

באנשי

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Banshee

This article is about the banshee of Irish folklore. For other uses, see [Banshee \(disambiguation\)](#).

The **banshee** (or *banchee*) (/ˈbænʃiː/ ***BAN**-shee*), from Irish: *bean sí* [bʲæn ˈʃiː] (“woman of the barrows”) is a female spirit in Irish mythology, usually seen as an omen of death and a messenger from the underworld.

In legend, a banshee is a fairy woman who begins to wail if someone is about to die. In Scottish Gaelic mythology, she is known as the *bean sìth* or *bean nighe* and is seen washing the bloodstained clothes or armour of those who are about to die. Alleged sightings of banshees have been reported as recently as 1948.^[1] Similar beings are also found in Welsh,^[2] Norse^{[3][4][5]} and American folklore.^{[6][7]}

1 History and mythology

In legend, a banshee wails nearby when someone is about to die. There are Irish families who are believed to have banshees attached to them, and whose cries herald the death of a member of that family. Most, though not all, surnames associated with banshees have the *Ó* or *Mac* prefix,^[8] indicating their name is native to Ireland, not descended from invaders. They were also associated with the *Airlie* clan.^[9] Accounts of banshees go back as far as 1380 with the publication of the *Cathreim Thoirdhealbhagh* (*Triumphs of Torlough*) by Sean mac Craith.^[10] Mentions of banshees can also be found in Norman literature of that time.^[10]

Traditionally, when a person died a woman would sing a lament (in Irish: *caoineadh*, [ˈkuːn̪ːə] or [ˈkiːn̪ːuː], “*caoin*” meaning “to weep, to wail”) at the funeral. These women are referred to as “*keeners*” and the best keeners would be in high demand. Legend has it that for great Gaelic families – the O’Gradys, the O’Neills, the Ó Longs, the McNaimhíns, the Ó Briains, the Ó Conchobhairs, and the Caomhánachs – the lament would be sung by a fairy woman; having foresight, she would sing it when a family member died, even if the person had died far away and news of their death had not yet come, so that the wailing of the banshee was the first warning the household had of the death.

The Ó Briains' banshee was thought to have the name of Eevul, and was ruler of 25 other banshees who would always be at her attendance.^[10] It is thought that from this myth comes the idea that the wailing of numerous ban-

shees signifies the death of a great person.^[10]

In later versions, the banshee might appear before the death and warn the family by wailing.^[11] When several banshees appeared at once, it indicated the death of someone great or holy.^[12] The tales sometimes recounted that the woman, though called a fairy, was a ghost, often of a specific murdered woman, or a mother who died in childbirth.^[13]

Banshees are frequently described as dressed in white or grey, often having long, pale hair which they brush with a silver comb, a detail scholar Patricia Lysaght attributes to confusion with local mermaid myths. This comb detail is also related to the centuries-old traditional romantic Irish story that, if you ever see a comb lying on the ground in Ireland, you must never pick it up, or the banshees (or mermaids – stories vary), having placed it there to lure unsuspecting humans, will spirit such gullible humans away. Other stories portray banshees as dressed in green, red, or black with a grey cloak.^[6]

One explanation for the origin of the banshee is in the screech of the Barn owl (*Tyto alba*).^[14] The nocturnal hunter is known for its chilling screech and has long been associated with agricultural activities in Ireland, attracted to the rodent activity around grain stores and barns.

The banshee can appear in a variety of guises. Most often she appears as an ugly, frightening hag, but she can also appear as a stunningly beautiful woman of any age that suits her. In some tales, the figure who first appears to be a banshee or other hag is later revealed to be the Irish battle goddess, the Morrígan.

The banshee may also appear in a variety of other forms, such as that of a hooded crow, stoat, hare and weasel – animals associated in Ireland with witchcraft.^[15]

In 1437, King James I of Scotland was approached by an Irish seer who was later identified as a banshee who foretold his murder at the instigation of the Earl of Atholl. There are records of several prophets believed to be incarnate banshees attending the great houses of Ireland and the courts of local Irish kings.

