AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLES OF CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS IN LITERATURE

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An Examination of the Roles of Contemporary Legends in Literature

by

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A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Language and Literature Faculty of Arts

Memorial University of Newfoundland

August 2006

St John's Newfoundland

Abstract

Contemporary legends are assiduously and simultaneously transmitted using every means possible; thus, it is fair to suggest that they meet a need or have some importance for the tellers and receivers. However, although the existence of contemporary legends within larger pieces of fiction is often documented, what is missing in the critical study of these texts is a sustained examination of the role and effect of the use of the contemporary legend within the larger text. This is a tremendous oversight; the strength of the contemporary legend is such that the inclusion of or the allusion to a contemporary legend within a larger piece of fiction functions in number of ways: 1) it acts as a mirror in the text, in that the self-contained story that is the contemporary legend mirrors the larger story that is the fiction; 2) the contemporary legend provides a window into the text, allowing the reader to make a mental leap or connection between the underlying theme(s) of the contemporary legend and the underlying theme(s) of the larger text and/or to make a connection with the characters or the setting of the text; 3) for texts that were written in a time before the reader's contemporary time, the contemporary legend provides a window into the concerns of the cultural time of the text's creation; 4) the contemporary legend upholds or undermines their society's hegemony as they invite the expression of diverse points of view. This is achieved, in part, through the message or moral of the contemporary legend; 5) contemporary legends transmit stories whose message or moral–upon reflection–seems like common or good sense. The common sense message either reinforces accepted behaviour, thinking and morality or, alternatively, when the message of the contemporary legend is discussed or debated, it supplies an alternative means of

disruption. This disruption occurs when what seems like common sense or the status quo is challenged.

Examination of the roles contemporary legends play when they exist within larger pieces of fiction is, thus, important for what contemporary legends contribute to and/or reveal about the text itself and the cultural context of the text's creation. Thus, through the study of contemporary legends in specific texts, this study examines the structure, forms, and roles of the contemporary legend within literature.

Acknowledgements

Were this dissertation a person its chances of survival would have been considered almost nil. However, just as there are great doctors that seemingly perform miracles enabling their patients to live, this dissertation had supporters and advisors who did the same.

For helping me, on a personal level, to get through this process I would like to thank my parents, Jack and Norma Stumpf, my uncle, Norton Mansfield, and my friend Amanda Burgess. Most of all, I would like to thank my husband Jean Gamilovskij for putting up with what often seemed like another member of our marriage.

On a professional level this dissertation would not have been possible without the efforts of my advisors Dr. Paul Smith and Dr. Pat Byrne, the Head of the English Department Robert Hollett and the generosity of Graduate Studies in allowing me extensions. Paul is the best advisor a student could ask for. He has been a part of this process from the beginning. All along he has provided me with scholarly information, shared his research and responded promptly with feedback to what ever was submitted. Pat came on board two years ago and his editing was invaluable. Nonetheless, this dissertation would not have been finished without the insistence from Robert Hollett that I not give up when I was so close to finishing. To all of you I say thanks for helping me get another kick at the can.

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Chapter One
Introduction

Lurking within some works of fiction are narratives that have been identified but not fully examined or analyzed with respect to their impact upon the texts within which they are incorporated. These narratives are a folklore form identified by scholars as the contemporary legend (Smith and Bennett 1996). The presence in a piece of literature of an already existing, socially circulating contemporary legend as opposed to a new narrative written by the author suggests that there must be some purpose or function of the contemporary legend within the text. Yet, what purpose or function does the contemporary legend serve when it is incorporated within a larger text and what impact does the contemporary legend have upon the text within which it is incorporated?

This thesis examines the roles of contemporary legends within larger pieces of fiction. To do this I will first provide a discussion of the relationship between folklore, in particular the contemporary legend, and literature. Next I will define the contemporary legend as it appears in fiction. I shall then identify the roles that the contemporary legend fills when used in fiction. Finally, I will illustrate those roles by examining contemporary legends in a number of works of fiction. Specifically, I will look at contemporary legends as they appear in specific works of fiction by Charles Dickens (1837), Barbara D'Amato (1991), Sue Grafton (1991), Gail Bowen (1992, 1994), Dave Klein (1980), Howard Engel (1980), Fannie Flagg (1987), Anthony Burgess (1986), Alex Garland (1997) and Stephen King (1980, 1983, 1992).

Through the roles they play, contemporary legends provide insight into the literary text itself as the roles of the legend may include developing the theme of the text, aid in

the establishment or development of ideas of characterization or types of characters, provide a means of identifying setting or plot or, in the case of a longer narrative, set up parallel actions between the contemporary legend and the story within which it is enclosed. Moreover, the role of the contemporary legend provides insight into the cultural context of the text's creation as they provide or reflect a system of accepted social organization and/or behaviour. Throughout the thesis, the contemporary legends found in literature that I examine will be identified through reference to collections of contemporary legends such as those by Jan Harold Brunvand (1981, 1984, 1989, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2001), Paul Smith (1983,1989), and Alvin Schwartz (1981, 1984, 1991).

In 1954 when the American Folklore Society and Modern Language Association met they focused one session that, as explained by Daniel G. Hoffman, emphasized "the common interests of scholars in both disciplines" (1957:1). Papers from this symposium were published in the 1957 *Journal of American Folklore* and included, among others, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature" by Richard M. Dorson, "Folklore and Literary Criticism" by Carvel Collins and "Folklore in Literature: Notes Toward a Theory of Interpretation" by Daniel G. Hoffman. In his introduction to a 1979 special issue of *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Neil R. Grobman provides an overview of the study of "Folklore and Literature." He notes that from1973 onwards at the annual American Folklore Society meetings "at least two sessions were dedicated to this specialized area" (1) and in 1977 "Folklore and Literature" was finally given discussion group status "guaranteeing permanent yearly accommodations" (1) in the Modern Language Association meetings. These events are important, yet, as Pat Byrne points out, they and others show the study of the interconnection between folklore and literature has always

been present. In his article "The Study of Folklore and Literature . . . ," Byrne demonstrates that the "study of the interconnection between folklore and literature is longstanding, traceable at least back to the emergence of folkloristics as a distinctive, recognizable discipline" (35). He continues on to note that:

> The current century has witnessed the maturation of folklore into an internationally recognized discipline with its own methodologies and critical terminology. This period has been marked by the ascendancy of the so-called literary or anthropological folklorists, and the shifting emphasis in folkloristics of theories which stress performance, dynamics, text, or context, yet the literary source has remained grist for the folklorist's mill. Indeed, two bibliographies published in the 1980s list over two thousand items dealing with folkloric elements in American and British literature alone (Jones 1984; Baer 1986). (35-36)

The recognition of contemporary legends in a text is not an issue and continuing with the listing of folklore items in literature, Paul Smith and Daniel Barnes have created an on-going checklist of fiction which borrows/uses/adapts or quotes from contemporary legend themes and motifs (Barnes 1991; Barnes, Smith 1992, 1993, 2001). The bigger issue is, however, the fact that folklore and literature often continue to be studied separately from each other even when the folklore is in the literature. As a result, the relevance of the folklore to the literature in which it appears is never clear as it tends to be looked at as being separate and, so, analyzed accordingly. However, to make the relevance of the folklore to the literature evident, how both are looked at needs to change. It is not enough that the folklore be identified and analyzed.. For there to be any

continued relevance to the study of folklore in literature the analysis and/or identification of the folklore must always occur in conjunction with the analysis of the literature as a whole and/or the context within which the literature sits. While this has been done, it has not been done with any degree of consistency.

When the folklore in question is a contemporary legend, part of the difficulty of examining it within the context of the fiction as a whole is due to the mutability of the contemporary legend itself. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, "Defining the Contemporary Legend," a contemporary legend can appear as a narrative in its own right, or reference to the contemporary legend may be made through the use of a phrase related to one of its key elements. As well, the form of the contemporary legend can change resulting in contemporary legends that are presented as jokes, as anecdotes or personal experience narratives. Their mutability and the fragmentary nature of their appearance aside, in (and out of) a text, contemporary legends possess both reach and power because of their larger commentary or expression within the context of ordinary, everyday interpersonal communication. Contemporary legends are told/passed on because they put into words the beliefs, concerns and fears of our society plus encourage debates about the search for knowledge.

There is no doubt that contemporary legends have reach. Because they are transmitted through a variety of media, they reach beyond the limits of the local community to broader national and international arenas. That a contemporary legend can reach beyond boundaries suggests that the concerns/fears/beliefs/debates that it communicates are international; contemporary society has indeed become a global village.

Contemporary legends also have power. This comes from the weight and association that they carry because of their very accessibility, popularity, and prevalence in our society. Contemporary legends are so powerful that the use of a motif from it or an allusion to it is enough that the reader familiar with contemporary legends will recollect the narrative in its entirety or recognize it as sounding like a contemporary legend.

This ability to recognize contemporary legends for what they are is an important one. Because of the familiarity that contemporary legends have within the context of the general population, the inclusion of, or the allusion to one in a novel or short story potentially establishes connections between the themes of the contemporary legend, the themes of the literary text, and the reader's knowledge. For the reader who recognizes the contemporary legend, these connections are in addition to that which is generated by whichever roles the contemporary legend fulfills in the text. Obviously, then, contemporary legends are more than just stories randomly chosen for inclusion in a larger text. They may be used as an attempt by the writer to forge a bond between the fiction and the reader. As Michel Foucault argues:

> the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. . . . The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands. . . . Its unity is variable and relative a book can not be limited unto itself. Indeed, it is caught up in a system of references to other texts. (1974, 23)

This referentiality can be identified as intertextuality which is the process whereby one text plays upon other texts, literary or non-literary works, in that they reference or relate

to further elements within the realm of cultural creation. By non-literary it is meant that texts do not have to be written. Any culturally produced object or social practice capable of symbolic interpretation and reinterpretation can be considered as a text. As Susan Stewart discusses in her book *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, it is when the boundaries between these texts are blurred or overlap that the exchanges between the two produces "intertextual discourse" (pp. 15, 48). The blurring of the boundary between literature and folklore serves to question, criticize, or invite re-evaluation of that which has entered the realm of the other. Thus, clearly, every text exists in relation to others and in relation to its cultural system of ordering its universe.

As an example of the limited way in which contemporary legends in literature have, for the most part, been dealt with by academics let us look at a passage from Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. In this passage the story that Sam is telling can be identified as contemporary legend dealing with contaminated food.

> "Weal pie," said Mr. Weller, soliloquizing, as he arranged the eatables on the grass. "Wery good thing is weal pie, when you know the lady as made it, and are quite sure it an't kittens; and arter all, though, where's the odds, when they're so like weal that the wery piemen themselves don't know the difference?"
>
> "Don't they Sam?" said Mr. Pickwick.
>
> "Not they, sir," replied Mr. Weller, touching his hat. "I lodged in the same house vith a pieman once, sir, and a wery nice man he was—reg'lar clever chap, too—make pies out o' anything, he could. 'What a number o' cats you keep, Mr. Brooks,' says I, when I'd got intimate with him.

> 'Ah,' says he, 'I do—a good many,' says he. 'You must be wery fond o' cats,' says I. 'Other people is,' says he, a winkin' at me; 'they an't in season till the winter, though,' says he. 'Not in season!' says I. 'No,' says he, 'fruits is in, cats is out.' 'Why what do you mean?' says I. 'Mean?' says he. "That I'll never be party to the combination o'the butchers to keep up the prices o' meat,' says he. 'Mr. Weller,' says he, a squeezing my hand wery hard, and vispering in my ear, 'don't mention this here agin—buts its the seasonin' as does it. They're all made o' them noble animals,' says he, a pointin' to a wery nice little tabby kitten, 'and I seasons 'em for beef-steak, weal, or kidney, 'cordin' to the demand. And more than that,'says he, 'I can make a weal a beef-steak, or a beef-steak a kidney, or any one on 'em a mutton, at a minute's notice, just as the market changes, and appetites wary!'"
>
> "He must have been a very ingenious young man, that, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick, with a slight shudder.
>
> "Just was, sir" replied Mr. Weller, continuing his occupation of emptying the basket, "and the pies was beautiful."

In her article "Urban Legends in the Pickwick Papers" Jacqueline Simpson identifies the story that Sam is telling Mr. Pickwick as a version of the "Kentucky Fried Rat" contemporary legend. Second, she interprets it using the context of the time of Dickens's writing:

> What we have here in *The Pickwick Papers* is a forerunner of the present-day oral legends of "The Kentucky Fried Rat" and "The Chinese

> Restaurant" cycles.[1] In these modern legends, as Jan Brunvand points out, there is an underlying distrust of ready-made, mass produced convenience foods, as opposed to home cooking, and especially of those where "the seasonings or the mode of preparation could be suspected of covering up the contamination" (*VH* 1981:81). Exactly the same moral emerges from Sam's anecdote. Whereas we would now regard the products of a local pieman, cooked on his own premises, as superior to those from a factory, Sam distrusts them, because he contrasts them with genuinely homemade pies individually prepared by some woman personally known to the eater of the pies. This trustworthy housewife, fulfilling her traditional role as food preparer, is briefly mentioned at the start of the tale to set up the contrast with the dishonest, profiteering, commercial pieman. The latter introduces nauseous meat into his products quite deliberately (not accidentally, as in most versions of "Kentucky Fried Rat"); this is parallel to the "Chinese Restaurant" stories, where the police allegedly find half an Alsatian (German Shepherd dog) in the deep freeze, or tins of cat food about to be used as sandwich filling. Sam's stress on the seasoning also prefigures a frequent motif in the modern tales. (463-4)

Simpson's analysis is interesting but, unfortunately it is incomplete and limited. As suggested earlier, she, like so many others, neglects to examine the contemporary legend in conjunction with the rest of the text.

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[1] See Ward (1976:348-353); Domowitz (1979); Brunvand (1981:81-84, 99); and Buchan (1981:4).

When we look at this contemporary legend in conjunction with what precedes and follows it in *The Pickwick Papers,* it becomes clear that the message of this tale reinforces one of the themes of the text: the education of Mr. Pickwick. Throughout the novel Mr. Pickwick "as a questing hero emerges from the naïve eccentricity of the Pickwick Club and the innocent pleasures of Dingley Dell and discovers, under the guidance of Sam Weller, the real nature of the world" (Rogers 21). In effect, the experiences Mr. Pickwick undergoes combined with the lessons Sam teaches him serve as rites of initiation moving Mr. Pickwick from childlike innocence to adulthood.

The story that Sam tells, the contemporary legend, is a part of this process. The contemporary legend deals with, as Simpson points out, the fear of ready made food and possible contamination. It also demonstrates a reality of Dickens's time: to survive one must be able to change easily and to do whatever is necessary. The pieman is able to survive and to prosper because of his ability to "make pies outa anything."

A sub-theme of this contemporary legend is that appearances can be deceiving. The veal pies were not what they appeared to be. This idea that appearances can be deceiving and the resulting importance of being able to see the truth is also important to the novel as a whole as problems resulting from this inability to see the truth appears throughout the text. In chapter two of *The Pickwick Papers*, we see a cabbie mistake Mr. Pickwick's making notes with taking his number to report him. In chapter twelve, Mr. Pickwick's landlady, Mrs. Bardell, mistakes his words and actions to mean that he is proposing marriage to her. When she faints in his arms Mr. Pickwick's friends and her son all misinterpret what has been happening. In chapter sixteen, Sam is fooled by the appearance and words of a fellow servant and thus led to believe that a gentleman is

going to elope with a young lady. When Mr. Pickwick attempts to intervene they discover they have been fooled.

In all cases the inability of the participants and observers to determine what was actually happening or had actually happened results in miscommunication and negative consequences, especially for Mr. Pickwick. For, as a result of misunderstanding what had actually happened, in chapter 31 Mrs. Bardell sues Pickwick for breach of marriage. It is at this point that Sam uses another story as a means of educating Pickwick about the reality of life and society in London at that time. The tool he uses to do so is, again, a contemporary legend.

Walking to Pickwick's lawyer Sam points out to Pickwick a "celebrated sausage factory" the owner of which had invented the "never-leaving-off sassage machine" (Dickens 395). Sam tells Pickwick that one day four years ago the owner disappeared but everyone thought he ran away from home. For although "a wery happy man he'd ha' been, sir, in the procession o' that 'ere ingine and two more lovely hinfants besides" (395) he was not because his wife was "a most ow-dacious wixin" (395). After the husband's disappearance, the wife continued the business while canals were dragged and dead bodies were brought for her to examine. However the husband never returned. That he had not run away but had been killed became clear one Saturday. As Sam tells Pickwick

> ". . . One Saturday night, a little thin old gen'l'm'n comes into the shop in a great passion and says 'Are you the missus o' this here shop?' 'Yes, I am,' says she. 'Well, ma'am,'says he, 'then I've just looked in to say that me and my family ain't a goin' to be choked for nothin'; and more than that, ma'am,' he says, 'you'll allow me to observe, that as you don't use the primest parts of the meat in

> the manafacter o' sassages, I think you'd find beef come nearly as cheap as buttons.' 'As buttons, sir!' says she. 'Buttons, ma'am,' says the little old gentleman, unfolding a bit of paper, and shewin' twenty or thirty halves o' buttons. 'Nice seasonin' for sassages, is trousers' buttons, ma'am.' 'They're my husband's buttons!' says the wider, beginning' to faint. 'What!' screams the little old gen'l'm'n, turnin' wery pale. 'I see it all,' says the wider; 'in a fit of temporary insanity he rashly converted his-self into sassages!' And so he had, sir" said Mr. Weller, looking steadily into Mr. Pickwick's horror-stricken countenance, "or else he'd been draw'd into the ingine: but however that might ha been, the little old gen'l'm'n, who had been remarkably partial to sassages all his life, rushed out o' the shop in a wild state, and was never heerd on artervards!" (396)

The story Sam tells is a version of "The Accidental Cannibal."[2] In her article, Simpson discusses the connections between both of Sam's stories. She says:

> There are obvious thematic links between this story pattern and the contaminated foods legends discussed above, with the implication that one should not trust sausages that are not homemade. Another theme is fear of machinery. In Sam's story all of the characters are neatly punished for foolishness and/or defying normal roles: the old gentleman for greed and for trusting commercial convenience food; the tradesman for inventing a machine rather than working traditionally by hand; the wife for her shrewishness and for attempting, with unfeminine enterprise, to carry on her husband's business in his absence. (465)

[2] This contemporary legend will be discussed in chapter five.

She, as others have done,[3] notes that cannibalism is a topic with which Dickens was familiar because of stories told to him by his childhood nurse and because the stories his nurse told him "reflected the macabre fears and rumors current in London at the time" (465). Moreover, Simpson observes that

> 19th-century London was a favorable ground for the birth and dissemination of urban legends. The fear of murderers and body snatchers, the suspicious attitude toward commercial preparation of food, and the readiness to believe in horrors of all kinds are familiar counterparts to the themes and preoccupations in modern belief tales. (465)

Finally she observes that being an observer and recorder of all that was around him it was natural for Dickens to include the tales he heard in *The Pickwick Papers* because of the nature of the book itself "an unplanned book, written at high pressure and full of improvisations, insert tales, anecdotes" (463).

Yet, again, Simpson discusses the contemporary legend in reference to Dickens' life and London in the 19th century but in isolation from the rest of the literary text. While the contexts of the books creation and setting are important, the relationship between the tale and the book as a whole is also important. Chapter 31 begins with a description of the law offices and the people within,

> These sequestered nooks are the public offices of the legal profession, where writs are issued, judgments signed, declarations filed, and numerous other ingenious

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[3] For more on this topic see Harry Stone's *Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994.

machines put in motion for the torture and torment of His Majesty's liege subjects, and the comfort and emolument of the practitioners of the law." (391)

It then continues with Mr. Pickwick's friends, all of whom misinterpreted what they saw between Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell, being subpoenaed to testify on behalf of Mrs. Bardell in her breach of promise suit against Mr. Pickwick. It is when Sam and Mr. Pickwick are on their way to Pickwick's lawyers the next morning that Sam tells Pickwick the story.

The point of Sam's story is that it does not really matter how the husband ended up in the sausage machine. Whether he had, as the wife supposed "in a fit of temporary insanity he rashly converted his-self into sassages!" or "he'd been draw'd into the ingine" was irrelevant for the fact was that the husband was dead and the little old gentleman, the unwitting cannibal, "who had been remarkably partial to sassages all his life, rushed out o' the shop in a wild state, and was never heerd on artervards!" (396).

This point that the result, not the cause, was what was important is further reinforced when Pickwick talks with his solicitor Mr. Perker. Discussing the case Pickwick tells him that his three friends have been subpoenaed. Perkins responds that that was to be expected as "important witnesses [they] saw you [Pickwick] in a delicate situation" (398). When Mr. Pickwick states what really happened "But she fainted into my arms of her own accord" Perker responds "very likely and very natural. Noting more so, my dear sir, nothing. But who's to prove it?" (398). Pickwick is surprised by the idea that the truth may not come out and does not know how to respond. Like the gentleman who ate the sausage maker, he cannot believe what is happening and so he runs away from reality, in a sense, as he refuses to accept that there is not much he can do to defend

himself against this charge. Even though he witnesses unfair treatment of a client (396-397) and is present for a discussion involving the not too subtle suggestion that money will help get your case looked at more quickly and favorably (399-400), he stays oblivious to how his society functions around him. As a result, he does not receive the message in Sam's stories nor understand what Sam is telling him about how his society really works.

Unwilling to believe Sam's condemnation of the legal profession as being true, Mr. Pickwick stands on principle and loses. An unwilling victim, he is 'eaten' by the system. He is cannibalized. He refuses to pay the fine, instead electing to go to debtor's prison. But, even in prison he discovers that all is not as it appears. In debtor's prison although he witnesses the suffering and degradation that the prisoners must face, he sees that these circumstances can be changed. He is able to purchase a room, thus making the prison a comfortable, as opposed to uncomfortable, place to pay his debt. Nonetheless, even though he is relatively comfortable, he is still in prison because of his inability and the inability of those around him to recognize that appearances can be deceiving, the necessity to search for the truth beyond the surface and to pay attention to what is really happening around them.

Part of Mr. Pickwick's prison is mental. It is one of his making. As long as he does not know the truth of life around him he will never be really free. The contemporary legends are told by Sam to Mr. Pickwick as a part of Sam's efforts to educate him, to force Mr. Pickwick to look closely at what is around him. Mr. Pickwick needs to see the real England. Sam uses stories, such as these ones, to remove slowly the blinders from Mr. Pickwick's eyes. Dickens's use of contemporary legends pulls together in two stories

what Sam has been trying to illustrate for Mr. Pickwick: that he does not see London or its people as they really are and that if he continues to take things as they appear on the surface, if he does not begin to pay attention to what is happening around him he will never really get what he should from his life and he, too, will suffer. The contemporary legends reinforce the themes of the text; their use assists Sam in his attempts to educate Mr. Pickwick and also act as a link with those stories and episodes that express the same theme and purpose prior to and after their telling. As a tool for the common sense of his time their focus is an important one: if you want to get ahead in life you need to look further than the surface. If you take everything by how it appears you will be a fool. Interstitially they challenge the division between good and evil. They show that in Dickens's and Pickwick's time the law is not there to determine innocence so much as it is "for the torture and torment of His Majesty's liege subjects, and the comfort and emolument of the practitioners of the law" (391).

In fact, it is not just Mr. Pickwick who needs to be educated. Dickens wrote *The Pickwick Papers,* to educate his fellow citizens. And he succeeded. As he wrote in his Preface to the 1867 edition:

> I have found it curious and interesting, looking over the sheets of this reprint, to mark what important social improvements have taken place about us, almost imperceptibly, since they were originally written. The licence of Counsel, and the degree to which Juries are ingeniously bewildered, are yet susceptible of moderation; while an improvement in the mode of conducting Parliamentary Elections (and even Parliaments too, perhaps) is still within the bounds of possibility. But, legal reforms

> have pared the claws of Messrs.Dodson and Fogg; a spirit of self-respect, mutual forbearance, education, and co-operation for such good ends, has diffused itself among their clerks; places far apart are brought together, to present convenience and advantage of the Public, and to the certain destruction, in time, of a host of petty jealousies, blindnesses, and prejudices, by which the Public alone have always been the sufferers; the laws relating to imprisonment for debt are altered; and the Fleet Prison is pulled down!
>
> Who knows, but by the time this series reaches its conclusion, it may be discovered that there are even magistrates in town and country, who should be taught to shake hands every day with Common-sense and Justice; that even Poor Laws may have mercy on the weak, the aged, and unfortunate; that Schools, on the broad principles of Christianity, are the best adornment for the length and breadth of this civilised land … .(xxx-xxxi)

Obviously, as seen in this example, the world of the contemporary legend and the print world of fiction are entwined. Both are reflections and expressions of culture. As expressions of culture they should not be examined in isolation of each other. As Mary Ellen B. Lewis notes in her article "The Study of Folklore in Literature an Expanded View," "since all authors come from a culture, they inevitably reflect folkloric elements in any work of literature, because folklore is a pervasive aspect of life" (1976:346). She goes on to say:

> Some authors are more involved with their specific cultural environment than others; folklore may be essential to the main thrust or statement of one work and in another incidental. An author may consciously depict the world around him/her and folklore becomes a major way of doing so; or an author may actively seek folklore from written documents or by conscious collecting. And a creative writer may simply use folklore —situation, medium, product— unconsciously because it is a part of the known; it is what is. (1976:346)

It is not enough to be able to identify the narrative, such as the contemporary legend, being used within literature. It is not enough to discuss the narrative as a narrative apart. Rather, the impact of the narrative and how it affects/effects the rest of the text in our critical analysis of the whole of the text must be analyzed. The folklore narrative, like any other folklore items that make up the literature, cannot exist in isolation from the rest of the text. Only by examining the folklore, in this case the complete text of the contemporary legend, and by noting how it interacts within the larger text of the fiction will there be any recognition of the need for discussing the contemporary legend's place within fiction, its contribution to the piece of fiction, its place within the analysis of the fiction itself and what it has to reveal about the larger culture involved.

Chapter Two
Defining the Contemporary Legend

The field of folklore is vast and not given easily to definitions that pigeon-hole that which is being studied. The contemporary legend has not escaped the wrangling that surrounds most of the other folklore concepts. In the introduction to *Contemporary Legend: A Reader*, the editors, Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, discuss the many groups who have become interested in contemporary legend and the resulting debates around the definitions, forms, functions, and approaches to the topic. Some of the groups who are interested in the contemporary legend include sociologists, psychologists, journalists, anthropologists, scholars of literature, folklorists, political scientists, critical theorists, and performance artists. Bennett and Smith write

> these diverse elements have not been assimilated without widening methodological and theoretical approaches and subtly altering definitional assumptions. The older orientations continue to be used . . . but techniques borrowed from sociology, anthropology and popular culture have also begun to be widely adopted. (xxxvii)

Contemporary legends are studied in many disciplines and in many different ways. How then do we approach defining the contemporary legend so that it can be examined within literature? For the population at large the contemporary legend is a narrative form that is more often defined through the relaying of an example, not a definition. This approach is described in Alex Garland's novel, *The Beach*,

> Zeph picked up a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers, trailing patterns between his legs. Then he coughed, almost

in a formal way, as if he wanted everyone to pay attention. "Hey," he said. "Do you know about the Kentucky Fried Rat?"

I frowned. It sounded like another wind-up, and I felt that if Etienne was going to fall for it in the same kind of way, I might start crying. I still had a picture in my head of his concerned face as he explained about his little red bike.

"No, What is it?" I said warily.

"It's one of those stories that gets around."

"Urban myths," said Sammy. "Like someone got a small bone stuck in his throat. Then he got it analyzed and it was a rat bone."

"Yeah, and the guy it happened to was a friend's aunt's cousin. It never happened to the person you're talking to."

"Oh," I said. "I know."

"Right. So there's a Kentucky Fried Rat doing the rounds at the moment. You heard it?"

I shook my head.

"About a beach. This amazing beach hidden somewhere, but no one knows where it is."

I turned my head away...(57-8) [4]

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[4] Although I do not discuss this novel it is, in effect, the search to validate or debunk the existence of the contemporary legend "The Beach." When the beach is found it is on an island that is out of bounds for tourists. The characters insistence in finding out if the beach is all that the legend suggests means that they sneak onto the beach. The novel deals with the results of this action on the main character.

In this example, when first asked if he knows about "The Kentucky Fried Rat", tale, the listener responds that he does not know the story to which Zeph and Sammy are referring. In order to enlighten him, Zeph and Sammy define the story, the contemporary legend/urban myth, not by giving a definition but by telling 1) a version of its key action, a person gets a bone stuck in his throat after eating Kentucky Fried Chicken and discovers that the bone is not that of a chicken but a rat and 2) its introduction "yeah, and the guy it happened to was a friend's aunt's cousin." Once the example of its content and method of introduction are provided, the listener recognizes the kind of story to which Zeph is referring.

However, even though contemporary legends are often recognized though the presentation of one or more examples, for the purposes of analysis this is not enough as they are not the only type of oral narrative; nor are they only told orally. Therefore, it is necessary to separate them from other narrative forms. Thus a definition is needed to help an academic identify such stories when they appear embedded in other texts or are presented through other than oral means. In the case of literature from an academic perspective a working definition of the contemporary legend is necessary to determine the roles the contemporary legend has in the story.

To develop a working definition for the purpose of this thesis, I will look to Paul Smith's article "Definitional Characteristics of the Contemporary Legend." [5] and discuss what characteristics are relevant for the contemporary legend and literature relationship, which are not relevant and which can be amended. First, however, let us look at one of the more problematic aspects of the contemporary legend: its name.

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[5] See Appendix A

In order to examine something we have to be able to name it. Yet, the naming of this narrative has been problematic. This is because the two groups who reference this narrative, the lay public and academia, identify it differently. To the general public the narrative is identified as an urban legend and, less often, as an urban myth, friend of a friend tale. For many academics these narratives are identified as a contemporary legend.

By virtue of the content and locations described in the tales, this narrative is known to the general public as the *urban legend.* It is generally accepted that folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand's books on urban legends, beginning with *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* in 1981, brought the term urban legends to a popular audience who accepted it and from which acceptance its use has proliferated. As a result, he is often credited with originating the term, although this is not true. As documented by Doyle and Knight in "On the Term Urban Legend" and Brunvand in "The Vanishing 'Urban Legend'" the term had been in use for a number of years. Doyle and Knight note that Linda Dégh,

> one of those who sometimes attribute the coinage to Brunvand was using the term as early as 1968, when, in the old JAF feature "Work in Progress," she announced a project of hers that she called "Life history of a modern urban legend" (JAF 81 Supplement [annual report of AFS]:30).

In his 1989 article "Why Are They Called Urban Legends?" Sandy Hobbs discusses the emerging use of the term legend as opposed to tale, story, hoax, sage. He then turns his attention to the emergence of the term urban and posits it might be:

> a survival of a time when folklorists were seeking to overcome the , perhaps unconscious, assumption that the 'folk' were peasants living in a

> rural setting. Hence the need to stress, as Dorson did, that folklore could be found in industrial, military and city settings. (20)

In his 2004 article "The Vanishing 'Urban Legend'" Brunvand discusses the use of this term further. He explores the definition of urban legend and urban myth in dictionaries, including the OED, and examines how the urban legend itself has changed from its transmission in an oral context to an electronic context. In addition he looks at how the term's use has changed over time with its acceptance and its use in popular culture and in the media. The result is, he says, a general misapplication of the term where "many uses of the term 'urban legend' in the media simply refer to something that's definitely urban and somewhat unusual" (18). He concludes by stating that "The term 'urban legend,' as Barbara Mikkelson put it so succinctly, "long ago became so far stretched out of shape that it's never going to fit back into the box it came in" (19)..

Clearly despite its long use and its current popularity the term is not acceptable to academia because it has become limited both by its misuse, as discussed by Brunvand, and by its content. Within the popular public at large the term urban legend has become associated with a limited group of stories mainly, although not limited to, those dealing with horrific/bizarre events, murder, death, accidents etc., in fact predominantly focusing on blood and gore as opposed to the broader range of legends that are circulating at any given time. Moreover, within the popular public at large the major purpose of recounting these tales today is to label them as urban legends and to debunk the truth of the events they describe. In short for many academics the term urban legend is of limited use because of its restrictive context and methodological baggage.

The alternate term *urban myth* is no more relevant since myths "attempt to explain the creation, divinity, and religion, to guess at the meaning of existence and death . . ." (Thrall, 298) which contemporary legends blatantly do not. Furthermore, it is misleading because myths, by definition, have "less of a historical background and more of the supernatural" (Thrall 298) and are "less concerned with moral didacticism and are the product of a racial group rather than the creation of an individual" (Thrall 299). Other names ascribed to this narrative form by the general public include *belief legends, friend of a friend (FOAF) tales* and *modern legends*. As a belief legend, the tale is defined by the element of belief in the tale being held by the teller and perhaps the listener. Yet, as the teller or listener may or may not believe the legend being told the name belief legend is inappropriate. Moreover, as *a friend of a friend (FOAF) tale* the legend is being identified according to its manner of presentation, where it is supposed that they commonly begin with an introduction that declares that the story about to be related by the speaker actually happened to a" friend of a friend". However, not all tales are introduced this way thus the appellation as a means of identification is faulty. Lastly, the use of the term modern legend implies that the narrative is from the current time, the now, only. As versions of these narratives have circulated in the past and re-circulate again in the present, clearly this term too, is not accurate.

In answer to the limits posed by the above names, the term academics tend to use for this narrative is contemporary legend as exemplified by the title of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research [ISCLR]) and journals such as *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend.* Like other names this one too has been surrounded by debate (*Folklore* Vol. 101 (1990):221-3 and 239-40; Vol. 102 (1991):106-7, 183-6, and 187-91;

Vol. 106 (1995): 96-8 and 98-99). Yet, of all of the potential names for this narrative, contemporary legend is the broadest as its use is inclusive of all of the tales identified in the more universal canon and does not exclude or limit its meaning because of content, place, belief, time, or presentation.

