Introduction

Storytelling in the Celtic Tradition

Newbattle Abbey College
NC Celtic Studies
Overview

1. Explain key aspects of the Celtic storytelling tradition
   - Explain the importance of storytelling in the Celtic tradition
   - Describe a selection of storytelling techniques
   - Explain key elements of Celtic storytelling

2. Evaluate a selection of Celtic stories
   - Identify Celtic stories, making use of a selection of sources and evidence from Celtic culture
   - Carry out research into a selection of Celtic stories
   - Identify and evaluate the key elements of a selection of Celtic stories
What you need to be able to do:

- **Written work (Short descriptive answers)**
  - Explain the importance of storytelling in Celtic cultures
  - Describe five storytelling techniques
  - Identify three key elements of Celtic storytelling
  - Identify five Celtic stories

- **Performance**
  - Present an individual interpretation of one Celtic story using storytelling techniques
  - Reflect on the effectiveness of your presentation
Celtic people lived from around 600 BCE to 400 CE
- tribes were to be found spread out over great tracts of Northern Europe
- livelihoods depended so much upon nature for the success of their hunting, fishing, farming, herding, building, and crafting

pre-literate people: they did not keep written records, write books or leave notes on events or their beliefs
- As such, storytellers and others gifted with the spoken word were vital to society.
• **Celtic stories** were passed from generation to generation in the **oral, druidic tradition**
  
  • creation myths, epic tales of supernatural heroes, and stories of pagan gods and goddesses, shape-changers and magical animals

• **Celts focused their spiritual beliefs and holy practices on environmental forces, the land, and the creatures they lived amongst**

  • They worshipped every imaginable aspect of nature and their gods and goddesses were drawn from the land, the sea, rivers, springs and the mountains themselves. Their most important divinities included the sun, moon, stars, thunder, fertility and water.
• Celtic pagan religion was gradually replaced by the Christian religion

• Fortunately, many of the orally-told stories, sagas and myths were written down by Irish Christian monks before they were lost
  • It is thanks to the monks of Ireland and Wales that we have the earliest written fragments of these stories, dating back to the sixth century CE.

• stories were told and re-told from one generation to the next and the monks' manuscripts were copied and re-copied from century to century, morphing and changing with the times.
Gaelic Storytelling

- The oldest continuous tradition of oral storytelling is in Gaelic.

- Deriving from the centuries when the Gaelic world embraced Ireland and western Scotland without cultural distinction.

  - This period may stretch back into prehistory but can only be measured linguistically and historically from the colonisation of Argyll from Ulster in the 4th century until the break-up of the Gaelic aristocratic society, first in Ireland and then in Scotland in 17th and 18th centuries.
In this world, there were professional storytellers, divided into well-defined ranks –

- **Ollaimh** (professors)
- **Filì** (poets)
- **Baird** (bards)
- **Seanchaidh** (historians, storytellers)
The Seanchaidh

- The word means a bearer of ‘old lore’ or seanchas
- It was their role to know the tales, poems and history proper to their rank, recited for the entertainment and praise of the chiefs and princes
- One of their jobs was to be the genealogical guardian in order to keep the memory of long-dead ancestors fresh
- These learned classes were rewarded by their patrons
- 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 Seanchaidh
Fireside Storytelling

- When the traditional hierarchies of Scottish Gaelic society went into decline, the hearth took on a wider role.
- Storytelling was one of the main forms of fireside entertainment.
- The storyteller was held in high esteem by the folk who revered and cultivated story and song as their principal means of artistic expression.
- We know a lot about these stories because of folklorists. In the Gaelic context, one of the most important collectors was John Francis Campbell, who published 6 volumes of West Highland Tales.
The Celtic storytelling tradition embodies the following characteristics:

- Poetic and skillful tradition passed down by storytellers from generation to the next from memory
- Belief in the otherworld
- Instincts and senses, power of sign, beauty of sound
- Animals as deities - boars, deer, hinds, bulls, cows, crows, ravens, dogs, horses, salmon, swans
- Connection with landscape
- Presence of the ancestors
The Stories

We are going to focus on 3 main areas:

