

PORTAL TO CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

In other sections, we've examined the influence of Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology on the Harry Potter books, and then learned a little more about each of them with stories about their gods, goddesses, and heroes. One other major mythology influences the books—Celtic mythology. Celtic mythology was the belief system held by the people of Britain before it was ever even a far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire.

The Celtic people were not a unified group of people, nor did they live in one general area like the Greeks. The Celtic world consisted of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, West England, some areas of France, Germany, and even down into Spain and Italy. When we think of the Celts today we usually think of the Irish, Welsh, Scottish, or English. Because they were not a unified group of people, they did not have a unified mythology. There is no one creation myth as we see with the Greeks or the Norse, nor is there one pantheon of gods and goddesses. The Celtic gods and goddesses had many different names and aspects, depending on where they came from. Some carried over from land to land and from people to people. The god Lug, for example, was a god popular from Ireland all the way down into southern France and Spain. Others were only popular in one particular area. For example, there are many gods and goddesses and heroes specific to Ireland or Wales. Another way in which Celtic mythology differs is that it ultimately became influenced by the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire conquered much of Europe, including France and Britain, and so its influence is felt on the Celtic gods and goddesses. In some areas a local Celtic god was subsumed by the Roman one and people turned, for instance, to worshiping Mercury instead of Lug. The one exception was in Ireland where they did have a distinct pantheon and a creation story. The island of Ireland was a little more isolated than the Continent or even England, and so the people there were less influenced by other cultures or by the Roman Empire.

In This Section we'll Learn About:

- Celtic Gods and Goddesses
- Merlin and the Druids
- Gods and Humans Who Transform
- Irish Creation Story

Celtic Gods and Goddesses

The following are some of the more popular gods and goddesses. We see them regularly in stories and in art, or they are considered "pan Celtic," meaning we see them throughout the Celtic world. Where appropriate I have given the Roman equivalent. They are in alphabetical order because no one god is the highest or leader of the gods, like the Greek Zeus or the Norse Odin.

Aengus Og—"Angus the Young." Irish god of love.

- Also the god of youth and beauty.
- One of the Tuatha De Danaan (thoo'a-haw day dah'-nawn)—a group of Irish gods.
- His father was the Dagda.
- Possessed the sword, Moralltach, "Great Fury."

Bel/Belinus/Belenos—"the shining god." He is a sun god.

- Also considered a fire god.
- He is one of the gods known and worshiped throughout the Celtic world from Ireland all the way down to Italy!
- His symbols are the wheel and the horse.

- His festival is Beltane, a celebration in May of life, fertility, fire, and the sun.
- His Roman equivalent is Apollo.

Bran—a Welsh god of battle.

- He is associated with the raven, because ravens were found on battlefields.
- Leads spirits of the dead to the underworld.
- Patron of the arts.
- Also known as a god of wisdom and leadership.
- He is well known for his part in a story that involved a magic cauldron.
- His sister is Branwen.

Branwen—Welsh raven goddess of battle.

- Her name means either "white raven" or "blessed raven."
- Like her brother Bran, she leads dead souls to the underworld.
- She is featured in the story of Bran's magic cauldron.

Brigid/Brigit—she is a goddess of healing, and especially associated with healing springs and sacred waters.

- Goddess of fertility, childbirth and motherhood.
- Strangely, she is also a goddess of smithcraft and martial arts.
- Her shrine is near an oak tree, and so she was important to the Druids.
- Brigid is sometimes considered the same goddess as Danu, the mother goddess of the Tuatha De Danaan.
- Christians know her as St. Brigid.
- Brigid is celebrated on February 1st, a holiday known in the Celtic world as Imbolc, a celebration of the coming spring.
- The Romans associated Brigid with Minerva.

Cernunnos (ker-nun-os)—He is a god of nature, grain, and fertility.

- Worshiped mostly in Gaul (Northern France) and Wales.
- He is a horned god and his name means "the horned one."
- Portrayed with antlers like a stag, sitting cross legged, and wearing or holding a torc, a metal band like a neck ring.
- His Roman equivalent is Jupiter.

