

The Lone Soul

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A hero's life is dominated by battles and adventures, with little time for ordinary matters. No matter how supernatural a hero appears, they still have humanly needs, for example a hero needs to eat and needs money to support their lives. There is never any mention of a hero owning land to cultivate food, inheriting a large sum of money, or having any source of income. A hero does live a higher quality of life than the average person and the proof can be found in both what the literature does and does not mention.

Celtic culture is a missing aspect of European history. The Celtic hero set the standard for accepted masculine behavior. In particular, Irish heroes established the foundations for knightly chivalry of the later Middle Ages, which became the rules of conduct for the officers in modern military establishments. Finally, popular culture has embraced the cult of the hero through action films of the cinema and the comic book superhero.

Everyone is familiar with these ideas and themes surrounding a hero, but the aspects that make up a Celtic hero are different. The Celtic hero differs in certain ways such as a delicate balance between honor and aggression, an extraordinary physical beauty, and, finally limits on their actions through taboos, which often are connected with supernatural contact, both beneficial and malevolent.

This study examines the hero's development. Beginning with childhood's effect on his personality, which explains why he is different from other men, the focus will be on Irish heroes, as they are found in the literature and in the historical interpretations of modern scholars. The investigation revolves around individuals, who represent marginal societies and their names, such as Cú Chulainn, Conaire, and Finn, which are largely unknown to English-speakers.

Aspects of the heroic

A hero's life is so extraordinary that it becomes a memorial in itself. A Celtic hero represents a delicate balance between aggression and honor. Honor and aggression act as a counterbalance. When the balance is disrupted, extreme aggression becomes uncontrollable. Once it takes control of the hero, he becomes feared by enemies and allies alike. Honor alone quells the aggression. For example, in the "Boyhood Deeds" of the hero Cú Chulainn, his temper is raging when he returns home from his first battle, fighting for the men of Ulster. King Conchobar of Ulster realizes that if Cú Chulainn's temper is not calmed, then his people are in extreme danger. The Ulstermen concoct a plan that exploits Cú Chulainn's extreme honor, by having the women of Ulster bare themselves and march out to Cú Chulainn. This plan combined with three consecutive

baths returns Cú Chulainn back to a normal state of being. (Cross, 151) The balance between honor and aggression are restored and life can continue on.

Physical aspects also have a role to play in the making of a hero. Their beauty is almost a cliché in literature. The descriptions of a hero include descriptions of everything from height to eye color and physical strengths. Cú Chulainn has “kingly eyes,” with pearls for teeth and is the “comeliest of the men of Erin (Cross 154 and 156).” The Celtic hero Finn, the leader of the warrior band or *Fíán* in the series of tales known as the “Hero Cycle of Finn Mac Cool,” is described as “tall, fair-haired...with broad shoulders (Mackillop, 232).” In “The Boyhood Deeds,” Cú Chulainn is able to defeat a hundred and fifty boys trained in warfare with his bare hands, showing off his amazing physical dexterity and strength (Cross, 138).

Taboos play a large part in the development and actions of the Celtic hero in a way that is almost unique from western traditions. These prohibitions were taken very seriously in Celtic society as demonstrated by literature. The taboos not only helped guide the heroes in life but also helped to prevent their deaths. Violation of taboos leads to disaster. In several cases a hero deliberately breaks a taboo even though he knows it will lead to his death. When Conaire, the anti-hero of “The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel,” slowly broke all of his taboos, it led him closer to his death one step at a time. Prior to his final battle, Cú Chulainn was forced to break his taboo not to eat dog flesh.

