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Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self

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Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self

This article analyzes college students' legends of apparitions in mirrors in relation to the "Bloody Mary" ritual that is most common in preadolescence. Through a modified Jungian analysis of their legends, it is possible to identify patterns of self-discovery in later adolescence that are underdiscussed in the literature. By telling legends about gender transformations, ghostly lovers, suicide, and violent death, college students undergo a quasi-initiatory experience that facilitates their development of a more complex sense of self.

FIVE YEARS AGO, I WAS SURPRISED to discover that students at Binghamton University in New York were telling stories about ghosts in mirrors. A few students spoke of deliberately summoning apparitions; others said that frightening figures had inexplicably appeared.¹ As I listened to their stories, I realized that these college students were actively pursuing a ritual primarily identified by folklorists, including myself, as a preadolescent phenomenon known by the name "Bloody Mary."² In late adolescence, these students were discovering a mode of self-expression that paralleled, but went beyond, the fear test favored by younger individuals. Having learned about mirror magic as children, they found themselves standing in front of a mirror again, seeing something new reflected in its shimmering surface.

A flashback to my graduate-school days reminded me of the first time I saw preadolescents performing a ritual in front of a mirror. In 1976, while doing dissertation fieldwork under Linda Dégh's direction, something unexpected happened. Alison, a ten-year-old member of my Girl Scout troop, asked permission to go to the bathroom during circle time and did not come back. Gradually, three other girls excused themselves and joined Alison in the bathroom. None of them returned. Knowing that good Scout leaders did not let their troops disappear, I hurried into the bathroom to retrieve the errant girls.

No lights were on in the bathroom; as my eyes adjusted, I could see that a ritual was taking place. Alison and the three other girls were standing in front of the mirror, chanting a name I did not recognize: "Mary Wolf, Mary Wolf, Mary Wolf, Mary Wolf, Mary Wolf."

"What on earth are you doing?" I asked impatiently.

Alison replied, "It's Mary Wolf! And you go in the bathroom at night, uh, not at night, but you turn off the light. And then you say 'I believe in Mary Wolf' either ten

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or fifteen times, and, uh, you'll see a wolf dressed in a burnoose with scratches all over her face, and you'll get a scratch on your arm." (Quoted in Tucker 1977:408.)

In *Legend and Belief*, Dégh devotes part of her "Legend-Tellers" chapter to "Calling Back Mary Worth," bringing together "Vanishing Hitchhiker" texts, ritual elements, and insights into cultural acquisition (2001:243–6). Viewing the slumber party as the main setting for invocations of a mirror witch, she closely examines a "Mary Worth" text from an eighteen-year-old boy who, at the age when many students enter college, vividly remembers rituals from his elementary-school years (243–4). Dégh's analysis of this text and others supports her assertion that the "mirror witch" legend has evolved from stories of innocent victims, such as "Resurrection Mary," to stories of aggressive women who burst out of mirrors to hurt the young. She describes Mary Worth as a "phantom heroine" who is, with some self-contradiction, "victim, witch, mother, avenger, child abuser, and protector" (244). According to Dégh, the key to Mary Worth legends is "believing and trusting"; children who are willing to take the risk of summoning her are rewarded with a glimpse of her face, while nonbelievers are punished (244). Although I agree that believing and trusting are important, I find the process of daring and testing—an initiation of sorts—to be even more significant. An older woman, a mirror witch, puts children through a fear test that may result in a painful scratch. Like the women in charge of certain girls' initiation ceremonies in Africa, the mirror witch inflicts pain when it is appropriate to do so.³

Examining the texts collected from college students after I read *Legend and Belief*, I realized that my sample of stories differed from Dégh's in one intriguing way: all of the figures in the mirrors of the narratives I was hearing were male, not female, and most of them were young, approximately the age of college students. Their faces were compelling and disturbing, suggesting a challenge. What challenge were the students seeking? Almost all of the storytellers were freshmen; some were sophomores; a few were junior and senior resident hall assistants. Some of the freshmen told me how much they enjoyed staying up later than they had in high school, eating whatever food they wanted, playing computer games for hours, and telling ghost stories. To some extent, freshmen experiencing this kind of freedom are like preadolescents at a slumber party; however, they must adjust to living away from home while coming to terms with academic and social pressures. As students become accustomed to their college environment, the supernatural becomes one area where boundaries can be probed and stretched.

Narratives about apparitions in mirrors help students to explore a more mature sense of self; both gender and sexuality are part of this exploration. Many works of literature, from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1946) to Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1961) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1999), show how looking into a mirror reveals a new dimension of oneself: a little girl becomes a heroine in a world on the other side of a mirror; a man sees himself struggling with a wolf; and a boy sees himself with the parents whose presence he deeply desires. Mirrors tell the truth about aspects of the maturing self that are difficult to acknowledge. In "Mary Whales, I Believe in You," Janet Langlois explains that the mirror literally reflects the identification of the participants with the revenant: "In normal

situations, when a girl looks in the mirror, she sees herself; in reports of the game-playing, she sees Mary Whales, or at least, expects to. In a sense, Mary Whales becomes the girl's own reflection" (1978:11).

