# The Cattle Raid of Cooley Study Guide

## The Cattle Raid of Cooley by Anonymous

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

The setting of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has traditionally been identified as the first century A.D. The earliest extant manuscript of any version of the work was written in the early twelfth century in the great monastery of Clonmacnoise overlooking the Shannon River. Sometime between these two dates, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* came into existence.

It has been a basic assumption of Irish literary studies that the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was written to be the *Aeneid* of Ireland. Nevertheless, despite continuous references to the characters and events of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, it is probably true that the stories of the Irish hero Finn Mac Cumhghaill (Finn Mac Cool), his son Oisín, and his warrior band, the Fianna, were more popular until the nineteenth century. Then, Irish nationalism interacting with contemporary scholarship began to look to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as the major source for a sense of Irish identity. National and cultural worth was judged against the classical past and the dominant English language culture. It was important that Ireland had a vernacular epic.

The Irish literary revival at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries introduced the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to a world audience. Lady Augusta Gregory, patroness of the young W. B. Yeats, published retellings of the stories clustered around the hero of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Cúchulainn. Yeats wrote a series of plays based on the stories of Cúchulainn and Deirdre (Dierdriu) and the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* entered the western literary heritage.

# Author Biography

The twelfth-century manuscript called the *Book of Leinster* preserves a note stating that at one time none of the poets of Ireland knew the full *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Two pupils of the poet Senchán Torpéist set out to find a copy that had been taken out of Ireland to exchange for a copy of the *Cuilmenn*, the Irish name for the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, the greatest digest of learning of the early middle ages. On their way, they happened upon the grave of Fergus, one of the great heroes of the Ulster cycle of tales. His spirit came and recited the whole *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to them. The note's scribe, however, added an alternative version: some people said Senchán himself learned the whole story from some of the descendants of Fergus adding, "this seems reasonable."

The existence even in such a note is characteristic of the history and scholarship of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* survives in several versions. The *Book of the Dun Cow*, or *Lebor na hUidre*, copied in the twelfth century and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, copied in the late fourteenth century preserve an older, shorter version, perhaps as old as the seventh or eighth century. This version is often described by scholars as 'mutilated' and 'interpolated' with alternative and sometimes contradictory versions of events. Other scholars suggest that these 'additions' are the author's own attempt to acknowledge variant material, and that this early version should be seen as a collection of materials relating to the great cattle raid of the Cooley peninsula. The *Book of Leinster*, copied in the twelfth century, preserves a fuller, more unified version. The compiler of this later version of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* attempted to clear up inconsistencies and repetitions and produce a polished narrative. The elaborate style, however, suffers in comparison with the older version, despite its variants and additions.

There is no real consensus as to exactly when the original author of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* wrote, or even if it is essentially the version that survives in the *Book of the Dun Cow*. Older scholars pushed the composition back as far as they might on linguistic grounds, but recently it has been strongly suggested that the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was consciously composed to have the feel of an ancient work.

There are good modern editions with translations of both the *Book of the Dun Cow* and *Book of Leinster* by Cecile O'Rahilly. In 1969, the poet Thomas Kinsella produced a translation of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* working from the earliest version with additions from the later versions. It is this version that is generally used by non-specialists.

# Plot Summary

## How Conchobor was Born and Became King of Ulster

Nes asked the druid Cathbad what the hour was lucky for. He replied it was lucky for conceiving a king, and swore that a son conceived then would be famous in Ireland forever. Nes and Cathbad therefore had relations. The son she bore was Conchobor. Cathbad raised him.

Fergus was King of Ulster, and he wished to marry Nes. She would only accept him if he allowed her son Conchobor to be king for a year. Conchobor was allowed to become king for a year, but Nes was clever. At the end of the year, she had persuaded the Ulstermen to not accept Fergus back.

## How the Men of Ulster were Cursed with Labor Pains

Crunniuc mac Agnomain was a wealthy widower. One day, a fine woman walked into his house and stayed. The place flourished under her care. One day, there was great fair in Ulster. Crunniuc went, but the woman, being pregnant, did not. She warned him to be cautious in his speech, but he boasted at the fair that his wife could run outrun the king's chariot horses. The king immediately demanded she do so. The woman was fetched. She begged the crowd for compassion because she was going into labor, but to no avail. She told the king her name was Macha and that a curse would come on Ulster for what she was forced to do. She raced the chariot. As they reached the finish, she gave birth to a son and a daughter shrieking that every man who heard her scream would have labor pains when Ulster needed them most. All the men of Ulster there that day and their sons for nine generations after suffered the curse, except Cúchulainn and his father.

## The Story of Deirdriu

Cathbad predicted that the daughter of the king's storyteller Fedlimid would be the most beautiful woman in the world and the cause of death in Ulster. The warriors wanted to kill her, but Conchobor had her raised in secrecy until she should be old enough to marry him. The girl, Deirdriu, met Noisiu, Uisliu's son, however, and fell in love with him. They ran off together with his brothers and eventually settled in Scotland. There they were threatened by the king who wanted Deirdriu himself. Conchobor offered them safe conduct home. Fergus, Dubthach, and Conchobor's son Cormac went surety (to stand in promise) for him. Conchobor had the brothers killed, Noisiu by the spear of Eogan mac Durthacht, who also killed Fergus's son Fiacha when he tried to protect Noisiu. Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac fled to the court of Connacht. Deirdriu killed herself.

## The Birth of Cúchulainn

Deichtine, Conchobor's sister, was driving her brother's chariot as they hunted a great flock of destructive birds. When night fell, they came to a little house where a woman was about to give birth. Deichtine helped her deliver a baby boy. When morning came, everything had disappeared except the baby. Deichtine took the baby home with her, but he died. Deichtine was heartbroken. One of her servants brought her a drink of water. While she drank, a tiny creature flew into her mouth. She swallowed before she noticed it. That night, she dreamed a man came to her. He said he was Lug mac Ethnenn, a prince of the *Síde*, one of the magical beings who live in the fairy hills. The boy she had nursed was his son. She was now carrying him. He was to be called Sétanta. It soon became obvious Deichtine was pregnant so her brother married her off to Sualdam mac Roich. She was so upset at marrying him pregnant that she vomited up the being she had drunk. Soon, she was pregnant again by Sualdam. She had a boy. They named him Sétanta. Although the tradition of Cúchullain's birth is contradictory, a rational explanation for his birth has never been expected.

## The Pillow Talk

Medb and Ailill, the queen and king of Connacht, were talking in bed about who between them was the richer. Their possessions were counted; they were equal except that Ailill had a beautiful bull, Finbennach, the calf of one of Medb's cows that had gone over to Ailill's herd rather than belong to a woman. Medb asked Mac Roth if there was any bull its equal in Ireland. There was only one: the Donn Cúailnge in Ulster. Mac Roth was sent to borrow the bull for a year with the offer of a generous reward. Dáire, its owner, was pleased to lend the bull on such generous terms. Unfortunately, one of the messengers drank too much and announced that if the bull had not been lent, they would have taken it by force. Dáire was enraged and ordered them to leave.

## The Muster of the Connacht Army

Ailill and Medb muster their army and wait for a favorable omen before setting out. The poetess and prophetess Feidelm tells Medb that the army will suffer enormous losses at the hands of Cúchulainn, repeating again and again, "I see them bloody. I see them red."

## The Army Encounters Cúchulainn

Fergus, given command of the army, leads it astray to give the Ulstermen time to recover from their curse. Cúchulainn feels the imminent approach of the army and asks his father, Sualdam, to warn the people. Playing for time, Cúchulainn leaves a challenge to the Connacht army, but the army circumvents it. Again, he attempts to slow them down with a challenge: he placed a forked branch in the river and impaled the heads of

four of the advancing warriors on it with a challenge that the army cannot pass until someone pulls the branch out with one hand. Fergus meets the challenge.

## The Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn

Ailill asks Fergus Cúchlainn's age. When told that Cúchulainn is only seventeen, Medb scoffs that he could not be much of a warrior yet. Fergus recounts his boyhood deeds, including the story behind his name change. As a small boy, he killed a fierce watchdog that attacked him, and then guarded its owner's property until a new one could be reared. Hence came the name Cú Chulainn 'the hound of Culann.'

## Cúchulainn's Challenge and the First Series of Combats

Cúchulainn puts a log in the army's path with a challenge that they dare not continue until a warrior leaps it in a chariot. Cúchulainn reluctantly kills his boyhood friend Fráech who had been sent against him. Fergus leaps the oak with his own chariot. Cúchulainn fights and kills all who come against him. The army pillages Ulster. Ailill suspects that Fergus and Medb are having an affair, and he sends his chariot driver to spy on them. He finds them sleeping together and steals Fergus's sword from its sheath. He returns with the sword to Ailill and confirms his suspicions. Ailill seems pleased by this: 'She is justified. She does it to keep his help on the raid." He then tells the charioteer to keep the sword safe.

## Bargain of the Single Combats

Cúchulainn takes his stand at the river Cronn, calling upon air, earth, and the river to help him. Maine, the son of Ailill and Medb, and thirty horsemen reach the river and Cúchulainn kills them all. These massacres continue until Fergus and Lugaid mac Nois Allchomaig organize terms of engagement favorable to Cúchulainn.

## The Escape of the Bull, the Bargain of the Single Combats, and the Morrigan

Medb sets out with a third of the army to find the bull and lay waste to Ulster. Cúchulainn meets her cowherd Buide mac Báin with the stolen Bull of Cooley. Cúchulainn kills Buide, but Medb's men get the bull to their camp. Cúchulainn fights warrior after warrior. In the midst of his struggles, the Morrígan, in the shape of a young woman, comes and offers herself to him. He spurns her. She swears to hinder him. He promises to wound her. She will carry the marks forever unless he gives her a blessing. He continues to fight whatever champions they send against him. When Lóch, his foster brother fights him, three times the Morrígan hinders him and is wounded. Fergus encourages Briciu to taunt the flagging Cúchulainn to keep his anger up in the fight.

Cúchulainn feels his own need for help. He kills Lóch, but is exhausted. The Morrígan appears now as an old woman milking a cow. He asks for a drink of milk. She gives him three and with each he blesses her and she is healed. Medb organizes an ambush, but Cúchulainn kills the warriors. She offers her daughter to him, but he cuts the girl's hair and leaves her on a pillar stone.

## Respite for Cúchulainn

Laeg spots a fine-looking man coming towards them. Cúchulainn recognizes him as one of the *síde.* The man identifies himself as Cúchulainn's father from the fairy hills, Lug mac Ethnenn. Cúchulainn admits, "My wounds are heavy. It is time they were let heal." Lug tells him to sleep. He tends his son's wounds. While Cúchulainn sleeps, the boys of Ulster come to his aid and are, to Cúchulainn's sorrow, slaughtered after a brave fight. Cúchulainn orders out his sickle chariot, 'every angle and corner, front and rear was a tearing place,' and in a frenzy, rages through the army encamped against him.

## The Single Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn and the Fight of Cethern

An Ulster warrior, Oengus, comes and hurls stones at the Connacht army until he is slain. Trying to find another warrior to fight Cúchulainn, Medb approaches Fergus. He refuses to fight his foster son. However, he faces Cúchulainn, asking him to retreat a step before him if he gives ground at another time when asked by Cúchulainn. He agrees. There is more fighting in which Cúchulainn is victorious. Fíacha mac Fir Febe, an Ulster exile, goes to Cúchulainn's aid in one fight. Medb works on Cúchulainn's foster brother and closest friend, Ferdia, telling him Cúchulainn has slandered him. The two fight over four days. Finally, Cúchulainn gives Ferdia a mortal wound, but laments over his lost friend. The Ulster warrior Cethern arrives, attacks the army and then retreats to Cúchulainn with a litany of his wounds. He kills doctor after doctor until Conchobor's doctor Fingin arrives. He examines his wounds from a safe distance, and tells him he can either stay still for a year and live or have three days of strength to fight before dying. He chooses the latter and dies fighting.

## Fintan and the Death of Finnabair

Fintan, father of Cethern, arrives to avenge his son. His other son is taken prisoner and returned on condition that Fintan not attack Ailill's army until the final battle. Rochobad Rigderg arrives to help Cúchulainn, but Ailill arranges a trap for Rochobad, baited with Finnabair, who has told her parents how much she loves him. Her parents agree to allow Finnabair and Rochobad to sleep together if Rochobad gives them a truce until Conchobor arrives.

## The Warning of Súaldaim and the Muster of the Men of Ulster

Súaldaim goes to his son's aid. Cúchulainn sends him to warn the Ulstermen to come immediately if they hope to punish the invaders. Súaldaim reports "men are slain, women carried off, and cattle driven away." He falls and is decapitated by his own shield, but his head repeats the warning. Conchobor vows to crush the raiders and bring back their booty.

Ailill asks Mac Roth if he can see the Ulstermen approaching. He says they are coming on like a lightning filled mist. He goes out again and sees the Ulster camp and comes back with descriptions of the men and troops he has seen. Fergus identifies them for the king. A truce is arranged until the next morning. The Morrígan appears to prophesy the coming slaughter.

## The Battle of the Armies and of the Two Bulls

The battle begins. Ailill and Medb beg Fergus to join the fight and give him back his sword. He cuts through the Ulstermen and confronts Conchobor, but is restrained by Cormac who begs him to remember his own people. Cúchulainn leaves his sick bed, arms and confronts Fergus, demanding that he keep his promise to retreat before him. Fergus takes the Ulster exiles out of the battle. The men of Leinster and Munster follow them. Cúchulainn catches up with Medb, but spares her. Fergus observes that the outcome of the battle is what one would expect when the herd follows a mare.

The following morning the survivors gather to watch the fight between the two bulls. The Donn Cúailnge defeats Finnbennach, littering the landscape with pieces of Finnbennach's body. The places where they fight give rise to place names (places where important events occurred). The Donn Cúailnge finally dies at Druim Tairb.

# The Pillow Talk

## The Pillow Talk Summary

The epic opens with Ailill and his wife Medb talking of wealth in their bed. Ailill believes Medb is rich indeed now that she has married him, a wealthy man. She responds that she was rich before she met him, being the daughter of the high king of Ireland. Medb was a better fighter and more gracious person than her five sisters, and her father gave her a lot of land, including the land of Cruachan, where she and Ailill now live.

Medb wanted a husband without jealousy, fear or greed. Medb found this in Ailill and happily gave him her dowry, but she wants him to remember that all the wealth came from her. Ailill responds that he is the third son of his father and has no kingdom without Medb. He considers himself the richest man in the land.

## The Pillow Talk Analysis

This brief chapter of the book introduces the two characters. Through their dialogue with one another, readers learn the story of how they came to be king and queen of Cruachan and also the history of their families. This is a traditional lineage chapter that lists the fathers and sons and daughters of all the relatives of the characters as they speak to one another.

# The Occasion of the Tbin

## The Occasion of the Tbin Summary

Still arguing over who has more wealth, Ailill and Medb gather all their possessions into two piles to see who has more. They seem to own equally fine cattle and horses and pigs. They finally realize that Ailill has a magnificent bull, the offspring of one of his bulls and Medb's cows. Medb does not have a fantastic bull such as this, and she cannot stand to be losing to Ailill.

Medb summons one of her messengers and asks where in Ireland she could find such a great bull as Ailill has. MacRoth, the messenger, says that Dari of Cooley has a magnificent bull named Donn Cooley. Medb sends MacRoth to go borrow the bull for a year, saying she'll give him back the bull and fifty heifers. Medb also says that if Dari protests, he should come personally and receive a chariot, land and her personal friendship.

MacRoth goes to Dari with the offer, and he gladly accepts. He invites MacRoth and his nine men to stay for a fabulous feast. The men become drunk. One of Dari's men overhears them say that Dari is a great man, but Conchobar the king is a better man. They also say that it was good that Dari agreed to give them the bull, because they would have taken it forcibly otherwise.

Dari's man reports this to Dari. In the morning, he is quite cold to MacRoth and says he could easily have them all killed if he wanted to. MacRoth is confused by this and apologizes for what he assumes was the drunken ravings of his stupid men. MacRoth asks Dari to please not act this way or hold it against Medb, but he does. MacRoth reports back to Medb, and she says, sadly, that they must take the bull by force after all.

## The Occasion of the Tbin Analysis

This epic starts off with a conflict similar to that of many such poems. A foolish argument between royals followed by drunken ramblings will surely lead to conflict. The ending of this chapter foreshadows a battle between Dari and Medb over the bull, all because of her silly desire to prove she has more wealth than her husband. It is ironic that Medb looked for a husband without jealousy or greed, but she herself is caught up in a battle with him to see who has better possessions.

# The Rising-Out of the Men of Connacht at Cruachan Ai

## The Rising-Out of the Men of Connacht at Cruachan Ai Summary

Ailill and Medb send messengers to the neighboring kings to gather armed men at Cruachan. Three thousand men come from Mani and Maga, and three thousand come from Cormac Conlongas and Fergus macRoig. Cormac's men were divided into three units with splendid armor and uniforms. One unit wore green, silver and gold. A second wore red, white and blue, and the third, with whom Cormac marched, wore yellow and purple.

The men all come to Cruachan and set up camp for two weeks. The fortunetellers and druids make them wait around for a sign that they should go into battle. The chapter ends with Medb going to visit her own druid.

## The Rising-Out of the Men of Connacht at Cruachan Ai Analysis

This chapter goes into great visual detail describing the colors and weapons and uniforms worn by all the men. Listing all these details along with the lineage of the kings slows down the action for the reader and builds suspense for the battle that will come.

# The Foretelling

## The Foretelling Summary

Medb tells her druid that she is worried about the battle. She knows that if many men are killed retrieving this bull, they will all be angry with her. Above all, however, she is worried about Ailill and her. She asks the druid whether they will survive, and he says they will.

As Medb is riding home, she sees a maiden on a chariot weaving lace. Medb asks her what she is doing there. The woman, Fedelm, says she has come to offer Medb good luck in her cattle raid and that she is a prophet. Medb asks her what will happen to her men. Fedelm says that she sees them "crimson-red from blood." Medb repeatedly protests, listing numerous reasons she thinks Conchobar is not to be feared. Conchobar and all his sons are said to be in their "pains," (a curse debilitating the whole country) and therefore not able to fight. Each time, Fedelm says she sees the men covered in blood.

Fedelm says that Cuchulain will come to the men of Ireland. Cuchulain is fair and scarred, wears a red cloak and is very tall. He holds four swords in each hand, and it is he who will cause the bloodshed. She calls him the Smith's Hound. Fedelm tells Medb that Cuchulain will destroy her men. The narrator steps in after the prophecy to say that this concludes the introductory material, and next will come the body of the story.

## The Foretelling Analysis

The active, visible narrator is a common feature in oral epics of this style. The narrator will most likely appear frequently to summarize or interpret the meaning of the action. This chapter also features more stunning visual detail. The author goes to great pains describing Fedelm and Cuchulain to gives the audience a clear mental image of the characters. Readers know Cuchulain will be of great importance both because of the overt narrator and the great detail in which he is described.

# This Is the Route of the Tbin

## This Is the Route of the Tbin Summary

The men of Ireland set off on the last Monday of summer toward Ulster and Conchobar's men. This chapter lists the names of the roads they take on their journey. When they reach Cooley, the men divide to search for the bull.

## This Is the Route of the Tbin Analysis

Much like the lineage chapters, this one lists the roads and counties and how they are related to one another. Land was of great importance to the people of Ireland, and they would have been very careful to keep track of routes such as this.

# The March of the Host

## The March of the Host Summary

Medb and Ailill set up camp. On one path, Ailill, Fergus and Cormac camp with their men; on the other path, Medb and the women camp. The narrator interjects that one of the women, Flidais, will later sleep with Fergus and become the women to bring milk and water to all the men of Ireland. Medb wants to stay to the rear of the troops so she can ride among the men and learn who is eager and who is hesitant to fight.

Medb learns that only one man among the warriors is eager to fight. This makes her angry, because she can see that they are good workers. They are well organized and good fighters. Ailill asks her what she wants to do. She does not want them to fight for her and will not send them home for fear they will revolt and take her kingdom. She decides that she wants them all slaughtered.

Fergus protests that he does not want to see the men slaughtered. Medb grows angry and tells him to watch what he is saying. Her seven sons have armies as well as Ailill's armies, and she threatens to take out Fergus's men. Fergus retaliates with a similar threat, and Medb changes the subject. They decide to redistribute the armies and continue marching with the blended men of the different kingdoms.

Medb and Ailill decide that Fergus should always be the man to ride ahead and speak with the leader of the land they are marching through because he is originally from Ulster. Fergus was once a king in Ulster before Conchobar usurped the kingdom and exiled Fergus. As he leads the way, Fergus suddenly feels remorse for the men of Ulster and starts leading the troops the wrong way, delaying them as much as possible.

Medb figures out that the men are marching in circles and yells at Fergus. He lies and says he is taking them on this route to protect them from Cuchulain. She decides to put someone else in the lead, and Fergus warns them to beware of Cuchulain, for he senses danger in the air. Medb tells Fergus that his fears are ridiculous because they have plenty of men and weapons to fight this man. Fergus responds that they will need them, for Cuchulain is mighty and will destroy them. They keep marching and come upon an entire herd of deer. The men of Galian, dispersed among all the divisions, are the great hunters and catch all the deer for the troops.

Meanwhile, Fergus has warned Cuchulain of the troops' approaching. He consults with his father, Sualtaim. Cuchulain knows the battle approaches, but he has a date with Conchobar's daughter. Sualtaim chastises Cuchulain for going on a date when the men of Ulster are in such danger. Cuchulain tells his father that he must keep his word with the woman and to send the men into hiding. As he leaves, Cuchulain chops down a tree, makes a wreath with one hand and leaves a note for Medb's armies to find.

As Medb's men march onward, she has her servants carry her and the other royals near the front so the dust and dirt of the multitudes will not ruin her fabrics and precious possessions. The procession stops when they find Cuchulain's note. Cuchulain has challenged them to make a similar wreath with one hand in order to pass. The druids say that they must obey the warning and either take one day to make the wreath or be slain. Medb grudgingly agrees to wait, and while they do so, the men cut down the trees to try to make the wreath. The narrator says that the land is barren of trees to this day.

The narrator interjects with an alternate telling of the chapter, where Fedelm told Medb that her vision was clouded by a great forest. Medb says she will chop down the trees so she could see the future, hence the treeless plains.

During the night, a terrible snowstorm comes, and the men of Ireland are miserable. When they set off in the morning, they are cold and ill and grumpy. They leave very visible tracks, and Cuchulain is able to easily track the men after his date. His men comment that it was wise of him to keep the date after all. Cuchulain is able to look at the tracks and figure out how many men are in Medb's army. He also sees that the Galian men have been dispersed among the troops.

Cuchulain's magic gifts are described in detail, from his excellence in battle to his cunning to his elocution. Cuchulain says he will not rest this night until he has slain a man of Ireland. He carves a mighty spear and throws it into the ground, leaving a note on it and blocking the path for the Irish. The frontrunners come upon Cuchulain, and he kills them and their chariot drivers, mounting their four heads on spikes in the path and sending the horses and bloody bodies back to Medb.

Medb's bearers arrive, blocking her from dust on all four sides so her clothes will not get dirty. She sees the commotion over the dead bodies, and they decide to send Cormac to see what happened. As it happens, Cormac is the son of Conchobar, and they believe the men of Ulster will not kill him when he comes to talk to them. Cormac comes upon the spear and the four heads. As he is looking at it, the army approaches.

The note on the spear says that the army may not advance until one man among them can pull the spear from the ground and throw it with one hand, but the man cannot be Fergus. They all marvel at the spear and rename the land for the four-pronged wonder. Ailill and Medb are shocked that one man alone formed the spear and killed the four warriors. Even though the note says for him not to, Fergus tries seventeen times to pull the spear from the road and fails, destroying chariots and irritating Medb. Medb thinks the challenges are ploys to delay them while the men of Ulster recover from their curse.

