

“Deirdre’s Lamentations” (Lady Gregory’s 1902 Version)

[Introduction: The episode here is taken from the conclusion of the story formally known as “The Sons of Uisneach” but better known as the story of “Deirdre of the Sorrows” after the beautiful enchantress at its heart. In Lady Gregory’s telling, the warrior-hero Fergus accepts a dinner from a his liege-lord of Conchubar which puts him under a *geis* [honour-debt] to bring Deirdre and the Sons of Usnach (Uisliu) back to Ireland from Scotland with promises of safety, a treacherous mission which he reluctantly fulfills. Readers of the story know from the first chapter that Deirdre was doomed to tragedy by her beauty from childhood—a fact made known when she sees a black raven on white snow. Deirdre has run away from her husband, the old king Conchubar at his royal palace of Emain Macha in Ulster, taking with her the young warrior Naoise, whom she has put under a spell. Naoise and she become passionate lovers. They are accompanied on their travels by his loyal brothers Ainnle and Ardan in spite of their tribal fealty to Conchubar. When the king hears that Deirdre is in Scotland he sends the now-aged Fergus to trick her into returning so that he can reclaim her as his bride. After the deaths of Naoise and his brothers, Deirdre kills herself, preferring to be buried with Naoise and the others than live on with the old king. In a similar story, though without the suicide motif, known as “The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne, Fionn Mac Cumhaill, a great hero, is the old king. The ending of that story is set at Ben Bulbin, an outstanding feature of the landscape in the West of Ireland in the County of Sligo which lies on the Atlantic coast. There Diarmuid is gored by a huge boar and dies because Fionn refuses him the healing water from a nearby magic well and reclaims Grainne as his bride. Both legend became the stuff of modern legends, but the legend of Deirdre—which has an aspect of Greek tragedy due to its suicide-ending—became the subject of a wonderful verse-play by John Millington Synge in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909), was completed by W. B. Yeats after Synge’s death in that year, following long and painful illness. It is the clearest example of Irish mythology furnishing material for modern literary art. BS.]

[...]

“It will be safe for you to come with me,” said Fergus. “It will be safe indeed,” said Naoise, “and we will go with you to Ireland; and though there were no trouble beneath the sun, but a man to be far from his own land, there is little delight in peace and a long sleep to a man that is an exile. It is a pity for the man that is an exile; it is little his honour, it is great his grief, for it is he will have his share of wandering.”

It was not with Deirdre’s will Naoise said that, and she was greatly against going with Fergus. And she said: “I had a dream last night of the three sons of Usnach, and they bound and put in the grave by Conchubar of the Red Branch.” But Naoise said: “Lay down your dream, Deirdre, on the heights of the hills, lay down your dream on the sailors of the sea, lay down your dream on the rough grey stones, for we will give peace and we will get it from the king of the world and from Conchubar.” But Deirdre spoke again, and it is what she said: “There is the howling of dogs in my ears; a vision of the night is before my eyes, I see Fergus away from us, I see Conchubar without mercy in his dun; I see Naoise without strength in battle; I see Ainnle without his loud-sounding shield; I see Ardan without shield or breastplate, and the Hill of Atha without delight; I see Conchubar asking for blood; I see Fergus caught with hidden lies; I see Deirdre crying with tears, I see Deirdre crying with tears.”

“A thing that is displeasing to me, and that I would never give in to,” said Fergus, “is to listen to the howling of dogs, and to the dreams of women; and since Conchubar, the High King, has sent a message of friendship, it would not be right for you to refuse it.” “It would not be right indeed,” said Naoise, “and we will go with you to-morrow.” And Fergus gave his word, and he said, “If all the men of Ireland were against you, it would not profit them, for neither shield nor sword or a helmet itself would be any help or protection to them against you, and I myself to be with you.” “That is true,” said Naoise, “and we will go with you to Ireland.”

They spent the night there until morning, and then they went where the ships were, and they went on the sea, and a good many of their people with them, and Deirdre looked back on the land of Alban, and it is what she said: “My love to you, O land to the east, and it goes ill with me to leave you; for it is pleasant are your bays and your harbours and your wide flowery plains and your green-sided hills; and little need was there for us to leave you.” And she made this complaint: “Dear to me is that land,

that land to the east, Alban, with its wonders; I would not have come from it hither but that I came with Naoise.

