

# Study Ireland: Storyteller

## An Introduction to Storytelling, Myths and Legends

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### INTRODUCTION

There have always been storytellers because people enjoy stories. This is true of all races and periods of history. Story-telling was a favourite art and amusement among the Gaelic-speaking people of Ireland and Scotland and much of their repertoire went back to pre-Christian sources. In olden days, there were professional storytellers, divided into well-defined ranks - ollamh (*professors*), filí (*poets*), baird (*bards*), seanchaithe (*historians, storytellers*), whose duty it was to know by heart the tales, poems and history proper to their rank, which were recited for the entertainment and praise of the chiefs and princes. These learned classes were rewarded by their patrons, but the collapse of the Gaelic order after the battle of Kinsale in 1601-2, and Culloden in Scotland (1746), wiped out the aristocratic classes who maintained the poets, and reduced the role of the historian and seanchaí. Storytelling was, of course, one of the main forms of fireside entertainment among the ordinary folk also, and the popular Irish tradition became enriched by the remnants of the learned classes returning to the people. Denied the possibility of enhancing their place in society, and deprived of the means to promote and progress their art, the storyteller was held in high esteem by the ordinary Irish who revered and cultivated story and song as their principal means of artistic expression.

This cultivation of the quality of oral expression was important in the Irish-speaking tradition. Much of the particular nature of the English spoken in Ireland is owed to this linguistic inheritance. Nevertheless, a lot was also lost in the transition from Irish to English; many tales have been recorded only in Irish, mainly due to the efforts of the Irish Folklore Commission, now in the department of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin. Some material has been translated into English, and there is, of course, an impressive amount of lore collected in English. The planters from England and Scotland added to the corpus and variety of stories told in Ireland, particularly in the north.

The term "folktale" is used to describe the various types of narrative stories that have been passed on orally from one person or generation to another. The principal kinds of folktales are **Myths and Legends**. These terms, as well as terms such as Fairytales, Romantic Tales etc. are often interchanged in popular usage, although scholars have made definitions and distinctions. Sometimes stories may have originated in manuscripts or in print, but then entered the oral tradition and gained new life in this form. Each tale contains motifs or elements which may vary from one storyteller or district to another, but the essence of the tale remains stable. Many tales have spread across the world and are described as international folktales, while other tales are only to be found within the area of their origin, for example hero tales such as those of Cú Chulainn and the Red Branch or Fionn Mac Cumhaill and the Fianna. And even here, we often find international echoes in the elements which comprise the tale. Most of our '*Storyteller*' stories could best be described as **supernatural legends**.

An early classification of the types of Irish tales is found in the **Book of Leinster**, from the 12th century. It contains a list of 187 tales divided, according to subject, into **Battles, Voyages, Tragedies, Military Expeditions, Cattle-Raids, Courtships, Pursuits, Adventures, Visions**, etc. Then, in the early 19th century, modern science and scholarship, influenced by the Romantic movement, turned its attention to the folktale, with the Brothers Grimm leading the way. In Ireland, the first important collector was **T. Crofton Croker**, who published *Researches in the South of Ireland* in 1824 and two series of *Fairy Legends* in 1825 and 1826. **William Carleton** (1794-1869) from County Tyrone, who wrote *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1842), was variously described by W.B. Yeats as a "novelist", a "storyteller" and a "historian". Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge,

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names associated with the Irish Literary Revival, were all fascinated by the folklore of Ireland and created a new literature out of the oral heritage. One of the difficulties faced by all the writers in English was how to translate the syntax and imagery of the Irish language into acceptable written English and reproduce the normal speech of the people in a natural manner. Too often, a “Stage-Irish” style resulted, depriving the text of its quality, and the peasantry of their dignity.

**Douglas Hyde**, the son of a rector from Roscommon, knew Irish well and collected the songs and tales for posterity, preserving them as accurately as he could in Irish and providing English translations that were faithful, rather than literary. The foundation of the **Gaelic League in 1893** provided the opportunity and enthusiasm to study and develop the Irish language, and the stories of the Gaeltacht, the Irish-speaking districts, were diligently collected. Soon after the establishment of the Irish Free State, the Folklore of Ireland Society was set up and a one-time assistant to Hyde, a County Antrim man called **Séamas Delargy**, became the editor of its journal *Béaloides*. In 1935, the Irish Folklore Commission was founded with Delargy as director and full-time folklore collectors were appointed. One of these, **Michael J. Murphy**, was appointed the Commission’s collector for Ulster east of Donegal. Murphy has described his experiences as a collector in *Tyrone Folk Quest* and in 1975 published *Now You’re Talking*, a fine collection of Northern stories.

