

The folk image of the fairy in Irish poetry
Tsapiv A.O.
Kherson State University, Kherson, Ukraine
*Corresponding author. E-mail: alyatsapiv@i.ua

Abstract. The research focuses on revealing peculiarities, functions on symbolic meaning of folk images in Irish poetry. The investigation conveys the evolution of the image of the fairy: from a scaring banshee into a magic fairy. It is claimed that folk images in Irish poetry are closely connected with pagan believes, superstitions of peasantry and the desire of authors to reconnect to Irish past, ethnic specifics and mentality.

Key words: folk image, the fairy, Irish poetry, mythology.

The research aims at revealing the genesis of folk images (the image of the Fairy) in Irish verse of the 19th century. It is claimed that fairies have evaluated their image from folk into a fairy one. Case study of the research are poems of William Allingham, Sir Samuel Fergusson, Edward Walsh and W. B. Yeats.

Folk and fairy images in poetry and fairy tales have been investigated by scholars [2;3;11;12], thus, linguistic properties of their realization and their genesis haven't been specifically learned.

Folk images in Irish poetry are the key to native history, mentality and ethnic specifics. To convey the importance of folk images of Irish poetry is invaluable to the direction of the research.

Irish peasantry always believed in miraculous, superstitious things. The Irish believed in the existence of nature spirits: *pooka, gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, undines*. As a rule each spirit embodied natural element: earth, water, air and fire [9, p. 13].

The Oxford dictionary esteems the fairy as “a small imaginary being of human form that has magical powers” [6, p. 319], Macmillan essential dictionary deems that it's “an imaginary creature with magic powers that looks like a small person with wings” [5 p. 249], thus these are contemporary views on fairies. In mythology, they are creatures from the other world. The Irish word for *fairy* is *sheehogue* [sidheóg], a diminutive of “shee” in banshee. Fairies are *deenee shee* [daoine sidhe] (fairy people) [9, p. 13-14]. They are believed to have supernatural powers, strong influence on the consciousness of people. Their appearance: pale women with long white hair and red eyes, that seems more scaring than magic. When a scream of a banshee is heard – it means some misfortune will happen or someone shall die.

Fairies are the creations of pagan society of Ireland before Christianization took place. They embodied the beliefs of people both in the ethnic belonging and religious views.

William Allingham, an Irish poet, had a great interest in folklore. In his verse there is the reconnecting to the Irish past—through rehabilitation of native mythology [2, p. 20]. The belief in power of fairies is described in his poem “The fairies”. Fairies had a power to take away mortals and bring them to *the other* world :

*They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
Her friends were all gone.
They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought that she was fast asleep,
But she was dead with sorrow.
They have kept her ever since
Deep within the lake,
On a bed of flag-leaves,
Watching till she wake*

A girl was stolen by fairies and as a human from *this* world she couldn't sustain life in the *world of mystic* creatures. She died of sorrow but they didn't notice she was dead. The world of fairies is the world of *eternal* life for spirits not for human. The girl remained young and beautiful as she used to be in her world, her body was unchanged, but her soul escaped from it. The life of fairies and people has different time measures, we have no idea how long the girl stayed with the fairies ‘ cause for this time all her friends died.

These lines are full of superstitions the Irish believed in:

*By the craggy hill-side,
Through the mosses bare,
They have planted **thorn-trees**
For pleasure here and there.*

*Is any man so daring
As dig them up in spite,
He shall find their **sharpest thorns**
In his bed at night [1].*

Fairies lived in forests with thorn-trees. The image of a *thorn tree* awakens the archetype of the Tree of life. It reflects the measure between the world of human and the world of spirits. People have created these superstitions themselves: “...**They have planted thorn-trees for pleasure here and there**”. But if these beliefs are strong and are deep in the consciousness they manage the whole life and *interfere* this world: “**He shall find their sharpest thorns in his bed at night**”. The bed is a part of people’s life and a place for the rest and recreation. If thorns of spirit world are in the bedroom, they don’t let a person forget about them even when the mind is asleep.

The same idea of fairies’ power we can find in the poems of Sir Samuel Ferguson “The fairy well of Lagnanay”. A girl was betrayed by her beloved and left alone. She suffers and cries for her broken heart:

*“O listen, Ellen, sister dear
Is there no help at all for me,
But only ceaseless sigh and tear?
Why did not he who left me here,
With stolen hope steal memory?” [4].*

The life without a beloved seems senseless for the girl and she wishes a death: “*I’ll go away to Sleamish hill, I’ll **pluck the fairy hawthorn-tree,** \ And let the **spirits work their will;** \ I care not if for good or ill, \ So they but lay the memory \ Which all my heart is haunting still!*”. Here the image of a thorn tree (hawthorn) embodies the **portal** between the world of people (life) and the world of fairies (death). The girl seems fearless, ready to pluck! a thorn tree to make spirits see her and take her away. In the poem the spirits are given the main power – to take the life of mortals, to become those who give life or death.