Dagda—god of life and death.

- One of the leaders of the Tuatha De Danaan.
- Portrayed as having an enormous appetite and extraordinary strength.
- He has a cauldron that never runs out of food, a magical harp that will fly into his hands at his call, and a magical club.

Mythology Connection! The Norse god Thor once went in search of a cauldron that would never run out of ale, plus he had a magical hammer that always came back to him.

Danu—fertility goddess and mother of the Tuatha Dé Danaan.

- She and Brigit are sometimes considered the same goddess.

Epona/Rhiannon—she is a horse goddess and a fertility goddess.

- An important goddess, worshiped all over the Celtic world.
- Her name means "divine horse".
- She is known as Epona in England and Gaul, and as Rhiannon in Wales, but both names live on and are well known.
- Usually depicted either riding a horse side-saddle or sitting with two horses on either side of her. Sometimes she is holding a dog in her lap.

- Associated with healing.
- Archeologists have found many small statues of Epona throughout Europe signifying that she was worshiped as one of the personal or household gods.

Mythology Connection! Archeologists have found many Thor hammer amulets showing that, like Epona, he was a god popular among the people.

Flidais (FLIH-dish)—Irish goddess of the forest and wild animals.

- The stag is her sacred animal.
- She is known by the nickname, Foltchain, which means “beautiful-haired.”
- She has a magical cow that can provide milk for hundreds.
- She travels in a chariot driven by deer.

Mythology Connection! Artemis is the Greek goddess of the forest and wild animals with the stag as her sacred animal. The Norse goddess Freya also travels in a chariot, hers driven by cats.

Lug/Lugh (Lú/lu)—Lug is one of the most "popular" of the Celtic gods and his name is seen throughout the Celtic world.

- His name means "shining one."
- Patron of travelers and commerce and patron of art and poetry and all crafts.
- God of healing.
- Described as tall, young, and handsome.
- Weapons are a spear and a sling.
- He has many skills—carpenter, smith, warrior, poet, sorcerer, and physician. He gained the surname Ildanach which means "All Craftsman" because he could do everything.
- Many towns were even named after him.
- He is the father of the Irish hero Cuchulainn (koo-hoo-lin).
- Roman equivalent is Mercury.

Mythology Connection! Like Mercury (or Hermes in Greek mythology), Lug is a part of many stories. He gets involved with humans regularly. Like Apollo, Lug is the god of many, many aspects of human life.

Mananan—god of the sea.

- His realm includes the island of the dead, and it is Mananan who guides the dead to that place.
- He owns the boat "Ocean Sweeper" which can read the thoughts of those who sail it and will go wherever they want.

- Owns a horse who can travel on land or sea.
- Also owns the sword "Answerer" that will kill anyone it touches.

Morrigan—goddess of death, war, fertility, and sexuality. • Her name means "phantom queen."

- Often seen as a raven flying over the battlefield looking for victims.
- Can disguise herself as a hag or a beautiful maiden.
- She is either seen as a single goddess or a triple goddess along with her sisters, **Badb (BAve or BYbe)** and **Macha (MAH-shah)**. **Badb** causes confusion on the battlefield.

Macha feeds off the slain.

- Morrigan would wash the clothes or armor of men who were about to die in battle.

Nuada (nu-uh-da)—he is a god and king of the Tuatha De Dannan who invaded Ireland.

- Lost his hand in a great battle.
- Because of his injury Nuada was no longer allowed, according to the custom, to be king because he was not physically perfect.
- A silver hand was made for him and he then earned the name, Nuada the Silver Hand.

Taranos—he is a god of thunder.

- His name means "thunder" or "thunderer."
- Associated with weather, particularly storms.
- Taranos is another of the Celtic gods who was worshiped all over Europe.

Mythology Connection! The Norse god Thor was also a god associated with the weather and called “the thunderer.”

Celtic Mythology in Harry Potter

As with Greek and Norse mythology there are a few characters in the Harry Potter books named directly for Celtic gods, goddesses, or heroes.