Commenting on this point, Alan Dundes, in his illuminating psychoanalytic essay "Bloody Mary in the Mirror," agrees that Langlois is "absolutely correct" (2002:79). Enthusiastically seconding his statement, I am further suggesting that college students' stories of apparitions in mirrors reflect a search for affirmation of a complex, sometimes contradictory self. These apparitions differ radically from what the viewer expects; instead of seeing her own face, a female student may see the face of a young man. Instead of seeing his own full-length reflection, a male student may see the image of a grim young man wearing black clothes. Seeing the opposite of what one expects is startling and frightening; the stimulus for telling stories makes it possible to understand perceived experience.

The intricacies of college storytelling, embedded within the matrix of campus life, suggest a need for analysis with both a social and a psychological orientation. Gotthilf Isler, one of the few folklorists to apply Jungian analysis to legend study, wrote that he wanted to "build bridges" to help folklorists understand how legends reveal the collective unconscious (1973:162). Since 1973, Jungian analysis has not been prominent in folklore scholarship.⁴ Finding that study of archetypes can illuminate subtleties of college student legends, I choose to use Jungian analysis in combination with studies that emphasize social context, gender, and folk tradition.

C. G. Jung's family background was rich in folklore of the supernatural. His grandmother, Augusta Faber, had second sight; his grandfather, Samuel Preiswerk, felt spirits moving behind his back as he wrote sermons. Jung himself participated in séances with relatives as a university student; in fact, the adolescent girl who served as his relatives' medium became the subject of his dissertation, "Zur Psychologie und Pathologie sogenannter occulter Phänomene" (1902). In his autobiography, *Memoirs, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung describes seeing apparitions and being nearby when a bread knife inexplicably exploded (1961:98–106). His experience with adolescent folklore of the supernatural provided an important foundation for his psychological theory, a connection that has not been explored by many scholars.⁵

Jung explained archetypes by comparing them to the axial system of a crystal: invisible and inherited, this system determines a crystal's structure, although it has "no material existence of its own" (1970:13). An archetype, like the crystal's axial system, is "a possibility of representation"; an archetypal image, on the other hand, comes from the archetypes being "filled out with the material of conscious experience" (1970:13). This explicit metaphor of the crystal's axial system applies to college legends in two ways: both as an explanation of how archetypal images can be perceived and as an indication of how storytelling works in a college residence hall. When freshmen arrive at their new home away from home, they enter a domain where a communication pattern for storytelling already exists. This pattern is invisible (not readily apparent) and inherited (passed along by older students). Stories that spring from this underlying pattern rise to the surface with subtle variations.

Jung's formulation of archetypes follows his 1936 concept of the *syzygy*, "conjunction of opposites."⁶ Two archetypes, *animus* and *anima*, represent male/female com-

plementarity; the anima is the “female element in every male,” whereas the animus is the male element in the female (Jung 1968:14–7). Representations of these two archetypes can be recognized fairly easily by gender identification; a woman’s animus would always be male, and a man’s anima would always be female. There is some overlap between the anima and animus, often depicted as dangerous, and the shadow, which represents the negative side of the psyche.

In *Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought*, Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht praise the “remarkable range, complexity, and fluidity” of Jung’s archetypes but decry their “rigid oppositions” (1985:5–6). With regard to the anima and animus archetypes, Lauter and Schreier Rupprecht agree that “the most important implication of this line of thought is that culturally defined masculine and feminine qualities are equally available for development by either sex” (5). Naomi Goldenberg and other feminist scholars have further explored the need to reinterpret uses of the animus and anima archetypes (1976:443–9). I agree that these archetypes should be interpreted flexibly, with a focus on re-vision.

Man in the Mirror

Most of my data sample consists of forty-two narratives collected from students in Sullivan Hall, a residence hall at Binghamton University, between 1999 and 2003.⁷ Because I served for eight years as Faculty Master in the residential area where Sullivan Hall is located, I spent many hours there getting to know its folk traditions very well.⁸ Sullivan is known as the “haunted” hall, where supernatural experiences are most likely to happen. Some of the narratives tell of ghosts appearing in mirrors; others describe related supernatural events.

The first text I examine came from Christie, a freshman who lived on Sullivan’s “Chem-Free” floor with her roommate, Jessica. Students on Chem-Free sign a contract stating that they will avoid drugs and alcohol; instead, they engage in activities that promote a healthful lifestyle. Ghost hunting has become one of those activities, especially on or before Halloween. In the spring of 2001, a female student in my folklore class told me, “It is already known that Sullivan Hall is said to have a ghost, but what is probably not known is that Chem-Free is one of the places it likes to haunt.” Whether the “no drugs, no alcohol” policy encourages students to explore supernatural phenomena is beyond my ken, but Christie’s story, the first of its kind that I collected in Sullivan, marked the beginning of a series of dramatic encounters with ghosts in mirrors. Christie wrote her story around midnight on Saturday, May 6, 1999, then slipped it under the door of my office, where I discovered it Monday morning.

Jessica (room 207) was meditating in front of the mirror when the face shimmered and changed to the face of an unfamiliar male. Jessica, a tad frightened, left the room for a few minutes, returning with Jason (room 201), who felt a “presence” of some sort in the room. (Jason is versed in shamanism and has felt something before in 207). They went downstairs to the subbasement, determining that the “presence” was also noticeable in the far corner by the outside exit. Jason’s conclusion is that

the “ghost” is probably the spirit of a student here, that either lived or had extremely close friends in rooms 207 and 208. The presence in the subbasement which had malignant overtones lacking in the other locations is most likely where the event that led to the ghost’s coming into being took place. Based on what he and Jessica felt, Jason concluded this was probably in the 1970s.

