions we wanted to hint at the ancient stories that had inspired our world without losing the focus on our central characters.

Throughout the film there are visual and aural references to the old stories and traditions.

For example the Great Seanachai sings a traditional song "Si do mhamo" which is about an old Granny who is a witch – an allusion to the mirroring aspect between Granny and Macha's characters.

Many examples of ancient carvings and stone work are incorporated into the backgrounds. Viewers who know about these things will spot Dolmens, Ogham carvings, statues based on the Boa Island figures and so on.

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We hope we kept enough reverence and respect for our sources to encourage children everywhere to discover the folklore we were inspired by and also hopefully to continue the tradition.

Below are some short insights into the origins of our characters and their role in the Irish storytelling tradition.

Selkies

Selkies are creatures in Irish and Scottish folklore who can transform from a seal into a human.

Always dark haired and beautiful, they are the subject of many tragic love stories and legends.

Like mermaids they have beautiful singing voices and can transform by donning a special, magical sealskin coat.

A common theme is the seal wife whose selkie coat is stolen from her by a husband who wishes to keep her with him on land. But when she or her children find the coat and she returns to the sea never to be seen again, although sometimes the stories tell of her visiting her children in seal form.

Selkies, like mermaids, always have beautiful singing voices. I felt these stories were on one level likely veiled metaphors for death that helped seafaring families deal with the occurrence of losing a loved one to the sea.

Mac Lir

The Giant Mac Lir is based on the Celtic Sea Deity Manannán Mac Lir who appears in many guises in folklore, he is basically a Celtic equivalent to Neptune.

Mac Lir literally means “Son of Lir” and the name Lir is derived from an old Gealic word for “sea” so he is “Son of the Sea.”

Mac Lir is often portrayed as guardian of the Blessed Isles or Tir na Nog (the land of youth).

To the Celts, the Blessed Isles or Tir na Nog was a land that lies beyond the sea and is a the gateways to the Otherworlds, where the soul journeys to after death. Mac Lir is the guardian of these gateways between the worlds.

He is also known as a father figure, either as biological or foster father to many characters from Irish mythology.

The Owl Witch Macha

Macha is a composite character.

She is based on several Celtic Witches (Cailleach) and characters from folklore which are called Macha but all of which seem to be derived from the War Goddess Macha of the Morrigan.

The name Macha has connotations of motherhood from the legends surrounding Eamhain Macha in Ulster.

The character in Song of the Sea is an Owl Witch which is inspired by the Gealic name for a Barn Owl “An Cailleach Oiche” - “The night witch”.

A Cailleach in the old Scottish and Irish stories is a witch who is associated with Winter and the Weather.

Cailleach are often known as “Storm Hags” which is why there is a storm cloud over her house.

Macha has powers to turn fairies and herself to stone, this is based on the old belief that the Cailleach could turn to stone at springtime (Bealtaine) and return to her normal form at Halloween (Samhain) in order to rule over the winter months.

Machas house is a Crannog – A treehouse – often built on stilts on an artificial island in the middle of a lake. Sometimes a Crannog would have stepping stones to allow access to it but that were laid in a pattern that outsiders would not know and so we used a similar idea when Ben has to walk across the stone fairies to get to Machas house.

Na Daoine Sidhe

In Song of the Sea we meet many members of the fairy world known as “Na Daoine Sidhe”.

We meet only three Fairies not turned to stone, Lug, Mossy and Spud. Lug is named for the Celtic SunGod, but only as an ironic joke since he (and his friends) is a very silly little character, more based on the Leprechauns of later folklore than the noble and beautiful Tuath De Dannann of mythology.

In these old stories they appear as tricksters, musicians and troublemakers.

Sometimes they are helpful to humans but usually they are distrustful of humans and much superstition surrounds the areas they were believed to have inhabited.

The Sidhe were often believed to be descendants of the noble warrior clan that first inhabited Ireland The Tuath de Dannann who arrived in there flying ships in ancient times.

They were believed to have shrunken and taken to living underground or in Fairy Rings just out of sight of humans. It is from this belief that we get stories of “The Little People” or “The Good Neighbours”, both good and bad luck is often ascribed to the intervention of these otherworldly beings.

