Abstract

This thesis analyzes three stories from Alvin Schwartz's *Scary Stories* trilogy: "The Hook", "The Babysitter", and "A Ghost in the Mirror." These stories are analyzed through cultural and feminist lenses to assess how they reflect societal fears about women's sexuality and independence and encourage women to be fearful of these things. The social atmosphere of the 1980s was one of intense anxiety among the white middle class about women entering the workforce, stranger danger, and teenage driving and sex. These fears compounded to fuel exchanges of oral urban legends that Schwartz would eventually collect into his three *Scary Stories* anthologies over the course of the decade. The resulting anthologies became immensely popular among youths while suburban parents across the nation campaigned to ban the books on the basis of their content and disturbing illustrations. In order to provide a starting point for analyzing these stories, three questions are asked: "What is the sin or danger?," "Who is punished?," and "By whom?." For each story, the answers to these questions illuminate relationships between the stories and the society they reflected, especially with regards to expectations for young women. The work of Diana Taylor on archives and repertoires informs the expansion of the analysis for the stories as they were transferred from the repertoire of urban legends to the archived stories by Schwartz and other scholars.

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The Kids Aren't Alright?: *Scary Stories* and the 1980s

The United States in the 1980s was marred by a number of societal fears. More women were entering the workforce, finding a two income household both necessary and possible (Myers et al). As former stay-at-home moms entered the workforce, their children began to fill daycare centers, some of which were scrambling to find the space and staff to keep up with the rising demand (Myers et al). The increased income generated by these families who now had two adults working, even if one was still paid significantly less, enabled many white families to move from crowded, racially diverse cities into bucolic monocultural suburbs. Despite insistent descriptions of these economically advantaged suburbs as "safe," concerns about safety prevailed, especially in relation to cars and stranger danger (O'Connor and Brown 159). Cars, which continued to find increased accessibility to the middle class in the 1980s, were essential for mobility in the suburbs, yet the very cars that provided access to these safe neighborhoods became a cause of concern for parents who worried about the danger they posed for their children (O'Connor and Brown 159). In 1981, six year old Adam Walsh was abducted from a department store and murdered by a stranger. His father, John Walsh, launched a sweeping nationwide campaign against stranger danger (Crime Museum), infecting suburban parents with anxiety about outside intruders who might permeate their borders to steal their children. This culture of compounded fears birthed the iconic slasher films from the 1980s, with enduring

staples of the genre such as *Friday the 13th, A Nightmare on Elm Street,* and *Halloween* generating millions of dollars and several remakes each. Before these horror giants dominated the box office, however, less lucrative, yet equally ubiquitous narratives were whispered at sleepovers and summer camps, then swapped by concerned parents in PTO meetings and Dear Abby columns across the country. It was these urban legends that Alvin Schwartz, together with visionary illustrator Stephen Gammel, transferred to print in their *Scary Stories* trilogy.

The *Scary Stories* trilogy is composed of three books: *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* published in 1981*, More Scary Stories to Tell in The Dark* published in 1984*,* and *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones* published in 1991. The books contain urban legends collected and adapted by Alvin Schwartz accompanied by illustrations from Stephen Gammel. They achieved near instant success and became Gammel's best known work (Lambert 8). Their fame and infamy endured, making them some of the most checked-out books from school libraries into the 2000s and the most banned books of the 1990s, according to the American Library Association (DeLuca). As DeLuca notes in his article written for *Smithsonian Magazine*, the banning of *Scary Stories* is unique because unlike most books, which are banned for their verbal content, Gammel's illustrations were as much of a factor as the text in the banning (DeLuca). After beginning in the Seattle suburbs, the bans spread across the country, primarily in suburban areas (De Luca). This, of course, only served to skyrocket the books' popularity, and Schwartz relished being the author of banned books (DeLuca and Lambert 8). The books were banned not necessarily because the parents worried they would be too scary for their children but because parents themselves were scared by the books and feared they might inspire violent behavior among children (DeLuca). Ironically, the urban legends in the books had been spreading among

children and teens before the books were published. Even in districts where the books had been successfully banned, similar urban legends circulated among youths with or without the books' guidance. In school libraries that stocked the books, students waited in hold queues of several students to get their chance to page through the stories written at the 5th grade level and gaze, transfixed at the wispy illustrations.