The warriors all decide that the man who did this must be a great warrior indeed, as Fergus finally pulls the spear from the ground. They see that it was cut by a single stroke, like the druids said. Ailill says they should make camp and rest since everyone is so ill and cold from the snowstorm. Ailill pulls Fergus aside and asks questions about who could have come to them to do this. He lists great warriors of Ulster, and Fergus responds that only Cuchulain could have done these feats.

Ailill remembers that Fergus has often spoken of his boyhood friend Cuchulain. Ailill asks how old Cuchulain is now. Fergus responds that his age should not set them at ease because the boy went to war at age five. Cuchulain is seventeen at this time. Medb refuses to believe that they have anything to fear from a teenager. Fergus warns her to be wary, because Cuchulain carried out far scarier deeds when he was a young child.

## The March of the Host Analysis

This very detailed and lengthy introduction to Cuchulain allows the characters of Ailill, Medb and Fergus to develop. Readers build a dislike of Medb as she continually makes rash decisions about the lives of her men and emphasizes her good clothes during a battle march. The audience starts to connect with Fergus, who is exiled from his own country and was once friends with the great warrior who threatens to kill them all.

Even though the druid foretells Cuchulain as a great threat to their armies, no one can quite believe that one man carries out the mighty feats. When they discover his youth, they are even further shocked that a teenager is so threatening to them. Cuchulain is portrayed as a mythical, magical hero with likeable personality traits. Readers are drawn to him for his honesty and reliability in keeping his promise to the daughter of Conchobar, and we respect him for returning the horses and clothing of the men he has killed.

Because Ailill and Medb are shown as so reluctant to cooperate with Cuchulain's requests, and because Medb's selfishness is so emphasized, readers can anticipate difficulty for them ahead.

# The Youthful Exploits of Cuchulain

## The Youthful Exploits of Cuchulain Summary

This chapter opens with Fergus relating a story from when he lived in the kingdom of Ulster. As soon as Conchobar becomes king, he divides his time into three segments: watching the youth play sports, playing chess and strategy games and finally eating, drinking and sleeping. A young lad, the king's nephew, wants to go and play with Conchobar's son Folloman. The boy is unwelcome in their gang, but he jumps into a game of hurling and surprises them with his ability. They get angry and all attack him. The boy is able to magically ward off 150 youths with his toys and bare hands.

Suddenly, the little boy begins seizing, his face contorting, and he begins to conquer his opponents. He runs toward the castle gates, where Fergus and Conchobar are playing chess. Conchobar grabs the child's hand and asks him why he fought so mightily against the other youths. The boy replies that his name is Setanta, and he has come from far away. He was angry that they would not play with him nicely.

Conchobar tells the troop of boys to play nicely with the boy, and they agree. Soon after, he starts a huge fight with them again and begins beating them all up. He tells Conchobar that he wants to be the leader of the gang of boys and will not stop until he is. Fergus emphasizes that Cuchulain was five years old when he did this, defeating sons of warriors and champions from across the kingdom. The men of Ireland agree that they are better off knowing Cuchulain's abilities.

## The Youthful Exploits of Cuchulain Analysis

Fergus's story sets up Cuchulain as a person of determination. Since he was five years old, he has not settled for anything less than the best. Fergus tells this story to the Irish men to prepare them for the mystically powerful threat they are up against.

# The Slaying of the Smith's Hound

## The Slaying of the Smith's Hound Summary

After Fergus's story, Cormac contributes his own tale of Cuchulain's greatness from when he was six years old. In the tale, a talented blacksmith named Culann lives in Ulster and has prepared a feast for the king. As it is a modest meal for a modest man, Culann asks Conchobar not to bring many people. Conchobar sets off alone for the feast and comes upon the athletic fields.

Setanta is tending the goal on a hurling field, and 150 boys are trying unsuccessfully to score on him. He is, in turn, scoring 150 goals against them. Conchobar mentions to Fergus that he cannot believe the skill of the boy. Fergus mentions that as he grows older, his feats will become more amazing. Conchobar invites the boy to the feast, but he declines, saying the boys are not tired of playing yet. He says he will follow the trail of the horses and meet them at the smith's house.

Conchobar heads off to Culann's house, and the small party begins feasting and drinking. Culann asks whether anyone else will arrive because he wants to let his vicious dog off the chain. Conchobar, forgetting that Setanta is going to come, says not to worry, and the bloodhound is released to guard the property.

The young boys eventually tire of playing and go home. Setanta walks toward the party, and the dog smells him and begins to growl. When the dog attacks, Setanta hurls his ball through the dog's body, picks up his feet, smashes the dog against a rock and kills it. When Conchobar hears the commotion, he remembers that his nephew was following them and sadly informs the smith that he thinks the dog is dead.

Everyone runs outside, and Fergus runs up to the boy to see if he is all right. Culann is devastated at the loss of his guard dog and friend. Setanta says he will make it right by training a puppy until he is as worthy as the dead dog. Until that time, he says, he will guard Culann's house and flocks and keep him company.

Culann is happy with the agreement and says the boy should change his name to Cuchulain, which means wolfhound of Culann. Culann says all the men of Ireland will one day speak that name, and the boy agrees that it's a good one. Cormac finishes his story by reminding everyone that a six-year-old boy did these things and that none of them should be surprised by anything magnificent he does during this cattle raid.

## The Slaying of the Smith's Hound Analysis

Like the previous chapter, this one serves to build suspense and build up Cuchulain as a mighty hero. It also serves as more character development by showing that Cuchulain always wanted to make right after he was forced to kill something. Cuchulain is a god-like hero with superhuman powers, somewhat analogous to the Greek hero Hercules. In

this chapter, he takes on a new name, likening the boy to a wolfhound and indicating a passage from childhood to adulthood.

Ending the tale by bringing readers back to the present builds suspense for what will happen next on the current cattle raid. Readers leave this tale in further awe of this hero and with strong curiosity over what will happen.

# The Taking of Arms

## The Taking of Arms Summary

Fiachu chimes in after Cormac's story. In the story, when Cuchulain is seven, he performs another mighty act. Cathba the druid and Conchobar's father are teaching a class of Conchobar and eight other students. Cathba tells the class that the little boy who takes arms will one day be a great and mighty warrior such as Ireland has never seen, but that his life will be short.

Cuchulain, though far away playing, overhears this conversation and begs Conchobar for some weapons. When he gets them, he destroys them sparring and goes through fourteen sets of weapons and armor before declaring that they are of low quality. Cuchulain tells Conchobar that Cathba has told him to take arms, and Conchobar gives the boy his own personal weapons.

Later, when Cathba and Conchobar are talking, Conchobar discovers that Cathba did not advise the boy to take arms. They call Cuchulain a liar, and he admits that he overheard the discussion and that he does not care if he only lives one day, so long as he is famous.

The same thing happens to Cuchulain with mounting chariots. Cuchulain overhears the druid make a prediction, asks for chariots, goes through seventeen low quality chariots and finally obtains the king's personal chariot.

Cuchulain takes the chariot out for a spin with Ibar, the chariot master. Cuchulain wants to show off his weapons to the other boys, who all tell him he should stick with them and play and not take up weapons. Ibar urges Cuchulain to let the horses rest and to go rejoin the boys, but he will not. Cuchulain wants to go to the Ford of Watching, where a guard protects Ulster from any who might attack.

This day, the guard at the Ford is Conall Cernach, a champion of Ireland. When they arrive, Cuchulain tells Conall that he can abandon his post, and Cuchulain will watch over the land. Conall and Ibar insist that Cuchulain is too young and inexperienced to protect the country from any warrior. Cuchulain says he will then go into the wilderness, past the border of Ulster, to see whom he might fight that day.

Conall feels compelled to go with Cuchulain and protect him, so they head along the border. Cuchulain is sure Conall will not let him fight if they come upon anyone. The boy throws a rock at Conall's chariot, toppling it. Conall yells in anger and heads back to his post at the Ford. Cuchulain continues into the wilderness. He and Ibar wait all day, but nobody comes to fight. Ibar says they must return to the castle for dinner. Cuchulain gets a place at the table in the castle, but Ibar must scrap for food with the other workers.

Cuchulain does not want to return, however, and makes Ibar drive him all around the perimeter of the country. They drive along, and Ibar lists all the features and history of the land. Cuchulain reaches a pasture with a challenge for champions - an iron pillar he throws into a stream. Cuchulain makes Ibar set up blankets to stay the night in the field.

Soon enough, a man named Foill approaches them. He taunts Ibar, and they both insist that Cuchulain is not fit for battle. Cuchulain is furious, and though Ibar threatens to kill them both, they agree to fight. Cuchulain throws a spear straight through Foill's skull, decapitates him and takes his riches.

Soon, another man comes to fight. Tuachall tells Cuchulain that slaying one champion is nothing to brag about. Cuchulain kills him with one blow of the lance. Cuchulain then kills the third son of that land and drives away with all three brothers' heads, although Ibar still doubts his abilities.

As Ibar and Cuchulain head back, Cuchulain chases down a herd of wild deer in a foot race, catches a flock of live swans and ties them all to the chariot. Ibar is now afraid because the horses are spooked. He cannot lean backwards because the deer horns will gouge him. He cannot walk near the chariot because the sharp wheels will slice him. Cuchulain says Ibar deserves this for doubting him. He says he will control the animals with one glance and that Ibar has nothing to fear. They drive back home, and everyone marvels at this great champion returning with the heads of the enemies and the exotic animals.

The king realizes that if he does not recognize Cuchulain as a great warrior, the boy will kill all the boys in the kingdom. He sends a royal welcome party to him, including scores of women. The party dresses him in fine clothes and seats him at the feet of the king from that day onward.

Fiachu finishes by saying that the three brothers Cuchulain killed at age seven were warriors who had killed a third of the warriors of Ulster. The men of Ireland grow fearful that such a mighty warrior protects the men of Ulster.

## The Taking of Arms Analysis

By the third story of Cuchulain's magical abilities, readers have a great picture of him as an impending force. They also see that, though he has the physical abilities and logic and reasoning of a man, he has the impatience and selfishness of the child he is. Cuchulain ignores the needs of Ibar to return home and ignores the warnings of those around him because of his need to immediately prove his abilities. This can be interpreted as extreme confidence in himself, but it comes at the expense of Ibar.

The technique of having the Irish men tell these stories of Cuchulain demonstrates how renowned the warrior is through the land, even at this young age. On the night before battle, the men have to listen to story after story about this unbeatable boy enemy. By the end of this story, the suspense over what will happen to Medb's men is extremely high.

# The Slaying of Orlam

## The Slaying of Orlam Summary

In the morning, Medb's troops head out after Cuchulain. Cuchulain looks down in the valley and is shocked that the men have chopped down all the trees. Cuchulain approaches one of the men, who is making spare parts for the chariots ruined in the battle the day before.

The worker does not realize who Cuchulain is and begs for his help so he can set off before Cuchulain attacks. Cuchulain begins to quickly repair the chariots. The man is astounded with Cuchulain's skill and speed. He asks for his helper's name. When Cuchulain reveals his identity, the man thinks he is surely done for.

Cuchulain insists he will not kill an unarmed man and asks where the troops are hiding. The man indicates where the troops are located and rushes off to his master. Cuchulain takes an alternate way, challenges the man to a fight, kills him and leaves his head on display for the men of Ireland to see.

## The Slaying of Orlam Analysis

This brief chapter packs a lot of action and suspense as Cuchulain once again reveals his might. Cuchulain's character is complicated in this chapter because he leads the charioteer to believe he is safe only to kill him minutes later.

# The Slaying of the Three MacArach

## The Slaying of the Three MacArach Summary

Three men from macArach go out front to confront Cuchulain because they are angry at his killings from the previous day. Cuchulain kills them and decapitates them all.

## The Slaying of the Three MacArach Analysis

This is another action chapter featuring exciting feats from Cuchulain.

# The Combat of Lethan and Cuchulain

## The Combat of Lethan and Cuchulain Summary

A warrior named Lethan comes to battle Cuchulain. Cuchulain decapitates him in battle, and the land is named after him. Soon after, a group of men called the Crutti Cainbili come from Ulster to see the mighty army of Ireland. When they see the army, they become afraid and run away, chased by the soldiers. The Crutti Cainbili transform into deer and escape into the forest because they are actually druids and have magic powers.

## The Combat of Lethan and Cuchulain Analysis

The interesting thing about this series of chapters portraying Cuchulain's battle victories is the discussion of the land around the fighting. Each river and forest and meadow is later named after the man or men who fell there, honoring both Cuchulain's greatness in killing them and those men themselves for their deeds earlier in life.

The sudden addition of the frightened druids from Ulster into the plot adds suspense at the end of the chapter and leaves readers questioning their importance to the story.

# The Killing of the Squirrel and of the Tame Bird

## The Killing of the Squirrel and of the Tame Bird Summary

Cuchulain makes an open threat that if he sees Medb, he will hurl a stone at her and barely miss killing her. He later sees her from afar and fires his sling shot at her, killing the pet bird on her shoulder. He soon sees her again and repeats his deed from afar, this time killing a tame squirrel on her shoulder. She finally orders the men to build a canopy to carry over her so Cuchulain cannot shoot at her anymore.

The men of Ireland decide to pillage the lands Cuchulain holds dear, fighting with and terrorizing the people there. Fergus warns the men in the night to be on the lookout for Cuchulain, singing to them that if he sneaks up on them they will surely be killed.

On this same day, Donn (the bull) of Cooley moves closer to the armies with fifty heifers in tow. Morrigan, a fairy, transforms into a bird and speaks to the bull. She warns him that the men of Ireland are out to capture him and that he cannot allow himself to be taken by them. He hears the warning and moves away from the army.

Donn the bull has many magical powers, the foremost of which is his fertility. When he breeds with the heifers, they give birth the next day because his offspring are so enormous. He is such a large animal that 100 grown men can stand in his shadow and be protected from the wind behind him.

## The Killing of the Squirrel and of the Tame Bird Analysis

This chapter shows Cuchulain teasing the men of Ireland, hiding from them and showing off his marksmanship with his slingshot. Readers also finally hear more about the mighty bull that started the trouble. This lull is welcome after so many chapters of action scenes and allows the audience to anticipate when the next warriors will meet Cuchulain.

# The Slaying of Lochi

## The Slaying of Lochi Summary

The warriors of Ireland set up camp for the night. Medb is thirsty and asks her handmaid, Lochi, to get her a drink of water from the river. Lochi, wearing the golden tiara of a royal maid, goes to get the water, and Cuchulain, believing her to be Medb, shoots a rock at the tiara from afar. He shatters the tiara and also kills the maiden.

## The Slaying of Lochi Analysis

This chapter is interesting because it shows Cuchulain killing an innocent woman, a rare event in the life of a mythic warrior hero. It would have been less shocking to read if Lochi were slain because she has picked a fight with Cuchulain. This slaying leaves readers wondering what the repercussions will be.

# The Killing of Uala

## The Killing of Uala Summary

In the morning, the Irish troops reach an impassable river. Medb orders the men to try crossing it, and a man named Uala fails and drowns. Medb has the men erect a grave for Uala, and the stream is named for him. Meanwhile, Cuchulain follows the men closely, killing many of them with his slingshot.

Medb orders the army to go fight Cuchulain in the open, but they refuse to meet him in one-to-one battle. They walk along the stream until they come to a place where it is narrower by a mountain. Medb decides that the men must tunnel through the mountain to leave a scar on the land of Ulster.

As the men are tunneling, they make a more permanent camp with cattle stalls and stables for the livestock. They finally are able to cross the stream, driving the animals and chariots across their forged path. The area is given several names for the cattle and the workers.

## The Killing of Uala Analysis

Medb's pride builds tension in the story again in this chapter. Rather than move quickly toward their destination, she causes the men to delay and dig a tunnel through a mountain to spite her enemies. Meanwhile, her army is losing morale as Cuchulain continues to kill their men with ease. Though the action in the story has lulled, the suspense is high at this point, since the army must soon battle Cuchulain.

# The Harrying of Cooley

## The Harrying of Cooley Summary

Medb decides that the troops should divide because the road is narrow. She and Fergus take half the troops and livestock on one road, and Ailill takes the other half another way. Ailill suspects that something is wrong and asks his chariot driver to go spy on Medb and Fergus.

The driver finds Medb and Fergus having an affair. He takes Fergus's sword from the sheath and brings it to Ailill, who understands the significance of an unattended sword. When Fergus leaves Medb's tent and finds the sword missing, he panics a bit and is ashamed to have wronged his friend. He goes into the forest and carves a wooden sword. Later, he goes to Ailill, supposedly to play chess. Ailill laughs at him.

Meanwhile, Cuchulain is riding in close pursuit of the armies and comes to another river ahead of them. He talks to his chariot driver of great victory and infamy for their defeat of the enemy. He then calls upon the water to help him and creates a flood. Mani, Ailill and Medb's son, is marching ahead of the army with a few troops. Cuchulain kills Mani, and the troops are drowned in the flood.

Lugaid rides on ahead to speak with Cuchulain. They talk about the situation, Lugaid revealing that the men are afraid to go to the bathroom alone because Cuchulain might slay them. They discuss the terms of a truce. Cuchulain asks that Fergus guarantee he will not be killed and will be given food and water each day. In return, he will stop killing the men.

Lugaid comes to Ailill's tent and delivers the message to Fergus, who does not know what to do. They give Cuchulain some salt pork and wine to allow the armies to reunite while they discuss the truce. After the armies merge again on the path, Cuchulain kills thirty more soldiers while Ailill and Fergus decide what to do. Cuchulain kills great chariot drivers and other workers, and the roads and bridges are named for the men he slays. Fergus encourages Ailill and Medb to take the truce, telling them that soon the men of Ulster will recover from their curse, and in the meantime, Cuchulain is killing all their men.

## The Harrying of Cooley Analysis

This chapter seems like some sort of decoy or trap from Cuchulain. It is far too early in the novel for all of the struggles to be over, and the previous descriptions of Medb's pride make it likely that the couple will accept the truce. Though Cuchulain has killed many men individually, there is still suspense about what the great armies of Ireland are capable of, and this suspense is heightened as the audience is reminded of the army so large they have to divide to fit on the road.

# The Proposals

## The Proposals Summary

Cuchulain makes a great noise in the night, rattling his weapons. One hundred soldiers die of fright listening to the sounds of Cuchulain. In the morning, Medb sends Fiachu to offer a proposal to Cuchulain. She will restore his lands and titles if he stops killing her men and comes under her service instead of Conchobar's. She refers to Conchobar as a lordling. When Cuchulain hears this offer, he is greatly offended at the suggestion that he would change his allegiance.

The next morning, Cuchulain meets with Medb and Fergus. Medb sees how young he is and scoffs to Fergus that this man is a fool to reject her offer. Fergus warns Medb not to let appearances deceive her and tells her to speak to Cuchulain herself and not bad-mouth him to Fergus.

Medb speaks to Cuchulain, ordering him to stop bothering them with his slingshot. She offers him half of the men and women they have acquired on the march. He responds that she stole those people from his land to start with and that he will take them back. They part angrily. Over the next three days, the Irish are afraid to pitch tents or make fires, and Cuchulain kills one hundred of them each night.

Medb recognizes that her army will soon be depleted at this rate. She decides to offer Cuchulain all the women and all the milking cattle they have acquired. She asks that he stop shooting the slingshot and stop killing men at night. She asks Fergus where Cuchulain might be hiding and sends MacRoth to the sunny plain where Cuchulain is napping to deliver the proposal.

Cuchulain is so angry that his body heat melts snow for thirty feet around him. He rips off his clothes and grows angrier when he sees MacRoth approaching. MacRoth does not recognize Cuchulain and speaks to him on the path, asking where he might find the warrior. Cuchulain asks to hear the proposal and rejects it, saying the men of Ulster will kill the dairy cows for meat in the winter and make whores of the women, producing a generation of illegitimate children.

Medb sends MacRoth back, this time to offer meat cows and only the noble women they have captured. Cuchulain rejects the cattle for the same reason again and says it would be a disgrace to see the noble women made into servants and slaves. Cuchulain says there are terms he is willing to accept, but he will not reveal them. He also says that the next messenger who comes with an inappropriate proposal will be killed.

Fergus knows what Cuchulain wants. He tells Medb that Cuchulain wants her to send a warrior to battle him every single day. While they fight, the army will be allowed to march forward. Once the warrior is killed, they must send another one or make camp for the night. Medb will also have to give food and clothing to Cuchulain during the journey. Ailill

thinks it's a terrible proposal, but Medb prefers losing one man per day to losing one hundred each night. She vows to keep the terms and sends Fergus to deliver the message.

## The Proposals Analysis

Cuchulain rejects all of Medb's proposals because she fails to acknowledge the damage she and her men are doing to Cuchulain's country. Since she will not respect his kingdom and its citizens, he refuses to negotiate with her. Knowing Cuchulain's sense of honor for himself and his country, Fergus is the only person who can relate to Medb what Cuchulain really wants: to decimate Medb's troops one man at a time and make her pay for her brazen, selfish behavior in attacking his country to steal a bull.

# The Violent Death of Etarcumul

## The Violent Death of Etarcumul Summary

As Fergus prepares to go off to speak with Cuchulain, Etarcumul asks to go along so that he might see the mighty warrior. Fergus makes the boy promise that he will not pick a fight with Cuchulain, because Fergus will not be able to protect him if he does. They set off, and Cuchulain greets his old friend heartily, promising to give him the best fowl and fish he can catch to eat.

Fergus stays only long enough to discuss the agreement. Cuchulain will fight only one man at a time. Cuchulain agrees and asks the boy Etarcumul what he is staring at. Etarcumul replies that he is staring in wonder at Cuchulain. Etarcumul says he finds Cuchulain to be beautiful and majestic but does not consider him a warrior.

Cuchulain is very angry but will not harm Etarcumul because he came with Fergus. The boy says he will be the first to challenge Cuchulain in the morning. As they return back to camp, Etarcumul decides he cannot wait any longer to kill Cuchulain. He turns back around and goes to fight. Cuchulain will not fight him, because of his devotion to Fergus, whom he calls a foster-father. Instead, he swings his sword and digs up the grass on the ground in front of Etarcumul, making him fall flat on his back. He tries to send the boy away, but Etarcumul refuses to go.

With that, Cuchulain swings the sword and slices Etarcumul in half from head to waist and then sideways at the waist so his body falls in three pieces. Meanwhile, Fergus has no idea this is happening. No matter what he is doing, Fergus does not look behind him so that it can never be said he turned around in fear. Eventually, Etarcumul's squire rides up to Fergus and tells him that Etarcumul went back to fight. Fergus sighs and turns the chariot around to go back for the boy.

Fergus ties the pieces of Etarcumul's body to the chariot and drags them back to camp over rocks and bumps, depositing the gory sight at Medb's tent. He tells her to look at her warrior, and she begins to scream in rage. Fergus yells back that he himself was lucky to escape alive and that she asked for this.

## The Violent Death of Etarcumul Analysis

This chapter reveals the strong devotion Cuchulain feels toward Fergus. The relationship between the two men has not been discussed in great detail, but Cuchulain thinks of Fergus as a foster parent. He has made numerous references to wishing harm on all the Irish soldiers but Fergus. Despite this great devotion, Cuchulain has to defend the honor of Ulster and violently attacks Etarcumul. He does not stop with killing the boy, however. He adds a second swipe of the sword to leave a grisly demonstration of his superiority in battle. This complete domination of Etarcumul leaves a legacy of fear behind for the other warriors of Ireland.

# The Slaying of Nathcrantail

## The Slaying of Nathcrantail Summary

A warrior named Nathcrantail goes next to fight Cuchulain. He carves nine darts from holly wood to throw at Cuchulain. The warrior leaps over each of Nathcrantail's darts, and suddenly, a flock of birds is startled and flies away. As Cuchulain has nothing to eat in the forest except wild fowl and fish, he runs after the birds to hunt his dinner. Nathcrantail takes this as a sign that Cuchulain is fleeing battle. He goes back and reports the cowardice to Medb.