A second problem in the naming of this type of narrative lies in its history. I refer to it as a contemporary legend, but what is meant by contemporary? These narratives are contemporary, and they also existed in the past. How is this possible? It depends on how you define the term contemporary. Scholars Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith have come to the conclusion that

> the term 'contemporary' legend has made it possible to leave the older disputes behind and to refocus the task in hand. More than other appellations, it has the potential to unify the study. Scholars whose interests lie in the explication of meaning are now tending to see these sorts of stories as symbolic representations of contemporary issues. They are thus able to leave behind questions of 'factual' truth...and are liberated to study more rewarding subjects such as how 'fact,' 'truth,' 'belief' and legend are constructed. Simultaneously, this brings them nearer to the 'narrative' oriented scholars who can interpret the 'contemporariness' of contemporary legends as stylistic and performance options and approach the construction of legend through questions of authorship and the status of text.
>
> Our preferred term also has the advantage of pointing to observable and measurable characteristics (unlike other earlier

> unquantifiable terms–how does one measure the belief in a belief legend, establish beyond contradiction the modernness of a modern legend...?) What is suggested is that the term usually points to legend-participants' perception of the related events as contemporaneous with the act of narration, so that 'story time' and 'narrating time,' 'story world' and 'real world' are brought into proximity to produce the cognitive dissonance that is typical of the legend experience. (xxxviii-xxxix)

Thus, as explained by Smith and Bennett, although the word contemporary means, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1992), "belonging to the same time or period; of the same age; modern in style or design," it can be used to describe these narratives because the contemporary nature of the legend is pertinent to the time period in which it is related/performed, rather than the historical age of the story. Consequently they cannot be examined separately from the social, political, cultural time of their emergence. The contemporary nature of the legend is always forefront. Therefore, the contemporary legend is not necessarily just contemporary to the time of the modern (whatever the year) performer and receiver of the tale. Instead it is contemporary to the time of its use by the author of a literary text. Thus the contemporary legend being used is always contemporary to the frame of the story. Moreover, the use of a contemporary legend may reflect what was in circulation at the time the author wrote the text or it may be retro-prospective. This provides a window into the cultural, social, and/or political time of the text's creation and of the text's setting

In addition to the problems in naming the contemporary legend are those, as mentioned previously, associated with defining it. In his article "Definitional

Characteristics of the Contemporary Legend," Paul Smith identifies what he feels to be the main characteristics of the contemporary legend and discusses them independently of each other. In doing so he creates two lists of characteristics. The first list identifies those characteristics which describe the nature of contemporary legends in terms of "what they are or are not" and the second list identifies those characteristics which describe contemporary legends in terms of "what they may or may not be." In each section he subdivides the characteristics according to narrative status, form, structure, style, dissemination, narrators, context of narration, content, truth, belief, selection, meaning and function. Overall Smith provides a comprehensive look at the contemporary legend as a folklore narrative. However, as we shall see, not all of the characteristics he discusses apply to our consideration of the relationship between contemporary legend and literature.

Narrative Status

The narrative status of a contemporary legend has a peripheral level of importance when analyzing its relationship to the literature in which it appears. According to Paul Smith, "a contemporary legend is a type of traditional discourse which is extremely mutable at many levels. As a discourse, it may have a clear author, be rightly or wrongly attributed to an author, or the creator may be anonymous or have a discoverable source. Because of its manner of transmission the contemporary legend does not exist as a single, unique item and is circulated in multiple versions at any one time. Thus the contemporary legend is not static and no two examples of supposedly the same story are exactly alike" (6).

In literature the contemporary legend as often as not, may appear in the text with an ascribed author, may be told by a character or may appear as a complicating or non-complicating incident in the text; however as it is in a piece of fiction it usually appears in one version only and is fixed as opposed to mutable. Thus narrative status is relevant in literature only insofar as how it is introduced in the text affects/effects the text overall.

Form

Smith notes that in regards to form, "the contemporary legend is primarily a conversational genre . . . which may be found embedded in other types of traditional discourse (e.g. joke, memorate, dite, rumour, gossip, personal experience narrative) and in diverse settings, ranging from news-reporting to after dinner speeches" (6). As a result, "it may or may not be an elaborate, underdeveloped or fragmentary narrative or find expression as a kernel narrative, a digest, a statement of belief, or as a reference or allusion to a narrative or proto-narrative" (7).

The lack of a solid form by which to identify the contemporary legend can be problematic in literature. Yet, one of the ways that the contemporary legend survives is through its flexible form and its ability to change. One reason for the mutability of the contemporary legend is, as Gillian Bennett points out, the lack of a clear border in storytelling sessions. Her observation that contemporary legend versions have been collected as personal experience narratives, memorates, news, and incredible stories reinforces the contemporary legend as a conversational genre which, as Smith notes "may be found embedded in other types of traditional discourse"(6). As Bennett observes, "even in theory the borderline between legend and other genres is often difficult to delineate; and, in practice, stories collected in a natural context prove frequently to be

unclassifiable, the borders shifting and merging in real life story telling sessions" (1984:47).

The flexible nature of the contemporary legend allows an author freedom in presentation. The contemporary legend may be delivered/lived by any one of his/her characters in the text. It may be presented in any one of a multitude of ways. No matter how it is presented, in what it is or is not embedded, or how developed it appears, it is a contemporary legend and as such carries all that is associated with it.

Structure

Literature is accepted as having a structure. Writers may experiment with that structure but, in general, it is assumed that all pieces of fiction have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is what is in between the beginning and the end that makes the story. The contemporary legend also has a structure. It is one that compliments the structure of literature because of its mutability.

Smith observes that "contemporary legends vary in terms of structure. In general, they comprise only a single episode or motif and have no set formulaic openings or closings. In addition, they have no definitive text, and, consequently, their traditional nature is not always immediately apparent. . . . and they may or may not have reflective descriptions added" (6-7). It is because they vary in terms of structure that they are so mutable. This mutability, as discussed previously, in turn, leads some to argue there is no structure.

However, this lack of a clear definition of text is because contemporary legends are, as often as not, composed of one single (or few) episodes or motifs. In his text *The Folktale*, Stith Thompson states that the single episode or motif is "the smallest element

in a tale having a power to persist in tradition" (415).. But where myths, folktales and legends each comprise a number, the contemporary legend often comprises only one, or a limited number..

What Ellis identifies as the metonym of the contemporary legend, is what Susan Kalcik identified as the kernel narrative. Kalcik states that this kernel story is a "brief reference to the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story. In this form one might say it is a kind of potential story, especially if the details are not known to the audience" (1975: 7). Ellis explains that this central action, the kernel, or what he calls the metonym as he considers it a more flexible term, is essential in identifying the contemporary legend as the kernel of the contemporary legend is the one thing that always stays the same. What changes is the identifying information that surrounds it. In exploring this issue, Bill Ellis in "When is a Legend a Legend" sees a contemporary legend as having five elements in its typical life. He describes them thus:

> In its first and most transient state, it provides an individual with convenient language to identify an uncanny event or social stress; it names a marginal experience. Second it shares this experience in the form of words, with others, who evaluate and comment on it; it translates marginality into language. Third, with the help of this evaluation and existing tradition, the performer reduces idiosyncratic elements in the narrative to good form. The resulting performance can be repeated at will to convince or entertain; it becomes a fixed narrative. Fourth, the story no longer requires performance but instead remains a familiar part of the group's knowledge; it becomes a *metonym*, a kernel narrative. . . Fifth, as it

> decays farther from its original energy, it becomes dormant. Known but no longer relevant, it circulates only in parodic or summary form; it is no longer a legend but a *legend report*. (35-36)

An example of this can be seen in Brunvand's Type-Index in his text *Baby Train.* In the type-index the one sentence summary for "The Hook" is "Hookman leaves hook-hand dangling from door handle" (327). In effect the kernel is that a hook man poses a threat. In an examination of the history and scholarship of "The Hook" Bill Ellis notes, "a California archival text, dated by the informant '*c.* 1942,' may well reflect a primitive version, since it is set inside a house, not on a parking road, and ends with the murder of the couple. Another text, dated '*c.* 1961,' is likewise set inside a house, features a girl and her uncle, and climaxes when the uncle surprises and kills a hook-handed intruder who is leaving the girl's room" (1994;63). In each of these versions the kernel of the hook man, mentioned above, applies although the identifying information that surrounds the story does not.

The identifying information that surrounds the kernel follows William Labov's view of the overall structure of narrative. In his text, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, Labov examined some narratives obtained in South-Central Harlem from pre-adolescents, 9 to 13 years old, adolescents 14 to 19, and adults (355). Through this examination, Labov defined the overall structure of narrative. He concluded "some narratives...contain only narrative clauses; they are complete in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there are other elements of narrative structure found in more fully developed types. Briefly, a fully-formed narrative may show the following: 1. Abstract; 2. Orientation; 3. Complicating Action; 4.

Evaluation; 5. Result or Resolution; 6. Coda" (360). Labov explains the structural elements as a series of answers to underlying questions: a. Abstract: what was this about?; b. Orientation: who, when, what, where; c. Complicating action: then what happened?; d. Evaluation: so what?; e. Result: what finally happened (Labov 370). These structural elements also inform issues of truth and belief as discussed later.

W. F. H. Nicolaisen used Labov's narrative structure and applied it to a corpus of the contemporary legend "The Surpriser Surprised." Although his results are limited because he only considers one contemporary legend, they are still interesting. In his article "The Linguistic Structure of Legends," he identifies three of Labov's structural elements as making up his idea of the kernel of the contemporary legend. He writes "while Abstract and Coda, and to a certain extent Evaluation, are on its narrative periphery, Orientation, Complicating Action and Result (Resolution) are the legend's narrative core, ensuring, for the folk-cultural register, an appropriately tripartite structure" (72). This tripartite structure can also be seen in Aristotle's beginning, middle and end which is held as the most common structure of a narrative.

The use of Labov's structural elements also explains what appears to some to be the structureless, nature of the contemporary legend. Nicolaisen wondered, with reference to Labov's structural elements, if there were any structural elements that identified a form as a legend and not some other kind of narrative. He answered with reference to Labov's second element, Orientation. According to Nicolaisen,

> a piece of vital information is left out of the Orientation section, to be made known to the listener only after the telling of the Complicating Action has been completed. This deliberate delay, which puts the listener

> in the shoes of the main character or characters, is often given the explicit outward form of an 'explanation,' although it is just as often implied at the end of the narration of the complicating actions. . . .The narrator misled us as much as the individual or couple are misled by a phony request to check the furnace, fill the washing machine, or attend to the preparation of food. Together with them, we are in the dark until the narrator decided to switch on the light. (70-71)

Nicolaisen's determination, that a delay in the release of pertinent information is an important structural feature of a contemporary legend, echoes Daniel Barnes's thoughts on the subject. In his article "Interpreting Urban Legends," Barnes sees the fragmentary nature of the contemporary legend as being intentional and a set part of its structure. He writes that "plots conceal functions and for much the same reason that mystery plots and indeed most other literary plots do: it is a necessary requirement of the genre that this be the case. In both urban legends and detective stories, what is to be dis-covered (un-covered) is the 'real plot,' as opposed to the 'apparent plot.'"[6] Where Nicolaisen identifies the withheld information as belonging to the structural element Orientation, Barnes identifies the withheld information as being part of the climactic moment. Although both scholars may use different terminology to identify the information being withheld, the fact is that they agree that vital information is suppressed. This suppression is part of what makes the contemporary legend appear to be fragmentary

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[6] Here Barnes notes "Compare Suzanne Ferguson on 'actual' versus 'hypothetical' plots in 'Defining the Short Story: Impressions and Form,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 28, (1982), 13-24 and the exchange which followed between Professor Ferguson and Kristien Hemmerechts, 253-256.

or even formless; yet, at the same time is also a part of what leads to the reversal, a key part of the structure.

Accordingly, in spite of the variables that influence the structure of the contemporary legend, it must be recognized that the contemporary legend is not without structure, although it may appear to be so depending upon how it is told and in what detail. It may appear to be without a clear structure because of, as Bennett notes, the mutability of the form of the contemporary legend and its lack of a clear border between narrative forms which can result in its transmission as a joke, rumor or other narrative form. It may appear to be without structure because, as Dégh notes, its popularity means it does not need to be told in its entirety to be understood and so it remains incoherent. Yet structure is there because, as Labov notes, "though some narratives... contain only narrative clauses; they are complete in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle and an end" (360). Moreover, contemporary legends may also contain those Labovian structural elements that Nicolaisen has determined the contemporary legend tends to use: Orientation, Complicating Action and Result. The narrator can deliver the contemporary legend in a series of bare connected statements or as an embellished set of statements both of which suppress pertinent information.

Thus, it must be recognized that even though they are mutable, contemporary legends possess a constant feature: their ability to be reduced to a basic kernel, or as Ellis calls it the metonym. This metonym is what exists and what is built upon no matter the rhetorical form, the teller and location, their manner of dissemination. It is this kernel that is present when the contemporary legend is cast in a written text and it is this core upon which any interpretations are based.

This then is how the contemporary legend differs from that of other narrative forms and is what allows it to be recognized. It has a kernel, around which the structure is built. And, depending on the type of presentation desired, the structure can stay as small as a kernel/metonym because it is a familiar part of the group's knowledge or it can be expanded into the length of an anecdote, short story or novel depending on the identifying details and elements used to flesh it out. This mutability and flexibility makes this narrative form one that is particularly useful in literature.

Style

Just as the form of contemporary legends is mutable, so too, is their manner of performance; what is perceived as their style. It is this lack of a set style that makes them so suitable for use in literature. According to Smith "contemporary legends, in general, do not have an artistically developed form, and no effort is made to polish the stories . . . . although they may or may not be dramatic in presentation" (6-7). As well, in general their language is informal and/or colloquial and . . . . may or may not be 'politically correct.' This lack of development and polish is what differentiates them from a story or tale"(6-7).

The perception of style is a personal one. As Smith states the contemporary legend *itself* does not have a style associated with its telling. The contemporary legend lacks the development and polish associated with the tale because of its form and structure. With a mutable form and a structure that is built around a kernel, the teller or performer of the contemporary legend is responsible for its style. The rhetoric of the narrator, his/her method of delivery (volume, gestures, body language, facial expression, tone), his/her use of techniques such as withholding or abbreviating, the acceptance of

comments from the receivers, his/her use of oral techniques such as the pause and caesura are all a part of style. This in turn allows the fiction writer the freedom to present the contemporary legend however s/he needs it to fit into the text, to match it to the character to which it applies or involves or to develop it as s/he needs within the story.

Transmission (Dissemination)

The folklorist study of how the contemporary legend is transmitted is important as the manner of the presentation of the narrative often depends on its form of transmission. According to Smith "contemporary legends in general have a wide, sometimes international, distribution" (6). As well, they "are communicated primarily by word of mouth, although they are frequently disseminated through the mass media (eg. Films, television, radio, newspapers), office technology (eg, fax, photocopiers, email), as well as novels and short stories (6). Another key source of the dissemination of contemporary legends is through popular publications by folklorists such as Brunvand, and non-folklorists, such as Alvin Schwartz, who have collected contemporary legends and published them in texts aimed at specific audiences such as teenagers.

Overall, however, the question of transmission is not really important to the use of a contemporary legend in literature as the transmission process is outside of the literature text itself.

Narrators

Since contemporary legends are transmitted in a number of ways Smith notes that it is clear that, "in general, we are all potential narrators/communicators of contemporary legends. Because they require no specialist performers there is no dividing line between the narrators and the listeners. The contemporary legend narrators are, in general,

unaware that they are telling a traditional narrative which has been previously told by others and they are not considered to be the property of any one individual" (6).

I agree with Smith's observation that, in regard to the contemporary legend, there is no dividing line between narrator and listener as the presentation of the narrative is in an informal conversational setting.[7] However, with the preponderance of publications about contemporary legends both in hard copy and on the internet about contemporary legends and the numbers of movies that have used or spoofed contemporary legends,[8] it is less likely that the majority of people are, in general, unaware of this narrative and their own participation in its spread. Nonetheless in regards to a working definition for literature the question of who is the narrator is not relevant as the contemporary legend may be being presented in a number of ways in the literature text including as a part of the actual story

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[7]Other oral forms such as the joke have, I would argue, a dividing line. As Carl von Sydow posited, there are two kinds of tradition bearers: active and passive. The active tradition bearers keep the tradition alive while the passive tradition bearers know what the tradition contains and may remember part of it but do not actively spread it. There is a real skill in being able to tell a joke well. As a result, only those who are interested in that type of tradition are going to be responsible for the passing on of the tradition. However, in the case of the contemporary legend, because it takes place in an informal conversational setting, there is room for the passive tradition bearer in its narration.

[8]*Urban Legend*, Dir. Jamie Blanks; *Scream*, 1996 Dir. Wes Craven 1996, are only two of the most current movies that involve contemporary legends. The plot of *Urban Legend* involves a series of urban legends that are being acted out (ostention) on a university campus. *Scream* begins with a contemporary legend "The Babysitter" unfolding. The basic plot of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* Dir. by Jim Gillespie, 1997, involves a contemporary legend where a student hits a hitchhiker and kills him. Those riding in the car hide the victim but are found out by someone who knows what they did.

Context of Narration

The context of narration is important for folklore and literature. Smith states that,

> Contemporary legends have no specific context for performance but instead are performed in a wide variety of contexts
>
> Contemporary legends are, in general, presented to the listener within the context of an existing group relationship.
>
> The "narration" of a contemporary legend is an interactive process.
>
> The "narration" of a contemporary legend stems from normal conversation rather than in response to a request for someone to tell a tale. (6)

As a result, "The setting of a contemporary legend may or may not include much interaction between the speaker and the listener" (7).

Clearly the context of narration thus described is applicable for literature as well. If a piece of fiction is to include discourse between characters it will do so by mirroring how such discourse would normally take place if it does not want to create a dissonance between the text and the reader. My interpretation of normal conversation is the give and take, including digressions and asides, occurring as people converse. A conversation does not proceed linearly; rather it is circular, vertical and horizontal. In short, it goes all over the place. As a result of this, spaces open up within the conversation for the insertion of a story to highlight, stress, point out, underscore, caution, or remark upon something that was touched upon or discussed in full. According to folklorist Mark Glazer, context and setting influence how a contemporary legend is told. He observed

that, from the tales he examined, contemporary legends are told predominantly in informal situations noting,

> If these two legends are typical, and there is no reason to think that they are not, then for the first time in the study of contemporary legend, we have sound statistical evidence to bear out our long-held assumption that contemporary legend telling tends to occur in unstructured contexts quite distinct from the traditional tale-telling gatherings conducive to the narration of folktales. (82)

He also noted that, while women prefer tale-telling in informal contexts, men tend to tell the contemporary legend in a work or school situation as a personal experience narrative (82). Unfortunately he did not explore the reasons behind this difference

With reference to literature the form and structure of what is being told/used is also influenced by context and setting thus context of narration is important when the contemporary legend is used in literature. Moreover, once a contemporary legend appears in a piece of literature. the literature becomes the context for the contemporary legend.

Content

Regarding content Smith talks about what contemporary legends are or are not in regards to a number of areas:

> *Themes*: Contemporary legends are the expressions of a variety of legendary themes, motifs, and *allomotifs* — not a fixed body of material. Contemporary legends are broadly related thematically, in that they emerge out of current physical and social contexts as well as social interaction, and they describe culturally proscribed behaviours (implied or explicit) of one kind or another.

Plausibility: Contemporary legends, in general, appear to be plausible, and even possible, in that they present descriptions and discussions of mundane and ordinary, rather than extraordinary and sensational, experiences and events (although often having an unusual twist).

Temporality: Contemporary legends are set in the "her and now," as if they happened recently —although the stories may have historical antecedents, roots in historical fact, or make reference to the past or reflect age-old concerns.

Contemporaneity: Contemporary legends are not simple traditional legends which have been modernized and/or "rationalized" and which are in circulation today.

Principal Characteristics: Contemporary legends are set in the real world and focus in ordinary individuals whom we encounter in the course of our everyday lives.

Setting: Contemporary legends are set in the real world and focus on familiar places we recognize and inhabit.

Events: Contemporary legends portray situations which we, or someone we know, may have experienced, are currently experiencing, or could possibly experience.

Secular / Sacred Status: Contemporary legends are primarily secular (as opposed to sacred).

Supernatural Status: Contemporary legends are, in general, non-supernatural.

In terms of what they may or may not be Smith talks about:

> *Contemporaneity*: A contemporary legend may or may not contain specifically contemporary material. Contemporary legends may or may not be updated narratives (historical and otherwise) which deal with contemporary issues, characters, settings, etc. A contemporary legend may or may not have historical antecedents in terms of plots and texts.
>
> *Events*: A contemporary legend may or may not describe what are perceived to be newly emergent events (threats, problems, and the like) that are in the physical and social contexts of the narrator and/or the listener
>
> *Connotation*: A contemporary legend may or may not be "politically correct."
>
> *Ostension*: A contemporary legend may or may not suggest or call for action on the part of the narrators or listeners (6-8).

In effect then, the narration of a contemporary legend is influenced by the setting. The setting in turn influences how a contemporary legend is told as there is no one specific context for performance. Moreover, the narration of a contemporary legend for performance is primarily based on the current context of the discourse taking place, literature and its conventions; that is, they are usually proffered in response to a preceding item of conversation. Contemporary legends voice and authenticate the values, attitudes, fears and anxieties of contemporary society that may not be easily or readily expressed otherwise and can serve as a tool for debate about these issues.

Since literature too deals with themes and motifs and since literature deals with the values, attitudes, fears and anxieties of society and can serve as a stimulus for debates about these issues the context of narration and content is an important part of the

contemporary legend in literature working definition. However the contemporary legend is presented, the context of narration, is going to depend on how it is being used in the text.

Truth and Belief

Also important to both contemporary legend and literature are issues of truth and belief. Smith notes that in regards to issues of truth ,

> Contemporary legends are presented as describing true events, even when they are intended as "lies," "Hoaxes," and "jokes." With contemporary legends, as often as not, the question of the truthfulness of the events described is overlooked because the tales sound so plausible and possible, even when they may have an odd flaw in the logic or story line. . . Contemporary legends, although probably unsubstantial, nevertheless appear to be substantiated through the inclusion of details such as names, times, and places. The fact that the participants in the events described are named is not validation that these individuals exist or that events ever took place. Rarely are the narrators identified as the participants in the story. Instead they distance themselves, though not necessarily intentionally, from the events they describe by the inclusion of such phrases as "...it happened to a friend," thereby making themselves less accountable for the truth of the story. (7)

With reference to belief Smith states,

> Contemporary legends vary in terms of the level of belief in the story exhibited by the narrators or listeners. Contemporary legends, in general, do not require that the narrators or listeners subscribe to any new or special

> belief(s) or belief system, but rather they emerge out of the existing beliefs of a given group. Contemporary legends, in general, include some implicit or explicit, positive or negative "statement of belief" out of which arises "dialogue" and "debate" in the form of confirmation or challenge by participants. (7-8)

In the oral performance of contemporary legends, there is a difference in the presentation of a contemporary legend told as true and when it is not told as true. This difference is expressed through the structure of the telling. In "Legend Performance and Truth," Gillian Bennett discusses these structural differences with reference to Labov and Waletsky's definition of narrative and structure. Bennett looks at the storytelling strategies of two narrators. She notes that the narrator who believes her text and wants it to be believed uses all six of the Labovian structural elements discussed earlier. In contrast, the 'skeptical' narrator does not. Furthermore, as Bennett has observed, narrators unwittingly use a variety of linguistic clues which assist us to interpret the extent of their belief in the events described in a narrative. As Bennet notes "a shrewd observer can use them to decipher what is going on in the social subconscious" (2005: 305).

In literature questions of truth and belief are important depending on the genre in which they appear. When a contemporary legend is used within a horror or mystery story then the reader's acceptance of it as true may be an integral part of the story. Moreover, the characters belief in it may also be predicated on the type of genre and on what events are unfolding. In realistic fiction the use of an accepted, circulating contemporary legend will add realistic detail to the text. In Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* the contemporary

legends that Sam presented to Mr. Pickwick as stories that he obviously believed, underscored the theme of the text and, so, were integral to the overall meaning of the piece of fiction as a whole.

Meaning and Function

According to Smith "contemporary legends have no single meaning and so can have different meanings for different individuals" (7). Just as they potentially have a multitude of meanings, as he points out in section B13, they also have a multitude of functions. This multitude continues to grow as more and more functions are identified. Nonetheless, the majority of functions can be identified by William Bascom in his article "The Four Functions of Folklore." Bascom writes that folklore serves to (1) amuse, (2) validate culture, (3) educate, and (4) maintain conformity

In "The Modern Legend," in *Language, Culture and Tradition*, folklore scholar David Buchan references this article when he states that ,

> modern legends, then, fulfill three of the four basic functions[9] of traditional literature: they entertain, they teach, and they validate belief. What they do not do, as far as I can see, is serve the fourth function: they do not apparently help maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour. There seems in fact to be a significant shift in emphasis within the functions of folk narrative from the old transmission of the values of the traditional community to the new articulation of fears of modern social groups. (13).

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[9] Buchan is referring here to the four functions of folklore as identified by William E. Bascom in his article "Four Functions of Folklore" which appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 67 (1954), 333-49.

Certainly contemporary legends do entertain, teach and validate belief (either positive or negative). However, in contrast to Buchan I see one function of some of the contemporary legends is to help maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour while a contrasting function of others is to illustrate non-conformity as they question that which is around us. "The Pinpricks in the Condom"[10] is an example of this. This contemporary legend is about a young couple who want to have sex. The problem is that the male is too shy to go into the local pharmacy to buy condoms. His mother, father, or neighbour works in the store, and, thus, his intent would be found out. The girl can't buy the condoms because she is a girl who should be heeding her mother's warning about the dangers of premarital sex. Finally, a friend of the male offers to buy the couple some condoms, does so and gives them to the male. The male and his girlfriend go parking where they have intercourse using the condom as protection. However, even though they use a condom the girlfriend ends up pregnant. When she questions her boyfriend as to how this could be, he doesn't know; he is sure he used the condom correctly. However, when it is revealed that the girl is pregnant his friend laughs and tells him that he poked holes in some of the condoms with a pin.

When I first heard "Pinpricks in the Condom," in 1976, it, as seen in Ellis's description from his article, quoted earlier, "When is a Legend a Legend?," named a

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[10] On another occasion in response to my mention of this contemporary legend, a friend related through e-mail how he heard this contemporary legend not as a story but as a factual explanation. When he was an adult he asked why, when he was a teen, his pharmacy kept condoms behind the counter. The explanation given to him was that before premarital sex became more accepted, little old ladies would go into stores and put pinpricks in condoms in order to punish sexually active people; hence, the need for stores to keep condoms behind the counter.

marginal experience, teenage pregnancy, and translated that marginality into language. The resulting performance was then repeated to warn against the dangers of premarital sex. The second time I heard "Pinpricks in a Condom" in 1996, it was as a joke. Told in an age when premarital sex was more accepted and a part of the mainstream it no longer really gave a language to a social stress or marginal experience; thus, the contemporary legend morphed into a joke. Clearly then, as seen in the above examples, the form of a contemporary legend is not a given and so its function also changes.

In her article "What is the Legend after all?" Dégh writes "the legend is more content than form because it is built on facts of the real world and addresses questions concerning existential problems of real people. The proposition of the tale is to tell a lie, to fantasize; that of the legend is to interpret observed experience" (20). In the interpretation of this observed experience lies an important function of the contemporary legend. It assists us in negotiating our comfort level with society. It does this by making us think and by answering or posing questions. The questions that the contemporary legend asks are many. Dégh explains:

> Every statement that counters notions held as rational and authentic, or beliefs that are canonized by elite churches or civil religions and therefore quasi-rational qualifying as rational, embodies its own built-in dialectics. This is the main identifier of the legend, setting it apart from other folklore genres. The joke, the anecdote, the magic tale tell a similar story, while they do not raise the question: did it or did it not happen? Is the real order of the world as we have learned it is? Can we expect that life will run its course as we were taught it should?. . . And if there are unknown forces,

> can they be identified, changed, avoided, or exploited to our benefit? Disputability is not only one feature of the legend among others; it is the very essence, . . . goal. The legend demands answers, but not necessarily resolutions, to the most mysterious, critical, and least answerable questions of life." (32)

These questions can be seen to rise from what Carl Lindahl term the psychic ambiguity of the legend's core. For him the contemporary legend helps the listener to answer the question "whom–or–what can we trust1984). Daniel Barnes also sees the contemporary legend as a duality. However, for him the answer or import of the tale does not come from the surface story but rather from the story that is not told. Barnes observes, contemporary legends do not just tell one story but two. He states, "what makes urban legends so compelling finally is not the story they tell but the one they don't tell, and the demands they accordingly make upon us as tellers and listeners, forcing us [tellers and listeners] as it were, to assume the role of interpreters" ("Interpreting Urban Legends" 11). The discussion of this interpretation is a function that is also connected with the issues of truth and belief.

This sense of duality is also seen in Sandy Hobbs's article "The Social Psychology of a 'Good' Story." In this article he sees the duality as a result of psychological analysis "whereas folklorists might treat a legend as a 'text' in its own right, equivalent to a literary text, a psychological analysis involves the legend being classified in two main ways. When a legend is told it is (a) for the teller, an aspect of his or her behaviour, and (b) for the listener, an aspect of his or her environment. Legend is to be seen not simply as a psychological phenomenon, but as a social psychological one"

(136-7). Hobbs, thus, determines that contemporary legends survive because they provide specific functions. He identifies and explains the functions as such,

> A. *Poetic justice.* A wrongdoer is punished in some bizarre way. Why should people like stories like that? Because in reality wrongdoers often get away with it or are punished in a less satisfactory way.[11]
>
> B. A*nxiety justified.* People often have anxieties which for various reasons they may feel slightly ashamed of, or which they may find it difficult to admit to directly. Some tales are 'evidence' to justify the anxiety (for example: fear of the dark, strangers, foreigners, food cooked by strangers, the foreign, new technology).
>
> C. *I am in the know.* Some stories allow the teller to suggest that they are privy to some special knowledge, usually hidden-for example knowledge about the workings of big business (once you've heard it you too are 'in the know'). This element would be added to any story by claiming that it is something which has been 'hushed up'.
>
> D. *Normal behaviour in inappropriate settings.* Farting, sex play and going nude are all things which though 'natural' are circumscribed by rules about when (and with whom) you do them. Some stories allow us to break the rules vicariously, by showing other people performing these actions at the 'wrong time'.

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[11] This function can be seen to be similar to Bengt Af Klintberg's view that many modern legends are about revenge as "we repress our feelings of revenge as being primitive. Instead the narration of legends provides a socially accepted form of releasing these feelings… " ("Why are there so Many Modern Legends about Revenge?" 146).

> E. *Expressing inappropriate feelings*. There are also social rules about what the appropriate feelings should be in certain situations. One *ought* to show sympathy with misfortune, respect for the dead, love and care towards children and pets. However, we can, and often do, react inappropriately: some misfortunes are funny, a corpse is just a bit of meat, babies and pets are vulnerable creatures whom we sometimes feel like exploiting. In public these 'wrong' feelings must be hidden. Stories again offer vicarious expression to the inappropriate.
>
> F. *Permanent representation of feelings*. Our feelings sometimes seem to be diminished by the material world. Someone may die in a room, but, however tragic the death is to us, the *room* is physically the same. If, however, the room *were* changed in some way, it might objectify and support our instinct that the world is somehow 'different'. This is the case in most supernatural stories. (141-2)

Overall there is a difference between the function of the content, the message, verses the function of the narration, how it is told, where and why.

If we take the various functions of the contemporary legend as outlined above, we can see that the functions of the narrative in life appear, as a whole, to make us think about: that which we are expressing; have a concern with or about our society; wish to raise questions about; wish to bring to people's attention or wish to entertain others with. They are there to provide us with a vicarious means through which to explore and express feelings that may or may not be considered valid, important or appropriate. As such the contemporary legend serves to enable us to continue to negotiate our role and place

within our mutable, and sometimes frightening, society. These functions of the contemporary legend are relevant to literature as they are similar to the functions of literature itself.

A Working Definition

When all of Smith's characteristics are examined in relation to literature and combined, for the purposes of this thesis, a general working definition that explores the contemporary legend in connection with both folklore and literature can be ascertained. Upon examining those parts that make up the whole we can say the contemporary legend is a short narrative form that circulates in multiple versions and forms, in folklore and popular culture.

In folklore the contemporary legend is transmitted by multiple media, and appears, in cycles, in a wide variety of contexts. Moreover, there is usually no clear authorship ascribed to the contemporary legend as each teller of the contemporary legend makes it his/her own by adding identifying information that marks it as having occurred in or near the location of the telling and to someone associated with the teller in some distant way. As well, it has no single meaning and no single function and may be presented in other forms such as anecdotes, jokes or personal experience narratives depending on its stage of existence and the teller. However, although their form is mutable contemporary legends do have a structure. Structurally, contemporary legends can possess all of Labov's structural elements, the middle three elements, or the narrative clauses of beginning, middle and end. The more a narrator believes the narrative to be true the more the narrator will use all of Labov's elements. However, which ever elements are or are not used, the contemporary legend has at *its core a kernel* that does not change. It is this

kernel that makes a contemporary legend easily recognized once the listener has been told or read a few and becomes familiar with the "feel" and standard content of the contemporary legend. The "feel" of the narrative is dependent on structure and content as contemporary legends voice and authenticate the values, attitudes, fears and concerns of contemporary society that may not be easily or readily expressed otherwise. Stylistically, how the narrative is presented depends upon the teller; moreover, with the advent of new technology they are no longer primarily transmitted orally. Finally, while the number of functions the contemporary legend has continues to grow they serve to (1) amuse, (2) validate culture, (3) educate, and (4) maintain or challenge conformity.