Between folklorists, mythologists, and any other scholars who happen to throw themselves into the mix, there has been a tedious decades long debate surrounding the definition and analysis of urban legends. This paper derives a working definition from Mikel J. Koven's article, "The Terror Tale: Urban Legends and the Slasher Film". Koven defines urban and legend separately. According to Koven, "… the term urban is understood as referring to Western modernity" (Koven 4). "Urban", therefore, does not refer to any city environment but rather to environments created as a result of the modernization and urbanization of society. Legends, according to Koven, are stories that, "…negotiate the conceptual space of the possible, of what could be true" (Koven 4). Koven also notes that urban legends typically respond to contemporary societal problems with some sort of moral bias. This paper will combine Koven's listed traits to define urban legends as contemporary stories that push plausibility boundaries in response to a perceived societal problem and define a moral dichotomy. Three analysis questions are used as a starting point for interpreting the urban legends in this paper. The first, "What is the sin/danger?" seeks to identify what the moral bias of the narrative presents as sinful or dangerous and therefore worthy of punishment. The second question, "Who is punished?" identifies who the perpetrator is according to the narrative. The third question, "By whom?" asks what entity in the story is responsible for the consequences that befall the punished for engaging in the sinful or

dangerous activity. Often, this is akin to the villain of the story. Identifying these key elements of the story helps illuminate valid links to broader societal fears at the time. Urban legends, by their very nature, are evolving narratives passed between youths, parents, scholars, and children's books. The details of the narratives evolve with these transfers, but the key factors identifiable by the aforementioned questions stay the same as they provide the traits that make one urban legend distinct from the others. Noting these key features helps standardize the texts enough for valid analysis. These key features, however, cannot be the only features analyzed, as the changing details can reveal just as much about the stories' contexts.

Before they made it into Schwartz's anthology, these scary stories were whispered by youths at sleep overs and summer camps. These oral tellings and performances by and for youths, learned via observation and replicated, make up what Diana Taylor calls a repertoire. According to Taylor, a repertoire is composed of a culture's embodied performances (Taylor); in this case, the scary stories/urban legends shared between young people in the US. If these embodied performances compose a repertoire, then the *Scary Stories* collections by Schwartz (as well as the versions of urban legends cited in the research for this paper) are the archive. To Taylor, archives are the repertoire captured and moved into a more permanent, storable state, such as the transcribed version of these oral legends (Taylor). When these scary stories were transferred from US youth's repertoire by an adult man (an outsider to the original group) into the *Scary Stories* archive, like in a game of telephone, something is lost and something is gained in the transfer. Schwartz is aware of his act of transfer, even adding directions for oral recitations in some of the stories, a call back or attempt to preserve the original repertoire with more integrity. The basic elements of the stories have survived the transfer, but some of the violence

and sexual behavior have been removed from the archive. Though Schwartz decided to remove such elements from his archive made for children, Gammel added haunting illustrations to the archive that now live in the minds of youths, though they were not part of the original repertoire.

“THE HOOK”: SEX, CARS, AND TEENAGERS

What danger is presented in “The Hook”? The story opens with teen lovers Sarah and Donald. After a date at the movies, “They parked up on a hill at the edge of town… Donald turned on the radio and found some music,” (Schwartz 62). This is a somewhat sanitized version of the story whispered at my summer camps growing up, in which the pair were “parking” on a lovers’ lane, the music background noise for their necking. The sexual nature of the scene present in my own childhood repertoire was removed when Schwartz transferred the story into an archived children’s book. Nonetheless, the danger, in both versions, is what teenagers do when they’re driving. As more families moved to the unwalkable suburbs, teenagers began driving more and more. Cars could take teenagers away from the home farther and faster than walking or biking. Young people with expensive and dangerous machinery, drastically increased mobility, and developing frontal lobes worried parents. Able to remove teenagers from the prying eyes and ears of parents in the home, cars also became a place for teens to explore their sexuality on secluded lovers’ lanes. Teenagers could be involved in car accidents, get pregnant, get STDs, drive too far from home, and get lost. Girlfriends whose boyfriends drove were in an especially vulnerable position. Tasked with being sexual gatekeepers instructed to maintain their virginity, teenage girls had to manage competing demands of familial expectations, personal desire, and their partner’s desire. Meanwhile, boyfriends with control of the transportation in a secluded area

had significantly more power than the girlfriend, especially in the 1980s before cellphones reached the mainstream.