“Dear to me, Dun Fiodhaigh and Dun Fionn; dear is the dun above them; dear to me mis Droignach, dear to me Dun Suibhne. O Coil Cuan! Ochone! Coil Cuan! where Ainnle used to come. My grief! it was short I thought his stay there with Naoise in Western Alban. Glen Laoi, O Glen Laoi, where I used to sleep under soft coverings; fish and venison and badger’s flesh, that was my portion in Glen Laoi. Glen Masan, my grief! Glen Masan! high its hart’s-tongue, bright its stalks; we were rocked to pleasant sleep over the wooded harbour of Masan. Glen Archan, my grief! Glen Archan, the straight valley of the pleasant ridge; never was there a young man more light-hearted than my Naoise used to be in Glen Archan. Glen Eitche, my grief! Glen Eitche, it was there I built my first house; beautiful were the woods on our rising; the home of the sun is Glen Eitche. Glen-da-Rua, my grief! Glen-da-Rua, my love to every man that belongs to it; sweet is the voice of the cuckoo on the bending branch on the hill above Glen-da-Rua. Dear to me is Droighin over the fierce strand, dear are its waters over the clean sand; I would never have come out from it at all but that I came with my beloved!”

After she had made that complaint they came to Dun Borach, and Borach gave three fond kisses to Fergus and to the sons of Usnach along with him. It was then Borach said he had a feast laid out for Fergus, and that it was geasa for him to leave it until he would have eaten it. But Fergus reddened with anger from head to foot, and it is what he said: “It is a bad thing you have done, Borach, laying out a feast for me, and Conchubar to have made me give my word that as soon as I would come to Ireland, whether it would be by day or in the night-time, I would send on the sons of Usnach to Emain Macha.” “I hold you under bonds,” said Borach, “to stop and use the feast.”

Then Fergus asked Naoise what should he do about the feast. “You must choose,” said Deirdre, “whether you will forsake the children of Usnach or the feast, and it would be better for you to refuse the feast than to forsake the sons of Usnach.” “I will not forsake them,” said he, “for I will send my two sons, Fair-Haired Iollan and Rough-Red Buinne, with them to Emain Macha.” “On my word,” said Naoise, “that is a great deal to do for us; for up to this no other person ever protected us but ourselves.” And he went out of the place in great anger; and Ainnle, and Ardan, and Deirdre, and the two sons of Fergus followed him, and they left Fergus dark and sorrowful after them. But for all that, Fergus was full sure that if all the provinces of Ireland would go into one council, they would not consent to break the pledge he had given.

[The sons of Usnach are murdered by Conchubar and laid in a grave together.]

[T]he sons of Usnach, after that they made a good protection with their shields, and they put Deirdre in the middle and linked the shields around her, and they gave three leaps out over the walls of Emain, and they killed three hundred men in that sally.

When Conchubar saw that, he went to Cathbad, the Druid, and said to him: “Go, Cathbad, to the sons of Usnach, and work enchantment on them; for unless they are hindered they will destroy the men of Ulster for ever if they go away in spite of them; and I give the word of a true hero, they will get no harm from me, but let them only make agreement with me.” When Cathbad heard that, he agreed, believing him, and he went to the end of his arts and his knowledge to hinder the sons of Usnach, and he worked enchantment on them, so that he put the likeness of a dark sea about them, with hindering waves. And when Naoise saw the waves rising he put up Deirdre on his shoulder, and it is how the sons of Usnach were, swimming on the ground as they were going out of Emain; yet the men of Ulster did not dare to come near them until their swords had fallen from their hands. But after their swords fell from their hands, the sons of Usnach were taken. And when they were taken, Conchubar asked of the children of Durthacht to kill them. But the children of Durthacht said they would not do that. There was a young man with Conchubar whose name was Maine, and his surname Rough-Hand, son of the king of the fair Norwegians, and it is Naoise had killed his father and his two brothers; Athrac and Triathrach were their names. And he said he himself would kill the sons of Usnach. “If that is so,” said Ardan, “kill me the first, for I am younger than my brothers, so that I will not see my brothers killed.” “Let him not

be killed but myself,” said Ainnle. “Let that not be done,” said Naoise, “for I have a sword that Manannan, son of Lir, gave me, and the stroke of it leaves nothing after it, track nor trace; and strike the three of us together, and we will die at the one time.” “That is well,” said they all, “and let you lay down your heads,” they said. They did that, and Maine gave a strong quick blow of the sword on the three necks together on the block, and struck the three heads off them with one stroke; and the men of Ulster gave three loud sorrowful shouts, and cried aloud about them there.

