

# **The Tain Study Guide**

**The Tain by China Miéville and Thomas Kinsella**

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# Plot Summary

The Tain or "Tain Bo Cuailnge," translated as "The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge," is considered the nearest equivalent Ireland has to a national epic. The central events of the story revolve around the theft of a prized and legendary cow (the titular Donn Cuailnge) by King Ailill and his Queen, Medb, and the subsequent great battle to avenge this theft, almost singlehandedly waged by Irish hero Cuchulainn.

This text, patched together from a variety of ancient sources, first tells the tale of the birth of Conchobor, who would rise to usurp the throne of an Irish land called Ulster. The Ulster people, cursed by a woman, would unfortunately be wracked by great periodic pains, similar to labor pains, called "The Pangs of Ulster," that immobilize them.

Beyond Conchobor, the more important hero to Tain, however, is Cuchulainn, whose birth story is next related. In a magical series of events, Cuchulainn has a sort of triple-birth (and thus a triple lineage), born both of men and of an ancient, semi-divine race of beings called the side. Cuchulainn has a remarkable boyhood, accomplishing impossible feats and achieving a god-like warrior prowess, similar to heroes in other ancient epics.

This is all lead-up to the actual Tain, which begins when King Ailill and Queen Medb compare their wealth, with Medb discovering she lacks a prize bull as the only difference between their stores of wealth. Medb and Ailill then amass a great army, from the four provinces of Ireland, to steal Donn Cuailnge, the legendary bull, from the people of Ulster.

Unfortunately for the Ulstermen, they are undergoing their curse and are immobilized with the pangs. The only warrior among them unaffected by the curse is the hero Cuchulainn. Most of the narrative has Cuchulainn waging essentially a one-man war against the Irish army, killing many from afar with his slingshot, and then one a day in a duel scenario he agrees to, all in an effort to stall the army in time for Ulster to wake from its curse and take up arms.

Cuchulainn performs mighty deeds and kills many, many members of the army, though even he suffers many wounds. His largest struggle comes in his duel with the warrior Ferdia, who is his foster-brother and almost his match in arms. After a furious and legendary three days of non-stop fighting, Cuchulainn resorts to using his legendary barbed spear, the gae bolga, to kill Ferdia, who he then laments in classical epic fashion.

The Irish army has lost its hero, and Ulster has awoken, spelling doom for the Irish. King Conchobor rallies the men of Ulster, and as wounded Cuchulainn watches from the sidelines, the Irish army is decimated. Peace is then returned to the land.



# Before the Tain, pages 1 - 20

## Before the Tain, pages 1 - 20 Summary

The poets of Ireland gather to a man named Senchan Torpeist, in order to collect and recall the various stories of the "Tain Bo Cuailnge" in its entirety. They find they only know parts of it, so Senchan sends a group of young scholars to find the rest of the story, found in a book called Cuilmenn. One of these scholars was Senchan's son, Muirgen. When the scholars stop for the night on their journey, Muirgen finds the gravestone of Fergus mac Roich (one of the characters in the Tain). He prays over the grave to find the complete Tain and the figure of Fergus appears before him in a mist, who recites the whole Tain. Their mission accomplished, they return to Senchan, who rejoices.

In some ancestral lead-ups to the Tain, young Nes happens upon a druid named Cathbad. Cathbad states that that day and time is perfect for conceiving a child who would gain great fame in Ireland. Nes, wanting just a son, beds Cathbad in order to become impregnated. Conchobor is the son, who is raised then by Cathbad. When Conchobor is still an infant, Fergus mac Roich, the King of Ulster, wishes for Nes' hand in marriage. She states she will only do so if Fergus names her son king for a year. Believing that bestowing such a title on an infant would have no great effect, Fergus agrees. However, wily Nes takes the opportunity to use her son's power to bestow wealth upon the important nobles of Ulster. In a year's time when Fergus seeks to reclaim his kingship, the nobles instead keep Conchobor as king, forcing Fergus into exile.

Conchobor grows up to be a great and well-respected king and there was a time of prosperity. This peace is shattered when a mysterious woman named Macha arrives at the home of a rich landlord named Crunniuc. Macha becomes Crunniuc's wife and takes care of domestic duties. Crunniuc attends a fair at which the king's chariot bests all other chariots. Crunniuc promises that Macha herself could beat the chariot at a race. Macha is summoned and warns against such a race, saying she is full with child and that a curse will befall Ulster, but she is forced to race. At the end, she ties the chariot and at the finish line gives birth to the Twins of Macha. The exertion causes intense labor pains and shrieking, and Macha curses all men of Ulster to go through such pain and shrieking in their most difficult moments. So, for nine generations, Ulster men go through periods of unbearable pain.

In another episode, Ulster men including Conchobor are drinking at the inn of a storyteller, Fedlimid. Fedlimid's wife is pregnant, and suddenly the child in the womb screams, which unnerves everyone. Fedlimid demands a reason behind this, but his wife doesn't know. But druid Cathbad examines her stomach and utters a prophecy that the child will be a beautiful woman that will bring much evil and death. Her name will be Derdriu. Ulster men wish to kill this evil child, but Conchobor says he will raise the child. And so she grows into a beautiful woman, isolated in Conchobor's castle.



But soon Derdriu desires a man, and she is told of a handsome one - Noisiu, son of Uisliu. She finds Noisiu, who knowing of Cathbad's prophecy resists her advances, but Derdriu binds him to marriage, cursing him. Knowing Conchobor will come to kill them (as he was saving Derdriu for himself), the sons of Uisliu and their retinue leave Ulster for other parts of Ireland. Conchobor indeed sends assassins and the like to kill them, but they are too strong.

The Uisliu and Derdriu come to the land of Alba. The king hears of Derdriu's beauty and wants her for his own, but she rejects him. The king sends Noisiu and his brothers on all kinds of dangerous military missions, to try to kill Noisiu so Derdriu would become his, but they are mighty and they survive. At this time Conchobor hatches a scheme to lure the Uisliu back with guarantees of safety. With the Albans ready to kill them, the Uisliu agree, provided Fergus comes with Conchobor's men to assure safety. However, Conchobor prevents Fergus from going by plying him with alcohol at a number of ale feasts. Instead a man name Eogan is sent to kill the sons of Uisliu. Eogan slays Noisiu, as well as Fergus' son Fiacha. Fergus hears of this outrage and he and his men make bloody war upon Conchobor, killing Conchobor's son and grandson. In the ensuing battle, three hundred Ulster men die. Three thousand exiled Ulstermen flee, and are not able to return to their homeland for sixteen years.

Meanwhile, Derdriu is kept by Conchobor for a year, trapped in the castle. She mourns for Noisiu and refuses Conchobor. To punish her, Conchobor has her go live with Eogan, who killed Noisiu. Preferring death over sex with Eogan, Derdriu dashes her head into a stone wall going full speed on a chariot, killing herself. Thus the awful prophecy of Derdriu was fulfilled.

## **Before the Tain, pages 1 - 20 Analysis**

The beginning of the text, almost eerily, presages the fact that this edition would be a cobbled-together collection of stories from several sources. Poets gather to pool their resources and craft the definitive version of the Tain, much as the translator Thomas Kinsella has done with his work and research. This gathering of poets from disparate parts of Ireland echoes the nature of the epic itself, which involves all corners of Ireland in one unifying work. The poets are found to be lacking a complete text, and thus they go in search of the missing portions, said to be in a book called Cuilmenn. This is a very interesting framework, a kind of story-within-a-story, in which the storytellers themselves must go on a journey, go on their own adventure, in order to tell the story.

The journey is stopped short when Muirgen makes a prayer at the burial place of Fergus mac Roich, one of the principal characters in the Tain events themselves. Muirgen's prayer is the first instance of a change to verse, versus prose. The ghost of Fergus mac Roich appears, reciting the entire and accurate story of the Tain, cutting short the poets' journey. This divine or supernatural aid helps to validate the poets and the authority of their text (the gods appear to be on their side), and already conditions the reader to expect the supernatural, uncanny, and heroic.



Stories in this first section are short "pre-tales" that provide important background information, such as ancestry, that will aid understanding of the Tain itself. In the first story Nes essentially tricks Fergus from his throne, the first in a long-running series of episodes characterizing women as deceitful tricksters and temptresses. Continuing with that notion, the next story reveals how Ulster abused Macha, and how she cursed the people of Ulster with her labor pains. Without this legend, the fact that the men of Ulster are immobilized with pain for the majority of the Tain would seem pretty head-scratching. In the next "women are trouble" story, there is Derdriu, who is not malicious or intently evil, but nonetheless her mere presence means evil and death, per prophecy. Her star-crossed attraction to Noisiu causes a civil war and an exodus of several thousand people from Ulster who would later take up arms against Ulster in the Tain. Again, this is very useful information that helps the reader understand why there are exiles, and why they battle against their homeland.



# How Cuchulainn Was Begotten, pages 21-50

## How Cuchulainn Was Begotten, pages 21-50 Summary

Conchobor and his men have a bird hunt on chariots, taking them to the land of Brug, where they find shelter in an inn. The innkeeper is pregnant, and Conchobor's sister Deichtine serves as midwife for the child. Deichtine decides to raise and nurse the child as her own. In exchange for the baby, the innkeeper is given two horses.

The baby catches an illness and dies. Deichtine is devastated. She drinks a cup of water and a tiny creature finds its way into the water, so that she consumes it. That night she is treated to a vision of a god-like man who says Deichtine will bear a child by him, in fact the same child who just died will be implanted in her womb, to be called Setanta. Indeed, Deichtine becomes pregnant, which Ulster fearing Conchobor had sex with his sister while drunk. Conchobor has Deichtine marry Sualdam mac Roich. Deichtine was ashamed to go to bed with a new husband pregnant, and as if in answer the "creature" inside her slips away, leaving her virginal and whole again. Deichtine bears Sualdam's son, and names him Setanta.

Everyone in the village wants to rear the boy for different reasons, to raise them according to this or that skill or condition, such as being rich or being cunning with weapons. Unable to decide, Conchobor consults a wise judge named Morann. Morann says the boy will be brought up by everyone, passed around communally, and therefore he will learn all traits and be skilled in all things.