When I first saw Christie’s story, I wondered what the word “meditating” meant. Was Jessica just staring into her mirror, contemplating her own image, or was she trying to summon a spirit? Friends of Jessica described her as “psychic,” “sensitive,” and intrigued by the supernatural. Although none of her friends thought she had tried to raise a ghost, they were not surprised that she wanted to figure out why the ghost appeared. Her trip with Jason to the subbasement was part of a serious investigation that a student with less interest in the supernatural might not have chosen to pursue.

Another question that demanded an answer was why Christie described Jessica’s apparition as an “unfamiliar male.” Superficial application of Jung’s animus archetype would suggest that Jessica saw an image of her animus, the masculine side of her psyche. Certainly the tension between female mirror-gazer and male apparition is important, but a closer look at the text shows that unfamiliarity is another cause of discomfort. Seeing the face of an unfamiliar male, Jessica goes to look for her friend, Jason, a *familiar* male who leads her down to the subbasement. Because Jason is a friend, he offers a more comfortable version of her masculine side than the one that appeared in her mirror.

The importance of unfamiliarity is made clear by Emma Jung, C. G. Jung’s wife, whose explanation of the animus begins with its meaning in Latin, “spirit” (1981:9). According to Emma Jung, the animus is “a lightning-change artist who can assume any form and makes extensive use of this ability” (27). One of these forms is that of the ghostly lover, which seems to be related to the large corpus of marriage divination rituals practiced by college students over a long period of time. College women’s rituals for summoning lovers’ faces in Ohio, circa 1925, included placing candles on either side of a mirror and walking downstairs backward while holding another small mirror (Puckett 1981:525). Many other summoning rituals on college campuses and elsewhere have sought to create a ghostlike image; Simon Bronner delineates types of college ghosts in his important study *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life* (1995).⁹ But in Christie’s story, the main thing we know about Jessica’s ghost is the fact that his face has taken the place of hers. This substitution suggests the possibility of subversion: what Judith Butler calls “a failure to repeat, a de-formity” that undermines gender binaries (1999:179). Suggesting that the gendered body is performative, Butler examines acts that occur “on the surface of the body” (173). Although the mirror provides a different surface, its close connection with identity makes it appropriate for enactment of complex self-perceptions.

Further information comes from Jason, whose familiarity reassures the ghost’s viewer. “Versed in shamanism,” Jason quickly concludes that the face Jessica saw belongs to a male student who died in the subbasement. Why does he come to this conclusion so quickly? Christie says he senses “malignant overtones” that indicate

evil and death. While Emma Jung's view of the animus emphasizes power, Lauter's analysis of the animus in visual images by women focuses on male frailty. Examining works of art by Betye Saar, Frida Kahlo, and other artists, Lauter concludes that if one looks beyond the animus concept one can find images of men that are "numinous . . . in their knowledge of impotence and death" (1985:71–2). Although Lauter prefers to classify these images of frailty as extraneous to the animus, the range of males delineated by Emma Jung includes both strong and vulnerable personages, some of whom are dying. Numinousness and death are vital aspects of the animus in college legends.

At this point, one might ask whether male college students sometimes see reflected images of female revenants who could represent their animas. Although I have not collected any stories of that kind in Sullivan Hall, some have been found on other campuses. At Mansfield University in Mansfield, Pennsylvania, students have told the legend of Sarah, said to have jumped to her death from a sixth-floor atrium after her boyfriend rejected her; ever since the day she died, students have seen her image in the windows of the building at dusk (Wehrman 2002). I have collected two legends about Sarah from young men, both of whom emphasized her reflection in the windows. At Mansfield, both male and female students refer to Sarah by name; university staff members playfully tell her story to new students at summer orientation. In this case, the legend does not seem to fit Jung's pattern of women seeing an animus in images of men and men seeing an anima in images of women.

Could previously told legends about Sullivan's subbasement have something to do with self-destruction? Jason thinks the male student died in the 1970s. College ghost stories about students who died in the 1960s and 1970s often emphasize drugs, aberrant behavior, and a propensity for occult activities, as well as suicide.¹⁰ Because many college campuses underwent dramatic changes during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is not surprising that those changes are preserved within the framework of ghost stories. Folkloristic studies of college students' legends and legend-related behavior include Andrea Greenberg's "Drugged and Seduced" (1973) and Bill Ellis's "Speak to the Devil: Ouija Board Rituals among American Adolescents" (1994). Jan Brunvand and William S. Fox have both analyzed the college legend about students receiving a 4.0 average after their roommate's suicide (Brunvand 1989; Fox 1990). The popular movie *Dead Man on Campus* (1998), in fact, translates this legend into cinematic form. It is no wonder that campus legends express worry about suicide; college life includes both academic and social pressures that can seem daunting and unbearable at times, and suicides do actually occur in this context.

Christie's account of Jessica and Jason's adventure emphasizes their descent to Sullivan's subbasement, a place seldom visited by students except for the purpose of doing laundry. College students often tell stories of ghosts in basements; like pre-adolescent narrators, they tend to find ghosts on the top and bottom floors of dwellings, the liminal spaces (see Tucker 1980). College students, however, approach such spaces differently from preadolescents. Having learned about liminality during their preadolescent and early adolescent years, many college students enjoy expressing their more sophisticated knowledge through ostensive play: ludic enactment of a situation that occurs within the text of a legend. Sometimes this kind of play involves no more

than visitation of a spooky site; other times it is more complex. As Dégh explains in *Legend and Belief*, full-fledged ostension involves the enactment of an entire legend scenario in a serious way, sometimes with criminal consequences (2001:422–40).¹¹ College residence halls, usually large buildings with multiple levels and passageways, make good places for ostensive play. As Jung explains in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961), dwelling places have symbolic meaning. His own home in Bollingen was, he said, a “representation in stone of [his] innermost thoughts and of the knowledge [he] had acquired” (223). Although college students do not usually live in the residence halls for more than a few years, these edifices take on deep, if transient, meaning as the students move toward adulthood.