The international folktale was classified by **Antti Aarne**, a Finn, in 1910. Aarne and an American called **Stith Thompson** brought out an expanded version in English in 1929 *The Types of the Folktale*. This was added to and re-issued in 1961. An Irish catalogue based on this Aarne-Thompson catalogue was produced by **Ó Súilleabháin** and **Christiansen** in 1963. This catalogue contained 43,000 versions of some 700 international tale-Types. So, for example, over 650 versions have been reported from Ireland of Type 300, where the hero kills giants and monsters to win the hand of a maiden. Since then, many more types and versions have been added.

The Aarne-Thompson classification of international tales falls into five main categories:

- I **Animal Tales**
- II **Ordinary Folktales**
- III **Jokes and Anecdotes**
- IV **Formula Tales**
- V **Unclassified Tales**

The ‘*Storyteller*’ tales can best be placed within the second category, “Ordinary Folktales”, and most can be further defined as supernatural legends. The word “legend” comes from the Latin *legenda*, “things to be read”, and originally referred to extracts or incidents in the lives of the saints which were read aloud in monasteries for the edification of the audience. The story was set in the recent or historical past, involved real people, and was believed to be true by narrator and audience. There were historical legends, associated with important events; personal legends, dealing with real people; local legends, closely connected with a particular place and how it got its name or what happened there; religious legends, dealing with the life of Christ or the saints; and, finally, supernatural legends, which are presented as true accounts of eerie experiences or supernatural beings such as spirits, fairies, ghosts etc., dreams coming true, death omens and warnings, and stories which depend on folklore and popular belief for their origin and effect. How do our stories conform to these definitions?

The change in language was not the only reason for the decline in traditional storytelling. Society was changing as well. The development of electricity allowed pastimes and activities beyond those available when the heat and light of the hearth provided the main focus in the long evenings after Hallowe’en.

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People began to travel, firstly locally and then further afield, with the widespread use of the bicycle and then the motorcar. After the newspaper, the radio became the source of news and entertainment, and finally, families began to gather around the television, isolated from their neighbours; indeed, the members of the family often appeared to sit beside each other, without talking, allowing the television and other modern media to take over communication.

Television was considered by some as a threat to the cultural heritage of the storyteller and his lore. Yet these 'Storyteller' films attempt to show that television can be used to present a good folktale and pass on the tales to a new audience in this technological age. We have the pictures of the television drama, and the voice and words of the storyteller.

The successful storyteller possessed two main skills - a good memory and a good style. He (and most storytellers were men) was able to build up a rapport with his audience, making subtle changes in each presentation in order to create the necessary emotional bonding with his audience. The television version does not change, but does it create its own emotional effect?

### QUOTATIONS

*In the years when printed books, magazines and newspapers were rare or altogether unobtainable and when neither radio nor television had as yet been invented, the people of Ireland, like those in other lands, had to provide their own entertainment. Conversation, music, singing, dancing and sports formed part of this widespread pattern, but, especially in areas where the Irish language was still spoken, storytelling was extremely popular. The good storyteller, who had a large repertoire stored in his memory, seated by his own fireside, in an honoured place in the house of a neighbour or at a wake, was assured of an attentive audience on winter nights. Nor was it only adults who wished to hear tales. My father described to me how himself and other children of eight years of age would spend hours, night after night, listening to an old woman storyteller in South Kerry; and an old man in the same area told me that, as a youth, he and his companions used to do all the household chores for an elderly neighbour each winter evening in order that he might be free to spend the night telling them long folktales.....*

**Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition* - page 10**

*The main venue for storytelling was the fireside during the long winter nights.....Fiannaíocht sa ló (Storytelling in the daytime) was said to be unlucky, yet men have described how they learned their tales while hay-making or digging potatoes. Stories were told also by fishermen at sea at night, as they waited for the time to draw in their nets. In crowded wake-houses, tales were told to attentive groups in quiet corners.....Lodging houses were great centres for storytelling.....Travelling seasonal labourers (spailpíní) also helped to spread folktales from one area to another.*

**Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition* - page 11**

*Relatively few of the impressive hero tales, which had been told in Irish, passed over into English when that language came into common use. This resulted in the loss of their "runs" and colourful language in the new medium. Some ordinary folktales did pass through the language mesh, however, but these were but faint echoes of the former glories of Irish storytelling.*

**Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition* - page 12**

*From the view-point of the folklorist, Ireland has a strategic geographical position as an island off the west coast of Europe. Much of its lore, at least as far as custom and belief are concerned, derives from that of the Celtic-speaking peoples who once lived in the western lands of that continent. In addition, traces of certain facets of European lore, which have disappeared on the mainland, can still be found in Ireland.*