Flash-forward, and Setanta (known hereafter as Cuchulainn) is a heroic young man, who bests all others in feats of strength, like the javelin throw. Ulster sends men out far and wide to find a fitting bride for Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn himself finds his own girl, however, in the person of Emer. Cuchulainn announces his intentions, but Emer says that only a man who fulfills three heroic tasks can have her hand: he must kill a "hundred men at every ford," battle men using the "salmon-leap" feat while carrying twice his weight in gold, and go sleepless for more than a year. Cuchulainn says it will be easily done.

Forgall, Emer's father, gets wind of this courting and disapproves. He disguises himself and goes to Cuchulainn, praising him but nevertheless leading him to seek greater glory by seeking a trainer named Domnall in the land of Alba, and then Scathach. Forgall feels Cuchulainn will die through such harsh training. But Cuchulainn not only survives but learns more techniques and becomes a great warrior. He kills Scathach's best man and thereafter promises to become her champion. Scathach has war with another woman chieftess, Aife. Cuchulainn and Scathach's sons best Aife's men, and Cuchulainn bests Aife with cunning, distracting her by lying that her chariot and horses



are dead. Cuchulainn forces Aife to swear never to attack Scathach, and also to bear him a son.

Cuchulainn returns to Emer, cutting through a swatch of men to get to Forgall's fortress. There he performs the "salmon-leap," killing many men. Escaping with Emer to Ulster, he kills many men at every ford. Thus by the time he returns to Ulster he has fulfilled Emer's conditions for marriage. They marry and love each other until their dying days.

Seven years after these events, Cuchulainn's unnamed son (by Aife) arrives in a boat. Clever and strong as his father, he harasses men on the shore by casting stones from a sling. A man named Condere, known for his diplomatic skills, is sent to stop the boy, but the boy will not stop for any man. He then mocks the strength of Ulster men, saying a hundred of them couldn't stop him, a mere boy. A great warrior named Conall is then sent, but the boy knocks him out with a rock. Cuchulainn, enraged, goes to stop the boy, but Emer beseeches him to stay his hand, as she knows the boy is his own son. Cuchulainn mocks "a woman's help" and states that the honor of Ulster must be protected at any cost.

Cuchulainn and the boy engage in a variety of Olympic-like contests, like wrestling and fencing, with the boy getting the upper hand. However, Cuchulainn eventually unleashes a powerful attack called the gae bolga, which Scathach taught to him and only him, surprising the boy and mortally wounding him. Afterwards Cuchulainn mourns his son, and the son is brought around to all the Ulster heroes to pay proper respects.

In a short story, two pig-keepers from rival towns have the power to change themselves into any beast, among other magical powers. They are not known to compete and in fact are friends, but the townspeople wonder who is the strongest, so one pig-keeper causes his pigs to grow fat while the other keeper's pigs wither. The next season, the other pig-keeper does the same. Thus starts an epic series of contests, with the pig-keepers battling in the form of birds, undersea creatures, warriors, phantoms, maggots, and bulls. In the end, both bulls are praised in poetry for their fine qualities. One is called Finnbennach, and the other Donn Cuailnge.

## **How Cuchulainn Was Begotten, pages 21-50 Analysis**

The origins of Tain's hero, Cuchulainn, are made clear. Origins, ancestry and bloodlines are very important to the text, and this is but one example of care taken in this regard. Cuchulainn's birth is very complicated. Deichtine acts as foster-mother to an innkeeper's wife's baby, who dies, and in the grieving process Deichtine swallows a bug that apparently impregnates her, and she receives a vision of a god-like man (one of the side race) who says she will bear his child. But Conchobor gives a pregnant Deichtine away to Sualdam (in order to quell rumors that Conchobor himself had slept with his sister), and as if to respect the new husband, the "bug" goes away and Deichtine is virginal and pure again. After all of this bizarre "distillation," Cuchulainn (initially called Setanta) is born. This multiple birth is reflective of the ancient belief of telegony, the belief that a child could bear traits not only of the father, but of previous men the mother





may have slept with, a belief only debunked by modern genetics. Cuchulainn is in one way special because he has so many bloodlines, including crucially the divine side. This lineage also allows Cuchulainn to be a national Irish hero, rather than a more narrowly Ulster hero.

Cuchulainn engages in typically fantastic heroic feats as a mere lad, beating 150 other boys at play. In his courtship of Emer, Cuchulainn must perform seemingly impossible tasks, which he does with ease, echoing, for one example, Hercules' Twelve Labors. This is an example of pathos (in the ancient sense), a virtuous suffering after which one emerges as a hero.

And like Hercules, Cuchulainn kills his own kin in another episode, in this instance his own son. He refuses to listen to Emer and her pleas that the arrogant boy pelting Ulstermen from the shore is his own son; Cuchulainn thinks only of honor and protecting his people. In this case blood is not thicker than water. This episode, probably more than anything, is just another instance of pathos, or suffering, the young hero must endure in order to emerge into manhood, however ostensibly cruel and senseless it appears.



# The Tain, I - III, pages 51 - 76

## The Tain, I - III, pages 51 - 76 Summary

I. A king and queen, Medb and Ailill, talk in bed. Medb claims that Ailill is a kept man who depends on her for wealth, but Ailill maintains he comes from a great and rich lineage and needs none of Medb's wealth. They then compete in a contest to see who has greater wealth. They have servants bring out jewels and gold, and the two's stores match each other. Horses and livestock match each other as well, and then bulls are compared. In this instance, Ailill has the great bull Finnbennach, who came from a Medb cow but refused to serve under a woman. Medb has no such great bull, and is ashamed, becoming intent on having a bull to match her husband. She is told by her right-hand man Mac Roth that the great bull Donn Cuailnge is held by a man named Daire in Ulster. Medb sends Mac Roth and several messengers to ask Daire for the bull, in return for many cows, a chariot, and the chance to sleep with Medb.

Mac Roth arrives in Ulster, and Daire is thrilled with the prospect. However, word gets back to Daire that Medb planned on taking the bull whether or not Daire assented to the deal. Whether or not this is true, Daire becomes angry and calls off the deal. When word gets back to Medb, she indeed does plan to take the bull by force.

II. Medb and Ailill gather a great army, including three-thousand elites warriors called the Galeoin; Fergus mac Roich's men (former king of Ulster exiled by Conchobor); and the Ulster exiles (from the war over Derdriu) led by Cormac, Conchobor's son.

As the army leaves, Medb encounters a strange girl with three irises in each eye, a prophetess called Fedelm. Fedelm repeatedly foresees crimson blood for all the army, and the defeat of her army at the hands of a "blond hero" (Cuchulainn) but Medb dismisses her prophecy as false, stating that the Ulster men are currently debilitated by the "labor pains" curse and could not possibly defeat her army. The army spreads all over Ireland in search of the bull.

III. Getting close to Ulster, Medb doesn't want the elite Galeoin warriors to take all the credit for their victory, preferring to have them killed instead. This is dismissed as "woman's thinking" by Ailill and Fergus. Medb threatens Fergus, and they compare their armies to see who might win should violence erupt. Finally, Fergus suggests that the Galeoin simply get disbursed among the other armies, which Medb agrees to.

As the march moves on, Fergus sends word to the men of Ulster of the incoming invasion, because of "old friendship" and a gentlemanly approach to war. He also slows the approach so Ulster can be more prepared, something questioned as treachery by Medb and Ailill. Fergus states he only means to try to avoid Cuchulainn.

Cuchulainn gets word of the attack, and halts the army's progress by putting a magical spancel-hoop (used for hobbling animals) in the road. On the hoop it is said that anyone



who crosses that path, without making an identical hoop using only one hand, is sure to die horribly by Cuchulainn's hand. No one is capable of making the hoop, so Ailill suggests they raze the nearby forest and go around the road, and many trees are cut to make a path.

Cuchulainn spends the night with a woman, and regrets it, stating he should have warned Ulster instead. Intending to delay the army further, Cuchulainn cuts a tree down with a single stroke so that it falls over a chariot path. Four charioteers from the army arrive and are stopped by the fallen tree, to be promptly decapitated by Cuchulainn. The bloody horses return to the main army, and Fergus arrives at the fallen tree, seeing that it was cut by a single stroke. Ailill, impressed by these feats from a single man, has Fergus tell him more about Cuchulainn and his exploits.

## The Tain, I - III, pages 51 - 76 Analysis

The Tain begins as a vanity contest, in which Ailill and Medb compare their vast stores of wealth and find Medb lacking a prize bull. Such a vain and ridiculous contest, linked with the ancient concern of the danger of royal whim, help to characterize Ailill and Medb as arrogant and ridiculous themselves. The Tain is not started for any noble or virtuous purpose; obviously Medb would be just fine without yet another treasure in her collection. This premise begins a contrast that will crop up again and again, between the ignoble Ailill and Medb, and the noble Cuchulainn, Fergus, and Ulster people. Obviously Ulster is in the right for protecting their homeland, and Ailill and Medb are in the wrong for their vainglorious, almost quixotic quest.

As is typical of Medb, she first tries to get the bull through bribery, including the prostitution of her own body, though she keeps military force as her ace in the hole, so to speak. This duplicity is specifically coded as woman-like or feminine, and is the chief trait of Medb's character. Another important trait of Medb, a certain prideful recklessness, is revealed when she wishes the elite Galeoin warriors dead, because they might steal the glory from the main army. To kill the best warriors in your army is foolishness incarnate, "woman's thinking" as Fergus says, demonstrating that Medb (and by extension, women) is not a welcome presence on the battlefield. That she is the very cause of the battle she doesn't know how to wage adds an additional layer of irony.

Later in the section, Cuchulainn sets the first of several "physical challenges," for lack of a better term. He sets a spancel-hoop in the army's path, indicating that no man may cross the path without first making an identical hoop with only one hand. This naturally stalls the army, who cannot match the skills of Cuchulainn. On the face these physical challenges are, in a word, ridiculous - what army would stop to make hoops or jump logs with chariots on the request of their enemy? But in a larger sense, these physical challenges are a manifestation of the warrior code, showing that even Medb and Ailill's army has enough honor to meet the enemy on an even playing field and abide by some semblance of protocol.