Fergus hears this news of Cuchulain's cowardice and sends Fiachu to tell Cuchulain it is better to go into hiding than be caught running from battle. Cuchulain is shocked that his actions were thus interpreted. He reminds Fiachu that he will not battle an unarmed man, and Nathcrantail was unarmed after throwing his darts. He tells Fiachu to send Nathcrantail back in the morning, and they will fight for real.

In the morning, Cuchulain is furious. He sits on top of a stone column waiting for Nathcrantail, who climbs up to him swinging. Cuchulain leaps onto Nathcrantail's shield, decapitates him and slices his body vertically in half. Cuchulain screams that now his fight against Medb will increase.

## The Slaying of Nathcrantail Analysis

This chapter emphasizes Fergus's extreme pride in bravery. In the previous chapter, readers learned that Fergus is so concerned with not appearing cowardly that he never, ever looks behind him. For him to hear in this chapter that Cuchulain appeared to run away from battle with Nathcrantail is deeply upsetting for him.

Cuchulain is similarly upset that Medb's people have this impression of him. Whether he is angry at disappointing Fergus or whether he shares Fergus's hatred of seeming cowardly is unclear. Regardless, he reacts with violent rage and kills Nathcrantail in the same bloody way he killed Etarcumul.

# The Finding of the Bull

## The Finding of the Bull Summary

Medb proceeds through Ulster searching for the bull, and Cuchulain pursues her mercilessly, killing warrior after warrior. When her armies reach Cuchulain's homelands, he stops fighting individual warriors to protect his land because he feels more strongly about this place. He stops an entire unit of the Irish forces as they pitch camp.

Buide, favored warrior of Medb and Ailill, finds the bull and is driving him back to Medb with scores of other cattle before him. He encounters Cuchulain on the trail, and Cuchulain hurls a spear at him, piercing his shield and his heart and cracking three ribs in his back as it leaves his now lifeless body. During this fight, the cattle charge toward the camp, and the great bull enters Medb's possession. This is the greatest shame Cuchulain will meet in this battle.

As Medb makes her way through Ulster, she changes the name of everything to honor herself. The armies finally return to the base camp after plundering the land, bringing the bull with them.

## The Finding of the Bull Analysis

This chapter presents an interesting scenario for Cuchulain. If he defends the bull that Medb seeks, he will seem a coward for not fighting Buide. If, as he chooses, he fights Buide, the bull escapes, and Medb has what she seeks. In this instance, Cuchulain's pride seems to have cost him the overall victory, as Medb now has what she came for and can head back to Ireland.

# The Death of Forgemen

## The Death of Forgemen Summary

Forgemen, the cattle-herd who tends to the great bull, will not drive him toward the Irish army. He will not cede the cattle, so the army whips and beats the cattle and drives them into a narrow valley where the herd tramples Forgemen to death.

## The Death of Forgemen Analysis

This chapter shows that even the cattle-herds of Ulster will give their lives to prevent Medb from getting her way.

# The Slaying of Redg the Satirist

## The Slaying of Redg the Satirist Summary

The great Irish army is together again and in possession of the bull. Medb and Ailill taunt that Cuchulain is no great warrior, except that he has a magic spearlet. They send their satirist, Redg, to demand Cuchulain release this weapon to them.

Redg demands the spearlet, and Cuchulain throws it all the way through his neck, killing Redg. Another messenger comes to tell Cuchulain that he is selfish and that their deal is nullified, though Cuchulain continues to kill one champion per day for a week.

Medb and Ailill then send twenty men at once, breaking their pact with Cuchulain. He slays them all viciously in one battle. Finally, Ailill sends Fergus to go speak with Cuchulain. Medb offers Cuchulain one half of the cattle in her herd if he stops killing her men. Cuchulain says he will honor the pact as long as she does not break her half of the deal the next day.

## The Slaying of Redg the Satirist Analysis

This chapter provides a real cliffhanger and foreshadows Medb breaking her promise the next day. It is difficult to believe that Cuchulain would stop his siege, leaving the impression that something tricky will happen and that Medb will break her bargain.

# The Meeting of Cuchulain and Finnabair

## The Meeting of Cuchulain and Finnabair Summary

Ailill decides to offer his daughter Finnabair to Cuchulain to stop him from killing the Irish troops. He sends several of his sons to speak with Cuchulain about this proposal, but Cuchulain will not listen to the sons. He is so angry that, yet again, Cuchulain melts the nearby snow with the heat of his body.

Finally, someone convinces Cuchulain to meet Finnabair, but Ailill is planning a trick. He sends a fool disguised as himself with Finnabair to trap Cuchulain, but Cuchulain recognizes the trick. He kills the girl and the fool, and eventually a search party comes looking for them. They find the dead bodies and agree that there will be no truce with Cuchulain.

## The Meeting of Cuchulain and Finnabair Analysis

At this point in the story, the author is playing with archetypal patterns. The stubborn bad guys (Ailill and Medb) are so clouded by their mission and blinded by their own pride that they fail to recognize the cleverness and strength of their enemy. They plan a very transparent prank on Cuchulain and are then surprised when he sees through it and become enraged at his gall. The angry Ailill at the end of the chapter foretells more trickery and foul play from Ailill to come.

# The Combat of Munremar and Curoi

## The Combat of Munremar and Curoi Summary

At this time, the army of Ireland finds itself in the middle of a feud between Munremar and Curoi, who are continually slinging boulders at one another and raining stones down upon the Irish. Medb begs Cuchulain for a truce long enough to move the troops and receives her wish. As they are settling on to the new course, however, the men of Ulster recover from their pains and gather an army together to aid Cuchulain.

## The Combat of Munremar and Curoi Analysis

The suspense at the end of this chapter is intense, as the men of Ulster are finally coming into the picture. Cuchulain has been slowly stifling the armies, and now there is great anticipation over what will happen when he has some help.

# The Slaughter of the Boy Troop

## The Slaughter of the Boy Troop Summary

The young boys of Ulster think it's terrible that Cuchulain must do all this fighting with no help. One hundred fifty of them, one third of the youth population of Ulster, march off to join him. Ailill sees them coming and sends 150 of his own men to destroy them. At this point, Cuchulain becomes contorted with rage so that his body turns ugly, and he cannot recognize friend from foe.

## The Slaughter of the Boy Troop Analysis

Cuchulain is obviously a hero to the people of Ulster, since so many young boys come to aid him and give their lives. This knowledge causes readers to identify with this character even more, for he is the only one able to defend his homeland.

# The Slaughter of the King's Bodyguard

## The Slaughter of the King's Bodyguard Summary

Ailill and Medb want to ask Cuchulain for a truce, and he tells them to put a man on the riverbank for him. Instead, six arrogant princes decide they want to slay Cuchulain, and they are killed by him.

## The Slaughter of the King's Bodyguard Analysis

This chapter reinforces Cuchulain's policy of always taking his word literally, as he does the promises of others. Defy his agreements, and he will react with vengeance.

# The Combat of Cyr with Cuchulain

## The Combat of Cyr with Cuchulain Summary

Back in the normal routine, the Irish men decide Cyr should be the next to fight Cuchulain. No one likes him very much, and they will not be too upset if he should be killed in combat. Cyr is reluctant to go only because he does not want to kill so young an enemy. Medb and Cormac insist, and he departs in the morning with his weapons.

In the morning, Cuchulain is practicing his tricks and working out, swimming, running and hunting. He practices all his skills every morning so they will come naturally and instinctively to him in battle. Cyr comes upon Cuchulain while he is tossing apples, and the boy-hero throws an apple at Cyr so hard that it goes through his shield, through his head and out the other side, killing him.

Fergus reminds Medb that she must send another and another hero to fight Cuchulain, and the narrator steps in to say it would get tedious to recount these battles again and again with the same results.

## The Combat of Cyr with Cuchulain Analysis

This is the first time the narrator has taken a stab at humor in this book, by reminding the audience that Cyr is not well liked among his army. Of all the warriors to die thus far, his death is the most absurd. This change in the narrator is interesting, especially since this narrator does not often editorialize and step into the story. Because the narrator indicates that it will get tedious to list killing after killing of the champions, readers can predict a turn of events in the story.

# The Slaying of Ferbaeth

## The Slaying of Ferbaeth Summary

Cuchulain sends Laeg (his chariot driver) to the camp to speak to his foster brothers and find out who will fight him the next day. Laeg discovers that Cuchulain's own foster brother Ferbaeth is the next in line to fight him and is currently being wined and dined at Medb's tent.

When Cuchulain hears this, he is very sad because he does not want to fight a man he was raised with, learned to fight with and trained beside. Ferbaeth comes to Cuchulain in the night, and they embrace and talk for awhile. Ferbaeth will not, however, stand down from the fight. Cuchulain is angry that his close friend must fight him. He stomps on a holly wood spike, cutting his foot. He picks out the stake and throws it blindly over his shoulder in rage, piercing Ferbaeth in the back of the neck and killing him. Fiachu, watching from near the Irish camp, applauds Cuchulain for his excellent throw.

## The Slaying of Ferbaeth Analysis

The narrator seems to have changed his mind about not describing hero's death after hero's death. This fight, however, is slightly different from the rest because Cuchulain does not want to harm this victim. Cuchulain demonstrates his rash and nasty temper and the repercussions of pent up rage.

# The Combat of Larini MacNois

## The Combat of Larini MacNois Summary

Cuchulain asks Laeg to go again to the camp and find out who is coming. This time, it will be Lugaid's brother Larini. Lugaid tells Laeg he will have to avenge his brother's death if Cuchulain should kill him, and he is not looking forward to that. He says he will not, to his dying day, fight against Cuchulain. Lugaid is another old companion of Cuchulain's from Ulster.

Lugaid goes to meet with Cuchulain and tells him not to kill his brother, for Larini is dull and not a good fighter. Lugaid says Medb is sending him to die just so Lugaid will have to avenge him. He begs Cuchulain not to kill Larini. Cuchulain agrees not to kill Larini and promises just to injure him very badly.

As usual, Medb and Ailill take Larini to their tent and fill him with wine and good food. They parade beautiful women in front of him the night before battle. He goes to fight Cuchulain, who has decided to come without weapons. Cuchulain sweeps Larini's weapons from his arms and shakes the boy. Cuchulain lifts Larini into the air and heaves him back to camp so that he smashes to the ground. For the rest of his life, he cannot move without pain, but the narrator says he remains the only man to fight Cuchulain and live.

## The Combat of Larini MacNois Analysis

This chapter is an important one because it shows Cuchulain's fierce loyalty to his friends and demonstrates how he keeps his word. Because such narrative emphasis is placed on Cuchulain's granting this favor in the name of childhood friendship, it foreshadows an important emphasis on these relationships to come. Cuchulain may well call upon his childhood friends to return the favors he grants them during combat.

# The Slaying of Loch

## The Slaying of Loch Summary

Ailill and Medb decide that Loch should be the next to fight Cuchulain. He refuses to do so, thinking that Cuchulain is too much a child and unworthy of his great skill. Loch tells them to send his brother, Long, instead. They do so, and Long is killed in battle.

Medb sends her maidens into the forest to beg Cuchulain to wear a pretend beard so the Irish will think he has matured and is thus worthy of fighting. He does so, and when Loch sees him, he decides he can fight Cuchulain after all. Loch begins battle with Cuchulain.

Meanwhile, the fairy Morrigan comes to destroy Cuchulain while he is fighting. She disguises herself first as a white cow threatening to lead the herd to stampede. Cuchulain shoots her eye out, barely pausing his fight. She next comes as an eel and binds Cuchulain's feet. While he is thus disposed, Loch slices his chest. In anger, Cuchulain stomps the eel and kills it.

The fairy next comes as a female wolf. While Cuchulain is busy fighting off the wolf, Loch shoots him with his spear and wounds Cuchulain in the leg. Full of rage, Cuchulain throws the spear straight through Loch. As he dies, Loch begs Cuchulain to step backward so he may fall face down and not appear to be fleeing the fight. Cuchulain obliges, seeing the importance of not appearing to flee.

After this, Cuchulain is tired and upset. He sends his chariot driver into Ulster to ask for hope, singing a song of sorrow at being there alone and bloody and hungry and having to cook his own food and fight every day. He asks for a companion.

## The Slaying of Loch Analysis

In this chapter, the theme of bravery is explored yet again. Appearances are everything, even to a dying man who does not want the position of his corpse to seem cowardly. This chapter also makes use of some of the silly tricks used throughout literature by villains. Medb herself tries to fool her men by asking Cuchulain to wear a mask and appear older. This request must have seemed strange to him, as it sent him another one of her great fighters.

This is also the first time Cuchulain must struggle through battle. Though Loch is aided by a magical being, he is still able to inflict pain upon Cuchulain. This greatly damages his morale and sends him lamenting for friendship. Given the emphasis on friendship in the previous chapter, it seems that Cuchulain might soon seek out his friends from wherever they might be.

# The Violation of the Agreement

## The Violation of the Agreement Summary

Next, Medb sends six druids to fight Cuchulain. This violates her agreement to only send one warrior at a time. Because she broke the deal, Cuchulain takes up his slingshot after killing the druids and kills numerous soldiers from afar.

## The Violation of the Agreement Analysis

Medb's motives are difficult to figure out. This should not be surprising from a woman who started an entire war just so she could have an equally fine bull as her husband. In recent chapters, she is consorting with the enemy to fool her own troops into dying at his hands. Now, she knowingly violates the agreement she begged for and loses even more of her soldiers. It is not yet clear why Medb behaves the way she does, but it is certainly mysterious and leaves curiosity over what she'll do next.

# The Healing of Morrigan

## The Healing of Morrigan Summary

Morrigan is hurt from battling Cuchulain and is frightened that he will find her and kill her. She disguises herself as an old woman milking a cow as he comes along the road. He is very thirsty and begs her for some milk. With each sip he takes, he prays for the old woman to heal of her injuries, and she does.

As Cuchulain stands up from the cow, Medb sends one hundred soldiers at once to fight him. He disposes of them all at once, and she is frustrated that her men are humiliated so in battle. She says something about it to Ailill, who snappily reminds her that this is not the first time they have experienced such a loss.

## The Healing of Morrigan Analysis

The audience is gently reminded of Cuchulain's magical powers as a healer as he is tricked into granting the fairy Morrigan health. This deed is quickly forgotten as he must fight one hundred Irish soldiers at once. It is a relief to see Ailill chastise Medb, because her motives in killing this many men have become completely unclear.

# The Great Rout on the Plain of Murthemne

## The Great Rout on the Plain of Murthemne Summary

Even depleted from Cuchulain, the Irish army is still enormous as the soldiers march south to Ulster. Cuchulain watches them moving along the road with their cattle and grows angry at the number of his enemies. In the distance, Cuchulain's driver sees a great warrior approaching. Cuchulain recognizes the man as a fairy warrior who has come to help him.

The man tells Cuchulain to rest and heal and that he will fight the Irish for him while he recuperates. Cuchulain has not slept in months while he's been fighting and is very glad of the rest. While Cuchulain sleeps, the fairy puts magical herbs on his skin to heal his wounds, unbeknownst to Cuchulain.

## The Great Rout on the Plain of Murthemne Analysis

For the first time, Cuchulain receives aid, though not the aid from Ulster he has requested. This time, the magical fairies have come to help rather than harm Cuchulain.

# The Slaughter of the Youths of Ulster

## The Slaughter of the Youths of Ulster Summary

One hundred fifty young men from Ulster, the sons of kings, come to fight the armies. Under the leadership of Follomain, Conchobar's son, they kill four hundred Irish men, but all die in battle except Follomain.

Follomain swears he will never return without Ailill's head on a platter. Instead, he is killed in the night. Cuchulain awakes from his three-day slumber and asks for a status update. When he learns the youth have perished, he is devastated and full of guilt at having been asleep and not protecting them.

Cuchulain asks the fairy to stay with him and avenge the youth. The fairy refuses because to help Cuchulain would be to toil without hope of recognition. Only Cuchulain will be remembered in the battle. The fairy departs, telling Cuchulain that the enemy stands no chance against him now. Cuchulain gets ready to depart, bringing his chariot driver with him.

## The Slaughter of the Youths of Ulster Analysis

This chapter builds suspicion that perhaps the fairy was not helping Cuchulain after all. Under his supposed supervision, one hundred fifty children from Ulster die in battle. It is interesting that Cuchulain is not angry with the fairy for not saving the children, but it is understandable that he wants to avenge the young men's deaths and feels guilty for sleeping through the fighting. Perhaps, as before, the fairy was really against Cuchulain as he seemed to aid Medb's cause more than Cuchulain's.

# The Scythed Chariot

## The Scythed Chariot Summary

Laeg the charioteer and Cuchulain get dressed for battle in resplendent armor. Laeg casts a magic spell and makes the chariot invisible so he and Cuchulain will be able to leap over the enemies and kill them more easily. After Cuchulain is fully dressed in his armor, he experiences his first "twisting fit of rage," so that his whole body spasms and contorts as he gets more and more angry.

There is a great deal of magic and sorcery behind each element of Cuchulain's outfit, from the feathered headdress to the oxen skin he wears on his chest. Eventually, his forehead spurts blood from his rage fit and the intensity of preparing for battle. He decks the chariot out in spikes and blades and sharpened wheels, so that anything coming near it will be sliced to bits.

Cuchulain starts driving his chariot in great circles around the army, digging such deep wheel wells that it creates levies through which the men of Ireland cannot escape. He kills anything he can reach, from men to dogs to cattle, in great numbers, and he makes a great pile of the victims. Over three hundred officers are slain that day, in addition to the soldiers and their livestock. Only one third of the remaining army escapes unscathed from Cuchulain's rage at the slaughter of the youth.

## The Scythed Chariot Analysis

This chapter takes great pains to describe Cuchulain's wardrobe in painstaking detail, creating a visual image of the mighty warrior in full battle dress, contorted with rage. The description of the clothing builds suspense with each paragraph until the momentous way Cuchulain thunders into battle. He easily destroys two thirds of the Irish army on his own, fueled only by the rage at seeing the youth of Ulster destroyed. It seems that there is not much left of the Irish army and surely not much of their spirit after such a brutal attack.

# The Account of the Appearance of Cuchulain

## The Account of the Appearance of Cuchulain Summary

The next day, Cuchulain comes in his normal clothes to show the women and civilians traveling with the army that he is not a terrifying and ugly beast when not in battle. He is actually quite handsome, with locks of brown, red and blond hair twisted neatly around his head. He wears fine clothing and jewels and is proud to show off his seven fingers and toes on each hand. He is so handsome that the Irish women beg the remaining soldiers to lift them into the air so they can see him more easily. They are all taken aback by the fantastic looking warrior.

## The Account of the Appearance of Cuchulain Analysis

Cuchulain's desire to seem normal to the Irish women could mean several things. He could be using his good looks to woo the Irish women and further mentally defeat the men. He could also be trying to demonstrate that he is indeed a young man and build shame in the Irish at having been so easily dominated by an angry young soldier. Lastly, given his prior concern with appearances, he could be very concerned with the Irish impression of his looks and trying to simply show them that he looks quite different happy than he does when full of rage.

# Dubthach's Jealousy

## Dubthach's Jealousy Summary

Dubthach of Ulster is very angry with Cuchulain because his wife is enamored with the warrior. He meets with the Irish and tries to help them plot to capture Cuchulain. Fergus finds out about this and is very angry, kicking Dubthach away from the camp. As he goes, Fergus screams out all the bad things Dubthach has done to all the people of Ulster.

## Dubthach's Jealousy Analysis

Cuchulain's idea of making the women of Ireland fall for him seems successfully in breaking the morale of the troops. They are beginning to argue and quarrel with each other, and this incident hints at further uprisings to come, with further interventions from Fergus to defend an honorable fight.

# The Slaying of Oengus

## The Slaying of Oengus Summary

A young man from Ulster named Oengus comes to help Cuchulain. Elders say that if Oengus had fought the Irish one at a time as Cuchulain did, he could have killed a great number of them. Instead, the Irish attack him from all sides and kill him very quickly.

## The Slaying of Oengus Analysis

Help arrives for Cuchulain at last, but the new arrival does not stop to take counsel with him on how best to be useful. The warriors of Ulster are no more magical and capable than the warriors of Ireland.

# The Misthrow at Belach Eoin

## The Misthrow at Belach Eoin Summary

Several men of Ulster attempt to gather together and discuss a fighting strategy. They grow so angry with one another that they throw spears and kill each other. The men of Ireland watch this and comment that they are so eager to kill their relatives that they do not stop to think that they are all on the same side.

## The Misthrow at Belach Eoin Analysis

Cuchulain really does seem to be surrounded by incompetent people. Whenever anyone attempts to help him, they wind up dead or making foolish mistakes or both. Cry as he might for help, he seems to be in this battle alone.

# The Disguising of Tamon

## The Disguising of Tamon Summary

The Irish convince one of their dim-witted soldiers, Tamon, to dress as Ailill, wear a crown and go out to Cuchulain. Cuchulain sees him coming, assumes he is Ailill and strikes him dead with his slingshot.

## The Disguising of Tamon Analysis

The narrator in this chapter refers to Cuchulain as "ignorant" and lacking knowledge. This is the first time the narrative voice has made reference to Cuchulain's youth and lack of experience in battle. This is not the first time in the book that Cuchulain has fallen for such trickery. The Irish are unable to beat him in strength and skill, but they have apparently found intelligence to be his weakness.

# The Battle of Fergus and Cuchulain

## The Battle of Fergus and Cuchulain Summary

The point has come where the Irish soldiers will no longer fight Cuchulain. Medb summons Fergus to fight him. Fergus insists it would be wrong for him to fight such a young man, and in particular one who was his disciple. They argue all night long, and in the morning, Fergus goes to Cuchulain.

Cuchulain sees Fergus approaching, but he is not concerned. He can see that there is no sword in Fergus's sheath. The narrator steps in to remind readers that Ailill took Fergus's sword when he was discovered having an affair with Medb. Indeed, Fergus has just gone to talk to Cuchulain.

Fergus begs Cuchulain to turn and run from him. Cuchulain says he cannot do this thing, since appearing a coward is the worst thing imaginable for the warrior. Fergus, who shares this sentiment, promises that one day, even if Cuchulain is weak from battle and can barely fight, Fergus will run from him. All the men of Ireland will see this and flee from Cuchulain. Fergus promises to end the cattle raid if Cuchulain will just run from him now. Cuchulain agrees.

The Irish see Cuchulain fleeing from Fergus and are amazed. They beg Fergus to chase him, but Fergus refuses to fight with Cuchulain again until every other man has fought him one-on-one.

## The Battle of Fergus and Cuchulain Analysis

The theme of cowardice and the great care taken to develop Fergus and Cuchulain as characters with enormous pride finally comes to fruition in this chapter. Fergus asks Cuchulain to do the one thing he morally cannot, the one thing he despises above all else. In return, Fergus promises to later do this same abominable deed. The fact that they each agree to sacrifice their one last moral stronghold shows how deeply they care about one another. The fact that Fergus is willing to compromise Medb's cattle raid shows how little he respects his current rulers.

# The Head-Place of Ferchu

## The Head-Place of Ferchu Summary

Ferchu is technically under the reign of Medb and Ailill, although he never does anything to aid them. He does not fight in their battles and always manages to escape whatever hardships fall in the kingdom. What he does do is wander the borderlands and rob and steal from their people with his gang of twelve bandits.

Ferchu decides he can make it up to Medb and Ailill by killing Cuchulain. He and his men sneak up on Cuchulain, and Cuchulain swings his might sword one time, decapitated all of them in one swing. He places each of their heads on top of a stone pillar for Ailill to discover.

## The Head-Place of Ferchu Analysis

Now that the brave and honest soldiers in Medb's army are reluctant to fight, the petty thieves and arrogant criminals are coming out of the woods to try their luck. Cuchulain, clearly, cannot be beaten on the battlefield.