In literature the contemporary legend may be difficult to discern. This is in part because the contemporary legend has an implied author, is mediated and woven into the literary text Claims to authorship by the writer of the text can be made and authorship may be attributed to the author by the reader. This is particularly so if the reader does not recognize the narrative being used as a contemporary legend. As well, within literature recognition may be hindered by the lack of a clear form and structure. Conversely, this lack of a clear form is of benefit to the fiction writer as s/he may present the contemporary legend in a number of ways including as a contemporary legend, as a story told by a character, as a plot device or as an aside. Nonetheless, once familiarized with the contemporary legend they are easy to recognize as their content expresses the values, attitudes, and fears of society in narrative form. As well, structurally they are easy to recognize as structurally contemporary legends can possess all of Labov's structural elements, the middle three elements, or the narrative clauses of beginning, middle and end. Moreover, Labov's second element, orientation, will often be missing and will only

become known after the complicating action has been completed. Depending on the type of presentation desired, the structure can stay as small as a kernel/metonym because it is a familiar part of the group's knowledge or it can be expanded into the length of an anecdote, short story or novel depending on the identifying details and elements used to flesh it out. This mutability and flexibility makes this narrative form one that is particularly useful in literature. The lack of a clear style means the fiction writer has the freedom to present the contemporary legend however s/he needs.. However the contemporary legend is presented, the context of narration, is going to depend on how it is being used in the text. In literature questions of truth and belief are important depending on the genre in which they appear. When a contemporary legend is used within a horror or mystery story then the reader's acceptance of it as true may be an integral part of the story. Moreover, the characters belief in it may also be predicated on the type of genre and on what events are unfolding. In realistic fiction the use of an accepted, circulating contemporary legend will add realistic detail to the text. In literature just as in folklore the four basic functions upon which the many other functions build are to (1) amuse, (2) validate culture, (3) educate, and (4) maintain, or challenge, conformity

In regards to the contemporary legend in literature, for the writer of fiction, then, the contemporary legend is a useful narrative tool. Because it carries no single meaning it can have different meanings for different individuals and for whatever the theme of the text. Because it is set in the real world and focuses on ordinary individuals it allows a connection between the characters in the text and the reader to be developed. Because it can portray situations which we, or someone we know, may, are, or could possibly experience and may describe what we perceive to be newly emergent events (threats,

problems, and the like) that are in our physical and social contexts they can comment on the our world as a connection is made between the us, the reader, and the world of the text. Moreover, what the contemporary legend articulates: belief, fears, concerns, debates may be used by the writer to subvert, challenge, or support the status quo. Finally the constant appearance of new contemporary legends and the collections of older contemporary legends, even those not current, provide a constant source for fiction writers to use, borrow or adapt. This is just a working definition; yet it is closely tied to the scholarship in the field to date.

Chapter Three

Roles of the Contemporary Legend in Literature

When contemporary legends are used in life, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they have no one meaning or function. Depending on their presentation they may educate/inform, entertain, carry a message, provoke the opportunity for debate, make a comment about our society, present an explanation . . . in short, they may fill almost any function and, as a result, have more than one meaning for both the teller and the receiver. In effect, their meaning and function will be determined as much by the nature of their delivery, where they are told, why they are told, when they are told, by whom they are told, and by how they are performed, as by whom they are received.

Unlike the presentation of contemporary legends in life, when contemporary legends are being presented within a piece of literature their presentation is more limited. In general, they are presented in one of three ways. They are presented as a narrative that is a recognized/recognizable/labeled contemporary legend, they appear as an unlabelled and unidentified part of the longer text narrative, or they appear as an unlabelled part of the text narrative that the author has adapted as his/her own.

Nonetheless, the difference in the presentation of contemporary legends in literature does not limit the role that contemporary legends may fill. When they are presented in literature, contemporary legends serve the same roles within the larger literary text as they do in life. Because the potential exists for contemporary legends to be assiduously, simultaneously transmitted using every means possible, it is fair to say that they meet a need or have something to say for the tellers and receivers *no matter in which media they appear*. What all contemporary legends have in common is a focus that

may be extracted from their content. Moreover that focus may change with the interpretation. In effect, contemporary legends continue to hold multiple meanings for the reader, as may literary devices, that may be other than the author intended.

The difference between contemporary legends in life versus contemporary legend content in literature is that the meaning behind the contemporary legend being used is limited in the latter. Because contemporary legends in the text are static, they do not change over time; when they appear in the literary work, the meaning of their content is limited by the text. In life, and in literature, they offer messages or models for behaviour or explanations that allow understanding. In life, as in literature, they show how to respond to extreme issues. In life, as in literature, the tales on some level educate and guide us in a direction through the illustration of a point. And, in life, as in literature the tales may entertain. Obviously, then, in life, as in literature, contemporary legends are more than just stories randomly chosen to be told.

The difference lies in the polysemy of the meanings or functions that can be ascribed to whatever contemporary legend content is being told. In life, there is a purpose behind their telling, yet multiple meanings can result depending on the worldview of the presenter and receiver as well as the interactive environment of the telling and any other variables that surround the telling of the contemporary legend. However, as mentioned, in literature their inclusion in a larger text fills a role as determined by the writer's agenda; thus, unlike contemporary legends in life, contemporary legends in literature are limited in meaning by the content and theme(s) of the text. In effect, a meaning cannot be ascribed to the contemporary legend content unless it is supported by that which is written in the text.

The roles of contemporary legends in literature are also more mechanical than those of their functions in life. In literature their roles include establishing ideas/types of characterization, identifying setting or plot or, in the case of a longer narrative, setting up parallel actions between the contemporary legend and the story within which it is enclosed and/or filling the role of didactic or cautionary tale, the agenda of which is to teach, model or challenge the accepted social mores of the society in the time of its telling.

Even so, meaning in life or in literature is influenced by the issue of truth and belief. Linda Dégh in her 1991 article "What is the Legend After All?" deals with this issue. In her conclusion she remarks that the question is not what the legend is but "what does the legend mean for its bearers?" In answering this question she states:

> The legend observed in the field (not only the performed, face-to-face event but also the copy-cat ostensive spread of newspaper variants, or the simultaneous reporting of a legend on the television and the radio and in the newspapers) usually entertains an extranormal topic that is unusual and surprising, shocking and frightening while remaining on the plane of the real world. This legend has three essential qualities: 1) it is of existential importance for people who participate in its presentation, 2) it is surrounded by uncertainty, lacking firm knowledge, and 3) it is controversial and invites the expression of diverse points of view. . . . It happens to average people within their cultural realms but contradicts accepted norms and values of society at large. (30)

The broad purpose of contemporary legends then, in life or literature, is to generate discussion about their society's hegemony through the expression of diverse points of view.

How do contemporary legends generate discussion about their society's hegemony? They do this, in part, through the focus of the contemporary legend as extracted from it by the listener/receiver. Contemporary legends transmit stories whose focus, upon reflection, seems like common or good sense to them. This common or good sense then exemplifies for the reader who is familiar with the contemporary legend accepted behaviour, thinking, and morality or it supplies an alternative means of disruption which is attained when the focus of the contemporary legend is discussed. This function occurs through the spread of contemporary legends in society and is also one of the roles of the contemporary legends when used within a larger narrative in literature.

What is hegemony? To Antonio Gramsci hegemony is cultural. It can be seen as an "organising principle" diffused by the process of socialization into every area of daily life. The result of this socialization is an internalization of the organizing principle by the general population becoming a part of what is called 'common sense.' This common sense, which will be discussed later, occurs when the philosophy, culture and morality of the dominant group appears as the natural order of things (Boggs 39). As Dominic Strinati explains "Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of the subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated

construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups" (16).

As Raymond William notes:

> Hegemony goes beyond 'culture,' as previously defined in its insistence on relating the 'whole' social process to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that 'men' define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realise this process. In a class society there are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognized as a whole process. (108)

For Gramsci, cultural hegemony is only possible through the use of cultural control and this cultural control is vital to the ruling class. Joseph V. Femia writes that Gramsci "saw in a way that no previous Marxist had done that the rule of one class or group over the rest of society does not depend on material power alone; in modern times, at least, the dominant class must establish its own moral, political and cultural values as conventional norms of practical behaviour" (3). Gramsci himself argues that

> Every historical act cannot but be performed by the 'collective Man.' In other words this presupposes the attainment of a 'socio-cultural' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed individual wills, heterogeneous in their aims, are welded together for the same goal on the basis of an (equal) and common conception of the world. Since this is what happens, great importance is assumed by

> the overall question of language, i.e. the collective attainment of single cultural 'climate.' (1957:156)

In effect, Gramsci believes that the ruling class needs more than just control of the means of production; it also needs control of culture and language. Gramsci argues that thought and even action can be controlled and manipulated through the use of language. Traditional Marxists state that once you own the means of production you control society. He who owns the factory owns everything. Traditional Marxist theory separates the base (the means of production) from the superstructure (social and political activities). However, Gramsci collapses the base and the superstructure into one. Gramsci argues that owning the factory was only a part of it; the status quo must also control culture, even language itself, in order to gain compliance.[12] The ruling class, therefore, must create a single cultural climate in which all the separate social voices are brought together to attain the same goal. Through this, the ruling class maintains control by forcing discontented voices to disregard their own goals in favour of a common world conception, which is, of

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[12] Gramsci, as co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, certainly saw his theory put into action by Mussolini (whom Gramsci knew as Mussolini was a former co-member of the Italian Socialist Party) and his Fascist government. As Gitlin notes "it was Gramsci who, in the late twenties and thirties, with the rise of fascism and the failure of the Western European working-class movements, began to consider why the working class was not necessarily revolutionary, why it could, in fact, yield to fascism" (516). Gramsci determined that this failure was because the revolutionary movements did not control culture and language. This is a mistake the Fascists did not make. In his history of modern Italy, Martin Clark states that to achieve their purpose "the Fascists had to 'mobilize' every Italian to the cause" (243). Clark shows that the Fascist government "concentrated on other means of persuasion - youth movements, recreation schemes, syndicates... rather than on mass propaganda. It also 'took over' one or two worthy bodies like the Dante Alighieri Society; and it founded both a National Fascist Institute of Culture and a Royal Italian Academy...to mobilize or flatter the intellectuals" (243). Just as Hitler did in Germany, Mussolini controlled every aspect of Italian culture in order to maintain support for his government, flattering and courting all sections of society.

course, defined by the ruling class. What becomes judged as "common sense" has been defined by the status quo, so it in effect becomes their common sense.

When thought and action are controlled and manipulated through the use of language, as seen in Mussolini's Italy, hegemony includes both dominant and dominated groups. This process is what Antonio Gramsci called consensual control. He sees consensual control as arising when individuals voluntarily absorb the worldview of the dominant group. The suggestion of the consent of one part of the population to a different part of the population is promulgated through what Gramsci termed "common sense." Common sense is a form of subtle conditioning that supports the status quo although it is presented in a form designed to hide it. It comes from a specific, usually conservative, point of view. Common sense is presumed by the majority, as mentioned above, to be a commonly held belief system.

What is interesting about Gramsci's view of common sense and hegemony is, as Strinati posits, that he "suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reason of their own" (166). This can be seen in the contemporary legend. In the case of the contemporary legend all classes tell contemporary legends as all are the folk. As a result, the stories can be pro or anti-ruling group or neither. However, as a function of contemporary legends is to generate discussion for and against hegemony it is thus fair to suppose that hegemony is not necessarily a strategy only of the dominant group. Rather, the subordinated groups may develop their own hegemony as a means to control the state.

In "Preliminaries to a Study of Philosophy," published in *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, Gramsci states:

> One is always a conformist in some conformism, one is always as it were a "collective man," a person within a social group. The question therefore is to determine or ascertain the historical character of that conformism, of that social group. If a person's world view is not coherent but disjointed and sporadic, then one develops a bizarre and capricious personality. Such a personality will have within it elements of the caveman alongside the most modern scientific concepts, remnants of parochial prejudices from past historical epochs, as well as institutions of a rising philosophy suitable to the entire human species, united throughout the world. (17)

What appears to be common sense is disseminated through education, the media, the law, beliefs, values, cultural traditions and myths (Boggs 17) *and* through oral and written narratives.

This role of narrative is investigated by Gramsci. In a letter to his sister-in-law, Tania, written in Turin on April 22, 1929, he comments on the value of studying any kind of literature. In this letter he discusses the worth of the literature found in the prison library:

> Furthermore, many prisoners underestimate their prison library. No doubt all prison libraries are inconsistent: books are thrown together haphazardly, whether gifts from ex-prisoners or from patrons who have their hands on publishers' remainders. And there is always a quantity of prayer books and bad novels. But despite this, I believe that a political

> prisoner ought to be capable of drawing blood from a stone. The trick is to have some aim in mind while you're reading and to take notes (that is, if you have permission to write). Let me give you a couple of examples. In Milan, I read a series of different kinds of books–above all, popular novels–until the director of the library allowed me to go inside to select what I wanted from among the books not given out yet and others which, because of their political or moral tendencies, were not available to everybody. Well, I found Sue, Montépin, Ponson du Terrail, etc., which sufficed if one looked at them from the following angle: why are these books always the most read and frequently published? What needs do they satisfy, and what aspirations do they fulfill? What emotions and attitudes emerge in this squalid literature, to have such a wide appeal? (1988;145)

This letter is important for it shows how reading and thinking about popular literature led Gramsci to realize that language was a social constructor; he clearly realized that popular literature was important for what it revealed about the needs and aspirations of its readers. From this realization, Gramsci drew a connection between the masses and the dominant hegemony:

> Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterises mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the

church, the mass media, popular culture, etc.(Strinati 168-169)

The Russian Steamroller myth is an example of this connection. The fear was that the Russian population would grow past its borders and threaten their own countries cultural make-up. This fear, fed by the "Russian Steamroller Myth," helped to keep the populace of the neighbouring countries aware of the danger that Russian growth posed and thus resistant to the breaking of any boundaries. In a letter to Giuseppe Berti, a communist friend, dated August 8, 1927, Gramsci makes reference to this myth. In the letter he notes

> I'm blessed with the capacity for finding something of interest even in trash like feuilletons. If I could, I would start a file with hundreds and thousands of cards on various aspects of popular psychology. For example what was the origin of the "Russian steamroller" myth in 1914? In these novels there are hundreds of references to it, which shows how a whole set of beliefs and fears existed among the masses then, and that, in 1914 governments were launching what could be called their campaigns for 'nationalistic agitations' " (1988; 93-94).

The narrative to which Gramsci makes reference dealt with a fear other countries had at that time. In effect, the 'Russian Steamroller myth' helped maintain the power structure of other European countries; a power structure that it was felt would be challenged through the acceptance of foreigners into their society.

As mentioned Gramsci realized popular literature was important for what it revealed about the needs and aspirations of its readers and for how it showed the connection between the masses and the dominant hegemony. Contemporary legends as an oral form, are important for the same reasons; as stated, they articulate the belief, fears,

and concerns of the transmitters. When they appear within literature, they may reinforce common sense and, by extension, consensual control because together their composition and process of dissemination operate as a subtle form of communication between the transmitters and the receivers of all groups and between groups. In effect, as narratives, contemporary legends, as shaped by those who transmit them, become a tool. They provide a social model on how to act, or not to act, within their society. Used by the writer they subvert, challenge, or support the status quo as they reflect the beliefs, fears, attitudes, values and concerns relevant to the theme of the text. Thus their focus or point exemplifies the "proper" or "improper" way to act or react. The reaction to a deviant behaviour is a part of the reception of how the narrative is told. That this way to act is accepted as being 'proper' is because the transmitters and receivers appear to accept, practice and spread these routine structures of 'common sense.' In effect, the contemporary legend content acts as a part of a guide to survival as it serves to assist the individual in negotiating their society and surviving within it. Moreover, the contemporary legend can also provide a stimulus for discussion or debate.

In her study of Gramsci, Nadia Urbinati notes:

> To avoid seeing Gramsci's common sense as a manipulatory outcome of the emancipatory ambition of the high theory, we should first of all pay attention to the communicative role he assigned to middle-class individuals (like "lieutenants"). Common sense looks like a medium that keeps alive the connection between the two extremes of high culture and folklore. Like the *axiomata media* of John Stuart Mill, Gramsci's common sense comprises the whole of the maxims through which principles are

translated into moral judgments in everyday life. (388)

Clearly, because there is movement between groups, no one group dominates. Rather the flow between groups means

> Using Rawlsian language, we might say that common sense looks like a reflective equilibrium, or, as Gramsci himself has said, "a reciprocal 'reduction' so to speak, a passage from one [principles] to the other [common sense] and vice versa," a movement back and forth between universality and common knowledge. (388)

In short, contemporary legends transmitted orally or in literature help support or redefine the status quo through the recognition of behaviour that is accepted or not. The disruption or flouting of accepted behaviours/attitudes is discussed and debated as contemporary legends are told and passed on. People can tell contemporary legends for shock value that challenges the status quo and common sense or as an expression of group consensus. The story form of contemporary legends, their lack of a clear author, the multiple means of their dissemination, combined with the changing nature of their presentation and presenters create a vehicle whose outward appearance serves to camouflage the common sense being presented. Moreover, the apparent participation of all branches in society in the spreading of the contemporary legend means it is not consciously associated with the ideology of one political or dominant group hence the fact that some may express views that upon examination may be considered racist or sexist. Their performance can encourage debate about what we don't understand as questions that they may raise may be used to start a conversation and a quest for answers

or they may be used to fill holes in our knowledge, or they may be used to challenge our assumptions about the way things are and the way that they should be.

An example of the debate created through the use of contemporary legends within larger texts can be seen in the Barbara D'Amato's 1991 short story "Stop, Thief!" Within this twelve page short story, exists another story. This other story is the contemporary legend "The Dead Cat in the Package" and it takes up the first three pages of the short story. The kernel of this contemporary legend is that a package, found or stolen, by someone contains a dead cat. D'Amato's version of the contemporary legend is as follows,

> Officer Susannah Maria Figueroa lounged back against one of the desks in the roll-call room. She was five feet one, which made her just the right height to be able to rest both buttocks on the desktop.
>
> "See-this woman in a Porsche was driving along, minding her own business, on the way to an afternoon of serious shopping," she said to Officers Hiram Quail and Stanley Mileski, while her partner, Norm Bennis, taller than she was, lounged with one thigh against a neighboring desk, "and *whump*! She hits a cat in the street."
>
> "I would think *moosh*! Not *whump*!" Mileski said. He was a skinny white guy, slightly stooped.
>
> "She gets out," Figueroa said, "looks at the cat, head's okay, tails okay, but it's as flat as a wafer in the middle. Well, it's about three o'clock in the afternoon and she figures the kids'll be coming outa school soon and it's gonna upset the little darlings to see a squashed cat."

"Would," said Mileski. "Some. Then again, some of 'em would love it."

"So she picks it up real careful by the tail and puts it in a Bloomingdale's bag she had in the car and drives out to the mall with it."

"Type o' woman," said Norm Bennis, "who has lotsa extra Bloomie's bags." Bennis was a black man of medium height, built like a wedge. He had slender legs, broad chest, and very, very muscular shoulders.

"Right," said Figueroa, shrugging a little to settle her walkie-talkie more comfortably. "So she pulls up into the mall. Gets out to go in, she should hit Nieman Marcus before the rush starts, but the sun's shinin' down hard and she figures the car's gonna heat up and the cat's gonna get hot and smell up her car."

"Which it would," said Mileski.

"So she takes the bag and puts it up on the hood of the car to wait there while she's shopping. She goes in the mall. Meanwhile along comes this other woman-"

"Nice lookin' lady," Bennis said. "Named Marietta."

"-who sees the bag there, thinks hah! Fine merchandise unattended, and takes it. Then this woman Marietta with the Bloomie's bag goes into the mall. She's a shoplifter. She's truckin' through the jewelry department at Houston's lookin' for something worth boostin', sees a pearl necklace some clerk didn't put back, picks it up, opens the Bloomie's bag, drops the necklace in, sees the cat, screams like a train whistle, and falls down in a dead faint. The store manager or some such honcho runs over, tries to

revive her, slaps her face, but she sits up once, glances at the bag and falls over again in a dead faint, so they call the paramedics. The EMTs arrive, chuck her onto a gurney, put her Bloomie's bag between her feet, which is SOP with personal belongings, and whisk her out to the ambulance."

"Meanwhile," Bennis said, "the clerk at the jewelry counter's seen the pearls are missin'."

"Which is where we come in. By this time the woman's at the hospital, but by astute questioning of the store personnel, we put two and two together-"

"*Experience* and astute questioning, Suze my man," Bennis said. Bennis was thirty-five. Suze was twenty-six.

"-we figure out where the pearls are. So we roll on over to the hospital with lights and siren. Woman's in the emergency room and we just mosey on in and ask if we can dump out the bag. Orderly doesn't know enough to say no-"

"Sometimes you luck out," said Bennis.

"-so we turn the bag upside down and out flops the pearls plus the dead cat. At which point the *orderly* faints."

"We were kinda surprised ourselves," Bennis said. "Didn't faint, though."

"Too tough," said Figueroa.

"Macho," said Bennis.

"Spent the next two hours in the district on the paper," Figueroa said.

"Odd, you know, when a supposed victim turns into a perp. Kinda felt sorry for her."

Figueroa said, "Not me, Bennis. She's a crook."

Mileski said, "Don't suppose they managed to revive the cat?"

Sergeant Touhy strode in and the third watch crew faded into seats. Sergeant Touhy said "Bennis? Figueroa? We've had a complaint from the hospital. Seems they don't like cat guts on their gurneys."

Bennis started to say, "We didn't know about the cat-" but Figueroa kicked him and muttered, "Probable cause!" so he shut up. "But we got our offender, Sarge," Suze Figueroa said.

"Yeah," Bennis said. "Boosts our solved record."

Touhy ignored them. "Next time, look in the bag first. Now let's read some crimes." (341-43)

In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, Brunvand discusses the telling of this contemporary legend as dealing with the problem of how to dispose of a dead pet especially for those who live in the city or in an apartment:

Obviously, you cannot flush a cat's body down the toilet, and for an apartment dweller, burying the corpse in the yard is usually out of the question. This is a real and a practical problem, and folklore has come to the rescue with the amazingly long-lived and fluid legend of the late feline companion neatly wrapped for delivery elsewhere. Along the way it is lost or stolen. (103)

In the version D'Amato uses, the dead cat was run over by a car. This version is

similar to the one Brunvand described in 1981:

> Current oral versions of "The Dead Cat in the Package" tend to drop the apartment-dweller's-dilemma theme, substituting the idea that the cat was accidentally run over by a car, and the body was retrieved by the remorseful driver. The theft–directly from the car–takes place at a shopping center rather than a downtown store, but then everything lately is moving to the suburbs." (107-8)

That this 1981 oral version is the version used in the 1991 text shows the power and reach of the contemporary legend. Not only is the contemporary legend still active, but in each version the problem of how to get rid of the dead cat is solved and the thief is punished.

Interestingly, D'Amato has not only placed "The Dead Cat in the Package" contemporary legend at the beginning of the story but also structured it so that the characters' telling of the story mirrors the tale-telling performance in oral tradition. This mirroring is complete with comments and interjections from the receivers of the tale. The difference is that the tale is being told as a personal experience narrative, which is something supposedly experienced first hand by the tellers, as opposed to a contemporary legend which is retold as happened to someone else.

As discussed in the previous chapter, even though the contemporary legend is presented as a personal experience narrative, it does not change the fact that it is a contemporary legend. The telling of the contemporary legend as a personal experience narrative in this story is important because of the setting in which the story is told, the believability that it creates and what it reveals about the character of the teller. In "The

Contexts of the Contemporary Legend: 'The Vanishing Hitchhiker' and 'Gravity Hill,'" folklorist Mark Glazer determined the natural contexts of the contemporary legend in Southern Texas. He concluded that in this area "contemporary legend telling tends to occur in unstructured contexts quite distinct from the traditional tale-telling gatherings conducive to the narration of folktales". However, he also observed that while women seem to prefer "tale-telling in informal contexts" men, on the other hand, "exchange stories in 'Work or School' situations more often than in other contexts" (82). Most interestingly, he noted that "telling a legend as a 'Personal Experience Narrative' seems to be common among male storytellers" (83).

Recognizing Glazer's observations on tale telling it is clear that it is appropriate for this contemporary legend to be told as a personal experience narrative in this situation. The contemporary legend is an important part of this short story. It is important for how it facilitates revelations about the main character. Susannah is a lone female in a work environment that is still filled mainly by men and thus traditionally male in practice. As such, as suggested by Glazer's work, any tale telling is more likely to be as a personal experience narrative. In addition, the tale itself is presented as an actual event that happened in the story. It is not identified as a contemporary legend or any other narrative form. However, whether this contemporary legend is realized for what it is or not, is not as important as how it is told and what the delivery of the contemporary legend reveals about Susannah's character. Finally, the parallel actions between the contemporary legend and the story within which it is enclosed are set up to be contrasted. This contrast, intertextuality, reveals more about the personal characteristics of the main character, Officer Susannah Figueroa. As Susannah's character is one that appears in many of

D'Amato's short stories, these revelations about her character are important if she and her cronies are to appear as more than cardboard characters and if their situations are to appear realistic. The use of a contemporary legend presented through a personal experience narrative facilitates this revelation of character because the manner (style), context and situation of the telling are as important as the contemporary legend itself in allowing Susannah's true character to emerge.

In this story, the telling of the contemporary legend illustrates the dynamics of the relationship between Susannah Figueroa, her partner Norm Bennis, and the other officers. Obviously Susannah and Bennis have an amiable working relationship. Susannah is intent on telling the others what she and her partner had experienced that day. Nonetheless, she never once indicates feelings of impatience or anger at her partner's many sidebars of interjected information. Instead she accepts the sidebars, acknowledges what he has to say and then continues telling the story. Indeed, through the knowledge that she and her partner share, her recognition of the import of whatever additional information he proffers only adds to the authenticity of the tale. Moreover, her willingness to let him interrupt demonstrates the respect she accords him as her partner and her trust that his interjections won't derail the story. This respect and trust is vital for a working relationship where her life may well depend on her partner.

Most importantly, however, is how Susannah's character is revealed throughout. Her unswerving telling of the contemporary legend, she maintains the thread of the story no matter how many interruptions there are by the listeners and her co-teller, and her attitude towards the perp/victim illustrate that Susannah is a focused individual who takes her role as an officer very seriously. Moreover, that Susannah is able to maintain the

thread of the contemporary legend through her presentation of it as a personal experience narrative clearly illustrates the strength of her character, as both forms can be easily hijacked by the listeners as they recognize a similarity between the tale being told and something that they have heard themselves. We also see that her view of right and wrong is clear cut. Unlike one of the other officers, she has no sympathy for the perp/victim. That the perp became a victim is irrelevant, as the woman is a crook. Clearly, for Susannah, wrong is wrong.

For the rest of the short story to have an impact, what is revealed about Susannah's character through the performance of this contemporary legend is important. The contemporary legend acts as a referent, a base line if you will, from which we can compare her behaviour later in the story with her behaviour and attitude at the beginning of the story. It is also the base to which we can add more information about Susannah as the story progresses.

Through the tale-telling we know Susannah is serious. From the way she and her partner solved the "Dead Cat in the Package" crime, we know she is good at her job. Her reactions to the perpetrator in the contemporary legend show she has a clear idea of right and wrong. Her tolerance of her partner's interjections illustrates that she and her partner respect each other's strengths and work well together. Later in the story, after the tale is complete and she and her partner are on the street again, we learn that she likes to be prepared for any eventuality so she carries a lot of ammunition. We also get more evidence of how highly developed her sense of right and wrong is: she wants to "brace," in other words, challenge, a man they know is a known felon not because he has broken a law but because she knows he will (345). In short, through the tale-telling and her later

actions we know Officer Susannah Figueroa is a tough, solid, serious cop with no sympathy for those that break the law.

But is this all there really is to Susannah Figueroa? The last incident in the story reveals something more. Figueroa and Bennis are called to investigate a shoplifting at a music store. Two teenagers had run out of the store as the alarm went off, knocking down an old man who was exiting the store between them. Susannah checks on the old man while her partner deals with the store owner. The music store specializes in dance music through the decades. Susannah notices that the window display showcases dance music from the late 1800s to the present. In talking with the old man, Susannah learns that he is 87 and lives in a nearby residence that is a home for the indigent elderly. She knows this home is functional but spartan. She learns that his wife is dead and that the two of them used to dance. She learns that the music played to entertain the people in the home is music from the forties and fifties. This music is from a time when the old man was already in his late forties himself. Through her conversation with him, by looking at the store display and noticing that the gap from where the CD was stolen is the section dealing with dance music from the early 1900s, Susannah figures out that the old man, not the teenagers, was responsible for stealing the CD.

The Susannah we were introduced to through the telling of the contemporary legend would have had no sympathy for the old man. In both stories the perp became a victim. However, unlike her attitude in the first story, in this case Susannah not only lets the man go free, but she also buys the CD he stole from the store manager. That she let the man go free is not so surprising for, as she says to her partner "Hey, Bennis, you figure he's gonna go on to a life of crime? He's eighty-seven years old" (351). What is

surprising to us and to her partner is that she bought the CD for the old man. Her rationale for doing so was that she saved them from two hours of paperwork. However, Bennis's response shows us that this rationale and her actions are unusual when he tells her that he is going to buy her a cup of coffee because he figures "it'll take you [Susannah] that long to get over bein' human" (352). From her partner's remarks and from what we know about Susannah from the tale she told at the beginning of the story, it is clear that Susannah seldom, if at all, has ever shown compassion for a perp/victim on the job before. Obviously, in this case, the contemporary legend was important for what it revealed about the main character and how it helped to set up, through parallel structure, the surprise we feel at Susannah's actions at the end of the story.

The surprise felt at the end of the story is where the debate comes in. In the story there is a limited discussion between the characters around the concept of guilt and innocence and when a crime is a crime. In response to this story, this discussion could be continued by the reader. Interstitially it challenges the order of punishment: you commit a crime; therefore, you should be punished. This is an order that is upheld by Susannah when the guilty perp in the first case is arrested and it is understood will be punished by being removed to jail for stealing. However, this acceptance is challenged in the second crime when another perp is not punished for the same crime. He steals, as did the first perp, but in his case Susannah not only does not punish him she pays for what he stole so that the store owner will not punish him either. Ultimately, this perp is rewarded. This is a challenge to the concept of what is right and wrong. The discussion centers around why, concepts of humanity, and the shades of grey that allow what we think of as fundamental truths such as stealing is wrong and should be punished, to be questioned.

As well as revealing something about the characters involved in the story, when used in literature the contemporary legend often acts as a form of *mise en abyme*, a mirror of the contemporary world. Dällenbach defines a *mise en abyme* as any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or specious (or paradoxical) duplication (36) and recognizes it as a specific device. In discussing the fictional *mise en abyme* Dällenbach states:

> The fictional *mise en abyme*, like the synecdoche, can be divided into two groups: the particularizing (miniature models), which concentrate and limit the meaning of the fiction; and the generalizing (transpositions), which give the context a semantic expansion beyond that which the context alone could provide. Compensating for what they lack in textual extent by their power to invest meaning, such transpositions present a paradox: although they are microcosms of the fiction, they superimpose themselves semantically on the macrocosm that contains them, overflow it and end up engulfing it, in a way, within themselves. (59)

Dällenbach further identifies three sorts of *mise en abyme*. He posits that the first kind, "(prospective) reflects the story to come; the second (retrospective) reflects the story already completed; and the third (retro-prospective) reflects the story by revealing events both before and after its point of insertion in the narrative" (60). According to Dällenbach most *mise en abyme* occur in the middle of the narrative (retro-prospective).

As a mirror of the contemporary world, contemporary legends used in a text either subvert, challenge, or support the status quo through their promulgation of hegemonic common sense. Because they reflect the beliefs, fears and concerns of their transmitters,

they reflect what is happening in the time of their cultural production and in regards to the plot of the story in which they are used and allow voice for debate around those same issues/themes.

Dällenbach looks at ways in which the *mise en abyme* works to reflect what is happening in the physical plot and links this to reception. In his article "Reflexivity and Reading," he elaborates on how the *mise en abyme* aids reception. He says that the *mise en abyme* is "an antonymous structure par excellence, in defining itself from the outset as an equivalent of the narrative, *mise en abyme*, the most powerful textual signal and aid to readability, can (1) use artifice to repragmatize the text, (2) seal directly or indirectly the text's vanishing points, (3) condense the text in order to provide a surview, and (4) render the text more intelligible by making use of redundancy and an integrated metalanguage" (440). Following his manner of definition and description, the *mise en abyme* can thus also be seen to reflect the emotional, mental or spiritual happenings in the text. In short, as well as reflecting the story itself, the *mise en abyme* can also reflect or explain a change that is about to occur within a character. This type of reflection is achieved when the *mise en abyme* used is a contemporary legend. Moreover, for the reader who recognizes the contemporary legend, the contemporary legend helps to fill in the gaps through the other language it brings to the text.

Within a text, contemporary legends have a number of roles. In a minor fashion contemporary legends serve as a communicative device by offering access to known stories, thus developing relationships or connections in the text through a vehicle familiar to the reader. Though the contemporary legend is itself of minor importance to the text as a whole and may or may not act as a mirror within the text, it can help the connection

between the speakers in the text develop, reflect the relationship between the speakers and/or develop the relationship between the speakers and the situation.

