

Irish Storytelling – Part 2

The **first article** in this series (April-May 2000) reported on the scholarly work of Antli Aarne and Steth Thompson who identified types of international folk tales in *The Types of the Folktale* and on the work of O'Suilleabhain and Christiansen who published *The Types of Irish Folktales* which identifies 43,000 versions of several hundred international tale types. This essay will discuss some of these types in relation to Irish storytelling.

The most popular type of story in the Irish tradition for both the teller and the listener is the story with a religious theme. These stories have a distinct medieval flavor, along with a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian motifs. According to Sean O'Sullivan, Irish folklorist, many of these stories centered around "severe penances" imposed on or by a priest, either voluntarily (to save parents from hell, for example) or to prove innocence and escape from the clutches of the devil. As would be expected, the "miraculous" powers of the priest show up in these stories. For example, a priest causes rain to fall in a time of drought, or he changes meat into fish when fish is offered to him on Friday, or he restores the dead to life, or he proves an evil landlord is in hell. The last example is similar to the tale I was told when I was growing up in County Westmeath. The local priest, the story goes, announced from the altar that the father of a family he had a difference with was "burning in the flames of hell." Called upon by the man's family and the local bishop, the priest went to the man's house and called forth his "spirit." The man did appear and announced that he was in hell and suffering.

The devil has a prominent role in many of these stories. Many times the devil appears as a tempter or temptress or as having some human in his power. In most cases, the devil is stopped either by a priest or by the innocence and trust in God of the victim and the devil is banished in a "blaze of sulphurous fire." Satan may consume the body of the victim, but the victim's soul is saved.

Journeys to the next world with visions of heaven, purgatory, or hell are the settings for many folk tales. Heaven has beautiful gardens with fruits and flowers, heavenly music, fine foods and great beds! In purgatory, souls awaiting their entrance into heaven perform labors that will atone for their sins. For example, a man who defrauded one of his workers is shown as an ass drawing heavy loads. In purgatory, time may be spent seeking shelter in inclement weather under bushes or in some cold, wet place or in a narrow, confined place such as between the bark of a tree and its wood.

Hell is often described as having a room specifically reserved for a certain person. The devil might live like any other "man-of-the-house" and have problems with his family and servants. Judgment scenes are part of these stories where the good and bad deeds of someone who dies are weighed. A crumb of bread given in alms may tip the scales in a person's favor. There are many stories too where the dead return to give an account of how they have fared beyond the grave, telling of some good deed that gained them heaven or of some sin, great or small, for which they had to atone.

The power of innocence and its reward are the themes in many of these stories: the simple boy, rather than the "exalted contenders," is chosen as bishop or Pope; a boy talks with the Lord in a holy picture and is invited to a heavenly banquet; a simple girl who prays before going to bed is protected by angels.

Other stories emphasize the power and value of prayer. For example, there is the old woman whose simple trust in God overcomes the power of the devil. I think of my own mother, who has had great trust and belief in the power of prayer all her life. Miraculous occurrences abound in these tales: food is provided for a starving family who gave its food to others; a crop of oats grows from chaff; stones are turned into potatoes; and children who have died are found alive and healed.

The "animal tale" is one of the oldest types in the storytelling tradition. These stories are usually short, consisting of one or two episodes and having a specific theme. One purpose of these stories is to explain certain animal characteristics, for example, why sheep have wool while goats have hair, or why dogs like to be outdoors while cats seek the comfort of the home. Quite common in the Irish tradition are stories about how the wren became king of the birds or how the plaice got its crooked mouth. Most popular of all

are stories about the clever fox. In these stories the fox usually outwits the unimaginative wolf and on some occasions, human beings. At other times, the fox may be fooled by an equally clever bird that he desires to eat but who escapes. "Rivalry and the interplay of wits thus lead to humorous situations, and variety is provided by the many actors who figure into the tales: cat, mouse, dog, ass, bullock, hare, wren, eagle, goose, crow, cuckoo, thrush, sparrow, magpie, scoldcrow, crane, duck and seagull." (*Folktales of Ireland* edited by Sean O'Sullivan).

The figures of Fionn macCumhaill and his Fianna and Cu Chulainin dominate the "mythological" aspects of the Irish storytelling tradition. Fionn and his warriors were involved in fighting for and defending Ireland against invaders. These stories involve the figures of Oisín, Fionn's son; Oscar, his grandson; Gall macMorna and his brother Conan Maol; and Diarmid O'Duibhne. The exploits of Fionn and his men seem to have a great interest for storytellers because, despite the magical content of the tales, they belong to a fairly recognizable world. Fionn as a hero, according to O'Sullivan, never reached the godlike stature of Cu Chulainin. The most popular stories in the Fenian Cycle are the stories of Fionn's youth and the pursuit of Diarmid and Grainne.

In the tales, romances and legends of the Ulster Cycle, Conchobhar, king of Ulster ; Cu Chulainin, his son; Conlaoch; Conall Cearnach; and Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach play prominent roles. It is the oldest cycle of tales in Irish literature, and we know the stories are set in the early days of the Christian era. The most popular stories in the cycle are about Cu Chulainin's "interesting" birth (born while his mother is racing against a horse), and about Deirdre and the sorrowful tale of the Sons of Uisneach.

Along with the Fionn and Cu Chulainin tales are other "Irish Hero" tales which were popular among storytellers in both Gaelic-speaking Ireland and in Scotland . Many of these tales were difficult to tell as they involved the use of difficult "rhetorics" (skills in effective use of speech) or "runes" as well as themes of a magical nature. We know there were storytellers who could tell, literally, for three to four hours straight, a very long story like "The Cattle Raid of Cooley." Among the most popular of these tales are "The Everlasting Fight," "The Sad Knight Without a Laugh," and "Conall Gulban."

A close relative of the "Hero" tales are the "Tales of Magic." Of the four hundred and fifty types of tales listed by Aarne-Thompson in their work, one-third of the "Tales of Magic" have been recorded in Ireland . In these stories almost anything imaginable can happen and the "fairies" and "leprechauns" play a significant role. There are even Irish versions of very familiar "fairy tales," such as "Cinderella and the Cup o'Rushes."

Another category is "Tales of the Stupid Ogre." As its title suggests, stories in this category describe ways in which the ogre (in Irish versions, usually a giant) is fooled and outsmarted by his smaller human opponent. The plots may involve situations where there is a partnership between them or a contest of strength (squeezing a stone or throwing a hammer) or in racing or eating (the hero wins by using a sack as a false stomach).

The reader may have thought while reading this essay, "How were these stories collected and saved for our enjoyment?" The people who did this important work in Ireland had lives that were as equally interesting as the stories they have saved for us. They will be the subject of the next article in this series.

(Written by Jim Hawkins, September 2000)