## IV - V

### IV - V Summary

IV. Fergus explains that Cuchulainn spent his infancy drinking ale and playing fidchell, an ancient board game. As a toddler, he set off to play with the neighborhood boys, all 150 of them. They flung javelins and balls at him, but he blocked them all. He then went into a "warp-spasm," a warrior rage, fighting all the boys and forcing them to run. He then agreed with King Conchobor to not kill any of them in play, and in return they would not kill him.

Other feats and spectacular events are explained. He once gave a concussion to a man who woke him up. Another time, he lifted a bed full of thirty grown warriors over his head. He saved Conchobor and his son Cuscraid from the battlefield after they were defeated by King Eogan.

Another legend has 27 marauders attack Ulster. The Ulster men were defenseless because of the curse of the labor pains. However, Cuchulainn was not from Ulster and therefore was not cursed. He killed nine of the marauders and ran the rest off. This was all before he was five years old.

Conall, another warrior who reared Cuchulainn (and since defected) tells more of these feats. He killed Culann the Smith's savage guard hound when everyone thought it would rip the boy to pieces. Culann is sad that his prize dog is dead, so Cuchulainn volunteers to guard Culann and his land. And this is how Cuchulainn got his name, literally "The Hound of Culann."

In another event, Cuchulainn overhears the druid Cathbad state that whoever takes up arms for the first time that day would be a great warrior, so Cuchulainn successively steals Conchobor's weapons and chariot. Cuchulainn goes on a legendary journey in the chariot, visiting most parts of Ireland. Eventually he happens upon a fort guarded by three warrior brothers, who Cuchulainn challenges to combat. Despite each brother's prowess, he cuts off all their heads as trophies. He then escapes the place, with the chariot traveling so fast it outstrips the birds and wind. Next journeying through a marsh, Cuchulainn captures a live wild deer and a flock of swans.

Finally, Cuchulainn returns to Ulster, with the men fearful of his mighty chariot and trophies. They send out naked women to appease this warrior, but then they realize it is one of their own, and a boy at that. They punish him by dousing him in vats of cold and hot water. Afterward, they recognize him as a hero and place him upon King Conchobor's knee.

V. Back to the present, Ailill tires of the stories and wishes to continue on. Unfortunately, Cuchulainn has issued another physical challenge barring their path, daring charioteers to leap a fallen tree in only one try, and so the army's charioteers take turns trying to



jump the tree. Meanwhile, Medb tires of this and has a man named Fraech go ahead of the army and kill Cuchulainn. Fraech and Cuchulainn wrestle in the water. Cuchulainn wishes to spare Fraech, but Fraech refuses to surrender, so Cuchulainn kills him.

Next, Cuchulainn happens upon the charioteer of Orlam, a son of Ailill and Medb. The charioteer is startled and fears death, but Cuchulainn says he has no quarrels with charioteers. Instead, he goes to nearby Orlam, kills him, and instructs the charioteer to enter Medb's camp with Orlam's head on his back. The charioteer stops just outside of the camp and speaks with Medb and Ailill. Cuchulainn kills the charioteer from long range with a slingshot, because he hadn't followed his orders to carry the head all the way into camp.

For the rest of this section, Cuchulainn swears a vow to hurl a stone at Medb and Ailill whenever he sees them. They are always surrounded by their army, and thus Cuchulainn kills many of their servants and warriors in this manner as the army moves. Places like fords or plains are then named for people Cuchulainn kills there.

## IV - V Analysis

At the request of Ailill, who wishes to know his enemy in greater detail, Fergus relates the amazing childhood feats of Conchobor. In this, at least, Ailill displays a bit more sense than his wife Medb, who earlier continually rejected the words of a propheticess predicting her doom. In addition to adding to and supplementing Cuchulainn's ever-growing legend, Section IV offers relief and a bit of whimsy to the proceedings, with images of a toddler lifting a bed full of thirty soldiers above his head, or killing nine pirates and fending off 18 more. There is also the humor, at the end of Section IV, of five-year-old Cuchulainn re-approaching Ulster after a long chariot journey, and Conchobor (mistakenly?) taking him for a fearsome warrior, such that naked women are sent out to appease him.

Section V begins with Ailill tired of hearing the exploits of Cuchulainn. Unfortunately, present-day Cuchulainn has issued yet another physical challenge to slow his army. Importantly it is Medb who breaks the sort of warrior code associated with the challenges, sending warrior Fraech ahead to kill Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn retaliates by not only killing Fraech but by killing Orlam as well as Orlam's charioteer (after he fails to follow Cuchulainn's order to the letter). Medb has "crossed the line" and behaved dishonorably, stoking Cuchulainn's wrath, in contrast to Fergus and Ailill, who were cautious in trying to avoid said wrath. From then on Cuchulainn begins his habit of killing members of the army from afar with his slingshot, trying to hit either Ailill and Medb. Here is another instance of "noble" Cuchulainn (only trying to kill his sworn enemies and end the conflict) versus "ignoble" Ailill and Medb, who cowardly surround themselves with servants and soldiers who get killed in their place.



## VI - VII

### VI - VII Summary

VI. This section describes two different versions for how Medb and Ailill's army moved from Finnabair to Conaille. In the first version, the army gets word that the prized bull is on the move and is now in a place called the Black Cauldron. They travel there and encircle the bull, trying to drive him back to Finnabair, but the enraged bull kills Medb's herdsman, Lothar, and then fifty other heroes besides before vanishing back into the countryside. The army follows the bull, ravaging the countryside as they go. They come to the river Cronn, and the river seems to flood to bar them passage. A good many men, including a hero named Ualu, as well as two chroniclers of the Tain, Roan and Roae, drown trying to cross. Next they cross the river Colptha, and again the river swells at their coming, carrying off one-hundred chariots. After a final swelling river, the Glenn Gatlaig, the battered army finally arrives in Conaille.

In the other version of events, Medb suggests the army split in two at Finnabair, with Ailill going one way and Medb and Fergus going another. Ailill is suspicious of the closeness of Medb and Fergus, and a spy he sends confirms that they are sleeping together. This spy, while Fergus and Medb sleep, steals Fergus' prized sword. Fergus is shamed when he wakes, for both the wrong he has done Ailill and because he can't find his sword. He goes into the woods and makes a wooden sword as a replacement.

This predicament cause a long war of words between Fergus and Ailill, written in verse rather than prose, in which Ailill mocks Fergus for his lack of sword. The two play the chess-like board game of fidchell, and Ailill further mocks Fergus for only "playing" king in fidchell, and not being a real king like Ailill. Medb further mocks Fergus for going easy against his kinsmen at Ulster, but Fergus swears he will strike mighty blows against them and forget old friendships.

Eventually, Cuchulainn arrives to kill more men, including Maine, another son of Medb and Ailill. One lieutenant, Lugaid, meets with Cuchulainn to betray the army and strike a truce with Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn agrees, and extends his promise of protection to Fergus and Fergus' men. Ailill becomes suspicious of the secret meeting between Lugaid and Fergus. It's unclear whether Fergus agrees to the truce. Cuchulainn kills more and more men, thirty at a time, until the army reaches Conaille.

VII. Cuchulainn continues to kill the army's men at night from afar with his sling. Ailill wants to offer a truce to get Cuchulainn to stop this. He offers the best chariot, some land, some women, and some cattle, if Cuchulainn will stop the murders and also swear allegiance to Ailill instead of Conchobor. Mac Roth takes this offering to Cuchulainn, who scoffs at the idea of switching allegiances. The only deal Cuchulainn will make, is to meet one man of Ailill's army during the day in single combat. This will stall the army's advance, but Ailill agrees, figuring one man lost during the day is better than a hundred a night.



Fergus, accompanied by Etarcomol, a foster-son of Ailill's, take this message to Cuchulainn. Etarcomol is characterized as hot-headed, and sure enough he insults Cuchulainn by declaring him "nothing to be afraid of." Etarcomol continues to goad the hero, even as Cuchulainn cuts his clothes and hair off as threats. Finally Cuchulainn kills Etarcomol. Fergus is enraged, but even the charioteers agree that Etarcomol had it coming.

The next day, Ailill can't find a man to fight against Cuchulainn, per the deal. There are only perhaps two heroes in Ireland who could best Cuchulainn; Curoi, and Nadcranntail. Curoi refuses, so Nadcranntail is hired at the price of his marrying a daughter of Ailill. Nadcranntail approaches Cuchulainn from afar, who is bird-catching, and the warrior throws spears at Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn runs after his birds, and Nadcranntail thinks Cuchulainn ran in cowardice. The next day, Nadcranntail approaches Cuchulainn face to face. Nadcranntail refuses to fight a beardless boy, so Cuchulainn has his charioteer disguise him with a fake beard so they can fight. The two agree on spear-throwing. Cuchulainn avoids Nadcranntail's spear, and Cuchulainn's spear gets Nadcranntail in his head, killing him.

## VI - VII Analysis

Section VI offers the most obvious instance of the text admitting uncertainty about its own veracity by offering two versions of how the Irish army got to Conaille. This stems from both the reality of the text as a patchwork from various source materials, and a stab at realism, framing the events as a "real" historical event about which there are uncertainties that should be debated. As is customary, Medb comes off poorly in either version. In the first, Medb ruins the countryside in her reckless pursuit of the bull. When they come to several rivers, the rivers rise up magically as if to bar them passage, showing that the gods are not on the side of the doomed army. Nevertheless Medb urges the army on, costing many lives in the process in her heedless quest.

In the second version, Medb, full of deception, wishes for the army to split up, with Ailill taking some of the army another direction. Typical of Medb, this suggestion is made not for any military reason, but so she can consummate her affair with Fergus apart from her husband. Intelligent Ailill is wise to Medb's scheming, and he takes the opportunity to rob Fergus of his sword; symbolically, his phallic power. The subsequent, almost theatrical exchange between Fergus, Ailill, and Medb, slows the narrative down and dramatizes the love triangle for full effect.