The fairy fort in the centre of Dublin that the fairies that Ben and Saoirse meet is a reference to these rings or trees found all over Ireland. These are ancient ring-forts from Celtic times that by folk tradition are protected due to a superstitious belief in the fairies. Farmers avoid them even if they are on their land and in County Clare the storyteller (Seanachie) Eddie Lenehan even managed to have a modern motorway diverted to protect a fairy tree.

When Saoirse sings her song at the end and frees all the fairies from the stones, they are transformed into more beautiful, noble versions of themselves in order to show their previous incarnations as the mythological Tuath De Dannann.

In the Golden Northern Lights we see the flying ships as well as figures from various stories from folklore such as the swan Children of Lir and the horse-like Puca.

From Wikipedia:

In folk belief and practice, the *aos sí* are often appeased with offerings, and care is taken to avoid angering or insulting them. Often they are not named directly, but rather spoken of as "The Good Neighbors", "The Fair Folk", or simply "The Folk". The most common names for them, *aos sí*, *aes sídhe*, *daoine sídhe* (singular *duine sídhe*) and *daoine síth* mean, literally, "people of the mounds" (referring to the *sidhe*).

Aos sí are sometimes seen as fierce guardians of their abodes – whether a fairy hill, a fairy ring, a special tree (often a hawthorn) or a particular loch or wood.

The Gaelic Otherworld is seen as closer at the times of dusk and dawn, therefore this is a special time to the *aos sí*, as are some festivals such as Samhain, Beltane and Midsummer.

The Spirit Dogs

As Macha controls the weather and emotions, I decided to have her spirit the children home with a Seidean Si – a fairy wind, and since it is the children's dog Cu's moment of glory the wind takes the form of two “Cu Sidhe”, fairy hounds from Scottish and Irish folklore. Often associated with Death, the stories say these huge wolflike fairy dogs can spirit humans away to the fairy world.



Samhain/Halloween

Song of the Sea takes place on Halloween which is an ancient Celtic Pagan festival.

Samhain is mentioned in some of the earliest Irish literature and is known to have pre-Christian roots. Many important events in Irish mythology happen or begin on Samhain .

Since the fairies or Daoine Sidhe were believed to be more present in our world on this night, costumes were often worn to disguise children from the fairy folk.

The lighting of Bonfires and celebrations are all ancient traditions from pre-Christian times.

Holywells

In Song of the Sea the children shelter from the rain in a Holy well which proves to be a portal to the fairyworld.

In Ireland there is a unique combination of ancient beliefs with modern Catholicism. Holy wells, like fairy forts are sacred spaces often found in fields and woods around the country.

The early Celtic church took on these ancient pagan sites and so there is a unique mixture of rituals around these spaces combining pagan and Christian beliefs.

The holy well often includes ancient carvings of female fertility goddess figure – Sheela na Gig in combination with modern devotional sculptures of The Blessed Mother. I find this symbolism intriguing, suggesting the Irish devotion to Mary to be a continuation of a Goddess worship from Pagan times.

When visiting a modern Holy well it is common to see votive candles lit as well as numerous offerings of personal effects. These little totems are left in the hope of a miraculous intercession on behalf of the person who is being prayed for. Again this seems to me a continuation of a very pagan belief in leaving offerings for the fairies. There is often a rag tree at a Holy Well were a piece of clothes of a sick loved one is tied in the belief that once it has rotted away they will be healed.

The water of the holywell is often believed to have miraculous healing powers.

In Song of the Sea the Holy Well provides a calm womblike respite for the children on their journey. The symbolism both of the Holy Mother statues and the pagan well seemed appropriate to subtly suggest that the children are searching for something associated with their absent mother.

To emphasize the layering of modern beliefs on top of ancient pagan ones we included carvings on the rocks as Ben is pulled by Cu down the well to the fairy world. Ben passes from a well full of catholic imagery and offerings to a cave with carvings of Celtic Gods and Ogham writing and Pictish symbols covering the rocks.

