

## The Immortal and Mortal Origins of the Banshee

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### Abstract

The banshee is one of the most important supernatural creatures in Ireland, due to her ominous and gloomy fate. There is a debate whether she is a goddess, an undead creature or a fairy; in the case of the modern banshee, all of these categories can be true due to her complex origin. Her oldest forms must have been such Irish warrior goddesses/fairy queens like Mórrígan or Badhbh and the Crone Sisters, who are called the Ladies of the Earth. That is why the personality of the banshee became richer when she incorporated other elements from mortal women. Therefore, the contemporary banshee can be claimed to possess strong connections with both humans and immortals and both of them are equally essential in her evolution.

**Keywords** banshee, pagan Ireland, Mórrígan, Badhbh, undead creatures, evolution

Ireland has always been the home of the supernatural due to the fairies who are said to live there. These creatures can be found in myths, legends, folk tales and even recordings of ethnographers both in Ireland and abroad mention several meetings with them (Lysaght,1998: 4). Many of them are well-known all over the world and they have become important symbols of the Emerald Island.

Among them, we can find such strong male creatures like the pookah and the leprechaun and there are some female spirits, like merrows and banshees, of which, the latter can also easily be called the most important and most ominous creatures.

Although the banshee is often called one of the "foreboders of death" (Lysaght,1998: 8), and has quite a bad reputation due to her frightening features and connection to death, it is a huge mistake to call her an evil creature as many people do. Fortunately, there are more who treat her as the protector of the old family bloodline. In short, she often appears when a family member dies, taking part in the dying process, circling and keening around the house (Ó hÓgain 2006: 31-32).

The name banshee means "woman of the sidhe" or "fairy woman" (Lysaght,1998: 8), so we can imply that she is immortal, therefore, she must be related somehow with several goddesses of the Celtic mythology (Lysaght 1998: 20-22). On the contrary, another theory exists which says that banshees were once mortals, who came back from death due to various reasons (Lysaght,1998: 17). According to several Irish legends and family stories, every true-blooded Irish family has its

own banshee (Lysaght, 1998: 93-94), therefore, it can be stated that several different banshees exist, however, the singular form 'the banshee' is used much more often in the sources.

This article aims to present these powerful goddesses of pagan Ireland and even some once-mortal characters, who had an integral part in the development of the banshee we know.

According to many legends, myths and folklore, the banshee is called the "messenger of death" (Curran 1997: 45) who appears as an old hag with shabby long grey hair. This creature never shows her face because it is hidden behind a cloak or a thick white or grey veil. She also wears a dark shabby mantle above her grey or white long dress, which is often bloody (Lysaght 1998: 40).

However, she can also appear as a beautiful young lady or a mother-like figure (Lysaght 1998: 37) and this time her positive side is emphasized; there are some tales which featured her as a gentle and kind woman, particularly when she meets children (Lysaght 1998: 37-38). The reasons why she is portrayed as a beautiful young woman, are "the romantic descriptions and poetic images of fairy queens in the 19th and 20th-century oral tradition" (Lysaght 1998: 37).

While some Irish people think that she is a fairy, she seldom possesses red hair, which is the trademark of the fairies in Ireland. On the contrary, her hair colour can be grey, brown, black, or sometimes blond (Lysaght 1998: 44-45). Therefore, she can hardly be called a "true fairy" due to her gloomy and complex origin. Instead, the term "supernatural creature" should be used because it works well with both mortal and fairy-like theories of her background.

In parallel with her appearance, her movement is also worth mentioning; this creature can travel fast (Curran 1997: 47) and when she walks, her movement looks like floating above the ground or when she is in her bird form, she tends to circle the houses where a person with true Irish bloodline lies ready to pass away (Curran 1997: 47). The latter movement can be important for some Celtic warrior goddesses, who must have been the ancestress of the contemporary banshee (Ó hÓgain 2006: 26-27).

Nevertheless, if we want to understand her popularity and importance among the supernatural creatures of the Celts, her behaviour needs to be discussed as well. When she arrives at the house of the dying person, she starts circling the building and keens (Lysaght 1998: 9). Keening is a special way of crying; that is why many keener women respected her in the past and called her 'bean chaointe' (Lysaght 1998: 9), which means "keener woman" (Lysaght 1998: 9). Her voice is high and piercing; sometimes it is described as a "piercing cry" (Byrne 1987: 36), "hoarse scream" (Byrne 1987: 41) and a "mournful, dismal, wailing cry" (Byrne 1987: 36). In addition to these, her keening is often compared to the "hooting of an owl" (Curran 1997: 49) or "mating cats and foxes" (Lysaght 1998: 26).

On the other hand, she is often said to have been seen washing clothes, especially the ones of those who are going to die soon (Curran 1997: 49). Hence, it is not surprising why people used to avoid meeting her close to the water. Interestingly, warriors were also afraid of her; according to them, if they were visited by the banshee before battles, she would come for them and they were going to die on the battlefield (Ó hÓgain 2006:26).

