

DREAMWEAVER mythical story: Willie Harper's Story of Ossian

This is my outline of Willie's story, which is told in verse, song, narrative, dialogue, dance, visuals, etc

It is continually scored, with both songs and snatches of dialogue emerging at particular points. Musically it is lead by Willie's harp, but Willie's harp is often just the trigger, quite literally the key, that opens up a full orchestrated musical drama. In the same way, Willie's words in the narrative are simply the trigger for the world and events of the story to be created on stage through dance, movement, mobile design, computer visuals, film, dialogue, poetry and song – sometimes fully, sometimes with just a hint that leaves it all to our imaginations.

At times during the story, the worlds of Tir na n'Og and Erin slip away, and we are brought back to the real, modern world and the all too palpable, all too painful, personal worlds of the actors.

Each heading marks the start of a musical theme and passage in the narrative

The Fenians

This is the story of Ossian. Now Ossian was a mighty poet - a man feared and revered through all Ireland for his power with words. Not just a few years ago, but over a thousand years ago, in the heroic days of Ireland, when it was called Erin and the Fenians (the sons of Fin MacCumhail) were alive and well. Ossian, then, was blind, but the worlds he conjured with his poems were so real and so palpable that it was as if he was blessed with more than perfect vision — and when people listened to him, they were held so firmly in the world he spun they began to think it was they who were blind and Ossian's visions were the true reality.

Deirdre of the Sorrows

Despite this magic, Ossian was never a popular man, and there was a great sadness in his life. He told wonderful stories of love and romance. Yet like all his tales, they were purely imaginary. Girls were too frightened by his ugly, weird manner, and by his uncanny perception which seemed to see straight into their hearts and lay them bare.

Tir na n'Og

One day, while he was musing by a well, he idly threw down a stone, and in the echoing clatter and faraway plump splash in the water there came to him a strange story. Or was it the truth? He couldn't tell. Anyway, the story was that there is a magic land called Tir na n-Og, where everything is beautiful, and everyone is forever young. A land where the blossoms of spring never fade, even as the fruits of autumn ripen.

The Race

Well, Tir na n-Og was ruled by a king, but the kingship was not passed down through the generations — for a son might wait forever, since his father would never age. Instead, a king was chosen for seven years from among the champions and best men of the kingdom. At the end of the seven years, the champions and best men would come together on the great, green verge in front of the palace, high above the misty plain. And on the sound of the huge horn, they would all plunge down the hill and run like the wind through the trees and far away to the top of a hill two miles distant. On the top of that hill was a chair, and the man that reached the chair first and sat down became King of Tir na n-Og for the next seven years.

Now one king was an especially strong runner, and he had won the

kingship seven times in a row. But as the years went by he became more and more concerned, lest some one should beat him to the chair next time, and he wore a deep furrow in the floor with his anxious pacing. So one day he called his Druid to him and asked the wizened old buzzard, "How long will it be before any man sits in the chair before me and takes the crown?"

"The chair and the crown are yours forever," said the Druid gravely, looking deep and long at the king, "unless your own son takes them from you."

Beyond the softest dawn

The king had no sons, so he was mightily relieved. But he was a clever man and knew all about those crafty prophecies that caught you out by slipping in through the back door. No, he had no sons, but he had a daughter, the finest girl in Tir na n-Og; and the like of her could not be found in Erin nor anywhere else, nor in any lovely dawn since the beginning of the world.

Oh yes, she might marry, the king realized — and then it would be her husband that was his son and could beat him to the chair to fulfil the prophecy. And he knew then that he could never let his daughter marry.

The Enchantment

Yet she was a headstrong girl, who would defy him till the world turned backwards and the stars fell from the sky. So one fine evening, as the last rays of sun were performing their golden alchemy on the palace walls, he called her and the Druid to him in the small chamber overlooking the fountain. For a while, the three stood in silence, while outside the window, a pair of swallows swooped and swerved in and out of the falling water, their shadows racing in huge curves across the stone paving. Then, as the daughter turned to watch them, the king stepped quietly forward and took from the Druid his weird and twisted rod of spells, carved long ago from blackthorn. Striking the girl gently on the back of the head with the rod, he quickly muttered a phrase in the ancient language.

