REFLECTIONS ON TWO IRISH FILMS
By Lara Newton

There are powerful forces at work beneath the surface in the human psyche, and when those forces are activated we *must* respond. We go through our daily lives accomplishing much or little, with minor ups and downs, and yet are detached, often with a sense of meaninglessness. Then we have an experience that takes us into the depths, and we feel rather than direct our response. The universal energies that guide, direct and give fuel to our lives have been tapped. In speaking of these energies, Jung said:

> Archetypes . . . are living psychic forces that demand to be taken seriously, and they have a strange way of making sure of their effect. Always they were the bringers of protection and salvation, and their violation has as its consequence the "perils of the soul."[1]

There is no culture whose myth and literature express more eloquently the consequences of violating these psychic forces, than the Irish culture. In our modern culture, we have seen how the mythic dimension of life can be portrayed beautifully and compellingly in the image-making medium of film, and here again the Irish culture has proven to be a particularly rich source for such portrayal.

Over the past several years, Irish stories with their powerful interweaving of myth and everyday life have inspired filmmakers. Two films that have arisen out of such inspiration are, "Into the West" (1992, directed by Mike Newell), and "The Secret of Roan Inish" (1994, directed by John Sayles). These films, while bringing into bold relief the failings of human nature, have also provided us with the hope for salvation that is so characteristic of archetypal stories. Both the failings of human nature and the hope of salvation are seen on a very earthy concrete level and a powerful otherworldly level. The films seem to give us the message that these two levels can feed and depend on each other, when our lives are in balance, and they call upon themes as old as life to show us the way back to that balance: the spiritual link between mother and child, the father's struggle, the connection between the ordinary world and the otherworld, and the divine animal guides who can reconnect us when we have lost that connection.

In the two films, "Into the West" and "The Secret of Roan Inish," there are animal helpers who guide the families back to the meaning that they have lost. The animals are part of a mythic heritage that informs us of the otherworld's influence on the world of everyday reality. In Irish myth and legend, gods and semi-divine beings often appear in the ordinary world, and sometimes they make that appearance in animal form.

"Into the West" and the goddess *Macha*[2]

Macha is a powerful horse goddess of Ireland. She was the daughter of a king, Red Hugh, and enjoyed his confidence in matters of state, sitting at his right hand at great occasions. Upon his death, she defended her right to rulership against all other contenders for the throne, and forced some of them to labor for her, building the fortress that became known as Emain Macha, the Brooch of Macha.

In a well-known story of this goddess, she appears at the door of a widower farmer, Crunniac. She cares for his children, becomes his wife, and with her power he is blessed and prospers. One day there is a great feast at the king's house, and Crunniac goes without his wife. She tells him to be careful and say nothing of her. But when he is drinking wine, Crunniac boasts that his wife is faster than the king's fastest horses. The king demands proof, and has her brought before him. Macha is due to deliver, and begs the king's pity, saying she will race once she has delivered her child. He is unrelenting. Macha races the horses, wins the race, and gives birth to twins – a girl and a boy - at the finish line. At that moment, she places a curse upon the men of Ulster. They will suffer the pains of labor for five days and four nights whenever they most need their strength. The curse is for nine generations.

Macha is a mighty horse, warrior, and mother goddess. Particularly in relation to men, she demands recognition of her power and ability to rule, as well as consideration for her position as wife and mother. She bestows bountiful gifts, but she expects the recipients of these gifts to remain worthy. If she visits the human realm, her gifts must be valued and respected. Her relationship to the human realm can be fertile, exemplified by the birth of twins.

The opening scene of "Into the West" is simply a beautiful white horse running along the beach at night. Ethereal in the moonlight, one could imagine that the horse has sprung out of the sea foam. As the story develops, we see that the horse is an animal with a purpose, which is directed toward the children of "Papa" Riley, a traveler who has become stuck in the city since leaving his caravan when his wife died. He repairs other peoples' cars for less money than the work is worth, and he drinks himself to sleep each night. He and his young sons live in poverty and are outcasts. The older son Tito feels responsible for the family, and is more clear thinking than his father, who is obviously still paralyzed by his wife's death seven years ago. But Tito is a child of nature who has not been educated to the ways of the city. He is a traveler, and that's "in the blood."