# Mann's Fight

## Mann's Fight Summary

Medb next sends Mann to fight Cuchulain. Mann is a gigantic person, crass, rude, loud and strong. He says that he will fight Cuchulain with his bare hands and grind up his bones. Cuchulain wrestles him, and Mann appears to be winning for a short while. Laeg, the charioteer, yells out to remind Cuchulain of the slaughter of the youth. Cuchulain's rage returns to him, and he tears Mann to pieces.

## Mann's Fight Analysis

Sometimes even the superhuman strength of Cuchulain is challenged. The Irish cannot rest easy by thinking that they just need to wear him out, however. At the mere suggestion of the slaughter of the children of his homeland, his powerful rage restores him to full power.

# The Combat of Calatin's Children

## The Combat of Calatin's Children Summary

Next up to fight Cuchulain is Calatin and his twenty-seven sons and their sons. These men are very skilled fighters, who tip their weapons and spears and arrows with poison. They are known to be very accurate throwers and have never missed their mark before. They decide to fight him all at once, arguing that Calatin's body extends into his offspring and that they are therefore one person.

Fergus is very upset over this and feels certain Cuchulain will fall at the hands of the poisoners. He begs someone to go watch the fight for him and report. The men throw their spears at Cuchulain. None miss their mark, but Cuchulain is fast with his shield. None of the spears cut him. Cuchulain pulls out his sword to chop the spears from his shield. While he does this, the men rush in and start beating him into the gravel. Cuchulain screams a mighty cry so loud that everyone within miles hears it.

Fiachu comes sprinting from the forest to Cuchulain's aid. He swings his sword and chops off the fists of the men beating Cuchulain. Cuchulain and Fiachu quickly set their sights on killing the men so they cannot return to camp and report that Cuchulain had help in battle, breaking his end of the bargain with Medb.

Cuchulain kills all the men but the grandson of Calatin. The boy goes sprinting for the camp to Medb's tent and screams "Fiach!" before Cuchulain kills him. Medb hears this, the Irish word for debt, and thinks the boy is worried over any debts he incurred before battle. She assures the men standing around her that they will not leave debts behind them; their service to her is repayment enough.

## The Combat of Calatin's Children Analysis

Once more, Cuchulain seems about to fall in battle and once more he is aided by a friend. These battle scenes demonstrate that Cuchulain is perhaps human after all, though he seems often to possess supernatural gifts. The recent battles have shown the value of loyalty in the characters in the book.

Fergus and Fiachu have shown great loyalty to the warrior, and he has sworn to repay them. He gives his word to look out for the men, and because such care was taken early in the novel to show Cuchulain keeping his word no matter what, readers anticipate a great scene where Cuchulain is challenged to return the loyalty favor. These battle scenes show the same things (men dying quickly at the hand of Cuchulain), but they are now incorporating the themes and emotions hinted at in the beginning of the book.

# The Combat of Ferdiad and Cuchulain

## The Combat of Ferdiad and Cuchulain Summary

The Irish next decide that Ferdiad should fight Cuchulain and end the battle once and for all. Cuchulain and Ferdiad trained together in Ulster under the same masters. They equal one another in skill, size and fighting style. Cuchulain is slightly better with the barbed spear, and Ferdiad is slightly more skilled at man-to-man combat because of a horned suit he wears for protection. Ferdiad refuses to fight his friend, and Medb hires sorcerers to bring boils on Ferdiad's skin to shame him for cowardice. Ferdiad decides it is better to fight his friend than be disgraced and goes into the camp, where he is wined, dined and entertained in Medb's tent.

Medb promises Ferdiad anything he could wish for - land, women, titles and riches - if he will just conquer Cuchulain. Ferdiad asks for six sworn promises of the rewards, not trusting Medb's word. She swears on the lives of her sons and her greatest warriors. She promises everything she can to get Ferdiad to fight his friend. Ferdiad laments that he would rather fight two hundred men than this man, swearing to kill himself if he kills Cuchulain, wanting to be buried with him.

Ferdiad next swears to kill Medb if he kills Cuchulain in battle. Medb decides to fool Ferdiad, saying that Cuchulain mentioned him specifically and said it would be no big deal for him to kill Ferdiad. Ferdiad is furious and is now eager to fight Cuchulain. They send Fergus to warn Cuchulain who will come next.

Fergus talks to Cuchulain and tells him to be ready because Ferdiad is far greater than all the others Cuchulain has killed. Cuchulain reiterates that he has never fled from an opponent in battle and is not afraid of Ferdiad. Ferdiad, meanwhile, prepares for battle. The six warriors Medb promised him are to go with him in case Cuchulain wants to battle them all at once. They are not confident of victory in the battle.

On the day of battle, Cuchulain sleeps until mid morning so it cannot appear as though he woke early out of nerves if someone should see him. Cuchulain mounts his chariot and rides to the battle place, surrounded by shrieking demons and spirits. Ferdiad hears the racket, and his men are frightened. He knows a mighty battle is coming. He tells his men to stop praising Cuchulain for looking so formidable, saying that Medb has foreseen their victory.

Ferdiad and Cuchulain meet at the ford and talk about their situation. They ask why it had to be this way, that such friends should have to fight. Each says that he will destroy the other, and then they begin to discuss how they want the fight to proceed. They argue over which of them knows the other's skills better. Ferdiad calls Cuchulain a braggart, and the talk turns less cordial. Cuchulain insists that Ferdiad was tricked into this fight by Medb's cunning. Ferdiad questions why Cuchulain alone must toil so to protect the cow.

Ferdiad, recalling the two friends' earlier training and friendly adventures, decides to use the weapons of their youth. Ferdiad, having been first to arrive at the battlefield, gets to choose the weapons for the day. He picks up shields and eight-edged blades, along with daggers and knives, and prepares to fight. They fight for hours, each showing excellent defense and offense, and neither man cuts or strikes the other. They decide this fight is futile and pause to decide another means of battle.

Ferdiad and Cuchulain next throw spears at one another, each wounding the other, until nightfall. They decide to rest. The men hug and talk about old times over a meal as the fairies come to apply healing herbs to them. Cuchulain is very careful to divide the portions of everything perfectly equally so nobody might say a victory came from better food or medical care. They sleep the night in the ford, and in the morning, Cuchulain decides to fight on horseback. They fight from early morning until sunset again, each wounding the other significantly and tiring the horses. They decide to stop and rest again that evening.

The next morning, Cuchulain notices that Ferdiad looks angry. They both talk about how awful it is that Medb has convinced such good friends, sworn allies, to fight one another to the death. This day, they choose to fight with the heavy long-swords. They fight again until sundown, slicing and bruising one another tremendously, but they do not embrace one another or eat together this evening. They are sad and go sleep alone with their own helpers. The next morning, Ferdiad wakes up early knowing this will be the final day of battle between them.

Ferdiad puts on his best armor and gets up early to practice his skills. Cuchulain comes to the ford and sees him practicing, resplendent in the sun. He tells his man that Ferdiad is a splendid man. If in battle, Ferdiad is winning, Cuchulain asks the men to remind him of the children and evoke his rage. If, however, Cuchulain is winning, he asks them to cheer him on so he has the strength to continue killing his best friend. Cuchulain picks the battle today, and he decides on the feat of the ford, or all-out fighting with whatever weapons are available. Ferdiad sighs, knowing that this is how all his other Irishmen lost their lives.

The battle begins, and for hours, they fight at a distance with swords and daggers. Around noon, they scream out and fight closer together. Cuchulain jumps on Ferdiad's shield to decapitate him. Ferdiad waits until Cuchulain's weight has shifted for the blow and then knocks him off the shield. This happens three times, and Cuchulain's men begin to shout to him to taunt him on. Cuchulain twists with rage, and the men fight so closely and so fiercely that the stream changes course to avoid them as their weapons bend and break under the pressure of their bodies.

Ferdiad stabs Cuchulain in the chest, burying his knife to the handle. He continues to deliver blows with the other hand. Cuchulain calls upon his spirit friends to come to his aid. Ferdiad suddenly feels the strength of three men pushing against him, as two invisible fairies come to help Cuchulain. Ferdiad asks Cuchulain why he did not reveal his fairy helpers before. Cuchulain responds by asking Ferdiad why he never revealed

the secret of his horned armor. They now have no secrets from one another, except Cuchulain's barbed spear.

Ferdiad swings and kills the two fairies, and this gives him great hope of succeeding. Laeg renews the shouts to encourage Cuchulain to win again. Cuchulain calls for his spear, and Laeg produces it from its hiding place in the stream. Ferdiad's chariot driver, instructed to keep Laeg from helping Cuchulain, unleashes the dam and washes the spear out of Laeg's arms. Cuchulain is furious and leaps on Ferdiad's shield again. Ferdiad again deflects the blow and sends Cuchulain flying across the stream.

Cuchulain demands that Laeg get the spear, and Laeg beats Ferdiad's driver to a bloody pulp. He runs down the river after the spear, and Ferdiad's man recovers briefly enough to pierce the damn and set the whole river crashing upon Laeg. Cuchulain is furious and leaps on Ferdiad again. Ferdiad again deflects, and this time he sends Cuchulain crashing into the river. Cuchulain keeps screaming for the spear until Laeg is forced to kill Ferdiad's driver in order to get it. He throws it to Cuchulain, who is severely wounded from Ferdiad.

Cuchulain hurls the barbed spear into Ferdiad, who hears it being called for and ducks. He must decide which of Cuchulain's weapons is deadliest, the spears, knives or this new barbed weapon. He lowers his shield, and Cuchulain stabs his upper body. Ferdiad raises the shield quickly, and Cuchulain uses his foot to drive the spear into Ferdiad, where the barbs expand and rip his organs inside.

As Ferdiad is dying, he screams that Cuchulain killed him unfairly by using his feet. Cuchulain carries his friend north, so he will die facing away from the Irish army. He collapses by his friend, weeping, and asks Laeg what is wrong with him. Laeg tells Cuchulain that he must hurry and get away and that the Irish will no longer keep their promise of single combat now that he has slain Ferdiad. He also adds that it is not fitting for him to cry. Cuchulain is exhausted and stricken with grief over killing his friend. Cuchulain continues to sob as Laeg tells him it is all right to feel tired, because he has hardly slept these months and is severely wounded from his recent battles.

Cuchulain begins to describe Ferdiad's childhood with Cuchulain, talking about their games and lessons and fights together. He says there will never be another warrior like Ferdiad. Cuchulain asks Laeg to strip Ferdiad's body so Cuchulain might see the brooch Medb gave him in her battle promise, saying that the daughter Medb has now promised in marriage to every warrior is not that fair that she should end a friendship like theirs. Cuchulain then slices Ferdiad open because he needs to retrieve his barbed spear to use again. He sobs as he washes the weapon covered in Fergus's blood. Cuchulain says that if he had his way, he would die soon after Ferdiad, but he must protect the bull of Cooley. Laeg encourages Cuchulain that they must leave, and as they walk away, Cuchulain moans that it was all only sport until he had to kill Ferdiad. He is devastated with grief.

# The Combat of Ferdiad and Cuchulain Analysis

This chapter of the epic is the most famed and repeated story from the book. It is told again and again throughout Ireland in various works of children's literature. The chapter is so endearing because it highlights the themes of friendship and loyalty and duty.

In rich visual detail, the author describes the fight scenes and the armor and the preparations of the two men who truly care about one another. The scenes are so carefully detailed that the emotions are heightened by the realistic images presented. This is a moving depiction of the repercussions of deceit from Medb and of what happens when men second-guess their lifelong devotions because of the hasty and angry reaction to hearing some contrived gossip. Had Ferdiad paused and thought about what Medb said, he might never have had to fight his lifelong friend.

However, Ferdiad does react hastily to Medb's claim that Cuchulain does not care if Ferdiad dies. Hurt feelings and not a sense of loyalty to the cattle raid spurs Ferdiad into this battle. For the first time, Cuchulain is seriously wounded in combat. He faces an equal in talent, and each must resort to secrets to defeat the other. Unfortunately for Ferdiad, Cuchulain's barbed weapon is stronger than his magic armor. Painful as it is for Cuchulain, he must destroy his friend. The teenage warrior is so unaccustomed to grief that he does not recognize the emotion, asking Laeg to explain why he hurts so badly after killing this man. Even though Cuchulain knew the fight would be difficult, he had no idea how badly it would hurt to lose a loved one. This chapter shows Cuchulain growing as a man emotionally, not just growing in prowess or athletic skill.

The ending leaves a question of whether Medb really will break her truce now that Ferdiad has died. Will she, as Laeg predicts, send the whole of the Irish army after Cuchulain? The suspense is thick as Cuchulain escapes into the forest sobbing into his barbed spear.

# Cuchulain and the Rivers

## Cuchulain and the Rivers Summary

Along the road, the men of Ulster come to help Cuchulain heal. They take him to the rivers and dress his wounds with herbs and potions until the waters are topped with green.

## Cuchulain and the Rivers Analysis

This chapter serves as another reminder of how badly Ferdiad has wounded Cuchulain in battle, further emphasizing how equally matched the warriors were.

# Cethern's Strait Fight

## Cethern's Strait Fight Summary

Medb fears the Ulstermen might have recovered from their curse. She sends a watchman out to warn them if an army approaches. The guard sees a stark naked man riding toward them violently, carrying no weapons and wearing nothing. The man crashes into camp right behind the warning and wounds people all around him. The men, wielding weapons, wound him right back, and he dashes from camp to where Cuchulain is being healed and demands medical attention.

Cuchulain demands that Laeg go back to the Irish camp and get a doctor for the man, as Medb promised to provide food and medical care to Cuchulain. A stream of doctors comes to help Cethern, the warrior, and each tells him his wounds are too severe and that he will die. Cethern punches each of them in the forehead so hard he drives their brains through their skulls. Cethern kills fifteen Irish physicians and then demands Cuchulain's special magic doctor, Fingin, who comes to treat Cethern.

## Cethern's Strait Fight Analysis

In this strange turn of events, a worthy ally comes to aid Cuchulain. While the great warrior is recovering, this new fighter attacks the Irish with skill and a bizarre temper. He demands Cuchulain's best care and seems quite worthy of receiving it, matching Cuchulain in ferocity and fighting ability.

# Cethern's Bloody Wounds

## Cethern's Bloody Wounds Summary

Fingin looks at Cethern's wounds and decides that they are not too bad. Cethern describes the man who wounded him, and Cuchulain says that man is Fergus's son, who would probably not have wanted Cethern to die had he known who it was. Another wound is determined to have been from Medb, who certainly would have enjoyed killing Cethern. Other wounds are from Ailill and Medb's bodyguards, from their children and from Medb's children and numerous other Irishmen who all wished Cethern dead.

Fingin can tell by the wounds what sort of person gave them, reading the magical signs of the cuts. Cuchulain and Cethern discuss the characters of the people who wounded Cethern and determine each one's motivation for hurting Cethern in the name of Medb and her cattle raid. Fingin says there is no hope for Cethern and for him not to count on his cattle sales this year. Cethern kicks Fingin into a chariot, intending to harm him like the other doctors. Fingin gives him a choice of a long but gentle recovery, or a three-day bloody one so he can then fight off the Irish. Cethern picks the three-day route.

Cuchulain sneaks into the Irish camp to kill livestock to make a marrow-soak for Cethern, who climbs in for three straight days. He emerges with a slab of wood lashed to his stomach to keep his organs inside. Cethern's wife comes to him and brings his sword so Cethern can run to the camp and start killing the Irish.

Meanwhile, one of the doctors Cethern thought he had killed lived to crawl from the pile of bodies back to camp and warn Ailill and Medb of the mighty new warrior with Cuchulain. They meet him prepared. They have dressed a stone pillar to look like Ailill and placed it in the woods. Cethern comes upon it and stabs his sword in the pillar to the hilt. Many, Ailill and Medb's son, then comes out dressed as Ailill and lures Cethern into a ring of armed men, who kill him. His wife mourns her husband and sings a great song about the warrior and his skill killing the Irish when he could.

## Cethern's Bloody Wounds Analysis

This chapter depicts a very strange turn of events for Cethern. The man from the previous chapter seemed as invincible as Cuchulain, with an even nastier temper. He seemed certain to be a great help to Cuchulain, with his mysterious strength and ability to survive a trip with such bad injuries. This chapter seems to predict a similar ally in showing Cethern's stubborn and miraculous recovery and his determination to get back into the fight. The end of Cethern seems to be, again, his rash decisions. Like Ferdiad, he makes a snap judgment in assuming the pillar is Ailill without looking closely. Like Ferdiad, this mistake costs him his life. The message of the recent battles seems to be patience and trusting one's instincts.

# The Tooth-Fight of Fintan

## The Tooth-Fight of Fintan Summary

Fintan, Cethern's father, comes to avenge his son. He brings one hundred fifty men with him, and they all kill three times that number of Irish. The Irish, however, also kill all of Fintan's men except another of his sons. On the battleground, the bodies of each army are found locked at the jaws from fighting so closely. The Irish name this site the tooth-fight. Medb and Ailill tell Fintan that if he withdraws and promises not to fight them until the great battle foretold by the sorcerers, they will release his son. Fintan accepts and retreats to his home.

## The Tooth-Fight of Fintan Analysis

This fight seems to function as a suspense builder and a reminder that there is to be a great battle between the armies. It is an alert that the Ulstermen might soon recover from their curse, and they might all soon fight over the cattle.

# The Red-Shame of Menn

## The Red-Shame of Menn Summary

A man named Menn comes to fight, bringing with him twelve warriors who kill many more Irish than their number. They, of course, are all also slain except Menn, who is greatly wounded. The Irish declare it shameful for Menn to be wounded so badly and bleed on the dead bodies of his men. Ailill and Medb tell Menn that they will not chase after him if he retreats back to his kingdom to recover. They say that they will all meet again at the great battle when the Ulstermen recover.

## The Red-Shame of Menn Analysis

This battle reminds readers yet again that there is a greater battle to come.

# The Charioteers

## The Charioteers Summary

Next, the charioteers from Ulster come to fight the Irish. They are very skilled and kill a great number of the Irish soldiers before falling themselves after being attacked by stones.

## The Charioteers Analysis

This chapter shows that more and more Ulstermen are recovering and serves as a reminder that a great battle is coming soon.

# The White-Fight of Rochad

## The White-Fight of Rochad Summary

Rochad from Ulster brings an army to fight the Irish. Finnabair, the daughter of Medb and Ailill who is promised as reward for each champion before he dies in battle, tells her parents that she is in love with Rochad. Upon hearing this, they encourage her to go sleep with him and arrange for a truce.

Some of the other Irish men discover that Finnabair is on her way to Rochad. They have in the past been promised her hand for various duties to Medb. They want to defend her honor and take about a thousand men to fight off Rochad's troops. Finnabair discovers that the Irish soldiers have died for her and dies of shame and a broken heart. They call the battle a white fight because, while Rochad's men are killed, he is not red with blood at all.

## The White-Fight of Rochad Analysis

Finnabair has been Medb's bait throughout the book to encourage her men to die for her cause. Now that Finnabair has finally died a lonely and sad woman, Medb will need to come up with a new enticement to send her men into death with Cuchulain unless the Ulster army approaches quickly. This chapter adds to the suspense of awaiting the great battle.

# Iliach's Clump-Fight

## Iliach's Clump-Fight Summary

Iliach of Ulster decides that he wants to ward off the Irish, not caring if he dies for the cause. He rigs up his two pathetic horses and his rickety chariot and heads off to do so. As he approaches, the Irish comment that they wish all the Ulstermen would look this shabby.

Iliach is so full of rage that he fights like Cuchulain. He attacks and kills the Irish until his weapons break, and he then fights them with his bear hands, tearing them into clumps of bones. The narrator interjects that this is one of only several uncountable things in the whole tale: the number of Irish soldiers Iliach kills in this battle.

When Iliach first arrived, he met with Dochi, son of Maga, and said that Dochi should be the only one of the Irish men to kill him. After he spends his rage, Iliach returns to Dochi, who decapitates him.

## Iliach's Clump-Fight Analysis

The Irish are starting to discover that the Ulstermen are tougher than they appear. Like Cuchulain, Iliach has deceiving appearances and turns out to be not only a man of his word, but also an amazing warrior. If the Irish army is smart, it will learn to stop underestimating its enemies as they slowly return from their curses to drive the Irish out of the kingdom.

# The Deer-Stalking of Amargin

## The Deer-Stalking of Amargin Summary

The Ulstermen start to fight the Irish. Amargin blocks their path on the march by pelting them repeatedly with stones. Meanwhile, Curoi decides to face Cuchulain next. When he gets to the ford, however, he sees Cuchulain covered in wounds from his fight with Ferdiad. Curoi decides not to fight because if he wins, people will say it was not due to skill but because Cuchulain was already wounded from Ferdiad.

Curoi decides to hurl stones back at Amargin instead. Their stones keep meeting in the air and shatter, raining slivers of rocks on the men. Medb tells Curoi to stop because his efforts are killing more men than Amargin's rocks. Medb convinces Amargin to stop fighting them and says the army will not move forward for one day to give the Ulstermen more time to recover for a great battle.

## The Deer-Stalking of Amargin Analysis

The Irish grow a bit careless in their anticipation of the great battle. They are still allowing pride and appearances to dictate their actions, however, as they judge Cuchulain too weak to fight and crave honor and fame in battle above a simple victory. Medb seems to grow more reasonable and recognizes when she is being defeated, and she still manages to eke out a way for her troops to come out on top as she prepares for this great battle.

# The Repeated Warning of Sualtaim

## The Repeated Warning of Sualtaim Summary

Sualtaim, Cuchulain's father, hears of his son's difficulty. He rides to see his son and moans at the sight of him. This is upsetting for Cuchulain, who never wanted to appear weak and particularly not in front of his father. Cuchulain says he can fight no more and that he has fought every day from summer through the following spring and is covered in wounds completely. All the hairs have been singed off his body, and his best body part is his hand, which clasps his shield despite its wounds. Cuchulain says it is time that the Ulstermen raise arms.

Sualtaim goes back to his people and begs them all repeatedly, in all corners of the kingdom, to take up arms. They refuse to aid Cuchulain, saying it is treason to speak against the king of Ulster. At last, Sualtaim goes to Conchobar in the throws of his curse. He tells Conchobar what has been happening, and Conchobar wakes up and orders the men of Ulster to arms.

## The Repeated Warning of Sualtaim Analysis

Sualtaim runs through his homeland begging people to fight off the approaching Irish army. They either refuse to believe him or think he is exaggerating and will not go to aid his son. As the country slowly recovers from its curse, the people are at last forced into action by their angry king, forced out of bed before he is well.

# The Order of the Men of Ulster

## The Order of the Men of Ulster Summary

Conchobar sends his messenger Finnchad to every warrior in Ulster to command each to get ready for battle. Some come to his palace to wait for his full recovery, and some march off toward the Irish right away. Conchobar decides that secrecy is his best weapon, as the Irish do not know if he is well or not. They set off toward Medb's army as well.

The soldiers first come to Medb's bodyguards. The Ulstermen decapitate over one hundred men and release their female slaves back to their families. They continue marching into the night, now with an enlarged army.

## The Order of the Men of Ulster Analysis

This chapter uses lists of names again to keep a record of the tribes of men fighting in the battles. It ends suspensefully on the eve of a great march, the full army now assembled. There is a great foreshadowing of action to come.

# The Agitation of Celtchar

## The Agitation of Celtchar Summary

The leaders of the Ulster army, particularly Celtchar, dream of the battle to come and cry out in their sleep about it. Cormac talks in his sleep to the Irish and tells them that tomorrow will be the day. The Irish have an uneasy night, as their men have nightmares, and teems of ghouls and spirits come to their camp to frighten them. The Ulster men envision victory on the battlefield.

