

# LA LLORONA

## A Southwestern Legend for GURPS

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 the West that has a significant Spanish-speaking population: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, or southern California.

This article explores the legend of La Llorona, looks into a few variations, and suggests a range of ways to use this legend in GURPS adventures, both Wild West and later.

### 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.

## **La Llorona in *GURPS***

A brush with the supernatural – or seemingly supernatural – can make a memorable incident in a non-magical Old West campaign, and La Llorona can also be used in any historical or modern fantasy campaign set in the Southwest or Mexico from the 1700s to the present day.

### ***Basic Statistics***

La Llorona can be many things, ranging from a tragic ghost to a vengeful goddess. Providing full ***GURPS*** 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.

***GURPS Horror*** provides 4th Edition rules for ghosts, and the section on serial killers is useful for creating the vengeful, child-killing version that features in many modern retellings of the legend. ***GURPS Spirits*** provides more details and options for creating ghosts, both vaporous and solid, for the 3rd Edition rules. The Zombie Maker in ***GURPS Zombies*** offers ways to make more corporeal undead for 4th edition, while the section on Revenants in ***GURPS Undead*** will be useful to the 3rd edition GM.

### ***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 PCs 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 Control 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 Howard-style Western horror story, she could be one of the last priestesses of such a terrible deity.

***GURPS Aztecs*** includes chapters on Aztec religion and magic that will be useful to the GM 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.

### ***The Mortal***

In a low-magic or no-magic campaign, La Llorona may be entirely mortal – a 19th-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 **GURPS** 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 fantasy western setting such as the now out-of-print **GURPS Deadlands** or in Wild West **GURPS Steampunk** or **GURPS Screampunk** adventures, La Llorona might be one of several types of restless dead, but arguably her ready-made backstory and her long history in the real-world West give her an added authenticity.

### *Beyond the Old West*

The legend of La Llorona is alive and well in the present day, and she need not be confined to an Old West setting. While she is somewhat fixed in place, she can appear almost anywhere in time.

Pairing **GURPS Aztecs** and **GURPS Swashbucklers** offers players the opportunity to see Cortez and Doña Marina for themselves, and watch her descend into vengeful madness following Cortez’ abandonment. A 17th-18th-century campaign set in northern New Spain can give the PCs a chance to meet the Maria of the common legend and prevent the terrible sequence of events that created La Llorona. With minor changes she can also appear in Aztec-inspired alternate history settings such as Ezcalli from **GURPS Alternate Earths** or Spanish America in the Cornwallis setting from **GURPS Alternate Earths 2**.

**GURPS Cliffhangers** adventures allow the GM to use La Llorona in a pulp context. The 1933 Mexican movie *La Llorona* (English title *The Crying Woman*) used a contemporary setting, and two-fisted pulp heroes regularly confronted supernatural threats in the Southwest and Mexico. The ghost will add a splash of authentic Southwestern color to adventures in the region.

***GURPS Atomic Horror*** uses the Southwest as a key locale, and it is entirely in keeping with Atomic Horror logic for the fallout from an atomic test to raise the dead woman from her suicide's grave and set her on a rampage. A ***GURPS WWII: Weird War II*** campaign can feature a similar revenant caused by the Trinity test or other Manhattan Project operations. The GM can decide whether she is a pure ghost, a mummy-like undead creature, or a radioactive undead mutant with atomic powers.

In a present-day campaign – even one that does not normally feature the supernatural – PCs can encounter La Llorona in a Mexican neighborhood in almost any North American city as they follow up on a series of child abductions, drownings, or apparent ghost sightings.

## **Bibliography**

De Aragon, Ray John. *The Legend of La Llorona*. Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2006.

Beatty, Judith S. *La Llorona: Encounters with the Weeping Woman*. Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2004.

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/lxl01>

"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.