Who is punished for engaging in teen driving and sexual behavior? In Schwartz's version, both Donald and Sarah make it out unscathed, but it is Sarah who is targeted. When Donald arrives at Sarah's house, "He went around to the other side of the car to let her out. Hanging on the door handle was a hook" (Schwartz 63). The hook is on Sarah's door, meaning she was the one who was targeted for punishment. This complements societal narratives that positioned teenage girls as the gatekeepers of sexuality; Sarah, according to the narrative, should not have put herself in a position in which Donald could have had sex with her. In my childhood version, the boyfriend goes out into a rainstorm to check for another person, while the girlfriend waits terrified in the car, unable to see because of the darkness. When the rain subsides, she hears a tapping on the roof of the car. Finally stealing herself to leave the car, she finds her boyfriend suspended upside down like a hog from a tree over the car with his throat slit, the blood dripping onto the car, and a hook on her door handle. In both versions, the hook is attached to the girlfriend's door handle, indicating her culpability. In my childhood version, the boyfriend is more violently punished, perhaps for attempting to take advantage of his girlfriend or for staying out late. His violent punishment fits with physicality culturally ascribed to manliness. Whereas the feminine tends to be characterized by the emotional in society, the girlfriend's punishment is being traumatized by the sight of her boyfriend slaughtered like an animal.

By whom are Donald and Sarah punished? According to Schwartz, "A murderer had escaped from state prison. He was armed with a knife… His left hand was missing. In its place, he wore a hook" (Schwartz 62) and this is the villain. In some versions, the villain is a "sex

maniac" from a "lunatic asylum" (Clements 41). Schwartz's change from a sexual predator to a murder also occurs in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, in which villain Freddy Krueger, a child molester in the original script, is edited into a child killer, though, in both stories, sexual themes remain despite the vocabulary change (Herbert). "The Hook" and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* both incorporate 1980s fears of outsiders: dangerous strangers and sexual predators.

"THE BABYSITTER": MISDIRECTED FEAR AND POWER DYNAMICS

The sin committed in "The Babysitter" in Schwartz's Scary Stories appears to be the babysitter Doreen's failure to respond to a potential threat proactively. Doreen and her charges barely escape in time because she allowed the stranger to call three times before alerting someone. There is also a sin committed by the parents, who allowed their children to be left in the care of the babysitter while they presumably pursued work or entertainment outside of the home. By shirking off their parental responsibilities, the parents nearly lost their children. Schwartz's version is unique in that the children are awake and sitting with the babysitter and so make it out alive. This is similar to the *Halloween* movie, in which the careless babysitter Annie is murdered as punishment while the more cautious babysitter Laurie and her charges escape traumatized but alive. One year before *Halloween, When A Stranger Calls* adapted the more popular version of the urban legend in which the children are murdered in their sleep upstairs while the careless babysitter watches TV downstairs, neglecting to proactively respond to the ominous phone calls.

In the 1970s and 80s, two-income houses were becoming more common. More women were leaving the home to join the workforce, which led to a boom in the childcare industry (Myers). This disruption of rigid gender roles set many conservatives on edge (Myers). In the

early 80s there was also a growing acknowledgement of child sexual abuse, but there were not yet sound, research-based questioning practices (Myers). In fact, the questioning techniques used were very likely to generate false accusations from the prepubescent witnesses (Myers and Possley). These factors converged to form a moral panic about ritual satanic child sex abuse of children by daycare workers (Myers and Possley). False accusations of abusive childcare workers believed to be true spread across the nation, including one of the most notable cases of the panic taking place in New Jersey, where Schwartz lived (Possley and Lambert). The satanic panic created a distrust of childcare professionals and implicitly blamed women for leaving their children in the care of another.

Babysitting, a job mostly held by teenage girls, has long been a source of anxiety for parents who worried about the sitter's responsibility, trustworthiness, and qualifications, despite the job often being treated as unskilled labor. Teenage girls who babysat were stereotyped as uninvolved, lazy, and hyper-sexual (Easterbrook et al 105). The babysitters themselves were often encouraged to start babysitting due to the belief that it would better prepare them for motherhood or, conversely, deter them from having premarital sex when they realized how difficult caring for children could be (Easterbrook et al 104). Babysitting gave young women access to a disposable income and in many cases began girls' financial independence from their families and boyfriends, which likely also caused anxiety (Easterbrook et al 104). Despite many babysitters having pursued additional qualifications such as community childcare, CPR, first aid, and lifeguarding courses, they often found themselves underpaid under the table (Easterbrook et al 104). Babysitters occupied a liminal space in terms of power in that they held a position of power over their charges, but their employers still did not seem them as their equal (Easterbrook

et al 110). This liminal position made it difficult for babysitters to negotiate raises, and, in some cases, resist inappropriate advances from a parent. Babysitting both upheld and undermined traditional gender norms by putting women in the position of caring for children while also giving them a disposable income. The tensions inherent to babysitting created interpersonal difficulties for the sitters on the job and anxiety in parents.

