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Cu Chulainn as a Type of an Epic Hero

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Zásady pro vypracování:

Cílem práce je porovnání irského epického hrdiny Cu Chulainna s literárními hrdiny jiných národů. První část práce se zaměří na typologii epického hrdiny na základě legendy o Cu Chulainnovi. Praktická část se bude věnovat srovnání Cu Chulainna s hrdiny bájí a legend jiných národů.

Seznam doporučené literatury:

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala pod vedením vedoucí diplomové práce samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne.....

Poděkování

Děkuji Mgr. Heleně Polehlové, Ph.D. za cenné rady, odborné vedení mé diplomové práce, vstřícnost, ochotu pomoci s řešením problémů, a za nekonečnou trpělivost.

Anotace práce

TOŠOVSKÁ, Kateřina. *Cu Chulainn jako typ epického hrdiny*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové, 2022. 69 stran. Diplomová práce.

Předložená diplomová práce se zabývá porovnáváním irského hrdiny Cu Chulainna s literárními hrdiny různých indoevropských kultur za účelem stanovit, jestli Cu Chulainna lze považovat za typ epického hrdiny. Teoretická část práce obsahuje shrnutí poznatků vědecké literatury o epických hrdinech a životní příběh Cu Chulainna poskládaný chronologicky za využití primární a sekundární literatury. Praktická část práce se věnuje stanovení klíčových charakteristik epického hrdiny ilustrovaných příklady epických hrdinů různých kultur, a jejich následné aplikaci na Cu Chulainna s cílem zjistit, zda všechny ustanovené charakteristiky vykazuje.

Klíčová slova: Cu Chulainn, epický hrdina, indoevropské legendy, Irská mytologie.

Annotation

TOŠOVSKÁ, Kateřina. *Cu Chulainn as a Type of an Epic Hero*. Hradec Králové: Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, 2022. 69 pages. Diploma thesis.

The presented diploma thesis focuses on the comparison of the Irish hero Cu Chulainn with literary heroes from various Indo-European cultures with the aim of establishing, whether Cu Chulainn can be considered a type of epic hero in his own right. The theoretical part of the thesis contains a survey of the findings of scholarly literature about epic heroes, as well as the biography of Cu Chulainn composed in chronological order using both primary and secondary literature. The practical part of this thesis focuses on establishing the key characteristics of an epic hero, illustrated with examples of epic heroes from different cultures, and their subsequent application to Cu Chulainn with the aim of finding, whether he exhibits all of the previously designated characteristics.

Keywords: Cu Chulainn, epic hero, Indo-European legends, Irish mythology.

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Abstrakt v českém jazyce

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá irským epickým hrdinou Cu Chulainnem, konkrétně porovnáváním hrdiny s podobnými postavami pocházejícími z nejrůznějších indoevropských kultur. Cílem práce je dokázat, že Cu Chulainn vykazuje všechny znaky typické pro epického hrdinu, a tím pádem se sám dá označit za typ epického hrdiny. Téma bylo zvoleno z toho důvodu, že postava Cu Chulainna je relativně neznámá, o hrdinovi se ve výuce světové literatury obvykle nezmiňuje. Vybrán byl tedy za účelem na něj upozornit a ukázat, že je stejně významnou postavou, jako mnozí jiní indoevropští hrdinové.

Prvním krokem práce bylo hledání informací o epických hrdinech v odborné literatuře. Mezi literárními vědci, jejichž výzkum byl pro tento účel použit se nachází například Richard P. Martin, Joshua T. Katz, Dean A. Miller, nebo Gregory Nagy. Názory Martina a Katze byly užitečné především ke zmapování významu slova *epos* (*epic*). Z jejich díla vyplývá, že tento pojem je poměrně těžce definovatelný, protože se používá jako označení obrovského množství literárních děl, která se časem napsání liší v řádu staletí, a která vznikla prakticky doslova na druhém konci světa. I tak zejména Katz poukazuje na to, že eposy vykazují velké množství společných znaků, ať co se týče struktury, tak obsahu děl. Otázkou zůstává, proč tomu tak je. V některých případech je možno předpokládat, že kultury byly vzájemně v kontaktu, a tak došlo ke vzájemnému ovlivnění. V případech děl jako je například *Kalevala*, které byla v současné podobě sepsána až přibližně v polovině devatenáctého století, je možno předpokládat vliv znalostí světové literatury na styl psaní autora. Konkrétně u tohoto díla existují mezi literárními vědci spory o jeho autentičnosti, protože není zcela jasné, jak velká část textu obsahuje původní lidové příběhy, a kolik si Elias Lönnrot přidal, nebo upravil. Mnohem méně pravděpodobné však je, že se vzájemně ovlivnila díla jako Homérova *Odyseea*, a perský epos *Shahnameh*. Tyto poznatky přispěly k hypotéze této diplomové práce, že epičtí hrdinové se navzájem podobají.

Podobného názoru jsou rovněž Gregory Nagy a Dean A. Miller. Nagy se specializuje na řeckou literaturu, tudíž na řecké hrdiny, u kterých popisuje společné znaky, které jsou často aplikovatelné rovněž na hrdiny jiných kultur. Dean A. Miller poukazuje na to, že označení “hrdina” může mít mnoho významů, poté dělí hrdiny na *epické* a *tragické*. Poté popisuje “biografii hrdiny” pomocí událostí, které jsou pro život epického hrdiny

typické – hrdinův původ a rodiče, jeho mládí, manželství a sexualita, a konečně hrdinova smrt. Právě toto členění hrdinova života bylo použito jako základ rámce porovnávání jednotlivých epických hrdinů, které bylo provedeno v rámci praktické části této diplomové práce.

Teoretická část této práce je zakončena popisem Ulsterského cyklu, literárního díla, ze kterého je hrdina Cu Chulainn známý, a popisem Cu Chulainnova života. Protože v samotném Ulsterském cyklu se nenachází hrdinova biografie od narození až po jeho hrdinskou smrt, bylo nutné ji poskládat z kombinace primární a sekundární literatury.

Jak zmíněno výše, praktická část této práce začíná nadefinováním rysů typických pro epického hrdinu, za účelem vytvoření rámce, podle kterého jsou hrdinové srovnáváni, a který pomáhá ukázat, že Cu Chulainn mezi ně bezesporu patří. Tento rámec vycházel především z “biografie hrdiny” popsané Millerem, ale bylo třeba jej adaptovat, aby lépe odpovídal Cu Chulainnovi. Jako znaky hrdiny byly určeny: vznešený původ, neobvyklé dětství, neobvyklé schopnosti, proroctví týkající se hrdinova osudu, speciální zbraně a vybavení, neobvyklý zjev, neoblomný morální kodex, mocný nepřítel, a hrdinská smrt. Všechny tyto znaky byly ilustrovány konkrétními epickými hrdiny, na nichž bylo demonstrováno, jak se projevují, a že si jsou nápadně podobné. Porovnávání hrdinové jsou souborem postav z mnoha kultur. Mezi řeckými hrdiny byli vybráni Homérovi Achilles a Odysseus, Oedipus Rex, a Herakles. Jako představitelé severských mytologií byli použiti Olaf ze ságy *Laxdaela* a Väinämöinen z finské *Kalevaly*. Dále práce zohlednila německého Siegfrieda z *Pisně o Nibelunzích*, Rolanda z *Pisně o Rolandovi*, anglického hrdinu Beowulfa, nebo španělského El Cida. Protože podobné znaky vykazují rovněž hrdinové pocházející z Asie, k ilustraci znaků hrdiny byli použiti rovněž hrdinové jako indický Karna, nebo Rostam a Suhrab z perské *Shahnameh*.

Každý znak epického hrdiny byl aplikován na Cu Chulainna, a bylo zkoumáno, jestli se u něj vyskytuje. Bylo shledáno, že Cu Chulainn vykazuje všechny znaky epického hrdiny. Vzhledem ke svému specifickému trojímu narození je synem jak boha, tak krále, na jehož dvoře je pak vychováván. Už v dětství je neobvykle silný a obratný, což demonstruje jeho schopnost zabít hlídacího psa kováře Culainna. Jeho neobvyklé schopnosti se s hrdinovým rostoucím věkem zvyšují, začíná se u něj projevovat schopnost zvaná *riastrad*, při které se celé jeho tělo promění, a pod jejímž vlivem je hrdina ještě schopnějším bojovníkem než obvykle. V Cu Chulainnově mládí se objevuje rovněž proroctví, které praví, že ten, kdo v daný den pozvedne zbraně, bude slavným,

ale zemře mladý. Cu Chulainn si tento osud dobrovolně vybere. Od krále, svého strýce, dostane vůz i s věrným vozatajem Láegem, stejně jako oštěp míněný pro krále samotného, protože obyčejné zbraně hned zlomil. Při svém výcviku s legendární bojovnicí Scáth se navíc naučí zacházet s oštěpem zvaným Gáe Bulg, který od ní dostane. Stejně neobvyklí jsou i jeho koně, kteří cítí, když se blíží hrdinova poslední bitva, a snaží se ho od ní odradit. Cu Chulainnův vzhled je také zvláštní. Podle popisu barda z jedné verze příběhu má vlasy tří různých barev, a v očích drahokamy. Jeho morální kodex se rozhodně dá označit za neoblokný – hrdina bojuje za svého krále a lid i proti obrovské přesile, a jde do boje i přes vědomí, že jej nepřezijí. Navíc se nechá oslabit, protože nechce porušit společenské tabu o odmítání nabídnutého pohostinství. Jeho nepřátelé jsou rozhodně mocní. Jedná se nejen o armádu královny Medb, ale také o Morrigan, bohyni, která se mu snaží uškodit. V neposlední řadě jsou Cu Chulainnovými protivníky také jeho vlastní syn Connla, nebo hrdinův blízký přítel Ferdiad. Cu Chulainn padne hrdinskou smrtí, kdy je smrtelně zraněn, ale přiváže se ke kameni, kde čelem k nepříteli umírá tři dny.

Zvláštní pozornost byla věnována Achilleovi a Karnovi, hrdinům, kteří se Cu Chulainnovi podobají ještě blížeji než ostatní hrdinové popisovaní v této práci. Dále bylo vyzdviženo, že se u Cu Chulainna objevuje i častý motiv syna bojujícího se svým otcem, který je pro epické hrdiny vcelku typický.

Z tohoto srovnání lze jednoznačně vyvodit závěr, že Cu Chulainn patří mezi podobné postavy, a může sám být označen za typ epického hrdiny.

Introduction

Cu Chulainn, arguably the most prominent hero of the Ulster Cycle of Irish tales, is a character who remains unfortunately unknown to those who do not specifically study Celtic mythology. Instead, Czech-speaking readers will likely make the connection to Kukulín, the protagonist of *Král Lávra* by Karel Havlíček Borovský, and rightly so. The tale bears striking resemblance to an Irish story about kind Labraid Loingsech. So striking, in fact, that it would be quite fair to assume that Borovský took inspiration from the Irish original. Besides this, Cu Chulainn's name is very unlikely to be mentioned among the most famous epic heroes and yet, his saga is arguably just as tremendous as that of heroes such as Hercules, Achilles, or Odysseus. However, upon closely examining the Ulster Cycle and the stories concerning Cu Chulainn, it is undeniable the hero sports some very conspicuous similarities to the more famous epic heroes.

Upon closer examination of literary epics, folk tales and legends, it becomes quite clear that the characters therein bear striking resemblance to each other. In fact, the heroes of such stories tend to be rather similar. This is especially interesting because it seems to be a rather universal phenomenon across countless different Indo-European cultures. As this thesis seeks to show, an ancient Irish hero like Cu Chulainn exhibits many traits that can also be observed in, for example, Karna from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. This is in spite of the fact that the two civilisations – that is, the Celts and the Hindu, lived thousands of kilometres apart and it is quite unlikely that they would have come into contact regularly.

Naturally, literary scholars have conducted research into this fascinating phenomenon, varying in scale from grand projects seeking to compare heroes the world over, with much smaller studies, focusing on only a handful of different cultures. One of the most prominent scholars who have focused on the characteristics of an epic hero is Gregory Nagy, who centres his studies on Greek heroes in particular. Meanwhile, the late Dean A. Miller is the author of *The Epic Hero*, a book examining the common traits of epic heroes across cultures. As described previously, some scholars also attempt to explain these similarities. The hypotheses range anywhere between contact among different cultures and certain tales just being emblematic of the human experience. However, a definitive conclusion has not been reached on that front. Still, their findings are useful

as the foundation for this thesis, as they can help us facilitate the comparisons of different epic heroes to each other.

To achieve this comparison and to establish whether Cu Chulainn is, in fact, worthy of the title of an epic hero, three lines of research have been conducted. Firstly, literature on the topic of epic heroes has been surveyed and the opinions of several prominent literary scholars have been presented. This served as a starting point for the empiric part of the thesis. Secondly, it was necessary to examine the tales about the hero coming from the Ulster Cycle and subsequently attempt to compile a coherent narrative of his life and death, as there is no legend describing the hero's life in chronological order - rather, the most prominent tale, *The Táin*, talks about the hero's childhood in fragments told to queen Medb by a druid who knows Cu Chulainn well. This was achieved partly by compiling the details in two different translations of *The Táin* itself, as well as supplementing the narrative with missing details described in secondary literature.

