

DAOINE SIDHE:

CELTIC SUPERSTITIONS OF DEATH WITHIN IRISH FAIRY TALES

FEATURING THE DULLAHAN AND BANSHEE

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Marissa Harris

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by
Marissa Harris

Thesis Supervisor:

John Blair, Ph.D.
Department of English

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

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ABSTRACT

A literary analysis of the portrayal of the *dullahan* and *banshee* in Celtic fairy tales and the connection to cultural beliefs of the Irish peasantry. The *dullahan* is viewed as a headless horseman that appears to the peasantry when a death occurs, or is known for decapitating people who come across the *dullahan*'s path. The *banshee* is believed to be a corpse-like spirit that wails and foretells the death of a family member. This analysis investigates popular versions of Celtic fairy tales to reveal the Irish peasantry's attempts to understand unexplainable daily occurrences and explain the mysteries of the unknown in an era when life was full of uncertainty. The supernatural appearances of the *dullahan* and *banshee* in these tales demonstrate the cultural fears of the imminence of death and anxieties of the unknown. Celtic fairy tales help the peasantry deal with death, a recurring theme of daily life, which allows the persistence of these tales among the Celtic culture.

INTRODUCTION

Most countries have some sort of belief in a class of beings distinct from men that are viewed as somewhat supernatural. These beings usually inhabit a region of their own, typically deep under water of lakes or oceans, or within caverns below the earth. They are different from mankind due to their higher level of power and intelligence, but they are similar as both being subject to the laws of death, though these other beings have a prolonged period of existence (Keightley, 3). In Ireland, these beings are called fairies and are a large aspect of Ireland's culture. Celtic superstitions about death were embodied in their beliefs of encounters with solitary fairies; the creation of superstitions about death involved appearances of these dark, supernatural beings as omens of oncoming death. The most common tales of solitary fairies that are affiliated with death feature the *dullahan* and *banshee*; the *banshee* wails, claps her hands, and her eyes are gaunt from mourning whereas the *dullahan* is dark, silent, and headless. These superstitions reflect a fear of the loss of senses and control that occurs in death and the foreshadowing of oncoming death through the allusion to funerary rituals.

The Celtic superstitions about solitary fairies are darker and more ominous than superstitions about their domestic counterparts. Domestic fairies appear to humans often and provide services, creating a positive association to humans. On the other hand, solitary fairies live among nature, away from humans, so little is known about them. Like the appearance of solitary fairies, death was unexpected and a fearful experience. Death is an equally disturbing enigma, taking victims without cause. This mystery causes humans to be weary of and fear solitary fairies, making up tales about them as a means of understanding the unknown and providing "answers for questions which were otherwise

profoundly and painfully unanswerable” (Eberly, 74). Humans are commonly afraid of things they do not understand, and these tales provided a sense of comfort and answers to these mysteries. The *dullahan* and *banshee* only come to humans in moments of death so meeting either solitary fairy is the equivalent of encountering death, which leaves characters in the tales shaken and terrified. In an ancient-medieval culture that had little to no source of lighting, a fear of the dark was prevalent. The Celts viewed death as a dark occurrence in which the light of life was taken. This fear is embedded in fairy tales with the description of the *dullahan* as black and dark. In tales of solitary fairies, the peasantry describe the meetings taking place after midnight, which is the darkest time of night. The darkness of night provides cover for these creatures so no one can perceive the fairies’ approach, increasing the peasantry’s fear.