Later Folk tales about fairies focus on finding magical instruments, saving spells, extraordinary technologies or powerful people and animals that will enable people to resist their magic. There were superstitions that fairies steal pretty children and take them to their land. Instead they leave sickly fairy children. Whether children were happy with fairies or not was unknown, but still it was believed that fairies could be good or evil. In a folk tale by T. Crofton Cooker. “The brewery of egg-shells” mother believes that her true child was stolen: “*Mrs. Sullivan fancied that her youngest **child had been exchanged by “fairies theft,”** and certainly appearances warranted such a conclusion: for in one night her healthy, blue-eyed boy had become shriveled up into almost nothing, and never ceased squalling and crying*” [9, p.85]. Mrs. Sullivan suffered a lot and could do nothing, this alien child still resembled her own child. Once she meets a cunning woman, well known about the country by the name of Ellen Leah (or Gary Ellen). That woman could tell where the dead were, and what was good for the rest of their souls; and could charm away warts and wens, and do a great many wonderful things of the same nature. Ellen gives Mrs. Sullivan an advice how to learn whether it is her own child, if it’s not – a brewery of egg-shells will discover it. Ellen told Mrs. Sullivan to put down the big pot, full of water, on the fire, and make it boil like mad; then get a dozen newlaid eggs, break them, and keep the shells, but throw away the rest; when that is done, put the shells in the pot of boiling water, and she will soon know whether it is her own boy or a fairy. If she finds that it is a fairy in the cradle, she should take the red-hot poker and cram it down his ugly throat. This recipe helps a woman, she gets her dear child back and becomes happier than ever.

William Butler Yeats, a famous Irish poet, in his poem “The stolen child” creates a different world of fairies – a Fairyland as an alternative to a real life, an escape to something different and magic:

*Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we’ve hid our faery vats,
Full of berry
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,*

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand [9, p. 100].

The archetypes WATER and A TREE OF LIFE are actualized via implicit senses of the nominative units “*Come away, O human child! To the waters and the wild*”. The Irish mythology treats water as portal to the other world, water has magic power, it is strong and mysterious. To get to the fairy land one can by river. *The wilds* symbolize in the poem wild forest, where fairies are believed to live. A child is asked to go with fairies, hand in hand, trustful, to the Fairyland. In the lines: “We’ve hidden our faery vats, full of berrys and of reddest stolen cherries” the verbal image *vat of cherries and berrys* symbolizes knowledge, prosperity and wisdom. The world of fairies seems friendly and peaceful. It is even more pleasant than the world of mortals and the child chooses it.

Delicate beauty and ample imagination run through the poems of Edward Walsh, a village schoolmaster, who was one of the members of the Young Ireland movement [8, p. 23]. Edward Walsh made a translation of and Irish lullaby and made it sound melodic and magic “The fairy nurse”:

*Sweet babe! a golden cradle holds thee,
And soft the snow-white fleece enfolds thee;
In airy bower I’ll watch thy sleeping,
Where branchy trees to the breeze are sweeping.
Shuheen, sho, lulo! lo!*

This lullaby is sang to a baby by fairies. A baby is sleeping in his golden cradle and the fairy is singing to him tenderly: *sweet babe, snow-white fleece enfolds thee*. The image of the *airy bower* embodies magic power of fairies to fly in the air, as if they are angels that protect children. The Fairy says she loves the baby not less than his mortal mother does: “*Rest thee, babe! I love thee dearly, And as thy mortal mother nearly*”. In these lines the fairy mentions that all misfortunes of mortal private life, relationship, quarrels and partings of adults are unimportant:

*When mothers languish broken-hearted,
When young wives are from husbands parted,
Ah! little think the keeners lonely,
They weep some time-worn fairy only.
Shuheen sho, lulo lo!*

The fairy calls the time of weeping *time-worn*, as something uninteresting.

*Rest thee, babe! for soon thy slumbers
Shall flee at the magic’s koelshie’s numbers;
In airy bower I’ll watch thy sleeping,
Where branchy trees to the breeze are sweeping.
Shuheen sho, lulo, lo! [10]*

The voice of a fairy (banshee) that once was considered horrible and death approaching *turns into* a sweet child’s melody, full with love and tenderness. The fairy in “The fairy nurse” is a caring and loving creature, singing magic music (Ceól-sidhe — i. e., fairy music).

Folk elements and characters in folktales and poems appear regularly in story after story. They become *motifs* : wishes are granted, magic objects, such as rings, beans, are standard props in many tales. The longer and more involved the tale – the more motifs. The folk images of fairies actualized in Irish poetry transform from scaring spirits with extraordinary powers into magic creatures helping people and loving children. Fairies are immortals and are over death and life haste. Folk fairies served the prototypes of magic fairies in children’s literature. In stories for children fairies are friendly and helping. Further investigations can be focused on revealing linguistic and cognitive peculiarities of folk images in fairy tales for children (children’s literature).

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Фольклорный образ Феи в ирландской поэзии

Цапив А.О.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию особенностей, символических значений и функций фольклорных образов в ирландских поэтических текстах. Прослеживается эволюция образа феи: от устрашающей банши – до магического и волшебного существа. Фольклорные образы являются созданием и предрассудками языческих крестьян. Фольклорные образы в поэтическом тексте служат способом воссоздания специфики менталитета, этнокультурных традиций и истории Ирландии.

Ключевые слова : феи, фольклорный образ, ирландская поэзия, мифология.