In Section VII, Ailill tires of Cuchulainn decimating his army from afar, and offers him wealth and land to switch sides. Cuchulainn, again displaying loyalty and honor, scoffs at the idea of switching allegiances. Instead he offers the idea of a daily duel. The duel format, appropriately, is a particularly honorable form of combat. In contrast to the chaos of war, the duel features a set day and time, rules, and full preparedness on both sides. Ailill, now pragmatist, agrees, figuring the loss of life will be less, though he has little hope of anyone besting Cuchulainn in single combat.

Etarcomol's episode, in which he insults Cuchulainn and is killed for it, provides another display, by contrast, of Cuchulainn's warrior code, which would disallow him from insulting another warrior and, in turn, disallow him from being insulted.





## VIII - IX

### VIII - IX Summary

VIII. Medb finds the prized bull in the district of Cuib. Cuchulainn follows her, and slays the shepherd responsible for bringing the bull back, Buide. Nevertheless the bull falls into Medb's hands. Ailill hatches a plan to seize Cuchulainn's javelin from him, sending a "satirist" for the task, but Cuchulainn kills the man with a javelin in the head, which is humorously referred to as the "Overwhelming Gift." Medb meanwhile passes through lands, devastating them with her army.

The pact to send one man a day to fight Cuchulainn is still in effect. A man named Cur chooses to face the hero, and like others hesitates to fight a beardless boy. Nevertheless Cur attacks Cuchulainn, who is practicing his martial arts and fighting stances to such a degree he doesn't even realize Cur is attacking him. When another man yells to Cuchulainn that he is being attacked, Cuchulainn throws an apple at Cur and kills him.

Next to fight Cuchulainn is Ferbaeth, who Cuchulainn is loathed to fight because he is a foster-brother and is evenly matched. Ferbaeth is also hesitant, but he is made drunk by Ailill to the point he decides to fight. Cuchulainn kills him with a holly sprig through the head. More men go to their deaths in these daily duels. A man named Larene agrees, who is Lugaid's brother (the man who made a truce with Cuchulainn). Because of these truce, Cuchulainn only badly maims Larene. Cuchulainn is next visited by a "Morrigan," a fair lass, and he resists her womanly seduction. Spurned, Morrigan swears she will return to him as an eel, a she-wolf, and a cow, to kill him.

Medb begins to break the rules of the pact, sending multiple men in secret to kill Cuchulainn, but he slays every one. Cuchulainn makes himself a beard of berry juice so men don't hesitate to fight him. Medb goads a man named Loch to avenge his brother and face Cuchulainn. He does so, and in the ensuing fight the Morrigan returns in the animal forms, entangling and distracting Cuchulainn, nearly leading to his death at the hands of Loch. But Cuchulainn bests all three forms of the Morrigan, and then kills Loch. An old woman appears to Cuchulainn and offers him milk, which he drinks. The old woman is actually the Morrigan woman in disguise, and by drinking the milk Cuchulainn unwittingly heals the woman of the wounds the hero inflicted to her animal forms.

IX. Medb calls for a false truce in which she will meet Cuchulainn and then ambush him with many men. Cuchulainn's charioteer, Laeg, warns Cuchulainn against Medb's treachery, and Cuchulainn comes prepared to the meeting with a sword. Indeed, Medb springs her trap, and Cuchulainn kills fourteen of her best men. Noble Fergus warns against betraying their pact further, and for the next few days the army behaves honorably, with Cuchulainn continuing to kill men one day at a time, with their places of death being named for them.



Ailill finally offers Cuchulainn his daughter Finnabair to stop the slaughter. But deceptive Ailill sends the town fool Tamun in place of Ailill to the truce meeting, along with the real Finnabair. Cuchulainn spots this deception, and responds by setting the fool and Finnabair on stakes until their death.

Ailill and Medb's great army finally reaches the Murtheimne Plain, very near Ulster. Cuchulainn howls in demonic rage at their coming, slaying men with just the sound of it. However, Cuchulainn is very weary at this point, suffering from many war wounds.

Luckily, Cuchulainn's divine god-like father, Lug, arrives, healing Cuchulainn's wounds with magic and vowing to guard him as he sleeps away his weariness. Cuchulainn sleeps for three entire days. During this time, the young boys of Ulster (too young to suffer from the curse of the pangs) spot the army near their town, and go to fight them. Though they kill three times as many men as they number, they are eventually all killed by the army, including their leader Follamain, son of Conchobor. Cuchulainn wakes, and Lug tells him of the boys' fate. Cuchulainn regrets he was not awake to aid them, but Lug assures him the deaths are not his fault. Lug leaves, leaving Cuchulainn to his singular glory.

Cuchulainn is greatly renewed and feels a great energy coursing through him. Laeg his charioteer and him don their battle gear, which are described in great detail. Then Cuchulainn undergoes a heroic "warp-spasm," turning into a monstrous war creature. His body flips in his skin, his face becomes perverted, his cheeks recede to reveal his lungs and gullet, and all manner of monstrous disfigurements. He then rides upon the enemy army, encircling them with his chariot and creating great slaughter. Bodies pile up six deep in the massacre. It's unknown how many Cuchulainn killed that night, but he killed 103 kings and all the soldiers, women, children, hounds, and servants under them. Cuchulainn, his charioteer, his chariot, and his horses did not receive a scratch in return.

## VIII - IX Analysis

More humor is attempted when Cuchulainn gives an enemy messenger an "overwhelming gift" of a spear to the head in a "be careful what you wish for" scenario. Humor continues when a man named Cur fights Cuchulainn, who is in the middle of exercising, and Cur fails to even get the attention of Cuchulainn with his attack. Cuchulainn is finally told of Cur, and he casually tosses an apple from his exercising at Cur, killing the man rather unceremoniously.

Duels continue, with the enemy trying different strategies and Cuchulainn (admirably) remaining steadfast and unchanging. One man is killed when Cuchulainn throws away a holly sprig that had stuck into his foot, another exaggerated demonstration of just how much stronger Cuchulainn is than any of his foes.

In the midst of this, Cuchulainn is visited by a woman from Morrigan, and importantly he rejects her sexual advances, doing what a lesser hero, Fergus mac Roich, failed to do.



Given the values inherent in the text, and its portrayal of women, Cuchulainn is all the more heroic by being impervious to the seductive powers of the fairer sex.

Medb continues her deceit, ambushing Cuchulainn and again breaking the deal of the daily duel, with Cuchulainn up to defeat any dissembling. Noble Fergus rejects Medb's meddling.

Badly wounded, Cuchulainn is next "saved" by his divine father Lug, who heals him and allows him to sleep. This event could be viewed as not only the healing of physical wounds, but a salve to heal the deceit and trickery of Medb and Ailill. In any case, it is clear Cuchulainn has divine favor, with his soul renewed and purified for the battles ahead. It is ironic that Cuchulainn must be healed and purified for the immediately proceeding transformation into a monster, when his physical form in fact falls apart almost entirely.



## X - XI

### X - XI Summary

X. The day after the bloody battle, Cuchulainn makes sure to strut his non-monstrous form for the army and especially their poets and bards, to make sure they know he is not always the monstrous creature he was during his massacre. His handsome physical qualities are noted. One of the Ulster exiles, Dubthach, wishes to kill the man there and then, but Fergus, as always, urges caution. Medb cannot look upon Cuchulainn, for fear he will suddenly sling a javelin and kill her.

Cuchulainn urges the army to send someone out to fight him and they all refuse. Medb and Ailill use the old trick of making Fergus drunk, and in his drunken state Fergus agrees to come out to fight Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn makes fun of Fergus' lack of a real sword. Cuchulainn agrees to yield to Fergus if Fergus will yield to him in the final battle, and Fergus agrees. Thus Cuchulainn disappears back into the countryside.

More attempts are made at Cuchulainn's life. A man named Ferchu, who is a criminal in Medb and Ailill's kingdom, wish to get their pardon by slaying Cuchulainn, but Cuchulainn easily dispatches him instead. Gaile Dana and his 27 sons are next sent out by Medb. Each is armed with poison on their weapons, and Fergus fears any scratch from the poison will end in Cuchulainn's death. Fergus sends his man Fiacha to essentially observe Cuchulainn's death and report back. In the battle with Gaile's sons, Cuchulainn blocks all of their javelin tosses with a shield feat, but they respond by battering Cuchulainn with their fists. They appear to have overwhelmed Cuchulainn, but Fiacha steps in and cuts off all the men's hands. Cuchulainn thanks Fiacha for his timely help, and kills Gaile and his sons so they cannot report back Fiacha's treachery to the army.

XI. Medb and Ailill look for a final solution to kill Cuchulainn. They choose a man named Ferdia, who is Cuchulainn's foster-brother and who studied the martial arts under Scathach with Cuchulainn. He has a horn-skinned armor that is said to be impenetrable. Ferdia refuses, due to his friendship, but Medb sends out poets and bards to spread word of Ferdia's cowardice, to the point that Ferdia's honor compels him to take up the offer to kill Cuchulainn. He is promised women and cattle and land, and even Medb's "friendly thighs." Medb further manipulates Ferdia by telling him that Cuchulainn said dispatching Ferdia would be no great feat. This enrages Ferdia, and he vows to battle Cuchulainn the next day. Fergus hears of this and goes to warn Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn is confident that he will best his friend, though he loves him and does not wish him harm.

The next day, Ferdia's charioteer attempts to talk him out of it by reminding him of their old comradeship, but Ferdia doesn't listen. In fact, when he arrives at an empty ford, Ferdia boasts that Cuchulainn ran in cowardice at his sight. Eventually Cuchulainn arrives, and the two warriors exchange boasts and spiteful insults. Cuchulainn, more



level-headed, tries to convince Ferdia he is only here because of Medb's womanly wiles and false claims, but Ferdia cannot turn back due to his honor.

They fight. They first decide to use iron darts and shields. Each blocks the other's darts excellently, and no one is hurt after many hours. They next try spears, and while this time they draw blood against one another, they draw to a stalemate and rest for the night.

The next day they use stabbing spears, and while their wounds become so large and gaping that birds could fly through them, neither will budge after a whole day. They rest and healers come to heal their wounds. The next day passes similar to the last, with each using swords and coming to an impasse despite great wounds.

