

Celtic Literature

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Please Silence Your Cell Phones

Types of Celtic Literature

- Oral Origins
- Hero Tales
- Nature poems
- Love poems
- Elegy
- Satire and humor
- Religion

Heroic Tales

- Prose tales; verse is reserved in Celtic literature for expressions of emotion
- Conchobhar, great King of Ulster
- Cu Chulainn, great warrior
- Ulstermen fight against men of Connaught, led by King Ailill and Queen Medhbh
- Legendary tales with oral origins
- Written down between 7th and 11th centuries

How Cu Chulainn got his Name

- Culann a smith in Ulster invited King Conchobhar for a feast
- The king goes to say farewell to the boys and saw three times fifty boys faced off against one in games and winning.
- King asks the boy to come to feast; ‘No, for the boys have not had their fill of play’; He says he will follow later
- King enjoys the feast at Culann’s and asks about protection of the stronghold; Culann has a huge dog

Hound and Cu Chulainn

- Forgetting about the boy the dog was loosed in the yard
- He looked “wild, savage, fierce, rude, surly, and pugnacious”
- The dog prepares to swallow the boy whole, and the boy, with nothing to defend himself. Throws the ball so that it goes down the dog’s throat and brought his guts out the other way!
- Culann is distraught he has lost his guard dog but the boy tells him: “If there is a puppy of that hound’s breeding in Ireland, it shall be brought by me until it is fit for service like its father. During that time I myself will be the hound to protect his herds and his cattle and his land.”
- He is given his name by a Druid: Cu Chulainn means “The Hound of Culann”

Interpreting the Story of Cu Chulainn's Name

- Hero shows promise of his future valor at a young age; think of Hercules and the Snakes in his crib; David and Goliath
- Defeats the “monster” dog without the benefit of weapons
- Highlights the qualities of loyalty and responsibility and strength
- Story foreshadows and highlights his role as protector of the people of Ulster

The Killing of Edarcomhol

- Edarcomhol wants to go out with Ferghus but he is worried that Cu Chulainn will kill him; he will extend his protection
- Cu Chulainn greets Ferghus: “if a fish swims into the rivers, you shall have a salmon and a half...” etc
Ferghus delivers the message of King Ailill and leaves but Edarcomhol stays and stares
- What are you looking at?
- You...”I see no horror nor terror nor overpowering of odds in you. You are a pretty boy only, with weapons of wood and with impressive tricks.”
- “For the sake of Ferghus, I won’t kill you...”

Fight between Cu Chulainn and Edarcomhol

- Challenges him to single combat the following day
- Goes back because he cannot wait to fight him
- Cu Chulainn tries to put him off but he won't be denied
- Cu Chulainn strikes him with his sword so that his clothes fall off and tells him to leave
- Then he cuts off his hair
- Finally he split him from the head to the navel
- Ferghus: why did you violate my protection? After hearing the story Ferghus concedes Cu Chulainn did right

Analysis

- Much like the Greek concept of Hubris, Edarcomhol was arrogant and fought against someone who was his superior when he should have known better
- Cu Chulainn shows restraint by waiting three times before killing him
- Cu Chulainn even has the respect of his Connaught enemies

The Curse of the Men of Ulster

- A cattleman boasts his wife, Macha, can outrun King Connor's chariots
- She is pregnant but King forces her to compete
- She dies at the finish line, gives birth to twins, and curses men of Ulster to feel pain of childbirth whenever the country is threatened
- Curse last nine generations until Cu Cuhlainn

Cattle Raid of Cooley

- Queen Medhb and King Ailill argue over who is more wealthy
- Equal except for White Bull; She seeks the Brown Bull of Ulster
- Her army attacks and Men of Ulster feel pain of Labor; but Cu Chulainn invokes right to single combat; defeats all of Medhb's warriors
- While he is distracted in a combat, the army gets the Brown Bull
- Brown Bull defeats White Bull; goes home and dies
- Medhb vows revenge on Cu Chulainn

Cu Chulainn in the Valley of the Deaf

- The princesses and his mistress, Niamn, want to take him to the Valley of the Deaf, where the witches and sorceresses can't convince him to fight enemies
- Niamn tells him to come with her and she has a protective charm; but, she brings him to the V.O.D.
- Six witches and wizards conjured up huge armies laying waste to the land around the Valley
- They go seeking his horse and weapons and again he is tempted by one of the wizards but Niamn reminds him of his oath to her not to fight

- Conchobhar tells the Druids to take Cu to the Valley of the Deaf so that he won't hear anything and be tempted to fight
- They are awaiting help from Conall and the picts and trying to avoid a prophecy
- King tells the Druids and the women and the poets go with him to the valley and make amusements there
- Cathbhadh, Chief Druid invites him to a feast and it is tabu to refuse but he is worried: 'it is not a good time for me drinking and amusement now, when the four provinces of Ireland are burning...' The women entreat him too
- But he goes and they begin to feast and sing

- The three witches seek for Cu but can't find him; finally they go to the Valley
- Out of wood they make an Army in the surrounding hills
- Cu Chulainn hears the cries from the "battles" around the valley
- Cathbhadh warns him that they are just illusions
- One of them goes in disguise to the party; she drew the women off with her magic and created a magic mist between them and the party; she goes back in the form Niamh herself and tells him to go fight and that she will reproach him for keeping back
- Cu says: "hard it will be to put trust in women after this, and I had thought you would not give me this leave for the gold of the world...but since it is you urging me on, I will go to meet the men of Ireland."

- He prepares to go but then he realized that it was all illusion and phantasms and that he had broken his Tabus
- Cathbhadh tells him to stay but he says:
 - “There is no cause for me to stay now; the end of my life has come, and my tabus are broken, and Niamh has given me leave to go to meet the men of Ireland...”
- Niamh lays hold of him and tells him she wouldn't give him leave for all the gold on earth...
- But Cu Chulainn did not believe anything she said and he ordered his horse and chariot to be prepared

Analysis

- Geasa, Tabus: spells that prohibit or demand certain actions otherwise some horrible effect will occur
- He has a tabu that required him to accept an invitation to a feast—recalls the feast of the King to which he was invited as a youth

Death of Conchobhar

- Brains of defeated warriors mixed with lime were used in disputing or contending
- An enemy of the Ulstermen, Cet, got a hold of the brain of a Meis-Geghra, said to get his vengeance on the men of Ireland
- In the midst of a battle with him some women complimented Conchobhar on his figure; he went among them and Cet followed him and struck him with the Brain from a sling throw
- It embedded in his head; take it out and die or heal it with it in his head and not be able to move or fight again
- The ground trembled when Jesus was crucified and Conchobhar believes
- In his zeal to avenge Jesus he grabs his spear and rushes into the forest attacking trees
- In his fury the brain of Meis-Geghra comes out and his brains with it

Summary

- Celtic literature had roots in oral literature
- Heroic stories date back to 1st century but they were written in 8-11th centuries
- Christian influence from later era after Ireland was Christianized in 5th century
- Tales reflect a heroic culture of individual heroism, tribal battles, and pre-Christian beliefs of the early Middle Ages