HISTORY OF FAIRY TALES AND BELIEF

The belief in fairies was popular throughout Ireland, as seen in the many fairy tales common to their culture. Fairy tales are a link to the Celtic culture and their social values and perspectives. Noreys O’Conor writes that, “Ireland is the country of Fairies,” due to superstitions and Gaelic literature in which fairies have a key role (O’Conor, 545). Fairies were first mentioned in literature written centuries ago, with tales as early as 300 BC; stories and poems from the twelfth to sixteenth century reveal early Irish conceptions of fairies such as where these creatures come from, notable characteristics, and their contrast to humans. For example, it was an ancient belief that the fairies of Ireland could make themselves invisible by enveloping themselves in mist. They also had the power of transformation (O’Conor, 550). Since ancient times the Irish believed that the fairy folk are immortal and that fairies would give gifts to those who are kind and plague the gruff sort. The mysterious ‘people of the hill’ were met with caution and awe, both generous yet dangerous. Some fairies brought good fortune whereas others were considered an annoyance. For example, fishermen dreaded seeing mermaids, “for they always bring bad weather” (Yeats, ix). In the middle ages a fairy was referred to as a being associated with magic, who would dwell in the forest and was close to nature (Keightley, 31-32). In later centuries, this categorization would describe solitary fairies rather than all types of fairies. Although all fairies come from their dwellings in the hills and forests, solitary fairies are more recognized for residing solely among nature whereas domestic fairies will venture to the homes of mortals. Based on the Celtic beliefs of their history, fairies have an inherent connection to the land and to the Celtic ancestors. As such, fairy tales revive the folks’ connection to their ancestors, creating a strong belief in fairies.

The history of Irish oral tradition is linked to the beginning of the Irish race. Storytelling was a popular pastime in Celtic culture and associated with country life; “in the Irish countryside, there is an old custom of ‘nightly visiting, known as *ar cuairt*’ (i.e. ‘on a visit’)” (Samalikova, 14). It was common practice for rural folk and storytellers to gather together on a particular evening and recite their stories to provide a time of social entertainment. Celtic folklore is unique from other European nations since it consists of a large oral tradition about Celtic mythical heroes, whom the Celts believed in greatly as their ancestors (Samalikova, 14). Old women knew the most stories but would not easily talk about what they knew, “for the fairies are very secretive, and much resent being talked of,” to the extent that the old women may be attacked by fairy blasts, in which a fairy strikes a human with paralysis (Yeats, xi). The most prominent story tellers were tailors and shoemakers, or journeymen, who travelled around the country side for their work. During their travels they would hear many tales, which they repeated when they returned home. The Celtic people would come together “during the long nights of the winter months, when there was no work in the fields” (Samalikova, 14) to hear the recitation of fairy tales because “the Irish peasants relied on one another for pastime” (Samalikova, 14). Crowds would gather at the houses of story tellers, and as the winter nights drew on, audiences of these tales would listen attentively and scarcely miss any part of the story (Hartland, 6). During these gatherings, two types of stories were told. The first were *seanchas* (sean meaning ‘old’) which were told by *seanchai* (tellers), and then *scealaiocht* (sceal meaning ‘story’) that were told by *scealai* (narrators). *Seanchas* were shorter narratives about national or local histories or tales about the supernatural. *Scealaiocht* were longer tales with an elaborate structure, mostly consisting of myths and

legends (Samalikova, 15). Sometimes the storytelling would be turned into a competition; if a storyteller had a different version of a story from the other storytellers, they would all recite their version and vote on whose version was the most accurate. The man whose story varied had to follow their verdict of whether he was right or wrong (Yeats, xi). Consequentially, stories that have been handed down through generations are so accurate that even long tales are told almost word for word. However, this pertains to folk and bardic tales rather than fairy legends which vary based on the village.

The belief in fairy folk influenced superstitions among the people of early rural Ireland. The 'fairy culture' within these tales is a reference to how fairies are embedded into Celtic culture. As fairy tales became more popular, people began to use these stories to explain things that went wrong in daily life. Fairies were the answer for questions that could not be understood, the reason for occurrences that could not be comprehended. If something went wrong in daily life, it could easily be attributed to the work of a fairy. The manner in which characters regard the supernatural creatures that they meet reveals superstitions of the rural Irish folk. There are different superstitions depending on the type of fairy and for specific reasons. This need to explain misgivings created an association of good fairies with good events and bad fairies with unhappy events. The worst moments in peasant life involved death, which became affiliated with dark fairies and the belief that these fairies would take a person when they least expected, usually under the cover of night.

