

La Llorona

A Legend of New Spain in Colonial Gothic

By Graeme Davis

Known in English as the Weeping Woman, La Llorona (pronounced “yo-RO-nah”) is a legend of Mexico and the Spanish Southwest. The Weeping Woman is a type of ghost or demon that can be encountered anywhere in New Spain. According to the TV series *Sleepy Hollow*, a sub-type is also found occasionally in the Thirteen Colonies.

This article explores the legend of La Llorona, looks into a few variations, and suggests a range of ways to use this legend in *Colonial Gothic* adventures.

The Legend

Almost every Spanish-speaking population north of Mexico City has its own version of this tale. The details vary, but the ending is always the same.

Her name was Maria, she lived a long time ago, and she fell in love with a handsome *ranchero*. Because of him, she drowned her own children in a river.

Some say she killed them – and then herself – out of grief and rage when her *ranchero* abandoned her. Others say these children were from an earlier marriage, and she killed them so she could be free to marry again. According to a third version of the tale, her children drowned by accident when she left them alone to go to a dance with her new beau. All versions agree that her spirit cannot rest and she is cursed to spend eternity wandering and weeping, searching for her lost children along the banks of rivers and canals.

Ever since, people have seen a beautiful woman dressed in white walking beside rivers and canals at night, her hair disheveled and her eyes red from crying. Many have heard her weeping, and a brave few have gotten close enough to hear her sob “*Ay, mis hijos!*” – “Oh, my children!”

Some versions of the tale are darker still. It is said that bad luck will soon befall anyone who sees the Weeping Woman, or that she will steal, and even drown, any children she finds in the course of her wanderings.

Origins

It is not known whether the legend of La Llorona is based on an actual event. However, it is enticingly similar to both an Aztec legend and a story from the life of Hernan Cortez. It also evokes an even darker being from Mexican folklore.

La Malinche

La Malinche (also known as Malinali, Malintzin, and Doña Marina) was one of twenty women given to Cortez by the people of Tabasco in 1519. She served the Conquistador as a translator and advisor, eventually becoming his mistress and bearing his first son, whom he named Martín. She spoke Mayan as well as the Aztec language, Nahuatl, and helped Cortez form local alliances and head off potential rebellions. Cortez is reported to have said that after God, Doña Marina was the main reason for his success in Mexico. Contemporary Aztec records almost never depict Cortez without her by his side, and they sometimes show her alone, apparently acting on her own initiative and authority.

Unlike Disney's Pocahontas, though, Doña Marina did not keep her European paramour. Cortez abandoned her to marry a good Spanish lady. While it is not recorded that she killed her children, and some sources claim she died in 1529, other sources hint that she did not suffer her abandonment meekly. In some later fiction she lived on as a vengeful resistance leader, and even as a vampire.

Cihuacoatl

Cihuacoatl was an Aztec goddess, the most prominent of several patron deities of childbirth and motherhood. It has been said that the Aztecs honored a woman who died in childbirth as highly as a warrior who died in battle.

According to Mexican folklore, the goddess was seen shortly after Cortez appeared, weeping for the loss of her children – an omen of the fall of the Aztec empire at his hands.

Cihuacoatl had a son named Mixcoatl, who became a god of the hunt and the stars. She abandoned him at a crossroads, but regretted her decision and returned weeping, only to find a sacrificial knife where her son had been.

The spirits of women who died in childbirth serve Cihuacoatl. Known as *civitateo* (“divine women”) they haunt crossroads at night, steal children, and cause seizures and other illnesses.

Although these Aztec legends do not correspond exactly with the commonly-told story of La Llorona, it is easy to see how they may have influenced its development.

Game Statistics

La Llorona can be many things, ranging from a tragic ghost to a vengeful goddess. Providing full *Colonial Gothic* statistics and rules for every conceivable variant would take an article far longer than this one. Instead, the following paragraphs suggest a range of possible approaches to creating a version of La Llorona that fits with the tone and magic level of the individual campaign.