The strange words seemed to roll from his mouth and spread like a marsh mist across the floor, wrapping themselves round the princess's feet. At once, the girl's beautiful head began to change, as if it were reflection in water broken by the wind. Her lovely hair grew stiff and coarse. Her delicate nose turned huge and snouty. Her petal pink lips flapped wide and thick and ugly. And then the sweet voice that had made even the burbling waters of Erinmore pause to listen cracked into a horrible grunt — and by the time the echo of the king's words had dwindled away the princess's head had changed to that of an old sow.

A King must Rule

Seeing the dreadful image of her face staring back off the king's breast plate, the girl covered her face and fled from the chamber. "Well," the king said harshly, as a single tear ran down his face and stained the white marble where it dropped to the floor, "There is not a man that will marry her now." And he handed the Druid back his rod and turned on his heel.

Now the Druid had watched all this, struck dumb by shock, and seeing the pig's head on the princess, he was sorry he had told the king so much. He wanted to mend some of the damage. So after a long, long moment's thought, he determined to risk the king's

wrath and talk to the princess at once.

The falls of Sheemore – Niamh's tears

It was some while before he found her, weeping gently by the deep, shady pool at the foot of the falls of Sheemore, and it was as if the very waters wept with her as her tears mingled in the stream. The Druid stood by and silently wept, too, and his tears were swept away by the current.

At last, the girl looked up and saw him.

"Must I be in this way forever?" she asked the Druid, holding his gaze with her sad, piggy eyes.

"That you must, for there is no gainsaying such a spell – unless you marry one of the sons of Fin MacCumhail in Erin," he said, "If you gain the love and marry a son of Fin, then might you be freed from the blot that is on you now, and get back your own head and countenance."

Journey to Erin

When she heard this she was impatient, and she leaped up and started running across the hills and valleys like a hunted hart, her cloak flying and fluttering out behind. And she did not rest until she had left the land of Tir na n-Og and come to Erin. Then, stepping out into the grey-green morning mist that was draped like a huge web over the land, she paused for breath and pulled the hood of her cloak deep over her head.

For weeks, she wandered far across field and moor, asking in a hoarse whisper from under her hood for news of the Fenians, as the sons of Erin were called. Each person she met shook his or her head and hurriedly passed on by, secretly crossing their fingers against danger. Then at last she encountered a laughing young boy who looked at her strangely then darted away, shouting mischievously at her that Fin and the Fenians of Erin were to be found on Knock an Ar. Almost overcome with relief, she set out on her way to that high hill without delay.

Dancing in the dew

The bushes seemed to be chuckling in the breeze as she skipped by, and the grass almost smiled as it bent beneath her featherlight feet.

The Sons of Fin

In no time, she had reached Knock an Ar, and strode boldly up through the moonlight to the small group of sturdy, handsome men that sat around a glowing fire, carefully polishing their spears and swords.

"And are you the sons of Fin?" she started to ask, thinking to enchant them with that lovely voice of hers that could charm the morning lark from the sky. But all that emerged from her mouth was a ghastly, rasping grunt.

The Joke

The sons of Fin paused a while in astonishment, then began to chuckle quietly, one by one. And as they did, she flung her hood back in anger, forgetting the secret it hid.

Seeing her piggy head, the Fenians began to laugh, and as the princess grunted louder and louder, the men all laughed louder and

louder until they were all swept up in a guffaw so gigantic that the very trees shook with the force of their merriment.

Song of the Stones

Only blind Ossian did not laugh, unable to see the cause of their amusement, but he smiled to himself and began to strum his harp, until its gentle lilt stilled the trees and so soothed the men's laughter that they returned to their work, chuckling quietly.

As the days passed, the pig-headed princess tried to converse with each of the Fenians in turn. Each time, the sweet words she intended twisted into a grunt as they struggled from her mouth, and each time the man's laughter turned to mockery as he hurried away to join his brothers, shaking his head at her ugliness.