Into this life comes the white horse, who attaches to Ossie, the youngest son, right away. The children's grandfather names the horse "Tir-na-n-Og," saying that is where the horse has come from, the land of the ever young. This is the otherworld in Irish mythology, sometimes imaged as a land across the sea and sometimes as under the sea, where time seems to stand still. Around a campfire, later that night, the grandfather tells the story of the handsome bard Oisin (a name uncannily close to that of Papa's youngest son Ossie), who follows a fairy to Tir-na-n-Og, riding a white horse. Three hundred years later, when he wishes to return to Ireland, the fairy tells him he must stay on the horse and not let his feet touch the ground. But he does touch the ground, and he instantly grows old and feeble, and soon dies.

Ossie is troubled by this story throughout the movie, but Ireland has another mythic figure who is linked to horses, and that is Macha the Horse goddess. Though the film does not name her, the presence of this goddess is apparent in the behavior of Tir-na-n-Og. Macha was a mother, a warrior, and could out-race any horse in Ireland. Tir-na-n-Og's exceptional jumping is noted early on by a police officer, who decides to confiscate and sell the horse to a wealthy horse trainer. When the boys rescue their horse from this fate, they begin a journey to the west. The horse is able to evade police barricades and a high-profile search, and it becomes clear that he knows where they are going, even if the boys don't.

It is during this journey, and the chase it brings on, that the horse's connection to the boys' dead mother is revealed. It was her death on the night of Ossie's birth that threw the father and thus the family into despair and a separation from their roots. Ossie has never been told how his mother died, and he has always had a "breathing problem." In fact, it is as though his life is tenuous because of this secret surrounding his birth. It appears that the father's denial, not the mother's physical death, is what prevents Ossie from fully living. Ossie's breathing improves when he is with the horse. In his presence Ossie feels a comfort that is akin to a mother's touch.

Meanwhile, as Papa seeks out his former traveler companions to help him find his sons, the history unfolds – Papa has refused these seven years to perform the traditional rituals that will release Mary, his wife's, soul. We understand now why, early in the film, Papa had yelled to the grandfather, "The old ways is dead!" and why later when prodded to perform a ritual with ashes, he said, "bloody stupid superstition." He has attempted to turn his back on the mythology of his people, in order to hold onto his dead wife. Although we might sympathize with Papa, Macha doesn't. His is the curse of Macha; he is helpless and in pain, unable to act as a man should in the world. This failed attempt to turn his back on the mythology of his people is a testimony to the fact that, "a tribe's mythology is its living religion, whose loss is always and everywhere, even among the civilized, a moral catastrophe."[3] However, now the fear of losing his children is bringing Papa back into a relation to life, and he realizes that the horse is a spirit animal. Frantically, he asks the grandfather, "Is it a good horse or is it a bad horse?" The grandfather truthfully answers, "I don't know, but I know where he's taking them." And they travel to the shore of the ocean. The truth is that the horse is neither good nor bad in our human terms. He is a creature of the otherworld, and he intends to restore balance in the lives of the Rileys. His gifts are bountiful, and his expectations are high. It is a dangerous encounter when we are faced with a being from the otherworld.

The climax of the movie occurs at the beach. All the groups collide: police, travelers, children and horse. In the chaos, Tir-na-n-Og races into the sea with Ossie still on his back. Desperately, Papa runs in after them. In slow motion, we see Ossie underwater, being caressed by a woman's hair (or is it a horse's tail/mane?), and we see a woman's hand take hold of his and pull him up. Moments later on the shore where Papa has brought him, Ossie gasps, "I saw her Papa, I saw her in the ocean." The boy has been troubled that he never saw his mother's face, and now he has seen her.