CLIODNA (Clevna)

In Harry Potter she is on one of the Chocolate Frog Wizard cards. On the card she was a druidess, an animagus who took the form of a bird, and discovered the properties of moon dew.

In Celtic mythology (Irish) she is known as "Clidna of the Fair Hair." In one account she was the daughter of a Druid and in another the granddaughter of one of the Tuatha De Danann.

In one story a young man Tadg (Teeg) landed on the island where Clidna lived. It was a magical, enchanted island and Tadg and his men were there for a year, even though it felt like just one day to them. They did not need to eat or drink while they lived there either. Clidna gave Tadg a magical green cup that would turn water into wine. However, if Tadg lost the cup it meant that his death would not be far off. Clidna told him where he would die, that a wild deer would give him his fatal wound, and that she would be the one to bury him. She then led Tadg back to his ship and bid him farewell.

Mythology Connection! In the Greek story, *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men landed on Circe's island. It was enchanted by the sorceress and they stayed there for a year. Circe, like Clodna with Tadg, gave Odysseus advice about his life and further adventures.

MORFIN GAUNT

In Harry Potter Morfin is Tom Riddle's uncle and Merope's brother. Morfin is very nasty and can speak Parseltongue.

In Celtic mythology Morfin (or Morfran) was a Welsh hero, the son of Ceridwen (Ker-rid-wen), a witch who brewed a potion that gave great wisdom to the bard Taliesin. The name Morfran means "great raven" and ravens are associated with the battlefield in Celtic mythology.

Morfin was also a part of the King Arthur tales and took part in the battle of Camlan. Morfin was so ugly that no one attacked him because they all thought he was a demon. Now that's ugly!

MORGAN LE FAY

In Harry Potter Morgan is one of the Chocolate Frog Wizard trading cards.

In Celtic mythology Morgan is sometimes considered the equivalent of the Morrigan. She is the raven goddess who flies over battlefields searching for the dead. She can transform into a cow, raven, hag, or beautiful young maiden. Her name is actually Morgan *le Fay*, Fay meaning "fairy." She is magical—an enchantress and sorceress.

ROSMERTA

In Harry Potter Rosmerta is the owner of the Three Broomsticks, a pub in Hogsmeade. In *The Half Blood Prince* she falls under the Imperius Curse and gives Katie Bell the cursed necklace meant for Dumbledore. She also informs the Death Eaters when Dumbledore leaves the castle to go to the cave.

In Celtic mythology Rosmerta is a goddess from Gaul. She is a goddess of healing and plenty. Her name means "great provider" and she is often depicted holding a cornucopia, a purse, or a patera (a vessel for holding water). Rosmerta is associated with the Roman god Mercury and there are many carvings in which she is either standing next to him or wearing his winged helm. It is fitting that Rosmerta, the owner of a pub, would be named after a goddess associated with a cornucopia and water jug!

The "Veil" Between Worlds

The Celtic people believed in an Otherworld. Gods, goddesses, and other mythological beings (e.g. fairies) lived in this Otherworld, but they could travel between that world and our world. This is a little different than what the Greeks and the Norse believed. They believed that their gods and goddesses lived in another *world* like Mt. Olympus or in Asgard, but it was not that closely linked to the human world. The gods could come and go as they pleased, but mortals could not cross over into the worlds of the gods. If they did cross over (like into the realm of Hades), it was very difficult and sometimes the mortals had to pay a huge price. In the Celtic world the Otherworld was more permeable, although mostly it ran one-way. Certain times of the year were better for traveling between the worlds, like Samhain (November 1st) which gave rise to our celebrations of Halloween and All Soul's; and Beltane (May 1st) which we still sometimes celebrate as May Day. All of the rituals such as burning fires and displaying skeletons were developed to protect people from those coming from the Otherworld.

This is a connection to the Harry Potter books in that Rowling created this entire "other world" of witchcraft of which we Muggles are not aware.