ORIGINS OF ANCIENT CELTS AND FAIRIES

The ancient Celts are a mysterious people and little is known about where they came from or what group of people was considered 'Celtic'. It is theorized that this group of people had northern origins, and by the 5th century BC they were settled in the Iberian peninsula (Collis, 5). During his invasion, Caesar said "the people who lived in central and southern Gaul called themselves Celts" (Collis, 2). In the 16th-18th centuries the term 'Celts' was extended to inhabitants of Britain. From the 18th century and onward the definition of a Celt became someone speaking a Celtic language. The mysterious background of the Celts is similar to the mysterious origins of fairies and fairy tales. Despite several theories, there is no definite answer of whether fairies are meant to resemble Celtic ancestors or are merely mythical beings.

The Irish word for fairy is *sheehogue* [*sidheog*] and fairies are *deenee shee* [*daoine sidhe*] or 'fairy people' (Yeats, 1). Based on folk beliefs, scholars have created two main theories for the origins of fairy culture. First, the Irish peasantry consider fairies to be, "Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost," (Yeats, 1). Being less guilty than the rest, these fallen angels were not driven to hell, but rather, "were suffered to dwell on earth" (Keightley, 363) in remote areas away from humans:

"some were granted the depths of the oceans and became merfolk; others were sent to the lands under the earth and became goblins and trolls; others were granted the air and became spirits and sheeries; while others were given the harsh and barren areas of the countryside and became leprechauns and grogochs" (Curran, 9).

The notion that fairies are actually fallen angels is derived from the characteristic that fairies are good to the good and evil to the evil, much like angels. The reason that these angels have fallen is that they are evil without malice, explaining why they fell but were not lost.

Second, the fairy folk were viewed as the gods of pagan Ireland, known as the Tuatha De Danaan. Irish antiquarians surmise that when these gods were no longer worshipped and fed offerings they dwindled away until they became only a few spans high. According to Eberly, scholars trace the origins of fairy belief by interpreting fairies as, “deified ancestors, nature spirits, descriptions of aboriginal races, half-remembered gods, and/or spirits of the dead” (Eberly, 58). One scholar attributes that fairy belief developed as a response to questions that went unanswered in typical rural life, such as climactic disasters, premature deaths of young people, epidemics among cattle and livestock, infantile paralysis, and the birth of deformed children. The theory that fairies are the remnants of the original Irish pagan gods finds evidence in the same names between fairy chiefs and old De Danaan heroes. The places where fairies are believed to gather are the same locations of old De Danaan burying-places. Finally, the De Danaan tribe used to be called the *sloa-shee* [*sheagh sidehe*] or ‘the fairy host’.

Early superstitions of fairies have historical truth, but without the concept of magic. These ‘supernatural’ creatures are actually the remaining memories of Celtic ancestors, twisted into myth over time. The natives became identifiable with fairies, and the existence of fairies began with human beings. This perception is unrecognizable at first glance, but when analyzing closely to find meaning, the connection to historical accuracy can be found. Fairies of ancient Ireland were descended from the Tuatha De

Danaan, or people of God. According to legend, this race came from the northern isles and were the size of mortals, or sometimes larger than mortals (O’Conor, 546). Historical records place the arrival of the Celts to Ireland during the first millennium BC. Early writers of literature depict the De Danaans with hints of divine power due to their advanced skills and magic, alluding to the confusion between the gods of the ancient Irish and these northern invaders. After their ships landed, the De Danaan colonists adjusting to the new land received hostility from the natives – the fairies. With the introduction of bronze and the Iron Age, fairies became more violent and aggressive towards the newcomers until the De Danaan overthrew the native people of Ireland. In turn, the invaders were overthrown by the Milesians, the mythical ancestors of modern Irishmen. As Christianity was introduced to Ireland and spread across the country, the De Danaans withdrew into the green hills (Curran, 10). These hills dwellings gave the De Danaans a new name; they became known as People of the Fairy Mound, or *Shee*. These early settlers hid themselves very carefully to avoid animals and enemies. They lived off the land and stayed away from human contact in secluded areas, much like the descriptions of the solitary fairy. The De Danaan were learned in the ways of magic and connected to the Druids, some of the earliest immigrants, who practiced black arts. This mystical group was devoted to the gods and practiced the “superstitious ceremony of enchanting” (Hore, 122) or the singing of verses. These songs would have also been chanted by banshees, or fairy-women, as they conducted their spells. This led to the belief that banshee and druids have supernatural powers. Druids and other members of the bardic caste chose to live in the hills to study and practice their skills, where they resided until the sixteenth century. This seclusion kept the bardic caste distinct from the other