In the empiric part of the thesis, in order to draw comparisons between Cu Chulainn and other epic heroes, several characteristics typical of an epic hero have been designated. This was achieved by examining the methodology of the previously mentioned literary scholars, choosing the most suitable approach, and then adapting it for the specific needs of this thesis. The approach chosen was that of Dean Miller, who focuses on specific key points of an epic hero's life, which allows him to show how different heroes tend to have rather similar "heroic biographies." With the outline of the method of comparison established, each characteristic has been examined, illustrated by specific examples, and compared to the hero Cu Chulainn to show whether his key points match those of other epic hero. Special attention has been paid to Achilles in particular, as he exhibits striking similarities to Cu Chulainn, moreso than the other heroes considered in this thesis.

Finally, the findings of this comparison have been summarised and presented in the conclusion of this thesis, and possibilities for future research have been outlined.

All literary sources have been cited using the citation norm ISO-690 in the bibliography at the end of the thesis, while Harvard citations have been used throughout the text of this thesis itself.

In order to have the ability to assess whether Cu Chulainn can fit the traits of an epic hero, it is necessary to establish how this thesis understands the term. Colloquially, the

term „hero“ is typically used simply to refer to the main characters of stories, including legends and epics. However, upon examining different scholarly works, it may be found that there is great debate concerning what exactly the designations „epic“ and „hero“ mean, and, conversely, what the definition of an “epic hero” is. This part of the thesis will focus on mapping out some of these scholarly opinions.

1 Epic as a Term

The term “epic” is commonly used to refer to works such as Homer’s Iliad or the Odyssey – those are the examples one may find when looking through a literature textbook. However, many literary scholars would argue that the situation is a little more complicated.

For example, Stanford professor Richard P. Martin presents the idea that the entire concept of the epic literary genre can be somewhat reductive and, moreover, proves rather difficult to define. In his own words:

Modern handbooks of literary terms, in defining “epic,” inevitably mention features of content, such as a cosmic scale; a serious purpose; a setting in the distant past; the presence of heroic and supernatural characters; and plots pivoting on wars or quests. (Martin, 2005, p. 10)

He posits that premature canonization of genre only impedes further understanding and that the term “epic” is, in fact, very culture-bound. Indeed, it may at times even take the structural form of what would otherwise be referred to as “poetry”, “prose” or “drama”. He goes on to say that the entire concept may even be quite misleading, as many works of the Middle East, India, Africa, and Central Asia may be excluded from this concept by those raised with a Eurocentric mindset. Martin proposes a solution to this conundrum – he believes that while there are formal differences between epic works, there is a common thread, that being similar functionality. (Martin, 2005, p. 9)

Furthermore, Martin points out that the writers of literature handbooks have a tendency to categorise as epics such wildly disparate compositions as Beowulf and John Milton’s Paradise Lost. He proposes that what leads to this phenomenon are similarities in content, roughly comparable formal features such as length, the poetic form (heroic verse lines), musical accompaniment, rhetorical speeches made by the heroes, or typical, recurring scenes and motives. He points out that these signifiers are often unfortunately treated in isolation, rather than as relics of possible past performances. He expands on this idea by questioning, whether the length of epic poems really is as absolute as some may believe and whether perhaps their presentation changed depending on the situation and the audience they were being presented to. He then comes to the conclusion that epic as a genre is “*hugely ambitious, undertaking to*

articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its ideals of social behavior, social structure, relationship to the nature world and to the supernatural". He proposes that epic is the "*ultimate metonymic art form*", even "*on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself.*" (2005, p. 11). Many literary scholars are in agreement with his findings, such as Joshua T. Katz, professor at Princeton University.

Katz writes that, inevitably, when attempting to define the term "epic", one must begin with its Greek roots, as the word is a borrowing from Greek, originally meaning "word". He explains that "epic" is a standard, classical term for poetry such as the Iliad and Odyssey. He illustrates this by citing The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, which defines the term thusly: (Katz, 2005, p. 21)

"An e[pic] is a long narrative poem . . . that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war or conquest, or an heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture" (Katz, 2005, p. 21, p. 24)

Katz goes on to explain that the two Greek works are, in this sense, most certainly epics, but that many scholars, classicists in particular, have a tendency to add additional characteristics, such as meter, or its dependence on Homeric tradition. The Princeton professor argues that, while these markers of an epic make sense from a classicist point of view, they prove to be rather reductive when one examines the broader context of Proto-Indo-European literature and the Indo-European tradition. While he does not discount Homer as a figure of utmost importance to the genre, he claims that calling him the founder would be too restrictive and argues it would perhaps be better, and more accurate, to instead view the Greek poet as a figure in the middle of a deeper, much wider tradition. (Katz, 2005, p. 21, p. 24)

Katz further expands on this idea of epic being a broader genre than what many scholars would imagine by explaining that, rather similar to Homer, while the Greek dactylic hexameter is seen as a hallmark of the epic, which was latched onto by Romans and later most likely inspired the English iambic pentameter, it may not have been a uniquely Greek feature that was later adapted by other cultures. He presents the idea

that there could have been other verse forms in early Indo-European languages very similar to the dactylic hexameter. He goes on to point out that “*scholars since Meillet (1923) have slowly begun to acknowledge that early Greek lyric (not epic) meters are cognate with meters in other Indo-European branches, certainly in Indic, Slavic, and Celtic, and very likely in others.*” Because of this, Katz draws the conclusion that the Greek dactylic hexameter has very likely originated from a lyric form often seen as having a cognate in Sanskrit. (Katz, 2005, p. 21, p. 25)

Katz stresses one further interesting point – if one looks away from the fine details and instead looks to the bigger picture, stories that bear striking similarities appear again and again all over the world, across many diverse cultures. He claims that “*this tells us a great deal about what it means to be human (that is to say, humans compose stories about men who unknowingly sleep with their mothers and fish that find rings at the bottom of the sea).*” (Katz, 2005, p. 21, p. 26)

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is quite interesting, as it suggests that there are simply ideas that are shared by the human race as a whole, independent on the culture one comes from. The French linguist Antoine Meillet puts it thusly:

The idea that there was a drink capable of conferring immortality is too natural to be characteristic. But when one finds in a more or less complete way among the various Indo-European peoples the legend of a beverage of immortality made in a gigantic vat, and when to this legend is joined the story of an untrue fiancée and the account of a struggle between gods and demoniacal beings, there is therein a set of singular facts which do not in themselves have any connection with each other and whose convergence cannot consequently be fortuitous.(1967, p 13-14)

The findings of these scholars are an important point for this thesis, that being that there are obvious similarities between epic heroes from many different stories and thus, it should be perfectly possible to tell if a figure can be referred to as an epic hero by comparing it to other similar characters.

2 The Epic Hero as Defined by Gregory Nagy

Gregory Nagy points out that the terms “epic” and “hero” both defy generalization and are rather difficult to define. He also posits that the two concepts do not even necessarily go together. Despite this fact, he agrees with the assessment presented by Meillet that the stories of epic heroes, while having many differences, also exhibit a striking number of similarities and share a large amount of core features. He goes on to explore why this is the case. (2006, p. 1)

According to Nagy, there are two current general explanations for this phenomenon. The first is based around the research of linguists such as the aforementioned Joshua T. Katz, who believes the similarities between epic heroes across different cultures may be the vestiges of a lyric system that existed at a time when many Indo-European languages like Sanskrit or Greek were not yet differentiated from each other properly. (2006, p. 1)

Other scholars argue a different theory, one that suggests patterns of cultural exchange among linguistically unrelated traditions, citing the parallels between the stories seen in some Near East traditions and the ancient Greek epic. While Nagy considers both explanations to be plausible, he points out that it may not be wise to treat these points of view like they are mutually exclusive. He argues instead for an integration of comparative approaches in order to achieve the broadest possible formulation. Because of this, he proposes utilizing three methods together, naming them “*typological*”, “*genealogical*” and “*historical*”. (2006, p. 1)

The first method, which Nagy calls “typological”, attempts to find parallelisms between structures in the texts, without any presuppositions. This method is widespread in the field of linguistics to compare similar structures of different languages, even if they are seemingly completely unrelated to each other. Although, as Nagy points out, structuralist analysis is no longer used just in the field of linguistics. Indeed, it has found its place in the work of many literary scholars. Perhaps the most prominent of these works is Albert Lord’s treatise on oral poetry, *The Singer of Tales*. Nagy himself refers to it as a “masterpiece of scientific methodology”. This work focuses on comparing ancient Greek heroes, especially Achilles and Odysseus with modern South Slavic epics. Despite the in-depth comparative studies of Lord, Nagy reminds us that the term “epic hero” remains quite an elusive, difficult to define concept. (2006, p. 1-3)

When talking about the “genealogical” comparisons, Nagy points once again to the cognates between ancient Greek epics and ancient Indic – the language that later went on to evolve into Sanskrit. He points out that even the meters of ancient Indic hymns exhibit a multitude of similarities to the dactylic hexameter of the ancient Greek epic. Notably, there are also many parallels in both plot and characters between the Indic epics, such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana with the Iliad and the Odyssey. (2006, p. 1-3)

There is, however, evidence of genealogical comparanda to be found among other cultures as well. Nagy points out specifically similarities in the context of medieval Europe, such as parallels in a large range of languages, for example Old Irish, Old English, Welsh, Middle High German, or Old Norse. (2006, p. 1, 4)

Turning to the “historical” method of comparison, Nagy mentions important historical background, namely common intercultural contact in the first half of the first millennium BCE, in which era, the Greek-speaking parts of the world were strongly influenced by the civilizations living in the Near East, such as Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean coast or Egypt. These points of contact are described in detail in works such as Walter Burkert’s *The Orientalizing Revolution*, or *The East Face of Helicon* by Martin West, who pays special attention to the legends of Gilgamesh. (2006, p. 1 - 8)

2.1 The Defining Characteristics of an Epic Hero According to Gregory Nagy

The first heroic figure Gregory Nagy examines is none other than Achilles, the hero of the Iliad. In his analysis of the subject, Nagy calls Achilles “*a monolithic and fiercely uncompromising man who actively chooses violent death over life in order to win kleos ‘glory’ of being remembered forever in epic poetry*”. He describes the hero as “a man of unbending principle”, one who never allows his integrity to be compromised and refuses to bend his will even when begged to save his own people. (2006, p. 8, 12)

Further, Nagy presents the concept of *hemitheos* – the “programmed” potential a hero has, usually lent to him by his divine heritage. He goes on to point out that, indeed, most, if not all, heroes have a divine ancestor, but they are not gods – the other half of their heritage is mortal. Conversely, this means that, while having power greater than any other human, the hero is still mortal himself. The hero does achieve immortality, but

not in the literal sense – he is immortalized in epic poems, only eligible for a life of immortality after death, so to speak. (2006, p. 20-21)

Another example illustrative of this pattern, according to Nagy, is the hero Herakles. His ultimate Labor is one of suffering and death on Mount Oeta, during which the hero mounts his funeral pyre and orders it to be lit. When the pyre is lit, Herakles is struck by lightning sent by his father, the god Zeus, to put him out of his misery. The pyre is set ablaze, but nothing remains of the hero's body, not even bones. At that moment, he is symbolically rebirthed by the goddess Hera and joins the ranks of the immortals. (2006, p. 22)

Another commonality among heroes, according to Nagy, is the fact that they were worshipped, even though the worship of heroes was different from that of gods. He suggests that this difference is a result of hero worship being an extension of the tradition of worshipping one's ancestors in many cultures. He illustrates this theory by using the example of Gilgamesh, or the Egyptian mythological fusion of deities and pharaohs. He points out that there is evidence of heroes being worshipped in ancient Greece as well, such as references, inscriptions, or other archaeological remains of cult sites. (2006, p. 23-24)

A major aspect of hero worship was the cult based on the presence of the hero's body at a certain place. The practice of venerating body parts of heroes continued well beyond ancient Greek tradition, eventually transforming into the worship of saints and their remains common to Christianity. While the hero's physical body was considered dead, at the same time, as has been referred to earlier, the hero was seen as immortal, likely in a place that awaits heroes after death. Such places could include Elysium, the White Island, Valhalla, or, in rare cases, Olympus. (Nagy, 2006, p. 26)

From this information, Nagy finally establishes three defining characteristics of a hero, those being the following:

1. *He or she is unseasonal.*
2. *He or she is extreme - positively (for example, "best" in whatever category) or negatively (the negative aspect can be a function of the hero's unseasonality).*
3. *He or she is antagonistic toward the god who seems to be most like the hero; antagonism does not rule out an element of attraction (often a "fatal attraction"), which is played*

out in

a variety of ways. The sacred space assigned the hero in hero cult could be coextensive with the sacred space assigned to the god who was considered the hero's divine antagonist. In other words, god-hero antagonism in myth - including the myths mediated

by epic - corresponds to god-hero symbiosis in ritual. (2006, p. 28)

3 The Epic Hero as Described by Dean Miller

Dean Miller, the late Professor of History at the University of Rochester, and expert on Celtic, as well as Indo-European studies, is largely in agreement with Gregory Nagy on many points, the first of such being that the term „hero“ is rather nebulous. Miller also points out that the word’s meaning has changed with the times and may carry different connotations depending on context. (2000. p. 1)

For example, in common parlance and western journalistic tradition, it is not unusual to see the term „hero“ used to refer to a person who intervenes in some sort of critical situation, often putting themselves at risk in order to save others. This idea of a hero also comes with the expectation of humility and self deprecation, instead of boasting of one’s supposedly heroic character. A more extreme version of this use can be seen in the ideals of military virtue, often awarded medals after the heroic act, at times even posthumously, such as the Medal of Honor, Croix de Guerre, Victoria Cross, or any number of similar military decorations. (2000. p. 1-2)