The Black River

At last, she had tried her luck with all the Fenians but Ossian, who she had no inkling was also a son of Fin — and they had all rejected her. She began to despair...

Hunting the Hart

Now, it was usual in those days for the Fenians to go out hunting on the hills and mountains and in the woods of Erin, and when they went Ossian always went with them to gather material for his tales.

One day, when the Fenians went hunting in the tangled woods beneath Suliven, the pig-headed princess trailed along behind them, in a last, desperate attempt to win one of them over. Of course, they mocked and jeered as always.

That day, the Fenians had extraordinary luck. They killed so much game they decided to leave one hart behind for Ossian, if he could carry it. But of course, puny and blind as he was, he could never bear it by himself. As he stood by the still warm body of the hart, he said out loud, "What a tragedy it would be to waste this hart," At that, the pig-head princess, who had been weeping quietly nearby looked at him and said, " Let me help you."

Shadow fall

So between them, they began to drag the hart home. The evening was warm and the hart heavy, and after they had gone some distance, Ossian said, "Let us rest a while."

So they both threw down their burdens and put their backs against a great stone by the roadside. For a while, they sat in weary silence, each of them locked in their own bleak world. But as the setting sun dropped quickly out of sight and chill shadows rose like a flood around them, they both let out a gasp — and they began to talk.

Night on Suliven

And as they talked, the pig-headed princess began to warm to Ossian, and Ossian to her, perhaps finding comfort in each other's weirdness.

Ossian and Niamh

Long they talked, as the Moon waxed and waned in the dark, soft night above, and the princess enchanted Ossian with sweet memories of Tir na n-Og, and Ossian entranced the princess with

his low, undulating voice and the magic of his poetry as he spun tales of Erin and its heroes.

The Green Linnet

At last, as the first blush of light stole along the eastern horizon and fingers of gold caressed the curves of Suliven, Ossian stirred. Oh, the linnet its call pierced the chill air, echoing off the hill, as Ossian turned to the princess and asked in a voice as soft as dew if he could touch her face with his hands, so he might know her better.

No, no, you must not, she said in panic, her heart fluttering like a trapped bird. But his gentle words spread their calm over her and at last, she consented. Yet, as his fingers moved over her wrinkled brow, she began to weep, begging forgiveness for her ugly features. But Ossian only laughed with joy, for miraculously, he could see her. He could see the copper glow of dawn on her broad brow. He could see the sun glistening in her piggy eyes. He could see the dark, velvety canyons of her snout. And he laughed with joy.

Golden dawn

The princess hid her face in shame, but Ossian pulled her to him and gently kissed her, with the utmost tenderness. And the princess began to laugh, too, in a snorting kind of way, as it became clear that Ossian was not laughing at her piggy head. And all at once she knew she could happily live forever with that monstrous head if only Ossian loved her.

As if reading her thoughts, Ossian said he loved her more than all the golden stories in Erin whatever shape her head. But he thanked the stars she had not the head of a hart, for antlers could prove mighty awkward.

The Curlew's Cry

As words of love washed from his lips, an imperceptible change began to come over her. The princess could not tell what the change was. She just felt frightened. And she knew that she must return to Tir na n-Og without a moment's delay, for the air of Erin had become fatal to her. And she and Ossian must part, for every hour in Erin now would age her a year. And once more she wept, until Ossian had coaxed from her the reason for tears. Then at once Ossian swore he would go with her. The princess warned him that once he entered Tir na n'Og he could never go back to Erin, but Ossian hesitated only a moment.

Flight to the Shee

Hand in hand, the pair ran fast as the wind over the mountains, until in time they came to the shee (a fairy hill). There the princess stamped on the bright grass and sang a song as wild and old as the hills and called for the Druid to let them in. The shee gaped softly open before them and they tumbled deep down into the land of Tir na n-Og.