As for Deirdre, she cried pitifully, wearily, and tore her fair hair, and she was talking on the sons of Usnach and on Alban, and it is what she said: “A blessing eastward to Alban from me; good is the sight of her bays and valleys, pleasant was it to sit on the slopes of her hills, where the sons of Usnach used to be hunting.

“One day, when the nobles of Scotland were drinking with the sons of Usnach, to whom they owed their affection, Naoise gave a kiss secretly to the daughter of the lord of Duntreon. He sent her a frightened deer, wild, and a fawn at its foot; and he went to visit her coming home from the host of Inverness. When myself heard that, my head filled full of jealousy; I put my boat on the waves, it was the same to me to live or to die. They followed me swimming, Ainnle and Ardan, that never said a lie; they turned me back again, two that would give battle to a hundred; Naoise gave me his true word, he swore three times with his arms as witness, he would never put vexation on me again, until he would go from me to the hosts of the dead.

“Och! if she knew to-night, Naoise to be under a covering of clay, it is she would cry her fill, and it is I would cry along with her.”

After she had made this complaint, seeing they were all taken up with one another, Deirdre came forward on the lawn, and she was running round and round, up and down, from one to another, and Cuchulain met her, and she told him the story from first to last, how it had happened to the sons of Usnach. It is sorrowful Cuchulain was for that, for there was not in the world a man was dearer to him than Naoise. And he asked who killed him. “Maine Rough Hand,” said Deirdre. Then Cuchulain went away, sad and sorrowful, to Dundealgan.

After that Deirdre lay down by the grave, and they were digging earth from it, and she made this lament after the sons of Usnach: “Long is the day without the sons of Usnach; it was never wearisome to be in their company; sons of a king that entertained exiles; three lions of the Hill of the Cave. Three darlings of the women of Britain; three hawks of Slieve Cuilenn; sons of a king served by valour, to whom warriors did obedience. The three mighty bears; three lions of the fort of Conrach; three sons of a king who thought well of their praise; three nurslings of the men of Ulster. Three heroes not good at homage; their fall is a cause of sorrow; three sons of the sister of a king; three props of the army of Cuailgne. Three dragons of Dun Monad, the three valiant men from the Red Branch; I myself will not be living after them, the three that broke hard battles.

“Three that ‘were brought up by Aoife, to whom lands were under tribute; three pillars in the breach of battle; three pupils that were with Scathach. Three pupils that were with Uathach; three champions that were lasting in might; three shining sons of Usnach; it is weariness to be without them. The High King of Ulster, my first betrothed, I forsook for love of Naoise; short my life will be after him; I will make keening at their burial. That I would live after Naoise let no one think on the earth I will not go on living after Ainnle and after Ardan. After them I myself will not live; three that would leap through the midst of battle; since my beloved is gone from me I will cry my fill over his grave. O young man, digging the new grave, do not make the grave narrow; I will be along with them in the grave, making lamentation and ochemes! Many the hardship I met with along with the three heroes; I suffered want of house, want of fire, it is myself that used not to be troubled. Their three shields and their spears made a bed for me often. O young man, put their three swords close over their grave. There three hounds, their three hawks, will be from this time Without huntsmen; three helpers of every battle; three pupils of Conan Cearnach. The three leashes of those three hounds have brought a sigh from my heart; it is I had the care of them, the sight of them is a cause of grief. I was never one day alone to the day of the making of this grave, though it is often that myself and yourselves were in loneliness. My sight is gone

from me with looking at the grave of Naoise; it is short till my life will leave me, and those who would have keened me do not live. Since it is through me they were betrayed I will be tired out with sorrow; it is a pity I was not in the earth before the sons of Usnach were killed. Sorrowful was my journey with Fergus, betraying me to the Red Branch; we were deceived all together with his sweet, flowery words. I left the delights of Ulster for the three heroes that were bravest; my life will not be long, I myself am alone after them. I am Deirdre without gladness, and I at the end of my life; since it is grief to be without them, I myself will not be long after them.”

After that complaint Deirdre loosed out her hair, and threw herself on the body of Naoise before it was put in the grave and gave three kisses to him, and when her mouth touched his blood, the colour of burning sods came into her cheeks, and she rose up like one that had lost her wits, and she went on through the night till she came to where the waves were breaking on the strand. And a fisherman was there and his wife, and they brought her into their cabin and sheltered her, and she neither smiled nor laughed, nor took food, drink, or sleep, nor raised her head from her knees, but crying always after the sons of Usnach.