Why did Jason go down to the subbasement with Jessica to search for the “presence”? In Sullivan Hall, focus on the subbasement developed from a personal experience in 1997. Alice, a member of the cleaning staff, was standing on a stepladder cleaning a light fixture in the subbasement when she suddenly felt cold, then light-headed. As she slipped from the stepladder to the floor, she decided that a ghost named Michael had overpowered her at that moment. Shortly after that happened, she refused to go back to the subbasement, often telling staff members and students why she would not go there. Intrigued by her story, residential life staff members shared it with colleagues on campus. Students who heard Alice’s story took it very seriously, wondering who Michael could be. Some of them asked whether a student by the name of Michael had died in the subbasement, but, to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever checked campus records to verify this possibility. Alice’s story was well known enough two years after her fall that it provided an explanation for supernatural activity. Her story had the same kind of tension that Christie’s story expressed: a woman, encountering a male ghost, briefly felt overwhelmed and sought an explanation of what had occurred. The subbasement, an underworld of sorts, became a locus for supernatural energy that influenced the shape of both narratives.

Two years after Jessica saw the man in the mirror, other students and staff members in Sullivan Hall speculated about what the incident meant. A resident director, Ron, told a student interviewer in April of 2001 that Jessica “saw a face of a male figure covering her face” and feared that this was a spirit “trying to make contact with her”; this statement shows that Jessica’s memorate had entered oral tradition. The phrase “covering her face,” more specific than the description in Christie’s story, suggests worry about loss of identity. The spirit who appears in the mirror is aggressive, determined to make contact; in his relentless pursuit of the young woman, he resembles the Bluebeard figure that Emma Jung identifies as one representation of the animus (1981:33–4). The elusive spirit of Christie’s story becomes a possessive and threatening presence in the story told by Ron.

Other narratives told in April 2001 describe aggressive spirits, both in room 207 and down in the subbasement. One story from Jennifer, a sophomore resident of Sullivan, tells of both roommates in 207 feeling someone approaching from behind while they study at their desks. Although the word “ghost” is not mentioned, the story clearly indicates that the mysterious entity comes from the side of the room with the mirror. A second story told by John, a sophomore, describes what happens when a staff member organizes an “MTV Fear” program in Sullivan’s subbasement:

students light candles and use a Ouija board to see if any spirits are present. A freshman woman, feeling “a hand on her back,” becomes upset and pulls up her shirt to see if the hand left an imprint; everyone around her is shocked to see that a red letter “A” extends across her back. With its connection to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, this evidence of a spirit’s presence strongly suggests a ghostly or demonic lover.¹² In a comparable text analyzed by Ellis, a female adolescent uses a Ouija board to summon a violent spirit identifying itself as a “bondage hooker”; the spirit, which appears to be female, leaves “a red welt” on the young woman’s arm (1994:70). This attack’s erotic overtones suggest that a ghostly lover can be of the same gender as the summoner. Butler’s concept of “subversive resignification” applies to both situations: a disturbing physical sign in the context of play disrupts familiar categories of sexuality and gender (1999:xxxix).

A story told about the Sullivan ghost in April 2003 reveals a dramatic shift from memorate to legend. Nick, a senior who used to live in the haunted hall, said “I forgot some of the details about the Sullivan ghost, but he’s rumored to live in the wing on Sullivan where Chem-Free is. Apparently, there was a girl on Chem-Free who worshipped the devil and summoned the ghost in the room where she lived; you can still see to this day a burned pentagram in the corner of the ceiling.” By the time this story was told, Nick no longer lived in Sullivan; a year had passed since Christie and Jessica’s graduation. With no personal ties to the women in room 207, Nick transformed the mirror incident into an episode of devil worship where a ghost (or the devil) is summoned. The “burned pentagram in the corner of the ceiling” seems to show that the “girl on Chem-Free” was a witch. This physical evidence makes the story’s transformation into a legend complete. A comparable text, collected in 1972 and published in Ellis’s *Lucifer Ascending*, tells of a female college student who deliberately summons evil spirits as she sits alone in front of a mirror in her room. Evidence here includes the student’s face, “scratched all to pieces” (like the faces of Bloody Mary’s victims), and the sudden insanity of the other student who has gone in to check on her friend (Ellis 2003:164–5).

What image of the animus, if any, do we find in Nick’s story? It seems to be the devil or a demon lover. The devil is a powerful figure, well matched to the witch who confidently summons him. One could say that this is a strong animus, part of the psyche of a woman who does not hesitate to reach beyond the borders of the supernatural; it also seems important to recognize that summoning the devil in a college residence hall is a highly subversive act. Binghamton University, like other institutions of higher learning, allows students who are Wiccans or Pagans to light candles in their rooms, but devil summoning would certainly go beyond the code of acceptable behavior.