He notes more common uses of the word „hero“, chief among them being a speaker stating „X was Y’s hero“, denoting a role model or ideal to be striven for. He argues that, in this case, the term refers to the person’s qualities rather than the person themselves, thus showing remnants of the hero worship traditions of old. (2000. p. 2)

As mentioned previously, Miller posits that the cultural idea of what exactly constitutes a hero has morphed and shifted throughout the ages, the term itself first being used in ancient Greek, thus causing our perceptions of a hero to be heavily influenced by ancient Greek ideals. In this matter, Miller points to Homer specifically, as his use of the term “*héros*” was coupled with „*an effort to convince the audience of the extraordinary heroic-epic status of Akhilleus and others, like Patroklos and Diomedes, who may also sometimes carry the appellation on Best of the Achaeans*“, together with *matched or overmatched players on the Trojan side, like Sarpedon or Hektor.*“ (2000. p. 4) He explains that this may mark the beginnings of a later very prominent tradition of hero cults, which he describes as being comprised of two parts. The first line, best represented by Achilles, consists of the heroic ideal of a young man dying for fame and thus achieving eternal fame, paradoxically preserving him as „deathless and ageless“. The second line, Miller claims, is the integration of the hero’s story into the socio-

political entity that is the Greek city-state, attaching to the hero's motivations that of protecting his land or his people. (2000. p. 2-5)

Miller goes on to describe two distinct types of heroes – the *tragic hero* and the *epic hero*. The former, illustrated on the example of Heracles, agonizes over his actions, is indecisive between alternatives, and often experiences guilt for his past deeds. On the contrary, the epic hero is never plagued by doubt or uncertainty. He claims that this mostly applies to Greek heroes, but there is notable resemblance to be found elsewhere, in particular in Old Irish heroic literature with heroes such as Cú Chulainn or Conaire Mor. While these heroes are caught between unbreakable demands of their code of honour and societal taboos, they do not exhibit the usual signs of a Greek tragic hero, in that their character flaws are rarely explored, the heroes maintaining a very limited emotional range and enjoying freedom from guilt. (2000. p. 5-9)

4 Ancient Celtic Literature and the Ulster Cycle

Unfortunately, very little is known of ancient Celtic culture, as ancient Celts, while being skilled artists, left no written documents. Besides a number of law tracts, some of the earliest texts left over from this time are heroic sagas, thought by different literary scholars to have been written in their extant form roughly in the sixth or seventh century, with linguistic evidence suggesting a long oral tradition before that. The legends and epic tales themselves claim to describe events as old as the time of Christ, however, there is no real way to verify the veracity of this. (Dillon, 1948, p. xi, xii)

Old Irish literature is largely preserved in the form of vellum manuscripts, the earliest surviving having been written towards the end of the eleventh century. Approximately a hundred vellums have been recovered, the majority of which can be found in the Royal Irish Academy. These manuscripts mostly consist of miscellaneous collections of different genres and literary forms, with Old, Middle and Modern Irish written side by side. Interestingly, there is no drama and no rhetoric among them, instead, they mostly contain either historical records, or poetry and legends. As noted by Myles Dillon, the classification of these stories into cycles is a modern invention. Before this became common practice, the tradition was to sort them by type, such as Battles, Tragedies, Voyages, etc. (Dillon, 1948, p. xvi, 1) There are four major cycles of ancient Irish literature, as described by literary scholars. While the Ulster Cycle is far and away the most well-known, the three other cycles also deserve being mentioned. Those are The Mythological Cycle, The Fenian Cycle, and The Historical Cycle. (Rees and Rees. 1961, p. 26)

The Mythological Cycle centres around the Tuatha Dé Danann, “The Peoples of the Goddess Danann”. They are ancient beings purported to have occupied Ireland before the coming of the present inhabitants and their ancestors. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 26). Unfortunately, the cycle is not very well preserved. Notably, a member of the Tuatha Dé Danann is Lug mac Ethnenn, also known as Lug Lámfada (“Long Arm”), the divine father of the hero Cu Chulainn. (Dillon, 1948, p. 51)

The Historical Cycle is a group of mainly miscellaneous stories detailing the lives of various Irish kings and nobility. According to Rees and Rees, these tales contain distinctly common Indo-European heritage, which was likely a part of Celtic culture before the Celts came to live on the islands. (1961, p. 26)

The Fenian Cycle is a collection of accounts detailing the adventures of roving bands of warriors (*fiana*). Three leaders of such *fiana* are mentioned – Finn mac Cumail, Fothad Canainne, and Ailill Flann Bec. However, only Finn’s company attains fame. (Dillon, 1948, p. 32). This cycle is also sometimes referred to as “The Ossianic Cycle” because most of the poems contained within it are attributed to Finn’s son Oisín. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 26)

By far the most famous cycle of Irish tales is the Ulster Cycle, which gets its name from the fact that it entails the stories of the heroes of the Ulaid, a people from northeastern Ireland. They recall a time under the rule of King Conchobar, with his seat at Emain Macha, near the city Armagh. The most prominent character of these tales is Cú Chulainn, an “Irish Achilles”, supposedly a demi-god and the son of Lug of the Long Arm. (Dillon, 1948, p. 51)

The form of the stories can be best described as prose interspersed with verse, with the main narrative being written in prose, while the more dramatic parts of the tale are highlighted in verse. It happens quite often that the poems in the story are spoken directly by one of the characters. Dillon notes that this form of literature first appeared in ancient India, and that the Irish sagas seem to preserve this primitive epic tradition, which was later honed by Icelandic sagas. Most of the stories are rather short, usually describing a single event, however, there is one long text which can be classified as a prose epic – the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. (Dillon, 1948, p. 2)

4.1 The Táin Bó Cúailnge

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, commonly anglicized as The Cattle Raid of Cooley, often referred to simply as The Táin, an epic saga detailing the exploits of the hero Cú Chulainn, is the longest part of the Ulster cycle – a collection of heroic tales and undoubtedly a major part of medieval Irish literature. It finds itself in a similar situation to that of the German Nibelungenlied, this being that there is no one definitive original written version of it.

Instead, the complete story of Cú Chulainn was pieced together by literary scholars from multiple manuscripts. As a result, it is quite unclear how old exactly the original tale is and what it contained, and which parts are later revisions and additions. (Dooley, 2010, p. 17)

The oldest surviving textual version of the Táin is contained within an incomplete copy of the Clonmacnoise manuscript written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and later completed by scholars thanks to newer copies from the fifteenth century. This text is commonly designated Recension I. As it was written by scribes, it bears signs of multiple instances of reworking, as well as later additions. Roughly towards the end of the twelfth century, this text was revised by an unknown author into a much more coherent narrative, complete with a new beginning, as well as the removal of some repetitive passages. This version, designated by literary scholars Recension II, was later copied into the Book of Leinster, written at the monastery of Oughavall in the south Irish midlands. (ADooley, 2010, p. 18)

The question of the Táin's textual prehistory remains a somewhat contentious point among literary scholars. There are a number of "foretales" telling the story of the Táin being lost and then found and written down again following a phase of oral transmission. This leads some scholars to believe that the text could be as old as the seventh century. Based on the language used, others have proposed its point of origin to be around the ninth century, however, even this dating is not without problems. There are passages in the text that contain much earlier poetic language. It is not certain if these are, in fact, older than the rest of the Táin, or whether they deliberately evoke such language in order to "antique" the text, thus giving it a literary veneer that the audience at the time would understand as such. One thing is certain – there are two textual "witnesses" to the Táin being older than the oldest discovered manuscript. One is the list of names of the different Ulster heroes found in the last quarter of the Táin itself, which also contains a number of place-names in the local area of the Cooley peninsula, where Cú Chulainn comes from. Ann Dooley posits that this may hint at Cú Chulainn in fact originally being a local hero subsequently absorbed into the larger saga. The other proof of the tale's age is the poem *Conailla Medb michuru* from the set *Laud Genealogies*, which mentions the traditions of cattle-stealing from Ulster, Fergus being in exile, and queen Medb's deceitful behaviour. (Dooley, 2010, p. 18 -19)

Dillon notes that it is not implausible that the stories truly depict Celtic society roughly a century before Christ, as they claim to. He supports this theory by pointing out that the state of civilization depicted therein exhibits all the telltale markings of one that would have been in Ireland at the time – it is a pagan society, the life of which is comparable to

the Gauls. The stories are rather primitive in form as well as themes. Magic is present in these tales and gods regularly interfere in the lives of mortals, these traits being a commonality shared by many ancient stories. (1948, p. 2)

Dooley also raises a very interesting point for the purposes of our theory – that Cú Chulainn exhibits many traits found in different epic heroes - which is that the saga shows many similarities to other classical epic texts, namely those of Latin and Greek tradition. In her opinion, it is likely that this was done deliberately by the individual responsible for the written versions of the text. Moreover, the text exhibits signs of Irish Christian literary tradition as well. This suggests very strong cultural borrowing of classical texts among different Indoeuropean nations, and may partially explain the easily observable phenomenon of epic heroes and their tales being quite similar despite having emerged from different cultures over centuries. (Dooley, 2010, p. 20)

5 The Hero Cu Chulainn

In this section, multiple stories from the Ulster Cycle have been compiled together in an attempt to put together the events of the hero's life in chronological order from his birth to the moment of his death. This life story of Cu Chulainn will then be used to designate traits typical of a hero, as well as to compare him to other epic heroes from different cultures and civilizations.

5.1 Cu Chulainn's Birth

Cu Chulainn's birth is easily the part of his life where various accounts exhibit the biggest discrepancies. There are two prominent versions, as described in *Celtic Heritage* by Rees and Rees. They share many motifs, such as that of birds, but they differ rather significantly when it comes to the finer details of the story.

The first account begins with a flock of birds repeatedly grazing the plains of Emain, causing destruction of the land. The angered Ulstermen set out in chariots to hunt the birds, with Dechtine, Conchobar's daughter, serving as his charioteer. They pursue the birds, linked by silver chain, until nightfall. They seek shelter and find it in the form of a house occupied by a married couple – a man and his pregnant wife. They are entertained until they are drunk. In the night, the wife goes into labour and Dechtine helps with the birth. A boy is born. At the same time, a mare outside the house gives birth to two foals. By the morning, both the house and the birds have disappeared and all that remains are the infant and the two foals, which the Ulstermen take back with them to Emain. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 217)

Dechtine fosters the boy, but he falls ill and dies. Exhausted from her grief, she tries to drink from a copper vessel, but a small, invisible creature springs into her mouth. At night, Dechtine dreams of a man who claims to be the god Lugh, son of Ethniu. He says the little child was his son and declares he will now enter Dechtine's womb and she will bear a boy, whom she should name Setanta. However, with no apparent father, the rumours soon spread that Dechtine has conceived the child with Conchobar himself. The king gives his daughter in marriage to Sualdaim mac Roich but she, ashamed to go into a marriage while pregnant, induces a miscarriage. Later she has a child with her husband, calling the little boy Setanata.

This threefold conception of Cu Chulainn does not figure in the other version of the story where Dechtire (as she is called in this version) is not Conchobar's daughter but his sister. She along with fifty other maidens disappear from Emain three years before the events of the story previously told begin. It is them that plague the Ulstermen in the form of birds, grazing the nearby plains. In this account, the pregnant woman welcoming them along with Lugh is in fact Dechtire. When the Ulstermen awake in the morning, the house has disappeared and all that is left is a baby boy in king Conchobar's lap. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 218-219)

5.2 Cu Chulainn's Childhood

The youthful exploits of Cu Chulainn are recounted in the Táin by Fergus and his companions. They account the hero's boyhood deeds to an anxious Queen Medb before she sets out to oppose him in the Cattle Raid of Cooley. (Reese and Reese, 247) Wishing to know about her opponent, she asks about the lad and how he came to be known as "Ulster's Hound". (The Hound of Ulster, Eleanor Hull)

5.2.1 Cu Chulainn Joins King Conchobar's Boy-corps

Setanta is raised in Mag Murthemne. He is often told stories about the city of Emain Macha, Ulster's capital, and the boys who live and play there, as well as tales about his uncle, king Conchobar mac Nessa. Young Setanta is especially interested in Conchobar's boy-corps. Seeing them as future warriors, Conchobar gave them weapons to train for war. One day, when he is four years old, the young boy asks his mother to let him go to Emain Macha and play with the boys who live there. She objects, saying he is much too young and tells him it would be best to wait until a grown warrior can take him there. The young boy does not listen to his mother's warnings and sets out on his own. He takes with him his shield, his toy-spear, his playing club and his ball. (Hull, 2016, p. 25)

He arrives in Emain Macha and rushes to meet the boys he sees playing there, however he is not greeted in a friendly matter. There is a local custom demanding Setanta asks the boys to take him under their protection first – a custom the boy has no notion of. He enters the playing field, causing the other boys to attack him. He fights off the boys and manages to defeat fifty of them before they reach the city gates. Nine boys run to king Conchobar, who is playing chess, begging him for help. The king stands up from his game and goes to Setanta, asking him why he has beaten the boys so viciously and

Setanta explains everything. Upon learning about the custom of asking others to take him under their protection, he asks the king to instead be put in charge of protecting the other boys and the king agrees. (Dunn, 1914, p. 51)