Contemporary legends do not just appear embedded in a text. As I discuss later, they may appear as subplots, the plot, an aside, a throwaway line for the purpose of transition or for a moment of humour. But, when they are embedded in the text, when they do appear as a part of the plot or the sub-plot, they can play a vital role in the text. They do this when they can serve as the key incident in the action. In this instance their use is similar to Dällenbach's retro-prospective use of the *mise en abyme,* but applied to character development. Without the contemporary legend in the story, the conclusion would not be clear. The contemporary legend does this by acting as a plot or character device indicating a change or shift in narrative direction or character development. The contemporary legend reflects or explains either the development in the character that leads to a change or the development in the plot that leads to a change.

Most importantly, when the contemporary legend is used as a basis for the whole text, when it is used as the matrix upon which everything else is built, it is clear that the contemporary legend has provided the basic structure of the full story. It is, of course, fleshed out with details, character development and other elements of literature; nonetheless, the basic plot of the text is recognizable as a contemporary legend. In several ways the contemporary legend and the larger fiction act as mirrors reflecting each other.

In this instance we can also see that contemporary legend use may fulfill Dällenbach's first identified role of the *mise en abyme,* as the reader who has knowledge

of the contemporary legend will know the direction of the narrative. As Dällenbach points out,

> The fiction's room for maneuver is limited to reflecting back on this previous reflection, catalyzing it, adhering to the programme announced by it and spelling out its contents. . . . But this precursor's *revelatory* and *matricial* function necessarily entails other functions; most importantly, by revealing a condensed version of the fiction, the reflexion combines isolated episodes and elements which, by being perceived almost simultaneously early on in the book, cannot help influencing how the book will be interpreted. Made aware that what s/he perceives synthetically will occur over a longer scale, the reader knows what lies ahead and can immediately regulate the itinerary of his/her reading, recognize important parts as s/he goes through, and determine his/her rate of progress. (61)

This is how the contemporary legend functions in the story "Stop, Thief." Because of what the reader learns about Susannah through her retelling of what is, in effect, the contemporary legend "The Dead Cat in the Package," the reader proceeds with a perception of Susannah. This perception is reinforced through other happenings in the story. Moreover, the reader's reliance on this perception is such that when Susannah acts out of character, it is immediately noticed and recognized as important for what this departure from the norm reveals about Susannah's character.

The idea of the contemporary legend being a mirror in the text combines nicely with Gramsci's idea of consensual control. Contemporary legends, as we have identified, reflect and validate the concerns of the society of their time. Obviously literature often

acts as a mirror of our society. The characters in a story often mirror the people in society that we are familiar with; the plots in a text mirror episodes or dreams from our own lives; even the literary figures of speech serve to make the text in some way a mirror of the society in which we live. Without this sense of familiarity, the reader's willing suspension of disbelief and their ability to identify with who is in the text and what is happening are not possible.

Whatever divisions one wishes to create within literature, the mirroring of society crosses all boundaries. From Alexander Pope's use of satire to reflect what was wrong with his times' treatment of women to the current sub-genres of popular fiction, the mirror is alive in the text. For example, horror fiction mirrors our fear of the unknown in its characters and situations and allows us to work through them vicariously or to see them for the hollow fears that they are. The Western reflects the corruptness of our society in its treatment of the east and projects hope for our society in its creation of the west. Detective fiction or literary crime often reflects our social values and our commitments to and resentments against the principles of morality and order. Indeed, even Science Fiction has to obey the science in its name. As Malmgren notes "the general rule for SF is, as another SF author puts it, 'You cannot contravene a known and accepted principle of science unless you have a logical explanation based on other known and accepted principles'" (9-10). Without this rule it would be impossible to relate to the story or the characters in the text. Adhering to the science of our world and combining it with fiction Science Fiction takes what is happening in our time and projects our possible futures if we do not change our course of action.

Clearly, literature itself acts as a mirror of our world. Thus when the contemporary legend is used in a text it often reflects a theme in the text. As such, the themes of the contemporary legend, what they comment on, the questions they posit, the debate they stir up, all reflect the concerns of the characters in the text and through this the theme of the text. Moreover, the contemporary legend comments on or challenges the actions, themes, fears, concerns, attitudes, and the beliefs of the characters involved in the performance of the contemporary legend in the fiction. They model or challenge accepted behaviour, just as they do when used outside of a text.

Contemporary legends are not texts understood and passed on by an elite few. Rather, we all relate contemporary legends; we listen to them; we read accounts of contemporary legends reported as news in the media. In 1999 a popular show called *Freaky Stories* that revolved around the telling of contemporary legends aired on YTV. In 2005 a cartoon called *Martin's Mysteries* aired on cable in which a number of the mysteries to be solved are what would be recognized as contemporary legends.

Many lay persons do not care about academia's exploration of contemporary legends; they do not worry about those characteristics that make a contemporary legend a contemporary legend; they may not even call what they are listening to or telling a contemporary legend as they may only be aware of it as a story with which they are familiar. What is important is that the tellers of the contemporary legend are aware of it as a story or a reality that they either do or do not believe, but that, for some reason, they pass on. The power of contemporary legends is that they, as previously stated, "reflect, articulate, and validate values, attitudes, fears and anxieties of modern society that may or

may not be easily or readily expressed otherwise."[13] In the contemporary legends we have examined thus far the contemporary legends have articulated fears, whether about the fear of corpses as seen in the "Dead Cat in the Package;" the fear of foreign foods and values whether the value of being prepared as see in "The Kentucky Fried Rat, " the value of tradition as will be seen in "The Accidental Cannibal." Contemporary legends are a part of our culture and thus accessible to all. This accessibility is the common thread of contemporary legends as we all tell them, knowingly or unknowingly, or hear them. It is this accessibility combined with their popularity and prevalence in our society that makes them so valuable.

Moreover, if we accept the idea that contemporary legends reflect the concerns of their time and act as a form of consensual control through the spreading of common sense, we must acknowledge that the examination of the contemporary legend is of added importance for what it reveals to us about the culture of its telling. Thus, as mentioned, the contemporary legend is more than just a random story in a larger text. It is chosen, consciously or unconsciously, for how its theme fits within the larger narrative.

In life and in literature contemporary legends are accessible, popular and familiar to all of us and because of this they hold a power other narrative forms do not. In life and in literature contemporary legends speak for, of, and about us. In life and in literature their use has a function and a meaning. In the following chapters I will explore the roles of contemporary legends in literature and how they affect the larger literature narrative of which they are a part.

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13 Gail de Vos, *Tales, Rumors, and Gossip: Exploring Contemporary Folk Literature in Grades 7-12*, (Englewood: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 1996) 11.

Chapter Four

Popular Fiction and the Contemporary Legend's Role as a Communicative Device within It

Contemporary legends are often found embedded within popular literature. Popular literature, also called formula fiction, is fiction that is widely read. Mass produced it follows a highly predictable structure. This predictable structure, or formulae, allows the reader to move through the text comfortably. In *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Cawelti defines the concept of formula as "a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype" (7).

In the main, formula stories are read for escape and entertainment. Thus, in the past the worth of this fiction was often questioned. As seen in the previous chapter, Gramsci, himself in looking at popular literature asked

> why are these books always the most read and frequently published? What needs do they satisfy, and what aspirations do they fulfill? What emotions and attitudes emerge in this squalid literature, to have such a wide appeal? (*Letters from Prison* 145).

Gramsci answered his own question when he realized that popular literature was important for what it revealed about the needs and aspirations of its readers and the connection between the masses and the dominant hegemony, a connection that is maintained, in part, by popular culture. In effect, Gramsci is suggesting that because of this connection, all things popular contribute to what John G. Cawelti many years later

identified as cultural stability. Cawelti explains the connection of formula to cultural stability:

> one basic cultural impetus of formulaic literature is toward the maintenance of conventional patterns of imaginative expression. Indeed, the very fact that a formula is often a repeated narrative or dramatic pattern implies the function of cultural stability. Formulaic evolution and change are one process by which new interests and values can be assimilated into conventional imaginative structures. This process is probably of particular importance in a discontinuous, pluralistic culture like those of modern industrial societies.(35)

In what Gramsci might have seen as a more developed answer to his own query, Cawelti in commenting on the relationship between formula stories and culture suggests "four interrelated hypothesis about the dialectic between formulaic literature and the culture that produces and enjoys it" (35).

Cawelti's hypothesis can all be seen in some way to be similar to Gramsci's idea of the role of common sense. Cawelti suggests formula stories "often affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes" (35). He continues on to say that,

> by confirming existing definitions of the world, literary formulas help to maintain a culture's ongoing consensus about the nature of reality and morality. We assume, therefore, that one aspect of the structure of a formula is this process of confirming some strongly held conventional view. (35)

This "strongly conventional view" is another way of expressing Gramsci's idea of common sense. Moreover, Cawelti suggests

> formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of popular groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values. The action of a formula story will tend to move from an expression of tension of this sort to a harmonization of these conflicts. (35)

This hypothesis can be seen to be similar to the idea of language as a social constructor and Gramsci's discussion of how different groups within a society negotiate within it to create this common sense. In this case, the formula story can be seen as a part of the negotiation.

In addition, similar to my contention that contemporary legends both challenge and/or affirm the existing common sense, Cawelti suggests "formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary" (35) and finally Cawelti hypothesizes that "literary formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs . . .literary formulas ease the transition between the old and new ways of expressing things and they contribute to cultural continuity" (36). Clearly, formulae fiction and the culture that produces and consumes it are an integral part of the connection between the masses and the dominant hegemony.

Noting that one of the most important characteristics of formulaic literature is the identification we make with the protagonist, Cawelti explains:

> Because of its escapist thrust, formulaic literature creates a very different sort of identification between audience and protagonists. Its purpose is not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to

> take me out of myself by confirming an idealized self-image. Thus, the protagonists of formulaic literature are typically better or more fortunate in some ways than ourselves. They are the heroes who have the strength and courage to overcome great dangers, lovers who find perfectly suited partners, inquirers of exceptional brilliance who discover hidden truths, or good, sympathetic people whose difficulties are resolved by some superior figure. The art of formulaic character creation requires the establishment of some direct bond between us and a superior figure while undercutting or eliminating any aspects of the story that threaten our ability to share enjoyably in the triumphs or narrow escapes of the protagonist. Several means have been developed for accomplishing this purpose. By giving narrative emphasis to a constant flow of action, the writer avoids the necessity of exploring character with any degree of complexity. Second, the use of stereotyped characters reflecting the audience's conventional views of life and society also aids the purpose of escapism. Formulaic literature is generally characterized by a simple and emotionally charged style that encourages immediate involvement in a character's actions without much sense of complex irony or psychological subtlety." (18-19)

Why are contemporary legends often found embedded within this popular fiction? Contemporary legends work well within this type of fiction because of the formulaic nature of the fiction. Both are popular narratives. The use of stereotyped characters, the need to create a direct bond between the reader and the protagonist, and the "simple and emotionally charged style that encourages immediate involvement in a character's actions without much sense of complex irony or psychological subtlety" all reflect elements of

what makes a contemporary legend effective in daily life. The characters are stereotypical in that they are the reader/listener; the reader/listener's familiarity with the narrative type, if not the narrative itself, allows the creation of a direct bond, and the style of delivery is often simple without any complexity or psychological subtlety. Indeed, the problem is immediately evident, the action or resolution is fast. Clearly then, the contemporary legend can easily be adapted for use within the larger popular fiction.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, contemporary legends speak for, of and about us. Thus it is fair to suppose that when used in a text, the contemporary legend is of import. Yet, sometimes the contemporary legend has no significance beyond being noted by the reader who is familiar with the contemporary legend itself or the contemporary legends in general. Nonetheless, for the most part, even when the contemporary legend itself appears to be of minor value or significance to the text, as a part it still fulfills a role. One such role is to act as a communicative device within literature. Due to the familiarity that contemporary legends hold, the inclusion of or the allusion to the contemporary legend in a text allows a deeper interpretation of the text. As such, 1) the contemporary legend may reflect, reinforce or foreshadow the theme or focus of the text, 2) may help illustrate the connection or relationship between the characters in the text, 3) may reveal the character traits of one of the characters in the text or 4) be used as an aside in which case it adds a moment of entertainment to the text but adds nothing to the development of plot or character. In this chapter I will illustrate how the contemporary legend functions as a communicative device through reference to examples in specific popular fiction texts.

Dave Klein's *Blind Side* and "The Double Theft"

As a communicative device, the contemporary legend may fulfill more than one function simultaneously. In Dave Klein's 1980 novel *Blind Side* the contemporary legend used can be seen to reflect, reinforce and foreshadow one the themes in the text *and* can also be seen to show the relationship between the characters in the text. *Blind Side* revolves around the life of the protagonist, Butch Lewis, a sports reporter for a New York newspaper. The novel focuses on three stories. The primary story is that a series of unsolved murders that Butch links to a Panther player; the second is of the improvement in Butch and his wife Lisa's relationship and their finances as Lisa is hired to work in television. The third is the quest of Butch's best friend since childhood, Buddy Aaron, now a New York police detective, to arrest and convict a man known to be a major drug dealer. None of the stories appear to be connected. Yet, they are. In football, a game around which most of the story revolves, a blindside occurs when a player is hit unexpectedly by a member of the opposing team. In the novel, the blindside occurs when the three stories intersect.

The telling of the contemporary legend occurs midway through the story when Butch, Buddy and their wives are out for dinner and a movie. It is not a usual dinner, however, as three of the characters are distracted by what is happening in their lives. One of the couples is having relationship difficulties and one of the men is having a difficult time at work. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that only one member of their dinner party really wants to be there, the aim of Buddy Aaron, the person narrating the story, is to help with the facade that the dinner they are having is a regular dinner with four friends. He does this by telling the others about a case that occurred while he was on duty that day.

For him, and for his listeners, it is a factual story that actually happened during the teller's workday but one that he is presenting because of its entertainment value. He is attempting to lighten the dinner atmosphere. Presented in conversational discourse, the manner of its telling also mirrors/mimics the manner in which a contemporary legend would be passed in oral narrative. The contemporary legend Buddy tells is the contemporary legend "The Double Theft."[14] According to Brunvand's *Encyclopedia,* "The Double Theft" has been around since the early 1970s 123). Smith notes that in its original form it is usually associated with the theft of a handbag from a toilet stall in the largest store in town (1986, 57). However, recent variants have the theft involving an item such as a car. This latter version is the one that Buddy tells,

> Conversation which usually came easy for the four of them, was slightly strained. Butch and Buddy had the murders on their minds, and Lisa was aware of their distraction. Not Joanie. She wasn't sensitive enough to pick up the vibrations, and was acting normally. "Well, copper, what's new in the criminal world?" she said to Buddy. "Oh, hey, we got us a beauty today," he said, forcing a smile and then a half-laugh. "Guy up on Riverside Drive, some rich doctor. Two nights ago he parks his Mercedes on the street, where he always does, and in the morning it's gone. So, he calls us, reports it stolen. Fine. That night when he gets home, it's there.

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[14] For more on this contemporary legend see Brunvand's *Choking Doberman* (193-4); *Too Good to be True* (308-9); and *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (123); Gail de Vos. *Tales, Rumors and Gossip* (174-177); Paul Smith *The Book of Nastier Legends* (57).

> washed, waxed, full tank of gas, and a note on the seat. Somethin' like 'I don't know what came over me, I just took your car for a joyride. It's not scratched and I washed it and filled up the tank. I feel terrible and I hope you'll accept these tickets as an apology.' "Anyway, the guy opens the envelope and finds a pair of aisle seats for *Sweeney Todd.* He figures it's part of the great New York scene, you know, a new story to tell. So he takes his wife and they go to the show, and while they're gone their apartment gets cleaned out. Very smart burglars–they set up their own jobs."
>
> "Jesus, I'd have gone too," Butch said. "Guy with that kind of mind could take over the world if he tried." (198-99)

In this instance the contemporary legend is being told as, what Gail de Vos identifies as, a didactic tale (50). The contemporary legend provides a warning, a lesson, to the characters of Buddy, Butch, Lisa and Joanie and, by extension, to the reader about how not to become a victim. The contemporary legend as a narrative appears to be distinct from the text. After all it is not a story that involves any of the characters directly. Yet it is not separate from the text. The fact that the story is told by a major character makes the story important. We must ask, "Why this story?"

The answer is that in this text the contemporary legend, although minor to the story, enhances the text in two ways. First, Buddy's choice of stories shows the relationship between the couples. The conversation between the couples is identified as being "slightly strained." It is strained because the two men are thinking about the murders and Lisa is aware of their distraction. Nonetheless, they are having an evening

out, which is a rare occurrence and does not happen often enough to be treated casually. Thus, Buddy makes an effort to entertain the others by telling about an event that happened at his job. As a police officer, it is likely that many of the things that happen during his shift are unseemly. However, he finds and chooses to retell an event that is humorous as it provides a funny look at crime. Told for entertainment value the contemporary legend adds to one of the points of popular fiction: it is read for entertainment.

Second, the lesson of the story reflects one of the lessons of the text itself. The lesson taken from the contemporary legend by Buddy and Butch is a didactic tale. The theme of the novel centres around the uncertainties in life and the difficulty in anticipating the unexpected. This story is important for what it demonstrates about those uncertainties. In this case it presents a warning. This warning reflects the theme of the story which has to do with how we see those around us, as through the focus of the story it reminds the listener that bad guys can be smart and this intelligence can make bad guys dangerous. In other words, it teaches the listener that the appearance of crime can change and that what may look innocuous may not be. It gives the listener that jolt to keep him/her more alert to what the actual intent of someone who looks non-threatening might be. Ultimately, this jolt may prevent the reader from becoming a victim. Although it is humourous, it reinforces that there are no safe places or people. Unfortunately the doctor whose car is stolen learns this the hard way. Returning home from a wonderful evening courtesy of a gift, he and his wife are blindsided when they realize the apology was not sincere but rather part of an elaborate ruse to rob them. The world of the novel mirrors the social world of the reader.

Thus, the answer is clear. Why this contemporary legend? This contemporary legend is told because of what it reveals to us about the relationship between the characters in the novel. It is also told because of how it contributes to the text's meaning, for it enhances the intertextuality of the text while also, in retrospect, foreshadows what is going to happen in the novel as the contemporary legend itself contains a blindside, just as the novel does.

In addition, for the reader who recognizes the contemporary legend, the recognition of the contemporary legend creates a relationship between the written text being read by the reader and the social text being lived by the reader. For the other readers the familiarity of the narrative form, if not the identification of it, creates a relationship between the written text and the lived social text. This connection is an important part of formula fiction as identified by Cawelti.

With the telling of the contemporary legend the two worlds collide and intertwine, and the reader is given a glimpse of a frightening world filled with scams and death. This is a world that is and is not our world but that holds the potential to become our world if a blindside occurs. This potential is realized when the stories in the novel connect and Butch is blindsided.

The message of the text combined with the message of the contemporary legend when used in this text, gives critical readers the warning they need to avoid being blindsided in their own world. In the classic response to any bad news, those affected by it often wonder, "why me?" The doctor in the contemporary legend has no idea why his car was chosen. None of the victims in the novel have any idea why they were chosen. Neither Buddy nor Butch has any idea why the various victims are chosen, other than

their proximity to the temporary residence of the killer. Yet the reality, as the contemporary legend reminds us, is that there is no overreaching reason for why things happen; thus, you have to be prepared for the unexpected.

Even science, in the form of the police psychiatrist who is asked to provide a profile of the killer, is unable to help them identify who the killer could be. As Butch reflects talking with the doctor

> "All right," Butch said, "He's a nice guy. People like him. Shit, I might like him. He's intelligent, loose. I mean, that could be half the team, more. . . . What else do I look for? Is the guy black or white? Married? Single? A woman, maybe? What?" (153-5)

Indeed, all the doctor can tell him is, "I would guess he is single, if for no other reason that he has no one to explain his late-night outings to, but if all the victims were women, sexually assaulted, I'd be more sure of that. I think he'll get more violent the longer it continues. But the killings have been sexually indiscriminate, so far" (154). Basically, the characters in the story have no power because they are unable to penetrate the mind of the killer or to determine the motive for his actions.

Moreover, neither Butch, Buddy, nor the reader, has any idea that the drug dealer Buddy is pursuing will end up involved in the climax. It is the drug dealer Buddy is pursuing who is supplying drugs to the football players,; it is one of the football players who is the killer. In short, the whole text appears to meander from one story to another with no clear connection between the stories. Yet, apparently separate, the stories do come together.

Thus, although the structure of the novel would not be affected by the loss of the contemporary legend, the story is a part of the thematic direction of the novel. The contemporary legend reinforces the theme that nothing is as it seems and the idea of random punishment. There is no clear reason for things to happen. Lisa is murdered by the player/killer only because she is in the wrong place at the wrong time. The player/killer and the drug dealer are caught only because the player/killer is not home when the drug dealer delivers him his drugs. The result is that the police find the drugs sent to him by the dealer; this in turn proves that the player/killer has no alibi for the night of the murders. The proof that the player/killer was not home the night Lisa and her boss are killed helps to catch him.

Clearly the characters in the novel have all been blindsided because they did not see the connections. Just as in the contemporary legend, "The Double Theft," the conclusion and message of the story are that things are not what they seem; an action can have more than one reaction/result. All of the strands in the novel interconnect and intertwine with the others to bear out the conclusion. We do not exist in isolation from each other, and so to avoid being a victim we have to look closely at things rather than to accept them at face value like the characters in the contemporary legend did. If we do not do this then the perpetrators will prosper for as Butch articulated after hearing Buddy's story: "Guy with that kind of mind could take over the world if he tried."

Sue Grafton's *H is for Homicide,* "Cokelore," and "The Hook"

Just as the contemporary legend in *Blind Side* fulfilled two functions, so too does the contemporary legend in Sue Grafton's 1991 novel *"H" is for Homicide.* In this novel the contemporary legend acts as a communicative device within literature when it

illustrates the connection/relationship between the characters in the text and reveals the character traits of one of the characters in the text.

Sue Grafton is the creator of the Kinsey Millhone mystery series. In this series, the reader learns about the main character and her life as the series unfolds. Like a mystery, it is up to the reader to piece together the bits of information that are revealed in each book in order to create a full picture of the main character, Kinsey, and her life before the series began.

The books are written in the first person by Kinsey as a form of a report for an unidentified reader. In the first book we learn that she is twice divorced, her parents were killed in a car crash and she was raised by her aunt. We learn she likes small spaces, used to be a police officer but left the force to become a private detective, is now self-employed but, in exchange for office space, investigates various suspicious claims for an insurance company. We learn about her landlord, her likes and dislikes, but we don't learn a lot about her past. We don't know anything about her past marriages, why she was divorced or about her life with her aunt.

"H" is for Homicide is the eighth book in the series. In this book among what we learn are two very interesting pieces of information, one of which illustrates the connection between Kinsey and one of the other characters, and both of which reveal a bit of her past and help to explain her character. Interestingly, both glimpses into her past are enhanced through the inclusion of the metonym of a contemporary legend. Both of these bits of information are revealed as Kinsey remembers two episodes from her past and retells them. Neither is elaborated upon because the experience is assumed by the teller, Kinsey, to be a part of life with which the receiver, the reader, would be familiar. The

first personal reflection, including the metonym of the contemporary legend, is important for it illustrates the connection between Kinsey and another character in the text.

In this novel Kinsey is undercover trying to make a connection with Bibianna Diaz. Bibianna has filed insurance claims that Kinsey suspects are fraudulent. Kinsey has followed Bibianna into a bar and managed to develop a connection with her. As a result of the connection Bibianna, invites Kinsey to stick with her. Unfortunately, Bibianna's date is a man Kinsey knows. He is in a position to blow her cover and, being with Bibianna, this action is to be expected.

However, Kinsey's ties with this man, Jimmy Tate, go back to grade school. The strength of the grade school bond is such that he does not blow her cover but instead asks what she is doing and tries to encourage her to tell Bibianna. The bond that holds Jimmy from revealing Kinsey's intentions to Bibianna lies in their shared childhood escapades. As Kinsey recalls:

> He was twelve years old to my eleven when I met him, a bewildered boy who had no concept of self-control. More than once he came to my defense, beating the snot out of some bullying fifth-grade boy who'd tried pushing me around. I could still recall the exhilaration I felt every time we raced away from the schoolyard, giddy with freedom, knowing how short-lived our liberation would be. He introduced me to cigarettes, tried getting me drunk on aspirin and Coke, showed me the difference between boys and girls. I can still remember the mix of mirth and pity I felt when I realized all boys were afflicted with a doo-dad that looked like an ill-placed thumb stuck between their legs.(66)

Both Kinsey and Jimmy were rebels against authority. It is Jimmy who introduced Kinsey to those things that move us through childhood to adolescence and adulthood. As Kinsey says, "he introduced me to cigarettes, tried getting me drunk on aspirin and Coke, showed me the difference between boys and girls." It is the trust that developed between Kinsey and Jimmy through their shared escapades that allows Jimmy to know he can trust Kinsey not to hurt Bibianna and that he can count on Kinsey to try to help Bibianna, and which allows Kinsey to believe that he will not blow her cover.

Being able to get high on aspirin and Coke is a narrative form of a belief. Generally, a mixture of coke and aspirin is thought, among other things, to be an aphrodisiac, to prevent pregnancy, a way to get high and/or drunk. Contemporary legends involving the use of Coke are identified as Cokelore. In his *Encyclopedia of urban Legend*, Brunvand observes:

> Taken properly, Coke is thought by some people to be an effective contraceptive douche or a good hangover cure; however, Cokelore also claims that the misuse of Coke may lead to a Coke addiction, make you drunk, dissolve your teeth, or eat away at your tongue or stomach lining. Most Cokelore is transmitted in the form of simple statements with minimal anecdotal evidence, often attributed to a friend of a friend. (77-8)

The way this is retold by Kinsey mirrors how it is often told, as a statement with, as Brunvand commented, minimal anecdotal evidence.

Over time this contemporary legend has become so integrated into the minutiae of everyday life that it has become transformed into a fact that many accept as true. The fact

that Kinsey went through this process, as did many of the readers either personally, or through a friend of a friend, illustrates the connection between Kinsey and Jimmy, and, for some readers, develops the identification they feel with Kinsey. Without an illustration of their bond, Jimmy's decision to keep Kinsey's intentions from the woman he loves would not make any sense. However, when it is a bond that is developed by a shared experience through as tough a time as growing up, it is understood.

The second memory that Kinsey recalls involves her time at camp. This memory too contains a metonym. Part of the camp experience is the telling of horror stories around the campfire. These horror stories are generally contemporary legends. The power of these stories to scare comes from the kernels of truth or potential truth that the listeners believe they contain. Moreover, their power comes from their presentation and how they reflect the fears of the listeners. Generally, the shared camp experience is one that most people go through either in person or vicariously, and it is one we pass on as we retell the same stories. Kinsey was no exception to this experience. In this instance one of the stories told was the contemporary legend "The Hook."[15] As she recalls,

> My aunt had sent me off to summer camp when I was eight, claiming that

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[15] In the contemporary legend "The Hook" a boy and his girlfriend are parked in the countryside listening to music and kissing. The music programme is interrupted with a news bulletin. An inmate from a nearby facility has escaped. He is considered dangerous and can be identified by the hook he has in place of a hand. The girl is nervous and insists upon going back home over her boyfriend's protests. Angry, the boy leaves the parking area quickly. When he arrives at the girl's home, he gets out so that he can open the car door for the girl. In the handle of the door is a hook.

Examination of Bennett and Smith (1993) and Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* indicate that the story is well-known and together they list a number of examples. Folklorist Bill Ellis also discusses "The Hook" in his article, "When is a Legend a Legend? An Essay in Legend Morphology."

> it would be good for me to "get away." I see now maybe she was the one who needed the relief. She told me I'd have a wonderful time and meet lots of girls my own age. She said we'd swim and ride horses and go on nature walks and sing songs around the campfire at night.
>
> In dizzying detail, memories passed across my mental screen. It was true about the girls and all the activities. What was also true was that after half a day, I didn't want to be there . . . .The first night around the campfire, after we sang "Kumbayah" about six times, they told me about this poor girl camper who had drowned two years before, and one who'd had an allergic reaction to a bee sting and nearly died, and another who broke her arm falling out of a tree. Also one of the girl counselors had been parked with her boyfriend necking when the radio announcer told about this escaped raving maniac, and after they rolled up the car window and drove away quick, there was his *hook* right in the window. That night I cried myself to sleep . . . . The next day I went home. (241)

It is clear that for Kinsey this camp experience, including its ritual of telling stories, is traumatic. Her failure to negotiate the contemporary legend "The Hook" and the other things she is told in camp demonstrates her inability to become part of the group. Her inability to bond with the other children and her tendency to take too literally the things that they pass on as truth or try to scare her with, illustrates that she does not fit in; she is out of step. She does not get past this rite of passage. Instead, homesick with her homesickness exacerbated by the fact that she does not fit in, she retreats from it, leaves camp and goes home.

Although minor in relation to other events in the text, these two contemporary legend metonyms are important for what they do to explain Jimmy's actions and to help us to realize that Kinsey's character as a loner is one that has been a part of her since childhood and has not changed in spite of the fact that she now recognizes the contemporary legend. In effect, Kinsey is in adulthood as she was in childhood, an outsider.

Thus, it is clear that, while they are not pivotal to the text themselves, both metonyms help to explain Kinsey's character. As such, they are important to the reader's understanding of Kinsey, as revealed throughout the series, overall. Kinsey is a loner and as such she is out of step with the rest of society. Perhaps befitting her role as a private detective, she is more comfortable peering into the lives around her than becoming a part of them. In true private detective fashion her role is that of an observer. By its nature Kinsey's job has her watching from the outside, but at no time does she go home and become a part of what she watches.

Gail Bowen's *The Wandering Soul Murders* and "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs," "The Boyfriend's Death," and "The Hook."

A third way in which the contemporary legend acts as a communicative device within the text is when it shows the development of the relationship between the characters and/or a narrative event, and reveals character traits of one of the characters in the text. This use can be seen in the Joanna Kilbourn mystery series created by Canadian mystery writer Gail Bowen.

Joanne Kilbourn is a widow, a university professor, and, by happenstance, an amateur sleuth of sorts. In each of the novels, Joanne becomes involved in investigating a

mystery only because she is personally connected to the mystery, or she is, in some way, connected to someone involved in the mystery. In the Bowen mysteries the use of a contemporary legend or the allusion to a contemporary legend serves to develop the connection between the characters in the text and the reader as well. Upon critical analysis, the contemporary legends reveal character traits about Joanne herself. Indeed, in these texts the contemporary legends serve as a part of the minutiae of everyday life. It is the acceptance of the contemporary legend as a part of everyday life that is so interesting for the way it informs the text.

In Bowen's 1992 novel *The Wandering Soul Murders,* Joanne's son, Andy, chooses to tell some stories to his mother and his sister while they are waiting for the Victoria Day fireworks to begin,

> "You're falling asleep, T.," Angus said.
>
> She started. "No, I'm not."
>
> "Just resting her eyes, Angus," I said. "Remember, that's what you used to say."
>
> "Right, Mum," he said. "Want me to tell you one of the stories I heard at Scout camp last year, T?"
>
> "Oh, yeah." she said.
>
> "Not too scary," I said. "I want to sleep tonight."
>
> So Angus told all the old stories: the baby sitter and the anonymous calls, the kids parked in lover's lane when the ghost of her first boyfriend comes and bangs on the roof of the car. And Taylor and I screamed and giggled and then somewhere around the lake a cottager put his tuba to his

lips and played "God Save the Queen," and the fireworks began. (44-45)

The stories that Andy has chosen to tell are contemporary legends. The contemporary legends Andy tells are "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs" and "The Boyfriend's Death" in combination with "The Hook." The former commonly involves a babysitter who receives a phone call while she is babysitting. A man with a scary voice asks her if she has checked the children or to check the children. A series of phone calls follow with each getting progressively scarier. When the babysitter calls the police they tell her to keep him on the line and they will trace the call. They do so and phone her back, telling her to get out of the house as the call is coming from inside the house. When the police check the house they find that the children have been murdered.[16] In "The Boyfriend's Death," a young couple are parked in the countryside. When they go to leave, the car won't start and so the boyfriend leaves to get help. While he is gone the girlfriend hears a lot of noises and curls on the seat all night, afraid to get out of the car. The next morning the police come and lead her from the car, telling her not to look back. She does and sees the body of her boyfriend hanging above the car. The sounds she heard were his feet or his fingernails tapping on the roof of the car.[17]

The telling of these contemporary legends is important for they represent a rite of passage for the character for whom the stories are told. Andy is telling stories primarily

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[16] For more on this legend see Brunvand's *Choking Doberman* (214-215); *Too Good to be True* (220-222); *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (53-57); *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (28-29).

[17] For more on this legend see Brunvand 's *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (5-10); *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (44-45); *Baby Train* (240); *Too Good to be True* (103-104)

for the ear of his younger sister, Taylor. The other people to whom he is telling the stories are understood to be familiar with them; hence the lack of necessity for the second listener, Joanne, to retell the stories for the implied listener, the reader. However, it is clear that Taylor has never heard the stories before and that Andy has just been initiated into these stories recently himself, "Want me to tell you one of the stories I heard at Scout camp last year, T?" Clearly, Andy was introduced to the stories at his own coming of age ritual: camp. Joanne's familiarity is evident when she sets the guidelines for what contemporary legends are to be told: "Not too scary," I said. "I want to sleep tonight."

What is important is that Andy is not retelling just any stories. He is retelling stories that he heard in one specific setting and that are appropriate only to be told in another specific setting. As well, on both occasions the timing of the stories and their presentation is important. In camp it is understood that he would have heard the stories at night, most likely around a campfire as the campers and the counselors would have tried to scare each other with bigger, better and more realistic horror stories.