In all versions of "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs," the operator gives the babysitter the same crucial piece of information, "That person is calling from a telephone upstairs" (Schwartz 71). It is essential to the story that the villain is not outside the house, but already inside, usually upstairs. Even at home, where children are supposed to be safest, there is a villain capable of harming them. The positioning of the villain above the babysitter also indicates his dominance over the babysitter in the home of which she is supposed to be in charge. This babysitter assumes that the phone call is coming from outside the house, where the dangers are. As long as she and the children are inside the house, they're safe. When it is revealed that the call is coming from inside the house, the audience experiences the terror of misplaced fear: they were worried about the danger outside when the danger had already penetrated the home.

During the 1980s, the United States also experienced a stranger danger moral panic started by the abduction and murder of Adam Walsh from a Sears in 1981 by a stranger (Crime Museum). John Walsh, Adam's father, launched a nationwide stranger danger campaign in response to the isolated incident. One of the products of this campaign was an unsettling series of videos featuring a deep-voiced dog in a trench coat called McGruff, the crime dog that warned children never to talk to strangers lest they be kidnapped and lost forever (Rentrontario 0:12). The video also emphasizes that 60 children go missing every day, showing a playground full of

children disappear instantly (Retrontario 0:23). Videos like this were screened in schools across the country, spreading fear among parents and children of stranger danger. The reality is that these statistics were greatly inflated and it is extremely rare for children to be kidnapped by complete strangers (Best). In fact, children are far more likely to be harmed by someone close to them (Best). Fears about who was dangerous to children focused on the outside, often failing to miss the dangers closer at hand, a theme that carries over into "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs".

"A GHOST IN THE MIRROR": MENSTRUATION

The three question framework does not work as well for "A Ghost in the Mirror". One could say that the danger is maturation and menstruation and that the girls are punished by the older women who leave them in the dark, but it does not seem to fit quite right into the information provided by Schwartz. This is because "A Ghost in the Mirror" is not a traditional story, like the other urban legends, but a description of a ritual performed by prepubescent girls.

Though Schwartz's version exclusively uses the gender-neutral pronoun they when referring to those practicing the ritual, Dundes notes that the ritual is almost always performed by prepubescent girls (Dundes 120). Notably, both Dundes and Schwartz explicitly state that the ritual occurs in a bathroom mirror (Dundes 120 and Schwartz 58). Though she goes by various names, in all cases the ghost the girls try to summon is that of an older woman, one who has already menstruated (Schwartz 58-59, Dundes 128). Schwartz also writes that if the children manage to summon a ghost, "…its face will slowly replace their face in the mirror" (Schwartz 59). To Dundes, this is symbolic of pubescent transformations in which girls physically mature into women (Dundes 128), sometimes with such rapidity that they feel as if they cannot

recognize their own face in the mirror. The mirror also reflects girls' preoccupation with their looks (Dundes 128), which society becomes fixated on as their bodies become possible to sexualize. Yet another component tying the ritual to menstruation is the name of the ghost, which is always Mary (Dundes 127) with the exception of La Llorona mentioned by Schwartz (Schwartz 59). This is likely a reference to the Christian virgin Mary because now that the girls have begun to menstruate, virginity is pushed to the front of their minds by the purity culture they inhabit (Dundes 127). Interestingly, the second most notable Mary mentioned in the Bible is Mary Magdalene, who was a prostitute. The same name comes to be synonymous with either purity or sexuality and purity culture places the burden on the young girls to negotiate between the two. The ritual is always accompanied by blood in some form (Schwartz 59 and Dundes 128), further cementing its connection to menstruation. Many other cultures have customs surrounding the beginning of menstruation, and it is possible to see "The Ghost in the Mirror" as a kind of menstruation ritual created by and for young girls that allows them to process the fear and uncertainty surrounding their life changes in the company of those who are also experiencing the same changes and emotions. In this way, "The Ghost in the Mirror" can be seen as an empowering ritual that centers the experiences and emotions of young girls and their relationships with each other.

Conclusion

The urban legends in Alvin Schwartz's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* are representative of societal fears at the time of their publication. Asking the questions, "What is the sin or danger?", "Who is punished?", and "By whom?", facilitates the analysis of these stories in relation to the societal fears they implicitly express. "The Hook" is representative of fears about

the combined effects of teenagers' sexuality and access to cars. "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs" is reflective of fears about leaving children in the care of someone other than their mother and the possibility of danger penetrating the walls of the home. "A Ghost in the Mirror" is a ritual created by and for young girls to express their fears about menstruation and puberty. Despite attempts at censorship, these stories thrived amidst the fear-ridden culture of the 1980s and became immensely popular among children who grew up being taught that the world was full of things to be scared by.

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