Furthermore, she can be furious and dangerous when she is disturbed while keening or if her comb and mirror are stolen from her. These objects are said to be magical; they are to remind her of lost

beauty, this is why she combs her hair and cries at the same time (Curran 1997: 49, Lysaght 1998: 76-78). There are some folktales which feature a fierce banshee who brings death to the thieves who have stolen her things (Lysaght 1998:76-78).

Not only her behaviour and features are worth mentioning but also her magical abilities. First of all, the banshee is said to be a shapeshifter; she can change into the forms of ravens, crows, owls and blackbirds (Lysaght 1998: 9) but she can also turn into several nocturnal creatures, like wild hares, weasels and badgers (Curran 1997: 47).

Foretelling and foreseeing the future are her most important abilities; she can be called a seeress (Curran 1997: 52), that is why many people think she is ominous and brings bad luck wherever she can be seen (Curran 1997: 52). Nevertheless, she can be kind and helpful, especially towards old Irish families, children and the ones who ask for help from her (Lysaght 1998: 37). She can also appear like a wise woman who gives wisdom and help to the ones she is fond of (Berresford Ellis 2002: 307-319). Her positive side is called "bean tigh", said to be a fairy housekeeper of the Irish households and she protects the family with her knowledge and her presence (Eason 2001: 30-31, 221).

Apart from occurring in Ireland, she is well-known in Scotland as well; there she is called as "bean nighe" (Eason 2001: 30-31, 221), which means "night woman". According to Cassandra Eason, who is an expert on the topic,

the Scottish Banshee, the bean nighe, gives a more menacing appearance. The Scottish Banshee is dressed in grave clothes, with a face covered by a veil, while riding a dancing steed. Her age and features are difficult to make out but she appears to be an old crone (Eason 2001: 61).

First and foremost, if we want to understand why the banshee is connected to the immortal beings of Ireland, we need to mention the fairy race, the Tuatha Dé Danann, who, according to the myths, came to Ireland thousands of years ago before the Celtic tribes (Curran 1997: 8). Among them some powerful female goddesses can be found; the most important is Danu, who is the mother goddess of all fairies. Comparing her to the banshee, it can be said that she is also a protective figure and a shape-changer. What is more, Danu can appear as different shapes of the Triple Goddesses and like the banshee, she is also called the Soul of Ireland (Lysaght 1998: 13-14).

Irish war goddesses are equally important; they should be mentioned because they must be the ancestresses of the modern banshee due to many common characteristics (Ó hÓgain 2002: 31). The best-known among them, Mórrigan, the large goddess of war (Ó hÓgain 2002: 31, 361). She has strong connections with death; despite circling houses of dying people, she has often been seen circling above battlefields, crying for the spilt Irish blood (Lysaght 1998: 26, Ó hÓgain 2002: 362). This goddess is well known for "her fearful laughing" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 361), and for the fact that she can be ruthless and cruel with her enemies although she has healing powers and a forgiving heart. When she fought against the Irish superhero, Cú Cúlainn, who was lethally wounded by her, she turned into her crow form and cried for the dying hero on his shoulder until he died (Ó hÓgain 2002: 362).

Not only is Mórrigan responsible for war but there are also other warrior goddesses who have influenced the banshee of recent times. For example, Macha, the raven goddess should be named

(Ó hÓgain 2002: 325, 326), and there is Badhbh, the dreadful. She is "the announcer of death who usually appears in the form of a scald crow" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 26), and she is called the "fighting lady" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 26) or "fighting goddess, (...) who bring(s) sleet and strong showers against the enemy in battles" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 26). Badhbh is also a gloomy figure, often blood-thirsty, and she is "joyful when human women are sorrowful at the slaughter of their man folk" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 26). Before Cú Chulainn died, he met Badhbh at the river. She was in the shape of a "beautiful young woman at a ford 'lamenting and moaning, washing in cold water purple hacked wounded spoils'" (Ó hÓgain 2002: 27). Enhancing her frightening personality, it needs to be mentioned that she was also "described as a hideous hag and is washing mangled heads and limbs by the shore of a lake", like the traditional banshee figure (Ó hÓgain 2002: 27).

Interestingly, some older people still call the banshee "badhbh, "bow" or "bibe" (Lysaght 2001: 9), especially in counties like Tipperary, Kilkenny and Laois, and these names give strong evidence to the theory that banshees and the war goddesses are alike although the modern banshee looks less dangerous and more human-like.

Moreover, several other supernatural creatures can be mentioned as well. Firstly, there are three old women, the Crone Goddesses or Celtic Hags, who are also shapeshifters (Eason 2001: 180). They are responsible for the seasons, and also predict the future, and their clothes are similar to the ones which the banshee wears (Eason 2002: 181, 182). What is more peculiar, are their hidden faces under their veils (Eason 2001: 180). Another similar group, the Cailleachs, or the Veiled Ones also need to be featured because they were "once-powerful goddesses who can assure the form of lovely maidens, hares, cats, stones, and trees, like the Old Hag of Rollrights" (Eason 2002: 180, 181). They are also called earth-goddesses, representing the ugly side of similar deities (Ó hÓgain 2006: 58) and prefer such places, "which are associated with the Otherworld" (Ó hÓgain 2006: 58).

