

Cú Chulainn



Cú Chulainn (pronounced “Koo Hullin”) is a hero in Irish mythology. Like many other mythological heroes, such as Achilles and Heracles of Greek myth, Cú Chulainn is a demigod—the child of a god and a human. He has the ability to turn into a terrifying, near invincible monster during battle. However, as a monster, he goes into a frenzy and does not recognize friend from foe.

Cú Chulainn’s mother is Deichtine, the princess from Ulster, an area in northern Ireland, and his father is Lugh, a god of light and healing, similar to the Greek god Apollo. Cú Chulainn spends his youth with a foster family and learns how to be a great warrior.

The Hound of Culann

A famous legend of Cú Chulainn shows how he earned his name, which means “Culann’s Hound.” When he was born, he was named Sétanta. When Sétanta is a boy, the king of Ulster is impressed by his skills as a warrior and invites him to a feast held at the home of Culann the Smith. Sétanta arrives late to the feast. The king forgets about him and does not stop Culann from leaving his ferocious hound to protect the house while they eat.

When Sétanta came to the Smith’s home, the hound attacks him, and he kills it in self defense. The guests come to see what happened, and Culann is devastated. Sétanta swears to raise a new hound to replace it, and to guard Culann’s home himself in the meantime. From then on, Sétanta is called Cú Chulainn.

Use a dictionary to find the definitions of the words below. Circle the adjectives that describe Cú Chulainn:

feeble

stalwart

faint

gallant

cowardly

base

timid

daring

dutiful

noble

audacious



Táin Bó Cúailnge: An Irish Epic

Táin Bó Cúailnge, which means “The Cattle Raid of Cooley” and is also called The Táin (pronounced “toy-n”), is an Irish epic tale about a war in the 1st century A.D. between the lands of Ulster and Connacht, and the legendary hero who fought for Ulster, Cú Chulainn.



Ailill and Medb were king and queen of Connacht. One day, as they sat on their thrones, they began comparing their riches. In every possession the king and queen were equally wealthy, except for one thing—King Ailill had a great bull called Finnbhennach. In the whole world, only one other bull was worth as much as Finnbhennach, and its name was Donn Cúailnge. Donn Cúailnge belonged to Dáire mac Fiachna, the cattlelord of Ulster.

Queen Medb became jealous of her husband’s wealth, and sent messengers to negotiate with Dáire to keep his legendary bull in her own herd for a year. At first, Dáire was willing, but when he learned that Medb planned to take the bull by force even if he didn’t accept the offer, he was offended and sent the messengers away.

So the queen of Connacht raised up an army and rode out with them to capture the bull. Meanwhile, the entire Ulster army was cursed with a crippling illness by the goddess Macha, who hated the Ulster king. None could lift a sword except for one valiant warrior, Cú Chulainn, who was only seventeen years old.

Cú Chulainn met the army out on the ford, and invoked the right of single combat—fighting one person at a time. Queen Medb sent man after man to face him, and he defeated every one. Cú Chulainn defended Ulster this way for many months.





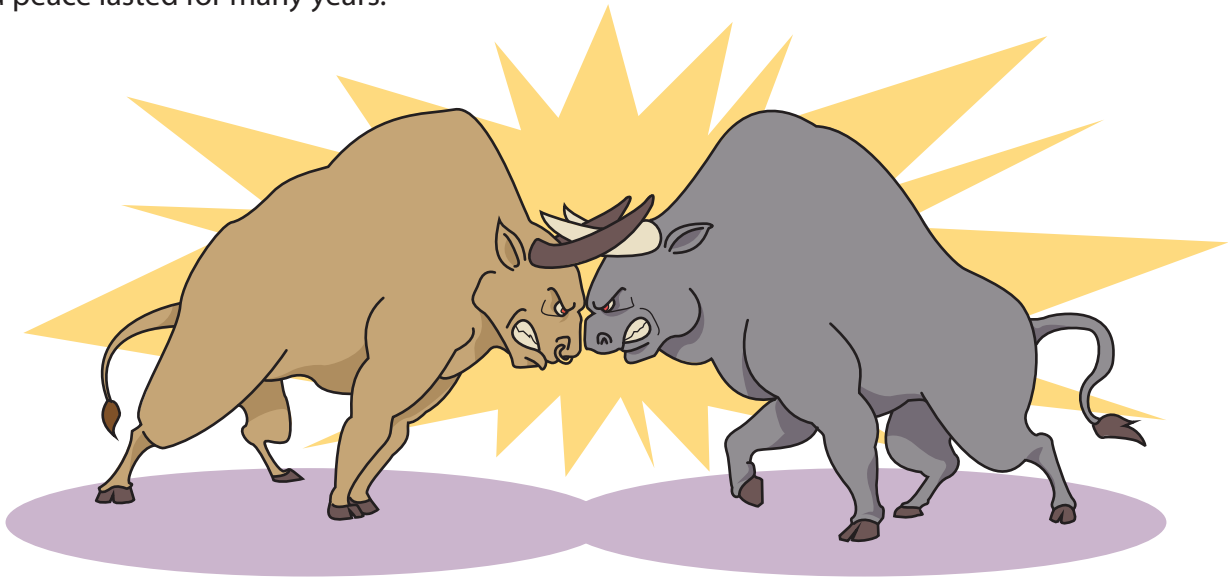
Táin Bó Cúailnge: An Irish Epic (Continued)

After Cú Chulainn's attack, Queen Medb sent his foster father, Fergus, to fight him. Not wanting to harm Fergus, Cú Chulainn made a deal with him that he would surrender if Fergus surrendered when they met again. Cú Chulainn won the next battle against his foster brother, Ferdiad, after three days of fighting.

The Ulstermen began to recover from their illness. When their strength returned, they prepared for a final battle to put an end to Queen Medb's plans. Fergus led the Connacht army and they fought the Ulstermen as Cú Chulainn was recovering from wounds. Finally, Cú Chulainn joined the battle. Fergus kept his promise and withdrew his forces, causing the Connacht army to retreat. The Ulstermen won the war, but Queen Medb was still able to capture the bull, Donn Cuailnge.



However, when Donn Cuailnge and King Aillil's bull, Finnbhennach, met, they fought, ramming their long horns into one another. Although Donn Cuailnge won, both bulls died from the wounds they had given each other. Aillil and Medb realized that their war had been futile, and that they must make peace with Cú Chulainn and the Ulstermen. The Connacht people returned to their home, and peace lasted for many years.





Reading Comprehension

1. Why did Fergus fight Cú Chulainn?

Queen Medb sent him to fight Cu Chulainn so he could claim the bull from Ulster for the queen.

2. How does Ulster win the war against Connacht?

Fergus had previously promised to surrender the next time he met Cu Chulainn. In the final battle, when Cu Chulainn returned to the war, Fergus kept his promise and withdrew his forces. This caused the Connacht army to retreat and the Ulster army to win.

3. Is Cú Chulainn similar to any heroes in other stories? What are some qualities he has in common with other well-known heroes from ancient or modern times?

Student answers will vary, but may include: Cu Chulainn is similar to many other heroes, like Hercules. Both Cu Chulainn and Hercules were born into nobility. They share traits of bravery and loyalty, and both engaged in battles and had other turmoil.

4. Circle the adjectives that describe Queen Medb.

placid

idle

avaricious

relentless

formidable

imperious

covetous

altruistic

blithe



Finish the picture by drawing Cú Chulainn's superhero costume.