The reader familiar with the contemporary legend understands the setting and the performance factors because going to camp, whether it be Scout camp, summer camp, camp with friends, is a rite of passage most children in our society experience themselves or, as mentioned earlier, vicariously through their friends or movies. Moreover, it is understood that the stories Andy is telling are meant to be shared at night, in the dark, preferably outside. In addition they are stories that are told at a specific time, such as the bonding moment he shared at camp with his friends or a delineated moment such as the evening of Victoria Day as they wait for the fireworks to erupt.

In either case, for the listeners both in and out of the text, it is understood that these are not just narratives to be told at just any time or in just any setting. For the reader familiar with contemporary legends, the connection between the story world and their social world is enhanced as this kind of contemporary legend is such an understood part of our culture that with just the reference to them the situation, medium and product involved is known. Indeed, for most of us, the familiarity of the tales as horror stories if not contemporary legends is thought to be understood i.e. "So Andy told all the old stories: the baby sitter and the anonymous calls, the kids parked in lover's lane when the ghost of her first boyfriend comes and bangs on the roof of the car."

Andy's act of telling the tales to his younger sister also acknowledges her place in the family hierarchy. She has been deemed old enough and mature enough to handle the stories. She is no longer a 'baby.' That Taylor is worthy of his gesture is revealed in how she responds to the stories "And Taylor and I screamed and giggled . . . ." (45). His telling also acknowledges that Taylor is mature enough to be initiated into the whole of the Victoria Day tradition "and then somewhere around the lake a cottager put his tuba to his lips and played "God Save the Queen," and the fireworks began" (45).

Moreover, Andy's telling of the tales to Taylor indicates his acceptance of her as his sister. Taylor is not Andy's sister by blood; nor is she his sister through marriage. Rather Taylor was the daughter of Joanne's friend Sally Love. Unfortunately, Sally was killed and as Joanne explains to a friend, "I don't think any of us are over it yet. Anyway, there was no one to take Taylor, so I did. It seems to be working out. The kids are really good with her, and I think Taylor's beginning to feel that we're her family" (11). The

passing of the stories from Andy to Taylor illustrates that her place in the family is secure; she is his sister.

Howard Engel's *The Suicide Murders* and "The $50 Porsche"

A fourth way in which the contemporary legend acts as a communicative device within literature is when the contemporary legend is used as an aside, in which case it adds a moment of lightness to the text but adds nothing to the development of plot or character. When popular fiction is read for escapism and entertainment, the moment of lightness adds to the latter. Moreover, in this case the contemporary legend helps to create a direct bond between the reader and the protagonist. An example of this use can be seen in Howard Engel's 1980 novel *The Suicide Murders* featuring detective Benny Cooperman.

Benny Cooperman is a Jewish private eye who lives in small town Grantham at the foot of the Niagara Escarpment. Cooperman's reports are, like Millhone's, written in the first person for the implied reader. Unlike Millhone, Cooperman has a family with whom he has a relationship of a sort. As well, unlike Millhone, Cooperman is both an observer and a participant in the life around him.

The first Cooperman book, *The Suicide Murders,* has the feel of the old hard boiled detective books written by Dashiel Hammet and Raymond Chandler, a feel that is reinforced with descriptions such as

> She was the sort of woman that made you wish you'd stayed in the shower for an extra minute or taken another three minutes shaving. I felt a little underdressed in my own office. She had what you could call a tailored look. Everything was so

understated it screamed. I could hear the echo bouncing off the bank across the street. (9)

However, from the beginning it is clear that Cooperman is not some tough gin swilling, gun carrying, rock jawed defender of justice. He is just a guy who is trying to make a living. He could be any one of his readers.

The ability of the reader to identify with or accept Cooperman is reinforced through the many little anecdotes and revelations about himself and his life that he shares. He does not appear to try to hide who he is. That Cooperman is a regular guy is part of his appeal. His presentation as a regular guy is reinforced through his self-deprecating wit, as we see when he describes himself tailing a suspect, "Chester kept to the sidewalk, maintained a steady pace–not too fast, although I'm out of shape and wheeze after sharpening a pencil . . . . " (17).

In *The Suicide Murders*, fifty-five pages into the text, Cooperman is mulling over some of his past cases. Wrestling with his tax forms, he is attempting to understand where the money has gone. During his attempt to organize his receipts, he recalls cases during his past year. What he recalls are not life and death situations or thrilling exotic adventures but rather mundane events. One case he recalls is where a client skipped out. This case is the contemporary legend called "The $50 Porsche." In this contemporary legend a husband's expensive car is sold cheaply by the abandoned wife in response to his request to sell his things and send him the money.[18]

I'd been playing around with the receipts from my three oil company

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[18] For more on this contemporary legend see Brunvand's *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (22-24), *Too Good to be True* (77-9).

> credit cards, wondering where all that oil had taken me and how much of it was for business and how much for pleasure. There was a trip to the Hamilton registry office to check the ownership in 1938 of a house on Barton Street, which in 1938 turned out to be a peach orchard. Meanwhile my client and his problem disappeared. There was the trip to Buffalo about that custom Porsche which a client's son had bought for two hundred dollars. My client, smelling dead fish, sent me to trace the ownership. In a rented room in Buffalo's tenderloin, I found the former owner. His estranged wife had done just what he had asked–sold his car and mailed him the proceeds. I couldn't find much pleasure on the written receipts. Funny how I get paid good money to fix other people's lives, but mine always looks like a garbage bag the cats have opened up. I've got a thing about tidying things up. I should make an appointment to see myself professionally one of these days.(63)

Although this is the only contemporary legend in the text, it still has a minor use. If the reader recognizes it, in combination with the further exposure of the minutiae that makes up Cooperman's life, s/he will realize s/he shares the same social world as Cooperman. Like the reader, he too has to organize things and file taxes. As well, like most readers, his professional life may be in order while his personal life is not: "Funny how I get paid good money to fix other people's lives, but mine looks like a garbage bag the cats have opened up. I've got a thing about tidying things up. I should make an appointment to see myself professionally one of these days." (63) As well, whether the reader recognizes the contemporary legend or not, it adds a moment of lightness to the

text, a chuckle, if you will, as it just operates as an amusing aside providing a small chuckle at the oddities of human nature.

As seen in the popular fiction novels discussed above, the role of a contemporary legend within a text may appear to be minor; nonetheless, its role still needs to be examined in relation to the text as a whole as only upon analysis can we determine its role. In Klein's *Blind Side* the contemporary legend foreshadowed the blindside the characters were to face. As well, it reinforced the theme of the text and illustrated the bond or connection between the characters in the text, in particular Buddy, Butch and their wives. In the Grafton mysteries, the metonyms of the contemporary legend revealed more about Kinsey's character allowing those readers of the series to garner information that allows a fuller picture of Kinsey to be formed. For those who may just read the individual book, the metonyms allow the reader a fuller picture of Kinsey, to create a direct bond with her and, moreover, within the text, the metonyms allow the reader to accept the behaviour of one of the main characters that if not understood would otherwise have weakened the story. In the Bowen mysteries the contemporary legends, although not of obvious import to the murder plot, were important for what they revealed about the workings of the Kilbourne family and the character of Joanna. Without the contemporary legends, the means by which her son fully included his adopted sister into the family would not be recognized. In Engle's *Suicide Murders* the contemporary legend provided light relief that added to the entertainment value of the novel.

In short, although their place in the larger narratives was small, the contemporary legends in each of the above mentioned texts had a role and so added to the larger narrative in some way.

Chapter Five

The Contemporary Legend and the *Bildungsroman*

In chapter three I examined how the contemporary legend is used as a communicative device that, in popular fiction in particular, fulfills a number of roles. In this chapter I will discuss how the contemporary legend can be used as an important functional device within the text. It is important, in particular, when it is used as a functional device within the *Bildungsroman.*

In the *Bildungsroman* the change in the main characters that leads to their attaining selfhood is crucial This is where the importance of the contemporary legend comes into play. In effect, when we recognize the contemporary legend being used in the *Bildungsroman* and examine it in its place within the text, we will see that it acts as the indicator of the change to come. In short, the contemporary legend is important, for upon examination the contemporary legend in the *Bildungsroman* can be that which signifies, accounts for, or is seen to influence the main character's move towards attaining selfhood.

In particular, I shall examine how the contemporary legend acts as the key incident in the female *Bildungsroman* in Fannie Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and the male *Bildungsroman* in Anthony Burgess's *The Pianoplayer.* In each of these novels the contemporary legend plays a pivotal role. In *Fried Green Tomatoes,* the first contemporary legend used is of crucial importance for what it indicates about the main character's progress in attaining selfhood. Moreover the second contemporary legend used in this novel is important for the significance ascribed to it by one of its participants and how this shapes his life. In *The PianoPlayer,* it is only

when the male character is able to participate in an event which can be recognized a contemporary legend, when dealing with his mother-in-law's death, that he too completes the process from immaturity to maturity and adulthood.

The term, *Bildungsroman,* originally from German, translates as "novel of education" or "novel of formation" in English. As Maria K1arafilis writes in her article, "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of *Bildungsroman* in Sandra Cisnero's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *AnnieJohn,*" the *Bildungsroman* "is a novel that relates to the development of a male protagonist who matures through a process of acculturation and ultimately attains harmony with his surrounding society" (63). Although the *Bildungsroman* has traditionally involved the development of a male protagonist, this has changed; indeed, the definition of the *Bildungsroman* has evolved and the study of the *Bildungsroman* now includes the female *Bildungsroman*, and the *Bildungsroman* of other cultures. As Karafilis states:

> Discussion of this particular genre continues because what we really mean as critics, when we refuse to abandon the *Bildungsroman*, is that we are interested in how texts negotiate the development/education of their protagonists and how these protagonists negotiate themselves in larger social context, whether it be within the dominant Anglo-American culture, a local community, ethnic group, nation, or combination of the above. (63)

The *Bildungsroman* is a form that has proven to be dynamic, not static in nature. Its ability to evolve has also stretched the limits of the form. It is not just the gender and cultural focus of the *Bildungsroman* that has become inclusive. Now the time/age

delineation of childhood to adulthood is not so clear. In discussing the female *Bildungsroman* Lisa Ohm writes:

> Such personal growth, characteristic of the male Bildungsroman, should apply to the female Bildungsroman as well. Margo Kasdan writes: "...the novel of apprenticeship is admirably suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress toward the goal of full personhood, and the effort to restructure their lives and society according to their own vision of meaning and right living" (Able, Hirsch 267). Carol Gilligan, in her book, *In a Different Voice*, adds "Among the most pressing items on the agenda for research on adult development is the need to delineate *in women's own terms* the experience of their adult life" (173). Translated into literary terms, she is calling for a Bildungsroman. (4)

Ohm's view that Gilligan is calling for research in the area is supported through Gilligan's observation that the "failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation" (174). This assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation is argued as being incorrect; in fact, the truth is that there is no one mode of social experience. If there is no single social mode, then what is to say that the transition from childhood to adulthood includes a coming of age? In fact, a person's coming of age depends upon a number of extraneous factors associated with the person's gender, race, class and historical circumstances.

These factors are affected by the common sense of the time and thus influence when and how easily a person is able to, if ever, become self-actualized. As Karafilis points out

> Many women writers of color, both ethnic American and postcolonial, use the *Bildungsroman* precisely to "affirm and assert" the complex subjectivities of their characters and, by extension, themselves. Such writers have adopted and radically revised the classical *Bildungsroman* to suit their purposes of narrating the development of a personal identity and sense of self, and they have proven that doing so is not necessarily an impossible task even in fragmented and alienated contemporary societies. (62-63)

This ability to develop a personal identity and sense of self in a linear process from childhood to adulthood is one that is not easily attainable for most women. Gilligan argues that the reality of women's lives is such that it is often women in mid-life who "return to the unfinished business of adolescence" (170). Thus, for women, the narration of female *Bildungsroman* is not a linear process (separation from parent, initiation into adult world, return as adult to take rightful place); rather, it is a circular process (separation from family, redefinition as wife/mother, separation from children, redefinition) that eventually, one hopes, leads to the return to take one's rightful place.

Therefore, if we take into consideration the reality of women's lives and we take into consideration the change from a male focus to a gender inclusive focus of the *Bildungsroman,* we can argue that the *Bildungsroman* has the ability to change or be changed by its users along with changing ideologies. If we accept Gilligan's assertion that women in mid-life return to the unfinished business of adolescence and Karafilis's observation that the classical *Bildungsroman* has been revised to narrate the development

of women's personal identity and sense of self, then we must accept that the female *Bildungsroman* can be argued to be any novel the primary focus of which is to illustrate the development and growth of the main character, spiritually, morally, psychologically, or otherwise, into selfhood, no matter at what age that may occur or what rites of passage are involved.

Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

In Fannie Flagg's 1987 novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, we see how the acceptance of her time's common sense hinders the development of the main character, Evelyn, and how her repudiation of that common sense for the common sense of a newer age, frees her to move from the restrictions of the old common sense into selfhood as she is able to act more independently. As well, we see how common sense appears to be accepted but is actually subverted by Idgie and Ruth and George, their coloured helper, and his family. In both instances the strength of common sense as a form of conditioning supporting the status quo is clear.

Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at The Whistle Stop Cafe* is composed of a number of stories, all of which interweave in the text. The main story is that of Evelyn Couch, and her place in the world. The other stories, as told by Ninny Threadgoode to Evelyn, revolve around the adventures of Idgie Threadgoode, her friend Ruth, their helpers Big George and his family, in particular his son Artis, and the Whistle Stop Cafe run by Idgie and Ruth. Other parts of the stories not narrated by Ninny are revealed through excerpts from the *Weems Weekly*, out of Whistle Stop, Alabama; excerpts from *Slagtown News Flotsam and Jetsam*, out of Birmingham, Alabama; and excerpts out of the *Valdosta Courier* and the *Valdosta Gazette* out of Valdosta, Georgia. In addition,

stories about the life experiences of those related to Big George or connected to Idgie and Ruth are told through third-person narration.

One reason this mixed narrative structure is relevant is that it shows the power of the storyteller to effect change and the power of the tales told to make the listener/reader constantly redefine their perceptions of the characters and events involved. All of the stories told or retold by Ninny serve to guide Evelyn out of the darkness in which she finds herself and towards the light of the self-actualized adult. As in a contemporary legend, the stories are told in a fragmented manner; it is not guaranteed that the stories will follow in logical order, or that they will be completed within the allotted visiting time that Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode spend together. As mentioned in chapter two, in "Interpreting Urban Legends" Daniel R. Barnes comments on the fragmentary character of the contemporary legend. He argues that this fragmentary nature "may be as much the result of special demands of a formal literary nature as it is traceable to what Dégh locates as its "communal" functions[19] among members of a particular folkgroup."
and that as a result what is hidden and covert in the urban legend "is, put simply: much of the plot itself" (3). As a result Barnes points out that

> The climactic moment in the urban legend may be defined affectively as the moment when the listener discovers the presence of hidden plot functions, functions that have been deliberately suppressed and withheld for reasons which are ultimately formal and generic. (5)

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[19] See Linda Dégh "The Belief Legend in Modern Society: Form, Function, and Relationship to Other Genres," (62)

In effect, "legend plots, like mystery plots, are often elliptical, a feature which both these types share in turn with the modern short story as a literary art form" (5). In *Fried Green Tomatoes* the fragmentary nature of the narrative is similar to that of the contemporary legend, both hold back information deliberately to create an impact. In the contemporary legends used as functional devices, the ending has a twist, it is unexpected and demands, as Barnes notes, that the reader "redefine the roles and relationships among characters" (10). Consequently, contemporary legends fit in well with the *Bildungsroman* not because

> of the story they tell but the one they don't tell, and the demand they accordingly make upon us as tellers and listeners, forcing us as it were to assume the role of interpreters . . . We are drawn as well by their power as parables, even allegories, and to the corresponding need to reveal their "true" (and therefore of necessity for us, their "hidden") meanings for all to see. (11)

Thus, even though the stories are incomplete and the teller does not, as the reader realizes through the additional excerpts, have complete knowledge about what is told, what is told is powerful enough to act as a conduit for change in Evelyn's life. The fragmented nature of the narrative combined with the functional use of the contemporary legend forces the critical reader to be constantly redefining what it is s/he thinks s/he knows about the story and the characters involved. As such, if s/he does not want to lose the narrative s/he must stay an active rather than a passive reader and, as such, is more likely to note those moments that indicate when the main characters have moved towards attaining selfhood: a moment indicated through the characters' participation in an event which can also be recognized as a contemporary legend.

A second reason this mixed narrative structure is relevant is that it draws a picture of the time in which the stories occurred. The purpose of the additional information, supplied to the reader through the different performance venues, is to enhance the reader's awareness of what it was like in the time of the story; a picture is drawn illustrating the reality of each time and the common sense governing it. Through the stories and the reason for their telling, the reader also becomes aware of how Evelyn's identity crisis has been fueled by the common sense of her generation. The reader also becomes aware of how Idgie and Ruth lived as females whose role was proscribed by a male worldview and of how Big George and his family lived their lives and the difficulty they faced in negotiating adulthood as black people in a white world. The reader's awareness of how the time of the character's existence affects their actions in the stories allows the modern reader to accept a common sense/worldview that is nonsensical in modern times.

In particular, the acceptance of this common sense in turn paves the way for the awareness and understanding of Evelyn's dilemma; she is caught between two different societal times. The world in which she grew up has changed, but she has not changed with it. She is trapped between the past and the present. If Evelyn is to become fully developed as a person she must grow; however, to grow she must resolve her dilemma. The acceptance of the common sense/worldview portrayed through Ninny's stories, also enables the reader to understand and empathize with Idgie and Ruth and with George's decision on how to resolve a life-threatening predicament and how this has an impact upon his son Artis.

In addition to the contemporary legends, other folklore narratives and folklore appear throughout *Fried Green Tomatoes*. However, whereas the contemporary legend appears in both the world being revealed through Ninny's reminiscences about the past and in Evelyn's time, the other folklore forms, in particular the tall tale, only appear in the stories involving Idgie.

Nonetheless, as it is the stories surrounding Idgie and those told by Idgie that serve to effect the change in Evelyn, the role and place of this folklore is important. Certainly the tall tale narratives are integral to the text as they add to its voice and the authenticity of its characters. It is through these narratives that Idgie's character is revealed. The first narrative used is a tall tale told by Idgie to Smokey Phillips, a down on his luck hobo who is being given a meal at the Whistle Stop Cafe in exchange for work. However, Smokey, a drinker, has not had anything alcoholic to drink nor has he eaten for a few days; thus, he is feeling shaky and unable to eat without spilling his food. Asked by Idgie to take a walk outside, he is certain that he is being thrown out. Instead, Idgie has taken him outside in order to give him a drink to calm his nerves. While he is drinking she proceeds to tell him a tall tale:

> She walked him out behind the cafe, where there was a field.
>
> "You're a pretty nervous fella, aren't you?"
>
> "I'm sorry about spilling my food there ma'am, but to tell you the honest to God truth . . .well . . .I'll just head on, but thank you anyway . . . '
>
> Idgie reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a half-pint bottle of Old Joe Whiskey and handed it to him.
>
> He was a mighty appreciative man. He said, "God bless you for a saint

ma'am," and they sat down by a log out by the shed.

While Smokey was calming his nerves, she talked to him.

"See that big plot of empty land over there?"

He looked over. "Yes'm."

"Years ago, that used to be the most beautiful little lake in Whistle Stop in the summer. We'd swim in it and fish, and you could go for a boat ride if you wanted to." She shook her head sadly. "I sure do miss it. I sure do."

Smokey looked at the vacant land.

"What happened to it, did it dry up?"

She lit a cigarette for him. "Naw, it was worse than that. One November, a big flock of ducks, oh, about forty or more, landed right smack in the middle of that lake, and while they were sitting there, that afternoon, a fluke thing happened. The temperature dropped so fast that the whole lake froze over, as solid as a rock, in a matter of three seconds. One, two, three, just like that."

Smokey was amazed at the thought. "You don't mean it?"

"Yep."

"Well, I reckon it must have killed them ducks."

Idgie said, "Why, hell no. They just flew off and took the lake with 'em. That lake's somewhere in Georgia, to this very day . . ."

He turned and looked at her, and when he realized she was pulling his leg, his blue eyes crinkled up and he started laughing so hard that he started to

cough at the same time, and she had to bang him on the back.

He was still wiping his eyes when they went back in the cafe, where his dinner was waiting. When he sat down to eat, it was warm. Someone had kept it in the oven for him. (21-22)

In this instance Idgie uses the tall tale to help Smokey relax. It is used as a distraction so that he can drink his whiskey "to calm his nerves" without feeling ashamed. Moreover, it allows him to recognize the kind of people Idgie and Ruth are , as it is Ruth who keeps his plate warm while Idgie is telling him the tale..

Later Idgie tells another tale about a man who had a good paying job in the government. She says that the man was "making money for the government, and everything was going fine until one day he pulled the wrong lever and was crushed to death by seven hundred pounds of dimes" (31). Idgie tells the tale in response to her brother's question as to whether or not she is saving any money. In this instance the tale illustrates Idgie's view about money not being important in and of itself.

Throughout the text Idgie tells tales and jokes for a variety of reason: to put others at their ease, to illustrate her point of view, to calm people down and to devil others. In her world the ability to tell a good tall tale is an accepted pastime. There is even a club, "The Dill Pickle Club," to which she belongs. The purpose of this club is for tale telling, as Ninny says "all they did was drink whiskey and make up lies. They'd look you right in the eye and tell you a lie when the truth would have served them better. That was their fun, making up tales" (124).

Tall tales and jokes are not the only folklore forms in the text. Stories surrounding Whistle Stop and its inhabitants include the retelling of various folk beliefs as a means to

explain behaviour. For instance, it is believed by Sipsey that Idgie acts as she does because her "Momma had eaten wild game when she was pregnant with Idgie" (199). We also learn that Sipsey believes that if you don't bury the head of a dead animal "the spirit of that animal would enter your body and cause you to go completely insane" (48). In short, folklore appears throughout the text. Its inclusion explains behaviour, illustrates beliefs or reveals the character of the people of Whistle Stop.

In addition to the other folklore forms in the text, there are also three contemporary legends. The first contemporary legend is reported as an item of news in the May 16th, 1934 *"Weems Weekly Report."* This story is a version of the "snake in the toilet" or "the alligator in the sewer"[20] contemporary legend. In these legends animals that had been kept as pets until they grew too big, dangerous or are able to escape, live in the sewers. In some cases they come up to the surface either through open manholes or water pipes. When it involves the latter, the animal often comes up through the pipe into the toilet. The hapless victim is either bitten or just scared. In this version, because of flooding, a gopher has come up through the pipes and bitten Bertha Vick. It is Bertha who reports the story to Dot Weems, the editor of *The Weems* Weekly, who includes it in the weekly bulletin. In this instance the contemporary legend is being used as a communicative device within the text. Specifically, it is revealing the character of Whistle

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20 For more on the "Alligator in the Sewer" contemporary legend see: Brunvand *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (90-98). For more on "Snakes in the Toilet" legends see Brunvand *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (395). Recent reports of similar events include: "Snake hiding in sewers is caught" Monday, 17 October 2005, 19:44 GMT 20:44 UK BBC News http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/435149.stm; "Toilet Bowl Snake Attacks On The Rise" http://www.uncoveror.com/potty.

Stop itself. Its role is minor but adds to the sense of time, place and community being developed through Mrs. Threadgoode's stories

The other two contemporary legends in the novel play a major functional role. Importantly, unlike the other folk narratives, neither is relayed as a story by another character, referred to as a memory by a character, given as a metonym or identified as a narrative folk form. Rather, the contemporary legend unfolds as naturally as any other complicating incident or event in the text and is incorporated as a matter of fact, not fiction, in the lives of the characters involved. It is this direct participation of the characters in each event that makes it powerful. What makes each incident pivotal in the text, whether it is recognized as a contemporary legend or not, is what it indicates to the reader about the characters of those involved and/or how it influences the development of those characters and how it moves the story along.

For Evelyn, this pivotal event, more than any other, demonstrates to the reader the changes that have been occurring in her character and indicates further changes to come. These changes are important for they illustrate the process Evelyn has made on her journey and foreshadow the conclusion, Evelyn's attaining selfhood. For Artis, the incident he participates in, more than any other, enables him to navigate successfully the delimited social roles thrust upon him in a world in which he has only minor power; it contributes to his attaining selfhood in spite of his place in society.

To demonstrate how the contemporary legend illustrates changes in the characters of those involved, we must first discuss their characters. The novel tells the story of two women in the 1980s, with flashbacks to the 1940s and 1950s and, through the stories told

by Ninny, the stories of the people associated with the Threadgoode family and the Whistle Stop Cafe.

The first woman is Evelyn Couch. Evelyn is overweight, unhappy and experiencing menopause. The second woman is Mrs. Ninny Threadgoode. Ninny Threadgoode is an older woman who is temporarily living in a nursing home. The two meet in the visitor's lounge of the Rose Terrace nursing home where Mrs. Threadgoode is staying and Evelyn and her husband are visiting his mother. They soon strike up a friendship. During their visits Mrs. Threadgoode passes the time by telling stories from her past.

This novel is clearly a *Bildungsroman,* for although Evelyn is an adult she has not attained selfhood; as a woman, factors such as her gender and the common sense in rule while she was growing up have delayed her advancement into true selfhood. Although she is an adult in theory, in reality she is not as she has never attained true maturation. She has never become self-actualized. Therefore, as suggested by Gilligan, now that Evelyn is in mid-life she is returning to the "unfinished business of adolescence" (170). Thus, Evelyn still requires an older, wiser figure/mentor to guide her through her maturation process.

The common sense/worldview of the time in which Evelyn was born and raised was one that promulgated the inferior status of women. Evelyn was born in 1936. Her time of self re-examination, when the story is taking place, is 1986. This means that Evelyn's high school years, the formative years would have been in the mid 1950s. During this time she learned that a woman's role was to stay home, raise her family and please her husband. Hers was a role that was defined by her sex's ability to reproduce.

This ability was not one that she could easily control as birth control was not readily available. This lack of availability fed into the accepted common sense that only bad girls were sexually free as pregnancy outside of marriage was the sign of a fallen women and virginity was to be prized.

Evelyn's time of maturation was in reality a time of stagnation. Because she had bought into the limits of her role and had done everything she thought she was supposed to do, she has become what one could call a lost soul; she has no sense of selfhood.

Early on we are told, "Evelyn was forty-eight years old and she had gotten lost somewhere along the way. Things had changed so fast. While she had been raising the required two children. . . the world had become a different place, a place she didn't know at all" (40). She has belonged to different groups such as The Complete Woman and the Women's Community Center in an effort to find a group to which she feels she can belong, but to no avail. Food has become her only solace; every meeting between her and Mrs.Threadgoode at the Rose Terrace Nursing Home begins with what Evelyn has brought them to eat.

Her failure to come to terms with her assigned role or to find her place in the world has resulted in feelings of despair. The depth of this despair is clear. One morning during the drive out to the nursing home with her husband she realizes,

> that her life was becoming unbearable. Every morning she would play games with herself, just to get her through the day. Like telling herself that today something wonderful was going to happen. . . that the next time the phone would ring, it would be good news that would change her life. . .or that she was going to get a surprise in the mail. But it was never anything

but junk mail, a wrong number, a neighbor wanting something.

The quiet hysteria and awful despair had started when she finally began to realize that nothing was ever going to change, that nobody would be coming for her to take her away. She began to feel as if she were at the bottom of a well, screaming, no one to hear.

Lately, it had been an endless procession of long, black nights and gray mornings, when her sense of failure swept over her like a five-hundred-pound wave; and she was scared. But it wasn't death that she feared. She had looked down into that black pit of death and had wanted to jump in, once too often. As a matter of fact the thought began to appeal to her more and more.

She even knew how she would kill herself. It would be with a silver bullet....

No, it wasn't death she was afraid of. It was this life of hers that was beginning to remind her of that gray intensive care waiting room. (63)

Caught in a sense of despair and self-hatred ,Evelyn sees nothing ahead of her to live for and is filled with a sense of uselessness. When she thinks back on her past, she realizes that she has never acted as she chose to but was always influenced by what others thought she should do. Although she was always the good girl, in the end that has made no difference for the bad girls are all in the same place as she is; they are in good or bad marriages and are either happy or unhappy in their lives. Evelyn realizes that her choices have never been her own and that she has blindly followed what societal pressure has

deemed the "right" way. Now, having realized that her "right" choices have not made a difference, Evelyn is paralyzed by despair.

The despair Evelyn is feeling is common to women of her time. Oppressed by the common sense of the time in which they lived they are unsatisfied having never reached their full potential or explored all of their options.[21] Their assigned role is confining; they are prisoners but they don't know how to get out of the prison. Evelyn's sense of despair is a shared one. She is just a little late in acknowledging her unhappiness.

In 1963 Betty Freidan in *The Feminine Mystique* wrote about this universal sense of despair felt by suburban housewives:

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question– " Is this all?" (15)

Freidan concludes:

> the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone

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[21] For an example of maxims Evelyn would have followed as a housewife in the 1950s see http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/film/gdhwife.htm

> recognizes. It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home." (32)

Clearly this problem, the one that has no name, is one caused by the common sense of the time. However, although Evelyn is aware that that her problems are in part caused by her bowing to the expectations of her society, she sees no way to change the status quo. Just as young people struggle with their transition from youth to adulthood, so too is Evelyn struggling in her transition into middle age. However, this struggle is exacerbated by the baggage that she carries from her youth. In reality, because Evelyn adhered to the common sense of her time, she never fully completed the transition from youth to adult. She never came to a realization of her own or acted under her own powers.

Because Evelyn has never acted on her own she needs a guide. Thus, the importance of Mrs. Threadgoode is clear. Mrs. Threadgoode is the person who will guide Evelyn out of her place of darkness into a place of light and empowerment. Mrs. Threadgoode's understanding and direction are what helps to empower Evelyn and what enables Evelyn to move to self-hood. In effect, Mrs. Threadgoode is Evelyn's mentor. Moreover, it is only Mrs. Threadgoode who is sensitive enough to realize something is wrong and that Evelyn is suffering from more than angst. It is she who recognizes that Evelyn is going through menopause; after listening to Evelyn's litany of complaints and concerns which finishes with Evelyn saying, "Oh, Mrs. Threadgoode, I'm too young to be

old and too old to be young. I just don't fit anywhere. I wish I could kill myself, but I don't have the courage" (67) she asks Evelyn if her breasts hurt and if her back and legs ache. It is then Mrs. Threadgoode tells Evelyn, "You're just going through a bad case of menopause, that's all that's the matter with you. What you need is to take your hormones and to get out everyday and walk in the fresh air and walk yourself right through it" (67).

Moreover, she provides direction to Evelyn through her retelling of the life stories of two self-actualized women, tomboy Idgie Threadgoode and her friend Ruth, who, back in the 1930s, ran the Whistle Stop Cafe in Whistle Stop, Alabama. Importantly these are two women who successfully subverted the common sense of their time to attain their own sense of self.

Mrs. Threadgoode's role as mentor is clear. In the transition from youth to adult, a young person will often have an older role model or an older family person to supply guidance. This is Mrs. Threadgoode's role in Evelyn's life. It is Mrs. Threadgoode's wisdom and her stories that help to get Evelyn through her long endless black nights, black nights made blacker by menopause. Specifically, her stories about Ruth, Idgie and the Whistle Stop Cafe model for Evelyn the kind of person she wants to become. By living vicariously through the experiences and adventures of Ruth and Idgie, as told by Mrs. Threadgoode, Evelyn is directed away from despair and toward life.

> The importance of the stories becomes clear when we learn that
>
> lately, to get her mind off that cold gun and pulling the trigger, she [Evelyn] would close her eyes and force herself to hear Mrs. Threadgoode's voice and if she breathed deep and concentrated she would soon see herself in Whistle Stop. . . Everyone would ask her how she was and the sun was always shining and there

would always be a tomorrow. . . .Lately she slept more and more and thought of the gun less and less. . .(133-4).

As a result of Mrs. Threadgoode's guidance provided through her stories, Evelyn begins to have something to which to look forward.

Because Evelyn has something to which to look forward, she begins to change. The change is slow and not without problems. The first change is that she, once again, attempts to lose weight. After nine days on a diet she goes to Pigley-Wigley supermarket to shop. Unfortunately, while she is there a boy slams into her knocking her back. Evelyn mumbles to herself "Well there's a nice gentleman" and in response he turns to her and says "Fuck you, Bitch!" Always the good girl who doesn't want to offend, Evelyn runs after him to explain that she "had not meant to hurt his feelings and that she was sure he had come in the wrong door by mistake and hadn't realized that he had run into her." Nonetheless, in response to her attempt to explain he not only calls her a stupid cow but he pushes her, knocks her down and tells her "Don't fool with me, bitch, or I'll knock your fucking head off–you fat stupid cunt!". Evelyn is left feeling "old and fat and worthless all over again" (232-233).

The old Evelyn would have been devastated by this action. And Evelyn does nothing against the boy. She doesn't call the police or make threats; she does nothing. Instead, she just lies on the ground feeling powerless as she watches him walk away. Even worse she gives up her diet because she feels old and fat. But, to her surprise, his words do not destroy her. Once she realizes that his words have no real power she begins to look at her terror of being called names. This terror ruled her life in the past; she

stayed a virgin so she wouldn't be called a tramp, had children so she wouldn't be called barren, never nagged so she wouldn't be called a bitch (236-7). Ultimately, she realizes,

> . . .People didn't call blacks names anymore, at least not to their faces. Italians weren't wops or dagos, and there were no more kikes, Japs, chinks, or spics in polite conversation. Everybody had a group to protest and stick up for them. But women were still being called names by men. Why? Where was our group? It's not fair. She was getting more upset by the minute. Evelyn thought, I wish Idgie had been with me. She would not have let that boy call *her* names. I'll bet she would have knocked *him* down. (237)

Her belief that Idgie wouldn't have let the boy call her names and her wish that she had been there with her illustrates the power of Ninny Threadgoode's stories and leads to the second change in Evelyn. Evelyn moves a step closer to selfhood. She begins to negotiate a new life where she is empowered. She creates a secret life where she is more like Idgie. She becomes TOWANDA THE AVENGER. In her imagination as Towanda she rights the wrongs in society, shooting the genitals of rapists, giving dope dealers overdoses, making actors in Hollywood act opposite women their own age, destroying bombs and missiles and so on.