In the final two scenes of the movie, the spirit horse's connection to the mother is confirmed. Papa has finally decided to burn the caravan and release Mary's spirit. As the travelers solemnly look on, both boys see Tir-na-n-Og's image neighing, prancing and looking at them, from the burning caravan. The mother's spirit is released. Finally, the movie closes with an image of the horse back on the beach at night, as in the opening scene.

Irish films as a whole seem to gravitate toward the theme of the child as a redemptive figure. In this film, Tito and Ossie form a unit, both seeming to take on aspects of the divine child at times, with Ossie clearly as the most vulnerable and "special" one. Ossie is a constant reminder of something Papa wants desperately to forget, the death of Mary. He is a link to that past, and he and Tito are both the carriers of the future. Symbolically they are that which unifies the opposites, the "unifying symbol."[4] As travelers they are considered marginal and insignificant to the "settled people." In the city and on their journey, they are exposed and vulnerable. Seven years ago, they were "abandoned" by their mother. With sheer luck, Tito's survival skills, and of course the protection of the horse, they prove invincible on their journey west. According to Jung, these are all elements pointing to the divine child.[5] This is the one who brings us to a new level of consciousness, to a transformation of the personality.

When Tir-na-n-Og comes into the lives of the Riley's, the children are stuck just like their father. Ossie is likely to go the way of his mother, with a serious breathing problem and no hope for medical treatment. The city is not a place where they can grow. The horse never behaves like a simple animal. He is a white spirit from the beginning. He can eat anything the children feed him – chocolate biscuits, popcorn, punch. He never seems to tire. Right away he gives the children something to hope for. They want to keep him. He trustingly goes into the building and up the elevator with them. When he is taken away and used for profit in races, the children rescue him. What nearly happens to Tir-na-n-Og is parallel to what has happened to the Rileys, and the boys are rescuing themselves from bondage, as well as the horse. It is important that they do this – this rescue is their "work" to reclaim a connection to life. The gifts of the spirit never come easy.

On the journey west, the horse takes the boys to two memorial spots. One is a statue of the Virgin Mary with a sign saying, "God bless the travelers." The other is their mother Mary's grave. It is here that Ossie learns his mother died "on his birthday." Tir-na-n-Og has connected the boys, and especially Ossie (who had been denied his mother) to the otherworldly and the earthly mother, and continues in the journey to watch over and protect them. He will not let them turn back when they are afraid. This is the fierce horse goddess, Macha, who provides stamina beyond what is humanly possible, but requires that we do what is right.

In the beach scene, every one of the travelers is afraid, and it looks as though Ossie will die. Here is an image of the frightening, dangerous aspect of transformation. We must go to the brink, not knowing conclusively if it is "a good horse or a bad horse." The film portrays this scene so powerfully that we are completely swept up in the "not knowing." The conclusion is a triumph for the spirit as well as for the humans and their endurance. For seven years Papa (and Tito) had feared that knowing how his mother died would be bad for Ossie, perhaps even that it would rob him of his life. Papa has also avoided letting her death be a reality for himself. Now the mother has stepped out of the otherworld, in the form of a white stallion, and brought Ossie and the whole family back into life.

"The Secret of Roan Inish" and the Selkies

The legends of seals with magical powers to become human are plentiful in Ireland. In many of these stories, a seal woman or "selkie" is sunning on a rock, and a man sees her. He takes her sealskin, or sometimes her "hood," and thus has power over her ability to return to her seal form. The selkies are attracted to the human world, just as often a man becomes attracted to the unusual beauty of a selkie woman. The stories all point to a strong and loyal feminine nature. The men of the stories are singularly good, handsome, hard working, and well thought of in their community. The selkie woman provides a good home for the lonely man, who is often a fisherman. She bears him many children, and often she shows great compassion for his human limitations.