In some parts of Leinster, she is referred to as the *bean chaointe* (keening woman) whose wail can be so piercing that it shatters glass. In Kerry in the southwest of Ireland, her keen is experienced as a “low, pleasant singing”; in Tyrone in the north, as “the sound of two boards being struck together”; and, on Rathlin Island, as “a thin, screeching sound somewhere between the wail of a woman and the moan of an owl”.

2 In other mythologies

2.1 American folklore

Stories of banshees can also be found in America in the late 18th century.^[6] The most prevalent of the American stories comes from Tar River in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. However, in this variation of the story, the banshee is simply a ghoul, as opposed to a sign of misfortune.^[6]

In the badlands of South Dakota, a banshee is said to wail upon a hill near Watch Dog Butte. Like other American tales of banshees, this legend does not connect her to any particular death (aside, perhaps, from her own).^[7]

2.2 Other Celtic cultures

In Scottish mythology, a similar creature is known as the bean nighe or *ban nigheachain* (little washerwoman) or *nigheag na h-àth* (little washer at the ford). In Welsh folklore, a similar creature is known as the Hag of the mist.^[16]

2.3 In popular culture

See Banshee in popular culture

3 See also

- Aswang
- Bean nighe
- Bánánach
- Cailleach
- Clíodhna
- Irish mythology in popular culture
- La Llorona
- Pontianak
- Psychopomp
- Rusalka
- White Lady (ghost)
- List of English words of Irish origin

4 Notes

- [1] “Superstition”. *Western Folklore* (Western States Folklore Society) 7 (4). October 1948. JSTOR 1497855.

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- [3] Kellog, various (2001:745)
- [4] Orchard, Andy (1997). *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*. Cassell. ISBN 0-304-34520-2
- [5] Simek, Rudolf (2007) translated by Angela Hall. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. D.S. Brewer. ISBN 0-85991-513-1
- [6] “Banshee”. *The Element Encyclopedia of the Psychic World*. Harper Element. 2006. p. 62.
- [7] Skinner, Charles M. “Myths and Legends of Our Own Land”. J.P. Lippincott Company, 1896, p. 216.
- [8] Monaghan, Patricia (2009). *Encyclopedia of Goddesses and Heroines*. ABC-CLIO. p. 307. ISBN 978-0-313-34990-4.
- [9] Knight, Jan (1980). *A-Z of ghosts and supernatural*. Pepper Press. p. 10. ISBN 0-560-74509-5.
- [10] Westropp, Thos. J. (June 1910). “A Folklore Survey of County Clare”. *Folklore* (Taylor & Francis): 180–199. JSTOR 1254686.
- [11] Visual or oral Hallucinations of the Banshee may cause death especially in a person who is very sick and close to dying by destroying that person’s confidence that he/she can survive, see Nocebo effect.
- [12] Yeats, W. B. “Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry” in Booss, Claire; Yeats, W.B.; Gregory, Lady (1986) *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*. New York: Gramercy Books. p. 108. ISBN 978-0-517-48904-8
- [13] Briggs (1976), pp. 14–16: “Banshee”
- [14] “NestWatch 2012 Barn Owl – Tyto alba – Scréachóg reilige, from “NestWatch 2012””, 2012.
- [15] Lysaght, Patricia (1986) *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger*. The Glendale Press
- [16] Owen, Elias (1887). *Welsh folk-lore: A collection of the folk-tales and legends of North Wales*. Felinfach: Llanerch. p. 142.

5 Further reading

- Sorlin, Evelyne (1991). *Cris de vie, cris de mort: Les fées du destin dans les pays celtiques* (in French). Academia Scientiarum Fennica. ISBN 978-951-41-0650-7.
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- Evans Wentz, Walter Yeeling (1977). *The Fairy-Faith in celtic countries, its psychological origin and nature*. C. Smythe. OCLC 257400792

6 External links

- MovableInishowen.com: The Legend of the Banshee, Leo Bowes
- Irish Culture and Customs: Creepy Irish Creatures, Bridget Haggerty
- Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Banshee". *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

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