However, although Evelyn is changing and becoming a stronger character all of the changes in her have been internal; her actions of empowerment have all been in her imagination, there have been no overt displays of the strength that she draws from Towanda. Moreover, there has been no indication that the changes will be permanent. Rather the opposite has been indicated with her abandonment of her diet after her run-in

with the young man. No overt displays, that is, until the incident at the Pigley-Wigley Supermarket, the incident that is the contemporary legend.

This event is key as it is the event that signals to the reader that the change in Evelyn is here to stay and is going to be manifested in her personality. The event, the second contemporary legend used in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe,* involves Evelyn Couch and occurs three quarters of the way into the text after a picture of Evelyn and her insecurities has unfolded. The insertion is titled "Pigley-Wigley Supermarket." But, in the text, Evelyn is a major participant in the event moving it from legend to fact status. The event is presented as a part of the text, not identified as a contemporary legend. It takes place as Evelyn is waiting for a parking spot,

> On Saturdays, when Evelyn Couch went shopping, she always drove Ed's big Ford LTD, because there was more room, but it was hard to park; so she had been sitting waiting for the parking place on the end for five minutes while the old man loaded the groceries into his car, took another three minutes to get in, find his keys, and finally backed out. Just as she was about to pull in, a slightly battered red Volkswagen came around the corner and shot right in the space she had been waiting for.
>
> Two skinny, gum-chewing teenage girls, wearing cut-off jeans and rubber flip-flops, got out and slammed the door and started to walk right past her.
>
> Evelyn rolled down her window and said to the one in the ELVIS IS NOT DEAD T-shirt, "Excuse me, but I was waiting for that space and you pulled right in front of me."

> The girl looked at her with a smirk and said, "Let's face it, lady, I'm younger and faster than you are," and she and her friend flip-flopped into the store in their rubber-thonged shoes.
>
> Evelyn was left sitting there, starring at the Volkswagen with the I BRAKE FOR REDNECKS bumper sticker on the back.
>
> Twelve minutes later, the girl and her friend came out, just in time to see all four of their hubcaps fly across the parking lot as Evelyn crashed into the Volkswagen, backed up, and slammed into it again. By the time the two hysterical girls had reached the car, Evelyn had almost demolished it.
>
> The tall one went berserk, screaming and pulling her hair. "My God! Look what you've done! Are you crazy?"
>
> Evelyn leaned out her window and calmly said, "Let's face it, honey, I'm older than you and have more insurance than you do" and drove away. (290-1)

This incident is the contemporary legend identified by Brunvand as "Old vs. Young." [22] It is important for what it reflects; it reflects the shifting power base between the young and the old and it reflects Evelyn's move from the insecurity and powerlessness of youth to the security and confidence of adulthood. Additionally, this contemporary legend is clearly one of revenge. Because of what we know about Evelyn before this incident, the contemporary legend foreshadows the change in Evelyn's character. Evelyn's realization about her role in life and how she bought into it is a

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[22]Under the heading Legends about Automobiles and the subheading Accident legends on page 326 of *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends* "Young driver steals parking place, old one crashes into car for revenge" (326) also discussed in *The Mexican Pet* (67).

necessary step for her to evolve. The effect of this story is all the more powerful for the contrast between it and the previous incident at the Pigley-Wigley, when the boy called Evelyn names, discussed earlier.

This incident also acts to support the common sense of the time of its telling. Although the power base between young and old shifts, what does not shift is the expected and accepted behaviour that should occur between the two. Young people are expected to respect those older than themselves. As we age we may lose our physical and mental power and be replaced by younger quicker workers, but the right to be treated with respect is not lost. The girls in this incident do not act with respect towards Evelyn. Instead they flaunt their physical youth and speed. They are rude and this is not socially acceptable. So, what happens to the girls is what should happen. They are punished for their disrespect. What is surprising is that it is Evelyn who metes out the punishment through the destruction of one symbol of their power: their car.

What makes this incident critical in the text is what it indicates to the reader about Evelyn's character. Her physical act of responding to someone's rudeness with a strong action of her own is far different from her usual response. As we saw in the previous Pigley-Wigley incident with the young boy, she accepted what he did and did nothing herself. In fact, the incident with the young boy was blown out of proportion because she felt the need to ameliorate the situation by explaining things to him. Her attempt to explain and excuse herself only fed into his power over her and his disdain for her. Her attempt to be nice is taken as being weak, and, as we know, the weak are usually victims.

In the second incident in the parking lot Evelyn is not weak. She does not accept the actions of the girls. She does not wait around to try to explain to them, in detail, about

how she waited for five minutes for the old man to load his groceries, find his keys, get in and back out. Instead she reacts to their rudeness with an obviously assertive action of her own. And it is an action that responds in kind to theirs. She hits them physically as they have hit her emotionally. We know her actions are because of Towanda and Towanda is because of Mrs. Threadgoode and her stories when Evelyn realizes:

> the truth was, she had enjoyed wrecking that girl's car too much. Lately, the only time she wasn't angry and the only time she could find peace was when she was with Mrs. Threadgoode and when she would visit Whistle Stop at night in her mind. Towanda was taking over her life, and somewhere, deep down, a tiny alarm bell sounded and she knew she was in sure danger of going over the edge and never coming back. (291)

It is this incident that signifies the personality change that is about to occur in Evelyn during the rest of the novel. It is this incident that forces her to face herself. It is this incident that gives her a taste of the power she could possess. However, without Mrs. Threadgoode it is unlikely that Evelyn would move beyond the first step, out of despair and towards a new place and thinking about life. Without the stories told by Ninny, stories that inspired Evelyn, it is doubtful that she would have ever acted as forcefully as she does in the Pigley-Wigley incident.

The contemporary legend functions as the key incident in the rising action leading to the climax and the conclusion of the text. As a *mise en abyme* it is retro-prospective as it reflects the change that has been happening on one level and is about to happen on another level in Evelyn. This contemporary legend is integral to the plot yet not presented as a contemporary legend. Indeed, it is only the reader in the know who will

recognize it. However, whether it is recognized as a contemporary legend by the reader or not is irrelevant. The critical reader will recognize that this incident is key as functionally it signifies a personality change in Evelyn.

It is only after the incident at the Pigley-Wigley Supermarket that Evelyn begins to pull her life together and to take control. Moreover, how she begins to take control is important. Her first act is to go to church, like Mrs. Threadgoode has asked her to, to take her troubles to God and to ask him to help her through her bad times. However, instead of going to her regular church she goes to The Martin Luther King Memorial First Baptist Church. Here she confronts her submerged fears and prejudices concerning blacks. This is important for it is during the church service that Evelyn really looks at those around her and into herself.

By examining herself she comes face to face with her truth. Buying into the common sense of her time "she had considered herself to be a liberal. She had never used the word *nigger*" (307). However, the reality was that this was an untruth. Her "contact with blacks had been the same as for the majority of middle-class whites before the sixties–mostly just getting to know the maid or the maids of friends" (307). After Evelyn realizes that many of the things she had accepted and believed in her past, the consensual control which allowed the creation of the common sense, were hollow, she comes alive during the service and feels joy. It is during the service that she forgives those that have hurt her and as she forgives them her burdens of hate and resentment are released into the air, taking Towanda with them (313).

Once Evelyn releases her hate for others, she is able to release her hate for herself. No longer hating herself, Evelyn realizes that food is no longer the only sweetness in her life,

> after all these months of being with Mrs. Threadgoode each week things had begun to change. Ninny Threadgoode made her feel young again. She began to see herself as a woman with half her life still ahead of her. Her friend really believed that she was capable of selling Mary Kay cosmetics. Nobody had ever believed she could do anything before, or had faith in her; least of all, Evelyn herself. The more Mrs. Threadgoode talked about it and the more she thought about it, the less Towanda ran rampant in her mind, beating up on the world, and she began to see herself as thin and happy–behind the wheel of a pink Cadillac. (359)

It is only after this key incident that Evelyn begins to take control and to grow. She begins to sell Mary Kay cosmetics. She goes to a doctor who gives her a prescription for Apremarin to help her estrogen levels. She relaxes sexually and has an orgasm. Finally she goes to a fat farm where she loses 23 pounds but more importantly finds her group, ". . . the group she had been looking for all her life. Here they were, the candy snatchers; chubby housewives, divorcees, single teachers and librarians, each hoping for a new start in life as a slimmer, healthier person" (375).

The book concludes with Evelyn visiting Mrs. Threadgoode's grave and talking with her. She shares her success as a Mary Kay consultant, she has earned the coveted pink Cadillac, and has lost weight.. And she tells Mrs. Threadgoode "if it hadn't been for you talking to me like you did every week, I don't know what I would have done" (389).

The stories that Mrs. Threadgoode told were what helped Evelyn get through her time of crisis. The inspiration of Idgie and her strength of character were what inspired Towanda. Her overt lashing out in response to the rudeness of the young girls in the parking lot led her to recognize that Towanda was getting out of hand. This recognition led to her visit to the church where she let go of her hate and began to grow as a person and to take control of her life.

This incident "Old vs Young," a contemporary legend, is thus key to understanding the personality and growth of the main character Evelyn Couch. Finally, Evelyn is able to attain selfhood. She is able to see who she is and realize her place in her world. Her journey is complete. Thus, it is clear that the use of the contemporary legend in this manner is of key importance in this *Bildungsroman* for how it mirrors the character's internal growth and what it indicates about her progress towards selfhood.

Where Evelyn was hampered in her personal growth due to gender, Big George and his family were hampered due to their colour. Big George and his family are black in a time, the early to mid 1900s, when black people had few rights and were poorly treated. Worse, Big George lives in the southern United States, specifically Alabama. During Big George's life the Jim Crow laws were in effect. According to The Martin Luther King Jr, National Historic Site, "From the 1880s into the 1960s, a majority of American states enforced segregation through 'Jim Crow' laws (so called after a black character in minstrel shows)."[23] From Delaware to California, and from North Dakota to Texas, many states (and cities, too) could impose legal punishments on people for consorting

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[23] http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm
Created by Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site Interpretive Staff.

with members of another race. The most common types of laws forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated. As the Jim Cow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids Michigan illustrates through their displays,

> 1) during the period of Jim Crow, 1877-1965, racist images of Blacks permeated American society as evidenced by the proliferation of anti-Black everyday items; 2) anti-Black caricatured items were used to support anti-Black prejudice and discrimination; and, 3) Jim Crow-like images are still being created and distributed.[24]

Indeed, life for African Americans during most of the 20th century was not easy. Segregated physically, marginalized socially, they existed in a climate of political, social and cultural disenfranchisement. This disenfranchisement and marginalization is clearly shown in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* through the characters of Big George and his family, in particular his son Artis. This marginalization and resulting disenfranchisement could hinder a person's ability to grow into selfhood. However, in the case of these characters, it does not.

In addition, two other people from Big George's time are also marginalized due to the accepted common sense of their time. Idgie and Ruth, like Evelyn, are also marginalized by gender. Marginalized by race and/or gender by the leadership of the dominant group, in this case male and white, it appears that Idgie, Ruth, Big George and

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[24] The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia can be viewed on-line and or person. For a brief virtual tour of their exhibits see http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm

his family accept the ideas, values and leadership of their society. They are physically induced to acquiesce because of laws that state women and black people are not equal to white males; mentally they are induced to comply because being marginalized, they are denied equal opportunity to pursue whatever goals or desires they have. However, at the same time as they appear to accept the status quo, they also subvert it. It is their subversion of the accepted common sense that allows then to attain selfhood and, unlike Evelyn, to move comfortably within their delimited existence.

One way the status quo is subverted by Idgie and Ruth is with the implicit support from a white male in power; Idgie's father is willing to lend Idgie and Ruth money to start the cafe. In turn, another white male in power, Grady Kilgore, the sheriff, is willing to look the other way when Idgie and Ruth sell food to the "coloureds" out the back door of the cafe. Both of these actions allow Idgie and Ruth to carry on as they desire. However, part of the reason both males may have decided to enable the women to live in a manner not commonly accepted is because of the strength of Idgie's character. It is clear from the stories about Idgie that Mrs. Threadgoode tells that even as a child Idgie did what she wanted and did not accept the common sense of the time. For example, Idgie did not go to church, or wear a dress. She gambled and had been going hunting and fishing on her own since she was a child. In describing Idgie, Mrs Threadgoode says, "She'd serve the coloured people out the back door. Of course, a lot of people didn't like the idea of her selling food to the coloureds, and she got into some trouble doing it, but she said nobody was gonna tell her what she could and could not do. Cleo said she stood right up to the Klu Klux Klan all by herself, and wouldn't let them stop her. As good-natured as she was Idgie turned out to be brave when push came to shove..." (51).

Unlike Idgie and Ruth, the way that Big George and the other "coloureds" attain selfhood is to work within the common sense that demarcates their existence. They are segregated and marginalized *but only within white society*. Within black society they function according to their own common sense. Next to white Whistle Stop is black Troutville. Within white Birmingham is black Slagtown. In short, within every white setting is a black closed society with its own culture, set of rules and expected behaviour. The existence of such an enclave is one of which white society is largely ignorant.

These settings are important for the sense of community they engender. We see their importance when Big George's son Artis visits Birmingham and finds "4th Avenue North, where all of a sudden the complexion began to change" (118). He has found what is called Slagtown. Surrounded by all shades of black and brown, in a place where the "Highland Avenue maid of that afternoon could be tonight's Queen of the Avenue, and red-caps and shoeshine boys were the leaders of Slagtown's after-dark fashion show" (119), Artis feels "home at last" (120).

Importantly, the citizens of these segregated settings are all aware of the dangers that face them. They are not naïve; they know what treatment they can expect if they break the boundaries set for them by the common sense of white society. They have no illusions. Thus when Sipsey, Big George's mother, kills Frank Bennett, Ruth's ex-husband, when he tries to steal Ruth's baby, Big George and Sipsey know what the consequences will be: Death.

It is at this point that the second contemporary legend, The Accidental Cannibal,[25] unfolds:

> . . . Big George was making a decision. There was no defense for a black who killed a white man in Alabama, so it never occurred to him to do anything but what he had to do.
>
> He picked up Frank's body and threw it over his shoulder and said, "Come on, boy," and took it all the way in the back of the yard and put it in the wooden shed. He laid it down on the dirt floor, and said to Artis, You stay here till I get back, boy, and don't you move. I's got to get rid of dat truck."
>
> About an hour later, when Idgie and Ruth got home, the baby was back in his bed and sound asleep. Idgie drove Sipsey home and told her how worried she was about Momma Threadgoode being so sick; Sipsey never told her how close they had come to losing the baby.
>
> Artis stayed in the shed all night, nervous and excited, rocking back and forth on his haunches. Along around four o'clock, he couldn't resist; he opened his knife and, in the pitch dark, struck the body under the sheet-once, twice, three, four times-and on and on.
>
> About sunup, the door creaked open and Artis peed on himself. It was his daddy. He had driven the truck into the river, out by the Wagon Wheel, and had walked all the way back; about ten miles.

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[25] In his Type-Index of Urban Legends Brunvand notes that he has discussed "The Accidental Cannibals" in his texts *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (117), *Choking Doberman* (114-5), *The Baby Train* (75-79), and (334).

When Big George pulled off the sheet and said, "We got to burn his clothes," they both stopped and stared.

The sun had just cracked through the wooden slats. Artis looked at Big George, his eyes as big as platters, with his mouth open, and said, "Daddy, dat white man don't have no head."

Big George shook his head again. "Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm. . ." His mother had chopped that man's head off and buried it somewhere.

Stopping only long enough to take in that horrendous fact, he said "Boy help me wid dese clothes."

Artis had never seen a white man naked before. He was all white and pink, just like those hogs after they'd been boiled and all their hair had come off.

Big George handed him the sheet and the bloody clothes and told him to go way out in the woods and bury them, deep, and then go home and say nothing. To nobody. Anywhere. Ever.

While Artis was digging the hole, he couldn't help but smile. He had a secret. A powerful secret that he would have as long as he lived. Something that would give him power when he was feeling weak. Something that only he and the devil knew. The thought of it made him smile with pleasure. He would never have to feel the anger, the hurt, the humiliation of the others ever again. He was different. He would always be set apart. He had stabbed himself a white man . . .

And whenever any white folks gave him any grief, he could smile

inside. *I stabbed me one of you already. . .*

At seven-thirty, Big George had already started slaughtering the hogs and started the water boiling in the big black iron pot-a little early in the year, but not too soon.

Later in the afternoon, when Grady and the two detectives from Georgia were questioning his daddy about the missing white man, Artis nearly fainted when one of them came right over and looked right in the pot. He was sure the man had seen Frank Bennett's arm bobbing up and down among the boiling hogs. But, evidently, he hadn't, because two days later, the fat Georgia man told Big George that it was the best barbecue he had ever eaten, and asked him what his secret was.

Big George smiled and said, "Thank you, suh, I'd hafta say the secret's in the sauce." (365-367)

A number of versions of the unwitting cannibal exist. In all it is a taboo, as identified by Stith Thompson.[26] Thus, in most versions a person eats and enjoys parts of an actual corpse unknowingly. In *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends*, Brunvand talks about this contemporary legend. Common around the end of the Second World War, the version in *Fried Green Tomatoes* takes place in 1930, it usually involved a European family receiving a packet of what they presume to be spices from relatives in America which they then use. Unfortunately, later information reveals the package to be

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[26] In his *Motif Index of Folk Literature* Thompson lists motif X21 Humor of discomfiture Accidental Cannibalism Vol. V (503).

the cremated remains of a relative who wanted to be buried on his/her home soil[27]. Other common versions involve workers in a brewery drinking beer from a vat only to discover eventually the body of a co-worker inside (Brunvand 1984, 1999) or shipmates drinking alcohol from a cask within which a body is being preserved (Brunvand 1984, 1999).

A version recounted by Brunvand in *The Baby Train* is similar to the one in *Fried Green Tomatoes*. In Brunvand's version a Jew is attempting to smuggle home the body of his friend for burial. To do so he dismembers the body and packs it in a large jar with spices and honey. During the journey a Gentile sneaks pieces of the body from the jar, unwittingly eating the corpse (76).

The similarities between the *Fried Green Tomatoes* version of "The Accidental Cannibal" and the version of the man being smuggled home for burial involve the corpse being prepared with other seasonings. As well, in both the person who has prepared the body is considered inferior to the person who is doing the eating. And, in both one of the people eating the corpse, the one considered superior according to the common sense of the time, is doing so unknowingly. Thus both could be seen to fill Sandy Hobbs's identified function of Poetic Justice as discussed in chapter 2–there really is no difference between people. In this contemporary legend, those that consider themselves superior to another group of perceived lesser status and worth should be able to tell when they are dining on a substance that is of lesser quality; in the version in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, it does not say much about the perceived superiority of white people when their flavour cannot be distinguished from that of a hog.

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[27] see Smith 1983, de Vos 1996, Brunvand 1981, 1984, 1989, 1993.

In this instance "The Accidental Cannibal" also works well inside the novel because it provides the resolution to a previous event. In this instance the contemporary legend act can seen to be, according to Labov's narrative structure, acting as the coda. For Big George, it is a coda about a real event. The coda deals with the result: what finally happened. And from this resulting reversal produces ironic laughter. The coda in this instance provides the resolution as to how we dispose of unpleasantness or problems in our lives.

In this case, the problem is Frank Bennett. Bennett poses a threat to life at the Whistle Stop Cafe. He is Ruth's estranged husband; he is violent; he is determined to punish Ruth and to steal their child from her.

Should Frank have been successful in removing Buddy or in hurting Ruth, Big George's life would have been affected. At its most basic, people he loves would be hurt. However, on a broader scale it could have affected the running of the Whistle Stop Cafe which both employed his mother and fed his people. Big George is used to dealing with unpleasant things in his life. As a black man in a white world, he is used to swallowing his pride or views, lowering his head and moving on. However, although he may swallow, or eat, unpleasantness in his daily life those same problems give him strength. He is admired for the strength of his person by his own community and by those Whites who see him as a man: Ruth and Idgie.

The coda to the killing of Frank Bennett is particularly satisfying because of who is played for a fool. It is also important because of how the participation in the killing and disposing of Frank's body affects Big George's son, Artis. First, the police officer whose job is to determine the truth of Frank's disappearance does not know he is eating

the evidence that could solve his case. The coda thus turns a dark part of the story lighter. As well, it seems poetic justice that Frank Bennett is cut up and treated like a hog since in real life he behaved as an animal treating women and Blacks as inferior beings. Thus that he is treated like an animal in death seems only fitting.

Moreover, the contemporary legend as coda acts as a key incident in the life of Big George's son, Artis. This event occurred when Artis was a child. It was he who guarded the dead body while Big George disposed of Frank's car. While he was guarding the body Artis stabbed it. Later, when it was cut up and cooked as a part of the BBQ, Artis ate it.

Participation in this incident provides Artis with the means of attaining a sense of self worth outside of his limited world as a black man. It gives Artis the power to consider himself as an equal. He knows that after this incident he "would never have to feel the anger, the hurt, the humiliation of the others ever again. He was different. He would always be set apart. He had stabbed himself a white man" (366). Most importantly, he has not only stabbed a white man; he has eaten him as well.

Artis has swallowed the problem and it has fueled him both physically, the nutrition from the BBQ, and mentally. For, after this event, Artis is different. He goes through his life boldly. He lives large. And at the end of his life when all he has are his memories, it is the memory of this incident that enables him to feel good. The power of this key incident is that even his last thought involves it,

> . . . Then, the old man, who had been agitated just a moment ago, begins to smile and relax. He is out in the back of the cafe, helping his daddy barbecue, . . . and he is happy . . . we know a secret.

> His daddy gives him a barbecue and a Grapico, and he runs way back up in the woods to eat it, where it's cool and green and the pine needles are soft . . . .
>
> The pockmarked man in the hotel lobby walked over and shook the smiling Artis O. Peavey, who was now quiet and still. "What's the matter with you?"
>
> The man jumped back. "Jesus Christ! This nigger is dead!" He turned to his friend at the counter. "Not only that, but he done peed all over the floor!"
>
> . . . But Artis was still way up in the woods, with his barbecue (373-4).

Artis not only stabbed himself a white man and helped to cook him, he also ate him. The whole Accidental Cannibal experience gives him a sense of empowerment that is alien to blacks at that time.

Impact of the contemporary legend

In all stories it is apparent that gender, colour, social class and cultural context combine to hinder or prevent the progress of the main characters in their quest for self-actualization unless they reject, challenge or modify the common sense of their time on some level. In Evelyn's case, the novel explores the way she comes to terms with a society that has changed. In her situation her ability to attain the freedom to act and develop a sense of self and self direction is hindered by the way she sees her choices; they are delimited by the society within which she grew: growing up in a traditional family in a patriarchal culture. Yet, Evelyn does receive a chance to achieve selfhood as the society within which she grew changes and the common sense supporting that society

changes as well. In the new society she is able to move beyond her delimited role, a role that was gender-defined, to discover true self knowledge and, ultimately, to achieve autonomy and independence. She is able to negotiate these two sets of common sense largely through the stories told to her by her mentor Mrs. Threadgoode, and it is these stories which serve to guide her. Her ability to negotiate this change is revealed during her participation in a key event presented as fact but which can be recognized as a contemporary legend. In turn, she is then able to create a new place that enables her to stay within her marriage but in a role that has changed and, with her change, has allowed her husband to change as well.

In addition, marginalized by race and/or gender and by the leadership of the dominant group, in this case male and white, it appears that Idgie, Ruth, Big George and his family accept the ideas, values and leadership of their society. However, as we learn through the various excerpts, retellings, and stories told in the third person, at the same time as they appear to accept the status quo, they also subvert it. It is their subversion of the accepted common sense that allows them to attain selfhood and to move comfortably within their delimited existence; in Artis's case it's his participation in one specific complicating incident, the contemporary legend, which influences how he is able to comport himself as a self-actualized black male in a white society.

The contemporary legend is of value in the text. When used as a key incident it reflects the changes occurring in the character with whom it is connected. When used as a key incident it also influences the development of the person's life with whom it is connected.

Anthony Burgess's *The Pianoplayer*

As in *Fried Green Tomatoes,* Anthony Burgess's *The Pianoplayer*, published in 1986, is a *Bildungsroman.* Similar to *Fried Green Tomatoes*, it has more than one narrative. In this novel three stories are told. The first story is the story of the narrator, Ellen Henshaw. The second is the story of her father, Billy, and the third is the story of her son, Robert. All of the stories are being told by Ellen to honour the memory of her father, but the telling of the story is inspired by the success of her grandson, Robert's son William, as a pianist. It is the event that allowed the creation of William that is pivotal to the text and is the contemporary legend.[28]

The first story being told is that of the narrator, Ellen Henshaw. This story is also intertwined with the second story, her father Billy's. Billy is, as Ellen calls him, a pianoplayer. In speaking to the young man that is recording her story she explains:

> My dad always called himself not a pianist but a pianoplayer. Rolf Marcus says it ought to be piano player, with a hole between the two words, but I say that pianoplayer one word gives you a better idea of what he was. The piano. Pause. The player. There's the piano, waiting. Then the player comes on and you clap like mad. No, it wasn't like that for my poor father. Pianoplayer gives you the idea of him and the instrument being like all one thing, jammed together. In the pub, in the cinema, at the end of the pier in Blackpool he was always the pianoplayer. No applause for my dad. He was not Schnabel or Rubenstein or Horowitz or his own great grandson.

[28] The incident recounted in Burgess's novel, embellished with character development and other literary techniques is too long to retell in its entirety.

He was the pianoplayer. (12)

The third story told is that of Ellen's son Robert. The story concludes with the birth of Robert's son and the reason for telling the stories in the first place. The stories are told because all of them are connected by the piano. Ellen's father is the pianoplayer; her son Robert is a piano player (two words equaling more skill) and her grandson is a pianist. The success of the grandson is what has inspired Ellen.

There are twelve and a half chapters in this novel (twelve and a half because as the narrator says, "I am superstitious" (173)). It is in the last chapter that we are told the story of Ellen's son Robert.

Although he is married, Robert has not attained selfhood, and he has no place in his world. In effect Robert's part of the story can be seen as a *Bildungsroman.* Robert's growth into selfhood was stymied by events that occurred on the day that should have been a coming of age ritual leading him into adulthood: his wedding. During his wedding reception his wife's father dies, so his mother-in-law moves in with them. After this, things between him and his wife change. They never have a honeymoon; because his mother-in-law does not like noise they are unable to consummate the marriage properly and, worst of all, the mother and the wife sell Robert's piano and use the money to purchase a car.

Refusing to give up playing, Robert retaliates by making a wooden keyboard and practicing on it every night in such a way that neither his wife nor her mother can avoid seeing him practice as they watch T.V. However, even though he is retaliating, his action is childish. It is his house too, yet, he never stands up to his wife or her mother to

make that claim. Instead, he is silent. He has no identity and no place in his world; he has not attained selfhood.

Robert's lack of selfhood is reinforced when his wife and his mother-in-law co-opt the trip abroad he had planned for himself and his wife. Needless to say, the mother-in-law insists on coming along and, with the approval of her daughter, they end up driving to Italy because that is where the mother-in-law wants to go. Robert does not fight this takeover; again, he is silent. It is now that the contemporary legend occurs.

Ten pages long, the contemporary legend occurs near the end of the novel. While on vacation in Italy, the mother-in-law dies. Not wanting to bury her in a Roman Catholic country, they wrap her body in a raincoat and prepare to drive with the body back to England. However, on the way they are caught in the middle of a police chase and bullets enter the car shattering the windshield and entering the body of the mother-in-law. The police cannot determine if the bullet or shock killed the woman, but they offer to pay for the burial and give some money towards a car.

This incident is clearly related to the "Runaway Grandmother" also known as "Stolen Grandmother" contemporary legend discussed by Jan Harold Brunvand in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. A version of this contemporary legend is as follows,

> A local resident reports as fact an experience of a Washington State family that he knows. After the family had crossed the Mexican border on a vacation trip, one of the children said, "Mama, Grandma won't wake up." Upon discovering that Grandma had died, the family placed her body in a sleeping bag and secured her to the top of their automobile, planning to report her death to the police at the first town. While they were in the

> station, their car was stolen–with grandma's body still aboard. No trace has yet been found of either Grandma or the car. Another resident reports the tale as having happened in Italy.[29]

In both the novel and the contemporary legend, the family has gone on a vacation abroad. In both the novel and the contemporary legend, the elderly person in the family dies. It is not important that a mother, not a grandmother has died in the novel. The main criterion is that it is an older family member who has died. In both the contemporary legend and the novel, the body of the dead person is stored, wrapped in something, in or on top of the car. Finally, although the corpse in the novel is not stolen, it is lost to the family. It ends up being buried in the country they are visiting.

What is important about the contemporary legend in this story is that were it not for the incident that we can identify as a contemporary legend, the narrator would not have thought of telling the story in memory of her father because her grandson would never have been born.

This incident is important to the novel for it is the main reason that Robert changes. Prior to the death of the mother-in-law, he was powerless as regards to having a say in his own home. His wife and his mother-in-law have emasculated him; they have taken all that he enjoys away from him. He cannot enjoy the company of his wife, because of the presence of his mother-in-law; he cannot enjoy the comfort of his own

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[29] Jan Harold Brunvand *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1981) 112-113. He also discusses this contemporary legend in *Choking Doberman* (219); *Curses* (14-15); *Baby Train* (237, 240); *Too Good* (76-77); *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (362-363); as well as, as Brunvand notes, in Linda Dégh's "The Runaway Grandmother," *Indiana Folklore* (1968) 68-77; Alan Dundes "On the Psychology of the Legend," in Hand, *American Folk Legend* (1971), 21-36.

home as the mother-in-law is always there and he cannot enjoy making music as he no longer has a piano. He holds no power as the mother-in-law and wife hold it all. He is impotent. He is a child.

His changes are directly related to the contemporary legend. His impotence begins to change after the death of his mother-in-law. It is now that Robert's determination to gain back power over his own life begins to express itself. Robert takes the first step towards asserting himself when he agrees to the offer from the Italian Police to bury his mother-in-law. Because she died outside of her country he has the freedom to bury her without censure from compatriots. This distance from England allows him to act more independently and he argues for, and wins, a proper tombstone for her. When the Italian Superintendent queries the inscription "HERE SHE LIES, THE OLD COW" Robert tells him

> You don't seem to realize that the cow is a very precious object among us people. The cow is a sacred object to the Indians, and India was part of our great Empire until the Labour Government gave it away . . . . Mrs. Aldridge was a cow to me, and she was also old. So OLD COW is just about right. It is what her daughter would want. (198-9)

The change in Robert continues after they return to England. At first he is depressed and due to an error at work loses his job. But his depression turns around when he sees an American Organ in the window of a second hand shop. Free from his mother-in-law, Robert sells her things to buy the organ. This is a turn around from what the wife and the mother-in-law did when they sold his piano and used the money to purchase a car.

It is only because his mother-in-law is dead that he has the money and the freedom to buy the organ. Robert now only has to take back control over his life from his wife. She, like the mother-in-law, must be dead; therefore, he must kill her. Accordingly, he moves the organ near the bathroom, knowing that after they have a fight about the organ she will want to take a bath. He is correct and as she is bathing he calls out,

> 'I'm going to play you some music, dear.' She made some kind of noise through the sound of the water which Robert took to mean that she didn't want any music, it would give her a Piercing Headache. He sort of smiled...and he started to play the hymn Nearer My God To Thee. He called out to her in the bathroom: 'Can you hear what I am playing, Edna dear? It's a hymn that they sang on the Titanic when it was going down, and it means what it says. Nearer Your God To Him. I'm coming in there now. And when I come out again I'm going to play this hymn again, but you'll not hear it.' (204)

Robert plans on drowning his wife but has trouble forcing open the door; finally he resorts to an axe. Next he discovers that she is no longer in the bath cowering and afraid like he had thought she would be. In the struggle they end up in the tub and, as he tells Ellen when he relates this story, "it was the first time they'd either of them got anything out of Sex" (205). Ultimately, they have a resoundingly successful sex life and soon their son, Ellen's grandson and her father's great-grandson is born.

Ellen concludes all of the stories saying,

> And now I'll come to the name you'll know, even though you don't know

> much about music. Little William Ross, son of Robert and Edna and named after my poor dad, was the Child Wonder when he was seven and Richard Rodney Bennett wrote this Concerto for him, without any octaves because of the smallness of his hands. The kid has a natural instinct which his father did his utmost to help come out, and it was really the Family Gift at last. It had been trying to get through for a long time, failing with my dad and succeeding in a twisted sort of way with his daughter ...failing again with Robert and then bursting like a flower with little Billy.
>
> If only my poor dad could have foreseen this . . . it might have made things easier for him, but perhaps not. But nothing had really been wasted. Out of the blood of a pianoplayer, so to speak, a Pianist came at last. (205-6)

Although this contemporary legend unfolds in the middle of the last story being told it is of pivotal importance to the stories overall. The reason the stories are being told is in memory of Ellen's father. But, the reason that she thinks of doing something for the memory of her father is because of the success of her grandson. Without her grandson we don't know if she would ever have thought about writing a story for the memory of her father. And, as we have seen, the birth of her grandson and his success as a pianist would never have happened were it not for the case of the "stolen mother-in-law" and the resulting character changes in Robert, Ellen's son, as he moves towards and attains selfhood.