The Otherworld

In the Harry Potter books, the "veil" between the world of the Muggles and the "otherworld" of magic and witchcraft could be very permeable, just like in Celtic mythology. This permeability first appeared at the beginning of *The Sorcerer's Stone*. When one-year-old Harry Potter vanquishes Lord Voldemort, the witches and wizards come out of the wizarding world and are seen in large numbers in the Muggle world. They breach the barrier. Vernon Dursley sees witches and wizards and owls and all sorts of strange things that day. In *The Half Blood Prince*, Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters breach the barrier between worlds several times. Death Eaters destroy Muggle bridges and kill Muggle people. Muggles do not realize wizards are causing the mayhem, but the two worlds collide at this point.

This barrier between worlds is symbolized by the portrait hanging in the Muggle Minister's office. When the Minister of Magic wants to talk with the "other Minister" the portrait talks and Cornelius Fudge enters the office through the fireplace. Fudge is a physical manifestation of an otherworldly person entering the Muggle world.

This barrier is also seen at Privet Drive. Privet Drive represents our normal world and it is breached by the "other," magical world in every book.

- In *The Sorcerer's Stone* magic breaches the barrier for the very first time when Harry receives his letter to Hogwarts in the mail. It also happens (most dramatically) when Hagrid breaks down the door to the cabin and tells Harry he's a wizard. You can't have a more literal 'breaching the barrier' than the door crashing in!

- In *The Chamber of Secrets* Ron, Fred, and George literally break down the barrier between the Muggle world and the magical world when they rip the bars off of Harry's bedroom window.
- In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the barrier is breached by the arrival of The Knight Bus. It literally pops out of nowhere into the Muggle world.
- In *The Goblet of Fire* the Weasley's bust the barrier down again when they all arrive at Privet Drive through the fireplace. However, they cannot enter the house because the fireplace is bricked up. Mr. Weasley has to blow a hole through the wall that is dividing the magical world from the Muggle world.
- In *The Order of the Phoenix* the advanced guard of Aurors break into Privet Drive and take Harry to the Burrow.
- In *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore breaches the barrier. The difference with Dumbledore is that he politely shows up at the front door and knocks!
- In *The Deathly Hallows* the breach is planned and prepared. There is no blowing up a walled off fireplace or tearing down bars. Harry and the Dursleys expect the magical world to enter the house. However, even though planned, the breach is no more welcome to the Dursley's than any other visit by wizards.

The problem today is that we Muggles no longer believe in this Otherworld and so have no protections in place against the beings who would travel in between the worlds. In the ancient world they believed in the comings and goings of gods and fairies and creatures like boggarts. The ancient Celts came up with rituals and festivals in which to honor or to protect themselves from those in the Otherworld. Of course, Harry wants the magical world to intrude on the Muggle world, but for people like the Dursleys and the "other Minister" it is not quite so welcome.

The Veil

When gods or fairies or any other being from the Otherworld passed into our world, or any being from our world passed into the Otherworld, it was said that they passed through the "veil" between worlds. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, Sirius dies because he passes through the *veil* in the Department of Mysteries. Harry and his friends come across the room with the archway and veil while looking for Sirius. There is something strange and eerie about the veil, which was "*fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched*" (OOTP, 773). Harry and Luna could hear voices coming from the mysterious veil, "*there were faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil*" (OOTP, 774), thus showing that the world behind the veil was inhabited by someone, somewhere. Harry "*had the strangest feeling that there was someone standing right behind the veil on the other side of the archway*" (OOTP, 774). When Luna says that she can hear voices "in there," Hermione tells her "*there isn't any 'in there,' it's just an archway, there's no room for anybody to be there...*" (OOTP, 774). Harry and Luna can hear and sense the Otherworld but Hermione is right, there is no "in there" because the veil is an entryway into the Otherworld of spirits, not a place itself. Harry and Luna, because they have been seen death, are more attuned to the Otherworld.

Merlin, the Druids, and Albus Dumbledore

Another way in which Celtic culture and mythology is incorporated into the Harry Potter books is through the character of Merlin. Merlin himself is mentioned in *The Sorcerer's Stone*—as a wizard trading card.