inhabitants of the country and provided additional mystery and superstition for their neighbors, “which, in the dark ages, identified them with fairies, and which, down to the seventeenth century, upheld the belief that they were in communication with them” (Hore, 123). The Celtic Dark Ages lasted from the fifth century to the fifteenth century. The druids learned medicine, astrology, bardism, and prophecy. Some magicians and witches pretended to use incantations and spells to achieve success in the practices of medicine and prophecy, which allowed them to maintain an aura of mystery around themselves. Since the banshee was a healer and associated with the druids, it was believed that she could look into the future and see approaching deaths. The De Danaan remained in the country for several centuries despite the Gaelic invasion, and over time the wonder of the De Danaan dwindled until the prowess of these large creatures shrunk into the little people of common fairy folk. Since literature alludes to the De Danaans’ connections to the Irish gods, the appearance of fairies is likewise imagined to be similar to the brightness of divinities. Fairies were thought to have blue eyes and yellow hair and were elegantly dressed, always wearing green, the color of immortality, among their garments. The theory of fairies being the Tuatha De Danaan, or fallen angels, or a fusion of both, depicts the blending of pagan and Christian traditions.

THE DULLAHAN AND BANSHEE IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are stories of death omens within many cultures in which there is a personification of death that escorts people to the afterlife. There are similar elements among death-related stories of various cultures, such as the transportation of the deceased to the afterlife and confronting death. In the Celtic culture, the dullahan is the personification of death. Irish tales of the dullahan predate the nineteenth century. With the arrival of Irish immigrants and their stories, the dullahan appeared in American folklore during the 1700s and 1800s. Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death" includes an encounter with a dullahan as the narrator describes a carriage ride to the afterlife. However, the most notable difference between Dickinson's poem and traditional versions of the tale is the narrator's lack of fear when death appears (Fee, 296). Sightings of the dullahan vary from person to person, but recurring characteristics include a black carriage drawn by black horses, that is driven by a dark coachman wielding a whip, and the creature appears close to midnight. The approach of a dullahan may be heard from the sound of hooves or the cracking of a whip. Folks may hear a dullahan but not see it, and vice versa. The dullahan is the masculine form of the banshee and warns of impending death.

The Gaelic root *bean-sidhe* meant "a woman of the fairies" (Hore, 116), identifying the banshee as a fairy-woman. The idea of the banshee as a phantom omen of approaching death is a modern concept. Early perceptions of the banshee viewed her as a female physician or witch, one of the earliest settlers in the country. She cured the wounded and sick with remedies from nature, and people attributed these healing powers to the supernatural. Folk superstitiously attributed the wounds "to those old sources of

evil, the fairies” (Hore, 120). Even after fairies were no longer visible to humans, there was a strong belief in the extent of their evil. Banshees used incantations to avert fairy harm from their friends, or direct the evil to their enemies. Some of the herbs that banshees used for cures are still used by herb doctresses in modern Ireland. Banshees were employed as nurses within Irish castles along with being a professional mourner at funerals. As a nurse, she would prepare medicines and administer to the sick. It was her duty to mourn and cry, so when a patient was beyond her care she would “begin to lament in her fashion” (Hore, 127). Those within the castle would hear her cries and recognize it as a sign that the patient was dying, “and thus it came to pass that the banshee’s or fairy-woman’s shriek was truly deemed a forerunner of death” (Hore, 127).