Both sense the next day will end in one or the other's death. Before the match, both warriors display a remarkable series of feats, feats they were not taught, to demonstrate their prowess and equality. This time they fight in the water, and every heroic strike made by Cuchulainn seems to be bettered by a counterstroke from Ferdia. They fight so fiercely that their spears bend, and the river's course is altered.

Finally, Ferdia strikes what to normal men would be a fatal blow, a sword thrust to Cuchulainn's chest. In response, Cuchulainn orders Laeg to throw him his gae bolga, his finest weapon that even Ferdia has not learned. The gae bolga is what Ferdia has long feared, and he thrusts his shield down in defense. But Cuchulainn then uses a short javelin to pierce Ferdia's "impenetrable" armor right above the shield and in the torso. Cuchulainn seizes the gae bolga, a sort of many-barbed spear, and thrusts it into Ferdia's body, "so that every single joint filled with barbs."

Cuchulainn is greatly grieved at Ferdia's death, expressing his sadness in a classic lament in several passages of verse. He scolds Ferdia for being tricked by Medb, praises his warrior spirit, remembers the old times they had, and states that any other battle or feat he had engaged in before fighting Ferdia had been "play" and "sport." Even at Laeg's urging Cuchulainn refuses to abandon Ferdia's corpse.

## X - XI Analysis

Cuchulainn, after his monstrous assault, is sure to parade his true handsome form for the poets and bards, in the name of accuracy in the historical record. This monster-to-man event could be viewed as vanity; more simply, it is a literalization of the fact that a warrior must become someone/thing else to be successful in battle.

Ailill and Medb have to resort to alcohol now to get men to fight Cuchulainn, and this time it is Fergus (who in the pre-ales also succumbed to ale). But Cuchulainn, again according to his personal code, will not fight a man who doesn't have a real sword, and this leads to the truce that would become crucial later in the heat of the final battle. Earlier the Monster, Cuchulainn now demonstrates the Man, his warrior fury restrained by his code, offering a diplomatic solution instead of a bloody battle.



The battle with Ferdia acts as a climax to the story, even more than the final battle, in several ways. To convince Ferdia, Medb is at the height of her deviousness and manipulation, promising wealth, prostituting herself, spreading lies about Ferdia to the "media" (poets and bards), lying that Cuchulainn insulted Ferdia. Only after these "womanly" weapons are employed does Ferdia agree to fight Cuchulainn.

Ferdia is Cuchulainn's finest opponent, not only because of their mirror-like similarity (foster-brothers, both taught under Scathach), but because each has a strict warrior code and a vast respect for the other. Like Fergus, Ferdia's weakness is women, which Cuchulainn chastises Ferdia about in verse. But, in a tragic moment, Ferdia acknowledges his fatal flaw but nonetheless he is resigned to fight, due to his honor.

The pair's fight is typically heroic and typically exaggerated, in which they use a variety of weapons (all politely agreed-to ahead of time) over several days. When Cuchulainn finally bests Ferdia using his signature weapon, the gae bolga, what follows is a long set of verse laments, infused with a great deal of pathos, in that Ferdia, through great suffering, has made Cuchulainn feel alive for the first time (anything before was "play" and "sport"). One could argue that it is this fight, which almost robs Cuchulainn of his life, that ushers Cuchulainn fully into manhood. It is telling that, considering the care and length given to this fight and the subsequent lamentation, the final battle is almost an afterthought, and one in which Cuchulainn only arrives at the end to exercise his truce with Fergus and tip the scales. This event is the climactic and most dramatic point of the Tain.



## XII - XIII

### XII - XIII Summary

XII. The men of Ulster begin to rise from their pangs (the curse) in time to meet the Irish army in the final battle. Cuchulainn is carried away from Ferdia by three risen Ulstermen to Conaille, where he is bathed in various rivers to recuperate his health.

Back at the army, scout Mac Roth spies someone arriving in a chariot, the fierce Ulster warrior Cethern. He heedlessly crashes into the army and hacks at them, slaughtering many men but also receiving a great many wounds himself. Cethern returns to Cuchulainn at Conaille "with his guts around his feet," and cries for a healer. Cuchulainn sends word that the army had better send healers, or he would find and kill them all, so the enemy healers come. Each healer tells Cethern he is beyond healing, and each healer is then battered to death by the disbelieving Cethern, fifty healers in total.

Finally, the royal healer himself, Fingin, is summoned, keeping his distance from Cethern lest he too get battered. Fingin and Cethern then engage in a long list of wounds and who they were inflicted by. Fingin mentions that a particular spear wound looks like it was caused by two brothers, and Cethern recalls that, yes, it was caused by two particular brothers. This give-and-take allows for more of the contemporary Irish lineage to be described. After Fingin's lengthy list of wounds, Cethern is given two options: Fingin can heal him so that he would live a year longer, living in a kind of sickly manner, or else Fingin can heal him to full warrior strength, only Cethern would die after only three days. Cethern chooses the later option, gets healed, uses chariot parts in place of missing ribs, then gets his revenge on the Irish army, killing many men before himself being killed.

In another episode, Cuchulainn summons a warrior, Rochad, to help scout the advancing army. Ailill spots Rochad, and hatches a plot to send his comely daughter Finnabair (that Finnabair died earlier in the narrative is unimportant to the text) out to meet Rochad, to distract him before warriors set upon him. Finnabair was in fact smitten with Rochad, and so the plan is altered to have Rochad captured and Finnabair promised a night with him. The plan goes off successfully, with Rochad captured, Finnabair bedded, and Rochad promising to call a truce for his small army. Meanwhile, the kings of Munster hear of Finnabair's night with Rochad, and they all become enraged, for Ailill had all separately promised Finnabair to each of these Munster kings. The kings start a war against Ailill's army, and the bloody massacre has to be put down by the elite Galeoin warriors. Finnabair, shamed at having caused so much death and being manipulated by her father, falls dead.

The remainder of Ulster were ending their pangs at this time, particularly Cuchulainn's mortal father, Sualdim, who hears of his son's feats and wounds. Sualdim goes to his son's aid, but Cuchulainn waves him away, stating he would have no strength to avenge his father should he fall in battle. Instead Sualdim is urged to warn Conchobor and the



rest of Ulster of the incoming army, which Sualdim does. At first Sualdim's yelling is annoying to the king and he nearly sentences Sualdim to death, but eventually they understand Sualdim's intent. King Conchobor vows to meet the Irish army and restore normalcy. He summons a great and long list of kinsmen, and they move quickly to meet the Irish army.

XIII. This chapter is composed almost entirely of a long list of great warriors of Ulster and its allies as they march to meet the Irish army. Mac Roth has scouted these warriors and describes them in great detail, whereupon Fergus states who exactly they are, their bloodline, and their power in battle. As far as Mac Roth's descriptions, of chief interest are clothes, chariots, physical qualities, and weapons. A final important warrior riding into the fray is a mere boy. Fergus is especially fearful of this boy, Erc, as he is a cherished grandson of Conchobor, and his youth will inspire extra rage in Ulstermen when they defend Erc. In fact, Fergus figures the family ties of the Ulstermen, versus the mercenary, disconnected organization of the Irish army, will be the difference in the battle.

## **XII - XIII Analysis**

These sections underscore just how important lineage is to the text. Cethern and his close examination of wounds by the royal healer Fingin is little more than a clever method of listing all the important ("better-born") participants in the great battle to come on the Ailill/Medb side. Cethern's decision to fight at full strength for three days rather than live in a sickly state for a year is another particularly masculine aspect to the warrior code, echoing young Cuchulainn in a pre-tale who stated he would take one day of fame to a lifetime of obscurity.

Where in Section XII it was the Irish army's turn to be counted and recognized, Section XIII features the Ulster nobles and heroes, in a large procession described by Mac Roth and made sense of by Fergus mac Roich. Abandoning the fancy of couching this procession in terms of war wounds, the Ulster accounting is a much more straightforward affair.





# XIV

## XIV Summary

XIV. Conchobor and Ailill meet, and agree to suspend hostilities until the morning of the next day. Meanwhile, the Morrigan woman speaks a prophecy of doom for Ailill's army, though she (falsely) also speaks of doom for Ulster, in order to hide the truth from Ailill. Ailill rallies his kinsmen for the battle to come. Meanwhile, Cuchulainn is still healing and unable to fight.

The war actually starts pre-dawn, among the servants of the two armies. Then the young boys join, then the better-born people at sunrise, and finally the kings themselves after sunrise. Cuchulainn gets news and reports from the battlefield from Laeg his faithful charioteer.

The battle begins to tip the Ulster's way, and Ailill and Medb beg Fergus to join the fight. Fergus is still powerless (and emasculated) with his mere wooden sword. Ailill has his charioteer fetch the real sword he was concealing. Now properly armed, Fergus joins in and kills a hundred Ulstermen in his first attack. Conchobor hears Fergus' ruckus and leaves to face him. Fergus attacks Conchobor, who blocks with his legendary shield Ochain. The mighty blows can be heard all over the land. As Fergus raises his sword for another mighty blow, Cormac comes from behind him and clamps his wrists, making him powerless. Fergus agrees to stop killing Ulstermen, and Cormac advises him to instead turn his rage to the nearby hills, which Fergus shears in half in three mighty strokes.

Cuchulainn hears Fergus' blows and wishes to cast off all his healing herbs to join the fight. Two handmaiden healers try to deceive Cuchulainn, telling him Ulster has fallen and Fergus is dead, but he smashes their heads together and heads to the battle. He calls for Fergus and orders him to yield, as Fergus had agreed to do earlier. Fergus agrees, withdrawing all of the Ulster exiles as well as the elite Galeoin warriors. This leaves only Medb and Ailill's battered army, which Cuchulainn and the rest of Ulster decimates. Defeated, Medb in a kind of tragi-comic moment must leave the front lines to both take care of her menstrual period and to pee, leaving a place later called Medb's Foul Place. Cuchulainn comes across her, but refuses to kill a woman. The battle is over, with Fergus dismissing the whole affair as men following "the rump of a misguiding woman."