5.2.2 How Cu Chulainn Got His Name

Sometime later, Conchobar is invited to a feast held by a smith named Culain. As he is on his way to Culain's home, he sees the boys playing outside. Young Setanta is with them and he is managing to singlehandedly beat all the other children at their games. Astounded and impressed by this, the king decides to invite young Setanta to attend Culain's feast with him. The boy accepts, but he asks the king to allow him to finish playing with the others, promising to join the feast later by following their tracks. (Hull, 2016, p. 34)

When the king and his men arrive at the smith's house, Culain asks the king whether all the guests have already arrived. The king, having completely forgotten about having invited the little boy, tells the smith that all his men are already present. Upon inquiring why the smith wants to know, the king is told that Culain possesses a very dangerous guard dog, a vicious beast brought all the way from Spain. The animal is so fearsome that it has to be fettered by three chains. When told that no further guests of the king are to arrive, the smith unchains his dog. *“And he comes to the mound whereon he was wont to keep guard of the stead, and there he was, his head couched on his paws, and wild, untameable, furious, savage, ferocious, ready for fight was the dog that was there.*“ (Dunn, 1914 p. 57)

After the boys finish playing, Setanta follows the trail the king's company's wagons left all the way to Culain's home, playing with his ball and club as he goes along. Upon arrival, he is ambushed by the guard dog. The men inside hear the beast howling and are frozen in fear. This is the moment the king remembers that he has forgotten about his nephew, declaring that the boy must surely be dead. The guests go outside in order to look for the child's body, but that is not what they find. (Dunn, 1914, p. 58)

Setanta came to the smith's house unarmed, with only his ball and his play-club. When the dog sets upon him, he uses his toy ball to defend himself:

he hurled an unerring cast of the ball, so that it passed through the gullet of the watch-dog's neck and carried the guts within him out through his back door, and he laid hold of the hound by the two legs and dashed him against a pillar-stone that was near him,

so that every limb of him sprang apart, so that he broke into bits all over the ground (Dunn, 1914, p. 58)

The smith is saddened by his faithful hound's demise, saying: „*that was a good member of my family thou didst take from me, a safeguard of raiment, of flocks and herds.*” (Hull, 2016, p. 38). Setanta understands Culain's vexation and makes a bold promise. As recompense for having killed the smith's dog, he vows to find a new pup and train it himself, until it can replace the old one. Until that time comes, he promises to serve as the smith's hound instead, defending both Culain and his cattle. He is praised for this honourable vow. Fergus, the king's magician, tells the boy that from now on, his name will no longer be Setanta. Instead, the boy shall be called Cu Chulainn – the Hound of Culain. The boy objects to this at first but he is appeased when the magician promises him that „*one day will the name of Cu Chulainn ring in all men's mouths; among the brave ones of the whole wide world Cu Chulainn's name shall find a place. Renowned and famous shall he be, beloved and feared by all.*” (Hull, 2016, p. 39) Thus, from that day onward, the hero is referred to as Cu Chulainn.

5.2.3 The Taking of Arms by Cu Chulainn

The last important event in the hero's childhood involves a prophecy. It is the time Cu Chulainn took arms. It takes place a year after the incident with Culain's hound. Cathba, a druid, sits with eight of his pupils, teaching them, telling them that certain days are lucky for special acts and certain days are unlucky. (Hull, 2016, p. 38) When the boys ask him whether that particular day is lucky or unlucky, he answers with:

“any youth who should assume arms, as became a champion of war, should attain eternal fame; beside him, no warrior's name in Ireland should ever more be named, or spoken in the same breath with it, for his glory would transcend them all. For such a youth, however, no happy thing were this, for he should die at an early age, no long-lived warrior he; his life shall be but fleeting, quickly o'er.” (Hull, 2016, p. 38)

Cu Chulainn overhears this conversation and immediately runs into the king's house, asking Conchobar for the arms of a warrior. Conchobar, unaware of why the boy wants weapons, grants his wish. However, the young hero proves much too strong for regular weapons and, when testing them, breaks all of them with ease. Seeing this, the king decides to give the boy his own weapons and shield. Cu Chulainn does not break them. (Hull, 2016, p. 38)

He shook and he brandished, he bent and he poised them so that tip touched butt, and he brake not the arms and they bore up against him, and he saluted the king whose arms they were. "Truly, these arms are good," said the little boy; "they are suited to me. Hail to the king whose arms and equipment these are. Hail to the land whereout he is come!" (Dunn, 1914, p. 61)

Cathba sees Cu Chulainn testing the king's arms and asks why the boy took up arms on that day, prompting the boy to explain that he has overheard the prophecy. The magician warns him, that this act means his life will be glorious but short lived. Cu Chulainn seems not to be bothered by this at all, proclaiming: *„Little care I for that, nor though my life endured but for one day and night, so only that the story of myself and of my deeds shall last.“* (Hull, 2016, p. 42) The king's nephew also asks his uncle to gift him his chariot along with his charioteer, which Conchobar does. The charioteer, Láeg, serves Cu Chulainn for many years, until his death.

5.3 Training With Scáthach and Cu Chulainn's Marriage

As Cu Chulainn grows up, he desires to get better and better as a warrior. Training with other Ulstermen is no longer enough for the young hero, and so he sets his mind on training with the warrior Scáth, who lives in "Shadow-land." In some versions of the story, he is sent to train with Scáth (also spelled Scáthach) by Forgall Monach ("the Wily"), the father of Emer, whom Cu Chulainn desires to marry. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 259)

After a long, arduous journey, he comes upon the Bridge of Leaps, on the other side of which Scáth resides and where she trains young warriors. Her other pupils tell him he cannot cross the bridge, as this feat is something Scáth only teaches to her students after they have achieved valour. Cu Chulainn attempts to cross the bridge and eventually succeeds, impressing Scáth, who notes that this must be someone who has achieved valour somewhere else, and welcomes him to the fort. (Hull, 2016, p.- 57-64)

Cu Chulainn stayed with Scáth for a year, learning all she could teach him. She even bestows upon him the knowledge of how to use the Gae Bulg, also known as the "Body Spear" – a technique she refused to teach anyone else, as Cu Chulainn alone is worthy of it. (Hull, 2016, p. 65) He made a lifelong friend here, a fellow pupil of Scáth named Ferdia, who becomes very important later in the story, when Queen Medb turns him against Cu Chulainn. Lastly, the hero begets a son during his time in the Shadow-land.

The mother of this child, a boy named Conla, is Aiffe, a warrior-woman equal in power to Scáth (in some versions, the two are sisters). She comes to attack Scáth and her men, but Cu Chulainn impresses her so much that he is able to negotiate a peace in return for aiding Aiffe in her wars for a while. They are briefly married, but eventually the young man grows weary of his new wife and leaves. He instructs her that if she were to bear a son, she is to send him to Ireland to seek his father. Furthermore, Aiffe should name the boy Conla and instruct him not to tell his name to anyone. He also gives her a golden armband to give to their son, so that he may be recognised by his father upon his arrival in Ireland. (Hull, page 242)

5.3.1 The Wooing of Emer

As he grew into adulthood, Cu Chulainn was admired by many women, which caused the Ulstermen to attempt to find him a wife. He would, however, refuse every woman offered to him in marriage, finding them not worthy. Every potential bride had a flaw he simply would not look past. That is, until he hears of Emery, daughter of Forgall the Wily, a young maid possessing the six gifts of womanhood: *“the gift of loveliness, the gift of song, the gift of sweet and pleasant speech, the gift of handiwork, the gifts of wisdom and of modesty.”* (Hull, 2016, 69). Because of these qualities, Cu Chulainn chooses Emer as his future wife.

Forgall is against the idea of letting Emer marry Cu Chulainn and sends the hero to first prove himself by training with Scáth in the Shadow-land. When the hero returns, his bride’s father still tries to prevent Cu Chulainn from reaching his bride. He does not succeed in this, however. Cu Chulainn storms Forgall’s castle, fights off his men, and abducts both Emer and her foster-sister. Forgall, attempting to give chase, falls of the ramparts of the castle to his death. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 253-267)

5.3.2 Emer’s Only Jealousy

There are several instances of Cu Chulainn having “trysts” with women other than his wife. Emer does not seem to mind this, save for one occasion – the beautiful fairy named Fand.

Some time later, Cu Chulainn is wounded and weakened after a battle. A mysterious stranger invites him to the Fairy-land. There, he meets the beautiful fairy Fand and the two begin a relationship. Before he returns to the lands of men, Fand makes him promise to meet her again after a year (Hull, 2016, 188). He keeps his promise and

Emer catches the two together. She becomes jealous and bemoans Cu Chulainn's apparent loss of interest in her. Fand, seeing this, decides it would be best to leave the married pair alone and leaves back to the Fairy Land.

At that moment, Manannan, Fand's betrothed and a powerful shape-shifter appears. He takes Fand with him back home and, seeing both Cu Chulainn and Fand distraught by the situation, shakes his cloak of forgetfulness between them, causing them to forget the whole affair. (Hull, 2016, 191-193)

5.4 The Death of Connla

The chronology becomes somewhat unclear later in Cu Chulainn's life. Seven years after his fight with Aiffe, the woman, as she has promised the hero, sends their son Connla to Ireland to find his father. She tells him all the things Cu Chulainn instructed her to – never to tell his name to anyone, never to back down from a challenge and never to abandon a quest. Aiffe also gives her son the arm ring left for him by his father and sends him off.

When he comes to Ireland, he encounters a group of Ulstermen who are astonished by how strong the boy is at his very young age. They are also afraid that he may be dangerous.

“There is woe to the land to which that little boy comes. For, if a child like that can do such feats, of what sort must be the men of the land from which he comes? They would grind us all to powder if they came to fight with us.” (Hull, 2016, p. 245)

They try to peacefully negotiate with Connla at first but he vehemently refuses to tell them his name, saying he will only be persuaded if they manage to best him in single combat. No soldier is strong enough to face him. One Ulster warrior named Conall Cernach, another prominent hero from the Ulster Cycle, looks at the boy as he plays and remarks: *“One only other than this boy can do a trick like that, even Cuchulain, Ulster's Hound; and indeed, I know not whether he can do it quite so well.”* (Hull, 2016, p. 245) It is then decided that it would be best to send for Cu Chulainn, as he is likely the only fighter strong enough to be able to face and defeat Connla. Cu Chulainn engages in single combat with the boy and are almost evenly matched, forcing Cu Chulainn to use the *Gae Bulg*, dealing Connla a fatal blow. As the boy is struck with the spear, he cries out *“Now this was what Scáth never taught me!”* (Hull, 2016, p. 279),

causing the hero to realise that he has just killed his only child. He begins to call upon Aífe to come comfort and support the dying boy, but Connla asks him not to:

“Call not on Aiffe, o my father, for through her wiles it was that I came hither to do combat with thee; evil and cruel is that woman, and her ways are evil; for it was to avenge herself on thee because though hadst left her that she sent me hither, that I might bring thee to death or die myself in the attempt. ... And now, O Father, it is well for me that I have fallen by thy hand. No shame it is to fall by the hand of the Guardian of Ulster; but to have fallen by a lesser hand, that, O Father, would have been unworthy of thee and me.” (Hull, 2016, p. 250)

With that, Connla dies in his father’s arms. Cu Chulainn lays his son’s body on the ground and cries:

*“The end is come indeed for me.
I am a man without son, without wife,
I am the Father who slew his own child,
I am a broke, rudderless bark,
Tossed from wave to wave in the tempest wild;
An apple blown loose from the garden wall,
I am over-ripe and about to fall.”* (Hull, 2016, p. 251)

The Ulstermen do their best to comfort the hero and make a noble grave for Connla, with a large pillar stone, upon which they write his name and deeds. King Conchobar mac Nessa orders that there shall be no feasts or celebrations in Ulster for three days, just as it would be if a king had died. (Hull, 2016, p. 252)

5.5 The Cattle Raid of Cooley and Cu Chulainn’s Death

As mentioned previously, the tale of the cattle raid of Cooley describes a war between queen Medb’s forces and king Conchobar mac Nessa, all because of a prized bull Donn Cúialnge. Medb and her army invade Ulster in order to seize the animal by force after the queen’s proposal to rent the bull for a year is declined.

Cu Chulainn battles Medb’s army and has little trouble keeping the fighters at bay. This is when the queen realises her regular fighters are no use against the hero and instead says Ferdiad to challenge his friend in single combat. Cu Chulainn does not wish to

harm his battle brother, but he is bound by honour to defend his city and serve his king, thus he has no choice but to fight Ferdiad. The battle lasts three days, as the two young men are nearly evenly matched in both strength and skill. In the end, Cu Chulainn is forced to resort to using the *Gáe Bulg*, killing Ferdiad. (p. 218 - 261)

Medb, becoming desperate, conspires with the sons of those Cu Chulainn has killed. Luga, one of Medb's co-conspirators, has three spears made, each of them said to kill a king. With the first spear, he kills Cu Chulainn's charioteer Láeg, the king of all charioteers. With the second he kills one of the horses pulling Cu Chulainn's chariot, the king of all horses. The third spear strikes the hero himself, inflicting a fatal wound. (Hull, 2016, p. 264 - 266)

Even then, the hero refuses to die so easily. He first goes to a nearby river to drink and wash himself, then he ties himself to a standing stone, so that he may face his enemies on his feet, fighting until his death. (Hull, 2016, p. 268)

When the hero dies, his enemies at first refuse to believe he is dead until a raven lands on his shoulder. Luga then approaches Cu Chulainn in order to cut off his head and as he does, the hero's sword falls from his hand, cutting off Luga's hand, enacting one last righteous act of revenge. (Hull, p. 269)

6 Defining the Characteristics of an Epic Hero

While it is undeniable that different epic heroes exhibit striking similarities, to compare all of them would be a gargantuan undertaking. Thus, it is necessary to carefully select only a smaller number. As Gregory Nagy describes, there is a number of approaches available when attempting to draw comparisons between different epics. However, while his characterisation of an epic hero is interesting and worth examining, it is not the best fit for the purposes of this thesis, as it is rather vague and thus difficult to apply to a wide spectrum of epic heroes, likely caused by the fact that he primarily focuses on Greek mythology, and specifically tailors his methods for the unique needs of his own works. Instead, an approach akin to that of Dean Miller was selected. Miller, in *The Epic Hero*, after discussing the definition of an epic hero, continues to describe the typical outline of such a character's life through the lenses of parentage, the hero's youth, sex and marriage, love and death. Similarly, in this thesis, particular elements of the heroes' stories have been chosen and used as a basis for the comparisons, in order to show that the "heroic biography" has a tendency to follow the same pattern with surprisingly little deviation when it comes to the major events of a hero's life. The key characteristics of an epic hero have been adapted to better suit the purpose of the intended comparison, such as examining more closely heroic feats and extraordinary powers, rather than the hero's personal life.