- Fionn and the Fianna (Fenian Cycle)
- Legends of the Saints
- Celtic Folk and Fairy Tales
Ulster Cyle

- Full of stories of cattle raids
- Quite violent!
- Táin Bó Cúailnge commonly known as The Cattle Raid of Cooley or The Táin.
- Cuchulain, the hero, is trained by the warrior queen Sgathach who lived in Skye
- The Tragic Death of the Sons of Uisneach involves exile in Scotland from where Naoise and his brothers are recalled to a treacherous death, leading in turn to the suicide of the tragic heroine Deirdre of the Sorrows
Fenian Cycle

- Collection of stories about the warriors within a military order called the Fianna

- hero was Fionn MacCumhaill
  - a mythical hunter-warrior of Irish mythology, occurring also in the mythologies of Scotland and the Isle of Man

- contained many stories of Fionn and his companions, the Fianna
  - Much of it was narrated in the voice of Fionn's son, the poet Oisín.

- Fionn and the Fianna are no more historical than Cuchulan and the Ulster warriors, since both cycles clearly concern culture heroes with magical and semi-diving powers
The Fianna

- The Fianna were an elite band of roving hunter warriors.
  - Task was to keep ancient Kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland safe.
- To be a Fian is essentially to step outside the ties of tribe and kin and to undertake special initiations into skills of hunting, fighting, music and poetry.
- High code of honour prizing skills in battle and the hunt, accomplishments in the art of peace and worthy behaviours and the care of women and children.
They were Goll mac Morna  
Fiercest of the fighting men of the Fianna  
Goll of the one eye, and that eye  
sharper than the eye of an eagle and  
He, strong in the hunt of the white deer

They were the Cailte  
Swiftest runner of the Fianna, he whose feet  
could race over the meadows or morning  
without bending the tips of the blades of grass and  
He, swift in pursuit of the white deer

They were Oisin  
Clever in the word craft, greatest of word makers  
Greatest of all poets of all lands since the dawn of time,  
He who could unravel all riddles and  
He, elegant in pursuit of the milk white hind

And they were Diarmid O Duibhne  
Most fearless of the warriors of the Fianna  
Diarmid, friend of women  
Most handsome of men  
Most generous of heart and  
He, tireless in pursuit of the beautiful white deer
Finn MacCuil and the Salmon of Knowledge

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandsstories/finnmaccoolandthesalmonofknowledge/index.asp
Celtic Fairy Belief

- The Celts believed when you died, you went to live with the fairies: therefore, your ancestors were the fairies.

- Tradition tells that the fairies are descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann, an ancient folk that were driven to the Underworld by a wave of invaders, the Gaels. The Tuatha had no other choice than to take refuge under the Sidhe, a Celtic word for the hills or mounds.

- The fairies who live in the mounds are known as the daoine Sidhe
• The **Sidhe** can be found by humans in certain times in the year, especially at Midsummer, when the daoine sidhe might be seen dancing under the moonlight.

• The **Sidhe** are considered to be a distinct race, quite separate from human beings yet who have had much contact with mortals over the centuries, and there are many documented testimonies to this.

• Belief in this race of beings who have powers beyond those of men to move quickly through the air and change their shape at will once played a huge part in the lives of people living in rural Ireland and Scotland.
"The Sidhe cannot make themselves visible to all. They are shape-changers; they appear as men or women wearing clothes of many colours, of today or of some old forgotten fashion, or they are seen as bird or beast, or as a barrel or a flock of wool. They go by us in a cloud of dust; they are as many as the blades of grass. They are everywhere; their home is in tile forths, the lisses, the ancient round grass-grown mounds."
Banshee

- The most well-known of the fairy women both in Ireland and Scotland has to be the Bean Sidhe, the Banshee.

- When any death or misfortune is about to occur in the family, she will be heard wailing her unearthly lament.

- She is more often heard than seen, though if you do catch sight of her she may be combing her long hair with a silver comb.
Cailleach

- Many spirits of rivers and mountains in Scotland appear in the shape of an old hag, the Cailleach.

- The most famous is the Cailleach bheara who washes her clothes in the whirlpool of the Corryvreckan off Jura, and rides across the land in the form of the 'night mare'.