In the ballad, "Peter Kagan and the Wind,"[6] the seal woman lives with Peter for many years. She calls him in from the storms at sea, and he says he can hear her even if he's twenty miles out to sea. One day, he is caught in a fierce storm, and when there is no hope of his surviving the cold, his wife returns to the sea as a seal, to cover him as a blanket and save him from sure death. According to legend, this is a sacrifice for the selkie. Once she has returned to sea as a seal, she can never take human form again.

The call of the sea is strong for the seal woman, and the man who marries her is always at risk of losing his partner to this call. In the Kerry story, "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman,"[7] Tom keeps his wife's hood in the loft at home. One day when he is searching for a tool, he distractedly throws down bags and ropes, and the hood is accidentally thrown down. Seeing it, his wife picks it up and hides it. Soon, when Tom is at work, she cleans the house, washes the children and combs their hair, kisses them, and goes back to sea.

While the selkie is attracted to the human world, and even lives in it for a time, she, like Macha, is of the otherworld. She sees a worthy, lonely man in need of wife and family, and she bestows her gifts on him. Eventually the call of her world becomes so strong that she leaves the human world, always leaving behind reminders of her visit. Her children have webbed feet or hands, great skills at sea, dark and mysterious features. The otherworld has left its mark.

In "The Secret of Roan Inish," the themes of the helpful animal, divine and earthly mother, and divine child are again in the forefront. In this masterful film, the otherworld and the ordinary world are so interwoven that there seems to be only a thin veil of separation. The film takes a family from the West of Ireland, the Coneellys, who have been said to be seals in legend and folklore[8], and presents a 20th century story about them. In the opening scene, a young girl Fiona Coneelly, is traveling by boat to stay with her grandparents. In this scene, three significant things happen, two memories and one encounter. The memories are of her mother's funeral when she was perhaps a few years younger and her brother Jamie was a baby; and of (her and) her father's recent unhappy factory/city life and his decision to send her back to the rural life with her grandparents. This brings her to the present voyage, and there she has an encounter with a seal who watches her from a rock. Fiona and the seal calmly stare at each other as the boat slowly passes him by.

The story unfolds forwards and backwards, simultaneously. This approach in the film gives one a strong sense of the connection between past and present, with Fiona as a link to the future. As Fiona adjusts to life in the small fishing village, she is being told stories about the history of the Coneellys and their connection to the seals. According to the stories, many generations back there was a shipwreck, and the sole surviving Coneelly man was saved from drowning by a seal. The seal carried him on its back, from the depths of the ocean to the shore. This story is reminiscent of the ballad of Peter Kagan, and it establishes the Coneelly's mysterious connection to the seals. In another story, told by Tagdh Coneelly who is one of the "dark ones," on Roan Inish (also many generations ago), Liam Coneelly took the seal skin of a "selkie" and brought her home to be his wife. They had many children. The selkie, Nula, eventually went back to sea, but all the Coneellys are descended from her, and a "dark one" appears every generation. Jamie was the dark one, and he was lost at sea as a baby when the island was being evacuated. Fiona learns from her cousin Eamon and others of rumors that Jamie didn't die, but is being nurtured by the seals on and around Roan Inish.

Fiona's grandparents appear to be emotionally torn throughout the film between belief in the legends (and even the possibility of Jamie's survival) and their awareness of the harshness of everyday reality. The grandmother is concerned that the girl's head not be "filled with stories," and the grandfather loves the stories, but seems to have trouble when it comes to actually believing them. At one point in the film, the grandmother says of Tagdh Coneelly, "It's like he's caught between the land and the sea." In fact, this is true of the whole Coneelly family. And if this generation is to carry on the Coneelly legacy, they must recognize and accept their difference, the specialness that has brought them into relation with the seals. Otherwise, the seals will keep Jamie away from their influence. Eamon is an adolescent boy, and he struggles with his obvious desire to be manly and mature in the ordinary world, but when Fiona tells him that she has seen Jamie he can't help but believe her.