As for the bull that started it all, Donn Cuailnge, he is brought out to face his foe, Finnbennach. They have a legendary struggle over many lands, and eventually Donn Cuailnge gets the upper hand and totally dismembers Finnbennach. Donn Cuailnge continues to travel the land, leaving bits of Finnbennach (liver, hoof) at various places, which are subsequently named for that body part.



Ailill and Medb make peace with Ulster, a peace that lasts for seven years, and everyone goes back to his or her own country, with Ulstermen "full of their great triumph."

## XIV Analysis

Medelm's pre-war prophecy reminds of Medb's folly of refusing to listen to the same prophecy before the Tain began, and re-emphasizes the importance of fate. The fact that the great battle actually begins with pre-dawn skirmishes amongst peasants on either side is a welcome touch of realism, and underscores the relative anti-climactic aspect of the great battle (as was said, the outcome was really decided when Cuchulainn beat Ferdia). Cuchulainn's receiving news of the battle through his charioteer Laeg is a smart comment on the second-hand way in which the reader him/herself receives the account.

Cuchulainn and Fergus call a truce, with the consequence being the Irish army loses many of its men. The battle is won. Medb's folly is exposed, literally and in the most humiliating way possible, and the entire affair is summed up by Fergus, placing the blame squarely on Medb and more generally on women: "We followed the rump of a misguiding woman [...] It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed." (251)

The journey made by Donn Cuailnge, his battle with Finnbennach, and the subsequent scattering of body parts and naming of topographical features is a final statement on the epic nature and large scope of the text (names being a permanent reminder of the events).



# Characters

## Cuchulainn

Cuchulainn is the primary hero and protagonist of Tain. His birth is significant, as he is essentially born (or at least conceived) three times, giving him three lineages - Burg, Ulster, and a race of semi-divine beings called the side. To associate Cuchulainn with the side accomplishes a justification for his superhuman powers, much as Hercules or other heroes in Greek mythology were semi-divine in their origins.

Cuchulainn, at a mere five years old, is capable of fantastic feats, including beating 150 boys at wrestling or "Shoot-the-Goal"; defeating the vicious guard dog of Culann the Smith, after which he became the "Hound of Culann," adopting his namesake; killing several men in combat; and lifting 30 warriors above his head on a bed.

At the time of the Tain, Cuchulainn is seventeen, in some ways a "beardless boy" (he must use a fake beard so men will fight him), but in most ways mature beyond his years, not to mention the finest warrior in Ireland. Not only is his fighting strength unmatched, as evidenced by the thousands of men who fall at his feet by the end of the epic, but he is smart and resourceful. He plants physical challenges for the advancing Irish army to stall them, and agrees to a once-a-day duel with the army, again as a stall tactic so that the men of Ulster have time to awake from their curse.

He is impervious to the wicked seduction of the fairer sex (as evidenced by his rejection of the Morrigan woman). While he sometimes adheres to a warrior's code of honor (stating he does not kill charioteers, refusing to kill Medb because she is a woman, honoring the duel-a-day deal even as the other side breaks the rules), in other times he is apt to break such a code in his warrior rage, in fact killing many women in war, or killing the charioteer when he doesn't perform exactly as specified.

## Medb

Queen Medb is the vain monarch who starts the events of the Tain by comparing her vast wealth to her husband's, and finding herself missing a prize bull. She then raises a great army to find the bull, Donn Cuailnge.

She is characterized as impetuous, irrational, and cruel. When the elite Galeoin warriors join her army, she wishes them killed, as they might rob her and the rest of the army of glory in battle. This is dismissed as "woman's thinking" by the much more reasoned Fergus mac Roich. A seductress through and through, she is fully capable of lying and offering her "friendly thighs" in order to manipulate men, usually to go to their deaths to fight Cuchulainn, as she does with the hero Ferdia and several others. Subtextually, Fergus is in fact entrapped by said "friendly thighs," and literally loses his sword during a tryst with Medb, symbolic of Medb's sinister ability to sap men of their (phallic) power.



It is under Medb's command that her army ravages the countryside as it goes, killing peasants and setting fire to settlements and trees. She is equally cold and ruthless in spurring her own men to their death, such as when rivers rise at the army's coming and many soldiers drown. It is also, importantly, Medb who dismisses the prophecy of Fedelm who predicts disaster for the army. In this dismissal Medb betrays a blind vanity and lack of reason, what the text calls "woman's thinking." In the end, the text humiliates Medb for her extreme femininity, as she gets her period and an irresistible urge to pee at the height of battle.

## Fergus mac Roich

Fergus has a long history in the Tain and preceding events. He is the King of Ulster, who is forced from the throne by a woman (who else), Nes, the mother of Conchobor. The men of Ulster turn on him and he is forced into exile. By the time of the events of Tain, he is having an affair with Medb and is thus allied to her in her witless cattle raid. While resigned to fight on the wrong side of the conflict, Fergus is characterized as a victim of Medb's femininity. He in fact is belittled and made powerless through much of the narrative because his "sword" has been stolen and he has a poor wooden substitute. Beyond womanly wiles, Fergus is a sage and noble leader. He has many "old friendships" with Ulster, and he thus betrays Medb's army several times, telling Cuchulainn he is coming, slowing the army's pace, or striking a truce at a crucial point in battle. It is wise Fergus who tells the army (and the reader) who every warrior is in the advancing Ulster army, and it is Fergus who relates the incredible stories of Cuchulainn's youth. Versus Medb's irrationality and petulance, Fergus displays a calm wisdom. Importantly, Fergus breaks Medb's power over him by the end, admitting he followed "the rump of a misguiding woman."

## Ailill

King Ailill accompanies his wife on her quest to steal a prize bull, starting off the events of the Tain. Ailill is, above all else, a schemer, manipulator, and deal broker, though not a particularly bright or clever one. He tolerates Fergus sleeping with his wife Medb because of the political and military advantages that union might bring. It is Ailill who continually offers his fair daughter Finnabair (along with land and riches) to anyone who would duel Cuchulainn, a strategy that backfires badly when the kings of Munster discover they were each promised Finnabair separately, thus starting a bloody civil war. It is Ailill who agrees to Cuchulainn's one-duel-a-day pact, ceding that it would be better to lose one man in the day than a hundred at night. Ailill becomes secondary to Medb as the narrative goes on, virtually disappearing by the time of the final battle. His scheming and deception are a clear contrast to Cuchulainn's nobility and warrior prowess. Where Ailill is a talker, Cuchulainn is a doer.



## Conchobor

Conchobor is the king of Ulster during the events of the Tain. He is a wise, powerful, and respected ruler, and no one would dare to cross him or contradict him. Like Cuchulainn, Conchobor also has a fantastic boyhood, and the reader suspects Conchobor has many more heroic deeds than are related in this text. By the events of the Tain, Conchobor is a relatively old man, a king and leader first and not a warrior, that role being left to Cuchulainn. Conchobor's rallying of the men of Ulster proves to be the final death blow to Medb's army.

## Mac Roth

Mac Roth is Medb's scout, moving ahead of the army to report troop movements and so on, and also the one sent out to broker deals and deliver messages.

## Ferdia

Ferdia is Cuchulainn's final and most worthy opponent. Ferdia studied the martial arts under Scathach with Cuchulainn, and the two consider each other foster-brothers. This makes their battle particularly difficult for Cuchulainn, who knows Ferdia is fighting because he was manipulated by Medb. The two fight with equal skill for three entire days, until Ferdia delivers a near-fatal blow, and Cuchulainn is forced to use his gae bolga weapon to kill Ferdia. Ferdia is then wept over by Cuchulainn for his worthiness as a warrior, and his honorable spirit.

## Cathbad

Cathbad is a druid with powers of foresight and prophecy. In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, Nes beds Cathbad in order to bear the hero Conchobor. Cathbad prophesizes the wickedness of Derdriu, and the power of Cuchulainn, and is otherwise a sage figure.

## Nes

Nes is Conchobor's mother who tricks Fergus mac Roich into giving up his throne, after which Nes skillfully manipulates the men of Ulster into installing Conchobor permanently as king.

## Fedelm

Fedelm is a prophetess who attempts to warn Medb of the impending doom of her mission. She goes unheeded by the too-proud Medb.



## **Derdriu**

Derdriu's birth is heralded as an event of great evil by Cathbad, who nevertheless allows the child to be raised into a beautiful woman. She falls in love with Noisiu, and in the end is the cause for a bloody civil war among the Ulstermen, resulting in the exile of three-thousand Ulsters, the death of Noisiu and many others, and her own death as she smashes her head against a rock rather than face the prospect of bedding the murderer of her lover.

## **Macha**

Macha is forced to run a race while pregnant at a fair, in response to a witless bet made by her husband Crunniuc. At the end of the race she gives birth to twins, utters a curse that the men of Ulster will, at times, have the same pains she had running the race and giving birth, and then she drops dead. Thereafter, all men of Ulster, for nine generations, have the "Pangs of Ulster," periodic pain that render them as powerless as a woman giving birth.

## **Etarcomol**

Etarcomol is a boastful and arrogant foster-son of Ailill. He insults Cuchulainn needlessly, and pays for it by being promptly chopped to death by that hero.

## **Nadcranntail**

Nadcranntail is a legendary warrior who is paid handsomely for trying to kill Cuchulainn. Unfortunately Cuchulainn is simply much better, and when they exchange javelin throws it is Nadcranntail who is impaled to death through the head.

## **Lugaid**

Lugaid is a lieutenant in Medb's army who sees the writing on the wall and offers a truce to Cuchulainn. This leads to Fergus also making a truce, which becomes the difference in the final battle.



# Objects/Places

## Ulster

Ulster is a province of Ireland, and the home of the "good guys" of the story, the Ulstermen and their hero, Cuchulainn. They are afflicted by a curse that causes them to become immobilized with labor-type pains occasionally.

## Connacht

Connacht is the province of Ireland where Ailill and Medb hail from. It is chiefly Connachtmen who compose the army that battles Ulster.

## Donn Cuailnge

Donn Cuailnge is the name of the prize bull which Medb seeks and wages war for, the cause for the Tain of the title.

## Gae Bolga

The gae bolga is a many-barbed spear, a sort of secret weapon that Scathach taught Cuchulainn and seemingly no one else. The two times Cuchulainn is evenly matched and in trouble (versus his own son, and versus Ferdia), he employs the gae bolga to dispatch his foe, which spreads barbs throughout a person's body.