Merlin is a character from the Celtic mythology of Wales and most of us have heard of him. Merlin was probably based on a real person, a sorcerer of some kind, possibly a Druid. Or his story may be a combination of different real people. The reality, or historical basis, of Merlin is not as important as his

legend. The character of the wizard Merlin has been popular since the middle ages, and he is still popular now. Merlin has been the basis for many of the wizards we see in literature and movies, from Gandalf (in *The Lord of the Rings*) to Obi-Wan Kenobi (in *Star Wars*) to Albus Dumbledore.

Merlin and his literary descendants, in the form of wizards like Dumbledore, were based on the Celtic Druids.

Druids

The Druids were the "priests" of the Celtic people, although they were never called that, and they were more than what we would call "priests"; they were doctors, judges, magicians, astrologers, and teachers. The word Druid means, "wise man of the oak" or "knowledge of the oak", and they were associated with the oak tree. The Druids performed rituals and had meetings in oak groves and carried staffs made from oak.

The training and schooling for a Druid could last as long as 20 years! This schooling could be individual, but there is also evidence that there were Druid schools—organized groups of students taught by elder Druids. The Druids were powerful and important men in their communities; they were advisers to, and influenced, kings and chieftains. The king was the physical ruler of the tribe while the Druid was the spiritual leader of the tribe.

The Druids performed many functions within the tribe. They:

- Held all the information and knowledge that had been handed down over the generations. They were the keepers of the tribe's laws and rules, and therefore were seen as eternal figures, much more so than the temporary rule of a king.
- Protected the tribe from the Otherworld by maintaining the spiritual rituals.

- Advised the tribe on when to plant and harvest, because Druids were learned in the ways of nature.
- Mediated between conflicting tribes, and would tell leaders when it was a good time to go to battle.
- Were astrologers and understood the meanings and influence of the stars and planets.
- Were the keepers of the stories and were the main storytellers. In fact, it was against Druid law to write down their knowledge.

There were often different Druids in each of these roles:

- The storytellers who knew all of the legends and history of a people.
- The ones who understood herbs and were deeply in tune with nature.
- The political Druids who gave advice to chieftains and helped rule the tribe.

One of the most important roles of the Druid (and the role in which we see Merlin and Dumbledore) was to instruct the future rulers of the tribe. They were teachers and also advisers to their young charges. In this way, when the young man became a leader of the tribe, the Druid had influence and power over him. The Druids were also able to exert power and influence over more than one tribe. The Druidic priesthood was an institution out of reach and beyond that of any other human institution. They had the power to banish people in the tribe from participating in ritual functions, as well as banning entire tribes from attending intertribal festivals.

Druids were often mentioned in the old stories, leading scholars to believe that they really were regular members of the community. In the stories, kings and queens consulted their Druids before doing anything important. Druids acted as emissaries between kings and between the kings and gods. In addition to this role of counselor and diplomat, the Druids in the stories performed magic. They could recognize when someone was in disguise and could transform themselves and others into animals for disguises of their own. Druids also had

the gift of prophecy and used it to tell these kings what would happen and how to proceed.

On the down side, Druids performed human sacrifices. This was done on a purely religious level, but it was done. To be fair, many other cultures and societies also performed human sacrifices to appease the gods. In the Greek story of Andromeda, she was offered up as a sacrifice to the sea monster in order to appease the sea nymphs. In the Roman story of Psyche the young woman was offered as a sacrifice to appease the gods. The Druids would often sacrifice criminals or men taken in battle. Unfortunately, if they did not have enough criminals they'd have to use innocent people. Sometimes they sacrificed someone in order to maintain the "cosmic" balance in the universe.

Harry Potter Connection! In *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry is a human sacrifice. We learn that Professor Dumbledore believes that Harry will have to die in order for Voldemort to be defeated and he is willing to allow that sacrifice. This is a sacrifice like those in which the cosmic balance was at stake. Harry and Voldemort cannot both live at the same time—one must die. Dumbledore, as the wise Druid who has the stake of the entire community in mind (for the Greater Good), allows the sacrifice to happen.