I am Niamh

There in the silvery sunlight, beside the tall birches, they embraced in joy, as the Druid watched over them from a distance. And as they embraced, the pig's head on the princess began to melt, and her own true human head appeared in its place, with her own true lovely hair, her own true delicate nose and her own petal pink lips. And when she spoke, telling Ossian her name was Niamh, it was as if the sun had made shimmering bells of the dew drops that still sparkled on the grass.

For the first time in his life, Ossian was silent with awe, unable then and forever after to find words to describe the beauty so dazzling it almost robbed him of his sight once more. Niamh touched her face, gasped, then scampered to the pool of water and gazed with delight at the reflection she saw, before throwing her arms round the awestruck poet.

As they embraced once more in baffled wonder, the Druid came near, and as they listened, he explained that although Niamh had not guessed it, Ossian was a son of Fin—and his words of love had broken her father's spell. Even as they spoke, Niamh looked in love at Ossian, and as she looked she noticed how sturdy and strong and handsome, he was, which was strange, because she had first thought of him as puny and weird.

Homecoming

When they reached the palace, the king was so overjoyed to see his daughter again that he quite forgot the threat Ossian posed. At once, he ordered a great feast, and soon the palace was ringing with the merry sounds of people celebrating the princess's return and the coming of such a great poet.

Cormac's Song

And that night Ossian wove such wondrous tales and his agile fingers plucked such lovely sounds from his harp that all who heard were touched for long after with a renewed joy in the beauty of the world.

Mist on the Mountains

As for Ossian, he was so overwhelmed with the heady sights, sounds and scents of Tir na n-Og that he slept long the next morning, a deep, dreamless sleep. By the time he awoke, the princess had stared long at his peaceful face, laughed and run away to see her father, leaving a lock of her hair tied round his finger.

The Race reprised

Now, it so happened that it was this very morning that the seven-year run to the chair on the hill was to happen. As Ossian emerged shaking the sleep from his eyes, he saw the king and all the other champions assembled on the lawn in front of the palace. Much to the king's relief, though, Ossian barely took any notice of them, for all he cared about was where his beloved Niamh had gone. The horn sounded and the runners tore off down the hill, setting off the birds pecking the lawn in a flurry of wings, but Ossian was too busy searching the distance for Niamh with his newly sharp eyes to notice anything. But as the runners receded into the distance and the birds settled down, Ossian suddenly spied her, waiting on the distant hill by the chair to cheer the winner home. With a happy cry, he set off at a tremendous pace with his heart full.

In his delight, he ran so swiftly that before the last, panting, runner had reached the ancient oak that marked the halfway point, Ossian sped by him, moving so fast that leaves quivered with the draught of his movement. And before most of the other runners had emerged from the sun-dappled wood, he was roaring past them too, leaving them gaping in amazement.

Soon only the king was ahead of him leaping nimbly from stone to stone across the glistening river. But as the king steadied himself for the final stone, Ossian soared past him, clearing the river in a single giant bound. Ossian swept by in a beautiful arc, and the

king looked up—then with a cry of dismay, slipped into the bubbling water and sat down with a huge splash.

So intent was Ossian on reaching Niamh that he noticed none of this. He just sped on—past the mill, across the fields, over walls and ditches—until wonderfully soon he was hurtling up the hill towards Niamh at the top waving and shouting joyously. And as Niamh collapsed laughing, Ossian swept her up in his arms, pulled her down into the chair in a fond embrace and asked her why she was laughing so.

Times of Gold

After that time, no one stood up to run to the chair against Ossian, and as time went by it seemed nothing could mar the happiness of the poet king and the princess. The tugging fingers of age had no power over them and it seemed they grew more beautiful each year. Niamh never ceased to bless the lucky wind that brought her poet, and Ossian never ceased to be thankful for the day he met his beloved princess. They cherished each other with a tenderness that glowed as warmly as a cottage fire on a winter's night.