## The Warp-Spasm

Cuchulainn undergoes what the translator translates as a "warp-spasm" either before certain battles, or in the midst of a battle to provide a boost to his powers. In the most noteworthy instance of the warp-spasm, his physical body literally becomes disfigured (his bones turn in his skin, his jaw slackens to reveal his lungs, his one eye buries itself in his head), making Cuchulainn a literal monster.

## Murtheimne Plain

This is the plain close to the Ulster men, and the plain Cuchulainn must defend while the Ulster men are in their pangs. The great battle then takes place on this plain after the Ulster men rise and meet the Irish army.



## Ochain

Literally the "Ear of Beauty," Ochain is the legendary shield Conchobor wields in combat with Fergus mac Roich. Even Fergus' mighty sword blows, which otherwise shear the tops off of hills, cannot dent Ochain, although it does create a mighty noise.

## Finnbennach

Finnbennach is the other legendary bull, the twin of Donn Cuailnge in the possession of Ailill. At the end of the tale, Donn Cuailnge defeats Finnbennach in a long battle, and they journey across Ireland spreading Finnbennach's body parts, which then name the places they are dropped at.

## The Salmon-Leap

This is a special attack of Cuchulainn, one of the feats taught to him by Scathach. Of particular note is that it is one of the ways in which Cuchulainn satisfies the conditions set by Emer in order to marry her.

## Brug

Cuchulainn is born of both Ulster, divinity (the race called the side), and of Brug. Because of this special ancestry, he is immune to the Curse of the Pangs that afflict Ulster, and thus he is able to defend Ulster when every other warrior is paralyzed.

## The Curse of the Pangs

The Curse of the Pangs was given to Ulster men by Macha, when she was forced to outrun a chariot in a bet. For nine generations after that event, the men of Ulster were cursed to be occasionally wracked with intense, labor-like pains, to the point they could not move.





# Themes

## The Woman Problem

Women have an unfortunate place in Tain and the related Irish mythology. With a few notable exceptions, women are almost universally characterized as either manipulative temptresses or embodied evil and the source of much trouble. Nes is the first example of this. She weds Cathbad for the selfish reason of raising a great Irish hero, and then she deceives Fergus into giving up his throne, where she acts in secret behind the throne to bestow favors onto the Ulster men so they won't entertain the notion of allowing Fergus back. Next is Derdriu, predicted at birth as trouble and evil, who causes a civil war when she falls in love with Noisiu. In that scene, Noisiu clearly wants nothing to do with Derdriu and her evil prophecy, but she forcibly binds him. The episode of course ends in Noisiu's death, and a schism in Ulster which causes three-thousand to flee the land.

The list continues with Macha, who causes the Curse of the Pangs that afflict Ulster. There is the Morrigan woman who Cuchulainn rejects (thus proving his heroism and separating himself from someone like Fergus mac Roich, who is constantly overpowered by women), who then transforms into beasts to attack Cuchulainn. There is also meek Finnabair, who is little more than sexual currency for Ailill to buy men and send them to their doom.

The most important woman, however, is Medb, who sets new levels for manipulation, seductiveness, and cruelty. Touting her "friendly thighs" to get men to do her bidding, she is "whoresome," exchanging sexual pleasure for power. She wishes to have three-thousand elite warriors on her side killed, only because they might steal her glory, "woman's thinking" that is universally scolded. Otherwise, her vanity is the cause of the Tain itself, she ignores clear prophecy of her army's destruction, and she is needlessly destructive as her army ravages the countryside.

While there are a couple more positive portrayals of women, such as Scathach and Aife who teach Cuchulainn his best feats, generally the author(s) have a dim view of women indeed.

## The Epic Tag

There are many reasons by Tain could be considered an epic text, which will be enumerated here. There is first the scope of the piece, which involves all four provinces of Ireland in a great war that threatens the peace of the entirety of the country. There is next the presence of heroes, chiefly Cuchulainn but also Fergus mac Roich, Ferdia, and Conchobor, who perform hyperbolic fantastic deeds and are generally "larger-than-life" versions of humans. Especially noteworthy in Cuchulainn's case is a semi-divine origin. There is also a lyrical quality in Tain's frequent switches to verse, comparable to other



great epics, which elevates the story into epic territory. Verse imbues the story with an emotionality and a profundity that separates Tain from a mere war or adventure story. With verse the lamentation of Ferdia is possible, echoing Achilles' lamentation of Hector in The Iliad. In prose and in verse, the story also takes the time to describe weapons, armor, chariots, and physical qualities of many of the participants, again in a sort of heroic, heightened, "epic" fashion. Finally there is Tain's careful handling of topography and bloodlines, which seeks above all to include all the major tribes, families, and kingdoms of Ireland into a singular narrative, uniting the disparate Irish people with a national literature they can call their own.

## Cuchulainn's Code of Honor

In contrast to Ailill and especially Medb, who lie, deceive, manipulate, and break bonds, heroic Cuchulainn acts in a way that is definitively heroic, according to a warrior code. This may be attributed to both his semi-divine birth, and his upbringing, in which the very best nobles of Ulster take turns in raising him, providing him the best skills and traits. In this manner, as one blessed with extraordinary natural-born gifts and extraordinary upbringing (both Ulster and with the chieftesses Scathach and Aife), Cuchulainn need not rely upon the the guile and deceit of his enemies; he can succeed simply by playing by the rules, where his foes need to be plied with alcohol or promised vast wealth in order to face him. Fergus, importantly, is also an adherent to the warrior code, warning Cuchulainn of the army so he would not be ambushed, slowly the Irish army so the Ulsters could wake up and have a "fair fight" instead of the slaughter it would be if the Ulsters were still in the midst of their curse. Almost universally throughout Tain, those who fight with honor and according to laws and protocols are lauded and triumphant. The exception, Ferdia, who is an honorable warrior and who adheres to the code but nonetheless is defeated in an honorable duel, is given an epic lamentation and causes Cuchulainn to grieve greatly. Even though Fergus fights for the wrong side, the fact that he lives by the warrior code makes him universally respected, enough that he is spared from slaughter even after he attacks King Conchobor. Fergus' subsequent calling of the truce (after an agreement with Cuchulainn from earlier, another manifestation of the warrior code) provides the bloody end for the Irish army.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in *Tain* is primarily third-person omniscient. These events are well in the past and have become a part of the collective consciousness. As with other ancient texts, surely *Tain* had its origin in oral storytelling, where after many generations one definitive version of events emerged to be recorded as a written text, though interestingly in several places the text provides an alternative version of events, admitting its own uncertainty. This early form of an "unreliable narrator" is partly born from the reality of coalescing many oral stories into one written text and the inherent problem of multiple versions. It also provides a sense of realism to the text, insofar that, like "real" history, truth and certainty is elusive, and there are several perspectives and debates on the same event.

Otherwise, the text provides its own answer to questions of point of view in the first passage, in which "the poets of Ireland" gather to a sage, Senchan, in order to share fragments of the *Tain* in hopes of reconstructing an entire and cohesive narrative. It is from this narrative framework that we are to understand the perspective of the proceeding stories, though even this framework is ridden with problems, insofar that the poets find their patchwork version incomplete, to be eventually "rescued" by the ghost of Fergus mac Roich, who relates the entire story of the *Tain* through his first-hand recollection. Thus, the *Tain* is, self-evidently, a curious combination of bits of story told by poets and bards from around Ireland strung together, and the fiction of the ghost of Fergus cohering and justifying these story fragments with his first-hand account.

## Setting

The setting of *Tain* is various provinces of Ireland at some point in the distant past. The conflict is in fact drawn along provincial lines. Ailill and Medb, from the province of Connacht, gather forces from the other three provinces, Munster, Leinster, and Ulster (in Ulster's case, exiles from Ulster), in order to attack Ulster and steal its legendary bull. The story becomes a sort of underdog story, Ulster versus the world.

The text is very sensitive to topography, and part of the "epic" nature of the story as it unfolds is that the events have the power to literally name topographical features (fords, hills, glens, plains). Helpful maps are included with the text, given this importance placed on geography. Naming of the terrain happens constantly. As Cuchulainn harasses the Irish army by throwing stones and killing people from afar, the places where people are killed become named after them. Similarly, after the bull Donn Cuailnge defeats its counterpart, Finnbennach, it scatters Finnbennach's body parts in a long journey across Ireland, with locations being named after the body part dropped there. The site of Medb's humiliation/defeat, in which she carves long channels in the earth with her urine and menstrual blood, is thereafter designated Medb's Foul Place.



This process of naming, as stated, elevates the story to epic status, and also allows the story to serve as literature that unites the disparate Irish kingdoms.

## Language and Meaning

Tain was meant to be consumed by ordinary folks, in the tradition of oral storytelling, and thus much of the language is plain and commonplace. Like other worldly epics (The Iliad or The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example), there is a sort of fragmentary aspect to the narrative flow, consistent with the fact that the text is stitched together from various sources, and also the fact that certain portions necessary for a smooth and whole epic have undoubtedly been lost to the ravages of time. This "fragmentation" leads to problems of causation (with character motives being unclear, or more generally a sense that event A leads to event B only with some strain and suspension of disbelief), problems of internal logic/reality (for example, Finnabair and Maine are two characters who die only to reappear without mention later in the epic), and problems of transitions and the passage of time, with chronology allowed to be fluid and inconsistent. However, it must be stated that these aspects of the text are not to be blamed entirely on the nature of the source text; in some ways what the reader perceives as fragmentary is the result of modern biases about story. The modern reader is accustomed to access to the interiority of a character and understanding motivations, for one example; the reader is denied such access in many works of antiquity, as ancient authors many times were simply uninterested in interiority.

Also interesting to note under "language and meaning" is the frequent switch to verse in this otherwise work of prose. Unlike the prose, which progresses the plot and describes the action of the narrative, passages of verse are reserved for special events, mostly unrelated to plot, that call for a certain lyricism. These passages elevate the narrative and add beauty and pathos to what would otherwise be a straightforward war narrative. Times for verse would include: Fedelm and Cathbad's prophecies, Ailill and Fergus belittling each other, Cuchulainn lamenting the death of Ferdia, and chants and magical incantations.