This thesis will mainly focus on the following key aspect of an epic hero's story: a noble birth, such as a noble family or some sort of supernatural ancestors, an extraordinary childhood where the hero already shows that he is no regular man, a prophecy that often predicts the hero's deeds or death, an extraordinary appearance, special – often magical – weapons or other equipment, a strong moral compass, a powerful enemy to fight and thus showcase the hero's superiority, and a heroic death. They have been selected because they are the most prominent in primary literature about Cu Chulainn, specifically *The Táin*, and should serve to facilitate the most accurate possible comparison.

The heroes compared to Cu Chulainn in this thesis are numerous, and their backgrounds vary. They have been deliberately selected in this way, to show that the fundamental

characteristics of an epic hero are shared across different cultures. These heroes come from various European lands, as well as the Middle East.

Among Greek heroes, comparisons have been drawn to Achilles of the *Illiad* and Odysseus of the *Odyssey*. Both of these literary works are attributed to the Greek poet Homer, who lived roughly in the 8th century BC. Further among Greek epic heroes, Heracles and Oedipus were selected. The origins of Heracles are rather nebulous and nigh impossible to pin down. Perhaps the most well-known literary work concerning him are *The Labours of Heracles*, commonly attributed to Peisander, who supposedly lived in the early 7th century BC. The last Greek hero used in this diploma thesis is several centuries newer, that being Oedipus Rex, from the tragedy of the same name, written by Sophocles in the early 5th century BC. Despite spanning several centuries, these heroes prove similar in many aspects.

It would be remiss not to include Nordic heroes, therefore two were compared to Cu Chulainn. These are the Icelandic hero Olaf from the *Laxdaela Saga*, dated to the 13th century, and Väinämöinen of the Finnish *Kalevala*. *Kalevala* itself is a compilation of old Finnish folklore and mythology compiled by Elias Lönnrot, in the 19th century. There is some contention as to how authentic Lönnrot's work is, and how much he added himself. However, it bears mentioning that the hero Väinämöinen bears striking similarities to much older heroes, despite the text being relatively new in comparison.

Further in this selection of heroes is Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied*, a German epic poem pieced together from multiple manuscripts supposedly written around 1200, although, as with many epic heroes, the original story is likely much older. The German 12th century *Rolandslied* by the priest Konrad was used, providing information about Roland, the nephew of Charlemagne. It should be pointed out that this text is not the original version of the story, as it is an adaptation of the French *chanson de geste* named *Chanson de Roland*. The reason for this is purely practical, as the author of this thesis is able to read the German original, but does not speak French and would have had to resort to a translation.

Geographically closest to Cu Chulainn, the hero Beowulf was used as a point of comparison. He comes from an Old English poem of the same name. The author of the text is unknown, as is the date of composition, the latter being hotly debated by literary

scholars. The only thing that is clear is the age of the surviving manuscript, which was dated as being from around the year 1000 (Stanley, 1961)

Rounding up the European heroes is El Cid from Spain, supposedly based on a real knight who lived in the second half of the 11th century.

As the goal of this thesis is comparing Indo-European heroes, instead of just those of European origin, several such characters from Eastern mythologies were chosen. The first among these heroes is Karna from the Indian Mahabharata, who, despite originating from so far away, bears many similarities to Cu Chulainn. Further, Shahnameh, a Persian epic poem was drawn upon, facilitating comparisons with Rostam and his son, Suhrab.

6.1 A Noble Birth

An epic hero is typically not a mere human, or at the very least not a commoner. A truly overwhelming majority of epic heroes are the offspring of kings, their relatives or otherwise high-ranking nobles, or even descendants of gods or other supernatural beings of great power. This heritage often manifests itself in the heroes possessing various advantages over their opposition, be it superior training and education, or a variety of supernatural powers stemming from their magical parent. Especially heroes born as children of deities tend to possess powers like superhuman strength and fighting ability, or extraordinary shrewdness of mind. Many of them are also watched over and often aided by their parents on their heroic journey.

This holds true for Greek, French, Germanic, Scandinavian, as well as Eastern heroes, and the same is true of Cu Chulainn. The following are just a few examples to illustrate this claim:

Among heroes of noble lineage, but without supernatural parents, Siegfried, Roland or Beowulf are worth mentioning. The *Nibelungenlied's* Second Adventure talks about Siegfried being a prince, son of king Sigmund and queen Siegelind, brought up in the castle Xanten. (Needler, 1904). Roland, meanwhile, is the nephew of Charlemagne (Konrad der Pfaffe, Wesle, 1963). The hero Beowulf fares similarly, as he is also the nephew of a king, namely Higelac, king of the Geats. (Heaney, 2000). Rostam, the Persian hero of the *Shahnameh*, is similarly the son of the conqueror Zál and Rudabeh, a beautiful daughter of the chief of Kabul. (Ferdowsi, Davis, 2014) While neither of these characters can accurately be described as a king or queen in the same sense as the parents of the aforementioned European heroes, they are undeniably on a similar level.

Yet more heroes are the offspring of one or two supernatural beings. Such is the case with both Heracles, one of the many illegitimate children Zeus sired with a human, and Achilles, son of king Peleus and a Nereid named Thetis. Similarly, Väinämöinen from the Finnish *Kalevala* is born from the union of the Sea itself and Ilmatar, daughter of the Sky, as described in the opening sections of the epic.

As discussed previously, Cu Chulainn possesses both supernatural as well as noble lineages, though Lug and Deichtire respectively – Lug being a deity, and Deichtire being a sister of King Conchobar Mac Nessa. He is raised by the king's sister at first and then, after he journeys to the king's court in order to play with the boy-corps there,

he grows up at the king's court among the sons of nobles living in Emain Macha, the capital of Ulster. There, he also receives an education worthy of the king's nephew – he boasts about this when attempting to woo Emer, his future wife:

“Among chariot-chiefs and champions, among jesters and druids, among poets and learned men, among the nobles and landlords of Ulster have I been reared, so that I have all their manners and gifts.” (Hull, 2016, p. 75)

6.2 An Extraordinary Childhood

The hero's extraordinary nature often becomes apparent very early, typically as soon as in the hero's childhood, sometimes already when the hero is just a baby or very small. At times it may manifest itself in the hero being wise beyond his years, at other times in his unusual physical prowess or bravery.

One of such heroes is the Greek Heracles being able to strangle snakes sent by Hera when he is but an infant in the crib with his twin brother. He also shows no sign of fear, instead playing with the corpses as if they were mere toys. Both Völsung and Olaf Tryggvason, the protagonists of the *Völsungasaga* and the *Laxdaela* respectively, are precocious. Völsung is born “very well grown” (Miller, 2000, p. 85) and Olaf matures unnaturally quickly (Muriel, 2016, p. 27).

As described by Rees and Rees in *Celtic heritage*, Celtic heroes usually boast a great number of “youthful exploits”. As mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, at mere four years old, Cu Chulainn was able to defeat Culainn's fearsome hound by hitting a ball with his club so forcefully it killed the beast. When arriving at Emain Macha, he got into a fight with all the boys from the boy-corps and defeated them with relative ease, making them run to Conchobar for help. Later, he broke arms meant for an adult soldier with ease, and went on to be the only warrior deemed worthy of being taught the art of the Gae Bulg. As Dean Miller notes, the childhood of Finn mac Cumail is just as spectacular (p. 86) as Cu Chulainn's. In fact, his boyhood deeds feature a tale of beating a large number of boys in both games and a fight – one markedly to Cu Chulainn's quarrel with the boys of Emain Macha. (Rees and Rees, 1961, p. 250)

In light of this information, it must be concluded that extraordinary deeds during their childhood is another hallmark trait of an epic hero.

6.3 Exceptional Powers

As a general rule, epic heroes tend to be endowed with impressive physical prowess. These powers are often the key to the heroes' exploits and conquests, aiding them in battle as well as a wide variety of other situations, further setting them apart from the common man. This is often accompanied by all manner of supernatural abilities, be it unbreakable will or the ability to use magic. Sometimes, an epic hero also has the boon of an otherworldly patron watching over him, typically, although not exclusively, one of the hero's parents. It is not at all uncommon for a hero to possess more than one option from this list.

For example, Odysseus, the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, clearly exhibits incredible physical prowess. Upon returning home from his journey, he is able to use his bow and kill all the suitors to his wife Penelope – a bow none of the suitors were even able to draw, much less fire. Besides that, he also possesses great mental faculties, being an acclaimed tactician, strategist and advisor, and being able to maintain high morale in the Greek soldiers, thus preventing them from withdrawing from battle. He was also the person behind the idea to make the Trojan Horse. Additionally, while not having magical powers on his own, he does greatly benefit from the patronage of the goddess Athena, who lends her help on multiple occasions, aiding him on his quest to get back home to Ithaca.

Keeping with Greek heroes, Achilles is, thanks to his mother Thetis bathing him in the river Styx, nigh invulnerable save for his heel. Achilles is also described entering into a fierce battle rage, making him an even more powerful combatant than before. He shares this particular trait with Rostam, whose battle rage is described thusly:

„No elephant on earth is match for him... his body hatch a hundred strong men's strength...and when he rageth on the day of battle...what is a lion, elephant or man within his grasp? “ (Warner and Warner, 2010, p. 157)

Siegfried, the hero of the *Nibelungenlied*, shares the trait of near physical invulnerability with Achilles. Unlike the Greek hero, Siegfried's hardened skin is not something granted by his parents, rather it results from his bath in the blood of a dragon. Just like Achilles, however, he has a weak spot, this time on his back. His supernatural

abilities come mostly from the magical items in his possession, which shall be expanded on in later chapters of this thesis.

Väinämöinen typically uses his magic, but it is also said in the Kalevala that it is also described that he „*cuts and conquers as the housemaids slice the turnips*“ (Lönnrot and Bosley, 2009, p. 277), earning him the moniker „*miracle of strength and wisdom*“ (Lönnrot and Bosley, 2009, p. 465). He is said to be capable of great feats, among others, he can shapeshift into a serpent, „*split a golden hair with an edgeless knife, has snared a bird's egg with an invisible snare, has peeled a sandstone and made a whipstock from ice without leaving any shavings.*“ (Guerber, 1928, p. 465-466) His singing ability is also quite extraordinary, as he is able to defeat a foe by singing him into depths of a bog.

Cu Chulainn is much stronger and also much quicker than the average man. As described previously, this is already shown in his childhood deeds and only becomes more prominent as he matures into adulthood. Further evidence of his exceptional prowess is the fact that Scáth chooses him to be the only one of her students to whom she teaches the secrets of using the *Gáe Bulg*, a thing she refused to teach all the other young men training under her, including her own two sons, as the spear is reserved for only the most powerful warriors.

He is able to pluck whole trees out of the ground, throwing them as if they were just regular spears, and leap great distances. He also bests Connla, his son, a boy no warrior was confident enough to challenge, as even at the age of seven it was clear he had inherited his father's extraordinary powers and would be much too dangerous. Finally, Cu Chulainn defeats Ferdiad, a very powerful warrior, another student of Scáth and his close friend.

His greatest power certainly lies in his battle rage, referred to as *ríastrad*. It causes the hero to violently spasm and change his size to giant proportions, terrifying those around him, making him dangerous to all who dare come near. Interestingly, even in this state, the hero does not forget his manners. When his first rage comes over him, the king's men quickly realise they need to find a way to calm him down, otherwise he will be a great danger to everyone around him. The solution king Conchobar mac Nessa devises is bringing all the women of Emain Macha outside to meet him, as „*before women he is*

ever courteous and modest.“ This works perfectly and the boy’s fury passes. (Hull, 2016, p. 55)

In addition to making him even stronger than usual, causing him to lash out and changing his shape and size, Cu Chulainn’s *ríastrad* also causes him to heat up a tremendous amount. The warmth emanating from his skin under the effects of the battle rage causes him to melt snow in a large radius around him. After calming him down with the presence of women, he needs to be bathed *„in three baths of cold water before his heat and travel-stains were passed away from him. And the water of the baths was heated fiery-hot by his plunge into it.*“ (Hull, 2016, p. 55) His battle rage becomes very famous, earning him the moniker *Riastartha* („distorted one“). (Dunn, 2007, p. 144) He shares this rage with the aforementioned heroes Achilles and Rostam.