And yet Ossian was not at peace, and as the days went by, he was seen more and more often sitting alone by the falls of Sheemore, lost in thought. It seemed to Ossian that he was slowly losing his power to weave a story. At first, the people of Tir na n'Og had been entranced by his tales, but now he could not help notice that they were beginning to get bored. While his face stayed as youthful and fresh as spring grass, his tales withered and wrinkled like a senile old man, and soon people were yawning and dropping off to sleep before he had even said "Once upon a time..."

Stars grow dim

As Ossian gazed into the tumbling waters one day, he began to realize it was not just his power to tell tales he was losing, but his very inspiration, his spark of life. He knew he had to get back to Erin before it dwindled and went out altogether. Besides, for all his love of Niamh, he was missing his brothers and their warm fellowship.

For a long while, he stared blankly ahead of him, gored by the sharp bull's horns of his predicament. What could he do? He sat motionless, his thoughts tossed this way and that, until he felt a hand on his shoulder, and there was Niamh, looking at him with eyes full of pity and anguish. She took his hand, and they stayed like that silently, for what must have been an age before Niamh said quietly, "The Druid—he will know what to do."

"Yes," Ossian murmured, as they gently laid aside the bitter truth that sat before them like some ugly, leering imp.

With their hearts full of anxiety, they left the falls and went together to ask the Druid's advice. The Druid shook his head sadly, saying that if Ossian left Tir na n'Og, it must be forever—and he would never see Tir na n'Og or Niamh again. The princess began to weep, and Ossian sank to the floor in despair.

But the Druid began to think, and as he thought, he drummed his fingers on the window ledge, drumming faster and faster until suddenly he stopped with a brisk snap. "I have it!" he cried in triumph. "There is a way!"

White Horses

And then the Druid told them of the white horses of Tir na n'Og, whose great hooves hammered the earth like the raindrops from a summer storm and whose snowy flanks were soft and smooth as swan's down. These mighty horses bore within them the spirit of Tir na n'Og, and when they roamed abroad in the world, they took the spirit with them, so that it was as if Tir na n'Og itself were on the move.

If Ossian was to ride such a horse, he might visit Erin and come safely back to Niamh—since he would not ever leave Tir na n'Og entirely. But he must on no account dismount—even for an instant. If he put just one foot on the ground in Erin, he would be lost.

Ossian asked the Druid where such horses might be found, and the Druid said he might find them grazing in the meadows beyond the falls of Sheemore. But it would be hard work approaching them, for they were as wild and wilful as the western wind and would not be at anyone's beck and call.

When Ossian and Niamh reached the meadows, the horses were there as the Druid had said, shining silvery white against the green. They were grazing as calmly as cattle, and barely flicked their long tails as Ossian and Niamh came into the meadow. But as Ossian tried to come near one, it stamped and reared and trotted swiftly away. He tried again—and again and again—moving as gently and coaxingly as he could. But each time, it was the same, as the horse snorted and bolted.

Wind in the Leaves

Eventually, Ossian gave up and sat down upon a tree stump, defeated. To help him think, he took his harp and began to play, and Niamh sat close by humming softly. The plaintive music of the harp rippled over the grass, and as it reached the nearest horse, a change came over the horse. It looked up, then cantered across the meadow towards Ossian so quietly that he felt its warm breath on his neck before he even noticed it.

Motioning to Niamh to keep humming, he placed the harp upon the ground so that its strings went on warbling in the breeze. The horse shook its head a little, but quick as a striking adder Ossian leaped on its back and firmly gripped its flowing mane. After a slight shudder, the horse calmly acknowledged the new weight on its back and raised its great head to sniff the air.

At once, Niamh ran to Ossian and took his hand, telling him to take great care on his journey. Ossian leaned over and caught her in his arm and in a single swift movement, swept her on to the horse saying, "Ride with me to the shee, Niamh, my heart's darling."

"That I will," she said cheerfully, settling back against his breast. And they galloped from the meadow and out across the fields.

Farewell

All too swiftly, they reached the shee. All too swiftly, Niamh was slipping reluctantly to the ground as Ossian kissed her farewell with a face full of cheer and a heart full of dread.