## Structure

As has been stated, Tain is a text that has been stitched together from various sources, including medieval manuscripts, supplementary legends, etc., and thus some of the structure is artificially imposed, in this instance by the translator Thomas Kinsella. To this point, the beginning sections of the book, which deal with Conchobor's birth as well as the birth and boyhood of Cuchulainn, are not part of the Tain per se, but they have included by the translator as useful background stories that would help the reader prepare for the main action of the Tain. For example, without these "pre-tales," the reader would be at a loss to understand "The Pangs of Ulster" that cause the Ulstermen to be sick throughout most of the narrative, for one example.



Sometimes, even within sections, a brief event is presented, unrelated to anything else, inserted intelligently by the translator in the name of general interest.

After the preparatory background stories, the Tain itself is divided into fourteen sections. This division is probably again an invention of the translator, but they are nonetheless useful and intelligently placed, as they coincide with significant breaks in the action or movements in time or place. Unlike the pre-*tales*, Tain has a discernible beginning (Medb scheming to steal the bull and the raising of the army), middle (Cuchulainn harassing the Irish army, and finally besting Ferdia), and end (the Ulstermen rise to crush the Irish army).



## Quotes

"Then Cathbad said: 'A woman with twisted yellow tresses,/ green-irised eyes of great beauty / and cheeks flushed like the foxglove / howled in the hollow of your womb. / I say that whiter than the snow / is the white treasure of her teeth; / Parthian-red, her lip's lustre. / Ulster's chariot-warriors / will deal many a blow for her. / [...] Heroes will contend for her, / high kings beseech on her account. / [...] High queens will ache with envy / to see those lips of Parthian-red / opening on her pearly teeth / and see her pure perfect body.'

Cathbad placed his hand on the woman's belly and the baby wriggled under it.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is a girl there. Derdriu shall be her name. She will bring evil.'" (9-10)

"Cuchulainn met and fought Aife on the rope of feats. Aife smashed Cuchulainn's weapon. All she left him was a part of his sword no bigger than a fist.

'Look! Oh, look!' Cuchulainn said. 'Aife's charioteer and her two horses and the chariot have fallen into the valley! They are all dead!'

Aife looked round and Cuchulainn leaped at her and seized her by the two breasts. He took her on his back like a sack, and brought her back to his own army. He threw her heavily to the ground and held a naked sword over her.

'A life for a life, Cuchulainn!' Aife said.

'Grant me three wishes,' he said.

'What you can ask in one breath you may have,' she said.

'My three desires,' he said, 'are: hostages for Scathach, and never attack her again; your company tonight at your own fort; and bear me a son.'

'I grant all you ask,' she said.'" (32-33)

"'Is he [Cuchulainn] the toughest they have in Ulster?' Medb said.

'Yes, the toughest of all,' Fergus said. 'You'll find no harder warrior against you - no point more sharp, more swift, more slashing; no raven more flesh-ravenous, no hand more deft, no fighter more fierce, no one of his own age one third as good, no lion more ferocious; no barrier in battle, no hard hammer, no gate of battle, no soldiers' doom, no hinderer of hosts, more fine. You will find no one there to measure against him - for youth or vigour; for apparel, horror or eloquence; for splendour; fame or form; for voice or strength or sternness; for cleverness, courage or blows in battle; for fire or fury, victory, doom or turmoil; for stalking, scheming or slaughter in the hunt; for swiftness, alertness or wildness; and no one with the battle-feat 'nine men on each point' - none like Cuchulainn.'" (75-76)

"'That is a fair bargain,' Cuchulainn said. 'If I achieve fame I am content, though I had only one day on earth.' [...]

'A chariot was given to him. He clapped his hand to the chariot between the shafts, and the frame broke at his touch. In the same way he broke twelve chariots. At last they gave him Conchobor's chariot and that survived him.

'He mounted the chariot beside Conchobor's charioteer. This charioteer, Ibor by name, turned the chariot round where it stood.' [...]

'Use your goad on the horses now.'



'Which direction?' the charioteer said.

'As far as the road will take us!' Cuchulainn said.'" (85-86)

"'Come with me, now,' Cuchulainn said. 'I have no quarrel with charioteers.'

Cuchulainn went up to Orlam and slew and beheaded him, and shook the head at the host. He set the head on the charioteer's back and said:

'Take this with you and keep it like that all the way into the camp. If you do anything but exactly what I say you'll get a shot from my sling.'

The charioteer went up close to the camp and took the head from his back, and told Medb and Ailill his story.

'This isn't like catching birds,' she said.

'And he told me,' the charioteer said, 'that if I didn't take it on my back all the way into the camp he'd break my head with a stone.'

Orlam's charioteer was standing at this time between Ailill and Medb outside the camp. Cuchulainn hurled a stone at him, shattering his head so that the brains spattered the ears. His name was Fertedil. It is not true, therefore, that Cuchulainn didn't kill charioteers; he killed them if they did wrong.'" (95-96)

"'Watch Medb and Fergus today for me. I don't know why they are so intimate and I want you to find me some sign.'

Then Cuillius found the couple together at Cluithre, where they had lingered behind as the army moved on. Cuillius moved closer. They didn't hear him spying on them. It happened that Fergus's sword was laid down close by him. Cuillius drew it out of its sheath, leaving the sheath empty. Then he went back to Ailill.

'Well,' Ailill said.

'Well indeed,' Cuillius said. 'Here is your sign. I discovered them sleeping together as you thought.'

'Fair enough,' Ailill said, and they grinned at each other. 'It is all right,' Ailill said. ' She is justified. She does it to keep his help on the Tain. Now, keep the sword in good order. Put it under your chariot-seat with a piece of linen around it.'" (103)

"Then he let fly his spear, but he threw it up on high so that it dropped down into Nadcranntail's skull and pinned him into the earth, and Nadcranntail cried:

'Misery! Misery!'

Then he said:

'You are the best warrior in Ireland. I have twenty-four sons in the camp. Let me go and tell them about this treasure you've hidden in me, and I'll come back to be beheaded. If this spear is taken out of my head I will die.'

'Agreed,' Cuchulainn said. 'But come back.' [...]

In a while he made toward Cuchulainn again and flung his sword at him. Cuchulainn leaped on high. Then he swelled with fury as when he faced the boy-troop in Emain. He sprang onto the rim of Nadcranntail's shield and struck his head off. He struck Nadcranntail again through the neck, down to the navel, so that he fell in four sections to the ground.'" (124-125)

"The first warp-spasm seized Cuchulainn, and made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of. His shanks and his joints, every knuckle and angle



and organ from head to foot, shook like a tree in the floor or a reed in the stream. His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front. The balled sinews of his calves switched to the front of his shins, each big knot the size of a warrior's bunched fist. [...] His face and features became a red bowl: he sucked on eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn't probe it onto his cheek out of the depths of his skull; the other eye fell out along his cheek. [...] Then, tall and thick, steady and strong, high as the mast of a noble ship, rose up from the dead centre of his skull a straight spout of black blood darkly and magically smoking[...]" (151, 153)

"Cuchulainn came out the next morning to view the armies and display his noble fine figure to the matrons and virgins and young girls and poets and bards. He came out to display himself by day because he felt the unearthly shape he had shown them the night before had not done him justice. And certainly the youth Cuchulainn mac Sualdaim was handsome as he came to show his form to the armies." (156)

"He said:

'Ferdia, dead by their deceit, / our last meeting I lament. / You are dead and I must live / to mourn my everlasting loss. / When we were away with Scathach / learning victory overseas / it seemed our friendship would remain / unbroken till the day of doom. / I loved the noble way you blushed, / and loved your fine, perfect form. / I loved your blue clear eye, / your way of speech, your skillfulness. / [...] Medb's daughter Finnabair, / whatever beauty she may have, / was an empty offering, / a string to hold the sand, Ferdia.'" (199-200)

"'If only I had my sword,' Fergus said, 'I'd send men's severed heads toppling thicker than hailstones over their shields into the mud. It would be like a king's horses churning up the ground. I swear by my people's god, ' he said, 'I'd heap up men's hacked jawbones on men's necks, men's necks on men's shoulders, their arms on their elbows, with elbows on wrists, wrists on fists, fists on fingers, fingers on nails, nails on skulls, skulls on trunks, trunks on thighs, thighs on knees, knees on calves, calves on feet, feet on toes and toes on nails! I'd send necks buzzing through the air like bees humming on a fine day!'" (245-46)

"Then Medb got her gush of blood.

'Fergus,' she said, 'take over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland until I relieve myself.'

'By god,' Fergus said, 'you have picked a bad time for this.'

'I can't help it,' Medb said. 'I'll die if I can't do it.'

So Fergus took over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland and Medb relieved herself. It dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household. This place is called Fual Medba, Medb's Foul Place, ever since. Cuchulainn found her like this, but he held his hand. He wouldn't strike her from behind.

'Spare me,' Medb said.

'If I killed you dead,' Cuchulainn said, 'it would only be right.'

But he spared her, not being a killer of women. [...]

The battle was over.





Medb said to Fergus:

'We have had shame and shambles here today, Fergus.'

'We followed the rump of a misguiding woman,' Fergus said. 'It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.'" (250-251)



## Topics for Discussion

What qualities of Tain make it epic?

Women cause everything from curses to a war in Tain. How are women portrayed in the text? What power do women have over men?

What is the significance of Cuchulainn's "triple birth?"

What part does Fergus mac Roich play in the text? What does his unique position as the gentlemanly quasi-enemy of Cuchulainn help to uncover in the text?

Does Cuchulainn operate according to a warrior code? Does his heroic prowess and manly rage complicate any adherence to a code?

What might be behind the care the author(s) take to describe Cuchulainn's physical deformation upon entering his "warp-spasm" and preparing himself for war? In other words, why is it important for Cuchulainn to become monstrous in order to wage war?

Why might it be important (especially to the authors' contemporary audience) to devote so much of the narrative to establishing bloodlines, lineage, and towns/provinces of origin?