6.4 Prophecies

Many heroes are surrounded by prophecies, be it during their lifetime, or before they are even born. They range from prophecies about their lives and deeds to those foretelling or describing their deaths.

The prophecies come from a variety of sources. In the case of the Finnish hero Väinämöinen, the originator of a rather cryptic prophecy is the witch Louhi, foretelling him misfortune: *„if thine eyes be lifted upward, while the day-star lights thy pathway dire misfortune will befall thee, some sad fate will overtake thee.*“ (Lönnrot and Bosley, 2009, p. 67)

In the case of Odysseus, it is ordained by the gods themselves that the hero will successfully return home to Ithaca, because *„it is not ordained that he die away from his friends.*” (Homer, Butcher and Lang, 2014, p. 65). The prophecy El Cid is given is also divine in origin, presented by archangel Gabriel who appears to the hero in his dreams, delivering the promise of a life of prosperity: *“throughout thy life shall all thy deeds be well.*“ (Huntington, 1902, p. 10)

While Cu Chulainn shares the characteristic of being a hero with a future foretold by a prophecy, is a rather unique case in this regard, as he actively chooses to participate in the foretold future. As mentioned earlier, he overhears a prophecy stating that whoever takes up arms on that day shall achieve great fame and glory, but live a short life. Upon hearing that, he rushes to his uncle, the king, and asks for weapons, thus sealing his own fate willingly.

6.5 Special Weapons and Equipment

In addition to the aforementioned advantages epic heroes enjoy on their adventures, many are also the owners of magical or otherwise extraordinary weapons and equipment, items that further help them in their exploits. Often, although not exclusively, these items fall into the category of magical or otherwise extraordinary weapons, most commonly swords.

6.5.1 Weapons

As described previously, many heroes use some manner of extraordinary weapon. This section shall focus on some of them, namely King Arthur, Siegfried, Roland and Beowulf as examples of epic heroes wielding swords, as well as Achilles and Cu Chulainn, both of whom favour spears.

Perhaps the most well-known case of an epic hero in possession of a magical sword is King Arthur. As described in chapter three of *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (Holland, 1919), he is the wielder of the legendary Excalibur. Similarly, the German hero Siegfried owns a magic sword named Balmung, described as “*a blade of mighty worth... Never have the earth-folk wrought better sleep, nor has any man ever wielded a more trusty sword.*” (Baldwin and Leaf, 2019, p. 14). Roland’s sword Durendal cannot be broken. Additionally, the hero is gifted a special bow by his uncle Charlemagne. Among these heroes, a rare exception can be found, that of Beowulf. His sword, Naegling, does not appear to be magical. Instead, it serves another purpose – that of showcasing its owner’s strength by breaking with the force of the blow Beowulf deals to the dragon.

Many references to Achilles’ spear, *Pelican* (Homer and Fagles, 1990) are made throughout the *Illiad*, but book XIX in particular mentions that only the hero himself is capable of wielding it. It does not, however, seem to otherwise be magical. This directly contrasts Cu Chulainn’s spear, the *Gáe Bulg*.

This weapon is reserved for only the strongest warriors who have trained with Scáthach, which in itself signifies that its user also must be someone really special. The way this spear is used is also quite unusual, as it is thrown with the foot by grabbing it between the toes. Upon hitting its intended target, the *Gáe Bulg* splits into twenty-four spikes that pierce the victim’s body, always inflicting fatal wounds. (Dunn, 2014, p. 260)

Cu Chulainn does not use the *Gáe Bulg* in regular combat, instead only choosing to save the fearsome spear as a last resort for battles he may not win otherwise, such as when he is forced to fight his son Connla, or his close friend Ferdiad. Both of these opponents are markedly stronger than a regular fighter, thus requiring the hero to use more than just his usual abilities in order to best them in combat.

6.5.2 Other Equipment

Besides special weapons, epic heroes often make use of a variety of other equipment or tools that are at their disposal. In some cases, heroes also employ animals, such as horses.

The aforementioned hero Siegfried, upon defeating the king of dwarves, obtains a cloak that makes the wearer invisible, called *Tarnkappe*. This item aids him on multiple adventures. (Needler, 1904) Achilles has a full suit of armour especially crafted for him by the god Vulcan on the request of the hero's mother, Thetis, who personally brings it to him, as described in Book XVII of *The Illiad*. (Pope, 1899). Similarly, Karna wears earrings and armour, which grant him immortality. He is stripped of this power when he gives these possessions away, as told in Book 3 of The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa (Ganguli, 2005).

Notably, Rostam has trouble finding a worthy steed, until he finally manages to tame a horse he later comes to call Rakush. The *Sháh Náme* describes that the mother of this foal is descended from a demon. (Ferdowsi, Davis, 2014)

Cu Chulainn also has two special horses, but he does not use them as mounts. Instead, the two animals, which he tames himself and names the Grey of Macha, and the Black Steed of the Glen (Hull, 2016, p. 66) are used to pull his chariot given to him by king Conchobar. While he cannot rightly be referred to as „equipment“, it would be remiss not to mention Cu Chulainn's trusty charioteer Láeg, who faithfully serves him up until both their deaths.

Thus, once again, it has been demonstrated that Cu Chulainn falls right beside other epic heroes in every category, as he both wields a magical weapon, and employs special horses, a charriot made for a king.

6.6 Extraordinary Appearance

In addition to all the aforementioned characteristics, the appearance of many epic heroes makes them stand out from the crowd. This typically takes one of two forms – either the hero is described as unusually attractive, and is subsequently fawned over by countless women, or he exhibits an air of power and confidence, thus inspiring respect and fear in his enemies. At times, both of these options can apply to a single hero, depending on the situation he presently finds himself in.

One example of an unusually attractive hero is the Scandinavian Olaf, who is referred to as „*the handsomest of all men that people ever set eyes on.*” (Muriel, 2016, p. 5). It is described that he carries himself well, carrying an air of nobility around him, making it abundantly clear

„*that he is a high-born man.*“ (Muriel, 2016, p. 5) He is by far not the only hero talked about in such terms. In fact, attractiveness seems to be a trait many Eastern heroes share. Karna’s majestic appearance is recounted in terms of the hero’s powerful body and masculinity: „*like a moving cliff in stature... like a tusker in his fury, like a lion in his ire, like the sun in noontide radiance, like the all-consuming fire, lion-like in build and muscle, stately as a golden palm, blessed with every manly virtue, peerless warrior proud and calm*“ (Dutt, 2006, p. 5)

Both Rostam and his son Suhrab are unusually comely as well. Rostam in particular is compared to the rising sun, as well as purported to be “*like a lofty cypress*”. (Warner and Warner, 2010, p. 122). Suhrab is described very similarly. In fact, he is also compared to the sun just like his father, as well as a cypress: “*In stature taller than a lofty cypress, and in his aspect like the shining sun.*” (Warner and Warner, 2010, p. 454)

Achilles, on the other hand, falls into the latter category of heroes – those who inspire fear in their enemies. In particular, he sports a halo of flame in the heat of battle, which is a sight so terrible that his appearance alone causes death, as his enemies die by their own weapons and chariots in their panic. „*twelve of their finest fighters died then and there, crushed by chariots, impaled on their own spears*“. (Homer, Fagles, 2010)

Just as many heroes from different nations and cultures, Cu Chulainn is also unusual in his appearance. There are different descriptions of what the hero looks like in different versions of the stories that involve him, at times even differing across the same tales within individual manuscripts. Unfortunately, there is no way to definitively pinpoint

the “original” depiction. They offer different accounts pertaining to Cu Chulainn’s height, as well as hair or eye colour. The only point they agree on is that he is perceived by the people around him as very attractive. Perhaps the most elaborate description, one provided by a bard, has been chosen to illustrate:

„The appearance of three heads of hair on him, dark against the skin of his head, blood-red in the middle, a crown gold-yellow which covers them. A fair arrangement of this hair so that it makes three circles round the hollow of the back of his head, so that each hair —, dishevelled, very golden, excellent, in long curls, distinguished, fair-coloured, over his shoulders, was like gold thread.

A hundred ringlets, bright purple, of red-gold, gold-flaming, round his neck; a hundred threads with mixed carbuncle round his head. Four dimples in each of his two cheeks; that is, a yellow dimple, and a green dimple, and a blue dimple, and a purple dimple. Seven gems of brilliance of an eye, in each of his two royal eyes. Seven toes on each of his two feet, seven fingers on each of his two hands, with the grasp of a hawk's claws, with the seizure of a griffin's claws on each of them separately. “ (Faraday, 2004)

While it can be justifiably argued that a bard would likely embellish the hero’s appearance. This grandiose representation of the man perhaps hints at how different ancient Celtic culture was from the culture of today. It is questionable whether a modern reader, upon learning about Cu Chulainn’s different-coloured hair, dimples, and seemingly multifaceted eyes, would come to the conclusion that the character being depicted is meant to be attractive. However, this is how he is presented in the Táin.

It is worth mentioning that Cu Chulainn’s battle rage, *ríastrad*, also changes his appearance rather dramatically. His entire body contorts, presenting what can only be assumed to be quite a horrifying scene. His feet turn backwards while his buttocks are turned forward. One of his eyes dislodges itself from his head, and another head appears in his mouth. All his hair becomes sharp like thorns, and appears bloody. (Hull, 2016, p. 144)

In conclusion, Cu Chulainn, once again, can certainly compare to other epic heroes, in both categories. He can be both incredibly attractive as well as fearsome.

7 An Unyielding Moral Code

Besides being noble in birth, an epic hero is typically also noble in spirit. An epic hero will tend to have a firm moral compass and high ideals, such as undying loyalty to his ruler or his people, fairness and honour. These morals typically come to the surface as the reasons the hero decides to fight for.

Beowulf, before he becomes a king in his own right, aids king Hrothgar, whom he is very loyal to. fights to protect the people from monsters, even at the risk of his own life. In fact, his encounter with a dragon is the event that cuts his life short. Even then, the hero does not bemoan his actions. As he lays dying, he expresses joy and contentment, knowing that the dragon's hoard will provide for his people. His only regret being that he has no son. (Heaney, 2000) Similarly, Roland fights to protect his king and country, even when it becomes clear to him that he will not survive the battle. He also shows how important his honour is to him by refusing to withdraw or call for reinforcements, for fear of being seen as weak and foolish. (Müller, 2016, p. 106) In the case of Heracles, his twelve Labours are a punishment inflicted upon him in an effort to make him atone for the murders of his wife and two children. (Burt, 2015, p. 6)

Some epic heroes' reasons for their actions are much more personal. After all, Odysseus undertakes his journey for the simple reason that he wishes to get back home to his family. Rather than him choosing to go on a grand adventure, it is inflicted upon him by angered gods, further complications arising when Odysseus or his men wrong other powerful supernatural beings.

The heroes reasoning for their heroism can also shift, as can be demonstrated on the case of Achilles. At the beginning of the battle, he has no reason to participate in fighting other than fame and glory. This changes, however, upon finding out about the death of his close friend Patroclus. At that moment, his fight becomes one for vengeance.

Even though he is very focused on his own personal fame and glory, as evidenced by his taking up arms despite knowing that it will mean a short life, Cu Chulainn is also very loyal to his king and his people. His loyalty to his king is obvious when he fights Ferdia, his close friend and battle brother, when the two men find themselves on opposite sides of the war. It is clear that Cu Chulainn really does not want to engage in this battle, but he understands that it is his duty, as does Ferdia.

Additionally, his adherence to the local moral code is what eventually leads to the hero's death. He is forbidden from eating dog meat but, upon being offered a meal of dog meat from a crone, he stands before a difficult decision – it is a taboo for him to consume dog meat but there is also a strong taboo against refusing hospitality – thus, he chooses to eat the offered meal, which spiritually weakens him, allowing him to be easier to kill. (Rees and Rees, 326)

More proof of Cu Chulainn's loyalty to his people is his refusal to withdraw from the war despite being aware of his imminent death. Before his final battle, he encounters a great number of ill omens. Notably, weapons fall from their racks, the brooch of his cloak breaks and falls off, and his horses resist when he tries to harness them to his chariot. Despite this, Cu Chulainn readies himself for battle. On the way there, he sees a young woman by the river, washing bloody clothing. Láeg informs him that this is the Watcher of the Ford, "*the daughter of the goddess of grim war. She wrings garments of the slain, or those about to die.*" (Hull, 2016, p. 262) He also remarks that the garments she is washing are Cu Chulainn's, signalling that he will die that day. However, the hero refuses to turn back and goes into battle, fully knowing it will be his last.

This attitude of "death before dishonour" appears time and time again, cementing itself as an important characteristic of an epic hero. It is clearly also one of the key traits of Cu Chulainn, who, similarly to Roland, refuses to give up his fight despite knowing that he will die.

8 A Powerful Enemy

To show a hero's true power and capabilities, the hero is usually put into opposition to a very powerful enemy, be it horrible monsters, or whole armies of men at once. The amount of detail given about the foes faced by the hero varies wildly from epic to epic, with some providing quite detailed descriptions, while others simply mention that there are a great number of them, or that they are mighty.

A prime example of a hero facing down hordes of enemies who are not given much detail in the epic would be Karna, fighting warriors who are mighty, but who are not otherwise described. El Cid is very much similar in that he fights a great number of enemies, but there is no detail given about them. This is also the case with Roland, who kills

many warriors who are, a dangerous enemy mostly because of their numbers, not their individual skill or special powers.