## The Agitation of Celtchar Analysis

These dreams demonstrate the fortuneteller's predictions that Ulster will be victorious in battle. They also add an eerie mood and prepare the audience for a gory battle ahead.

# The Array of the Host

## The Array of the Host Summary

Ailill thinks the Irish have dominated the land of Ulster, taking their women and cattle and pillaging their lands. He sends MacRoth into the woods to take survey of their holdings. While he is in there, MacRoth hears a terrible roar. Every type of animal comes crashing through the forest, creating a rumbling as he has never heard before.

MacRoth runs back and reports this happening. Fergus knows exactly what it is. The massive Ulster army on the march has frightened all the animals in the woods. The soldiers and their weapons and the animals of the land and sky are making a terrible racket as they move toward the Irish. The battle approaches. Fergus tells Medb that it's a very good thing she has a brave army, as she will need all the help she can get against the fury of Ulster.

Ailill tries to reason that perhaps MacRoth was mistaken in the number of men he saw. Fergus warns not to underestimate these men and not to judge their numbers by the number of fires or horses he saw, for they could be hiding or coming in units. Medb says she is not worried and that she will take Conchobar prisoner. He hears of this boast and is even more determined to destroy her.

In the morning, thousands upon thousands of men gather for battle. Conchobar's troops surround one of Medb's units and destroy them, escaping unharmed. Ailill encourages the second unit to pounce from the rear. He wants the men to spy on the Ulster camp and report their damages and supplies. MacRoth sees them stationed atop a hill, preparing to feast. They are surrounding their glowing king as he talks to them of the battle. MacRoth sees unit after unit come to the top of the hill, resting with their shields in hand and eager to return to battle.

Fergus listens to the descriptions of the men and knows right away that it is Conchobar and his sons at the front of the feast. He recognizes the fancy weapons and tells Ailill and Medb what they are dealing with: great warriors in great numbers. MacRoth goes on to describe the Ulster army leaders in great detail, and Fergus recognizes them all and tells Ailill and Medb what's in store for them. The Ulster army has brought fantastic warriors and dragons and magical beasts and druids and any number of mythical and real weapons to fight the Irish. The men are so powerful that they can control the waters and the elements. They are so strong that they can crush rocks. Cuchulain's people are a brave and mighty group, especially when gathered together in rage.

The soldiers of Ulster have even brought with them their own wheeled towers, and from the windows of these stream demons proclaiming a great battle, getting the Ulstermen fired up. Luckily for Ailill and Medb, Fergus knows how to combat these elements and is familiar with the fighting styles of each warrior. Fergus asks Medb to retreat into the

woods, to hide and leave him with one battalion of warriors to fight the Ulstermen. Fergus says Medb's men do not stand to last half a battle against Ulster.

MacRoth ends by describing a horrible groan he has heard in the woods. Fergus says that is Cuchulain, moaning that he is too weak to fight after his battle with Ferdiad. While they speak, two witches come to Cuchulain and foretell the defeat of Ulster, the death of Conchobar and the death of Fergus in battle.

## The Array of the Host Analysis

This chapter is incredibly detailed, describing each warrior and weapon and animal very visually and carefully. Like earlier chapters depicting the glorious Irish armies, this chapter leaves nothing untold of the Ulstermen, finally recovered from their curse and, it seems, more than ready to fight for their land. Fergus speaks very directly to Medb, assuring her that she cannot win against this army. The prophecy from the witches at the end of the chapter leaves cliffhanger, as readers wonder who will be victorious and whether Medb will at last listen to reason.

# The Decision of the Battle

## The Decision of the Battle Summary

A woman named Morrigan travels between the two camps, trying to raise tempers by talking ill of each group to the other group. Meanwhile, Cuchulain begs Laeg to give him full reports of the battle. Cuchulain asks to know the strengths and weaknesses and fighting styles of the men. Laeg obliges, and Cuchulain speaks with the leaders.

Cuchulain feels worthless that he cannot help fight. Laeg assures him that he has done more than enough and is a hero for his country. Cuchulain tells Laeg to rouse the troops, as it is morning and time to fight. Laeg runs through the camp, screaming to the men to defend their honor and to protect the mighty bull of Cooley.

## The Decision of the Battle Analysis

The theme of honor is highlighted again in this chapter, as Cuchulain feels unworthy because he cannot fight in the great battle. It is very touching to see him so weak and vulnerable emotionally after spending the entire novel full of rage and fighting so admirably. The chapter ends in great suspense as the Ulstermen rouse to march to war.

# Now of the Battle

## Now of the Battle Summary

The men of Ulster wake up, stark naked and carrying only their weapons, responding to Laeg's call. Conchobar is very excited at their energy, but he tells them all to wait for a good omen before marching off. They wait until the sun is up, and Conchobar feels it is time to march.

Sencha, one of Ailill's sons, is Conchobar's general. He rides before the men and gives them an inspirational speech about fighting until they cannot fight any longer for the honor of their country. The Irish all arise at once, and the furious battle begins.

Cuchulain lies irritably on his bed as Laeg dictates the action. Cuchulain again laments that he cannot fight, and Laeg again assures him that he is a great battle hero. The Irish begin to make headway through the ranks of Ulstermen, with the goal of killing Conchobar.

## Now of the Battle Analysis

This section ends mid-battle, but at this point the Irish are dominating the fight. There is far less detailed description of this great battle than there was of the individual fights with Cuchulain. Because such masses of people are concerned and not carefully described in battle, there is less attachment to these characters. The main concern in this chapter is with Cuchulain, who feels so low because of his inability to keep fighting. This chapter highlights very well the importance of detail in growing emotional attachment to characters.

# The Muster of the Men of Erin

## The Muster of the Men of Erin Summary

Medb is teasing Fergus for not fighting, questioning his loyalty. He tells her that he would fight ferociously if only Ailill would return his sword, as he promised he would for the great battle. Ailill sends for a warrior's sword, and Medb tells Fergus to use it well, leaving no one safe from its blade on this day. Together, they drive back the Ulstermen three times.

Conchobar is upset, but he refuses to give another inch to the Irish, telling them to hold the line. He runs into battle and meets with Fergus. The two fight as they speak, talking about how Fergus was driven from the land by a better man than himself. Cormac begins to choke Fergus, screaming that he should not kill any Ulstermen and that it's disgraceful. Fergus hurls off his former protygy, saying he will fight until the dead Ulstermen outnumber the living.

Cormac tells Fergus that if he is so angry, he should slice off the hilltops instead of men's heads, and Fergus does, making a level plain. Cuchulain hears the racket when the hilltops crumble and asks who fights so mightily against Conchobar. Laeg tells him it is Fergus, and Cuchulain gets out of bed, streaming blood from his sore wounds. The two witches try to stop him, but he bashes their heads together and smashes them dead. He mounts his chariot and rushes to battle, killing all the Irish men in his path until he reaches Fergus.

Cuchulain commands Fergus to stop and turn around, reminding him of his promise to run away from Cuchulain. Fergus remembers his promise and turns and runs, and the Irish army turns with him. Medb hides behind her shields and releases the bull of Cooley along with the cattle she stole. Medb begs Fergus to stand guard over her, for she must use the bathroom so desperately. Cuchulain comes upon her while she is in the process and does not kill her from behind.

Medb turns and begs a boon from him, begging him to protect her men while they flee. He agrees, and the Irish head back where they came from. As they escape, Fergus tells Medb that they should have expected to be lead into disaster with a woman guiding them. Cuchulain returns to Conchobar, who cries his thanks for Cuchulain's service.

## The Muster of the Men of Erin Analysis

Despite all the build up to this battle, it is not nearly as exciting or intricately detailed as the rest of the book. Fergus attacks the enemy with great fervor, but he backs down immediately when Cuchulain reminds him of his promise. This is to be expected because Cuchulain has learned the high value of keeping promises from his mentor Fergus. It is still a bit jarring to see how quickly the entire Irish army turns tail before the Ulstermen since the Irish seemed to be winning up until this moment.

The victory for Ulster seems all the more dramatic and emotional as Medb runs away hiding under her shield. Cuchulain, ever the honorable warrior, even protects her after pathetically finding her going to the bathroom along the road. Fergus's commentary about the folly of women's leadership seems out of character but not shocking coming from a document produced several hundred years before modern feminism produced a female president in Ireland.

The overarching image of this chapter more than any of the other battle chapters is the greatness of Cuchulain. Broken hearted and nearly dead from his wounds, Cuchulain shines in this chapter. His bravery and loyalty and honesty are shown through his actions in this chapter and in the great care the author takes describing every bit of him. As he charges toward Medb, dripping the blood spilled by his best friend, readers cannot help but marvel at his decision to protect Medb. She leaves this chapter small and ridiculed, finally put in her place.

# The Battle of the Bulls

## The Battle of the Bulls Summary

Medb still has control of Donn the great bull. She sets him loose to battle against Ailill's bull after all the struggles with the army. Donn lows a might moo, and the other cattle cower at his magnitude. Before the battle, Fergus and a man called Bricriu had a fight over a game of chess back home at Cruachan. Fergus drove a chess piece into Bricrui's skull, and he has lain at home recuperating the entire time they were gone. He wakes and is healed the day they return, eager to watch the bull fight.

Ailill's bull charges Donn, scraping him with his horns. Then each bull begins to gore the other, and as they run around, they trample Bricriu and stomp him into the earth, killing him. Cormac starts beating Donn with his spear, saying he was not really worth the journey since he cannot really fight off Ailill's bull. The great bull has human understanding and hears what Cormac says. He is so angry that he charges Ailill's bull, and they continue to fight all through the night, running throughout Ireland.

## The Battle of the Bulls Analysis

Donn seems to be a symbolic representation of Cuchulain. After the entire war has been fought over him, the Irish underestimate his ability based on the appearance of the fight. Only when filled with rage can he reach his true potential on the battlefield, and like Cuchulain, he must fight long and alone with no help and with others breaking promises and abusing him along the way. It will be interesting to see if Donn comes out ahead in this battle and returns to Ulster.

# The Account of the Brown Bull of Cooley

## The Account of the Brown Bull of Cooley Summary

In the morning, Donn staggers back to Cruachan with the pieces of Ailill's bull hanging from his horns, victorious. When they see this, Ailill's sons make ready to kill the bull. Fergus is furious at their behavior and orders them to stop or else great evil will come upon the Irish. Donn begins to journey back to Ulster, leaving pieces of Ailill's bull along the way in the river, by the ford, in Cruachan. He slaughters the women and children he comes across, and then, when he is nearly home, his heart breaks. He dies, ending the cattle raid of Cooley.

The narrator ends the tale by telling readers to always remember this raid and saying he the narrator has just related what he has heard. He guesses most of the tale is legend, as much deals with magic and spiritual things, and he feels that most of it has been invented by fools.

## The Account of the Brown Bull of Cooley Analysis

This is a heartbreaking end to the epic journey, as the Irish get away with the bull they sought, and he dies on his way back to his homeland. The Ulstermen get one last dig into the Irish in that their bull defeats the great bull of Ailill, but in the end that puts Medb on top because she gets everything she wanted.

The fight of the bulls excites readers because of the symbolic similarities to Cuchulain, who is the great hero of the piece and the most memorable and likeable character. The heartbreak that kills Donn as he heads to Ulster represents the maturity and sadness of Cuchulain after the year-long efforts in battle. In one sense, this epic ends like all others because the hero (Cuchulain) is victorious, but in another, this epic is tragic because the villain (Medb) also gets her way, even if she leaves the battle in shame.

# Characters

## Aengus

An Ulster warrior who turned aside the whole Connacht army, pelting them with flagstones. The Connacht army eventually overwhelmed and killed him.

## Aife

A woman warrior living on the island of Britain. When Cúchulainn defeats her, he spares her life on the understanding that she will give hostages to his teacher Scáthach and bear him a son. She is to name the boy Connla and send him to Cúchulainn when he is big enough to wear the gold thumb ring Cúchulainn leaves for him. He tells her the boy must never reveal his name to any man, never give way to any man, and never refuse any man combat.

## Ailill

Medb's husband and the owner of the white bull, Finnbennach. He is a cynical man who generally accepts his wife's decisions, but seems curiously detached throughout the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

## Amargin

Amargin is the husband of Finnchaem and father of the hero Conall Cernach.

## Brown Bull of Cúailnge

See Donn Cúailnge

## Cathbad

A Druid and the father of Conchobor. Because he is a druid, Cathbad has prophetic powers.

## Conall Cernach

Cúchulainn's cousin and foster brother. Connall is one of the Ulster exiles with Medb's army.

## Cú Chulainn

See Cúchulainn

## Conchobor

The son of Ness and Cathbad the druid. Conchobor was conceived because his mother learned from Cathbad that the hour was propitious for the conception of a king. Conchobor is the most celebrated king of the Ulster cycle. The character of Conchobor is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, his Ulstermen idolize him. But on the other, he has lost some of the finest men of his kingdom through duplicity.

## Connla

The son of Aife and Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn told Aife that the boy must never reveal his name to any man, never give way to any man and never refuse any man combat. When he comes to Ulster these promises prove Connla's death. He refuses to give his name or give way. He matches Condere mac Echach in eloquence, stuns Conall Cernach and ties him up with his own shield strap. Cúchulainn goes out to fight him. Emer recognizes that the boy must be her husband's son and pleads with him not to kill his own child. Cúchulainn insists, however, that he must kill him for the honor of Ulster. He kills Connla with a weapon that Scathach had taught only him to use. Cúchulainn acknowledges his dying son, and the boy greets the hero of Ulster and dies.

## Cormac Connlongas

Conchobor's son. Cormac is one of the Ulster exiles with Medb's army.

## Cúchulainn

Cúchulainn is the son of Conchobor's sister, Deichtine. Both the human Sualdam mac Roich and a *sídh* prince are identified as his father. He is the Achilles of the Táin, fated to die young, but to leave a glorious memory. He holds off the combined forces of the other three provinces of Ireland and the Ulster exiles while the warriors of Ulster suffer the effects of Macha's curse. Cúchulainn, young, mercurial, and glorious, does what he can do and what only he can do, while all around him is deceit, treachery and chaos. Many of his fantastic deeds can be paralleled in Greek and Latin accounts of Celtic champions and warrior society.

## Deichtine

Conchobor's sister and wife of Sualdam mac Roich. She is the mother of Cúchulainn by a strange series of events that lead the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to identify both the human Sualdam mac Roich and a *sídh* prince as his father.

## Derdriu

Derdriu is often compared to Helen of Troy. Cathbad predicted before her birth that she would be the most beautiful of women and the destruction of Ulster. Conchobor ordered that she be raised in complete seclusion until she was old enough to become his wife. Derdriu, however, falls in love with Noisiu, Uisliu's son. He tries to refuse her because of the prophecy and the king's decree, but she put him under a magical compulsion or *geasa*, and they ran away together with his brothers and their followers. Eventually, Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac, Conchobor's son, give them their word that they could come safely back to Ulster and make their peace with the king. Conchobor had, however, tricked them all and had Noisiu and his brothers murdered. Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac burnt the king's stronghold at Emain Macha and went into exile with their warriors. Derdriu committed suicide rather than be given to Noisiu's murderer, Eogan mac Durthacht.

## Donn Cúailnge

A bull belonging to Dáire mac Fiachna. Medb tried to buy and then to steal the bull so that her wealth would match Ailill's.

## Dubthach

One of the Ulster warriors who stood surety (to stand in promise) for the return of Uislliu's sons. Dubthach went into Ulster with Fergus and Cormac.

## Emer

The daughter of Forgall Monach. She becomes Cúchulainn's wife.

## Etarcomol

A foster son of son of Ailill and Medb. Fergus was against Etarcomol coming along on the parley to establish the single combats, but took him there under his protection. Etarcomol picks a fight with Cúchulainn, who tried to avoid killing him, out of courtesy to Fergus, but must kill him in the end.

## Fedelm

A poetess and prophetess of Connacht. She returns from study in Britain and meets Medb's army about to set out on the cattle raid. Medb demands that she prophesy the expedition's outcome. The girl predicts their slaughter at the hands of Cúchulainn.

## Finnchad Fer Benn

Finnchad is called the Horned Man because of the silver horns he wore. He is Conchobor's son and was sent to call up the warriors of Ulster.

## Finnabair

Finnabair is the daughter of Ailill and Medb. She had been promised to one warrior after another to induce them to fight Cúchulainn. She is eventually even offered to Cúchulainn and was sent to him in the disguise of her father. Cúchulainn saw through the disguise, cut off Finnabair's hair, and thrust a pillar stone under her cloak and tunic, shaming her without defiling her. She is said to have committed suicide when she learned of the killing of so many princes on her account. In a variant tradition, she goes off with Cúchulainn at the end of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

## Finnbennach

The bull of Ailill's herd and a calf of one Medb's cows. This bull would not stay with a woman's herd and switched sides.

## Finnchaem

Finnchaem is the sister of Conchobor and Deichtine. She was Conall Cernach's mother and Cúchulainn's foster-mother.

## Horned Man

See Finnchad Fer Benn

## Ferchu Loingsech

A Connachtman who had never accepted the rule of Ailill and Medb. He proposed to his band that they kill Cúchulainn and win their favor. All twelve attacked Cúchulainn but were killed.

## Crunniuc mac Agnomain

Crunniuc is the husband of Macha. His boasting of his wife leads to her race against the king's chariot and her curse on the men of Ulster.

## Buide mac Báin

Medb's cowherd. Cúchulainn kills him.

## Bricriu mac Carbad

A mean-minded man who loved stirring up trouble; it was said of him that if he heard something unfavorable about any decent person he could not rest until he had told it. He was chosen to judge between the two bulls because it was well known that 'he favoured his friend no more than his enemy.' He was killed by the bulls.

## Ferdia mac Daméin

Cúchulainn's foster brother and closest friend. He was the son of a king of Connacht. He did not want to fight Cúchulainn, but Medb shamed him into fighting by telling him that Cúchulainn had boasted, "he wouldn't count it any great triumph if his greatest feat of arms were your downfall." They fight for four days, and Cúchulainn finally defeats Ferdia with the *gae bolg*, a terible javelin only he can use. He laments his friend. His beautiful lament for Ferdia is one of the high points of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* with its repetition of the highest praise for Ferdia's ability.

## Eogan mac Durthacht

Eogan is the king of Fernmag. He came to make peace with Conchobor and was chosen to kill Noisiu and his brothers.

## Dáire mac Fiacha

The owner of the Bull of Cooley. He was going to lend the bull until he learns that had he not accepted Medb's offer, the bull would have been taken by force.

## Fiacha mac Fir Febe

Fiacha is the son of Conchobor's daughter. He was one of the Ulster exiles with Medb's army. Fergus sent him to bring news of the fight when Gaile Dána and his twenty-seven sons and his sister's son simultaneously attacked Cúchulainn's with their poisoned weapons and fists. Fiacha broke the compact of the Ulster exiles and went to the hero's

aid. To protect the Ulstermen from Medb's wrath, Cúchulainn and the two sons of Ficce killed all twenty-nine.

## Lugaid mac Nois Allchomaig

Lugaid is the king of Munster. He goes to parley with Cúchulainn on several occasions on the behest of Aillil. He is on good terms with Cúchulainn. At his request his brother Láréne is the only man who escapes alive from single combat with Cúchulainn.

## Laeg mac Riangabra

Laeg is Cúchulainn's charioteer. He was the hero's confidant, counselor, and right-hand man.

## Sualdam mac Roich

Cúchulainn's mortal father who died when he cut his head off on the rim of his own shield trying to rouse the warriors of Ulster.

## Mac Roth

Mac Roth is the messenger of Ailill and Medb. He is sent to borrow the Bull of Cooley from Dáire mac Fiacha.

## Noisiu mac Uislenn

Noisiu is Derdriu's lover and one of the finest men in Ulster. He tries to escape the love of Derdriu but she puts a *geasa* on him, binding him to do as she requires. Despite a safe conduct from Conchobor, the king of Ulster, he and his brothers were murdered by Eogan mac Durthacht on Conchobor's orders, despite Fergus's own son throwing himself across Noisiu to save him.

## Lug macEthnenn

Cúchulainn's *síde* father, he comes to take his son's place holding the ford against the invading army when Cúchulainn is on the edge of collapse from his wounds and lack of sleep.

## Macha

Macha is the daughter of Sainrith mac Imbaith. She gave birth to twins after the race against the King of Ulster's chariot. She curses the men of Ulster with labor pains for

their cruelty towards a woman in childbirth. Her story not only explains why Cúchulainn had to stand alone against the combined forces of three provinces of Ireland, but also explains the name of the royal fortress, Emain Macha, "the twins of Macha."

## Medb

Medb is the daughter of the High King of Tara who gave her the province of Connacht for her own. Originally, Medb was the goddess of sovereignty, the patroness of every true king. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, she is a cold, amoral, power-hungry woman who treats her own daughter as a commodity to be bargained with for a moment's advantage. Her own adulteries are merely a form of leverage. She is, however, one of the most fully realized and internally consistent of the characters.

## Morrígan

Morrígan is the goddess of war. She was a presence on the battlefield but did not participate in combat. She caused panic in the Connacht army and attempted to seduce Cúchulainn. It is worth noting in reference to the setting of most of Cúchulainn's fights that she was traditionally associated with fords where she would be seen washing the clothing of those fated to die in a coming battle. This manifestation has passed into Scottish Highland folklore as the *Bean-nighe*, who is seen washing the clothing of those about to die.

## Nes

The mother of Conchobor by the druid Cathbad. She marries Fergus on the understanding that her son Conchobor can be king for a year, ensuring that his children will be the children of a king and giving them both status and a place in the succession. She then manipulates the situation to ensure that the warriors of Ulster will not allow Fergus to resume the throne.

## Scáthach

A woman warrior and prophetess of Albu, the island of Britain. She completes Cúchulainn's education as a warrior. He defeats her greatest enemy, the woman warrior Aife, by whom he has a son, Connla. Scáthach prophesied to him that he would have a short life, but everlasting fame.

## Setanta

See Cúchulainn

## Warped One

See Cúchulainn

## White Horned

See Finnbennach

# Themes

## The Breakdown of Social Order

Cúchulainn is the focus of a valiant attempt to preserve his society. Around him, the basic relationships of the early Irish social order are snapping: the ties between kin, between foster brothers, between men and women, between kings and subjects are broken. It is characteristic of medieval Irish thought that this anarchy flows from rulers. Conchobor has driven out his own kin through deceit, treachery, and murder. Medb counsels the murder of faithful allies and manipulates men into breaking the sacred bonds of fosterage and kinship. Between them, they have compromised Fergus, a hero as great Cúchulainn, and left widows, orphans, and grieving parents across Ireland.

## Heroism

Bravery is at the heart of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Facing physical dangers in combat is of the utmost importance. The highest expression of such heroism is the hero alone; Cúchulainn standing against the enemies of Ulster with only the most intermittent and qualified aid is perhaps the most rarefied example in western literature. Whatever flaws Cúchulainn may have, his physical courage and the motives that fuel it cannot be despised. Cúchulainn has made a decision based on his understanding of his ability and training, his sense of obligation to his Ulster kin and to Ulster society as a whole, and on the desire to purchase immortal fame.

## Kingship and the Sovereignty Goddess

At the end of the final battle, there is an exchange between Medb and her erstwhile lover and champion, Fergus. "Medb said to Fergus, 'We have had shame and shambles here today, Fergus.' 'We followed the rump of a misguided woman,' Fergus said. 'It is the usual thing for a herd lead by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.'" The negative attitude toward women has been a recurring subject in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* criticism, but it is not as crude as it is sometimes portrayed because women exercising power are not uniformly presented in a negative light. Medb, daughter of the High King of Tara, who brings a whole province with her on her marriage, is the sovereignty goddess made mortal. When the land is poorly ruled or without a king, the goddess had the form of an old woman; when joined to a just and capable king, she had the shape of one young and beautiful. Imperious, coldly amoral, and incapable of love, she may be an argument against women being allowed political power, but her character clearly reflects the kings with which she has contact. Ailill, Conchobor, and the disposed Fergus are all deeply flawed. Her lack of battle-prowess and ethical sense and her murderous treachery and sexual appetite mirror the flaws of the three royal men.