Druidic Dumbledore

In some Celtic legends, certain Druids, like Merlin, had magical powers. Powers we'll recognize as those of the witches and wizards in the Harry Potter series:

shape-shifting (transfiguration and animagus), levitation (Voldemort flying), prophecy, and seeing. They even carried wands made out of yew or ash.

In Harry Potter, Dumbledore is a Druidic character. He is a wise old man who has much more knowledge, wisdom, and magic than just about anyone else in his "tribe." Even when he was in school himself, Dumbledore was an exceptional wizard:

"Head Boy, Prefect, Winner of the Barnabus Finkley Prize for Exceptional Spell-Casting, British

Youth Representative to the Wizengamot, Gold Medal-Winner for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo."

As an adult Dumbledore racked up even more acclaim:

"Order of Merlin, First Class, and Grand Sorcerer; Founder and Secret Keeper, Supreme

Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Defeated the dark wizard, Grindelwald. Discovered the 12 uses of dragon's blood. Could speak Mermish, understood Gobblegook and Parseltongue."

There was no wizard in the community more capable or advanced in magic than Albus Dumbledore. He was also the only wizard of whom Lord Voldemort was afraid. Dumbledore teaches other young magic users. Not only does he have a school in which he teaches these young magic users, he also has a protege in Harry Potter. In the old stories, a Druid often had the responsibility of raising the young son of a tribal leader and teaching him the ways of the Druids. He taught the young man his lore. Dumbledore does the same with Harry, particularly in *The Half Blood Prince* when they travel through the pensieve in order to understand Voldemort's past, and also as they travel around searching for the Horcruxes. Dumbledore is *training* Harry.

Dumbledore is a leader in the community and is so wise that he wields some control even over the "chieftain" (Minister of Magic). Chieftains often asked the Druids for advice on when to go to war and what to do with the harvest. Although Cornelius Fudge eventually turns against Dumbledore, we know he did so because he thought Dumbledore and Harry had too much power. Before that Fudge took council with Dumbledore.

Dumbledore is a link between different "tribes" such as when he hosts the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He is a leader of the community in every way.

Finally, like the Druid priest, he allowed a human sacrifice (Harry) in order to sustain the balance of the community.

Animagus in Celtic Mythology

All mythologies have sorcerers who can transform themselves into animals, or people who are transformed into animals against their will, usually by the gods. Celtic mythology is no exception. Here are a few:

Blodeuwedd (Blod-ay-weth) (Welsh)

Blodeuwedd was a woman created by magicians out of flowers of the broom, the oak, and the meadowsweet and considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The magicians created her to be the wife of the hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes (thlay-thlou-guh-fes), a man almost impossible to kill. Unfortunately, Blodeuwedd had an affair with another man and decided she wanted to kill Lleu. Although it was very complicated, she discovered how to kill him, and she tried but was unsuccessful. One of the magicians who had created her turned Lleu into an eagle, so he could fly away. The magician then tracked down Blodeuwedd and transformed her into an owl and cursed her to only live at night and to be hated by all the other birds.

Ceridwen (ker-id-wen) (Welsh)

Ceridwen was a witch and sorceress. She had two children, a beautiful daughter and a son who was very "ill favored." She loved her son very much, and since he was ugly she decided to make him wise with knowledge of the future. To do this she brewed a magic potion in her Cauldron of Inspiration. Three drops from the potion was all it took for wisdom, and any more would be fatal. Ceridwen hired a young boy, Gwin, to stir the potion, since it took a year and a day to brew. Three drops splashed on his finger and burned him, and he instinctively put his finger in his mouth to cool it. Gwin tasted the potion and so gained the wisdom Ceridwen wanted for her son. He also gained the knowledge that Ceridwen wanted to kill him!

Mythology Connection! In the Norse story of Sigurd, Sigurd burned his finger while roasting the dragon's heart and gained knowledge from it. He heard the birds talking and one of them warned him that the dwarf Regin wanted to kill him.