Other heroes contend with enemies that are inhuman in nature. According to Hagen von Tronje's stories about him in the *Nibelungenlied*, the young hero Siegfried managed to overpower Alberich, king of the dwarves, winning the treasure of the Nibelungen in the process. Additionally, he also killed a dragon and bathed in its blood, providing him with near immortality, as described in previous chapters of this thesis. (Needler, 1904)

Heracles struggled with a large amount of worthy enemies – the Nemean Lion, the Lernaean Hydra, the Erymanthian Boar, the Stymphalian Birds, the Amazon queen Hyppolyta, the three-headed giant Geryon who has six arms and his two-headed dog Orthus, and many more. (Burt, 2015)

Odysseus also faces numerous monstrous enemies on his journey back home to Ithaca. After his ships are thrown off course by raging storms, his party lands on the islands of the Cyclopes, where he and his men must contend with a cyclops called Polyphemus. This only serves to enrage the god Poseidon, who then gives the travellers trouble for the rest of their way home. Among other adversities, Odysseus faces the witch Circe, who turns half his men into pigs after drugging them, only escaping the same fate thanks to the goddess Athena watching over him. He also faces the temptations of the Sirens, tied to the mast of the ship. He narrowly avoids death at the hands of Scylla, a terrifying sea monster, who still manages to kill six of his men. After enduring all of these hardships and arriving back at Ithaca, there is one last challenge Odysseus needs to face – besting his wife's suitors to win her back. (Homer, Fagles, 2002)

Beowulf undergoes a total of three battles with mighty monsters. The first foe he faces is Grendel, whom he battles with no weapons, considering himself strong enough not to need any. After the monster is slain, Beowulf also contends with Grendel's mother, slaying water monsters on his way. His last battle is one where he contends with a dragon and, while he comes out victorious, he comes out of it mortally wounded. (Heaney, 2000)

Cu Chulainn faces many powerful foes in the various tales about him, both human and supernatural. Most notably, these are the warriors in the service of Queen Medb, who are great in number. Both Ferdiad and Connla are certainly worthy opponents in battle as well. The last enemy of Cu Chulainn who bears mentioning is the goddess Morrigan.

Cu Chulainn encounters her multiple times on his adventures. She always attempts to trick him, but is bested by the hero's wit each time. After that, Cu Chulainn manages to insult her, resulting in outright attacks from the goddess.

Between battles with queen Medb's men, the goddess appears to Cu Chulainn three times. First it is in the form of an eel in a ford, trying to trip him and cause him to fall, which causes Cu Chulainn to break her ribs with his feet. The second time she comes in the form of a wolf, driving a stampede towards him. This earns her a broken eye, as the hero shoots a stone at her from his sling. The third time she appears to him as a hornless red heifer, rushing at him. Cu Chulainn once again withstands her assault, throwing a stone at her and breaking her leg. In all of these instances, her wounds do not heal, the hero promising they will not until she receives a blessing, thus placing a manner of curse on her, as well. (Dunn, 1914)

In conclusion, Cu Chulainn has once again been demonstrated to fall into both categories of heroes – those who fight hordes of faceless enemies given no further description, as well as supernatural, extremely powerful foes.

8.1 A Heroic Death

As a hero's story comes to an end, so does often the hero's life. Rarely does a hero fade into obscurity or die of natural causes - to the contrary, many heroes meet their death in a blaze of glory on the battlefield, fighting for their noble cause to the bitter end, despite the odds being against them, in certain cases even despite warnings and prophecies about their demise being imminent. It is not uncommon that the hero is in the end brought down by some manner of conspiracy or betrayal. This further serves to show the hero as powerful – he would not die if not for some manner of trickery.

Karna, is a victim of his own moral code. The hero is immortal thanks to the earrings and armour he was born with, inherited from his father Surya. He is warned of the plot devised by his rival's brothers, the purpose of which is to divest him of these magical objects and make him a mortal man. Despite this, the hero decides to gift his magical artefacts away to a rival disguised as a Brahmin, refusing to lose his reputation as one who always gives charity. This decision leads to the hero's death soon after, as he is injured by his rival Arjuna and dies. (Ganguli, 1896)

Rostam chooses to take revenge on his treacherous brother in his final moments. He is trapped in a well full of poisoned spears, into which he falls with his horse Raksh. He uses his last wish to ask his brother Shaghad for a bow and arrows, which he uses to shoot the traitor, before he himself succumbs to his injuries and dies. Siegfried also dies after being betrayed, as he is stabbed from behind by Hagen, a man he thought was a friend to be trusted. He still gathers enough strength to turn to the traitor and strike him with his shield so hard that he knocks him down. (Warner and Warner, 2010)

Similarly, Beowulf dies a heroic death. His final battle is one with a dragon, trying to protect his people from its wrathful vengeance. Not wanting to endanger his men, he tells them he will fight the beast alone. He is helped by Wiglaf, who does not want to leave the king to his fate and together they manage to slay the dragon, but he is mortally wounded and dies shortly after. (Heaney, 2000)

There are multiple accounts of the death of Achilles, however, in most of them, he is killed by Paris, who shoots the only vulnerable spot on his body with an arrow – his heel. In many versions the arrow was guided by Apollo, giving Paris little to no credit for killing the Greek hero. Despite being on death's door, Achilles still fought as long as he had the strength to do so, not wanting his enemies to know his wounds were fatal. (Homer, Fagles, 1990)

As many other epic heroes, Cu Chulainn dies a warrior's death. After relentlessly battling Medb's forces and coming out victorious in every single fight, after resisting the tricks of the Morrigan who attempts three times to foil him, the hero is ultimately defeated because he does not wish to break the honour code, as he is loyal to his king and fights Ferdiad and because he does not wish to refuse hospitality and eats a meal of dog meat, which weakens him spiritually. After this spiritual weakening, he is killed by the enemy gradually weakening him by first striking his horse, then his charioteer and, finally, the hero himself. All of the aforementioned is a result of Medb conspiring with the sons of those Cu Chulainn has defeated on the battlefield. Even then, he ties himself to a stone, so that he may face his enemies while he is still able, and only perishes after three days.

As has been shown, Cu Chulainn's death, too, exhibits key similarities to the deaths of many other epic heroes, as he is undone both by his own morals, as well as trickery on the part of Queen Medb weakening him, making his defeat possible.

9 Similarities Between Cu Chulainn and Specific Epic Heroes

Having established that Cu Chulainn exhibits all the characteristics of an epic hero, Cu Chulainn will be compared to specific heroes, with the purpose of pointing out their similarities. The most obvious comparison is definitely the hero Achilles, whose similarities to Cu Chulainn have been pointed out by literary scholars, even going so far as to call him “the Irish Achilles”. A further comparison can be drawn to Karna. Additionally, there are epic heroes who display a very specific story element. That is, a battle between a father and son, where neither man knows that he is battling his own kin until it is too late. A conflict between father and son was not uncommon in literature throughout the ages, however this specific handling of the motif seems to be quite rare and it is interesting that multiple stories of heroes from different cultures should display such similarities.

9.1 Achilles

The most notable comparison that is often made is that to the Greek hero of the Illiad, Achilles. Some sources go so far as to call Cu Chulainn “the Irish Achilles.” Whether this nickname is fitting, is, however, quite disputable. It would suggest that Cu Chulainn is, in some way, a mere Irish version of the same character, which is rather unfair, as it is unlikely that the Irish folk at the time would have had access to the Homeric texts. It must be conceded, however, that the influence of Homeric texts is not wholly out of the question. As described in earlier chapters of this thesis, there are no known versions of the tales of Cu Chulainn that were written by the Celts themselves. Rather, the surviving texts were written down by Christian monks. It is unclear exactly how much of their contents comes from the original tales, and how much was added or changed by the scribes. Whatever the case may be, the two heroes exhibit quite a large number of notable similarities.

The similarities between Cu Chulainn and Achilles begin with their origins. Both of them are the offspring of a member of a royal family and a supernatural being. In the case of Cu Chulainn, this is the king’s sister Deichtire and Lugh of the Long Arms, a member of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, a group of Celtic deities. In the case of Achilles, the parents are no less impressive, as they are the Myrmidon king Peleus and Thetis, who is

undoubtedly a supernatural being of great power, despite her role in Greek mythology being somewhat unclear – she appears as a Nereid, a sea nymph, but also as a water goddess.

The impact of their parents on their stories is large in both cases, but otherwise vastly different. While Cu Chulainn is raised by one of king Conchobar's sisters, his mother does not really impact him in any way past the point of him leaving for the king's court to train with the other boys. His father Lugh only interferes once when the hero is wounded, to put Cu Chulainn into a magic sleep that helps him heal faster. (Hull, 2016) Otherwise, he has no real impact on the hero's story and the previously mentioned incident is the only occasion they meet. Most of the time, the hero's divine parent is only mentioned when the speaker is trying to make Cu Chulainn as impressive as possible.

In contrast, Achilles knows both his father and his mother, though he is raised and educated by the wise Centaur Chiron. Thetis, like many of the other Greek gods, appears to be decidedly more meddling in comparison to the gods portrayed in the Ulster Cycle. Possibly her biggest influence on her son's life is her bathing him in the river Styx in an attempt to make the child immortal. Achilles is also seen praying to his mother to help him avenge his lost honour after Agamemnon forces him to hand over Briseis, a woman given to him among other spoils of war and who he was quite fond of. She also has a set of armour forged for Achilles by the god Hephaestus himself and keeps the dead body of Patroclus from decaying in order to ease her son's mind.

Perhaps the most prominent parallel between these two heroes can be drawn in regard to their fighting skill and style, however. Both of them are without a doubt extremely skilled fighters and priceless assets for the armies they are a part of. Both heroes also utilise a spear and a chariot. Neither of their weapons is a mundane spear, as both are spears no fighter other than the hero is able to use. Most importantly, both of them become even fiercer and more dangerous under the effects of a battle rage. When enraged by the death of his friend Patroclus, Achilles slays enemies in such amounts that their bodies fill up a river. (Pope, 1899) Cu Chulainn's battle rage, *riastrad*, has been described in the previous sections of this work.

The last major similarities between Cu Chulainn and Achilles can be found in how they face their death, as well as their knowledge that it is imminent. Achilles is warned by his

mother Thetis that if he slays Thenes, Apollo will kill him. This warning goes unheeded as Achilles goes on to kill Thenes despite knowing it would bring about his death, and indeed dies as a result. (Pope, 1899) Cu Chulainn receives multiple warnings, albeit not from his parents – his horse refuses to be harnessed by his charioteer and, even though the stallion gives in and allows the harnessing when the hero himself does it, he cries bloody tears, signalling his master's coming demise. Despite this, the hero refuses to turn back.

There are other minor similarities to be found between Cu Chulainn and Achilles. For example, they are both described as extraordinarily beautiful. They also both have a friend who is very important to them. For Cu Chulainn, this is Ferdiad, his fellow trainee whom he meets during his time with Scáth and his battle brother. For Achilles, it is Patroclus, who is sometimes speculated to have been his lover - although there is no evidence for this in the text of the Iliad and may possibly only be a case of modern readers projecting their own attitudes onto an ancient work of fiction, thus finding something that is, in fact, not present. The difference between these relationships is that while Patroclus is killed by Hector, with help from Apollo and Achilles has no hand in his friend's untimely death (Pope, 1899), Cu Chulainn is much more directly involved in the death of Ferdiad, as he is the one to kill his friend when they find themselves on opposing sides of the conflict after Ferdiad is manipulated by Medb to join her. Further difference lies in the way this affects the heroes' motivations. While Cu Chulainn is saddened by Ferdiad's death, it does not change anything about his motivation to continue fighting Medb's armies. On the other hand, Achilles refuses to fight in the war because of a perceived slight from Agamemnon, who took Briseis from the young hero. It is only after the death of Patroclus that Achilles is so enraged that he finally joins the battle. (Pope, 1899)

9.2 Karna

The Hindu hero Karna from the Mahabharata bears a number of similarities to Cu Chulainn, even though it is quite unlikely that the Hindu epic influenced Irish mythology very much, and this it is quite unlikely that Cu Chulainn is simply “the Irish Karna”. Certainly, this is much less probable than the stories of Cu Chulainn being retroactively influenced by Greek epics, which would possibly have been known by the

Christian scribes writing the manuscripts. Whatever the reason, the two heroes exhibit a number of similarities.

The first major similarity between the two heroes is their origin story. Both of them are descendant of a human woman and a deity. In the case of Cu Chulainn, these are Deichtire, the sister of king Conchobar mac Nessa, and Lugh of the Long Arm, a major deity and a member of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. For Karna, the parents are the beautiful princess Kunti, daughter of king Surasena, and the sun. Neither of the two heroes is raised by his birth parents. Cu Chulainn is raised by another of the king's sisters and partially the king himself, while Karna is adopted by a charioteer and his wife. (Ganguli, 1896)

Perhaps the most glaring similarity lies in the events leading up to their death. Cu Chulainn, while not immortal, is certainly nigh impossible to defeat, thus making his enemies doubt his mortality. This is demonstrated by the fact that they refuse to believe the hero has died until a raven lands on his shoulder. In order to kill him, his enemies must first weaken him. They do this by tricking him into eating dog meat, this breaking a taboo and weakening him spiritually. Karna, on the other hand, has rings and armour that he was born with, providing him with the gift of immortality. However, he chooses to give them away to an enemy disguised as a Brahmin beggar. Therefore, it can be said that both heroes choose being weakened over breaking social customs. In Cu Chulainn's case, it is choosing not to refuse an old woman's hospitality, an act that would have been very strongly taboo at the time. In Karna's case, he chooses to give charity because it would be taboo not to do so and he does not wish to tarnish his reputation. Both types of weakening eventually contribute to their deaths.