Taboos can limit the actions of a hero, often for his benefit, and can be placed on a hero at anytime from before birth to other life changing moments. Conaire has a taboo placed on him by his otherworldly animal family that he cannot hunt birds, which protect those uncanny beings in the guise of birds (Cross, 96). His supernatural origin and the advice from his avian kinsmen help him to receive the kingship of Ireland. An additional series of taboos comes with his new honor, and his disregard of them leads to his inevitable doom. Taboos of protection are often the creation of a divine power and are designed to either protect the hero and or those close by, including other divine beings. The hero Diarmuid of the Cycle of Finn Mac Cool, is given a list of taboos from his foster father Angus Óg, who is often associated or believed to be the god of beauty and youth (Mackillop, 17). Angus Óg does this to protect Diarmuid in his flight from the anger of Finn. Among these taboos are that he should never sleep in the same place for more than one night and never eat, cook or sleep in the same place. (Cross, 382)

Taboos that limit behavior or force them into doing something against their will are placed on many Celtic heroes. Cú Chulainn, for example, has a taboo on him that he cannot pass a cooking hearth without joining in the meal, forcing him to eat every time he passes one (Rees, 327). A classic example comes from the story of “Diarmuid and Grainne,” when the femme fatale Grainne compels Diarmuid to elope with her. Grainne puts a taboo of danger on Diarmuid that forces him to take her away from her promised husband Finn. Diarmuid must do her bidding because breaking the taboo would cause him to lose his honor (Cross, 374).

Family

One little discussed aspect of a hero is his family. An Irish family at this time did not just consist of the traditional mother, father and the children; it also consisted of uncles, aunt, grandparents and cousins. It was a system based on the larger collective group not the nuclear group. (Geary, 27) Many heroes, however, come from what is

today described as a “single parent household.” In literature, unlike reality, this situation frequently has a positive connotation. Many problems arise when a child comes out of a single parent home, in Celtic society which includes inheritance issues, weak social standing and a difficult acceptance from the family.

A child of Celtic society that was from a single parent household usually had a mother present in their life. The mother had the control and rights over the children, but it is still a society based on descent through the male line, making it a patrilineal society. (Patterson, 315 & 317) The mother is rarely missing from the life of a child because it is the mother who has the control over the children. The only reason a mother may not be present in the life of her child is if she has died in childbirth or if the mother was diseased or mad (Ancient laws of Ireland, 199).

If the child’s parent’s relationship was kept a secret then the child would have problems being accepted by the family. Rank was based on the father’s rank, so a child with an unknown father suffered the problems of lower and doubted social standing. The status of the mother did not carry over to the child. (Patterson, 312) The problem from being a child of a single parent household affected not just social standing but would also create legal problems later in life.

By not knowing who both parents are, the family as a whole would be reluctant to accept the child as one of their own. One reason that a family is hard to accept a child of a single parent household was that they worried about the social damages that the child could incur on the family’s reputation. If the child becomes accepted into the family, he might still be ranked lower in social standing than the rest of the family, therefore creating a lower claim on property rights.

Contracts were the customary form of interfamilial contact within Celtic societies, and they had to be authorized by the father. A child from a single parent household that is missing a father cannot form contracts because there is no one to validate it or offer up compensation if contract is broken. When a son is married he can make basic contracts without his father permission, but only once he has been married and even then a father can nullify the contract. If an unmarried son creates a contract without the father’s authorization then the father has the right to invalidate it at any time. This makes it nearly impossible for the child of a single parent household to make contracts that could advance their social standing and or increase the amount of land that they own. The only way a fatherless person can make a contract is if another male relative steps in and authorizes the contract, which is rare, but found commonly among Celtic heroes. (Charles-Edward, 38) Contracting is important in any society because it is one way that person can advance themselves in life or at the very least support their existence.

Another way to advance materially in society is through inheritance. A person from a single parent household has major problems when it comes to inheriting. Children from single parent household lack the right of inheritance if the father is unknown. A mother could not pass on inheritance nor could she receive inheritance unless she is the last surviving member of the family line. Girls do not inherit because they are often married outside the family’s range of influence. The father is the only one who could give out inheritance, which could be dispersed by either favoritism or split evenly among the sons. The reason that the father controls the distribution of his life’s wealth is because he can insure that the wealth does not leave the family. (Patterson, 210 and Charles-Edward, 63) A child without a father lacks any right to inheritance giving them a

slimmer chance to rise above their social standing and increase income. The lack of a clear cut status, inability to create contracts and the lack of inheritance are all problems facing a child of a single parent household within Celtic society. These problems do not seem to be faced by a hero of single parent households found in Celtic literature.

