

# Mythical Creatures Guide

## Banshee



Banshees are believed by some to be spirits of nature or pre-Christian Gaelic deities. In Theosophy and in Celtic Christian religion, they are commonly called "fallen angels". In English, they are described as a "fairy" or "fairy

woman".

The Banshee is also said to be tasked with the job of warning selected members of ancient Irish families of the time of their death. According to tradition, the banshee was only said to cry for four major families but this list seems to have been extended due to marriage.

Apparently in terms of clothing, she either wears a grey, hooded cloak or a grave robe meant for the unshriven dead. Those who were not allowed to find "absolution".

Banshees usually come in three of many forms, the first being a young woman, the second being a rich middle-aged lady or matron, and the third being of a fragile old woman. Another being, the bean-nighe (washing woman). In this form, she is apparently seen washing the bloodstains out of the fated person's clothes.

Rarely seen but heard, her mourning call is often given at night when someone is about to die. In 1437, Scottish King James the I is said to have been approached by one such being. There have been numerous reports of the same thing happening to members of the royal court and other high-profile members of Irish society.

The quality of her voice varies from region to region. Some describe it as 'low and pleasant' which can be used to comfort people or generally just to make them feel good and others as 'a mix of a wail of a woman and a moan of an owl' which can hypnotize many. Some also take to singing songs to do the work, and put power into it without changing the sound.

When several banshees appear at once, it is said that a person great or holy has died. Banshees are commonly depicted as having long, fair hair which they comb with a silver comb. If one is to see such a comb, it is suggested not to pick it up or that person might be spirited away. Though to some the comb is simply a gift to someone they love or feel is important.

Banshees are fairly popular and enjoy the same status (in Ireland) as leprechauns. One possible origin of the Banshee are keeners. Women in Ireland that sing songs of lament at funerals. The majority of these women quite possibly could be banshees that feel the need to sing in an attempt to raise or lower the feelings of those attending.

Banshees also appear in places where there is great sorrow and pain.



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# Mythical Creatures Guide

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# Banshee

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

## Banshee

<p><b>(Bean-sídhe (Gaelic)</b>  <b>Bean Sí (Irish)</b>  <b>Bean Shith (Scottish)</b>  <b>Bean-shìdh (Scottish)</b></p>	
	
<p>Bunworth Banshee, Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland by Thomas Crofton Croker, 1825</p>	
<b>Grouping</b>	Fairy
<b>Sub grouping</b>	Aos sí Sidhe
<b>First reported</b>	Folklore
<b>Country</b>	Ireland, Scotland

The **banshee** (/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. Similar beings are also found in Welsh,<sup>[1]</sup> Norse<sup>[2][3][4]</sup> and American folklore.

## Overview

Long ago in Ireland a keener would sing a **caoinadh** or lament at funerals. Keeners were always women and people would seek to invite the best keeners to the funerals of their relatives. For some great houses it was said that a **bean shee** or a woman of the fairies would come and keen at their funerals. When these stories were translated into English **bean sídhe** was anglicised as **banshee** rather than being translated as **fairy woman** and from this the stories of the **banshee** developed. In later stories, the appearance of the banshee could foretell death. Banshees were said to appear for particular Irish families, though which families made it onto this list varied depending on who was telling the story. Stories of banshees were also prevalent in the West Highlands of Scotland.

Banshees are usually seen by a person who is about to die in a violent way such as murder.

Although not always seen, her mourning call is heard, usually at night when someone is about to die and usually around woods.

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" 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.

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".

## History and mythology

In legend, a banshee wails nearby when someone is about to die. There are some special 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. They were also associated with the Airlie clan. Accounts of banshees go back as far as 1380 with the publication of the *Cathreim Thoirdhealbháigh (Triumphs of Torlough)* by Sean mac Craith. Mentions of banshees can also be found in Norman literature of that time. The Ban Si was also known to wail at the crowning of the true king. Such a cry was reported to be heard at the crowning of Brian Boru.

Traditionally, when a person died a woman would sing a lament (in Irish: *caoineadh*, [ˈkʷiːnʲə] or [ˈkiːnʲuː], "*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 McCnaimhíns, 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. It is thought that from this myth comes the idea that the wailing of numerous banshees signifies the death of a great person.

In later versions, the banshee might appear before the death and warn the family by wailing.<sup>[5]</sup> When several banshees appeared at once, it indicated the death of someone great or holy.<sup>[6]</sup> 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.<sup>[7]</sup>

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.

One explanation for the origin of the banshee is in the screech of the Barn owl (*Tyto alba*). 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.

## In other mythologies

### American folklore

Stories of banshees can also be found in America in the late 18th century. 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.

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).<sup>[1]</sup>

### 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.<sup>[8]</sup>

### In popular culture

See Banshee in popular culture


## Notes

- [1] Wiffen, B. B., *Choice Notes from "Notes and Queries"* ([http://books.google.com/books?id=Q\\_NFV5U3jj4C&pg=PA32](http://books.google.com/books?id=Q_NFV5U3jj4C&pg=PA32)), P.P. – London. – Notes and Queries, William John Thoms. p. 32
- [2] Kellog, various (2001:745)
- [3] Orchard, Andy (1997). *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*. Cassell. ISBN 0-304-34520-2
- [4] Simek, Rudolf (2007) translated by Angela Hall. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. D.S. Brewer. ISBN 0-85991-513-1
- [5] 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.
- [6] 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
- [7] Briggs (1976), pp. 14–16: "Banshee".
- [8] Owen, Elias (1887). *Welsh folk-lore: A collection of the folk-tales and legends of North Wales*. Felinfach: Llanerch. p. 142.

## 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.
- Lysaght, Patricia (1986). *The banshee: The Irish death-messenger*. Roberts Rinehart. ISBN 978-1-57098-138-8.
- *An encyclopedia of fairies: Hobgoblins, brownies, bogies, and other supernatural creatures*. Pantheon. 1976. ISBN 978-0-394-73467-5.
- Evans Wentz, Walter Yeeling (1977). *The Fairy-Faith in celtic countries, its psychological origin and nature*. C. Smythe. OCLC 257400792 (<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/257400792>)

## External links

- MovableInishowen.com: The Legend of the Banshee, Leo Bowes ([http://www.movableinishowen.com/history/mythology/legend\\_of\\_the\\_banshee.htm](http://www.movableinishowen.com/history/mythology/legend_of_the_banshee.htm))
  - Irish Culture and Customs: Creepy Irish Creatures, Bridget Haggerty (<http://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/ACalend/CreepyCreatures.html>)
  -  Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Banshee". *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
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