The past and the present are being pulled together in Fiona's life, and just before her first experience of actually seeing Jamie, she dreams of Nula, the selkie, beckoning to her. Nula is imaged in the film as a lovely, mysterious and impersonal-looking woman, always with a far away look in her eyes. We never hear her speak. One has from her a sense of power and a deep connection to the rhythms of life and the ocean, but not a sense of personal warmth. Indeed, personal warmth would get in the way of her task with the Coneelly family. She, or her descendants, have taken Jamie away from his human family and allowed them to believe him dead, grieving for what appears to be two or three years at least. She is the Great Mother, willing to bide her time, letting life move on and allowing our suffering to be perpetuated, until we "get it right." All of us who have lived long enough know this mother.

The mother's personal warmth shows up in the film, but it comes from the earthly mothers, Fiona's grandmother and a later dream of Fiona's mother. In this dream, the mother sits knitting, singing and rocking the cradle with her foot. She exudes warmth and love. Although the Coneelly's connection to the ocean and the seal mother are in danger, they must be regained without a loss of the earthly mother. Balance must be restored. Both the ordinary and otherworldly realities can destroy, and together they can bring salvation. This is the lesson of the individuation process: the outer world puts many "insuperable obstacles" in the way, but equally as dangerous is the possibility that the newly acquired consciousness (Jamie, and the later restored cottages on Roan Inish) could be swallowed up again by the instinctive psyche.[9] It is for Fiona and her cousin Eamon to do the work that will prove to the seals that they are worthy of their "divine child."

Meanwhile, the outer world has put pressure on the grandparents. Their cottage in the fishing village is going to be sold to wealthy foreigners, and they have no place to go. The grandfather goes into an apparent depression and life seems to be at a standstill. As this is happening, Fiona has a visionary inspiration that is aided by the seals. She knows that she must convince her family to move back to the island, if she is to get Jamie back from the seals. She and Eamon begin to secretly travel to Roan Inish daily, working to make the cottages inhabitable once again. Just as Tito and Ossie had to prove their worthiness, Fiona must prove her willingness to work for the gifts of the seals. Her imaginal connection to the transformative feminine (Nula) must now be put into concrete action. There is a nice balance to the fact that Eamon helps her. After all, the men of Roan Inish had been instrumental in the decision to evacuate, and a young developing man is now helping atone for that action.

The morning after she has dreamed of her mother, Fiona tells her grandmother that she has seen Jamie. She, Eamon and the grandparents are together, and a storm is coming up. Everyone stands still when Fiona has spoken. Then the grandmother says they must pack up and go to Roan Inish, surprising them all by telling them that she knew he was alive all along. That evening the seals allow Fiona to take her brother back, and a scared Jamie runs to the open arms of his grandmother. As the family is all in a warm cottage, safe from the storm, our last image is of a seal outside on the rocks.

Conclusion

As we have seen, in Ireland there are many legends and ballads that tell of seals and their connection to humans. Seal women marry lonely fishermen, keep house for them and have children with them. The seal women are always quite fertile, leaving behind many offspring when they inevitably return to the sea. Theirs is a gift of life. "The Secret of Roan Inish" shows an important "other side" to that gift: that the receiver must use the gift well and wisely and maintain a good connection to the spirit source of that gift. Kerenyi once said, "we have lost our immediate feeling for the great realities of the spirit – and to this world all true mythology belongs – lost it precisely because of our all-too-willing, helpful, and efficient science."[10] Of course it is not just "science," per se, that has taken us away from the realities of the spirit, but the world of ordinary reality with its drive to possess and to excel in material pursuits.

Life in the ordinary world has its harshness and cruelty, but if we give into that harshness and forget the life of the spirit, we forfeit our own ability to grow and individuate. Then we need the children to bring us back to balance, and in "The Secret of Roan Inish" they appear from three stages of childhood: Jamie, the divine child who is a baby and toddler, Fiona who is a preadolescent girl, and Eamon who is on the brink of manhood. As in "Into the West," the redemptive energy comes from the children, who are always a uniting symbol.