The most famous example of a Celtic hero from a single parent household is Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn does not really experience any of the negative connotations attached to only knowing who his mother is. Nevertheless, he has to substitute trickery and deception for more customary forms of behavior. Cú Chulainn goes to the king of Ulster, Conchobar, to assume arms. Conchobar asks who is allowing him to assume arms and Cú Chulainn responds that the druid Cathbad had given his permission. Cathbad as a druid would have the social standing necessary to stand in as Cú Chulainn's father in this instance. The king after giving the arms to Cú Chulainn finds out that Cathbad did not give his permission, which causes both Conchobar and Cathbad anger. (Cross, 143) This is the only real problem that Cú Chulainn faces for being from a single parent household; he had no one to vouch for him to become a warrior. From this point on his feats win the hearts of the people of Ulster, and his feats combined with the Ulstermen's love for Cú Chulainn help to support him.

As has been demonstrated, Celtic literature suggests that the effects of being from a single parent household are more positive connotation than real life warranted. This might explain why literature tries to correct the idea of hero from a single parent household by giving a vague often contradictory explanation for who the father was. Retellings of Cú Chulainn's life give him multiple fathers, the earliest of which was Conchobar, then Lug or Sétanta (Cross, 136 and Mackillop, 115). The fatherly figure may have been added to increase Cú Chulainn's social status. The stories that contain Conchobar as Cú Chulainn's father, tell that Cú Chulainn was born of an incestuous relationship, but at the same time it makes him a prince. Conchobar may have later been replaced by Sétanta by the monks who tried to clean up the impurities they found in Celtic literature. Lug, was probably put in to make Cú Chulainn appear more god like. Even when his father mentioned, the father plays no part in the life of Cú Chulainn.

Two common reasons for the absent father are that he is either a deity or a foreigner. The deity father figure is found in the legends surrounding Conaire and Cú Chulainn. When a deity appears to women, he will often come in the guise of a mortal or in the form of another creature as in the case of the Conaire's father coming in the guise of a bird (Cross 96). A deity rarely announces himself as such to the woman he impregnates but in one telling of the birth of Cú Chulainn, Lug comes to Cú Chulainn's mother and says he has impregnated her (Ó hÓgáin, 138).

If the father was a foreigner, then the relationship is rarely accepted by the family and the foreigner returns to his homeland. Bres, the anti-hero of the "Second Battle of Magh Tuired," has a mother of the Tuatha De Danann, or elves, and a father from the Fomor, a race of giants. Bres is raised by his mother's people in Ireland and does not meet his father until later in life. (Cross, 29) In another context, Cú Chulainn had a relationship in a foreign land with the warrior Aife; they produced a son named Connla. Cú Chulainn gave Aife a ring before he left with instructions to give it to their child and send him on a quest to find Cú Chulainn. Connla was raised far away from Ireland. He was not told who his father was until the day Aife gave him the ring and sent him in search of his father, who he does not know is Cú Chulainn. The foreign father giving a

gift to the mother before the child is born can occasionally be found. The gift acts as a way for the father to recognize the child later.

The heroes of Celtic literature do not always come from a single parent household; they may also come from a nuclear family. Celtic heroes like Conchobar and Conall both come from a family where both parents are known. The heroes that come from a nuclear family usually have parents with high social standing or a parent with a supernatural background. In the case of Conchobar his mother Nessa is a princess and his father Cathbad the druid (Ó hÓgáin , 110). Both of Conchobar's parents give him an attachment to both the real and supernatural world, already preparing him for the life of a hero. Conall was born to Fionnchoamh, a daughter of Cathbad, and to Amhairghin mac Eight Salaigh, a poet (Ó hÓgáin, 99). In Conall's case he is attached to both royalty and the supernatural world through his mother's family and by his father being a poet it gives his family some renown within the Celtic world. The Celts highly favored the poets and druids because of the rich culture knowledge that they have memorized and stored in their minds. A hero's childhood does not end here; a good portion of their young life is spent in fosterage.