In this chapter, the texts discussed each contain a contemporary legend which served as an important, functional device in that it acted as the key incident in the rising action leading to the climax and the conclusion of the text. More specifically, in each the

contemporary legend was pivotal to the plot as it is through the contemporary legend that the change that is occurring in the main character's progress toward attaining selfhood is reflected. Although the novels I have discussed are not traditional *Bildungsromans,* they have documented the progress of the main character's search for and attainment of selfhood. Most importantly, in each of these novels, the contemporary legend was pivotal for indicating the changes occurring within the main character. The changes indicated are part of the long change and in some cases pivotal for the resolution, the reaching selfhood, of the *Bildungsroman.*

The contemporary legend being used in each text acts as the indicator of change to come. Because it can be seen to act as a signifier of change to come, it can also been seen to be similar to Lucien Dallenbach's retro-prospective *mise en abyme.* But, instead of the contemporary legend revealing events before or after its inclusion in the text, it reflects the spiritual, moral or psychological change that has been happening and the further changes to come within the main character. In effect it signifies the main character's move towards attaining selfhood. Thus the contemporary legend in each case acts as a major functional device within the text.

Chapter Six

Contemporary Legends in Stephen King's Horror Fiction and the Theory of the Unknown

One category of popular fiction appears to use the contemporary legend as an extended narrative more than any other: horror/suspense fiction. One of the most prolific and popular writers of horror/sub-genre formula fiction is Stephen King. In fact King's popularity goes beyond literature. A number of his stories, both novels and short stories, have been made into films including *Carrie, The Shining, IT, Firestarter, Misery, The Shawshank Redemption,* and *Hearts in Atlantis*. He has written screenplays: *Creepshow, Cat's Eye, Silver Bullet, Sleepwalkers*; he has written non-fiction: *Danse Macabre,* and *On Writing*; and he has also written for the small screen: *The Langoliers, The Stand, Rose Red,* and *The Storm of the Century* to name but a few. His stretching across media and literary sub-genres has made King a recognizable part of today's popular culture. King sells books; people read King's books. Thus, King's texts are important cultural products.

In previous chapters I have shown the intertextuality of contemporary legends and literature. The inclusion of the contemporary legend into the text means it is no longer a form distinct unto itself. Rather its use enhances the text as not only are there links from the one text to the other, but also relationships are created within the texts, intratextuality, as we note when the contemporary legend is a communicative device or an important functional device, as in the *Bildungsroman*. In the next chapters I will examine how Stephen King uses the type of contemporary legend that focuses on horror as a major functional device that informs the text as a whole. The contemporary legend informs the

text as it is the kernel of the text as the entire story is predicated upon it. It has, of course, been fleshed out with details, character development, and other elements of literature; nonetheless, the basic plot of the text as a whole is recognizable as a specific contemporary legend. As Neil Grobman suggests in "A Schema for the Study of the Sources and Literary Simulations of Folkloric Phenomena" (1979), these are two of the main functions of folklore in literature: (1) "to give verisimilitude and local color," and (2) to serve as "models for production of folklore-like materials" (28-30). The difference is in the way the novel works through this plot. It appears to follow the plot yet is entirely different. In this case the urban legend is an extended narrative and it, and the fiction that is built upon it, act as mirrors reflecting each other. Indeed, the intertextuality is such that it is hard to see where the one text begins and the other leaves off.

In King's works the blurring between legend and fiction is created because, in part, he realistically and minutely accounts for the details of the lives of his characters. He reflects and records life as he sees it and in the process includes references to other cultural products, thus providing an insight into that culture. As critic Michael R. Collins notes:

> From the beginning, his books have been constructed not only on strong narratives and intriguing characters but also on insights into contemporary American society in the closing quarter of the twentieth century. More than any other single author in the field, King speaks for the experiences, expectations, achievements, and disappointments of the "Baby Boomer" generation, often coupling his cosmic horrors and monsters with references to the minutiae of daily life. (1)

Accordingly, then, it is from this recognition that the world in the text and the world we inhabit are one and the same, that the horror springs. Once this connection is made, so too is the connection made that the horror in the text provides an insight into the fears in our lives; it is this insight that King believes is the value of horror. In an interview on *Nightline*, in December of 1997 King discusses the purpose of horror. During this interview, as quoted by Stephen J. Spignesi, King said that horror:

> is one genre that's been pretty constant all through American literature going back to the "penny dreadfuls." Edison made a version of *Frankenstein.* So this has always been with us. . . .
>
> To me it's sort of interesting, in World War II, the universal monsters like Frankenstein, Wolf Man, Dracula, all disappear. There was enough real-life horror. And then, after World War II is over, you see the monsters start to come out of their dark holes again. And the biggest monster of them all was Godzilla from Japan, and he was caused by nuclear radiation. So you have a case of the first nuclear monster originating from the only people in the history of the world who have ever had to face the atomic bomb in a real-life situation. So we see entertainment, but we also see always this working out of the real fears that are underneath. (xiii)

The real fears that King believes are being worked out in the horror text can also be identified as a sub-text. In an interview with King, Stephen Magistrale asks, "In many of your non-fictional writings you argue that there is a subtext at work in horror fiction that speaks to certain social and political anxieties relevant to the time. How conscious

are you of this subtext when framing your own fiction?" (7). At first King replies that he is not conscious at all; however, he then goes on to explain:

> let me qualify that by saying the reason a second draft is so crucial is that a lot of times a writer is unaware of what he's really writing until after he's done. . . I sometimes think that with a really good tale or novel, the theme is there before you recognize it, before you create it. Before you write it down, the story exists, but it takes the actual writing to recognize it." (7-8)

King elaborates on the importance of second drafts and the conscious development of theme in his text *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. It is in the rewriting that the theme within the horror fiction is developed and it is this theme that speaks to, as Magistrale says, "certain social and political anxieties relevant to the time" (7).

In working out of the real fears that run underneath the surface of the lives of the baby boomers and in speaking for them, King quotes rock songs, makes reference to favourite childhood games, and builds on folklore including folk beliefs, tales, and narrative forms such as legends and folktales,

Magistrale, in discussing King's use of narrative forms, asks King why he likes fairy tales and how they function in "the context of [his] art?" (4). King's response is "that fairy tales[30] are the scariest stories that we have. I think that the stories for children form a kind of conduit leading to what adults call horror stories. To my mind, the stories that I write are nothing more than fairy tales for grown ups" (4). Magistrale and King use the term fairy tale and folk tale interchangeably. However, what is important is King's

[30] Magistrale and King use the term fairy tale and folk tale interchangeably. However, what is important is King's use of traditional narrative forms – no matter what he happens to name them.

use of traditional narrative forms – no matter what he happens to name them. Nonetheless, fairy tales are not the only narrative folklore form that King uses; he also uses the contemporary legend. Importantly, the contemporary legends he uses reflect the anxieties of his characters and, by extension, his readers. Clearly, for King, horror exists at every age. The only thing that changes as we age is what scares us..

Certainly, in the 1980 novel *IT*, the horrifying thing that has been terrorizing the town of Derry and which is locked in battle with the Losers Club, articulates this difference:

> It had always fed well on children. Many adults could be used without knowing they had been used, and It had even fed on a few of the older ones over the years– adults had their own terrors, and their glands could be tapped, opened so that all the chemicals of fear flooded the body and salted the meat. But their fears were mostly too complex. The fears of children were simpler. . . . (974)

As the monster in *IT* states, what is feared changes over time. Thus fairy/folk tales are suitable for children because they have stock characters and clean lines; there is no ambiguity; they are simple. In childhood, a person is seen as good or evil, honest or dishonest, worthy of reward or not worthy of reward. Fairy/folk tales are predictable as they follow a formula, a structure.[31] But, it is this same structure that prevents fairy/folk tales from being suitable for adults. While adult popular formula fiction also follows a structure, the difference lies in the ambiguity of characters and the blurring of good and

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[31] One structure has been identified in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. In this text, through a study of the Russian fairy tales, Propp demonstrates that all tales consist of a possibility of 31 functions. Although not all functions may be present in a tale, the order of the tale always follows the order of the functions. Thus, Function 12 will never occur before Function 3.

evil. In horror fiction what scared us as children does not necessarily scare us as adults. Moreover, although good and evil are present in our lives, they are not always so easy to identify as the lines between them become blurred as we age.

This blurring of good and evil is evident in the characters in King's books. He presents his characters as ordinary people who just happen to be caught up in extraordinary events; as a result, they appear to be as human as the reader thus making them easier with which to identify. Enhancing this ease of identification is that King's observation of the details of human contemporary life, extend to the minute. His characters break social taboos as they do the mundane, everyday things that the reader does.

These details imbue King's work making him not just a writer of horror or fantasy fiction but a writer of realistic fiction. This realism empowers his work and the issues with which he deals within his work. As Magistrale says:

> No literature, not even the literature of supernatural terror, can be understood as discrete from the culture from which it arises. At the heart of King's fictional universe is a profound awareness of the most emotional and deep-seated American anxieties. Behind the supernatural veneer of wolfmen and spiders, which remains one of the great popular attractions of his fiction, his world mirrors our own. On a subconscious (or perhaps hyper-conscious) level, many of the loyal fans who read King's works for his delicious terrors are also drawn to them because of his explorations of social and personal conflicts. (150)

King's examination of the motivations of people and the society and institutions they create is important for the resulting reflection of our society and the commentary that

is made upon it. Because culture is a whole way of life, his books are one way for us to read our own culture. His books reflect our society and all of its failings. This mirroring, warts and all, is evident in his first book, *Carrie,* published in 1974.

Even within his supernatural works, such as *Carrie*, the details that he uses to create the world that surrounds Carrie are all realistic. His depiction of Carrie and her place among her peers is vivid. At the beginning of the novel Carrie has finished taking a shower after gym class with her classmates when her period begins. Not knowing what is happening to her Carrie begins to yell. In response the girls start to throw tampons and pads at her yelling "plug it up." As this is happening King illustrates for us what life has been like for Carrie:

> Yet there had been all these years, all these years of let's short-sheet Carrie's bed at Christian youth Camp and I found this love letter from Carrie to Flash Bobbie Pickett let's copy it and pass it around and hide her underpants somewhere and put this snake in her shoe and duck her again, duck her again; Carrie tagging along stubbornly on biking trips, known one year as pudd'n and the next year as truck-face, always smelling sweaty, not able to catch up; catching poison ivy from urinating in bushes and everyone finding out (hey, scratch-ass, your bum itch?); Billy Preston putting peanut butter in her hair that time she fell asleep in study hall; the pinches, the legs outstretched in school aisles to trip her up, the books knocked from her desk, the obscene postcard tucked into her purse; Carrie on the church picnic kneeling down clumsily to pray and the seam of her old madras skirt splitting along the zipper like the sound of a huge wind-breakage; Carrie always missing the ball, even in kickball, falling on her face in Modern

> Dance during their sophomore year and chipping a tooth, running into the net during volleyball; wearing stockings that were always run, running, or about to run, always showing sweat stains under the arms of her blouses . . . (8-9)

The picture of Carrie and her place among her peers is clear: she is the underdog, the scapegoat, the victim that no one likes and everyone takes a guilty pleasure in hating. As a result it becomes easy to understand why the girls respond to her as they do, how Carrie feels and why she responds as she does to a final prank.

Moreover, how the book is composed helps to create the feeling that all that is happening is real. Rather than a straightforward tale we are presented with a text that reveals the story through a montage of sources. The inclusion of excerpts and quotes from magazine articles, science reports, Carrie's notebook, Sue Snell's book, newspaper clippings, dictionaries and a case study of Carrie with his descriptive detail results in a text where the line between what is real and what is fantasy becomes blurred. It is this grounding in reality that allows the reader to accept the addition of that which is supernatural. In effect, his fiction is realistic as it is a mirror of our world.

Carrie is a fantasy/horror about an adolescent girl who is tormented by her mother, a religious fanatic, made the butt of jokes, bullied by her peers, treated callously and cruelly and finally made the victim of a humiliating prank. As a result, she inflicts vengeance upon her town, resulting in its destruction and the deaths of many of the town's young people. Because Carrie is telekinetic, the text could be looked upon as having entertainment value only. But, for many who remember what it was like to be a teen and for all the girls who remember the feelings associated with the rite of passage into womanhood, it says a lot more. Carrie's feelings of alienation and angst and her fear

of rejection are all too familiar to those who didn't sail comfortably through the teenage years as a member of the 'in' crowd. And for those of the 'in' crowd, there may be many who identify with the character of Sue Snell and her attempt to do the right thing, even though it could mean she loses her popularity and standing within the crowd.

Ultimately though, in *Carrie*, King removes the veil with which many of us cloak our memories of our youth. In this text, he provides a sociological reflection of teenage life. In so doing, he brutally exposes the reality of adolescence; he exposes the reality of girls' lives and the way that they bully each other through psychological games, and he does this years before this awareness of how girls fight became the subject of sociological studies. In effect, his work identifies a cultural truth long before it is picked up by the establishment and examined. Ultimately, when read culturally, this text denies us the illusion that there is any 'safe' place for our children to be as King shows the truth: school and home can both pose terrors for teenagers as they fight for the power and independence to make their own decisions and to maneuver for a place in society. Through his story, King is showing us that our belief that there is such a place as a safe place is an illusion. In reality there are no safe places and to tell ourselves there are is an illusion that could come to hurt us. King brings this to our attention to make us more aware of the horrors with which we co-exist.

As in *Carrie*, each of his stories examines or illustrates the social and personal conflicts with which we exist on a daily basis. We are not being filled with literary junk food; the horror within his texts has a resolution which illustrates a possible course of action for coming to terms with the reader's own horrors.

Whatever the reasons for the interest in King, it cannot be denied that he is a part of mainstream popular culture. Almost everyone knows his name, even if they have not read his works. Most importantly, whether you like or dislike King's fiction, it cannot be denied that his texts present a slice of contemporary life. If we are to understand our culture now, or future generations are to understand it then, this reflection is important for his stories present life as it is with enough detail to make this understanding possible.

In order to discuss how contemporary legends function within King's horror fiction it is first necessary to discuss what horror fiction is. This is necessary for the contemporary legends which most people are most familiar are the ones whose content is horrific in nature. One element that is common to these contemporary legends is their ironic outcome which is often horrific. King attempts to explain the notion of the horrific in his critical text *Danse Macabre.* In talking about horror King introduces an oral tale "of the sort that never has to be written down. It is simply passed mouth to mouth, around Boy Scout or Girl Scout campfires after the sun has gone down and marshmallows usually have been poked onto green sticks to roast above the coals" (32). He comments that he is sure the reader has heard this story but that he would like to tell it as he recalls having heard it "gape-mouthed with terror, as the sun went down behind the vacant lot in Stratford where we used to play scratch baseball when there were enough guys around to make up two teams" (32). He then recounts "The Hook" introducing it as "the most basic horror story I know:"

> "This guy and this girl go out on a date, you know? And they go parking up on Lover's Lane. So anyway, while they're driving up there, the radio breaks in with this bulletin. The guy says this dangerous homicidal maniac named The

Hook has just escaped from the Sunnydale Asylum for the Criminally Insane. They call him The Hook because that's what he's got instead of a right hand, this razor-sharp hook, and he used to hang around lover's lanes, you know, and he'd catch these people making out and cut their heads off with the hook. He could do that 'cause it was so sharp, you know, and when they caught him they found like about fifteen or twenty heads in his refrigerator. So the news guy says to be on the lookout for any guy with a hook instead of a hand, and to stay away from any dark, lonely spots where people go to, you know, get it on.

"So the girl says, Let's go home, okay? And the guy-he's this real big guy, you know with muscles on his muscles- he says, I'm not scared of that guy, and he's probably miles away from here anyway. So she goes, Come on Louie, I'm scared, Sunnydale Asylum isn't that far from here. Let's go back to my house. I'll make popcorn and we can watch TV.

"But the guy won't listen to her and pretty soon they're up on The Lookout, parked at the end of the road, makin' out like bandidos. But she keeps sayin' she wants to go home because they're the only car there, you know. That stuff about The Hook scared everybody else. . But he keeps sayin' Come on, don't be such a chicken, there's nothin' to be afraid of, and if there was I'd protectcha, stuff like that.

"So they keep makin' out for awhile and then she hears a noise-like a breakin' branch or something. Like someone is out there in the woods, creepin' up on them. So then she gets real upset, hysterical, crine and everything, like girls do. She's beggin' the guy to take her home. The guy keeps sayin' he doesn't hear

anything at all, but she looks up in the rearview mirror and thinks she sees someone all hunkered down at the back of the car, just peekin' in at them, and grinnin'. She says if he doesn't take her home she's never gonna go parkin' with him again and all that happy crappy. So finally he starts up the car and really peels out cause he's so jacked-off at her. In fact, he just about cracks them up.

"So anyway, they get home, you know, and the guy goes around to open the door for her, and when he gets there he just stands there, turnin' as white as a sheet, and his eyes are getting' so big that you'd think they was gonna fall out on his shoes. She says Louie, what's wrong? And he just faints dead away, right there on the sidewalk.

"She gets out to see what's wrong, and when she slams the car door she hears this funny clinking sound and turns around to see what it is. And there hanging from the doorhandle, is this razor-sharp hook" (32-33)

King calls "The Hook" "a simple, brutal classic of horror" (33) saying it offers: no characterization, no theme, no particular artifice; it does not aspire to symbolic beauty or try to summarize the times, the mind, or the human spirit. . . .. No, the story of The Hook exists for one reason and one reason alone: to scare the shit out of little kids after the sun goes down. (33-34)

King asserts that the point of horror is to scare the listener/reader. Noel Carroll discusses this idea further in his study *The Philosophy of Horror,* where he asserts that true works of horror elicit an emotional response in tandem with a physical response from the reader that mirrors those of the characters in the text caught up in the horrific event being presented (17-18). When a text generates this physical response from its reader

Carroll identifies this as "art-horror" (15). If you feel scared but have no physical response such as an increased heart beat or shivers then it is not art-horror. It is art-horror that King tries to create within his reader: "I recognize terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorize the reader" but he admits that if he cannot succeed in generating terror he "will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud" (*Danse Macabre* i).

Both Carroll and King try to explain the popularity of horror by exploring its purpose. In *Dance Macabre* King argues that the main purpose of horror is "to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands" (368). He states:

> within the framework of most horror tales we find a moral code so strong it would make a Puritan smile. In the old E. C. Comics, adulterers inevitably came to bad ends and murderers suffered fates that would make the rack and the boot look like kiddy rides at the carnival. Modern horror stories are not much different from the morality plays of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when we get right down to it. The horror story most generally not only stands foursquare for the Ten Commandments, it blows them up to tabloid size. We have the comforting knowledge when the lights go down in the theatre or when we open the book that the evildoers will almost certainly be punished and measure will be returned for measure. (368)

Clearly King's view reinforces the Gramscian idea of societal mores being challenged or supported through the common sense presented in the text, as those that deserve

punishment receive it and those who don't go unpunished. The difference between who is punished and who is not lies in the complexity or simplicity of the social transgression.

For Carroll horror is all about uncertainty. He posits that horror moves in cycles, a point King makes as well, and it is most popular when there is instability and uncertainty. When the economy is booming and times are easy horror fiction is not as popular. To Carroll postmodernism and horror have something in common as "both articulate an anxiety about cultural categories" (212). For Carroll, however, the main purpose of horror is not so much about good and evil and how evil loses, but, rather, what it says. For Carroll,

> contemporary horror fiction embodies. . . cultural anxieties. Its expiation on the instability of norms–both classificatory and moral–its nostalgic allusions, the sense of helplessness and paralysis it engenders in its characters, the theme of the person-as-meat, the paranoia of its narrative structures, all seem to address an uncertainty about living in the contemporary world. . . . (213)

For Carroll horror is all about cultural anxiety. To him, that this is what horror reflects ties in with its popularity. Obviously, if there are few anxieties there will be no need for horror. If there are a lot of anxieties then horror will proliferate as a vehicle for the expression of these anxieties.

Most importantly, although both King and Carroll approach horror a little differently, what is interesting is that both see it as reflecting something cultural. For King that reflection involves the reinforcement of our world as we see it through the punishment of those that transgress our cultural norms (common sense). For Carroll that

reflection is of the cultural distress that our contemporary society may be feeling. Ultimately, both approaches can be applied to the contemporary legend canon and horror story as they are seen to reflect the concerns, beliefs, fears, debates of their society and in so doing reinforce or challenge the common sense of that same society.

The Theory of the Unknown

The horror contemporary legend as a narrative form is one that can fit easily into larger horror fiction as both forms complement each other. However, what is fascinating is how King develops what makes the contemporary legend real. He takes the details that ground it in reality, such as the fear of clowns and disguise in *IT,* the smell motif of the "Death Car," used in his 1982 novel *Christine*[32] and the anxiety of being trapped in "Superhero Hi Jinks," used in 1992 novel *Gerald's Game,* and expands them into full stories. He does this by grounding the generality of the contemporary legend and replacing this generality with a pattern of sharp detail. In *Gerald's Game,* this detail is enhanced through the flashbacks experienced by the main character in connection with the inner dialogues she has between various aspects of her personality and friends from her past, thus blurring the line between known story and possible truth. This blurring of the line between known story and possible truth results in a shift from the knowledge that the phenomenon is a fantasy, to the knowledge that it is a reality. The transition is subtle. We see a contemporary legend and move from legend to reality, within the text and the reader, all in the framework of fiction; in effect, what seems strange is accepted as

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[32] The smell motif of "The Death Car" is one that King comes back to. As well as in *Christine* it appears in his 2002 novel *Tales from a Buick 8*, and in his short story "Riding the Bullet" which appears in his 2002 short story collection *Everything's Eventual.*

possible truth and what seems like truth takes on overtones of fantasy resulting in a blurring of the real with the unreal.

This transition is necessary because of the nature of the unknown. The unknown is what makes the horror. King's novel *IT* has as the protagonist an enigma. What is IT? The answer is not clear for IT is the thing that is not known, nothing is behind IT. A pronoun without reference, the thing is just IT: something outside our experience which pulls together the nature of what is known with what is not. This idea of the unknown can be seen in *IT, Christine* and *Gerald's Game*. In each text the known is juxtaposed with the unknown. In *Christine* the horror comes from the known of technology juxtaposed with the unknown of what it could do and our secret fears about what could happen if technology becomes advanced enough to assume control; in *Gerald's Game* the known of Jessie's life is juxtaposed with what she must remember and learn about the unknown, that which she has experienced but forgotten, if she is to survive. This is possible only through a horrific circumstance. In *IT* the pronoun reference is to a clown disguise, but as it is a disguise it refers to something we can't know. This unknown is made more powerful with the addition of belief and our awareness that as adults we can not distinguish easily between those of the many people we meet on a daily basis who are in disguise and who pose danger to us and those who are not in disguise and are of no danger.

Contemporary legends spread because they sound believable or are believed. Horror is effective because, on some level, we believe whatever it is that we are afraid of is possible. As the character IT in *IT,* realizes, belief allows horror to survive yet, "belief has a second edge. If there are ten thousand medieval peasants who create vampires by

believing them real, there may be one–probably a child–who will imagine the stake necessary to kill it [the vampire]. But a stake is only stupid wood; the mind is the mallet which drives it [the mallet] home" (974).

King has picked up the unknown and melded it with the belief that promulgates the contemporary legends that he consciously or unconsciously uses. The expansion of both the unknown and the belief that allows it is where the horror is developed. The unknown is the technologically sublime, the unknown monstrous nature of things. King takes the IT, the tiny little thing and makes it bigger and bigger and so the core of horror in the contemporary legends that he uses grows and grows. Thus his use of the unknown and this exploration of the unknown is what underpins the horror in King's texts. This unknown is compatible with the unknown expressed in the contemporary legend texts upon which he builds his novels *IT, Christine* and *Gerald's Game*.

Chapter Seven

Stephen's King's *IT*: Not Just Clowning Around

Stephen King's novel *IT,* published in 1986, has a contemporary legend as a major functional device. King's story is similar to the contemporary legend "Homey the Clown" or "Phantom Clowns." "Homey the Clown" involves a van of one or more clowns that roams the city or town looking for children either to abduct or kill, but the clown(s) is/are unsuccessful. In his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, Brunvand notes that:

> the first documented outbreak of the phantom-clown stories was from 1981, as reported by Loren Coleman. The scare of that year raged from New England through the Midwest and described clowns in a variety of disguises who were supposedly driving vans of many colors and wielding swords, knives or guns." (314)

He continues on to note that the stories surfaced again in 1985 and 1991.

Although circulation of this contemporary legend and its versions are acknowledged, scholarship on it in particular is thin. Yet the type of story that it represents is common, kidnap stories. Michael Goss, in talking about kidnap stories, says that they all share common roots and have the same basic format: one group is kidnapping and abusing children for their own rituals. Whether the stories are true or not is not necessarily certain but when discussing their creation he adds:

> there is a strong possibility that whereas children may adopt and react to an evil image projected by their nervous parents or by other adult – and if the real villains of the satanic child abuse panic are the horror films on TV or video the latter

> would have to be true – it seems equally certain that another kidnap flaps the point of origin lies in what children themselves fear. Take Loren Coleman's accounts . . . of a spate of "phantom clowns" attempting frightening children[sic] across a wide geographical span of America – Boston and outlying Massachusetts cities, Kansas City, Omaha, Pittsburgh – over a relatively short space of time (May-June 1981). He is not entirely certain that, despite the lack of arrests, the alleged incidents were entirely without foundation. We could also say that the element of risk or kidnap was more potential than actual. Mr. Coleman writes of "Ronald McDonald, a modern Pied Piper with a mission," but who was the first to notice the bizarre ghastliness that dwells in the clown-caricature features we are supposed to love? Was it the parents who, unnerved by the numbers of people children are taught to take on trust, suddenly perceived that clowns maybe aren't so lovable after all? Or was it the children who first admitted that a strangely behaving, garishly abnormal fellow with a smile too big and too bright to be reassuring, is fundamentally untrustworthy?[33]

At the end of *IT* King writes, "This book was begun in Bangor, Maine, on September 9th, 1981, and completed in Bangor, Maine, on December 28th, 1985" (1090).

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[33] Michael Goss "The Lessons of Folklore" in *Magonia* 38, the SRA issue. Alien abductions, Satanic Ritual Abuse, Faerie Kidnappings, phantom clowns; they all share common roots in the rich history of folklore.
http://www.magonia.demon.co.uk/arc/90/folklore.htm referencing 6. Fate, March 1982,

His acknowledged beginning and ending dates correspond with when the contemporary legend was in circulation. Although, as Brunvand suggests, there is the possibility that the resurfacing of the contemporary legend in 1991 may be linked to King's story *IT*, the fact that the stories first surfaced in 1981 also means that it is very possible that King was aware of this legend when it was in circulation. However, whether his use was conscious, or not, in his novel *IT* the contemporary legend acts as a major functional device in that it is a frame of reference which is used not once but twice in the text as the contemporary legend is acted out and then repeated, but with an older cast. Of course, the details of this story and the development of the characters in the novel *IT* are beyond what would have been provided in even the most developed of contemporary legends as King is not writing a story about the contemporary legend, but writing a story in its own right.

As a frame of reference the contemporary legend has a huge impact on the text. First, it provides the reader who is familiar with the contemporary legend a means of identifying the setting and plot. Second, the use of an accepted circulating contemporary legend adds realistic detail to the text. This realistic detail is important as horror fiction is a genre in which the reader's acceptance of truth or belief in what they are reading is integral to the success of the story. This feeling of horror is enhanced as the parallel actions and characters between the contemporary legend and the story in both parts develop inter and intratextuality serving to blur the line between the real and the unreal, thus enhancing the horror. Third, what the contemporary legend is articulating King uses to, in this case, challenge the status quo. Finally, the content of the contemporary legend provides insight into the text as the concerns and anxieties the contemporary legend voices are echoed in the text. Finally, although different individuals and different

readings will generate different meanings and themes, the repetition of the contemporary legend scenario serves to validate these themes and to draw attention to the value of the themes or morals expressed for society as a whole, not just one segment of society.

The reality of childhood and all of its threats are what is hinted at in the "Homey the Clown" contemporary legend and brought out in full in *IT*. In the contemporary legend the message is about the danger strangers pose. The children being approached in the contemporary legend are able to identify the clowns as strangers because of their appearance – no one they know would need to hide their face, thus, they may be strangers. In the novel King takes this message and develops it to include the awareness that danger may not only come from a stranger and the resulting need to look beyond the surface to what is below. The first confrontation occurs between It, in the guise of Pennywise the Clown, and children in 1958. The second confrontation occurs between It, in the guise of Pennywise the Clown, and the same characters but when they are adults in 1985.

Why the use of a clown as a threat? In his book Baby Train, Brunvand ponders, "perhaps one underlying fact is that many little children are frightened by clowns in their grotesque costumes and heavy make-up, despite parents' belief that all kids love clowns" (104). Whether we accept Brunvand's explanation for clowns as a threat or not, there is truth to it. Even if a child expresses fear at the sight of a clown, adults tend to laugh and to say, "it's all right. He won't hurt you," thereby invalidating the child's feelings and encouraging them to ignore their own sense of danger. But to a child's mind, what they see is reality. A child's mind is flexible and accepts what an adult's mind does not.

By repeating the contemporary legend scenario, the message is sent that if we are to survive in this world it is imperative that we see past disguise to the stranger below no matter our developmental stage and the importance of finishing what we start. As well, the scenarios that both the antagonist and protagonists deal with are similar in both sections. This reinforces the idea that it is necessary to finish what we start.

IT tells the story of this group as they band together to fight an evil power that is destroying the town of Derry. In this case, *IT* is not just the name of the text but also the name of the antagonist. Pennywise the Clown is one of the main characters in *IT*. In fact, in his natural state, minus the clown make-up, he is It. He is described as It because there are no words to describe what he really is. Although throughout the text and Derry's history he most often appears as Pennywise the Clown, no one knows what his real form is or even if he is a he. This ambiguity as to his nature is because he also appears as whatever creature/thing of which the person with whom he is dealing is most frightened. The fact that we cannot "know" him, that his true nature is unknown, is a part of the horror. His true nature is unknown on a number of levels: to the children his real appearance is unknown, to the townspeople his pervasiveness and influence on their town's history is unknown, to everyone the full extent of his evil is unknown, at least until the end of the first battle when the children realize how evil he really is.

This ambiguity, this ability to be and remain unknown, is possible because a clown is by its nature in disguise, thus Pennywise is able to take the look of anything and anyone that it wishes; therefore, it is logical for Pennywise to be able to appear as any of its victims or appear as whatever the potential victim fears or likes. The problem is that because of the unknown nature of the antagonist, defeat is difficult as different means

must be used to destroy different enemies. For example, most creatures can be killed by a bullet, but a werewolf can only be killed by a silver bullet. Thus, It can only be defeated by whatever means is necessary to kill It in whichever incarnation It appears at the moment of the battle. Nonetheless, the mutable nature of the antagonist is also one of its weaknesses for as It knows "all living things must abide by the laws of the shape they inhabit" (966).

It most often appears in the guise of Pennywise the Clown. The clown is also the main character of the contemporary legend and so the connection to the contemporary legend is made. The contemporary legend can be seen as a major functional device for three reasons: the death of George is the pivotal moment for the text as it sets the stage for all that is about to happen and this death corresponds with the intent behind the contemporary legend "Homey the Clown." The main character from this contemporary legend appears throughout the text most often as Pennywise the clown. Finally, ultimately, just as in the contemporary legend, the children escape or in this case, defeat, the threat posed by the clown.

In the first part of the novel the children that fight Pennywise are able to see past the surface, the disguise, because all of them are outsiders. Because of their differences, they are not innocent youth. They are not innocent because they are not allowed to be. As Tony Magistrale notes in *Stephen King The Second Decade, Danse Macabre to the Dark Half* the disguises of Pennywise are

> symbolic of the masks that disguise and distort the true history of Derry itself. Underneath the veneer of Rotary Clubs and dusk curfews established out of concern for its children is Derry's reality, a history of persecution of outsiders –

> from blacks (as Hanlon's father reveals in his remembrance of the Black Spot), to the children who play in and around the town, to Adrian Mellon, who is murdered because he is a homosexual. Like the town's children, the gay and black communities of Derry exist outside of the social mainstream. This puts them in the position to comprehend the workings of Derry more clearly than the rest of the town at the same time as they are the victims of its violent prejudices. (103-4)

The children who fight Pennywise are able to do so because they are outside of mainstream Derry. All of them are marginalized. It is this marginalization that holds the characters together. In effect they are all outsiders looking in for some reason or another. Because they are on the outside looking in, they are able to see past the disguise that surrounds not just their own little world as children but the larger world that they inhabit in Derry. This ability to see beyond the disguise means that they are the ones that can see past the make-up of Pennywise, no matter which make-up he wears. Only they can see past the clown, past the disguise to the truth, the threat, that is below. Moreover, they know the truth: danger does not just come from strangers but also from those you know.

There are seven members in the group. One member is Bill Denbrough, the brother of the first victim, George. As a child he stuttered; as an adult he is a famous writer. Another member is Stanley Uris who as a child was an avid bird watcher but outside of the mainstream because he was Jewish. As an adult he is a successful accountant with his own business. However, he commits suicide rather than fight It when It returns again in 1984. As a child the third member, Richard Tozier, wore thick glasses and had a wise mouth that always got him into trouble. As an adult he has become a radio personality with a thousand voices. Mike Hanlon is the only member of the group

to stay in Derry after the first confrontation with It. He is the one who calls the others back when Pennywise returns. As a child Mike was an outsider because of the colour of his skin, black. As an adult he is the town librarian and historian. The fifth member of the group is the only female. Beverly Marsh was an outsider as a child because she was poor and lived on the wrong side of the tracks. Moreover, her father beat her. As an adult she has become a successful designer with her own company. Ben Hanscom was the fattest boy in Derry as a child and was tormented because of his weight. As an adult he is in good condition and has become a famous architect. The last member of the group is Eddie Kaspbrak. As a child he was under the control of his domineering mother who was convinced he was delicate and had asthma. Because of her beliefs he was not allowed to take part in school sports and was ostracized by many of his peers. As an adult he runs a successful limo business.