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*(Legends) differ in both nature and origin from folktales.....Folk belief and custom, on which legends are based, reflect the inner mind and behaviour of peoples more closely than do folktales, and they offer a fairly sure key to the ways of thought of our ancestors. The event described in a legend was regarded as an actual happening, so far as the folk - be they rural or townsfolk - were concerned. It might have been an unusual happening which, because of its nature, attracted popular attention and was credible and worthy of being kept alive. In addition to this, a legend was normally local; the places, persons, events and dates mentioned in the story were usually known to both the narrator and the audience. While some legends have wandered far afield, in most cases they are more likely to be associated with some local place or person, if the conditions are suitable. A legend may range from a dimly-remembered event to a detailed account of some more recent unusual experience, often associated with beings from the otherworld - ghosts, fairies, spirits, mermaids and such. At a time when our forefathers believed in the existence of an invisible world close-by, whose inhabitants could, and did, intrude into human affairs for good or ill, the scene was set for innumerable legends which described the contacts.*

**S.O Sullivan, *Legends from Ireland Introduction*, pages 11-12.**

*Poets and storytellers in homespun, humble carriers of an ancient culture, preserved until a century ago an oral tradition (seanchas) and an oral literature unrivalled in western Europe. Kuno Meyer, in a memorable phrase, has called the written literature of medieval Ireland "the earliest voice from the dawn of West European civilization".*

**J.H. Delargy "The Gaelic Story-teller", Sir John Rhys Lecture 1945**

*Éamonn Búrc, another story-teller of this parish (Carna, Connemara), gave our collector 158 tales. Some of these tales were very long; one of them runs to 34,000 words, and is one of the finest folk-tales I have ever read in any language. The story-teller died suddenly, 5 November 1942, leaving unrecorded at least as much as he had already given us (Folklore of Ireland Society). He was one of the most amazing story-tellers I have ever known.*

**J.H. Delargy "The Gaelic Story-teller", Sir John Rhys Lecture 1945**

*All printed texts of folktales are compromises between the written and the spoken word, between writers and storytellers*

**Henry Glassie. *Irish Folktales* - page 11**

*Peggy (Barrett) like all experienced story-tellers, suited her tales, both in length and subject, to the audience and the occasion.*

**Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends* - page 196**

*Attempts have been made from time to time during the present century to collect Irish folk-lore, but these attempts, though interesting from a literary point of view, are not always successes from a scientific one.*

**Douglas Hyde, *Beside the Fire* - preface, page X**

*The domestic seanchas of today is the cell on which the living Irish culture is built, or the channel through which the past flows to inform the future. It may deal with deep things in the house of the scholar; in the cottage it is satisfied with legendary tales.*

**Aodh be Blacam, *Gaelic Literature Surveyed* - p 349**

*Without further preamble or explanation he fell to reciting Ossianic lays. For half an hour I sat there while his firm voice went on. After a while he changed from poetry to prose....I listened spellbound, and as I listened, it came to me suddenly that here on the last inhabited piece of European land, looking out into the Atlantic horizon, I was hearing the oldest living*

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*tradition in the British Isles. So far as the record goes, this matter in one form or another is older than the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, and yet it lives still on the lips of the peasantry, a real and vivid experience, while except for a few painful scholars, Beowulf has long passed out of memory.*

**Robin Flower The Irish Tradition - p105**

*The ancient traditions of the Celtic peoples, which on the Continent have been almost completely obliterated by successive invaders have, in Ireland, survived and been handed down as the particular inheritance of the nation.*

**R.I. Best, Introduction to his translation of The Irish Mythological Cycle by H. D'Arbois de Jubainville.**

*With depopulation, the most terrific which any country has ever experienced, on the one hand, and the spread of education, and the introduction of railroads, colleges, industrial and other educational schools, on the other - together with the rapid decay of the Irish vernacular, in which most of our legends, romantic tales, ballads, and bardic annals, the vestiges of Pagan rites, and the relics of fairy charms were preserved..... can superstitious practice continue to exist? But these matters of popular belief and folklore, these rites and legends, and superstitions, were after all, the poetry of the people, the bond that knit the peasant to the soil, and cheered and solaced many a cottier's fireside..*

**Sir William Wilde (father of Oscar Wilde), Irish Popular Superstitions - pages 10-11**

*The writer has spent much time in listening to the innumerable legends, stories and traditions which are recited in the more remote parts of this parish. They mostly refer to nothing but the fabled deeds of Fin McCoul, Ossian and the many other giants and enchanters who made Glenariff and Lurigethan hill the scene of their exploits. They are inconsistent, contradictory and absurd.*

*Many of the lower orders in the Glens neither speak nor understand a word of English and most of their stories are recited in Irish; to these the people are very fond of listening.*

*It is strange that there should be any traditions or manuscripts when the people are all of Scotch descent and did not settle in this country till the beginning of the 16th century...*

**Ordnance Survey Memoirs Layd, Co. Antrim, (1830s) - page 52**

*The people in the mountains are very superstitious and relate many marvellous and absurd stories of St. Patrick, as also about fairies, enchantments, ghosts. The old women and men will tell these stories to any person as long as they will listen to them and to express any doubt as to their veracity is considered a sure indication of ignorance.*