The Artificial Family

Fosterage is the practice of having one family's children raised by another family. While found among other peoples, it was normal and widespread in Celtic societies. This is one of the many connections between reality and literature; fosterage of the hero is commonplace in Celtic literature. In Celtic society fosterage began at the age of 7, and ended at the age of 14 for girls and the age of 17 for boys, these are the ages when children are now considered adults and can start their own family. In fosterage children learned the valuable skills that are needed in the real world to sustain themselves. (Mackillop, 241) If a hero spends their childhood in fosterage, then the foster family would have the biggest impact on the hero's development.

Fosterage was a highly regulated practice and the literary versions were mirror images of the reality as found in the historical and legal materials. Fosterage began with an agreement between the biological parents and the foster parents. The foster family was usually related in some way to the mother (Patterson, 317). There were two types of fosterage: one with payment and one without payment. Fosterage without payment would include circumstances when the would-be foster family volunteers to take the child. If the fosterage were supported by a payment then the biological parents paid a price that was set at one honor price below the biological father's honor price grade. The exception was when girls were fostered; the price was set a little higher because they do not have enough control later in life to help support their foster parents. (Patterson, 190) Boys were expected to support their foster parents when they reached maturity. The only way the biological parent could get back the money from fosterage is if their child was sent back for no reason or if the child was abused by the foster parents. The standard of living and education level for the child in fosterage was based on the biological father's status. (Patterson, 190) During fosterage the actions of the children were the responsibility of the foster parents (Patterson, 191).

Fosterage was found everywhere, but especially among the nobility because they would have the money required to pay more than one fosterage family. In "The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel," Conaire's mother required that he be raised by three

foster families (Cross, 97). Multiple fosterage insured that the hero was well rounded, that the hero acquired the abilities needed to become a warrior and to also have some of scholarly aspects. Another benefit of having multiple fosterage families is the strength of the multiple alliances that it creates. (Charles-Edward, 79) The benefit of having multiple foster families was that the training and education would not be limited to a single style and would give the child a more broadly based education. Cú Chulainn is said to have been fostered by three individuals: Fergus, Amergin and Conchobar. Cú Chulainn's three foster fathers each specialized in a different area, Fergus was a great warrior, Amergin was a great poet, and Conchobar made him "a match for any chariot-chief" and gained valuable practice for dealing with nobility. (Cross, 159)

The relationship created by fosterage is very important and can often continue past the ending of fosterage. These alliances created a support system for the child or hero to call on upon in their time of need. When the child reaches the age of 17, the formal contract between the foster family and the biological family comes to an end. Whereas the relation that developed between the foster family and the child will often continue past the legal end of fosterage. The most affection can be found between the foster parents and the child due to the fact that the child spends most of life growing up with the foster family. A child in fosterage spends life away from their parents making the bond to them weaker than that of the relationship with the foster family. (Charles-Edward, 80) The heroes of Celtic literature are often aided by their foster fathers in moments of need. For example, when Diarmuid is running from Finn, Diarmuid gains valuable help from his foster father Angus Óg (Cross, 380). The relationship with the foster child and the children of the foster family was often strong too. This situation would only work if the child of the foster family is younger than the foster child. (Charles-Edward, 81) For example, Cú Chulainn and his foster brother Ferdia refuse to fight one another in battle (Cross, 290).

The Moment of Change

In the hero's life there is a moment of change that announces the fully formed hero. At this moment it becomes clear to everyone that a hero is among them. The change for Cú Chulainn occurred the day he assumed arms. The druid Cathbad prophesized that whoever took arms for the first time on that day "would top the fame of all other Erin's men... (Cross, 143)." After this Cú Chulainn was on the path to becoming a great hero. For Finn the change occurred when he was cooking the Salmon of Knowledge and burned his finger. Finn became known thereafter as the man who knows everything. Whenever Finn does not understand something he places his thumb in his mouth. His extraordinary knowledge helps him become the leader of a travelling band of warriors. (Cross, 365)