Promising faithfully not to dismount and to return to her almost before she could blink, he turned the horse, waved and rode out of the shee and into the land of Erin...

As he rode from the shee, he plunged suddenly and deeply into a darkness so black he believed he had lost his sight once more. He

cried out in anguish and tugged on the horse's mane, urging it to stop.

The horse came to a standstill as Ossian clutched his head and whispered, "Niamh, Niamh, what have I done? Will I never see you again". But as he sat there steeped in a gathering despair, he gradually began to see glimmers of light in the darkness. And as he looked, he began to see more and more and realized that he was not blind after all, but had simply emerged in the middle of the night. He glanced up and was immediately dazzled by the cloud white disk of the Moon rising out from behind the distant trees.

As he started to look around him in the moonlight he was overcome with a sudden tiredness and began to doze—then woke with a start as he realized the danger and found himself slipping. Strapping himself firmly to the horse's neck, he closed his eyes and slept until he was woken by a morning mist chilling his neck and the sound of birdsong ringing in his ears.

Ossian's journey

Setting out across the hills, glad that he would soon see his brothers again, he could not help but see how strange and unfamiliar everything seemed. And however far he rode—and he rode far and fast on that great steed—he could never find a familiar wood, or even a familiar tree. The farther he rode, the more it struck him how different it all seemed from how he remembered it.

As the sun began to set, he saw a hill in the distance—the unmistakable hump of Knock an Ar, lying black against the orange sky like a great sleeping cow. He sighed with relief and hurried forward, anxious to find his brothers again before another night. But as he rode on up the hill, it seemed he just could not find any of the old pathways, and when he came to the spot where their camp should be, there was nothing but shoulder high gorse and bracken.

Distressed and baffled, he pressed on up the hill, thinking he must somehow have missed the spot. Then, coming up over the ridge, he cried out in profound shock. For the quiet wooded vale where he had first sat with Niamh was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there in front of him were the myriad shining lights of a village with huge stone buildings the like of which he had never seen anywhere in Erin.

As he rode down the track into the village, he began to see people, all strangely dressed. who ran indoors as they saw him coming. With increasing desperation, he stared in at the windows, searching for a familiar face among them. But not a face, not a place did he recognize.

He rode through and out of the village, shuddering at its strangeness and marvelling at the ancient look of its mighty stone buildings. And as he rode out beyond the last house, he looked back and the awful truth began to dawn on him. That much, much more time had passed while he was in the land of Tir na n-Og than he could ever have imagined.

In fact, over a thousand years had past since he had left Erin behind, and all his friends and family, and their grand children and their great grandchildren had long since perished. The land of Erin was a very, very different place, altered out of all recognition by generation upon generation of human hands. The name of Ossian

and the Fenians, once famed for their deeds in every corner of Erin among both high and low, was now but a forgotten legend. He learned this from a strangely dressed old woman who greeted him with a mixture of awe and horror.

Discovering this, an immense loneliness fell upon Ossian, and he rode on through the weird new landscape, along a hard, straight road of dark rock. Yet so strange and wondrous were the sights that he saw — from the noisy metal carts that swished that he began to cheer up, knowing he would have lots of amazing material for stories when he got back to Tir na n'Og.

At last, as the sun was rising, his horse carried him down to another village. As he rode in, people scurried away in terror, even as he raised his hand to greet them. He was baffled until he realized that it was not just his weird, colourful attire that made people back away, but his immense stature. His time in fairyland had been so good to him that he was now a veritable giant, over three yards tall, with thighs the thickness of trees.

He was still chuckling quietly to himself when he came upon a pair of men struggling to lift a car with a rickety jack. As he rode by, one of the men looked up and said, "I don't know what you're laughing at, chum, but if you're as strong as you are big you could get down off that horse and give us a hand here." Without thinking, Ossian leaped from the horse and strode towards the car. But even as he moved, he began to bend and stoop, and the skin on his face began to crumple and turn ashen. By the time he reached the car, he looked like a wizened old man - which indeed he was. And the men turned round and wondered where the giant had run off to.