TALES OF SOLITARY FAIRIES

There are various types of species of fairy; so many different species exist that sometimes the characteristics of one type will be confused with another. The fairies of Ireland are typically small, “rarely exceeding two feet in height” (Keightley, 363). However, fairies are able to shape shift and take whatever form or size that pleases them, and have the ability to make themselves invisible. They live within human society or inside hills, or raths, where they spend their time, “feasting, fighting, and making love, and playing the most beautiful music” (Yeats, 2). They are quickly offended so you must not speak about them too much, and always refer to them as *daoine maithe* or ‘good people’. The best method for differentiating between the types of fairies lies within the traditions and fairy tales of the peasantry (Keightley, 13). In these tales, fairies are classified as either a solitary fairy that lives away from humans, or a domestic fairy, also called a trooping fairy, that mingles with mortals. Fairies can be either good or bad, depending on which creature you meet. They steal children and strike people with paralysis and other ailments, but they are kind to folk whom they like and will sometimes provide domestic services. Solitary fairies are subcategorized into good or bad, but most often these fairies are recognized with a sense of mystery and unknown. As their name suggests, these fairies live away from humans and are only met on rare occasions. The *dullahan* and *banshee* are mostly met with fear and apprehension. A headless rider and ghoulish spirit, these fairies are the embodiment of death and represent Celtic superstitions about death within their respective tales.

There is a debate among folklorists of “whether the banshee is a fairy, spirit or mortal” (Curran, 49). For those who believe the banshee is a member of the fairy race,

they believe that the *banshee* is a female fairy attached to a family of noble birth, who appeared weeping and lamenting when a family member's death was approaching. As an ancestral spirit, the banshee would forewarn "members of certain ancient Irish families of their time of death" (Curran, 49); high descent was well respected among Celtic society, so a banshee's mourning was exclusive to families of "pure Gaelic blood" (Hore, 116). A banshee did not care about the descendants of Norman invaders or other settlers. If the banshee is a ghost, then her act of following a family would suggest that these families have done her harm in some way and she takes "delight in the deaths of its members" (Curran, 49). In the tale, *How Thomas Connolly Met The Banshee*, Connolly believes he meets a *banshee* as he crosses a bridge on his way home. He describes the creature,

"as pale as a corpse...an' the two eyes sewn in wid thread, from the terrible power o' crying the' had to do...as blue as two forget-me nots, an' as cowld as the moon in a bog-hole of a frosty night, an' a dead-an'-live look in them that sent a cowld shiver through the marra o' me bones"
(Yeats, 115).

The appearance of a *banshee* always coincides with her wailing. Her cry is an omen of an approaching death. Further in the tale, Connolly mentions there was a visitor in the village and the *banshee* was heard wailing around the visitor's house the same night that Connolly met the fairy on the bridge. The next morning the visitor was found dead in his bed, and Connolly is convinced that it was a *banshee* that he met on the bridge. The belief in this fairy is so deeply embedded in the Irish culture that Connolly pointedly asks, "So if it wasn't the banshee I seen that time, I'd like to know what else it could a' been" (Yeats, 116). The characteristic wailing of the *banshee* is imitated in the

funeral cry of the peasantry. This can be seen in *The Banshee of The Mac Carthys* when Charles Mac Carthy dies suddenly despite previous good health. A crowd has gathered outside his home and when the medical professional informs the crowd of the death, all the women present “uttered a shrill cry” then “fell suddenly into a full, loud, continued, and discordant but plaintive wailing” while the men exclaimed in sorrow and deep sobs (Croker, 121).

Along with her corpse-like appearance and wailing, the *banshee* is known for her clapping. Friends of the Mac Carthys travel to the funeral and meet a *banshee* on their journey. The meeting occurs on a full moon night, with the clouds thick, black, and gathering together in strong winds. The friends hear a shriek from the hedges but see nothing since the moon was hidden behind the clouds and everything was dark. But they “distinctly heard a loud clapping of hands, followed by a succession of screams, that seemed to denote the last excess of despair and anguish” (Croker, 126). The noise keeps pace with their carriage but remains in the hedges. The moon is suddenly uncovered and the group sees a woman with long hair floating around her shoulders. She directs the carriage to their destination at the fork in the road by raising her arm and pointing, which forebodes that something bad is awaiting them. As the carriage turns, the *banshee* disappears, but the group continues to hear “a prolonged clapping of hands, gradually dying away (Croker, 127). Like wailing, this characteristic clapping is also imitated by the peasantry in funerary rituals. While the crowd wailed and sobbed after receiving the news of Charles’ death, one man “moved about the crowd, clapping his hands, now rubbing them together in an agony of grief” (Croker, 121). The description of the *banshee* resembles the appearance of a corpse, which relates the fairies’ affiliation with death.