The aftermath of the "moment of change" was striking. Ceremonies and rituals differentiated the hero from ordinary men. Feasting was an important aspect of Celtic society in literature as well as reality. This public display involved everyone in the community, who came together to celebrate a significant occasion. Feasting ceremonies ranged from one night to several nights and usually occurred in a special place such as fortress or banqueting hall. The layout of the feasting ceremony was organized around the king or the most prominent leader. Proximity to the king indicated rank and social status. A druid sat closer to the king than a cow-herder. Here is exhibited the higher quality of

life led by the hero. Heroes are given a seat of honor near the king at feasting ceremonies and “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” mentions “the Champion’s high seat of the house facing the king... (Cross, 111).” The hero’s deeds and adventures are recounted so that everyone can be entertained with the exploits of the champion.

An important aspect of feasting was the “Champion’s Portion” of meat. This piece of meat was the choicest and best piece of meat out of all the meat served and it went to the bravest person present, in most cases it went to a hero. The most famous individual ate the portion, as public acknowledgment of his prowess. More than one hero at the feast leads to conflict. In the instance of “Bricriu’s Feast” three heroes--Cú Chulainn, Conall, and Loegaire—all compete for the Champion’s portion of meat through tales and tests of feats. (Cross, 254)

Feasting is not the only medium that shows the higher quality of the heroic life. Not only do they receive preferential treatment, such as at a feast, but the hero is never mentioned to have an income, yet he somehow is able to survive. A hero’s every need from repairing and finding new weapons, to their food, all of which was somehow supplied. One suggestion on this problem comes from hospitality. In Celtic society it was customary to take in weary travelers and to offer up food and lodging for a night. This custom was so widely practiced that storytellers would not have found the need to include it in their recitations. This omission might explain how the hero survived. The custom of taking care of travelers helps point to the idea that heroes were taken care of by their countrymen. Also, because the heroes protect the country from dangerous men and animals, their countrymen might have found the need to come for the heroes.

The Hero in Love

Everyone experiences love together with the trials and tribulations that accompany it, and a hero is no different. Although a hero for the most part spent life alone, there is a little romance involved. Sometimes the hero begins their quest for a mate at insistence of others. Cú Chulainn began his search when the Ulstermen forced him. They did this for two reasons: to protect their wives and daughters from Cú Chulainn and to provide a son to continue on his heroic legacy. Once Cú Chulainn decided to look for a mate, the search covered all Erin for an appropriate mate. (Cross, 151) The mate for a hero cannot just be any woman; she must be of the right pedigree. In the search for Finn’s new wife the woman needed to be the “fairest of feature and form and speech (Cross, 371).” This “perfect” woman is considered to be blessed by God or the gods. Once a potential mate has been found, then it was up to the hero to woo her.

The wooing of a potential mate was completely up to the hero, it was his duty to win the love of his choice and convince the female that he was the best possible suitor. A hero will often recount their most heroic and dangerous adventures that they have experienced and who their foster parent were, all of which was the Celtic hero’s form of flirtation. The woman that the hero is trying to woo would recount how great and honorable she was and would also recount the strengths of her many guards. The courtship and wooing of a mate is not easy for the hero, as in the case of Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn has to complete a mission set forth by Emer, the woman he is wooing, but also must complete a mission that Emer’s father has set forth (Cross, 160-162). Even after Cú Chulainn has completed the mission set forth by Emer’s father, he waited outside the stronghold for a year until an opportunity presented itself so that he could

complete the mission that Emer set forth (Cross, 169). Once the mission has been completed a hero can finally take his wife and marry her. Strangely there appears to be little mention of the marriage ceremony, but this could have to do with the fact that nothing heroic was accomplished in the marriage ceremony therefore it does not need to be retold.