Ceridwen did try to kill Gwin and in the process they both transformed into many different animals.

- Gwin turned into a hare to escape and Ceridwen turned into a greyhound to chase him.
- He transformed into a fish, she an otter.
- He was a bird, and she turned into a hawk.
- Finally, he transformed into a grain of seed. Ceridwen transformed into a hen and pecked up all the seeds, including Gwin.

Later Ceridwen became pregnant and knew it was Gwin. She planned to kill him when he was born, but he turned out so beautiful she couldn't do it. So, she put him in a leather bag and threw him into the sea. Gwin was rescued and became the famous Welsh bard, Taliesin.

Mythology Connection! In the Greek story of Perseus, he and his mother were cast out to sea to die. They were rescued and Perseus grew up to be the famous hero. In the Roman story of Aeneas, he was left to die, but then rescued and raised by wolves. Both heroes went on to be famous.

Morrigan (Irish)

Morrigan can transform into many things, but most often she's a raven, hag, or a beautiful young woman. In the story of Cuchulain she is all of those things, plus can turn into a cow, an eel, and a wolf.

Tuan mac Cairill (Irish)

Tuan was a member of the Partholonians and the sole survivor of a plague that wiped out his people. When he was an old man he retired to a cave and woke up the next morning as a stag! This kept happening—he'd grow old, retire to a cave, and then wake up as a different animal. After the stag, he became a boar and then an eagle. One time he was reborn as a salmon and eaten by the wife of Cairill. Tuan's final rebirth is as a human because he has to tell his story. Tuan's story is the story of Irish mythology.

Irish Mythology

The Irish, unlike some of the other Celtic peoples, did have a creation story. The land of Ireland was basically untouched by the Roman Empire and kept its mythology and history intact.

The Irish mythology starts with Ireland as an empty land very unlike it is today. The early mythology tells of several different races of gods who, at different times, inhabited Ireland. They all arrived in Ireland from the "land of the west" which was either the land of the dead or some land of the gods. Each race of gods then died out—one was defeated by another, one died of pestilence, and one died of grief. These beings were all without firm characteristics and had no individual personalities. One race, though, was a race of giants.

Eventually the land was inhabited by the Firbolgs who were not a great race of beings. The Firbolgs were petty and mean and small. They were overthrown by the coming of the Tuatha De Danann, gods and goddesses resembling what we consider gods. The Tuatha De Danann were the children of Danu, and in fact the name means "the people of the god Danu." The gods Nuada, Dagda and Lug were of the Tuatha De Danann as well as Brigit and the Triple Goddess of Bodb, Macha, and Morrigan.

The Arrival of the Tuatha De Danann

The Tuatha De Danann came from the north in a magic cloud. They came from four cities and in these cities they learned skills and wisdom from four sages. When they came to Ireland they brought with them four treasures, one from each city:

1. The Stone of Destiny. This would become the place where the Kings of Ireland were crowned.
2. The Sword of Invincibility. Lug wielded this sword.

3. The Spear of Victory.
4. A Cauldron that could feed many men and was never empty.

The Tuatha De Danann arrived in Ireland on Beltane, May 1st, which we now call "May Day." The Firbolgs were not happy with the arrival of these new gods and so sent out an emissary to meet with them. The Tuatha De Danann had superior weapons, but the Firbolgs started a war with them. During this war, the god Nuada lost his right hand. Not only did the Tuatha De Danann have to deal with the Firbolgs but another race of beings, the Fomors, invaded Ireland at this time. Their king, Balor, was called Balor "of the Evil Eye" because the gaze of that eye could kill. The Fomors had enough power that they demanded tribute from the Tuatha De Danann.

Sound Familiar? Balor had an evil eye that could kill. This is very similar to the basilisk in Harry Potter and the Greek Medusa, both creatures whose look can turn people to stone.