When the peasant folk meet a *banshee* they are instantly reminded of a corpse, and the mannerisms of the *banshee* reflect the funerary rituals that are conducted by the peasant folk. Meeting a *banshee* is a foreshadowing of the rites that will soon be conducted. She is an omen of death and the embodiment of the peasantry's fear of fading into a corpse.

Sometimes the *banshee* is accompanied by another omen, the *coach-a-bower* or *coiste-bodhar*, a large black coach driven by a *dullahan* that is mounted with a coffin and drawn by headless horses. The *dullahan* is a "headless phantom, carrying his decaying head in his hand, dressed in black and riding a black horse or a black coach around the Irish countryside. Wherever he stops, someone dies" (Samalikova, 41). A *dullahan* embodies the fear of a loss of sense, through a frightening image of a person without a head. A *dulachan* is a dark, sullen person, also known as *durrachan* or *dullahan*. The word comes from *dorr* or *durr*, which means anger, or *durrach*, which means malicious or fierce (Croker, 98). Places where a fatal accident or murder has occurred are "seldom without a supernatural tale of terror, in which the headless coach and horses perform their part" (Croker, 110). Many stories of encounters with a *dullahan* feature headless appearances and are usually connected with horses and carriages; "such apparitions are sometimes looked on as the forerunners of death" (Croker, 101). In the *Tale of Hanlon's Mill*, a man encounters a *dullahan* while traveling home one night. The man, called Mick, enters a part of the road that is covered by thick trees and allows little moonlight to penetrate. Suddenly, the moon disappears completely. Mick looks up and is astonished to see,

"a great high black coach drawn by six black horses, with long black tails reaching almost down to the ground, and a coachman dressed all in black

sitting up on the box. But what surprised Mick the most was, that he could see no sign of a head either upon coachman or horses” (Croker, 107).

In the conclusion of the tale, the next morning Mick receives news of the death of a neighbor. At first Mick does not believe this, since he had just seen the neighbor the night before and he had seemed healthy and robust.

The appearance of the ‘Headless Coach’ is a general superstition and regarded as “a sign of death, or an omen of some misfortune” (Croker, 109). The coach made no noise as it passed, an allusion to the silent manner of death as it comes upon you without warning. In Irish the death coach is called “*coach a bower*” and always appears at midnight, or soon after, when the night is darkest. The coach can be heard as it drives around any particular house, with the coachman’s whip cracking loudly, and is said to be a sure omen of death (Croker, 135). These appearances can be interpreted as rural folks imagining noises outside when death is present in the home, an ominous personification of their fear of death. It was a common fear to be afraid of death as it was coming to take them. Stories of ghost appearances may also feature spirits as spectres without heads, which seems to be symbolic “as it was very natural to denote the cessation of life by a figure devoid of the seat of sensation and thought” (Croker, 102). However, despite the removal of their head, these figures are capable of speaking and thinking rationally. Death is already a fearful concept, and this fear increases when the dead begin speaking to you.

