

Celtic Mythology: Primary Source Analysis

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**Source**

“One day, in winter, Deirdre’s foster-father was outside, in the snow, flaying a weaned calf for her. Deirdre saw a raven drinking the blood on the snow, and she said to Lebarcham ‘I could love a man with those three colours: hair like a raven, cheeks like blood and body like snow’”.

‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu’ (p. 260)

**Analysis**

This paper aims at analysis of the above written passage from “The exile of the Sons of Uisliu” also known as the Story of Deirdre which is a part of Ulster Circle of Irish Tales. The story is dated back to 8-9<sup>th</sup> century. In it, there is a familiar to many peoples pattern of the old king –young man (prince) opposition because of a beautiful woman Deirdre. Even before she was born there was a prophecy that she would cause many deaths to Ulaid (Ulstermen). The story of Deirdre is similar to that of Helen of Troy. Deirdre was the most beautiful woman in Ulster Kingdom and a tyrant king Conchubur wanted to take her as his wife. However, she ran away with young warrior Noisiu. The lovers were tricked back to Ulster where Noisiu and his brothers were slain. Thus, Deirdre as well as Helen of Troy caused much blood between two clans. Another similarity is seen at the end of a tale. After the death of Noisiu, Deirdre returns to her husband Conchubur. According to one of the version of myth about Helen, after Paris’s death she returns to Menelaus. In Greek mythology, Hekuba, the mother of Paris, was also told by a prophet that her son will destroy the whole kingdom and was advised to kill a child. However, she could not do it. Paris did become a reason of many battles (“The literature...”, 2006, p.52-53).

Another analogy of this myth can be found in Britain itself – the story of Gwenevere, the wife of King Arthur, and Lancelot, King Arthur’s most trusted warrior. Here again we can

see a love triangle of king – beautiful woman – young noble man. Although only Lancelot runs away, he later returns to save Gwenevere and a war between the King and his chief knight begins. The story is more complicated than that of Deirdre and at the end the lovers stay alive, however, they cannot be together and live solitary lives (Davidson, 1989, p.15).

As for the passage itself, it exploits three similes: hair black as a raven, cheeks red as blood, and body white as snow. Number “three” has sacral meaning in many cultures including the Celtic mythology. First and foremost, it symbolizes tripartite cosmos and its three components: the sky, the earth and the underworld. The latter was also interpreted by the Celts as undersea. Hence, three conditions named by Deirdre correlate with the principle of tripartite. Black as a raven belongs to the sky realm because ravens fly in the sky and birds are perceived as aerial creatures. Red as blood signifies the earth as people and animals are made of blood and live on earth in contrast to gods. Lastly, white as a snow refers to submarine dimension as snow becomes water when melted (Sayers, 2013, p.11).

This tripartite principle correlates with other Celtic concept known as a threefold death. It was usually prophesied to kings who were unjust, immoral or cowardice. A threefold Death is a triple death affecting three main parts of the body. The common motif in Celtic mythology is of a king who dies of triple death: firstly, the roof falls on him (sky dimension), than he can be wounded by a weapon (earthly blood dimension) and lastly, he can drown or unsuccessfully seek refuge in underground shelter that kills him. A threefold death is a way to restore cosmic justice (Sayers, 2013, p.12). No wonder that Deirdre’s foster father (and her future husband) tyrant king Conchubur is the one weaning a calf in a passage above. Cosmic harmony disrupted by unjust ruling can be restored by the replacement of an old king by young and noble prince. This prince Noisiu is a representation of a threefold death to Conchubur’s tyranny, as he is the one with hair as black as raven, cheeks as red as blood, and body white like snow. Similarity with Christianity is obvious knowing the importance of

tripartite for Christians symbolizing the unity of body, soul, and spirit (“The literature..”, 2004, p.53).

The first component of a trinity is a raven. Raven is traditionally one of the best known and significant symbols of Celtic and north mythology. It is indeed associated with black color as ravens symbolized darkness and death. Many Celtic war goddesses were portrayed as ravens or crows that circle above the battlefield. For that reason, ravens were also the symbols of prophecy as they could predict the outcome of a battle. This corresponds to Scandinavian war goddesses Valkyries, the daughters of the main god Odin. Although they were not portrayed as ravens, they had wings and flew above the battlefield defining which warrior will die and which not (Monaghan, 2004, p.391).

The god associated with the raven is known as Bran the Blessed who was a legendary warrior. He was beheaded but his head continued to speak after it was parted from the body. In Deirdre’s words, she spoke of a raven in reference to a head/hair. There is also an old Gaelic proverb “There is wisdom in a raven’s head”. To possess a raven’s mind means to have extra sensorial powers of predicting the future (Kneale, 20114). Here is again some analogy to Scandinavian mythology. Vikings depicted ravens on their ships in order to honor their god Odin. Odin is often portrayed with two ravens - Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory). As well as for Irish people, they were messengers that flew around the world gathering information and delivering messages (Davidson, 1989, p.17). Ravens can be found in various mythologies – Greek, Egyptian, Native American and even Japanese.

Red color is one of the most intensive colors. It is used to represent high energy and passion. In Celtic mythology, it means health. Red wool was often used against the cold in Ireland. For that reason, Deirdre compared red color of that of cheeks. In harsh climate of Ireland and Northern Europe, red cheeks would mean healthiness and physical strength. Because of its connection to a human’s health, red was also the color of life and death. For

Celts, it was also the color of earth, thus, it was associate with the main mother-goddess. As well as in many cultures, red also symbolized love and passion. The color has similar meaning in other mythologies. In Christianity, it represents love and also blood of Christ (Monaghan, 2004, p.392).

Lastly, white color is traditionally associated with purity. However, for Celtic people it was also a representation of Otherworld. There is a myth about white stag who is a messenger form the Otherworld in the world of humans. He appears when there has been an injustice or when humans broke the law of gods. He also resembles Afterlife. It can lead people to new places and new knowledge. Red combined with white was a sign of fairy magic origin. Thus, in Ireland, animals having these colors were avoided and not hunted (Monaghan, 2004, p.392). King Arthur discovers magic place of Sir Pellinore's well when he follows a white deer. White stag is interchangeable with the unicorn known in many cultures. It can be found in Hungarian, Scottish, Japanese and other mythologies. In tales about King Arthur, white stag is always an animal that cannot be caught. It symbolizes humans' strive for something bigger which always stays out of reach. In Christianity, Jesus sometimes takes the form of a white stag (Davison, 1989, p.17).

In general, Celtic mythology can be characterized by great mysticism. Celts believed that everything is interconnected and that a man and a nature around them form a unity. It is also very symbolic with many symbols meaning death or Otherworld as can be seen from the analyzed passage. All three colors together represent the Otherworld and the Triple Goddess, the Morrigan. She is known as the fierce goddess of war and death. She decides who will win the battle and who will die. However, for Celts who were famous warrior death was not connected with fear, fear of punishment and God's justice as in case of Christianity. They believed that dying in a battle would help them to reach heaven and the fiercer they would be, the more chances they would have to enter heaven. For that reason, all concepts of Celtic

mythology, as well as human life, eventually lead to death. Death is not to be feared as it is not the end but the beginning of new life.

## References

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