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### **Keen for the Dead: Women's Roles in Irish Funerals**

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# Keen for the Dead: Gender and Class Roles in Irish Funerals

Dylann Leal

## Introduction

The Irish *caoine* (keen) was a funeral lament commonly practiced by rural, lower class people until the end of the 19th century. When a member of the community died, a woman, gifted in poetry, led mourners in a structured wailing and singing process until the burial. These women were professional mourners who were believed to have a connection to the supernatural.



The banshee (*bean sidhe*), a she-fairy whose cry predicted the death of a member of the community, appears to be based on keening women and their *caoinés*.

Fairies or the Sidhe, pronounced “shee,” inhabited the Otherworld, a place between this world and the Christian afterlife. For rural, lower class Irish, this idea coexisted peacefully with Christian beliefs.

*“There is an odd mixture of the ridiculous and the sublime in the prevalent notions respecting such beings. Nor could there have been a more extraordinary medium between Man and his Maker”*

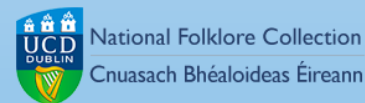
-Thomas Crofton Croker

## Sources and Methodology

Sources for this research came from a variety of databases. *The Dublin Penny Journal*, which ran from 1832-1836, provided rich information on funeral practices as well as folklore across Ireland. Written by men from the upper classes of Ireland, these articles provide insights into the class dimensions of keening in discourse and practice.



Other sources came from University College Dublin’s National Folklore Collection. These documents came from a national effort in the 1930s to document folklore as well as local history throughout Ireland



Previous scholarship on the Irish *caoine* focus mostly on the role of the state and the Catholic church in regulating the practice of keening. Little is said about the identity and experience of the keening women. Taking a gender and performance perspective, my analysis focuses on the role of the keening women and sheds light on the close relationship between the mourning practice and the gender role that women performed daily in the Irish rural community.

## Gender Performance

Keening as a female-only performance had its roots in the daily role that rural, lower class Irish women performed in their community. Traditionally, women were expected to be heard and involved in the community. This gender role was also seen in the keening rituals. When keening women lamented and sang, they were the most heard voice in the community and led the community in a highly structured grieving process.



Keening women also performed the role of caretaker, another role Irish women assumed. During the wake, a pre-burial celebration for the deceased, keening women led structured laments to protect the soul from staying in the Otherworld. Their performance cared for the soul until it reached its final resting place.

Keening women also cared for the community. By creating highly structured grieving processes, these women allowed everyone to grieve in the community. They grieved not only for the recently deceased, but for any loss that they had ever felt.

## Performance of Class Identity

The practice of keening was under scrutiny in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both the upper classes and Catholic church reprimanded and attempted to ban the practice to create an ideal, “civilized,” Ireland.

However, the practice of keening continued. Moreover, the rural, lower-class Irish women used keening to perform their class identity and create a strong sense of community bound together by emotional resonance and religious beliefs.

## Conclusion

The study of keening women from 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland not only highlights the active role that women played in the Irish mourning traditions, but also reveals the everyday gender role that rural and lower-class women performed in the community. When the practice of keening came under attack by the upper classes and the Catholic Church, it became an identity marker for the lower class. Leading the community through the grieving process, the keening women contributed to the development of communal solidarity and class consciousness in the rural society.