The otherworld's longing to connect with the human world, and the human's equal longing for that connection, are both evident in these two films. The seal and the horse spirits are drawn to the possibility of human transformation. Tir-na-n-Og seeks a relationship with the Riley children from the beginning to the end of "Into the West." He follows them sometimes, leads them sometimes, and protects them whenever they are in danger. Then he appears to them in the burning caravan, as though to comfort them once again in their loss. Likewise, in "The Secret of Roan Inish" the seals watch Fiona's movements and actions. Their heads pop up out of the water, making sure that she is where she needs to be, is seeing what they want her to see, and is doing the tasks they have made it clear she must do. When they are satisfied as to her steadfastness, they

orchestrate Jamie's return to her. At the close of the film, we have an image of the seals as guardians of the island dwellers.

In these films, we experience the mythic force that is present in our everyday human existence. It comes forth and speaks to us collectively, no matter what culture we call our home. In each of the "heroes" of the films, we can see aspects of ourselves as we are in all our failings, and as we would like to be in all our potential for salvation. We find ourselves in Tito and Ossie's impoverishment and longing for mother and acceptance; we grieve and struggle with Fiona in her search for her brother and a way of life that will allow her and her family to thrive. We feel the power of the otherworld in the horse goddess and the selkie mother, and we long to have such a connection in our lives.

It is significant to note just where these animal guides reveal themselves. Who are the human subjects to whom they impart their divine gifts? The specialness of the Rileys and the Coneellys is clearly outside of the accepted values of the collective society where they reside. Tito and Ossie are scorned and rejected travelers in Dublin, and Fiona is an islander on the mainland. They are outsiders, and not just any outsiders, but outsiders who are caught in grief over loss of the maternal in their lives. They are lonely children, and each of them is destined to bear the burden of bringing a higher consciousness into the world whether or not the world wants to receive it. Into the lives of these outsiders, the otherworld makes itself known. It seeks out the child, and then: "Mother Nature, pregnant with the future, takes the 'child' under its wing: it is nourished or protected by animals."[11] In both "Into the West" and "The Secret of Roan Inish," one has the feeling that these particular outsiders, the grieving travelers and the grieving exiled islanders, provide a vital link for us all, a link to the mythological realm where the archetypal source of our life's meaning resides. In witnessing the individuation of these lives, we are indirectly experiencing our own potential for individuation.

These films present us with modern versions of the themes of ancient myths, themes that still resonate for all humankind. This is the way an authentic use of myth works: It moves beyond the boundaries of the culture from which it arises, and touches the collective human psyche. Jung has said: "The most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress."[12] The mythic world and the ordinary world are interrelated, and when in balance they nourish each other and further the individuation process. In the films, "Into the West," and "The Secret of Roan Inish," we see filmmaking at its best – weaving stories that dream the mythic world onwards into our modern lives, and that give us a sense of hope in the salvation of humankind.

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[1] C.G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," *Essays on a Science of Mythology,* by C.G. Jung and C. Kerenyi (Princeton University Press, 1963), 75-76.
[2] Moyra Caldecott, "Macha," *Women in Celtic Myth* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1992), 127-131.
[3] Jung, 73.
[4] Ibid., 83.
[5] Ibid., 85.
[6] Gordon Bok, "Peter Kagan and the Wind," (1977).
[7] Jeremiah Curtin, "Tom Moore and the Seal Woman," *Irish Folktakes,* d. Henry Glassie (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 182-184.
[8] Richard Cavendish, Ed. *Man, Myth and Magic* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1970), 2516.
[9] Jung, 85.
[10] C. Kerenyi, "Prolegomena," *Essays on a Science of Mythology,* by C.G. Jung and C. Kerenyi (Princeton University Press, 1963), 1.
[11] Jung, 87.
[12] Ibid., 79.