Reflection in the Window

Another set of stories from Sullivan Hall tells of a ghost in a window, a reflecting surface that is analogous to mirrors made of metal and glass. Dan, a sophomore resident assistant, was checking to make sure all was well on his floor when he saw the ghost. He tells this story many times, whenever fellow students ask to hear it. This

version was told to a student collector in 2001, two years after his experience: "I was walking out of my room, probably around, you know, two or three o'clock in the morning, walking down the hallway. At the end of the hallway, there's a window, so I could see my reflection. I was walking down, I saw a reflection in the hallway of someone walking behind me, wearing all black. I turned around and there was nobody there, and all the doors were closed."

Dan told his story matter-of-factly, emphasizing its setting: a hallway. Corridors of all kinds symbolize transition: passage from one place or state of being to another. In children's scary stories and adult horror movies such as *The Shining*, chases through hallways offer some of the most suspenseful moments. Here, Dan offers enough details for the listener to picture what happens as if it were a scene in a movie. The sequence of visualizations is simple but clear: first his own image ("I could see my reflection") and then a new perception ("I saw a reflection in the hallway of someone walking behind me, wearing all black"). Who is this black-garbed follower? All Dan tells us is that "there was nobody there." It is clear that he means no *living* person was present; hence, the reflection in the window must have been that of a ghost.

Although, at first glance, Dan's story seems to fit the classic horror-movie pattern of a sinister supernatural figure sneaking up on an unsuspecting hero, a closer look reveals deeper meaning. When Dan sees the reflection of the man in black, he no longer sees his own image; the man in black replaces his usual perception of himself. This shocking moment of revelation fits Jung's description of the shadow, "the imperfect being in you that follows after and does everything which you are loath to do, all the things you are too cowardly or too decent to do" (1984:76). Unlike the animus or anima, the shadow has the same gender as the person to which it belongs. According to Steven F. Walker, "Acknowledging one's shadow and learning to deal with it honestly is one of life's great, if usually distasteful, psychological tasks" (1995:35). For each person, the shadow's appearance is startling and difficult. A ghost, both insubstantial and compelling, is an apt representation of the shadow-self.

Feminist scholar Jolande Jacobi has stated that the archetype has a "dynamism which makes itself felt in the numinosity and fascinating power of the image" (1959:2). The shadow, embodying all the destructive, negative, and antisocial impulses people learn to avoid, represents an exciting and dangerous part of the psyche. Jung describes the shadow as "dark aspects of the personality" (1991:8). Dan briefly describes what he sees in the mirror as a man "wearing all black," like a demonic figure. Startling in its contrast to the self, the shadow fascinates and disturbs its viewers. Telling a story about one's shadow-self is, to some extent, a rebellious act that reifies dangerous behavior.

Like Dan, male students on other college campuses have seen ghosts in mirrors or on other reflecting surfaces. A legend narrated by a Hofstra University student tells of a formally dressed man appearing in a bathroom mirror: "[M]y friend Randy was standing in the bathroom and he saw a tall figure of a man with a black coat and hat standing behind him, and when he looked over his shoulder there was no one there."¹³ Glimpsed briefly, this man in black clothing seems to represent the shadow: a dark, dangerous-looking analogue of the young man who stands in the bathroom. College bathrooms are well known as sites for spectral appearances; given that these bathrooms

are usually single-sex, it stands to reason that students would expect to see reflections that match their own gender. In Jeannie Thomas's study of the "barfing ghost of Burford Hall" at Indiana State University (1991), female students connect sounds of regurgitation with the presence of a female ghost. I first collected a version of Dan's story in 1999, a few months after he saw the reflection in the window. During the five years that followed, the crystalline structure of student storytelling yielded some intriguing results. In April of 2001, Maria, a junior living in Sullivan, remembered hearing about Dan:

Freshman year, when I lived in Sullivan, I heard this story from someone in my building about an RA named Dan from the previous year. Apparently, he was walking down the hall really late after everyone was sleeping, and in the reflection of the window at the end of the hall, he thought he saw someone walk across the hall behind him. He looked around to see who it was, but all of the doors were closed, and he hadn't heard anyone run across or shut the door real quick or anything. It's really weird. It is said that it was Gus's reflection. Gus is the ghost that haunts Sullivan.

Maria's revelation that the ghost was named Gus surprised me, bringing back memories of a student program that had, I thought, been forgotten. In the fall of 1991, when I had just moved into my new office in Sullivan Hall, I helped to plan a program in the adjacent hall, at which students could share stories about the supernatural. At this program, two freshman women decided to use a Ouija board to ask if any spirits were present. The answer they received from the Ouija board was that a spirit was in the room; he had died in the hall many years ago. This spirit's name, spelled out by the Ouija board's pointer, was Gus.

Before hearing Maria's story, I had had no idea that students had retained the memory of summoning Gus; I also had been unaware that Gus had moved to Sullivan. Clearly something about Gus was important enough to have stayed in campus tradition for ten years. I collected more stories, hoping to figure out what made Gus so interesting. Finally, in April of 2003, I learned the answer. Describing Gus, Steve, a sophomore, said, "All I know is that some guy hung himself during finals week. It was in the basement of Sullivan. Now it's incredibly cold down there and people say that his ghost haunts Sullivan. One day one of the cleaning ladies went down in the basement and in that very spot where the guy hung himself, the "cold spot," she fainted. The cleaning ladies refuse to go down there anymore."