But when she could not be found at Emain, Conchubar sent Levarcham to look for her, and to bring her back to his palace, that’ he might make her his wife. And Levarcham found her in the fisherman’s cabin, and she bade her come back to Emain, where she would have protection and riches and all that she would ask. And she gave her this message she brought from Conchubar: “Come up to my house, O branch with the dark eye-lashes, and there need be no fear on your fair face, of hatred or of jealousy or of reproach.”

And Deirdre said: “I will not go up to his house, for it is not land or earth or food I am wanting, or gold or silver or horses, but leave to go to the grave where the sons of Usnach are lying, till I give the three honey kisses to their three white, beautiful bodies.” And she made this complaint: “Make keening for the heroes that were killed on their coming to Ireland; stately they used to be, coming to the house, the three great sons of Usnach. The sons of Usnach fell in the fight like three branches that were growing straight and nice, and they destroyed in a heavy storm that left neither bud nor twig of them. Naoise, my gentle, well-learned comrade, make no delay in crying him with me; cry for Ardan that killed the wild boars, cry for Ainnie whose strength was great. It was Naoise that would kiss my lips, my first man and my first sweetheart; it was Ainnie would pour out my drink, and it was Ardan would lay my pillow. Though sweet to you is the mead that is drunk by the soft-living son of Ness, the food of the sons of Usnach was sweeter to me all through my lifetime. Whenever Naoise would go out to hunt through the woods or the wide plains, all the meat he would bring back was better to me than honey. Though sweet to you are the sounds of pipes and of trumpets, it is truly I say to the king, I have heard music that is sweeter. Delightful to Conchubar, the king, are pipes and trumpets; but the singing of the sons of Usnach was more delightful to me. It was Naoise had the deep sound of the waves in his voice; it was the song of Ardan that was good, and the voice of Ainnie towards their green dwelling-place. Their birth was beautiful and their blossoming, as they grew to the strength of manhood; sad is the end to-thy, the sons of Usnach to be cut down. Dear were their pleasant words, dear their young, high strength; in their going through the plains of Ireland there was a welcome before the coming of their strength. Dear their grey eyes that were loved by women, many looked on them as they went; when they went freely searching through the woods, their steps were pleasant on the dark mountain. I do not sleep at any time, and the colour is gone from my face; there is no sound can give me delight since the sons of Usnach do not come. I do not sleep through the night; my senses are scattered away from me, I do not care for food or drink. I have no welcome to-day for the pleasant drink of nobles, or ease, or comfort, or delight, or a great house, or the palace of a king. Do not break the strings of my heart as you took hold of my young youth, Conchubar; though my darling is dead, my love is strong to live. What is country to me, or land, or lordship? What are swift horses? What are jewels and gold? Och! it is I will be lying to-night on the strand like the beautiful sons of Usnach.”

So Levarcham went back to Conchubar to tell him what way Deirdre was, and that she would not come with her to Emain Macha.

And when she was gone, Deirdre went out on the strand, and she found a carpenter making an oar for a boat, and making a mast for it, clean and straight, to put up a sail to the wind. And when she saw him making it, she said: "It is a sharp knife you have, to cut the oar so clean and so straight, and if you will give it to me," she said, "I will give you a ring of the best gold in Ireland for it, the ring that belonged to Naoise, and that was with him through the battle and through the fight; he thought much of it in his lifetime; it is pure gold, through and through." So the carpenter took the ring in his hand, and the knife in the other hand, and he looked at them together, and he gave her the knife for the ring, and for her asking and her tears. Then Deirdre went close to the waves, and she said: Since the other is not with me now, I will spend no more of my lifetime without him." And with that she drove the black knife into her side, but she drew it out again and threw it in the sea to her right hand, the way no one would be blamed for her death.

Then Conchubar came down to the strand and five hundred men along with him, to bring Deirdre away to Emain Macha, but all he found before him was her white body on the ground, and it without life. And it is what he said: A thousand deaths on the time I brought death on my sister's children; now I am myself without Deirdre, and they themselves are without life. They were my sister's children, the three brothers I vexed with blows, Naoise, and Ainnle, and Ardan; they have died along with Deirdre."

And they took her white, beautiful body, and laid it in a grave, and a flagstone was raised over her grave, and over the grave of the sons of Usnach, and their names were written in Ogham, and keening was made for their burial. [...]