**Ordnance Survey Memoirs Skerry, Co. Antrim, (1830s) - page 113**

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## STORYTELLER

We often use the term “Ghost Story” to describe tales of the supernatural. But are these “Horror Stories”? The films in our series work most often in the mind of the characters and the audience, not on our senses, not frightening us by nasty scenes of blood and murder or by piercing screams and shrieks. But what about the tree-cutting scene in *'The Thorn Tree'*? If the maiden only appeared to Seán in his mind's eye, did the way it was filmed seem horrific to you? Did you find the other stories frightening? If so, why or how were they frightening?

The “bean sí” and the spectre of death in *'The Undertaker'* are presented as realities. But does the Thorn Maiden appear to Seán in *'The Thorn Tree'*, or is she conjured up in his imagination from the stories he had been told as a child? The superstition or “pisreog” becomes real in his mind.

The priest in *'The May Altar'* is baffled by the reappearance of the flowers. He tries to break with tradition, but, again, some “geis” or taboo in his subconscious preys upon his mind.

Is psychology the modern way to understand folklore?

## KEYWORDS

Folklore, Folktale, Legend, Storyteller/Seanchaí, Supernatural, Superstition/  
Pisreog, Taboo/Geis, Irish Language, English Language, Local, International,  
Imagination, Subconscious, Media, Communications, Cultural Heritage

## NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM

### English

Attainment Target 1	Talking and Listening
Attainment Target 2	Reading
Attainment Target 3	Writing

Consult the English Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets, Levels 3-10 for relevant statements.

### Cross-Curricular Themes

*'Storyteller'* should provide plenty of opportunities for CCT work. Cultural Heritage features particularly strongly throughout. EMU is often relevant, in *'The May Altar'*, for example. Grief and bereavement are topics within Health Education which arise in *'The May Altar'*. Economic Awareness issues arise in several stories.

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**General Questions and Activities** - Apply to each programme.

- General class discussion on each story. The teacher might focus on “words and images”, and the relation between the two. What were the most effective parts of the story? How well do you think the story was told; how well do you think the story was depicted?
- Divide the class into groups of about six. Let one person in each group be the storyteller. Tell the story using words and body language only. Try to make it as frightening as possible. Then write a piece about “The strangest thing that ever happened to me” or “The most mysterious moment I ever had was...”
- Let the children imagine some weird or unusual incident. Divide the class into pairs: one talks about it, the other plays the part of a reporter from the television or the local newspaper. Then swap roles.
- Ask each child to write a short report on the story for the television or local paper.
- Ask people at home or in your neighbourhood if they know any ghost stories. Tell your story to the class. Have you any explanation for what happened?
- Are there any legends connected with your area?
  - Historical Legends
  - Local Legends
  - Personal Legends
  - Religious Legends
  - Supernatural Legends
- Have a discussion about whether or not such things as ghosts, gnomes, fairies, banshees etc. really exist. What kind of evidence can the children give for their views?
- Some of the ‘*Storyteller*’ films have unexpected endings. Ask the children to rewrite the story in their own words and give it a different ending, or to write their own “Tale of the Unexpected” with a surprise ending. Remember that magical and supernatural stories can have as unusual and fantastic endings as they can imagine.
- Provide short stories with surprise endings, e.g. the stories of O. Henry.
- The teacher might want to follow ‘*Storyteller*’ up with other stories or poems dealing with the supernatural: e.g. “The Raven”, and other poems and stories by Edgar Allan Poe; “The Monkey’s Paw” by W.W. Jacobs; “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving.
- Ichabod Crane in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” was fascinated by tales of ghosts and spectres, listening to them at every opportunity. But he was really frightened by them. Have you ever read a book or seen a film that affects you like this?

*But if there was a pleasure in all this, while snugly cuddling in the chimney corner of a chamber that was all of a ruddy glow from the crackling wood fire, it was dearly purchased by the terrors of his subsequent walk homewards. What fearful shapes and shadows beset his path amidst the dim and ghastly glare of a snowy night!*

**Washington Irving** *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.*

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- The quotations from the Ordnance Survey Memoirs seem to regard the traditions and folklore as ignorant peasant superstitions. Is this a fair and informed assessment, or does it display another kind of ignorance and intolerance on the part of the Memoir writer?
- Do the Ordnance Survey Memoirs for your area give any account of storytelling? Are there any other local sources of evidence?
- Storytelling is a part of our oral tradition. How does the visual approach of television enhance the story and the drama? Discuss the effectiveness of the visual element. How successful is the narration technique together with the visual in '*Storyteller*'.
- Draw a picture with a banshee, fairy thorn, or some other such subject.

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## BOOKLIST

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