For Steve and other students, the crux of the Sullivan ghost's meaning was his mode of death: suicide. What matters about the "Gus" legends is their recognition of self-destructive impulses that might be felt by anyone at times of stress. Gus is the "shadow self" that could choose annihilation if not acknowledged and put in its place. Hearing stories of the Sullivan ghost, students can recognize its importance. Coming to terms with this ghost is part of an initiatory process of adjustment to college.¹⁴

Jungian psychologist Richard Frankel has pointed out the need for adolescents to undergo rites of passage, some of which are ritualized death experiences followed by symbolic rebirth (1998:82). His interpretation is supported by Mircea Eliade's observation that "the central moment of every initiation is represented by the ceremo-

ny symbolizing death of the novice and his return to the land of the living" (1958: xii). According to Kaspar Kiepenheuer, adolescents, in an "intensive quest for the meaning of life," benefit from a spiritual ordeal involving symbolic death and new birth; while such ordeals are common in traditional cultures, they are harder to find in contemporary society (1990:11–4). Secret societies such as Skull and Bones at Yale have offered college students a chance to undergo a symbolic death resulting in a new way of life. James Hillman's illuminating study *Suicide and the Soul* explains that the urge to commit suicide can be transformative; a part of the self can die to make way for a new phase of life (1964). Telling ghost stories and translating them into ostensive play, as in Jessica and Jason's trip to the subbasement, college students recognize the transformative power of death in the midst of everyday life.

Candyman at Denny's

Unlike the stories from Sullivan Hall, the last of the texts I collected between 1999 and 2003 came from a senior living in an off-campus apartment. Mandy and her friend Jeanette, another senior, were taking my "Folklore and the Mass Media" course in spring 2000. To explore relationships between folklore and film, we watched the movie *Candyman* in class.¹⁵ A week later, Mandy sent me the following story on e-mail:

Funny story . . . my friends and I were at Denny's late last night and these two men walked in, one of which looked and dressed exactly like Candyman. He even kept his left hand in his pocket at all times (he was hiding his hook of course!) His friend asked us our names and Jeanette told him she was candy. When he heard the name Candy he looked up and glared; it was pretty scary.

Later when we came home Jeanette and I went into the bathroom and she said "candyman" five times. I told her not to do it; I was too scared. But she did it anyway. Who knows what will happen next.

Intrigued by this unexpected incident, I kept in touch with Mandy on e-mail. Indeed, something else did happen. When Mandy and Jeanette returned to Denny's hoping to see the Candyman look-alike again, they found him sitting at one of the tables in the front of the restaurant. Once again, he glared at both of them. Deciding that they had had enough, Mandy and Jeanette stopped visiting Denny's for a while and did not try to summon any more spirits in mirrors. They finished their classes, graduated, and moved away. Their story did not go through the process of becoming a campus legend; it was known only to a few students and me, outside the lively conduit of residence hall story sharing.¹⁶

What interests me most about Mandy's story is its intensity, which comes, I believe, from three sources: the pattern set by two key scenes in *Candyman*; the setting at Denny's, which has a history of racial tension; and the allure of mirror conjuration. The fact that Mandy and Jeanette were about to graduate from college was significant as well. Standing at the threshold of life beyond college, they performed a mirror ritual that is often practiced by preadolescents, but, in the context of this popular movie, has become a form of ostensive play for college students as well.¹⁷

Toward the beginning of the movie *Candyman*, graduate students Helen and Bernadette decide to test the belief that saying “Candyman” five times in front of a bathroom mirror invokes the spirit of a black man who was brutally murdered because of his love affair with a white woman. Helen is white; Bernadette is black. Standing in front of the mirror in Helen’s bathroom, which has the same floor plan as the bathroom where Candyman is said to have appeared, Helen and Bernadette softly repeat the name “Candyman” four times. They giggle like schoolgirls, then become more serious. Ominous music plays. After a pause, Helen says “Candyman” one more time. Their summoning starts a disastrous series of events. Candyman pursues Helen with relentless insistence, beseeching her to stay with him. Although he seems to be Helen’s animus, a demonic lover, he could also be described as a representation of her shadow: the part of herself that does everything forbidden by society. Toward the end of the movie, after horrifying scenes that culminate in Helen’s death, Helen’s unfaithful husband stands in front of the same bathroom mirror before which his wife and Bernadette originally stood. “Helen,” he says softly, four times and then one final time. With horrifying speed, Helen leaps out of the mirror; she has become an anima/avenger who delivers an apt punishment. After Helen’s death at the hands of a male spirit, her husband dies at the hand (or rather hook) of a newly minted spirit who is female.

Helen, by performing a mirror ritual, becomes Candyman’s beloved, a new incarnation of his desire for vengeance. Following this model, Jeanette tells the Candyman look-alike that she is “candy” (faithfully reproducing this name from Mandy’s e-mail, I do not give it an uppercase “c”). In Jungian terms, Candyman is Helen’s—and then Jeanette’s—animus: the ghostly lover that leads her toward self-discovery. Candyman is black, passionate, male; Helen and Jeanette are white, rather reserved, and female. By saying that she is “candy,” Jeanette suggests that the Candyman look-alike recognizes a relationship between himself and her, but also articulates erotic possibilities. Once Jeanette and Mandy get home, they try to summon Candyman by repeating his name five times in front of their bathroom mirror.