## Mythology

No pagan god or ritual is mentioned as such in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. At most, characters swear "by the gods" or by "the oath of my people." The ancient gods and customs have been so thoroughly neutralized that it is often only through comparative mythology or information from classical writers that mythological material can be identified as such. Nevertheless, the epic has been carefully searched for pre-Christian gods and cult since the mid-nineteenth century. Various characters have been identi-fied as gods, various episodes and actions have been identified as being reflections of pre-Christian worship and belief. Lug mac Ethnenn, who identifies himself to Cúchulainn as 'your father from the *síde,*' is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge's* version of the Celtic god of light. The battle of the bulls has been identified by some scholars as a distant reflection of a myth of a sacrificed bull from which the world was made. The pains of the Ulstermen, lasting from the *Samhaim* (November 1) to *Imbolc* (February 1), which are the months of winter in Ireland, are similarly identified as a symbol of winter sleep. Perhaps the most easily recognizable cluster of mythological material centers around Cúchulainn himself. His conception and birth are miraculous and providential. His ability to function during the winter when the Ulstermen are laid low suggests a powerful force of nature. All these things, however, have been transformed from divine action or intervention to something more akin to magic.

## Topography and Place Names

A major element in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the attention given to the setting of the action. This is not in the usual form of verbal description, which allows the audience to 'see' the setting. Instead, the setting is established as a story behind a place name. Incidents often appear to be included simply to explain the name of a minor ford or wood. Some stories may have been invented simply to provide such an explanation. The great battle between the men of Ulster and the forces of Medb and Ailill at the end of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is treated in far less detail than the circuitous route of the dying bull, Donn Cúailnge, leaving behind him a scatter of place names.

This preoccupation with place names and their meanings and origins is not confined to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. A whole genre of place name narratives exists in Irish literature, the *dinnsenchas*. This native genre was reinforced by the importance of biblical place names in explaining the Bible in early Christian writings and by the use of place name narratives in classical literature, particularly in Virgil's *Aeneid*. It is possible that identification of a story with a place was a device for remembering a particular character or event.

The place name narratives in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* cannot be dropped out of the narrative without changing its meaning and character. First, they anchor the action, however fantastic, in the reality of the Irish countryside. Second, they all seem to share in establishing the action of the epic as of such importance that this raid and its heroes have made an indelible mark on Ireland. Third, they effectively confirm the author's

status with his audience by his apparently exact and detailed knowledge of every cairn, every wood in the path of the raid, and the combat of the bulls. This use of place name stories as an indication of learning is reflected in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* when Cúchulainn, on his first day as a warrior, is instructed in place name lore by Ibor, Conchobor's charioteer.

## War and Peace

Despite its concentration on the martial achievements of Cúchulainn, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* does not glorify warfare nor treat cattle raiding as merely a commonplace nuisance. Cúchulainn's grief over the death of Ferdia is only the most striking of his laments, and his reaction to the sound of the final battle ("anger destroys the world") is telling. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was composed in a society that was attempting in some small measure to limit violence.

# Style

## Epic Features

An epic is a long narrative in which a crisis must be met and overcome, whether in the form of warfare or a quest. An epic almost always represents the summation of a culture's ideals at the point of when those ideas are in flux. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* certainly qualifies as an epic because it is a long and complex narrative, treating a serious subject, the survival of a people in the terms of their ability to protect themselves, the integrity of their borders, and their means of survival. The action is centered on an outstanding hero, Cúchulainn, in whose hands lies the fate of his people. Around him are equally magnificent and compelling characters, subsidiary only in reference to Cúchulainn. The action springs from the clash of Medb and Ailill who are almost god-like in their detachment. The progress of the action is vitally affected by earlier decisions of Ulster kings: the command to Macha to race the king's chariot, despite her appeals, and Conchobor's treachery towards the sons of Uisliu. The first results in the warriors of Ulster being stricken with labor pains so that they cannot defend their homes; the second results in the desertion of many of their greatest warriors, splitting even the king's own family.

## Point of View

The narrator in all versions of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* sounds like a modern researcher. He is well informed about places, actions, and conversations, but anchors his story in remarks like, "They say it is here that Dubthach chanted," or, "Others say that the bird and the squirrel were both perched on Medb's shoulders." The narrator claims to do nothing more than report, noting the existence of alternate traditions and stories. In place of the help of the muses with their divine knowledge, there is, in one version, the ghost of Fergus or at least the traditions preserved by his descendants. Even when the narrator describes a character's mood, that mood is only what is apparent from either the character's plain admission or actions.

## Inconsistencies

The earliest recession of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* notes a number of variant versions of the narrative. This reference to variant versions raises questions concerning the state and purpose of the text. Is it a reconstituted version of an original that cannot be exactly established from among the variants or is it a file of materials for the composition of an epic? Both opinions are worth considering.

## Plot

The plot of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is remarkably thin, particularly when one strips away the preliminary material. There is the muster and march of the army of Medb and Ailill, punctuated by prophecies of doom. These actions are then followed by a long series of fights at a ford, which resolve into one long vindication of Ulster and the prowess of Cúchulainn. The fight of the two armies, when it finally comes, is punctuated with the confrontation of Fergus with Conchobor and of Cúchulainn with Medb. It ends with the final fight of the bulls. The self-cancelling victory of the Bull of Cooley over the Bull of Connacht is an ironic mirror of the waste of the human battle. The confrontations of the human battle reaffirm basic decency: Cúchulainn will not kill a woman and Fergus stops himself short of killing a kinsman.

## Imagery and Symbolism

Imagery in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has been described as Kelly suggests, "limpid." Her example, the description of the prophetess Fedelm, consists of concrete description in short sentences using only two comparisons in describing fourteen separate items. Looking at similar descriptions, the Fedelma description emerges as unusual in having even two comparisons. There is, however, a famous extended description that functions essentially as a metaphor using the messenger/interpreter, watchman/interpreter technique. Mac Roth, Medb's messenger reports a scene of unnatural phenomena that functions as a metaphor of the army of Ulster since Fergus is able to read these phenomena for what they really are□the effects of the army of Ulster on the march. The basic symbols of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* are hound/wolf, cow/bull, and horse. In general, the first is largely reserved for Cúchulainn, but is connected with a social type: the young warrior. The second is used of humans in general, but more particularly in the comparison of cows and women. Finally, horses are used as symbols of kingship. This symbol is exploited ironically when a mare is used to characterize Medb's incompetence as a leader of men. An image that passes into symbol in Cúchulainn's lament for Ferdia is the gold brooch that Medb gave to Ferdia as part of the inducement to fight his foster brother. In Cúchulainn's grief, the brooch is transformed into a symbol of all that Ferdia was.

## Style and Prosody

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is unusual in the epic tradition in that it is written largely in prose with inset passages of syllabic verse. Some of these passages, for example, the prophecy of the Morrígan, the unrhymed, alliterative *rosc(ad)* or *rhetoric* gives the impression of being older than the surrounding prose text. It has been suggested, however, that they are the products of poets who are trying to compose in what they thought was an ancient style. This text was probably not an attempt to confuse the audience about the age of their compositions, but to create the proper atmosphere of antiquity and give an exalted and heroic quality to the characters who spoke them.

# Description and Narrative

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* uses a number of narrative/descriptive techniques, for example, the watchman device. The watchman device is when a character whose knowledge and sense has been established and who is involved in the events gives action, scene, or character descriptions. A variation of this device has an uninformed but carefully observant character relaying a description to a knowledgeable character who then identifies what is observed.

# Historical Context

## The Reinvention of Early Irish History

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* floats within a period of over a thousand years. At one end is the generally assumed date of the essential action and characters of the first century A.D. At the other is the date of the earliest manuscript written in Clonmacnoise on the Shannon River in the first quarter of the twelfth century. Between these two dates is the great watershed of Irish history: the introduction of Christianity.

Christianity and Roman culture, because of the proximity of the Roman empire in Britain, had begun to affect Ireland from at least the third century. Their influence was strengthened with the mission of St. Patrick in the second half of the fifth century. At that point, the Irish had already developed a script of their own: Ogham. This script shows signs of having been affected by a high-level understanding of Latin grammatical and linguistic theory. Within a century of St. Patrick's death, Ireland was producing good Latin scholars and fervent Christian missionaries. Irishmen were laying the basis for modern page presentation and the spread of literacy, both in Latin and vernacular across Western Europe. Meanwhile, Ireland was in constant turmoil as new tribal and family groups like the Ui Neill remade not only the political landscape but the landscape of history, reinterpreting the past to establish political legitimacy. While the myth of the high kingship was being invented, the whole pre-Christian history of Ireland, or more properly, the pre-Patrician history of the island and it peoples, was overhauled. This was partially an attempt to integrate the Irish into the mainstream Mediterranean culture and Christian salvation history. It also represented an attempt to provide a basis for native Irish law acceptable to the new religion and learning. There was also an attempt at cultural one-upmanship. If the Jewish nation boasted of Moses, the Greeks of Homer and Plato, and the Franks and Romans of descent from Troy, the Irish would claim to be the descendants of a pharaoh's daughter, the foster mother of Moses. At some point in this intellectual and social ferment, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as we have it in the earliest collection began to take shape.

## Cattle and Cattle Raiding

Across Irish history, certain constants of Irish life emerge: endemic warfare, disunity, and cattle rearing as the basis of the economy. It is in this atmosphere that cattle raiding emerged almost as an institution and continued until the final imposition of English rule. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is only the most famous tale of a cattle raid. The names of thirteen such tales survive. The tale type and its popularity were a reflection of social reality. For most of Ireland's history, indeed up until the last twenty years, cattle rearing for meat, milk, butter, and hides was the mainstay of the economy. Prices in early medieval Ireland were expressed in cattle and slave girls at a ratio of seven cows to one slave. The integrity of a community vis-a-vis its neighbors were demonstrated by the successful cattle-raid. A king's authority was expressed in terms of the ability to enforce

a tax of cattle over a given area. Cattle-raids were used regularly as a tool of local politics by both the native Irish and the Anglo-Norman settlers and were a constant fact of Irish life into the seventeenth century.

## The Ulster Cycle

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the centerpiece of the Ulster cycle of eighty heroic sagas, one of several cycles of medieval and early medieval Irish stories, the most famous being the Fianna cycle centered on the figure of Finn Mac Cool and his son Oisín. It is by far the longest of any of these early Irish tales. While the Fianna cycle was more generally popular up to the nineteenth century, Irish language poetic eulogies used stories, images, and characters from the Ulster cycle to great effect. Native works on word meanings and place names also drew heavily on the cycle.

## Historical Fiction and the Place and Date of Composition

As part of a larger effort to integrate Irish history into biblical salvation history and place their past on a footing with that of Greece and Rome, medieval Irish scholars placed the action of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* around the time of Christ. They worked tirelessly to ensure that their proofs for its date corresponded to accepted notions of chronology and historical evidence. O'Rahilly, a recent editor of the three versions of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* believed that the earliest version of the work was written in the seventh century but composed three centuries earlier. But the language of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has been deeply affected by the introduction of Christianity and Latin. Further, archaeological study of artifacts, particularly of swords and their use suggests that the constant reference to beheading and the descriptions of the use of swords in general can only be explained in terms of the long sword, introduced during the Viking period. It would be nearly impossible to perform the actions recounted with the much shorter Iron Age or early Christian period swords. On this basis, the author of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* should be seen as consciously attempting to recreate a past for which there were broad outlines but few particulars. To recreate that past, the author relied on whatever information could be gleaned from native Irish sources, undoubtedly including the memory of the warfare that lead to the downfall of the ancient Ulaid. The author would also have adapted information about other ancient peoples known through Latin texts, people who were understood as living at a similar level of civilization, perhaps including information from Roman writers on British and continental Celtic peoples of the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. It is also possible that this recreation was affected by pagan peoples that Irish missionaries had encountered in their work. The poetic speeches inserted in the prose narrative were once thought to be extremely early. Recently, however, it has been shown that writers working in the eighth century and later were capable of producing consciously archaic texts. It would be appropriate for an author attempting to recreate a period long past to attempt to reproduce what he and his audience would recognize as linguistically old-fashioned. Thus, if a modern writer set her story in the sixteenth century, she might attempt conversation using words

and meanings of words familiar to her audience from Shakespeare. In the last thirty years, a number of scholars have attempted to assign a particular place and situation and even an author to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. As yet, no suggestion has gained general acceptance. It is fairly clear, however, that the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* must be one of the earliest sagas to reach a stable form because so many other of the tales depend on it in one way or another. It must also have been in existence by the ninth century since the story of its being exchanged for Isidore's *Etymologiae* and being recovered from the ghost of Fergus is preserved in the *Triads of Ireland*.

# Critical Overview

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* appears alien, primitive, and unimaginably ancient. There are unmistakable signs that this atmosphere is a sophisticated construction of the past, making its historicity a scholarly donné (a thing in a literary work that is taken for granted or expected by virtue of the genre or milieu in which it is contained) well into the twentieth century. As B. K. Lambkin notes, the clarity of perception of its earliest critic, the scribe of the twelfth century *Book of Leinster* who said, "But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable" was forgotten in a desire to have a reliable historical source. It was its apparent 'primitiveness' that caught the imagination of nineteenth-century scholars whose obsession with the presumed and desired antiquity of the *Táin* quickly became part of the Irish strain of nineteenth century romantic nationalism. Scholarship under its influence, and not only in Ireland, often justified itself in the search for the pure, unsullied national character of a people. As editor Barbara Hillers notes, even the greatest nineteenth century scholars approached the Ulster cycle of tales as history and its characters as real people. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was a rich source of historical, mythological, and linguistic information. As Gerard Murphy notes, the question of literary technique hardly entered into their consideration, its artlessness was a positive virtue, if only as a proof of its great antiquity, their origin in "the youth of the world, before the heart had been trained to bow before the head or the imagination to be troubled by logic."

The critical situation of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is somewhat better than Irish saga literature as a whole. According to Cathasaigh, there are good modern editions with translations. Yeats' dramatic adaptations of the Ulster tales never achieved the popularity of his lyrics, but Kinsella's 1969 translation has opened the work up to a wider audience whose interests are more exclusively literary than philological, mythological or historical. Ironically, it is further historical and archaeological research picking up anachronisms in the text that has shifted interest to the author's artifice and learning in projecting the aura of an archaic pagan past. This has been furthered by the emergence of a strain of historical-political readings according to N. B. Aitchison, moving interest away from the period it depicts to that of its original audience. This movement towards the analysis of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as highly ironic political satire has been further complicated by the fault line that has opened up across the fields of early Irish literature and history in the second half of the twentieth century. On one side are the so-called "nativist" critics who have traditionally emphasized the pagan and Indo-European material fossilized in medieval texts. They dominated the study of early Irish history and literature until the later twentieth century. On the other side are the "revisionists," beginning with Carney, who emphasize the quick and thorough assimilation of classical and Christian literary culture among the Irish and its profound influence on Irish vernacular literature. Carney's explanation of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge's* origins with its even-handed recognition of both native and classical Christian material is worth recapitulating. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, like the Irish sagas in general, shows in its

vocabulary that it was given the form we find in the manuscripts after Christianity was introduced. The essential narrative and characters go back to a more or less remote pre-Christian past. This nucleus of characters and action, however, were like the grain of sand in an oyster's shell. They attracted the author's total literary experience ranging across classical and Christian literature as well as native material, particularly the *senchus*, the stories that explained place names or how certain peoples came to be in a particular part of the country. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* also attracted both popular characters from other legends into its narrative and popular types of narrative episodes.

It is understandable that students of language, history, and archaeology have monopolized the *Táin Bó Cúailnge's* study, because only by taking them into account can criticism have validity. Nevertheless, whatever criticism has done, if, as Carney suggested, the original author of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was attempting to give Ireland the equivalent of the *Aeneid*. Scholars and poets in the last 150 years have worked tirelessly to ensure it that position in the history of Irish literature and in the popular imagination.

# Criticism

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# Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Conrad-O'Briain looks at the Táin Bó Cúailnge *as an elaborate literary creation, with particular emphasis on the author's use of place.*

Students of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in particular and the early Irish literature in general have often neglected treating it as literature. Patricia Kelly at the beginning of "The *Táin* as Literature" saw as the main obstacles to literary analysis the scholarly preoccupation with mythology, history, and prehistory, and a "primitive" quality that Murphy in *Saga and Myth in Early Ireland* attributed to their origin in "the youth of the world, before the heart had been trained to bow before the head or the imagination to be troubled by logic." Research is making this explanation of the peculiar quality of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* more and more difficult to accept. Work on all the elements of the texts suggests that the "primitive" character of the epic is a carefully constructed one, using biblical and classical as well as native material to build up a picture of the past that accorded with what might be called an anthropology of pagans. This construction was surprisingly positive for three reasons. First, these pagans were their ancestors; second, they were the source of a formidable body of native law that must be preserved; third, their society had been relatively amenable to conversion.What was the purpose of this reconstruction? Recent readings of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* are still driven by history, with suggestions or assumptions of a political allegory touched by bitter irony. But no single time, place, or situation, no one key for this allegory has, however, achieved even general acceptance. Despite Kelly's belief that "a reliable verdict of the artistic failure or success of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is only possible if the texts aims have been correctly identified," it is still valid to look at the text as something that should on one level explain itself. That is, the author has produced a work that says what it says in general terms that is a story that has generally applicable insights into the human condition.

Whether the first recession represents a learned Christian re-interpretation of the past for a complex political purpose, or as O'Corrain suggested, a file of material to be worked up for various purposes at a later date, it, like the later recessions must reflect the tastes and preoccupations of its contemporary audience. If the reader finds a theme, particular motif, or image used continuously throughout a work, it suggests that that theme, motif, or image is important. It is there because it embodies something important or fundamental, and it does it better than anything else the author can imagine. A reader must grasp how such things work both individually and as patterns in the work as a whole. However unappealing a literary device might be to a modern audience, for instance the use of proverbs or elaborate genealogical passages, they demand attention. They cannot be dismissed because they are not the modern choice.

Living far from the places named, with no sense of connection to the individual commemorated in any given place name, few modern readers can see an immediate purpose or pleasure from the place name narratives in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. But, they cannot be dismissed as meaningless or awkward. Carney suggests that they were the element most likely to be derived from the purely native tradition, but that the writers were using them in a radically new way. The function of these *dinnsenchus*, to use the

Irish term, was to preserve historic lore attached to a place. They existed as independent, self-suffi-cient narratives and were gathered into collections at an early date. They were not originally part of any dramatic, least of all fictional, narrative. Their su-perficially pointless ubiquity in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* must then represent a decision by the author to use them, outside of the immediate tradition of both the heroic tale and the place name narrative. When Carney identified the place name stories as native, he was right in recognizing that they reach back into the pre-Christian past and that they played a part in Irish literature and cultural life that cannot be exactly paralleled in any other country. But other literatures have used place name narratives and referred to the meaning of place names. Virgil's *Aeneid* used stories attached to place names to make his poem more than simply a glorification of the Emperor Augustus' Julian clan or even of Rome. Instead, his lingering descriptions of the places, people, and their origins, while fewer and more developed than those in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, created a broader theme of Italy over which the specific action of his poem runs. Scripture scholars and preachers regularly stressed the meaning of place names in the Bible, connecting them with the larger spiritual meaning of the individual actions that had occurred in each. It is not surprising that the most important study of the topography of the bible lands in the middle ages was written by the Irishman, Adomnán. All this must have fed into an already active native interest and genre, suggesting the possible ways short narrative attached to a place might be used to refer to something connected to, but outside of themselves. The author of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* then had an important body of material in which his audience had a cultivated interest. Clearly, the author used this material.

There has been a tendency among readers to concentrate on the lack of a particular type of topographical or landscape use in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* does not have the sort of landscape description, beloved by the romantics and Victorians, which concentrates on the individual and particular. The essential function of these landscapes is to create atmosphere, as for example in the description of Dartmoor in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The author of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was perfectly capable of creating such a landscape. Landscape as modern readers generally expect it to be introduced into a narrative appears spectacularly not as an actual landscape, but as a description and simile for the vast Ulster army finally coming to Cúchulainn's aid. Its use in the passage not only shows that it was not lack of ability that stopped the writer, but it gives the army a feeling of a force of nature, echoing Cúchulainn's calling of the land of Ulster to rise and fight the invaders with him.

The most usual form in which natural features enter the narrative is purely topographical, taking the audience and characters to rarely described features of the landscape: woods, fords, plains, standing stones. It does this fifty-eight times in Recession 1, slightly more in the second recession. The author does not use individual landscapes to create atmosphere. It is the sum total of all the short topographical narratives together that creates the effect. The land is connected in sympathy with its people. When Cúchulainn intercepts the raiding army of Medb and Ailill he says: "I summon air and earth; but I summon now above all the Cronn river ... and the water reared up to the treetops." Standing at the ford, a naturally defensible place but also a boundary with all the deep significance of a boundary, Cúchulainn calls upon the country to stand by him to protect their people. The landscape names become the

trophies of the earth; fame, or at least memory, is shared by both place and warrior. These features are very much where the action is. They are defined and named by a moment of history, but that moment of history is about the trees, the fields, the standing stones as well as men and women. Every fight is about protecting Ulster, whether the Ulster of water and earth or flesh and blood. Here a collection of *dinnsenchus* has been subjected to a new organizing principle. Suddenly, not only the place names but the endless series of individual combats begin to make sense. One great story, one great threat, one great champion to meet it, has emerged from their total. One combat would not have made Cúchulainn the champion of Ulster any more than one clan or province would have made Medb's army the formidable force it was. It is the cumulative effect tinged with irony. Cúchullain's rings his province with the graves of her enemies. Boundary burials are usually of one's own protecting ancestors or heroes; here, they are of one's enemies. Cúchulainn sets the boundary not for Ulster, but for those who have attacked her. **Source:** Helen Conrad-O'Briain, for *Epics for Students*, Gale, 2001.

# Critical Essay #2

*The following essay considers various characteristics and puzzling questions that the Táin presents.*

Creative Literature or Functional Writing?

What then of *Táin Bó Cúailnge?* While the earliest references to the events of the tale occur in a genealogical context, as early as the eighth century the Ulster Cycle would seem to have acquired a literary autonomy. For instance, the originally independent saga *Táin Bó Fróich* (Fróich's cattle-driving) was adapted in the eighth century to function as a foretale to the greater *Táin*. Motifs of the cycle are already parodied in two eighth-century tales, *Scéla Muicce meic Dathó* (The story of Mac Da Thó's pig), and *Fled Bricrenn* (Bricriu's feast).

While Recension II of the *Táin* conforms more to modern expectations of an aesthetic creation, presenting a smooth narrative in a unified style, the focus of this article will be on Recension I, which, it is hoped to show, is more than 'a mass of workshop fragments, not yet assimilated or amalgamated'. Recension II will occasionally be drawn on where it supplies extra material or helps to clarify the terse account of the earlier version.

The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn

The young boy expresses the heroic ethos memorably when he declares that he values everlasting fame more than life 'Provided I be famous, I am content to be only one day on earth'. Much of the action of the *Táin* shows Cú Chulainn living out his heroic ambitions. He fulfils his early promise when he compensates for the Ulstermen's inability to defend their province, and wards off the Connacht offensive in a series of single combat encounters. A mimetic interpretation of the *macgnímrada* episode would view it as a depiction of the initiation of a young man into warrior status as a fully integrated member of his *túath* (kingdom), and Cú Chulainn's characterisation in the body of the narrative as an exemplification of the warrior ideal. But Cú Chulainn's heroic biography also has mythological resonances, and these are reflected in this section by the scene in which the triumphant returning warrior is greeted by the bare-breasted Ulster women. This has been explained as a reflex of Cú Chulainn's original role as the vigorous young male who brings about the renewal of the year in an old seasonal vegetation drama.