Finally, another banshee-like creature, the Cailleach Bhuer (Blue Hag) needs to be presented because she is very similar to Bean Nighe, the Scottish banshee (Eason 2001: 222). She is "an old woman, wearing black or dark blue rags with a crow on her left shoulder and a holy staff that kills a mortal with a touch" (Eason 2001: 182). Like the Crone Goddesses, she represents winter and the bleaker side of the year and often "roams the Highlands by night during winter when her power is at its greatest" (Eason 2001: 182).

On the other hand, when Ireland converted to Catholic Christianity, the church did everything to reduce the importance of fairies and deities (Gardner 2004: 32). However, instead of deleting them without a trace, some of them were combined with some Christian saints (Gardner 2004: 32). What is more, others started to incorporate several new elements, and this is why banshees with mortal backgrounds started to emerge into the legends and tales.

It is important to examine such cases to get the answer as to why they remain on Earth. One can be when they "...cannot find rest in the afterlife and (...) return to this earth (...) to cause harm" (Lysaght 1998: 12).

This can be the cause of Dearg-Dee who returned from death to get revenge on those who had cheated on her. The story is well-known in Ireland and presents a vampire-like creature, who once was a beautiful girl and her father tore her away from her lover and forced her into a marriage with

a rich squire. It was unhappy because her husband tortured her until she committed suicide and with her last words she also turned away from God. However, she came back to life as a vampire-like creature. After slaying her husband, her father, and everybody who was in her way, she returned to her true love, who killed her to end her sufferings. (Stoker-Barker 2018: 285-293).

Another story, *The banshee's Revenge upon the Fitzpatrick's* also proves that the banshee seeks vengeance on the ones who were unfaithful to her (Byrne 1987: 39-44). This time, a young man killed his partner with his knife and later he started a family. Nevertheless, the murdered girl returned as a banshee and started to chase her unfaithful lover. Wherever he went, the man was followed by a female figure dressed in white sitting on the bank, uttering a melancholy cry.

(...) he aimed his pistol at her and fired. A scream of superhuman force and horror that nearly froze his blood burst upon him. As he turned to fly, the figure of the banshee, all covered in blood, crossed his path and continued at intervals to intercept him as he ran. (Byrne 1987: 43)

At the end of the story, all the family members died, and the banshee also chased her unfaithful lover to his death (Byrne 1987: 44).

Other causes can be for them to remain here because of love or a sense of guilt. A good example is *The Story of Dunluce Castle* (Byrne 1987: 13-16). This tells the story of Maeve, the beautiful daughter of the Lord. She fell in love with a young soldier, but the marriage was rejected by the father, so they planned to escape on water (Byrne 1987: 15). However, the boat turned over and Maeve drowned. Her father was sad and grieved for some weeks when Maeve returned as a banshee to protect the family until the death of the last offspring (Byrne 1987: 16).

Parallel to returning due to revenge and loyalty, there is a third reason why banshees remain on Earth. The " (...) return of the dead is that of negligence in the performance of duties while alive" (Lysaght 1998:13). This means that if there is a task not completed, the woman can come back as a banshee to finish it. For instance, according to the people from Waterford, "the banshee is the spirit of an old woman whose business it was while alive to caoin (keen) for dead people" (Lysaght 1998:13-14). It is a fact that keening has been a tradition connected to death in almost every culture, and it aims to help dying people to pass the gate of the afterlife. They used to start crying such songs during the dying process and continued until the funeral (Lysaght 1998: 9).

As it has been presented, banshees are special among the supernatural creatures of Ireland due to their unclear but surprisingly complex origins. While it is hard to decide whether they are faeries, ghostly creatures or goddesses, it is clear that these three terms are strongly connected in the case of the banshee. Her ancestors are presumably Celtic warrior goddesses, who resemble her very much in their appearance, the ability of shapeshifting, foreseeing the future and their strong connection to blood, all being common characteristics. Furthermore, there is another group of Irish goddesses, the Crone Sisters and the Cailleachs who represent ancient lore and they are also connected to the land. Parallel with these immortal figures of Irish mythology, the mortal origin is equally important in the evolution of the banshee, adding tones to her modern character. Despite her gruesome personality, she deserves to be one of the most important supernatural creatures of Ireland and maybe the banshee is the only one whose character is so varied in the legends, recordings and families' oral traditions.

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## Appendix



Picture 1. Morrigan, the war goddess

([www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com) Retrieved: 14/01/2020)



*Picture 2. Morrigan, the war goddess*

([www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com) Retrieved: 14/01/2020)