The *Colonial Gothic* rulebook provides 2nd Edition rules for ghosts, and the *Bestiary* covers banshees. Either one would make a good basis for La Llorona, though the banshee's Moan trait should be cut. For a more corporeal version, the GM might use the vampire from the rulebook (without any traits except for Night Vision and Undead) or the revenant from the *Bestiary*.

The Weeping Ghost

When creating La Llorona as a ghost, the main decision to be made is how (or indeed, whether) the living can interact with her.

At her most harmless she may be a spectral vision as insubstantial as smoke, to be laid to rest when the Heroes learn her sad tale, find her remains and those of her children, and give them a Catholic burial.

A more dangerous version may use mind-affecting magic of some kind to hypnotize children and send them walking glassy-eyed into the river – or to possess single mothers, especially those driven to the brink of despair by their circumstances, and force them to re-enact her crime. The lives of those she kills may be an offering to the angry spirits of her dead children, or she may simply be locked into an obsessive pattern of behavior, condemned to repeat it endlessly until she is stopped.

The Revenant

A solid, physically manifested version of La Llorona presents a different kind of threat. She has the inhuman strength of a lunatic and high grappling skills, which she uses to drown interfering mortals or simply break their necks. In a simple adventure, destroying her physical form stops her for good; for a longer and more challenging campaign thread, she simply comes back the following night, or month, until her tormented spirit is laid to rest by a Catholic priest or by Aztec-derived magic.

The Goddess

In a higher-powered campaign, La Llorona can be a vengeful manifestation of the goddess Cihuacoatl, imbued with all the terrible power that implies and determined to take the life of one Spanish or Anglo child for every Aztec who died at the hands of the Conquistadores. Alternatively she could be another Aztec deity, taking her own sacrifices since Catholicism replaced the bloody Aztec rites by which she was formerly appeased. In a Robert E. Howard-style horror story, she could be one of the last priestesses of such a terrible deity.

The GM has free rein in designing such a powerful entity. The legends of the *civitateo* give these creatures a shifting array of attributes including clawed hands and feet and the ability to wither limbs and cause fits and wasting diseases. One interpretation of these creatures may be found in my own *Atlas of the Walking Dead*, published by Eden Studios for their zombie survival RPG *All Flesh Must Be Eaten*.

The Mortal

In a low-magic or no-magic campaign, La Llorona may be entirely mortal – an 18th-century serial killer driven to madness by a life of abuse, or by the horror of having killed her own children to save them from an abusive father, or starvation, or some other threat. She may even believe that she has become La Llorona of the stories.

Adventures

An encounter with La Llorona can enhance even a strictly non-fantastic *Colonial Gothic* campaign. Rarity gives supernatural incidents – or incidents that merely seem to be supernatural – a greater impact in a non-magical setting.

Of course, the GM can always decide, in the best Scooby-Doo tradition, that the apparent haunting has a perfectly mundane cause: the “ghost” turns out to be a madwoman escaped from a local asylum, a kidnap victim leading into a mundane plot, or an attempt to play on a local legend to keep prying eyes away from a hidden gold strike or a planned robbery.

In a more fantastic campaign, La Llorona might be one of several types of restless dead, given an added authenticity by her ready-made backstory and her long history in the real world.

Bibliography

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Perez, Domino Renee. *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Online Resources

“La Llorona,” *Handbook of Texas* <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lx101>

“La Llorona - Weeping Woman of the Southwest” (3 pages), *Legends of America*
<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/gh-lallorona.html>

TV and Video

The Crying Woman (Spanish *La Llorona*), dir. Ramón Peón, 1933.

Supernatural, Season 1 Episode 1, The CW (Warner Bros.), 2006.

Grimm, Season 2 Episode 9, Universal, 2012.

Sleepy Hollow, Season 2 Episode 5, Fox, 2014.