The Tuatha De Danann sent Lug to defeat the Fomorians. As he rode into battle he was described as a "*young man...and the brightness of his face was like the setting sun, so that they [the Fomorians] were not able to look at him because of its brightness.*" (Gods and Fighting Men, location 464-69). He had many magical items at his disposal:

- The boat of Manannan (the sea god) that could read the thoughts of the "captain" and would go wherever he led.
- The horse of Manannan that could travel over land or sea and no rider would be killed off her back.

- Manannan's breast plate that would protect the wearer from injury.
- A helmet that would keep the wearer from getting too hot.
- Manannan's sword would kill any man it wounded and when it was shown in battle anyone fighting against it would lose all strength.

This was the Lug who went to battle against the Fomorians and who killed Balor of the Evil Eye. Lug became the "king" of the Tuatha De Danann, and the Danann's ruled over Ireland until the Milesians (Men) arrived.

Mythology Connection! In Norse mythology, the god Frey had a magical ship; it could travel on land or water, grow big enough to fit all the gods and yet shrink small enough to fit in a pocket. In Greek mythology, Hades owned a helmet that turned the wearer invisible (he gave it to Perseus). The story of King Arthur told of his magical sword Excalibur which never lost a battle and its magical scabbard which protected the wearer from injury. Mythological stories are filled with magical items!

The Arrival of Men

The Milesians were men who lived on an island to the west of Ireland. One day the leader of the Milesians, Ith, caught a glimpse of part of Ireland and decided he had to visit that land. He traveled to Ireland and there met the Tuatha De Dananns. By this time Ireland was ruled by grandsons of Dagda, and they were fighting over how to divide up the land between them. Ith got involved in their argument and told them he couldn't believe they would fight over such a beautiful land. He thought that surely Ireland could provide for all of them,

"for the country you dwell in is a good one, it is rich in fruit and honey, in wheat and in fish; and in heat and cold it is temperate." (Rolleston). The Tuatha De Dananns took this to mean Ith wanted their lands and so they killed him.

Ith's men took his body back to his people and the Milesians decided to invade Ireland to avenge Ith's death. When they arrived they found the Danann ready for them. The Milesians, under the guidance of Amergin (a Druid) concluded that it was not sporting to attack the Danann's by surprise and so withdrew out to sea to attack later. While at sea the Danann's put an enchantment on the island—a great mist formed between Ireland and the Milesians' ship— and they wandered lost at sea. One of the Milesians' Druids ascertained that the mist was enchanted and spoke a counter spell. The Milesians landed in Ireland and met the Dananns in a great battle. The Danann were defeated.

Sound Familiar? Using mist to separate an island or keep a hero lost are common in stories. In Greek mythology, the island of the Grey Women was shrouded in mist and gray skies in order to keep the old women a secret. If not for the help of Hermes, Perseus might never have found the island. In the King Arthur story, Arthur is taken to the Isle of Avalon after he is mortally wounded. The island is magical and surrounded by mist and fog.

Although the gods and goddesses of the Tuatha De Danann were defeated, they did not entirely leave Ireland. They lived on but with a *veil of invisibility* separating them from men which they can leave on or take off at will. Ireland

was then divided into an earthly and a spiritual island—the men on the earthly plane and the Danann occupying the spiritual plane. The Tuatha De Danann are not immortal but can be killed in battle, and they have to eat enchanted food in order to stay young and healthy. Lir, the god of the sea (Mananan's father), created the Feast of Age which includes magical ale and a feast of swine and this keeps them from aging and protects them from sickness. The pigs are killed and eaten every day but then return again the next day.

Mythology Connection! Like the Tuatha De Danann, the Norse gods have to eat special food, the apples of immortality, to stay immortal. Aegir, the sea god (like Lir) keeps a magic cauldron in which he prepares the gods' mead. Animals that regenerate after being eaten is also similar to Norse mythology. Thor has two goats he can eat, and as long as no bones are broken, they will come back again the next day. In Odin's hall of warriors, Valhalla, magical goats are killed and eaten and regenerate the next day.

The Tuatha De Danann leave their world of invisibility occasionally to mix with men in battle or in love. Lug, especially, gets involved with the affairs of men, the most famous being Cuchulain.