The preceding episode is an even better indication of how densely-layered the meaning of an ostensibly straightforward narrative can be. 'The death of the smith's hound', explains how the boy Sétantae acquired his adult name: forced to kill the fierce hound of Culann the smith-hospitaller in self-defence, he undertakes to substitute temporarily as a guard-dog, and accepts Cú Chulainn 'the hound of Culann' as his new name. Greene describes this as a 'simple well-told story' and signals disapproval that 'scholars have looked for deeper meanings'. That the story can be appreciated at the surface level of plot is undeniable, but in view of the sophistication of many early sagas, as recent

scholarship has demonstrated, it seems implausible that the 'national epic' should be an anomalous case of naiveté. And indeed it has been shown that there is more to this 'simple story' than is immediately apparent.

Given the literary convention that tales set in the distant past were primarily of relevance to the time and milieu in which they were redacted, it is clear that a knowledge of social idiom and particularly of the legal system is crucial to a deeper understanding of early Irish saga. The role of the warrior was obviously vital to that society. A number of recent studies have illuminated the institution of the *fían(n)*, 'an association of propertyless and predominantly young, unmarried warrior-hunters on the fringes of settled society'. The *Männerbund* culture of such sodalities of young men is well attested in Germanic and Greek traditions, so that here we have a trace of Ireland's pagan inheritance. The *fían*'s wild life was expressed in the wearing of wolf-skins or wolf-heads, which is reflected in the proliferation of names incorporating elements meaning 'wolf': such an element is *cú*, which signifies both the canine and lupine kind. Members of a *fían* were traditionally credited with the ability to experience ecstatic distortions. Both these features, the canine/lupine aspect and the distortion, are expressed in the warrior-hero of the *Táin*: Cú Chulainn's name marks him as a 'hound' or 'wolf', and the contortions he undergoes in his *ríastrad* are mentioned frequently. With this background knowledge, *Aided con na cerda* can be read as a predictable stage in Cú Chulainn's martial career. By killing the hound Sétantae appropriates its martial spirit. The symbolism of the episode and its wider societal implications would presumably not have been lost on an early Irish audience.

The Táin Bó Tale Type

On the subject matter of this tale type Mac Cana says: 'The *tána* are the literary reflex of a social practice which was not merely Irish, but Celtic and Indo-European, and which is found elsewhere among cattle-rearing peoples □ For the Celts the successful cattle-raid was an assertion of the integrity of the tribal community *vis-à-vis* its neighbours and a vindication of its leader's claim to primacy over his people □ It is no mere accident, therefore, that the greatest of Irish tales, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* □ belongs to the category of the *tána*'. What was at stake in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* on the political level was therefore the continued independence of the kingdom of Ulster. Such a conflict could easily provide the stuff of narrative, but surely does not exhaust the literary meaning of the tale. That something more than a normal, albeit major, cattle raid is involved is shown by the fact that the defeat of Ailill and Medb does not end the tale: the climax is not the battle between Connacht and Ulster forces, but the fight of the two bulls and their ensuing deaths. As the various encounters between Cú Chulainn and his adversaries leave an abiding mark on the landscape in the form of new place names, so too the battle of the bulls gives rise to a new onomastic inventory. The rivalry of the two bulls and the cosmogonic significance of the final scene, in which the physical landscape is recreated, is thought to reflect the original mythological nucleus of the tale. Between these two poles, the mimetic and the mythic, must lie the literary significance of the tale.

The other *Táin Bó* tales may give an indication of what is involved in a literary presentation of the cattle-raid. They all function as fore-tales (*remscéla*) to *Táin Bó*

*Cúailnge*, the motivation for the raid being of no great political importance, but merely to provide food for the duration of the larger foray. None of the raids is conducted by a reigning monarch, or against such a major political opponent, and as one would expect, the protagonist is always a man. Finally, as Carney noted there is often a love interest: the driving off of cattle goes hand in hand with the acquisition of a woman. I suggest that these two narrative strands are figuratively linked, via a metaphor which equates cattle with humans, and particularly women with cows.

This metaphor is memorably exploited in a famous passage from another Ulster Cycle tale, *Longes mac nUislenn* (The exile of the sons of Uisliu). The beautiful Deirdre, who is being raised in seclusion as a future consort for Conchobar, meets and is smitten by Noísiu, a handsome young warrior. Their conversation is couched in figurative language:

'□A fine young heifer that is going by,' he said.□'The heifers are bound to be fine where there are no
bulls,' she answered.□'You have the bull of the province: the king of
Ulaid,' Noísiu 'said.

Thus the identification of cows and women in the plot of the *táin bó* genre is supported in the language by a metaphor in which terms for cattle can denote humans. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, of course, the roles of male and female are reversed. It is a woman who is the initiator of the raid, and her primary objective is not cattle-herds, but a particular prize bull, the Donn Cúailnge, the 'bull of the province' of Ulster, i.e. the Ulster king, Conchobar. The choice of a female protagonist therefore brings about a variation on the normal *táin bó* pattern, and the interpretation of Medb's anomalous behaviour is seen as crucial to the understanding of this tale.

Medb: Sovereignty Goddess or All-too-human?

Medb's role in the *Táin* is pivotal. She identi-fies herself at the outset as the chief instigator of the foray: 'it is I who have mustered this hosting', and remains the driving force throughout the narrative. Her decisions are carried even against the advice of Ailill and Fergus. She has a major say in the choice of warriors sent against Cú Chulainn and the rewards they are promised. In her marriage she is the dominant partner: Ailill is a complaisant husband, virtually conniving in her cuckoldry of him with Fergus, as a means of securing Fergus's support in their expedition. It is she who quells the disturbance in the ranks caused by the attack of the war-goddess and the dire prophecy of Dubhthach. She leads a sub-expedition of her own for a fortnight to Dál Riata. At the end of the tale she participates actively, and initially with success, in the actual fighting.

While much in the presentation of Medb's character has the impact of a tour-de-force of verisimilitude, her exercise of power is unlikely to reflect the reality of early Irish society. Ó Corráin comments: 'On the political level, women never inherited political power as such and never governed as independent sovereigns or rulers, though, of course, strong-minded women had a powerful influence on the political activities of their husbands. Indeed, Medb □ is the archetypal strong woman□determined, domineering

and wanton□and we need not doubt that there were many like her in real life'. Kelly points out that 'the annals provide no instances of a female political or military leader. Indeed, the male imagery which surrounds the of-fice of kingship □ would seem to preclude even the possibility of a female ruler.' The imagery of kingship is well-attested in the literature of all periods. Its fundamental element symbolizes the land as a woman, with whom the prospective king must mate if his reign is to be legitimate. Various reflexes of this mythic female have been identified, but Medb is considered 'the outstanding figure of the territorial goddess in Irish literature'. One of the ways the goddess signalled acceptance of a would-be king was to offer him a drink: this aspect is conveyed in Medb's very name, which has been explained as a derivative of the word *med* 'mead', meaning 'the intoxicating (or intoxicated) one'. Medb Lethderg of Tara who is considered to be the original sovereignty goddess, of whom her namesake, the queen of Connacht in the Ulster Cycle, is a literary reflex. Medb Chrúachna's divine aspect is only 'vestigial in Recension I of the Táin, but Recension II is more explicit when it has her stipulate the qualities she demands in a husband: he should be *cen néoit, cen ét, cen omon* 'without meanness, without jealousy, without fear'. Absence of jealousy is necessary 'for I was never without a man in the shadow of another' (i.e. without one lover quickly succeeding another). This was once seen as a reference to the loose morals of pre-Christian Ireland, but Medb's promiscuity has been more plausibly explained as a reflec-tion of her original role as the mythic sovereignty figure, union with whom is constantly sought by candidates for the kingship.

For all that some contexts do identify Medb as a classic sovereignty figure, this aspect is certainly not to the fore in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. O'Rahilly notes that here 'she is no longer a goddess but a masterful woman, with the inevitable result that her character has sadly degenerated, so much so that at times she is no better than a strong-willed virago with unconcealed leanings towards a multiplicity of husbands and paramours.' I suggest that O'Rahilly's view of Medb's 'degeneracy' is shared by her literary creator, and that it is a central purpose of the *Táin* to depict her in a thoroughly unflattering light.

Medb's conduct of her expedition is shown to be severely wanting. She makes an inauspicious start when she rejects the vision of the prophetess Fedelm, whom she has asked 'How do you see the fate of the army?' Fedelm replies three times, chillingly, '*Atchíu forderg, atchíu rúad*' 'I see it bloody, I see it red'. Twice Medb disputes the veracity (*fír*) of this prediction, and finally dismisses it as of little significance (*ní báa aní sin trá*). She proposes to kill the crack regiment, the Gaileóin, lest they gain all the credit for the success of the raid, or eventually turn against the Connacht forces and defeat them. Ailill remarks laconically: '*Ní chélam as banchomairle*' 'I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel'. That following a woman's advice can only have negative results is a topos in many texts, and in a later scene Fergus pleads with Ailill not to heed the 'foolish counsels of a woman' (*banairle baetha*) when Medb predicts victory. She airily discounts Fergus's lengthy eulogy of Cú Chulainn. When the river Cronn floods, Medb rejects the possibility of travelling upstream to its source to find a passage, but sets the troops three days and nights digging up the mountain to make a pass through it, since that will remain as a permanent insult to the Ulstermen. The Connacht leaders repeatedly violate the warriors' honour code (*fír fer* literally 'truth of men', usually translated 'fair play') against Ulster warriors, but Medb is the only one who personally recommends this

course: *Brister fír fer fair* 'Let terms of fair play be broken against him'. Other characters make negative comments which reveal her reputation. When she plans a 'mock peace' (*sída celci*) to lure Cú Chulainn to a meeting unarmed, his charioteer warns: *At móra glonna Medbi  Atágur lám ar cúl aci* 'Many are Medb's treacherous deeds  I fear that she has help behind the scenes'. Although she fights actively, and initially with success, in the final pitched battle, in the end she is in the ignominious position of having to beg Cú Chulainn to spare her.

The last scene in which Medb appears shows her viciously disparaged as a woman for aspiring to military leadership. Her admission to Fergus that their forces are routed elicits this savage riposte from him: *'Is bésad  do cach graig remitét láir, rotgata, rotbrata, rotfeither a moín hi tóin mná misrairleastair'* 'That is what usually happens  to a herd of horses led by a mare. Their substance is taken and carried off and guarded as they follow a woman who has misled them.' The implication is that a 'stallion' would have been a more suitable choice of leader, and Fergus's patronymic mac Roeich 'son of great horse' marks him out as an ideal candidate. The final verdict of the narrative on Medb is therefore that she has usurped a man's function, and this is what has doomed the expedition from the start.

The positioning of this comment of Fergus's at a crucial point in the tale suggests that this aspect is of greater importance to the overall meaning of the *Táin* than has been acknowledged. Frank O'Connor noted 'the rancorous anti-feminist irony that occurs again and again through the story', and declared his conviction that 'the purpose of the original author would seem to have been to warn his readers against women, particularly women in positions of authority'. O'Connor's thesis is considered 'clearly extreme' by O'Leary, though even he concedes that 'distrust of women is by no means an insignificant theme' in the tale.

A further indication that Fergus's jibe may provide a clue to part of the central message of the *Táin* is that it echoes a phrase which occurs at other significant points in the narrative. The phrase is *tóin mná*, which has also been rendered less delicately as 'the rump of a woman' or 'a woman's buttocks'. The first use of the term in the tale certainly requires the literal translation. When the Morrígan in the guise of a beautiful young woman tries to distract Cú Chulainn from his task he dispatches her brusquely: *Ní ar thóin mná dano gabus-sa inso* 'it is not for a woman's body that I have come'. Conall Cernach taunts Fergus by implying a dishonourable motive for his Connacht allegiance: '*Baramór in bríg sin,' ar Conall Cernach, 'for túaith 7 cenél ar thóin mná drúithi*' 'Too great is that force which you exert against (your own) people and race, following a wanton woman as you do,' said Conall Cernach. The editor's discreet rendering notwithstanding, the sexual innuendo is again clear.

Medb is therefore not just a 'heavily rationalized' reflex of the sovereignty goddess, but a negative manifestation of the figure. Granted, the classic 'straight' version of the myth of the sovereignty woman can depict her as mentally deranged or physically unattractive or deformed; but this when she is bereft of a suitable lover. The negative depiction of Medb in the *Táin* has also been interpreted in this light: 'It is of the essence of the myth that the beautiful sympathetic goddess is transformed into a harpy or a

harridan whenever the cosmic plan is out of joint□as when usurpers or unworthy pretenders lay claim to her favours□and in this instance the monastic redactor has chosen to present her as a lusty and overbearing autocrat with a puppet husband'. Medb however retains all her beauty, and the focus of the text is not on Ailill's failings as a spouse, though of course they are a precondition for his wife's excesses. Of Medb's two male partners, it is Fergus who comes off the worst in the *Táin*; but he is rehabilitated as an honourable figure at the end.

One realization of the goddess which might be seen to merit the 'harpy or harridan' formulation is Sín, in *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* (The death of Muirchertach mac Erca). Sín is 'a diabolical sovereignty woman who bewitches the Tara monarch [Muirchertach], causes him to abandon his former wife, and leads him to conflict and death' (McCone 1990, 133). Here again, however, the narrative does not put the burden of blame on Muirchertach's inadequacy as king: 'Sín leads a hitherto flawless sovereign astray out of personal malice' (*ibid*). O'Hehir (1983, 168) characterizes this tale as an 'anti-goddess story, reversing the pagan polarities' and attributes it to a 'Christian redactor bent on discrediting otherworld goddesses as queens'. *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* can thus be seen as an inversion of the 'normal' sovereignty goddess story pattern, and this strengthens the case for reading the *Táin* in a similar way.

There is some support therefore for the view that the characterisation of Medb as a negative paradigm of the sovereignty goddess is a serious thematic concern of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Its author takes the matter a step further, however.

As we have seen, Medb does not confine herself to traditionally female spheres of activity. And the narrative judges her in accordance with the traditional criteria for the male role she aspires to. This can be seen in the legal implications of a number of incidents.

As mentioned above, in the final battle Medb is reduced to asking Cú Chulainn for his protection. He complies *úair nád gonad mná* 'because he used not to kill women' (4117). Medb, however, is a would-be combatant and should maintain the warrior ethos she seeks to embody. And 'pleading for quarter' is listed by the laws among the seven things which 'reveal the falsehood of [one party in] a duel' (Kelly 1988, 212-213). That doing so amounts to an admission of cowardice is shown by a contrasting instance where a defeated adversary asks a favour of Cú Chulainn. The full import of the scene is spelled out in Recension II: the dying Lóch asks that his body be let fall in such a way as to allay any suspicion that he was killed in flight. He justifies his plea: *Ní ascid anacail nó midlachais iarraim-se fort* 'No favour of quarter do I ask nor do I make a cowardly request', and Cú Chulainn concurs: is *láechda ind ascid connaigi* 'it is a warrior's request you make' (*TBC II* 2005-2010).

Themes

In keeping with the view that *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is epic or heroic literature, the main thematic concern has been formulated as 'the celebration of the martial heroism of Cú Chulainn; of his courage and ingenuity, his mastery of the martial arts, his unswerving

loyalty'. Certainly the greatest bulk of the tale is devoted to Cú Chulainn's exploits, and he is depicted in a wholly favourable light. This rubs off on the Ulaid, who are the victors in the contention. Some scholars however dispute the apparent corollary that the whole heroic age in general is also being celebrated. Radner notes that the tale emphasises the negative effects of war, summarised in Cú Chulainn's statement on hearing the clamour of the final battle: *conscar bara bith* 'anger destroys the world'. 'Thematically', she argues, 'the Ulster Cycle as a whole tends to present the tragic breakdown of those relationships on which early Irish society was founded: the relationships between host and guest, between kindred, between foster-brothers, between men and women, between lords and clients and kings and overkings, between the human world and the gods. Behind the immense vitality, humor and imagination of the Ulster stories is a picture of society moving to dysfunction and serf-destruction'.

Yet the blame for the breakdown of social order is not laid impartially on both sides, or on all participants. As far as 'societal' virtues such as *goire* 'filial piety' and *condalbae* 'love of kin, patriotism' are concerned, as exemplified in the behaviour of the Ulster characters, they prove resilient in the end. Fergus's kin-love (*condalbae*) causes him to sabotage the Connacht venture, he can be prevailed upon to desist from attacking the Ulaid in the final battle, and his ties of fostership with Cú Chulainn preclude their engaging in direct combat. The Ulaid are presented as strongly motivated by *condalbae* in relation to Conchobar's grandson. It is Medb who sets foster-brothers, foster-fathers and foster-sons against each other, who offers her daughter as a bribe to any likely opponent of Cú Chulainn, and who seduces Fergus into disloyalty to his kin.

The most negative point about the Ulaid is their inability to support Cú Chulainn through the winter months, and Radner makes the attractive suggestion that their mysterious sickness, the *ces noínden*, is 'the tangible and persistent symbol of a radical flaw in the Ulstermen'. Aitchison also notes the ambiguous tone in the depiction of Ulster glory, but his conclusion that the Ulster Cycle is anti-Ulaid propaganda is informed less by the *Táin* than by other Ulster tales. In the *Táin* the Ulaid are certainly not singled out for criticism, but I would agree that whole-hearted approval of war is withheld. The tale does not dwell indulgently on descriptions of the large-scale battle, and the final encounters, between Fergus on the one hand and Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn on the other, pass off without human casualties. This I would interpret as a reflection of a general pacifist stance, which would accord well with a hypothesis of clerical authorship.

The immediate catalyst for the chaos and killing is the cattle raid itself. Though such raiding may have been 'the most typical and abiding event recorded in the annals down the centuries' and 'a commonplace, not to say routine, experience to every individual in the population', there is evidence that efforts were made by the Church to put a stop to it, or to alleviate the destruction it could entail. Killing plough oxen and stealing milch kine are said to be among the three most serious offences which Patrick proscribed. The canons of Adamnán, no later than the ninth century, lay down that 'cattle seized in a raid are not to be taken by Christians whether in trade or as gifts'. An ecclesiastical *Cáin* attributed to a sixth-century nun Dar Í enjoined 'not to kill cattle'. The annals record its promulgation four times between 810 and 826. This concern with the destructive potential of cattle-raiding is perhaps only implied in the narrative message of *Táin Bó*

*Cúailnge,* but may have found more explicit literary reflection elsewhere in the Ulster Cycle: a passage in *Táin Bó Regamna* has been interpreted as advice to Cú Chulainn to give up cattle-raiding.

As the instigator of the cattle raid, Medb is the primary culprit, who as a woman has unjustifiably arrogated power and status to herself. It is her challenge to male superiority, the bedrock of a patriarchal society, which upsets the natural balance and destabilises society. One of the thematic concerns of the tale, then, is the perennial question of the relative roles in society of men and women. More specifically, it concentrates on Medb's unseemly aspirations towards the supreme male role, that of the king.

Style and Structure

It is generally agreed that one of the best features of early Irish storytelling is the terse, fast-paced style, consisting of taut, almost elliptical, sentences or phrases. It is deployed to striking advantage in conversation, lending passages of direct speech a staccato-like effect. As an example I quote from the touching exchange between Cú Chulainn and his mother in the first section of the *macgnímrada*:

"Cú Chulainn asked his mother to let him go to join
the boys.

'You shall not go,' said his mother, till you be
escorted by some of the Ulster warriors.'
'I think it too long to wait for that,' said Cú Chulainn.
'Point out to me in what direction is Emain.'
'To the north there,' said his mother, 'and the journey
is hard. Slíab Fúait lies between you and Emain.'
'I shall make an attempt at it at all events.' said
Cú Chulainn"

In general, the older the text, the more economical the prose. A comparison with the Recension II version of the above scene may serve to illustrate the development in style between the ninth and twelfth centuries:

"'It is too soon for you to go, my son,' said his mother,
'until there go with you a champion of the champions
of Ulster or some of the attendants of Conchobar to
ensure your safety and protection from the youths.'

The effect is smoother, but tends to the verbose.

In another instance from Recension I, the succinctness of Medb's speech is a perfect vehicle for the stark message it conveys. She feels threatened by the superiority of the Gaileóin. Ailill tries to divine her intentions:

'Well then, what shall be done with them,' asked
Ailill, 'since neither their staying nor their going

pleases you?'
'Kill them!' said Medb.

The limpid quality prevails even in descriptive passages, as in the following extended word portrait of the prophetess Fedelm, which consists largely of verb-free nominal phrases:

'She had yellow hair. She wore a vari-coloured cloak with a golden pin in it and a hooded tunic with red embroidery. She had shoes with golden fastenings. Her face was oval, narrow below, broad above. Her eyebrows were dark and black. Her beautiful black eyelashes cast a shadow on to the middle of her cheeks. Her lips seemed to be made of partaing. Her teeth were like a shower of pearls between her lips. She had three plaits of hair: two plaits wound around her head, the third hanging down her back, touching her calves behind. In her hand she carried a weaver's beam of white bronze, with golden inlay. There were three pupils in each of her eyes. The maiden was armed and her chariot was drawn by two black horses'.

An eleventh-century addition to Recension I, which contains a description of Cú Chulainn's hair, provides a contrast and highlights the later tendency to heap up adjectives: 'Fair was the arrangement of that hair with three coils in the hollow in the nape of his neck, and like gold thread was each fine hair, loose-flowing, bright-golden, excellent, long-tressed, splendid and of beautiful colour, which fell back over his shoulder. A hundred bright crimson ringlets of flaming red-gold encircled his neck'.

Some stretches of direct speech in the *Táin* are in a rhythmical alliterative style called *rosc(ad)* or *retoiric*. Their syntax is frequently marked, and they have therefore often been held to belong to an older linguistic stratum of the text. Corthals points out, however, that in the *Táin* such passages are fully integrated into the surrounding 'straight' prose as regards narrative content. Rather than reflecting a chronological divide, they exemplify one of the possible varieties in the 'supple stylistic continuum' of early Irish writing. A lengthy stretch of *roscad* occurs in the exchange between Ailill, Fergus and Medb after the love-making scene. Another context which features this style is the Morrígan's prophecy to the bull. The style here is even more highly marked, through the use of metre for the words of the actual prophecy, contained in the two central lines below, which are linked by alliteration to the surrounding rhetorical prose (alliterating consonants in boldface):

'□I have a secret which the Black one will find out:
'If he will (=would) eat in May (?) the very green
grass of the bogland, he would be overpowered (and
driven) out of his field by fire (and) contest of strong

warriors.' The flowering splendour of the host seduces
the Bodb'.

Another variation in style is brought about by an alternation between prose and syllabic verse. Some sections have no syllabic verse at all, e.g. the *macgnímrada*, while the eleventh century Fer Diad episode (2567-3142) features almost a half-and-half distribution between these two modes. After this episode the remaining thousand or so lines are entirely in prose, with some short passages of *roscad* .

The narrative technique also features diversity. A popular means of ringing the changes on conventional exposition is the 'watchman device'. This consists of description presented by a knowledgeable participant in the events (the 'watchman'), rather than by an omniscient narrator. The device has not found favour with the taste of modern scholars, who have dismissed instances in other texts as 'long and tedious', or 'repetitive and wearisome'. With an effort of empathy, however, it is possible to see some virtue in its employment in the *Táin*.