This sequence—apparition, then summoning—takes a direction opposite to what happens in the movie: a mirror image of cinematic events. On legend-trips, teenagers who see or hear something unusual may playfully enact what they have just perceived. College students on various campuses have responded to *Candyman* creatively, acting out the summoning scene with verve and humor. A male student of mine recently created a flash cartoon, “Adventures in Folklore,” featuring a student who chanted Candyman’s name five times; Candyman, materializing next to a blackboard in a classroom, turned out to be Michael Jackson. The author of this flash cartoon was a junior, not a senior on the point of graduation. Hence, while this kind of ostensive play can serve an initiatory function, such is not the case for all students who engage in it.

The fact that Candyman appears at Denny’s matters; recent court cases have made Denny’s a racially charged location. In 1993, lawsuits were filed against Denny’s by customers who claimed to have been denied service because of their race; two of the customers were Secret Service agents in Maryland. Reports of the enormous settlement resulting from two class action suits have varied; published sources have identified the

amount as \$54.4 million, \$45.7 million, and \$54 million (Adamson 2000). Before Mandy and Jeanette's adventure in the spring of 2000, two lawsuits alleging racial discrimination at Denny's restaurants—one in Wisconsin, the other in Texas—made national headlines.¹⁸ One could hardly find a more appropriate location for the reenactment of Candyman's painful history; Denny's becomes the setting for Mandy and Jeanette's exploration of racial tensions that they are struggling to understand.

The third intensifier of Mandy's story is its focus on the irresistible urge to summon a spirit in the mirror, no matter how dangerous that spirit may be. Mandy says, "I told her not to do it; I was too scared. But she did it anyway." The urge to push past safe boundaries into dangerous territory has been clarified by anthropologist Mary Douglas, who explains that "danger lies in transitional states; simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable" (1966:96). Humor can be found in transitional states as well. For Mandy and Jeanette, on the brink of graduation from college, the mirror ritual offers an opportunity for play that is both humorous and serious. Imitating Helen and Bernadette, who pushed too far into forbidden territory, they playfully experiment with self-destructive boundary breaking. As Ellis explains, teenagers find mirror rituals to be "both thrilling and deviant"; these activities exist in a "temporary world that players can create, elaborate, then leave behind" (2003:173). Mandy and Jeanette meet their Candyman look-alike twice, then distance themselves from him to get on with their lives. Survival of playfully imagined danger has given them a pathway toward the future.

Conclusion

Understanding the meaning of college students' ghost stories takes time. When Christie slipped her story about the man in the mirror under my office door in 1999, I did not know that students were still talking about Gus, who had revealed his identity through a Ouija board in 1991. After it became clear that Gus had committed suicide, I realized that Sullivan Hall's legends owed their development to fear of and fascination with suicide in the context of the residence hall's crystalline structure of communication. In gathering the texts that culminated in this realization, I followed the example of my mentor, Linda Dégh, who has repeatedly proven how important it is to listen closely to one's informants while spending many hours with them. The first stage of my listening process lasted five years; the second is ongoing.

A modified application of Jungian archetypes can help us to understand important patterns of late-adolescent perception. College students tell many stories in which the shadow, the dangerous, destructive part of the psyche, seems to be dominant. Although negative, the shadow is widely recognized by Jungians as one side of a healthful balance; subversive and self-destructive behavior can lead in a positive direction. Legend texts gathered from college campuses across the United States suggest that students feel compelled to confront the specter of suicide.¹⁹ Having briefly descended to the realm of the dead, they can move on with their lives, strengthened by a richer perception of life's boundaries. As Hillman suggests, suicide has transformative potential (1964). Through the legend, the importance of this transformation becomes clear.

In addition to the shadow, the ghostly or demonic lover—representing the animus—often generates a story. A close look at college students' stories reveals that these are not simple depictions of an animus figure but complex scenarios in which gender transformation is fairly fluid, with a certain rebellious twist. Gender shifts in mirror images can represent, in Butler's terms, "de-formity" and resignification that undermine traditional gender roles (1999:179). Summoning spectral lovers also breaks boundaries of safe and acceptable behavior. Whether students are imitating the protagonist of *Candyman* or describing a fellow student who worshipped the devil, they demonstrate willingness to take risks and to subvert social rules as they engage in ostensive play.

While there are parallels between preadolescents' "Bloody Mary" rituals and college students' sightings of ghosts in mirrors, the age stages are different; the images seen in mirrors are different as well. Preadolescent girls see an aggressive mother figure who threatens to inflict pain, an early initiation into the perils of female maturity. College students, farther from the protection of home, see aspects of their adult selves that are evolving: male/female identities, sexual relationships, and social roles. Although scientific training tells adolescents to view these supernatural images as "un-real," the images may seem more intensely real at times than everyday objects. Outside rationality, the images show young seekers a new dimension of understanding.

In *Legend and Belief*, Dégh suggests that the phantom heroine Mary Worth has evolved from stories of innocent victims such as "Resurrection Mary." For college students, images in mirrors may be phantom lovers, victims of self-destruction, or both. These images are evanescent; they serve their purpose, then fade away. College students delight in pushing back the boundaries of what is known, suspending disbelief while learning something new. Seeing ghosts in mirrors, they may find they have discovered something more substantial than any ghost; they may, in fact, find a deeper sense of the complexities that make them fully themselves.

Notes

This article is dedicated to Linda Dégh, with appreciation for her guidance and inspiration. I want to thank Janet Langlois, Linda Spetter, and the anonymous *JAF* reviewer for their excellent suggestions. I also want to thank Bill Ellis for sending me a chapter of *Lucifer Ascending* (2003) that provided very helpful texts and insights, and my father, Frank H. Tucker, who introduced me to Jungian analysis.