The last important aspect to a hero's life is the presence of the supernatural in their lives. Every hero had their life affected by the supernatural at some point whether it was a god or a member of the Otherworld. The hero's life from birth to death was affected in some way by the supernatural. For many heroes the magical presence begins at birth, like in the case of Conaire's birth which was a creation of a supernatural being and a mortal mother. In the middle of Finn's childhood, he consumed the magical Salmon of Knowledge which gave him unlimited knowledge. Cú Chulainn experiences magical intervention of when his memory of Fann, a fairy woman, is wiped clean (Cross, 197-198). The effect of magic on a hero's life can be both beneficial and detrimental. The magical effect on Cú Chulainn's life with him falling in love Fann, was detrimental to him because he laid there wasting away because the love had taken over every aspect of his life (Cross, 187). A positive magical effect on a hero's life would be in Diarmuid's flight from the wrath of Finn, he foster father Angus Óg used his magic to help protect both Grainne and Diarmuid.

Death, like the rest of the hero's life, is rarely normal. Often a hero's death comes as no surprise because there was some foresight. The day that Cú Chulainn assumed arms the prophecy not only said that he would be great but would also his life would be brief (Cross, 143). Taboos play heavily in the hero's life and their violation led to disaster. The idea that breaking a taboo leads to death reinforces how important taboos were in Celtic society. Taboos were taken very seriously in both Celtic society and its shows through the literature. In several cases a hero deliberately breaks a taboo even though they know it would lead to their deaths. When Conaire slowly broke all of his taboos, it slowly led him closer to his death one step at a time. Cú Chulainn was forced to break his taboo not to eat dog flesh and was killed in the next battle. The taboos not only helped guide the heroes in life but also helped to prevent their deaths.

Conclusions

Throughout the life of a hero they live by another set of rules, a hero is not exactly human but they are not a supernatural being. The life of a hero from conception to death slightly differs from the life of the average person. Heroes live life on a pathway that divided the world of humanity and the world of the supernatural. On this pathway the hero experiences a mixture of both worlds and this is what sets a hero apart.

As mentioned earlier, the literature never mentioned a marriage ceremony for Cú Chulainn and Emer there could be many reason for this. One reason that a marriage ceremony was not brought into the literature could be that one cannot marry a hero. If a hero truly walks the pathway between humanity and the supernatural then a marriage in the sense that we know it as, a relationship between two individuals, is impossible because the hero lives in a world all their own. The average rules and regulations that govern humanity do not apply to the hero. Within the unusual marriage of Cú Chulainn and Emer, she acts more of a guider then a wife. When Cú Chulainn falls in love with Fann, he develops a wasting sickness, Emer comes to him and yells at him for being so

weak and letting himself waste away when he should really be protecting Ulster. Emer never once yells at him for cheating on her, this could be because she knows that she cannot hold him to the rules of humanity.

Another example of how a hero differs from the average person is the day that Cú Chulainn assumed arms. On this day his supernatural strength becomes known, helping to prove that he is not quite human. Cú Chulainn was unable to use weapons that are designed for the average person; he can only use the weapons that were meant for the King of Ulster, Conchobar. As one of the Kings of Ireland, Conchobar is believed to be closer to the divine beings than the average person because he is a visual representation of how good or bad the kingdom is doing. By assuming the arms of Conchobar, Cú Chulainn showed that he was also connected to the supernatural world.

Taboos help control the actions of the hero, but also help show that the hero does not exist fully in the world of humans. To the modern reader the taboos laid onto heroes see like commonsense, things that the average person know not to do. The hero seems to be lacking common sense, from the beginning heroes are rebellious and do not follow any of the rules. The taboos may act as a way to try and impose some of the commonsense ideas that the average person knows. As seen earlier these taboos often do not succeed in helping the hero prevent their death, the commonsense does not fully seep into the mind of the hero.

All throughout this exploration of the Celtic hero one has been presented with information from the literature that provides a brief glimpse into the world of Celtic Ireland. From the birth of a hero through the change and until death the experiences of hero set them apart from average human, but at the same time their experiences when taken lightly provide a glimpse into Celtic Ireland. The family of a hero, fosterage and the life of a hero are very important to understand the world of the Celts and also because it shows what the standard of masculinity was for the Celts.

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