If it is correct to suggest that it is no concern of the tale to glorify war, the author is faced with the problem of how to create a credible battle scenario without direct description of the carnage. He conveys a sense of the strength of the defending army in the lengthy account of the approach of the Ulster warriors as viewed by the Connachtmen. The use of the watchman device here is far from mechanical: a reconnaissance man is sent out and returns with descriptions of individual warriors, who Fergus, their one-time comrade, is asked to identify. His answers are not stereotyped, and his personal reactions are varied. Another sophisticated use of the technique furnishes a *post hoc* and indirect account of bloody combat in 'The hard fight of Cethern'. The wounded Ulsterman Cethern will not suffer any physician near him, so the diagnosis of his injuries is conducted at a distance: he describes the warriors who wounded him, and here it is Cú Chulainn, all too familiar with the Connacht adversaries, who identifies them. In contrast, the account of Cú Chulainn's own participation in the final fray is a gem of understatement:

'It was midday when Cú Chulainn came to the battle.
When the sun was sinking behind the trees in the
wood, he overcame the last of the bands, and of the chariot
there remained only a handful of the
ribs of the framework and a handful of the shafts round the wheel'.

This stunning image is expressed with all the eloquence and brevity of the most admired passages of early Irish prose, but the other narrative responses to the task of describing the battle need not therefore be denied structural validity and artistic intent.

The structure of the opening scenes of the *Táin* has evoked unanimous critical approval. Some of the best literary effects here have been analysed by Carney. In the initial portion, some eight hundred lines, from the mustering of the Connacht forces to the end of the *macgnímrada*, he detects the hand of a literary personality, 'not a mere story-teller'. The *pièce-de-résistance* is undoubtedly the 'Boyhood deeds'. After the

advance of the Connachtmen has been held up by some displays of Cú Chulainn's prowess, the forward movement of the narrative is interrupted with a flashback to enable the exiled Ulstermen to recall the most striking martial feats of his precocious childhood. The build-up to this flash-back is also impressive. The narrator's attention is initially directed entirely to the Connacht side. The prophecy of Fedelm soon casts an ominous shadow on their proceedings. Cú Chulainn only slowly comes into focus: he is first referred to, but not named, in the prophecy of Dubthach (194), as the army traverses the centre of the country. When they reach the east, Fergus sends him a warning. From then on, Cú Chulainn's presence is increasingly felt, until he kills four of the vanguard of the invading army and sets their heads up on spits to confront the Connachtmen when they arrive. It is at this point that Ailill and Medb inquire about their formidable opponent, and the Ulstermen each contribute their memories of his 'boyhood deeds': this sets the scene for the ultimate triumph of the Ulster defence, and reinforces the sense of foreboding which dogs the Connacht forces throughout. Such 'tricks of presentation' Carney (*ibid* 71) considers to be evidence of a wholly literary sophistication, of a quality rare even in the early texts.

The remainder of the tale has not received anything like the same accolades. Greene's judge-ment (1954, 32) that 'the long series of single combats becomes wearisome and the story tails off badly' is probably representative of modern scholarly opinion. For Carney (1955, 67) the decline in the quality of the narration sets in with the very first of the single combats, the interpolated 'Death of Fróech'. Admittedly 'after this point □ there are a greater number of incidents which are merely of antiquarian interest' (*ibid*), but perhaps there are some points of significance encoded in the placenames or personal names in the single encounters which may yet be elucidated. However that may be, O'Rahilly concedes that 'the skill with which these encounters are varied in circumstance and detail is remarkable'.

Source: Patricia Kelly, "The *Táin* as Literature," in *Aspects of the Tain,* edited by J. P. Mallory, December Publications, 1992, pp. 69-95.

# Critical Essay #3

This lecture by David Greene regarding Táin Bó Cúailnge *relates the story's origins, history, and its many versions, providing a sense of this story's national and international appeal.*

People who deal with early Irish literature, usually refer to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* simply as '*the Táin*'. This is partly a handy abbreviation, but it is also the usage in Irish literature and it tells us something about the story; it is the original *Táin*, and the other stories whose titles begin with *Táin Bó* are all either later stories or old ones which have been re-worked to bring them into relationship with the *Táin* as *remscéla*□preliminary stories. ...

And why was this black bull of Cooley so badly wanted? Well, one of the versions of the *Táin*□not the oldest□gives us a nice rational interpretation. Ailill, king of Connacht, and his wife Maeve, chatting in bed one night, begin to argue about what each of them brought into the marriage. The argument grows so heated that they decide to compare their property on the spot, and, for every treasure that Ailill can produce, Maeve can find one to match it□except for one, a fine bull called Finnbheannach□Whitehorned□which had originally belonged to Maeve but had refused to be a woman's property and had joined the king's herd. When Maeve realises this, the rest of her wealth isn't worth a penny to her and she swears to get as good a bull for herself. The only one which is known to be good enough is the black bull of Cooley, owned by a certain Dáire. Maeve immediately sends messengers to Dáire to offer him the most generous terms for the bull, and all goes well until the Connacht emissaries get drunk and are overheard boasting that if the bull were not given freely they would take it by force. Tempers rise, negotiations are broken off, and war is the only possible solution.

It's a human enough incident, very well told in the Book of Leinster...but I don't think it's part of the original story. At the very end of the *Táin* the two bulls, the white one from Connacht and the black one from Ulster, sweep aside the fighting men and finish the war for themselves; the Connacht bull is defeated and the black bull makes his way home triumphantly to Cooley before he, too, dies of his wounds. It is plain that these are no mere animals, but heroic and god-like creatures; we have memories here, however altered, of a cult of bull-gods, such as is well known from the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean.

The *Táin*, then, like the rest of the Ulster sagas, preserves pre-Christian traditions□but of what period? The German scholar Windisch and the English archaeologist Ridgeway were struck, over fifty years ago, by the resemblances between the chariot-fighting warriors of the *Táin* and the Celts of Britain and Gaul described by classical writers in the first century B.C., and Windisch pointed out, reasonably enough, that this way of life could have survived considerably longer in Ireland, free from Roman observers and Roman invaders. But, while the Ro-mans seem to have regarded the Gauls as fairly civilised people, the contemporary Irish were not so acceptable; the chariots in the *Táin* were often decorated with newly acquired human heads, and scholars educated in the

classical tradition felt that the *Táin* stories would be more fittingly placed in a vague and distant past. ...

This view lingers on; it's only a year or so since I read an article which said that 'it is an acknowledged fact that the *Táin* cycle embodies memories of the Celtic way of life and of Celtic beliefs in the centuries from 500 B.C. to 100 A.D.' I think that talking in terms of Celts, and more especially of Celtic gentlemen, is liable to distract our attention from the main point. We know that Celts came to Ireland, since Irish is a Celtic language, and we know that early Irish society has many points in common with that of Celtic Gaul, as well as more distant relationships with early Rome and India. But that Irish society, and the literature it produced, are neither Indo-European nor Celtic, but simply Irish, and must be studied on that basis. Certain elements belonging to the coherent society portrayed in the *Táin*—totem and tabu, headhunting, fighting from chariots—are unknown in early Christian Ireland and cannot, therefore, be inventions of literary men influenced by Latin learning; we need not go too far in the other direction, however, and regard them as memories of an infinitely remote past. You may remember that some of the antiquarian writers after the end of the Old Irish period like to put the death of Conchobhar Mac Neasa, the king of Ulster in these stories, as coincidental with the death of Christ, but that is, of course, just a conjecture or invention. Remembering that writing was little known in Ireland before the fifth century, and writing in Irish not much before the seventh, we have to ask ourselves how long we should allow for an oral tradition which would preserve all these archaic features, free from any admixture of Christian lore. Not too long, I would suggest; the most important fact that occurs to me is that the same antiquarian writers put the abandonment of Emhain Mhacha, the capital of the Ulstermen in all these tales, somewhere about the middle of the fourth century. It's a common enough device to choose, as the subject of a national epic, a people or kingdom which has no longer any real political existence—it prevents any charges of undue favouritism against the literary men. If the Ulaid, this warlike people who gave their name to the whole province, if they preserved what we might call the *Táin* way of life up to the fourth century, and then were overwhelmed by an alliance of their enemies, it is not impossible that, just before the coming of Christianity and writing, the stories about them should have become part of the stock-in-trade of the literary men. These stories would hardly have been popular in the first flush of missionary enthusiasm—not popular, that is to say, with the propagators of the new learning. But in no country did the church make its peace with the old learning as quickly or as thoroughly as in Ireland; the elegiac poem in the old bardic style on St. Columba, who died in 597, is sufficient proof that a complete understanding had been arrived at by that date. And I think we might accept one more deduction from the antiquarian writers and say that the alleged finding of the *Táin* by the poet Seanchán Torpéist in the seventh century—he had to call up Fergus from the dead to tell it—that this finding of the *Táin* is just the antiquarians' way of saying that it then became respectable to write it down.

Not only writing down this traditional material, but re-arranging it as well. Most of our early sagas are quite short—about the length of this lecture, say. But even the earliest version of the *Táin* is about ten times that length and the Book of Leinster version longer still; they are no longer stories, but literary works. This, I suppose, was partly due to the fact that the story-tellers now had pen and vellum and could spread themselves, and

there's probably a good deal of truth in the suggestion of Thurneysen that the *Táin* in its present form has been influenced by the Aeneid; the writers were out to provide Ireland with a national epic.

I find that I have been talking as though this seventh century *Táin* had been preserved, but the fact of the matter is that we can only deduce its existence from later evidence. ...

...Our earliest literary manuscripts in Irish are as late as the twelfth century. One of these, Leabhar na hUidhre, or the Book of the Dun Cow, contains the earliest version of the *Táin* known to us, and there is another copy of the same version in the Yellow Book of Lecan. But this version is not a straightforward story at all; it is a compilation by somebody who was interested in collecting as much of the varying traditions of the *Táin* as possible. He does not attempt to conceal the fact; he interjects remarks such as 'They say it is here that Dubhthach sang the lay', 'But other books have the following version', 'According to another version, however', and so on. These are the remarks a modern editor would reserve for footnotes or a preface; here they are jumbled in with the text and, as they suggest, we often find two versions of the same incident told one after the other.

This arises, of course, from the popularity of the story. Once it had been established as the national epic, it became the common property of saga-writers who remoulded it to the taste of their period. We have plenty of parallels from other literatures; you will remember Professor Stanford's researches on the figure of Ulysses throughout the ages, and the play by Giraudoux, called Amphitryon 38, because it was the thirty-eighth handling of the theme, by the dramatist's own reckoning. From this point of view we can regard Yeats's use of Irish saga themes in his verse plays as a perfectly legitimate continuation of a process that had been going on since the beginning of Irish literature. But, to return to the *Táin*, it is sad that we do not possess one of the early versions in its entirety, instead of having to piece a story together from the very varied material gathered together by the industrious compiler. ...

...The original material of the *Táin* lay in the rivalry between the divine bulls, with which the story still begins and ends; Cú Chulainn's part, originally just an incident in the story, has been enormously expanded, in two ways. The first was to describe, not just one or two of his fights on the ford, while delaying the Connacht troops, but all of them, and in great detail; the most famous of these, the fight with Fer Diad, although occurring in the earliest version, is still so late in style and language as to show beyond doubt that it cannot be a great deal older than the twelfth century manuscript in which it is written down. You remember the story: Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn's old friend and comrade, is plied with drink and women, threatened with satire, and cajoled with promises of wealth, until he promises to fight Cú Chulainn, by whom, of course, he falls. Cú Chulainn's lament over him has been well rendered by Sigerson:

'Every other combat and fight that ever I have made
was to me but a game or a sport, compared to the
combat and the fight of Ferdia. And he spake
these words:

Play was each, pleasure each,
Till Ferdia faced the beach □'

This is fine stuff, as is the quarrel between Ailill and Maeve to which I have already referred, but it is not part of the original story, and neither, in all probability, are most of the fights on the ford, the best of which are by the same hand as wrote the 'boyish deeds'□the Prose-writer, as O'Connor calls him because, though his language is much older than that of the Fer Diad episode, it is not interspersed either with verse or with rhetorics□those passages in obscure alliterative rhythmic language which are characteristic of the older sagas and which we find in long passages between Ailill, Maeve and Fergus in the *Táin*. The language is barer here and the background more barbarous; take the death of Etarcomol, who forces a fight on Cú Chulainn against Fergus' advice:

Loeg said to Cú Chulainn: 'The chariot is back again and it has turned its left side to us'. 'That is not an obligation that can be refused', said Cú Chulainn, 'we will go down to the ford to meet it and see about it'. 'I do not wish what you ask of me', said Cú Chulainn. 'You must do it', said Etarcomol. Cú Chulainn cut the sod from under his foot, so that he fell with the sod on his belly. 'Get away from me', said Cú Chulainn, 'I don't want to have to clean my hands on your account. I would have you cut into many pieces long ago had it not been for Fergus'. 'We will not part this way', said Etarcomol, 'I will bring away your head or leave my head with you'. 'That is what will happen', said Cú Chulainn and struck with his sword under his two armpits, so that his clothes fell off him, but his skin was not touched. 'Go away now', said Cú Chulainn. 'No', said Etarcomol. Cú Chulainn swept him then with the edge of his sword and took his hair off as though it had been shaved with a razor. And, since the boor was still tiresome and persistent, he struck him on the top of the head and split him to the navel.

We can imagine how popular this murderous sort of slap-stick was with early Irish audiences, especially when connected with the great name of Cú Chulainn, and they were given plenty of it. But the second and greater triumph of the Prose-writer was his introduction of the stories of the hero's boyhood, given as the reminiscences of Fergus and the other Ulster exiles with Connacht forces□exiles, you will remember, since the death of Deirdre and the sons of Uisliu. This is the technique familiar to us in the modern cinema as the 'flash-back', and it is used here with remarkable effect, with little naturalistic touches such as 'that took place in the presence of Bricriu here', and 'I met him in the door of the lios and I badly wounded' and 'nine of the boys dashed past Conchobhar and myself, who were playing chess'. It is more than a little surprising to find so sophisticated a style allied to very primitive, not to say barbarous material; the

language of these stories shows that they can hardly have been written much before the ninth century, but there is no admixture at all of classical or ecclesiastical elements. They are one of the happiest examples of the process I have mentioned before, the remoulding of a traditional theme; extraneous though they may be to the action of the *Táin*, they came to form an integral part of it□indeed, to modern taste, by far the most attractive part. ...

...For example:

I haven't had enough of my game yet, uncle Conchobhar', said the boy, 'I will go after you'. When they all reached the feast Culann said to Conchobhar, 'Is anyone coming after you?' 'No', said Conchobhar; he did not remember that he had told his foster-son to follow him. 'I have a fierce dog', said Culann, 'there are three chains on it, and three men on each chain. Let it be loosed to protect our cattle and let the lios be closed?' The boy comes along then. The dog makes for him. He kept on his game meanwhile; he was throwing his ball and throwing his hurling stick after it so that it struck the ball. This shocked Conchobhar and his people so that they were unable to move; they thought they could not reach him alive, even if the lios had been open. When the hound reached him, he threw away his ball and stick and seized the hound with his two hands, one on its throat and the other at the back of its head, and swung it against a pillar-stone which was nearby, so that every limb of it sprang asunder. The Ulstermen rushed towards him, some over the wall, others through the door of the lios, and he was placed in Conchobhar's arms. They raised a great clash of arms, because the son of the king's sister had nearly been killed.

Well, the smith comes along then, and while rejoicing over the boy's escape, laments the death of the dog which protected his wealth, and Sétanta offers to take its place until another dog can be reared; and Cathbhadh, the druid, says 'Cú Chulainn shall be your name'. ...

...For the *Táin,* taken as a whole, can hardly be called an artistic success; if it's really intended as an imitation of the Aeneid, it's a very bad one. Of course, we have to make allowances for the fact that the earliest version we possess is the merest hotchpotch; how much we would give for a sight of those *alii libri*, those other books to which the compiler so often refers! But, even to the present day, the native genius has felt more at home with short stories than with long works of complicated construction; certainly there is nothing in the fragmentary *Táin* we have that would allow us to suspect the existence of a planned and developed prose epic□nothing to suggest that the *Táin* was ever

otherwise than jerky and episodic. I have suggested that later revisers threw the original story of the contest between the two bulls considerably out of proportion by devoting more and more attention to the attractive figure of the hero Cú Chulainn. And yet the *Táin* ends, as it begins, with the bulls, with the picture of the Black Bull of Cooley making his way home from Connacht with the carcase of his broken rival on his horns.

**Source:** David Greene, "The *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," in *Irish Sagas*, edited by Myles Dillon, Stationary Office, Dublin, 1959, pp. 94-106.

# Adaptations

While the character of Cúchulainn has proved a potent image in the expression of Irish identity in the last century and a half, there have been remarkably few media adaptations. Yeats wrote a series of plays using material from the Ulster Cycle, although not from the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* proper. *On Bailie's Stran* was first performed on 27 December, 1904, Dublin; *The Green Helmet* was first performed on February 1910, Dublin; *Deirdre* was first performed on 24 November, 1906; *At the Hawks Well* was first performed on April 1, 1916, London; *The Only Jealousy of Emer* was first performed in Amsterdam, 1922; and *The Death of Cuchulain* was produced after Yeat's death in Dublin in December, 1949.

# Topics for Further Study

The artifacts that are described in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* have often been compared to the artifacts and the decorative style of the La Tême culture. Research the La Tême style in Europe, Britain, and Ireland and its persistence in Irish art.

Early medieval Ireland produced more than a vernacular literature. It had an enormous effect on Western literary culture, even on the basic level of how a text is presented on the page. Investigate the development of word division, punctuation, and page layout in early Irish and Irish-influenced manuscripts.

The excavation at Navan Fort, the site of Emain Macha, has uncovered an Iron Age complex that is probably religious in nature. The interpretive center is an integral part of an initiative in Northern Ireland to give a sense of cultural inclusion to both communities in Northern Ireland. Research the differing attitudes of Northern Nationalists and Unionists in relation to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge.*

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is full of incidents that explain place names. Research the place names in your own locality to establish what lies behind them.

# Compare and Contrast

**The setting of *Táin Bó Cúailnge:*** Hurling plays an important role in the Ulster society. Not only does it serve as a great social event, it emphasizes the qualities and traits of courage and physical aptitude that the society admires.

1999: Mentioned at several points in the Ulster cycle of stories, hurling is the Irish national game and is promoted, with several other native sports, by a national association: the Gaelic Athletic Association. It is played in nearly every school in Ireland. Local club teams feed their best players into county teams, which then compete on the national level. County and provincial finals are as hotly contested as any ancient raid. The All Ireland Hurling Champions were County Cork in the men's game and County Tipperrary in the women's game.

**The setting of *Táin Bó Cúailnge:*** Cattle and the care and breeding of livestock is another important aspect of Ulster society. The number and quality of livestock a person maintains reflects highly on his or her character. This importance explains why Medb and Ailill emphasize the quality of their catttle during their pillow talk. **2000:** Cattle rearing still dominates Irish agriculture. Irish butter and beef is exported all over the world. Irish cheese makers have developed an international reputation in the last twenty years. Although artificial insemination is used almost exclusively on modern Irish farms, the pursuit of the best bull is still important; league tables of available bulls are published in farming journals. Most cattle reared in Ireland are now from breeds developed on mainland Europe, but a native breed, the small, hardy, Kerry Cow is still bred.

**The setting of *Táin Bó Cúailnge:*** Although Medb is queen, she still is only second in power to Ailill. Throughout the Ulster cycles, she has to resort to her powers of cunning and manipulation to assert her dominance in society.

2000: In contrast to the treatment of Medb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the last two Irish presidents have been women. Both were formerly professors of law at Trinity College Dublin. Ironically, the first, Mary Robinson, is a Connacht woman, while the present incumbent, Mary MacAleese, is from Ulster.

**The setting of *Táin Bó Cúailnge:*** Place names play a key role throughout the Ulster cycles. Place names spring from the locations where specific battles or important events took place. At the end of the epic, the bulls do battle. The places where the Donn Cúailnge and Finnbennach fight are remembered by the people present and throughout the generations.

2000: Although some of the place names in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* cannot be identified in the modern landscape, most of the action of the raid can still be followed across the modern landscape. The Cooley peninsula is in County Louth where *Táin* walks are regularly held. Louth is still an area of cattle rearing, although the port of Duddalk is important for bulk shipping.

# What Do I Read Next?

P. W. Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances*, first published in 1879 and recently re-printed, is one of the first and most influential collections of translations of Irish tales. "The Children of Lir" is perhaps the best-known story in the collection, which leans towards romance and magic rather than heroic battle.

"The Death of Aife's Only Son" is included in Kinsella's translation of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. It is a tragedy worthy of the Greek drama. Cúchulainn is caught up in an inevitable tragedy of his own making. In this tale, unlike in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, a woman's advice represents wisdom and the finest prompting of human love. Emer, Cúchulainn's wife, out of love for him and for his son by another woman, pleads with him to acknowledge and spare his son, Connla.

W. B. Yeats' cycle of plays (*On Bailie's Strand*, *The Green Helmet*, *Deirdre*, *At the Hawks Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *The Death of Cúchulain*), based on Cúchulainn's exploits, transpose the hero into a world of late nineteenth and early twentieth romantic, nationalistic and aesthetic sensibilities, but nevertheless, demonstrate the enduring appeal of the Ulster Cycle.

It may be a reflection of a continuing Irish preoccupation with the land, reflected in the place name stories of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but the landscapes of few countries have been as well or lovingly described as Ireland's in Frank Mitchell and Michael Ryan's *Reading the Irish Landscape*. The authors bring the geological and environmental history of the island forward from the earliest rocks to the present day pressures on the Irish environment.

The first volume of *Clonmacnoise Studies*, edited by Heather King, is a collection of wide-ranging studies of the monastery where the earliest extant manuscript of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was written. Taken together, they are a window on the world, both physical and intellectual, in which the author, scribe, and audience lived.

Paul Saenger's *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* is a demanding text, but for anyone interested in the development of western literacy and the way information is presented in text, the first ninety-nine pages are worth any difficulty they may present.

# Further Study

Dillon, Myles, ed., *Early Irish Society*, Published for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland by Colm O Lochlainn, 1954.

In need of updating, but there is still no introduction so well suited to the student. Dillon loved his subject, and his love is infectious.

□□□, ed., *Irish Sagas*, Thomas Davis Lectures, Published for Radio Éireann by the Stationary Office, 1959.

Another classic from the Thomas Davis Lectures, each scholar retells and discusses one of the Irish legendary tales. It is almost impossible to put this little book down.

Kelly, Patricia, "The *Táin* as Literature," in *Aspects of the Táin*, edited by J. P. Mallory, December Publications, 1992, pp. 69-102.

A clearly written introduction to the literary qualities of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Studies of the Táin Bó Cúailnge as literature are few and far between. Kelly's discussion goes some way to make good this lack, particularly for the student.

Kinsella, Thomas, trans., *The Táin*, Oxford University Press 1969.

This is the most useful translation for the non-specialist. It introduces the reader to all the beauties as well as all the scholarly puzzles of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. There are careful, but not overwhelming notes, including the identification of manuscript sources of the additional material. Louis le Brocquy's brush drawings make it one of the high points of twentieth century book illustration.

Mallory, J. P., "The World of Cú Chulainn: The Archaeology of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," in *Aspects of the Táin*, edited by J. P. Mallory, December Publications, 1992, pp. 103-59.

This study will prove useful in two ways. First, it is an absolutely vital study for our understanding of the development and historical source of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Second, it is a nearly flawless example of how literature and archaeology ought to be used to illuminate one another.

ÓUiginn, Ruairi, "The Background and Development of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," in *Aspects of the Táin*, edited by J. P. Mallory, December Publications, 1992, pp. 29-68.

Another excellent essay from the Mallory collection. ÓUiginn gives a thorough and clear overview of the theories of how the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* of the manuscripts came into being.

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Murphy, Gerard, *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland*, Published for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland by Colm O Lochlainn, 1955.

O'Corrain, Pádraig, "The *Táin*: A Clue to its Origins," in *Ulidia, Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, edited by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman, December Publications, 1995, pp. 31-7.

Yeats, W. B., *Selected Plays*, edited by Richard Allen Cave, Penguin Books, 1997.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

EfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Epics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from EfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from EfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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