1. According to Dan Norder, "Some people say that if you walk by a mirror in total darkness, regardless of whether you are trying to summon her or not, Bloody Mary will get you" (1999). For college students and others well versed in folklore of the supernatural, knowing can function as passive summoning.

2. Studies of the "Bloody Mary"/"Mary Worth" phenomenon include Langlois (1978), Bronner (1988:168), and Dundes (2002). Dundes's Freudian analysis, based upon texts collected from preadolescent girls, finds that anxiety about the onset of menstruation underlies "Bloody Mary" rituals. A significant shift to study the mirror rituals of older adolescents occurs in Ellis's "Table-Setting and Mirror Gazing," a chapter of *Lucifer Ascending* (2003:142–73), which had not yet been published at the time I undertook my own study of college students' legends. Also noteworthy are psychologists' studies of images seen in mirrors as "illusions" (e.g., Schwartz and Fjeld 1968).

3. In *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1963), Erich Neumann analyzes female deities who both protect and hurt: Kali, Hecate, and others. Some initiation ceremonies for girls feature a rep-

resentation of the Great Mother; my article about the Guéré panther woman, who menaces initiates with a sharp knife, is one case in point (1987).

4. One of the earliest applications of depth psychology to legend scholarship is Isler's "Tiefenpsychologie und Sagenforschung," which analyzes legends of the *Sennenpuppe* and mentions Dégh's interest in Jung's interpretation of unidentified flying objects (1973:149–62). Another folklorist who has made use of Jungian analysis is Max Lüthi (1976).

5. One scholar who has investigated in some depth Jung's background in folklore of the supernatural is F. X. Charet, author of *Spiritualism and the Foundations of C. G. Jung's Psychology* (1993).

6. Expressions of the syzygy come from biology, astronomy, and Gnostic theology (Hayman 1999:339). In 1940, Jung wrote, "Life is a continual balancing of opposites, like every other energetic process. The abolition of opposites would be equivalent to death" (quoted in Walker 1995:40).

7. The name "Sullivan Hall" is a pseudonym. Most proper names in this article have been changed as well unless the students specifically asked to have their own names used. The students who reported "mirror ghost" legends were of diverse ethnic origin: white, Hispanic, and African American. Christie, who told the story of seeing a male in her mirror, is of Italian-American descent.

8. In this capacity, I worked closely with resident assistants and resident directors, planned academic and social programs, offered informal counseling to students, and attended area events. Often in the halls late at night, I knew more about student activities and stories than I would have known otherwise as a regular faculty member.

9. Mirror magic is a well known form of divination practiced by young women who want to learn about their future husbands. Emelyn Gardner's *Folklore of the Schoharie Hills* describes a number of rituals which, with their focus on inversion, bear some resemblance to witchcraft rituals ([1937] 1977:277). An Irish legend tells of a girl practicing love magic who dies after seeing a terrifying figure in the mirror (Wilde 1890:118–9). Irish witches scratch their victims horribly (Gregory 1920:202). The *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* tells of young women who repeated the name of their beloved three times and then saw the devil's face in the mirror, because the young men of their choice were not right for them (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bachtold-Stäubli 1938:558). Possibly some legends of ghosts in mirrors are descendants of this sequence of early European love magic and punishment. The appearance of another face next to one's own also may be seen as a death omen (559).

10. In "Pain, Pleasure and the Spectral: The Barfing Ghost of Burford Hall," Jeannie B. Thomas explains that the supernatural lore of a college residence hall "picks up and carries concerns about political issues of the era in which the legends are circulated, and this political focus changes with the times" (1991:28). Likewise, I have collected a number of ghost stories situated in the politically turbulent era of the 1960s and 1970s.

11. The terms "ostension" and "ostensive," referring to the enactment of legend events, were introduced by Dégh and Vazsonyi in "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling" (1983).

12. Good sources on the "Satanic panic" phenomenon include Jeffrey Victor's *Satanic Panic* (1993) and Ellis's *Raising the Devil* (2000).

13. This legend was collected by a Binghamton University folklore student in April 2003.

14. Folklorists who have explored the initiatory function of students' folklore include Sylvia Grider (1973), Andrea Greenberg (1973), Michael Crawford (1974), and Helen Gilbert (1975), all of whom were students of Dégh's at Indiana University.

15. Gary Alan Fine and Patricia A. Turner discuss the meaning of *Candyman* in their book *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (2001:1–3). Another interesting study is Mikel Koven's "Candyman Can: Film and Ostension" (1999).

16. The hypothesis of multiconduit transmission in folklore was formulated by Dégh and Vázsonyi (1975).

17. Larry Danielson explains in "Folklore and Film: Some Thoughts on Baughman Z500–599," that movies "forcibly remind us of the roles modern media play in the reanimation, intensification, and distribution of folk narrative" (1996:65). Likewise, movies also reanimate folk customs that might otherwise die out if not presented in an intriguing form to young viewers.

18. Two articles found on the Internet include Gallun (1999) and Texas Civil Rights Project (1999).

19. Legends of suicides and accidental deaths at American colleges can be found in Scott and Norman (1985:131–5) and Bronner (1995:151); they can also be found on numerous web sites, including <http://www.hauntedusa.com/states/iowa.htm>.

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