CONCLUSION

In the daily life of an Irish peasant, unnatural occurrences are regarded with a fear of the unknown. To dissolve this fear, the peasantry attribute these occurrences with acts of fairies to explain the unexplainable. In matters of death, this tragic event is looked upon with misfortune and sorrow, even fear at the prospect that everyone must someday die. The *dullahan* and *banshee* are fearful spirits who take people away at the most unexpected moment. Silent and swift, these fairies are forms of grim reapers. The wails of the *banshee* fill the peasantry with fear and sorrow; her features resemble the peasantry as they deal with the death of a loved one. She is the forerunner of death and the imitation of the sorrow that takes place upon facing death. The *dullahan* is dark and headless, deprived of the implement for the senses; death makes no sense and takes life away. This spirit has the supernatural ability to speak after beheading, but for mortals the loss of a head is an end to life and all that they know. This fear of the unknown is portrayed in the tales of the *dullahan*, and its appearance is sometimes foreshadowed by a *banshee*. Together these fairies allow the peasantry to cope with the seemingly unnatural event of death and give meaning to the unknown.

Ireland has a long history of foreign invaders and oppression which resulted in a loss of identity after British colonialism. When searching for the Irish identity, some nationalists went to the country people and found Irish features in their culture. In the seventeenth century there was a transition from folklore to fairy tales when the written word became more important than the oral tradition, which caused stories to become more fantastic and delve deeper into fantasy. During the Celtic revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, ancient Irish tales and folklore were popularized

and the traits featured in these tales were embraced by the Irish as their national identity. Each wave of invasion had led to the creation of new stories that documented events and their Irish history. The focus was on fairy tales since they came from the “Irish imagination and spirituality” (Samalikova, 16). Fairy tales had only existed in oral form until folk collectors arrived in the nineteenth century. A fairy tale is a story about magic, which was popular among the Irish due to their captivating belief in fairies. Authors such as W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and other nineteenth and early twentieth century writers integrated Irish folklore into their writings. These figures were influenced by early folklorists such as Thomas Crofton Croker and the Brothers Grimm. Contemporary Irish writers use motifs of legends and myths, fairy tales, and folklore in their work “to create a new vitality in these familiar works, highlighting the tension and give-and-take between fantasy and reality” (Odak, 5). Writers mold the stories of Ireland to fit a modern Irish society. This blend of old and new stories allows writers to address contemporary concerns and transform controversial issues through a supernatural world without political repercussions or social ostracizing. In recent decades, writers have attempted to rework the perspectives of fairy tales to overcome pre-established social norms and values and make the tales relevant to a contemporary society. This creates a “tension between the old and the new stories that works to uproot assumptions about both the past and present” (Odak, 6). Contemporary Irish literature is a rediscovery of lost views that allow the continuance of tradition. Irish tales provide a connection to the natural world and celebrate the ability to transform a mundane task into an ideal. Fairy tales entrance readers and allow them to give in to their imagination; folklore and fairy tales have power due to this enchantment and writers utilize the influence that these tales have over the

mundane. In tales of the dullahan and banshee, the simple act of death becomes a fantastic journey as the deceased are carried away by the personification of death. The eerie noises that are heard at night are no longer branches and wild animals, they are the cries of a banshee or other fairy, come to wreak havoc on the peasantry. Everyday life becomes more profound when the mundane is perceived with aspects of the mythic. These tales depict the Irish love of stories and the value of being able to make up a tale that bewilders the mind and challenges the imagination. Belief in the fairy realm is not viewed as abnormal because “the boundary between the real and the fantastic has always been particularly fluid for the Irish” (Odak, 20).

The blending of reality and fantasy creates a stronger impact when informing folk of their history and maintaining their Irish traditions. Their heroic myths and legends of Celtic ancestors, and tales of fairies that bring good fortune or harm, all originate from a cultural value of recording their beliefs and passing them along to generations. The recurring themes within the Irish mythology include universal ideas “concerning life, death, love, and hate [that] are deepened when they are brought into contact with both history and the present” (Odak, 72). The dullahan reflects the many foreign invaders that have besieged Ireland, and the peasantry’s fear of strangers enhances this history. Tales of the dullahan remain a part of contemporary Irish culture to remind the Irish of what they have endured and serves as a traditional piece of their culture, giving them an identity unique from other nations. The banshee mourns the loss of those who have died in this history of invasion, mourning the loss of pure Gaelic blood. The banshee and dullahan warn of approaching death and impending doom, in a supernatural personification of Ireland’s history.

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