9.3 Fathers Battling Sons

As noted by Dean A. Miller, the theme of generational conflict – namely a son fighting a father – is rather widespread in epic heroic literature. While there are cases, such as Oedipus, where the hero kills his father, Miller points out that it is much more common that the hero himself has a son, who becomes a powerful warrior in his own right far from home. The son eventually encounters the father in battle and, although there is usually a token the son carries to identify him, it is typically revealed only after the son is slain, or dying. (2000)

This is especially tragic in the case of Oedipus. Both his father Laius and the hero himself are told about what the future holds, and both of them take steps in order to prevent it. Laius orders his son to be killed, while Oedipus, thinking his parents are the shepherd and his wife who raised him after finding him abandoned on a mountainside, leaves home because he does not wish to kill the man he perceives as his father. However, as is typical for Greek tragedies from the time of this particular epic, destiny is inevitable, and the hero kills his father, only realizing it many years later. (Sophocles, Murray, 2008)

As mentioned previously, Heracles kills his own children in his madness. In contrast, the Greek hero Theseus narrowly escapes fighting his father. He is given two identifying signs – a pair of sandals and a sword. Upon his arrival in Athens, his father Aegeus recognizes these objects last minute, and does not kill Theseus. (Miller, 2000) This situation, however, is an exception rather than a norm for epic heroes.

Cu Chulainn also does not know the identity of the young boy he fights. In his case, the situation is indirectly caused by his earlier actions, these being his instructions to Aife before he leaves her in Alba and goes back home, having finished his training. He tells her to teach the boy never to tell anyone his name, and the child refusing to tell king Conchobar his name is the cause of the whole conflict between father and son, as Cu Chulainn is deemed to be the only warrior capable of defeating the boy. The hero only realizes the identity of his son as the boy is dying in his arms.

This motif is very similar to the one found in the tragedy of Rostam and his son Sohrab. The story follows the usual pattern in this case also – the son grows apart from the father, and the two find themselves on opposing sides without knowing the identity of the other man until it is too late. Rostam gives his son's mother an armband for the child, but it is only revealed after Sohrab is mortally wounded. (Firdusi, Atkinson, 1909)

At times, the father and son know each other's identity, but they choose to engage in battle for one reason or another despite the fact. Such a conflict can be seen in the heroic poem *Hildebrandslied* (Song of Hildebrand), wherein Hildebrand meets his son Hadubrand. Hadubrand does not know his father but he has been told by elders that his father has fled, leaving him and his mother behind. In this case, the hero is recognized by his father, who, realising who his opponent, is, attempts to make peace with his son. However, the younger man does not want to accept his peace offering of gold arm-rings,

instead accusing his father of being a coward. The two engage in combat, the outcome of which is unclear, as the poem breaks off, not revealing which man came out of the fight victorious. (Müller, 2016)

Conclusion

Cu Chulainn as a Type of an Epic Hero

The aim of this diploma thesis was drawing a comparison between Cu Chulainn and a number of epic heroes from different nations and cultures. The purpose of this comparison was to highlight the fact that, while he remains relatively unknown, Cu Chulainn is more than worthy of the title of “epic hero”, and that his story is no less spectacular as those of the more well-known heroes, such as Heracles, Siegfried, Beowulf, or Karna. This was achieved after having conducted several lines of investigation.

Firstly, it was necessary to establish what the term “epic hero” means in this context. To that end, the works of several literary scholars have been surveyed. As was soon revealed, the term is rather nebulous and difficult to define. As described by Richard P. Martin and Joshua T. Katz, it is a term that has evolved over centuries, and is commonly used to describe a great number of very disparate works of literature, which span multiple continents, countless cultures, and a great amount of time. And yet, as Katz points out, there are marked similarities in both structure and content. It is not known why exactly this is the case, there is merely a multitude theories attempting to explain this phenomenon. Indeed, in some cases it is quite plausible that the nations from which different epic heroes originate came into contact with one another, trading stories. Some tales may have been influenced by the author of the surviving written text, as many ancient epics survived centuries being handed down the generations through oral tradition, only having been put into written form much later. While the objective of this thesis it not to explain these similarities, and thus this particular topic was researched only to a lesser extent, it contributed to the foundation of the thesis itself – that is epic heroes being similar to each other, and thus being able to be compared to one another. This point is one agreed upon by literary scholars such as Dean A. Miller or Gregory Nagy, who have researched the markings of epic heroes. Nagy has done a great deal of research into ancient Greek literature and its heroes in particular, establishing the characteristics of an epic hero. Miller writes about heroes more broadly, separating them into the categories of *epic* and tragic heroes, then choosing to focus on a “heroic biography” of sorts, where he describes the usual events of a hero’s life highlighted in epic literature. The opinions of both Nagy and Miller were important for creating the

framework through which the practical part of this diploma thesis examines and compares epic heroes.

Secondly, having established the terms “epic” and “epic hero”, the story of Cu Chulainn was pieced together utilising different tales from the *Ulster Cycle*, chiefly *The Táin*, also known as *The Cattle Raid Of Cooley*, as this tale contains tales from the hero’s life. Secondary literature was used as well, chiefly Eleanor Hull’s *Cuchulain: The Hound of Ulster*, which is a similar, though much more expansive, attempt at creating a coherent narrative of Cu Chulainn’s life from his birth to his death. Having accomplished a sufficiently complete account of Cu Chulainn’s life and deeds, everything was ready for the comparison to other epic heroes, which was the focus of the practical part of this diploma thesis.

As mentioned previously, a framework was necessary to gauge the common signifiers of an epic hero. While the characteristics of an epic hero according to both Gregory Nagy and Dean A. Miller were researched, they were deemed not exactly fitting the needs of this thesis. In Nagy’s case, the four key characteristics seemed rather vague and insufficient, though informative. Miller’s division of heroes into *epic* and *tragic* was, by itself, also not detailed enough. Rather, the “heroic biography” outlined by Dean Miller was used as a guideline for this framework, but was modified to better suit the hero Cu Chulainn, and more broadly the objective of this thesis. Thus, it was possible to select a number of key characteristics that epic heroes seem to share, no matter their culture or time of origin.

These characteristics were determined to be the following: a noble birth – this is usually a noble family and often also a supernatural ancestor, such as a deity or a different type of supernatural being like Thetis, a Nereid and mother to Achilles, or such as in the case of Karna, the sun. The second characteristic common to many epic heroes from different cultures is an extraordinary childhood, where the hero often already shows first signs of his superhuman nature, be it unusual bravery, extraordinary strength and speed, or mental capabilities that would otherwise be far beyond a child of such age. The third signifier of an epic hero was established to be a prophecy that often predicts the hero’s deeds or death. The fourth common point in a large number of tales of heroes was found to be an extraordinary appearance, such as the hero being unusually attractive. The fifth trait of epic heroes was established to be the possession of special – often magical – weapons or other equipment, such as chariots or horses, aiding their owner in battle.

The sixth commonality among epic heroes would then be a strong moral compass. This often means undying loyalty to the hero's people or ruler. It can also mean adhering to cultural traditions and a refusal to break social taboos, even at the cost of the hero's life. The penultimate characteristic typical of an epic hero was extrapolated to be the presence of a powerful enemy to fight and thus showcase the hero's superiority. These enemies range from hordes of warriors or entire armies to all manner of supernatural beings such as demons or various types of monsters and mages. In extreme cases these adversaries can even be deities or beings on the level of deities. The last defining point of an epic hero was established to be a heroic death. An epic hero typically dies on the battlefield while fighting a very powerful foe. Many times the hero's death is caused by some sort of betrayal or conspiracy, such as in the case of Karna. At other times the gods themselves have a hand in a hero's demise, which happens, to give an example, to the Greek hero Achilles. Very rarely does it occur for a hero to live out the rest of his days peacefully, while with certain heroes the circumstances of their death are unknown, such as with Odysseus, whose story in the *Odyssey* ends with his return home and winning back his wife Penelope. All of these key characteristics of epic heroes were illustrated by examples of particular epic heroes, showcasing how they impact their story.

After the key characteristics of an epic hero were established, they were used to examine the tales of Cu Chulainn. It was then found that the Irish hero fills all the "requirements" of an epic hero. He is of noble birth, as well as the son of a deity, this deity being Lugh of the Long Arm. Even the circumstances of his birth itself are quite unusual, as, depending on the source, he is essentially born multiple times, giving him both divine and human parents. Given his heritage, he is brought up first by the king's sister and then partially by the king himself. He shows the first signs of having special powers at four years old when he defeats a large group of boys his age and experiences his first instance of *ríastrad*, a fearsome kind of battle rage. It is also in his childhood that the young hero gets himself tangled up in a prophecy, something he does willingly in order to trade a short life for fame and glory. His appearance is undeniably also quite extraordinary, as illustrated by a bard's description of the hero. His equipment was described - he is in possession of quite a number of extraordinary items, these including the spear *Gáe Bulg*, a chariot made for a king and gifted to the hero by his uncle, king Conchobar, two decidedly unusual horses, and the charioteer Láeg who, while not a

piece of equipment, serves his master loyally until this death. Cu Chulainn also undeniably displays a strong moral compass, in that he is loyal to his king and his people, going as far as to fight his closest friend. His story includes many powerful enemies – whole armies, as well as the goddess Morrigan who, while not engaging in open combat with Cu Chulainn, does make several attempts at thwarting the hero's efforts. The Irish hero's story does not lack a heroic death, as he dies on his feet, tied to a standing stone, while fighting his enemies as long as he is able to.

Having demonstrated that Cu Chulainn exhibits all the typical characteristics of an epic hero and displays strong similarity to many epic heroes of other cultures, two heroes were chosen for more detailed comparison, these two heroes being Achilles and Karna. The commonalities and differences of these heroes and Cu Chulainn were discussed at length. Lastly, it was pointed out that Cu Chulainn's story includes a very specific occurrence, this being a fight between father and son - a theme rather common in epic heroic stories.

Thus, having pursued all three lines of investigation, this diploma theory concludes that Cu Chulainn is without a doubt worthy of the title of an epic hero, as he clearly fills all the previously established criteria and has been demonstrated to exhibit all the characteristics of an epic hero. In fact, he is strikingly similar to certain heroes in particular, namely the Greek hero Achilles and the Indian Karna.

The Merits of This Thesis

This diploma thesis aimed to compare the Irish hero Cu Chulainn to other Indo-European heroes. The largest beneficial effect of comparing the stories of different cultures to each other is showing how similar they are, pointing to cultural similarities in different nations despite their geographical distance. Academic research of Celtic mythology can also serve to bring more attention to legends and tales that are relatively unknown to a large number of scholars and students, as they are rarely talked about as part of usual literary education. This thesis could also be used as a starting point of more in-depth research into Celtic legends and their similarity to the legends of other nations, perhaps delving into the reasons why these similarities exist in the first place. As described in the theoretical part of this thesis, there are theories, but much more research would have to be conducted in order to bring conclusive results.

Possibilities Limitations of This Thesis

The first limitation of this diploma thesis is likely its scope. There are countless legends and tales of heroes in every culture in the world. Unfortunately, comparing them all is an undertaking that would require several lifetimes of careful analysis. Therefore, only a number of epic heroes needed to be chosen.

Limited access to different legends also proved to be a hindrance in the research for this project, as some tales have not been translated into English, Czech or German, or these translations are impossible to obtain.

The fact that, all the epics used in this work are mere translations could also prove to be a limitation, as some hidden meanings or context is unfortunately always lost in translation, no matter how skilled and knowledgeable the translator. It would be ideal to study all these texts in their original language; however, it was not possible.

Further expanding on the point of limited access to different legends about epic heroes, it must be noted that many of these tales are in their original form and, possibly with the exception of the Iliad and the Odyssey, their written form was not penned by their original author. Indeed, it is the case with many epic heroes, especially those coming from folk epic stories like Cu Chulainn that the tales describing the heroes' exploits are very possibly centuries older than their written versions, making it extremely difficult or impossible to determine what the tales were like originally. It is not unusual for stories to have been handed down through many generations through oral tradition. Such stories are often twisted and embellished to the point that they have very little in common with what their author intended them to be. A possible concern with the Ulster Cycle would be the fact that the written form comes from Christian monks. While it is quite unlikely that the folk tales of Cu Chulainn were influenced by Greco-Roman mythology, it is not impossible that certain elements of these stories were injected into them later by those who wrote the manuscripts which contain them.

Possibilities for Further Research

There are countless possibilities for further research into the topic of this thesis, or topics closely related to it. It would definitely be highly interesting to make similar comparisons between heroes in a much broader scope. One could, for example, examine the similarities and differences between Cu Chulainn and the epic heroes of cultures that

were not used in this diploma thesis, namely Slavic heroes, or even the heroes of East Asia or Africa. Such comparisons could map out, whether these common elements are a phenomenon only observable in Indo-European cultures, or whether epic heroes in this form are something universally human.

An undertaking of even greater magnitude would be attempting to explain why it is that heroes of cultures geographically far apart display such similarities to each other. Lines of investigation could be pursued through the lens of history, as well as anthropology or psychology.

Lastly, it would be possible to conduct research into the influences of Cu Chulainn on contemporary Irish culture, or perhaps analyse different media adaptations of the legends about him.

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