The first incident in *IT* is pivotal, for it marks the beginning of the active conflict between good and evil in the town of Derry and it does so through the appearance of a clown. This conflict between good and evil is set up through this incident, and it introduces Pennywise and involves the death of a young boy, George Denbrough. Chasing a newspaper boat during a rain storm, George is upset when he sees his boat disappear into a storm drain. He is upset in part because the boat was made by himself and his brother Bill, whom he admires. Bending over the drain George looks down and is amazed at what he sees. In the drain is a clown and the clown is holding George's boat. In the novel, as a departure from the contemporary legend, the character of the clown is developed. Pennywise the Clown is given extraordinary abilities. These include the ability to change his form, cunning and the ability to manipulate.

Ultimately, though, this clown like the clowns in the contemporary legend, is a threat. This clown, like the clowns in the legend, is attempting to abduct a child. He is not trying to get George into a van but he is trying to get him into the sewer. Both the van and the sewer imply movement away from the child's natural environment. However, unlike the clowns in the contemporary legend, this clown succeeds and, as a result, George is killed.

The depth of the illusion that is drawn for George shows that Pennywise is no ordinary clown. At each point that George could potentially pull back, Pennywise is able to come up with something to keep him interested. Pennywise entices George at first because of the oddness of a clown being in the storm drain:

> There was a clown in the stormdrain. The light in there was far from good, but it was good enough so that George Denbrough was sure of what he was seeing. It was a clown, like in the circus or on TV. In fact he looked like a cross between Bozo and Clarabell, ... The face of the clown in the stormdrain was white, there were funny tufts of red hair on either side of his bald head, and there was a big clown-smile painted over his mouth.... The clown held a bunch of balloons, all colors, like gorgeous ripe fruit in one hand.
>
> In the other he held George's newspaper boat. (12-13)

Captured by the oddity of a clown being in a stormdrain, George's uneasiness is lulled when the clown says it is in the stormdrain because it was blown away from the circus. The clown then maneuvers around George's fear of talking to, or taking things from,

strangers by cleverly introducing himself to George giving both a real sounding name and then his clown name,

> "I'm not supposed to take stuff from strangers. My dad said so."
>
> "Very wise of your dad," the clown in the stormdrain said, smiling . . . "Very wise indeed. Therefore I will introduce myself. I, Georgie, am Mr. Bob Gray, also known as Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Pennywise, meet George Denbrough. George, meet Pennywise. And now we know each other. I'm not a stranger to you, and you're not a stranger to me. Kee-rect?" (13)

Now that they are formally introduced, one of George's barriers to talking with the clown is removed. The clown then removes the final barrier. He peaks George's interest by asking if George can smell the circus. The action of Pennywise, however, that ensures that George will join him in the drain is the suggestion that George does not really want his boat or the balloons that Pennywise is offering to give him. Pennywise, aware of the esteem George holds for his brother Bill and the fact that it is Bill who had helped George to make the boat even though he was home sick, knows that George does not want to lose the boat.

By playing on George's curiosity, natural love of the circus, his indoctrination that clowns are there to make us laugh and are our friends, and his feelings for his brother, Pennywise is able to get past the natural barriers of self-protection set up by the teachings of George's parents. Once Pennywise is past these barriers, all it takes is the lure of something that is fun, the balloons, and the promise of the return of something important that George thinks that he has lost, the newspaper boat, for Pennywise to be able to kill George,

George reached.

The clown seized his arm.

And George saw the clown's face change.

What he saw then was terrible enough to make his worst imagination of the thing in the cellar look like sweet dreams; what he saw destroyed his sanity in one clawing stroke.

"They *float*," the thing in the drain crooned in a clotted, chuckling voice. It held Georgie's arm in its thick and wormy grip, it pulled George toward that terrible darkness where the water rushed and roared and bellowed and bore its cargo of storm debris toward the sea. George craned his neck away from that final blackness and began to scream into the rain, to scream mindlessly into the white autumn sky which curved above Derry on that day in the fall of 1957. His screams were shrill and piercing, and all up and down Witcham Street people came to their windows or bolted out onto their porches. (14)

Although the clown is not riding in a van, it is trying to abduct and kill a child. Pennywise, like Homey in the contemporary legend, has one thing as his intent: to get the child. Although he does not get all of George, as we see in the description of George after he is pulled from the drain, he does get George's arm, "the left side of George's slicker was now bright red. Blood flowed into the stormdrain from the tattered hole where the left arm had been. A knob of bone, horribly bright, peeked through the torn cloth" (14). Pennywise is only able to get George's arm but, more importantly, he is able to kill George.

We have to acknowledge that George is killed by Pennywise because there is no evidence that he drowned. The screams would have been impossible, and even though George could have survived the loss of his arm (help reached him within 45 seconds which is enough time to halt the bleeding), he does not. George is already dead when help arrives. George dies from shock.

The complicating incident that introduces the threat of a clown is a version of the contemporary legend "Homey the Clown." Until this point the actions of the contemporary legend and the fiction are parallel. The reader familiar with the contemporary legend will be able to identify the setting, any town North America, and the plot, an attempted abduction. However, the horror comes in the difference between the two; unlike in the contemporary legend, in the beginning the clown in *IT* appears to be successful as it kills its first intended victim, George Denbrough. As well, although the clown appears to look like a clown, in actuality it is not. The physical being may have killed him but the Itness of "It," the unknown, supplies the deeper horror. George's sanity is destroyed by what he saw and what he saw was worse than he could even imagine: "What he saw then was terrible enough to make his worst imagination of the thing in the cellar look like sweet dreams: what he saw destroyed his sanity in one clawing stroke" (14). George loses his life and his sanity simultaneously because he is not equipped to handle the horror that is the unknown of It.

Even though the contemporary legend and the story do not appear to end the same way, in actuality they do. Although the clown is successful in killing George and other children, it is not successful in its attempt to kidnap and destroy all of the children of

Derry. Moreover, just as in the contemporary legend, the clown does not get the children that it really wants as, ultimately, those children defeat it.

During the first battle for Derry the members of the group were roughly eleven years old. During the second battle they are all twenty-eight years older. Nonetheless, the success of this battle rests on their ability to remember how they fought the first time. As well, during the second battle they are only adults by age. Many of their advantages over the clown have been removed; in returning to Derry, they change, not of their own volition, to how they were as children. As a result we see parallels between both battles: Bill's stutter returns and in a second hand store he finds and buys Silver, the bike he had ridden that summer. Eddie's arm is broken once again as it was during their battle with It the first time and his asthma acts up as well; Richie can no longer wear his contacts as they burn his eyes and has to wear his glasses instead; Ben's scars from Henry Bowers, the school bully who victimized all of the Losers at one time or another, return. Henry Bowers escapes the mental hospital in which he is incarcerated through the machinations if It to threaten Mike again as he did the summer of the first battle. Finally, Bev is again running from an abusive and sexually threatening man, this time her husband instead of her father. All of them also have scars from the cuts on their palm; cuts that up until their return to Derry had not been visible; cuts they had made at the conclusion of the first battle, joining their hands and their blood in a vow to fight Pennywise again if needed. Ultimately, their success in the second battle is based on what they learned from the first battle; it rests on what they did and said when they were children.

In the story, like in the contemporary legend, the children escape. However, there appear to be differences between the contemporary legend and the story during the

second battle. When the battle to fight Pennywise begins again in 1985, unlike in 1958, at the beginning Pennywise does not appear to go after a child but an adult instead. Moreover, Pennywise does not go after the victim himself but is near-by when town bullies attack Adrian Mellon. They attack Adrian because Adrian is a homosexual. They beat him senseless and then throw him over the Main Street Bridge. While all this is happening Pennywise is lurking below the bridge. The victim could have survived being thrown over the bridge but Pennywise is there to administer the final blow. In addition, the victim is not the only one to see It in the guise of Pennywise the clown. Two other people, the victim's boyfriend Don Hagarty and one of the attackers, Chris Unwin, see It in the guise of the clown as well.

Yet, although the death of an adult and the sighting of Pennywise make it appear that there are differences between the first section of the text and the second section of the text, things are not really different. Those who see Pennywise and those who are attacked and killed by Pennywise are, as were the children, outsiders. As well, the killing of Adrian signals the beginning of the second part of the battle. In this part those who defeated Pennywise during the first battle return. Where they were children, they are now adults. Their second appearance as adults allows the attack to be against an adult, but an adult who is an outsider. Moreover, it is the attack on the adult and the sighting of Pennywise by two others adults that signals to Mike, now the town librarian, that it is almost time to call the others back to finish the job they had started 27 years before.

Knowing that their enemy could surface again, Mike stayed in Derry in the role of librarian and unofficial historian. In his role as unofficial historian, Mike has spent the intervening years completing the history of Derry that his father had begun before him by

interviewing Derry old timers about events in the town's history. During his research an interesting pattern has emerged. Derry has cycles of upheaval followed by cycles of calm. The cycles of upheaval all involve mass acts of destruction and the reports of missing or dead children. As well, during the cycles of upheaval and the resulting fear, one character is always present – a man dressed as a clown. For the children of Derry, a clown is a natural part of its history.

Mike recognizes the killing of Adrian, and the talk that a clown was present, as the start of a new cycle, and proof that the Losers Club hadn't killed the clown in their last encounter. For Mike, Hagarty's description of the clown and what the clown says connects this event with the one from the opening chapter. This strengthens the connection between both halves of the novel and the contemporary legend. During his discussions with the police, Hagarty tries describing the clown to them:

> The clown, Hagarty said, looked like a cross between Ronald McDonald and that old TV clown, Bozo–or so he thought at first. It was the wild tufts of orange hair that brought such comparisons to mind. But later consideration had caused him to think the clown really looked like neither. The smile painted over the white pancake was red, not orange, and the eyes were a weird shiny silver . . . . He wore a baggy suit with big orange-pompom buttons; on his hands were cartoon gloves.
>
> "If you need help, Don," the clown said, "help yourself to a balloon." And it offered the bunch it held in one hand.
>
> "They float," the clown said. "Down here we all float; pretty soon your friend will float, too." (31-2)

Clearly, Pennywise the Clown is back. We know it is the same character because of Hagarty's comparison of the clown to Bozo, just as George thought of him, and because of what the clown says. It's comment that they [the balloons] float is the same thing that It said to George just before It killed him by pulling off his arm. Later we also find that Adrian, like George, appears to have been killed by a bite to his arm. In fact, when Chris Unwin is speaking to the police about what happened that day he mentions seeing a clown and tells the police, "I think it bit into his armpit . . . Like it wanted to eat him . . . Like it wanted to eat his heart" (33). Unfortunately, because Unwin is a small time delinquent and Hagarty is a homosexual, both are outsiders; thus, no one listens to or believes either of them and so the threat of the clown is dismissed.

With the death of Adrian and the identification of Pennywise it is as if the clown wants to make sure Mike does not miss what is going on. And he does not. Mike follows the reports of the nine dead and missing children that ensue. During this time, the clown sends messages that only Mike and the other Losers can understand. After he has called back the Losers, during a meeting Mike tells them about one such message,

> "In February a boy named Dennis Torrio disappeared. A high-school boy. His body was found in mid-March, in the Barrens. Mutilated. This was nearby."
>
> He took a photograph from the same pocket into which he had replaced the notebook. It made its way around the table. Beverly and Eddie looked at it, puzzled, but Ritchie Tozier reacted violently. He dropped it as if it were hot. "Jesus! Jesus, Mike!" He looked up, his eyes wide and shocked.
>
> A moment later he passed the picture to Bill.

> Bill looked at it and felt the world swim into gray tones all around him. For a moment he was sure he would pass out. He heard a groan, and knew he had made the sound. He dropped the picture.
>
> "What is it?" he heard Beverly saying. "What does it mean, Bill?"
>
> "It's my brother's school picture," Bill said at last. It's Juh-Georgie. The picture from his album. The one that moved. The one that winked."
>
> . . . .
>
> "It was found *this year?*" Beverly asked again. Mike nodded and she turned to Bill. "When did you last see it, Bill?" . . . .
>
> "I haven't seen that picture since 1958. That spring, the year after George died. When I tried to show it to Ritchie, it was g-gone." (482)

Pennywise the Clown has sent a message that would only be understood by the Losers. They would all recognize the significance of a picture of his first victim being found next to another victim. The message being sent is clear; It is back. The purpose behind the messages is to have Mike call back the Losers so they can finish the battle begun so long ago.

However, although he recognizes the messages for what they are at the beginning, Mike finds himself unable to act. Mike is now an adult and as an adult finds it difficult to believe that anything so strange could really be happening. When he tries to explain this hesitancy to the others he says, "It was as if I was hypnotized by what was happening, by the *consciousness* of it – the *deliberateness* of it. George's picture was found by a fallen log less than ten feet from the Torrio boy's body. It wasn't hidden; quite the contrary. It was as if the killer wanted it to be found. As I'm sure the killer did" (482-483). Despite

the clear messages Mike is sent, he is paralyzed, hesitant, the adult in him unable to believe the cycle is really happening again and unable to imagine how they will defeat It a second time.

In pondering the cyclical appearance of the clown and why It always goes after children Mike reflects about the importance of faith in It's survival:

> What does It *really* eat, for instance? I know that some of the children have been partially eaten–they show bite-marks, at least–but perhaps it is *we* who drive It to do that. Certainly we have all been taught since earliest childhood that what the monster does when it catches you in the deep wood is eat you. That is perhaps the worst thing we can conceive. But it's really faith that monsters live on, isn't it? I am led irresistibly to this conclusion: food may be life, but the source of power is faith, not food. And who is more capable of a total act of faith than a child?
>
> But there's a problem: kids grow up. In the church, power is perpetrated and renewed by periodic ritualistic acts. In Derry, power seems to be perpetuated and renewed by periodic ritualistic acts, too. Can it be that It protects Itself by the simple fact that, as children grow into adults, they become either incapable of faith or crippled by a sort of spiritual and imaginative arthritis? (855)

Mike is more correct than he knows. This act of faith, or belief, is what feeds this unknown enemy and ultimately what will defeat It. This also explains why adults are unable to really see It; they no longer have the faith, the belief, in the supernatural and the things that go bump in the night. As adults they know that there are rational explanations

for everything. Their fears are, as It reflects, "too complex" whereas "the fears of children were simpler and usually more powerful. The fears of children could often be summoned up in a single face . . .and if bait were needed, why, what child did not love a clown?" (974).

However, if, as It says, the fears of children are easier, why does It call back the Losers Club? It calls back the Losers Club because they are the children who escaped and who almost defeated It. However, now they are adults and, thus weaker. As Mike determines:

> Why call us back? Why not just let us die? Because we nearly killed It, because we frightened It, I think. Because It wants revenge.
>
> And now, now that we no longer believe in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, Hansel and Gretel, or the troll under the bridge, It is ready for us. *Come on back,* It says. *Come on back, let's finish our business in Derry. Bring your jacks and your marbles and your yo-yo! We'll play! Come on back and we'll see if you remember the simplest thing of all: how it is to be children, secure in belief and thus afraid of the dark.* (856)

Finally, Mike is sent a message that the adult in him can no longer ignore. As he explains to the Losers the body of a fifth grader had been found. Next to what was left of his body,

> Printing straggled its way across the concrete retaining wall. It said:
>
> COME HOME COME HOME COME HOME
>
> Bill looked at Mike grimly. He had been bewildered and frightened; now he felt the first stirrings of anger. He was glad. Angry was not such a great

way to feel, but it was better than the shock, better than the miserable fear.

"Is that written in what I think it's written in?"

"Yes," Mike said. "Jerry Bellwood's blood." (485-6)

Pennywise has called and the Losers Club cannot ignore the calls. They must honour the vow they made at the end of the first battle. They vowed that if It ever came back so too would they.

Because the Losers Club had seen Pennywise and were able to recognize him in various disguises and were able to deal with the always unknown expectation of his presentation when they were children, they are able to deal with him when he shows himself again, in whatever form, when they are adults. However, Bill's wife, Audra, does not have this former frame of reference nor does she have the flexibility to accept how the clown appears to her, and thus she when she meets up with Pennywise she lapses into a catatonic state.

This misperception or unwillingness of adults to recognize the truth is brought out in *IT*. Mike talks to the Losers about the first time he saw Pennywise the Clown. He had been playing the trombone with the Niebolt Church School Band in the Fourth of July Parade:

> Anyway, I saw the clown. He was handing out balloons to kids on the three-way corner downtown. He was just like Ben and Bill said. Silver suit, orange buttons, white makeup on his face, big red smile. I don't know if it was lipstick or makeup, but it looked like blood. (678).

He continues on to talk about how seeing Pennywise scared him. However what scared him more was seeing him again, "'Then we were past,' Mike went on. 'We marched up

Main Street Hill. And I saw him *again,* handing out balloons to kids. Except a lot of them didn't want to take them. Some of the little ones were crying'" (679). Only little children who have not been socialized to accept the clown at face value see It for what It is: It, the unknown horror. Only little children, not fully integrated into society as the Losers are not integrated into society, are able to see It.

That it is only those who are too little or marginalized who can see the true nature of Pennywise is seen again when Mike shows the Losers his father's photo collection showing events in Derry's history. Mike tells them that the reason he had been so scared when he saw Pennywise in the parade was because he was sure he had recognized him from his father's photo collection. As they look through the album they see Pennywise present in all parts of Derry's history. One picture showing a parade for the return of soldiers from World War I shows Pennywise prancing

> along the sidelines, doing splits and cartwheels, miming a sniper, miming a salute. And Bill noticed for the first time that people were turning from him–but not as if they *saw* him, exactly; it was more as if they felt a draft or smelled something bad. Only the children really see him, and they shrank away. (696)

And, ultimately, this ability lets the children defeat the clown the first time, move away from Derry and become successful. It also allows them to return to Derry and defeat the clown the second time. And there is a reward for their ability to see past the disguise of the clown and their willingness to fight evil. Unlike the rest of Derry's inhabitants, the adults, the world of those that fight this unknown horror does not crumble upon them after its death. Derry falls apart, literally and figuratively, when Pennywise is killed. All of those in Derry who prospered by ignoring the odd things that happened in

the town including the disproportionately high number of child abductions, have their lives and or livelihoods destroyed.

Contemporary Legend, Text and Belief

King does depart from the contemporary legend. But he does not stray too far from it. In the novel the children battle the clown. In the contemporary legend there is no physical battle of the same degree as in the novel; however, they do resist the lure of the clowns because they do resist getting into the clown's vans. This resistance can be interpreted as a success in a battle of intent. In the novel, in the first battle, the children are able to defeat Pennywise. They are able to do so because they act together and because of the power of their belief.

The children's power comes from uniting. As Pennywise muses, "Any of these seven alone would have been It's meat and drink, and if they had not happened to come together, It surely would have picked them off one by one, drawn by the quality of their minds just as a lion might be drawn to one particular waterhole by the scent of a zebra" (974). But their power also comes from the very thing that attracts It to them: their imagination. The power of their imagination and their belief is such that even It learns something:

> together they had discovered an alarming secret that even It had not been aware of: that belief has a second edge. If there are ten thousand medieval peasants who create vampires by believing them real, there may be one–probably a child–who will imagine the stake necessary to kill it[sic]. (974)

As children they believe in vampires and werewolves and other horrors; thus they also know what is needed to kill these horrors. It is this belief that allows them to defeat

It. They enact the ritual of Chud to determine how to kill Pennywise. It is their belief that also protects them. In addition they each have their own weapon that helps when they fight the horror. Each child's weapon represents something about them that gives them power. Ben's weapon is his library card; Richie's weapon is his voice; Bill's weapon is his bike, Silver; Stan's weapon is his knowledge of birds; Eddie's weapon is his asthma inhaler; Mike's weapon is his father's history of Derry and Bev's weapon is her innocence as represented by her virginity. At different occasions during their battles with the antagonist, the use of one of these weapons allows them all to escape.

Unfortunately, although the children defeat the evil that is Pennywise in 1958, they do not kill It. It goes deep into the barrens but the children, terrified and exhausted, do not follow. Instead they choose to believe that It is dead or dying. Nonetheless, they make an oath that if It ever returns to Derry they will return to fight It.

The banding together of the Losers Club is important for what it shows. It shows that belief is, indeed as It knows, a two edged sword. Belief can paralyze us, but it can also set us free. When they were children they believed that a silver slug would kill or hurt a werewolf. And when they fought Pennywise in that shape, It was hurt. It also shows that power also comes from knowledge–in the house of Neibolt Street Bill is not fooled by the illusion that the house is getting bigger. He knows it is a fun house illusion and so, in spite of what his eyes see, he hits out to where he thinks there should be a wall and finds it. Not fooled by the illusion, he is able to demonstrate to the others that what they are seeing is just an illusion created by the clown. The novel also shows that power comes from banding together. The Losers Club is successful in the fight against

Pennywise because they stay together. It tries to weaken them by separating them but does not succeed.

The Losers Club members defeat the clown because of their shared belief, imagination and trust in one another. The clowns in the novel and in the contemporary legend are defeated because the children see them for what they are, a threat. Unfortunately, as Mike realized, children grow up and lose the ability to see past the disguise to true evil. So, the clowns will return again and again and children will run from them again and again. And as children become adults their real memories of being children will fade, as memories of dreams and nightmares fade once we wake up. King uses italics to indicate this change in Bill as he:

> *awakens from this dream unable to remember exactly what it was, or much beyond the simple fact that he has dreamed about being a child again. He touches his wife's smooth back as she sleeps her warm sleep and dreams her own dreams; he thinks that it is good to be a child, but it is also good to be a grownup and able to consider the mystery of childhood . . . its beliefs and desires.* I will write about all of this one day, *he thinks, and knows it is just a dawn thought, in the morning's clean silence, to think that childhood has its own sweet secrets and confirms mortality, and that mortality defines all courage and love. To think that what has looked forward must also look back, and that each life makes its own imitation of mortality: a wheel. Or so Bill Denbrough sometimes thinks on those early mornings after dreaming, when he almost remembers his childhood, and the friends with whom he shared it.* (1089-1090)

The contemporary legend "Homey the Clown" informs the novel *IT* on all levels. It is the base of the story. The summary of the story and the kernel of the legend are the same, and it provides the cast. What is different is how King has expanded the details and developed the characters in the novel beyond what would have been provided even in the most developed of contemporary legends. The use of a clown as a figure of evil upsets the perceptions of the reader. The change of a figure that we would consider safe and funny into dangerous and evil, challenges the perception of what and who is safe. Just as we will see in *Christine* and *Gerald's Game,* and as we saw in *Carrie*, in *IT,* King challenges the idea that there are any safe places or people. The Homey the Clown contemporary legend also challenges this assumption. The use of a clown also serves to highlight the major theme in the text and the contemporary legend: disguise. Moreover, King has, consciously or unconsciously, expanded the meaning and theme of the contemporary legend, and developed it to show not only the importance of looking beyond the surface and finishing what we start but also the importance and power of belief and imagination in our society and how standing together can help us to beat evil in whatever its form.

Chapter Eight

Stephen King's *Christine*: Pimples, Power and Paranoia

Published in 1983 *Christine* is King's seventeenth novel. Like *IT,* the central plot of *Christine* can be recognized as a contemporary legend. In this case the contemporary legend is "The Death Car" of which Brunvand provides two versions in his text *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. The first version takes place in Los Angeles and has the reason for the low price of the car, the smell of death, clearly stated:

> My friend from Los Angeles breathlessly announced that she could pick up a $5,400 Porsche Targa sports car for only $500. The reason for the reduced price was that it had sat in the middle of the Mojave desert for one week with a dead man in it; consequently, the smell of death could not be removed from it. (19)

In the second version the car is sold cheaply, but with no explanation given to the Purchaser:

> You know that car dealer out on University Boulevard? Its specialty is repossessed cars. Well, they say they reposed this red corvette a few years ago. The owner had been murdered and hidden in the trunk. Well, this car dealer cleaned up the car, repainted it and re-carpeted the trunk, and about a week later he sold that car to some guy. But he returned the car after a week, said there was a bad smell in it that he couldn't get rid of. This happened a couple of more times with other people who bought the car, and now the dealer is stuck with the car. I think its going price is something like $100. But it serves them right. That place is a big clip joint

anyway. I hope they never sell the car. (21)

While some of the details of both versions are different, their kernel is the same. "The Death Car" always concerns an automobile, usually expensive when in its prime, on sale for a ridiculously small sum because of a smell that becomes stronger and stronger. Ultimately, the car is returned and the discovery made that the smell is because a dead body had been in the car.

Just as in *IT,* the contemporary legend in *Christine* provides a frame of reference for the text. As the basis of the novel it provides a means for the reader familiar with the contemporary legend to identify the plot. An oft repeated contemporary legend, Bennett and Smith's *Contemporary Legend: a Folklore Bibliography* lists 13 papers discussing this particular narrative[34], it is both entertainment and a teaching tool. In addition, structurally the contemporary legend informs the structure of the novel. King divides the novel into a prologue, three parts and an epilogue. The Prologue corresponds with Labov's Abstract; Part One corresponds with Labov's[35]. Orientation and Complicating Action; Part Two continues with the Complicating Action and Evaluation; Part Three

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[34] see entry numbers 79, 92, 99, 107, 131, 138, 139, 189, 234, 274, 518, 520, 607.

[35] See Chapter 2, Defining the Contemporary Legend, pages 34-36 for the full discussion on how Nicolaisen and Bennett make references to William Labov's work on narrative structure in his *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. To sum up in this text, Labov defined the overall structure of narrative. He concluded "some narratives...contain only narrative clauses; they are complete in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there are other elements of narrative structure found in more fully developed types. Briefly, a fully-formed narrative may show the following: 1. Abstract; 2. Orientation; 3. Complicating Action; 4. Evaluation; 5. Result or Resolution; 6. Coda" (360). Labov explains the structural elements as a series of answers to underlying questions: a. Abstract: what was this about?; b. Orientation: who, when, what, where; c. Complicating action: then what happened?; d. Evaluation: so what?; e. Result: what finally happened (Labov 370).

corresponds with Evaluation and Result/Resolution and the Epilogue corresponds with the Coda. Thematically the contemporary legend also informs the text as it both warns about the danger in heavy reliance on technology while serving as a tool for debate about the resulting loss of control.

As a contemporary legend Brunvand states "The Death Car" [36] is "a classic automobile legend that has been repeatedly updated since the late 1930s and fed both by rumor and the mass media" (12-20). In discussing this legend further in his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, Brunvand writes:

> Despite the wide circulation of "The Death Car" in myriad variations, Richard M. Dorson believed that he had found the legend's origin in an actual incident involving an old Model-A Ford that occurred in a small Michigan town in 1938 about which people were still talking in the 1950s. His claim was disputed by English folklorist Stewart Sanderson and others who identified key differences between the Michigan event and the legend tradition, as well as the likely influence of the ancient motif "The Ineradicable Bloodstain" (Motif E422.1.11.5.1).
>
> A genuine death-related car – a low-mileage1959 Cadillac held as evidence for years after the owner had been murdered in it – was reported

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[36] In addition to the above texts, Brunvand discusses this legend in his texts *The Truth* (15-21); *Choking Doberman* (212-213); *Mexican Pet* (12-13); and *Too Good* (236 -237). Detailed discussions about this contemporary legend also appear in Dionizjusz Czubala, "The Death Car; Polish and Russian Examples," *FOAFTale News.* (2-5); Gail de Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip*; (110-112); Richard Dorson, *American Folklore*, (250-52); Duncan Emrich, *Folklore on the American Land* (338); and Paul Smith, *The Book of Nasty Legends*, (79).

> in the July 1990 issue of *Automobile* magazine. Although the editors were reminded of the legend, they verified this instance as true, but significantly different as the car did not smell. The legendary version of the story had been circulating for decades before "The Death Cadillac" was discovered, bought and installed in a museum. (108)

In discussing variants of "The Death Car" Gail de Vos also talks about the age of this contemporary legend. She notes that while some may think the contemporary legend is new:

> Other researchers maintain that the story is not new, but instead is an updated version of a classic legend about age-old evil, represented in "The Death Car" by the smell. The vehicle undergoes constant revisions, much like the vehicle in "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," not because of historical events, but because of the modes of conveyance a culture assumes, while the image of evil is constant (Poulson 1985,59). Thus, the vehicle may be a cart, a wagon, a ship, or a car. (111)

Thematically, that the evil represented in "The Death Car" is associated with any of the "modes of conveyance a culture assumes" as opposed to just a reflection on automobiles themselves is interesting. This allows for the fears of the culture that are expressed through the contemporary legend to be about more than just the fear of technology. They can also be about the fear of a loss of control. That loss of control is represented by our dependency on whatever it is we must use to go from one place to another.

In commenting on the number of automobile contemporary legends, Brunvand notes that "we are a highly mobile and often fairly affluent folk, so it is natural that many of our favorite plots involve private cars and public highways. Earlier generations told more stories of haunted houses, hunting adventures, or witchcraft, but we prefer stories centering on the family automobile, pleasure trips, and the open road" (1981:19). Indeed, in most places in Canada and the U.S. it is hard to survive without a car. Many families have more than one car. The public transit system as a whole is inadequate in spite of the focus in recent years on the need to cut down on pollution produced through gas and exhaust emissions. This inadequacy means that we cannot rely on it to get us where we want to go when we want to go; as such it is almost mandatory that we find some other means of transportation: a car. Because the distances between our towns and cities are too great for us to walk with ease and because we must travel these distances for school or work, it means that as a culture the car controls us more than we control the car.

With our reliance on the automobile, it is not unexpected that there would be many automobile contemporary legends, as stories grow up around things that are important to us or play an important part in our lives. When something is important for our survival, it is given a form of power over us. We become aware that without it we may not be able to exist or live in the manner to which we are accustomed. This in turn creates an uneasy relationship: in this case we need the automobile to survive as it gives us a competitive edge. Yet, most of us do not really understand it or how it works. It is a mystery. And, we are afraid of or fear that which we do not fully understand; hence, automobile contemporary legends.

It is also not unexpected that the automobile would play such an important part in the lives of teenagers growing up. For those of us who lived in the country or a small town, turning sixteen meant getting a driver's licence and becoming free. You had to have access to a car if you wanted to have a job or to get into town to 'hang out.' The automobile seemed especially important for boys. The type of car that they had played a role in the status that they held in school and if they were to have many dates. The 'cool' guys had 'cool' cars, usually hot rods or sports cars. Considering the role of a car in our culture, it is not surprising that there are contemporary legends surrounding it.

The length and durability of "The Death Car" as a contemporary legend means that it is probable that King was familiar with it in some form or on some level. However, just as in *IT*, whether King was inspired by the contemporary legend or if he used it consciously or not, is not the issue. The fact is that King's story is an extended narrative of this popular contemporary legend.[37] Thus the contemporary legend can be seen to inform the text as a whole as it is the frame for the text; as a frame, the contemporary legend acts as a major functional device. Moreover, because of the way the contemporary legend is used and how it is changed, the themes of both the text and the contemporary legend reflect each other, for they are the same. Essentially, the contemporary legend is integral to the understanding of the text from a literary angle and for the insight into our culture from the cultural studies point of view.

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[37] *Christine* is not the only fiction King has written that involves the use of a "Death Car." His 2002 novel *From a Buick 8* involves a car that is deadly. As well, in his 2002 collection *Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales* includes the story "Riding the Bullet" where the main character, on his way to visit his mother in the hospital, hitches a ride with a driver who turns out to be death.

The primary themes of this contemporary legend are the place of technology in our society, the importance of the automobile in our society and our desire for a bargain. The horror of this story is the unknown nature of technology. As the core of *Christine,* the contemporary legend provides the frame for the text. As a result, the effectiveness of this contemporary legend is such that by the end of the novel Christine the car appears to have human characteristics. Thus, in order to learn how to deal with the threat posed by what should be inanimate, the main characters have to reevaluate their perception of what constitutes the real; they have to move to an awareness of what had been considered the unreal, the fantasy. Only by changing their perceptions, only by accepting the challenge to see beyond the disguise of the car as a mechanical thing versus a living expression of evil are they able to get the information they need to deal with the threat Christine poses.

As mentioned earlier, Labov's structural elements can be applied to "The Death Car" contemporary legend and, by extension *Christine*. The prologue fulfills the first element: Abstract as we learn that at its most basic, *Christine* is the story of Dennis and Arnie two friends from childhood and what happens after Arnie buys a car.

The role of the car in *Christine* is clear. Dennis has a car and he is also on the football team and a part of the popular group. His childhood friend Arnie has nothing. He does not have a car; what he does have are pimples and a membership on the chess team. Neither of these is valued. In fact, he is as far from being one of the cool guys as it is possible to be. In reality, his time in school is only made bearable because of his long friendship with Dennis. As Dennis states in the prologue, "I guess I was the main reason Arnie didn't just get gobbled up in high school. I was a big guy there...but, because I was Arnie at least never got killed. He took a lot of abuse, but he never got killed" (1).

Obviously, by the time they have reached high school, Dennis is higher on the social hierarchal scale than Arnie. They are friends because of the friendship that they made in elementary school. The only way Arnie can hope to begin to climb the scale is to change something. The easiest thing to change is his lack of freedom; hence, his need for a car.

Part One of the novel, "Dennis – Teenage Car-Songs," sets up the story and the connection with the contemporary legend. In connection with Labov's steps it sets up the Orientation: who, when, what, where. It also hints at the Complicating action: then what happened. As mentioned in "The Death Car" contemporary legend, an expensive car in good condition is sold cheaply. The beginning of the novel sets up the acquisition of Christine by Arnie,

> "Oh, my God!" my friend Arnie Cunningham cried out suddenly.
>
> "What is it?" I asked. His eyes were bulging from behind his steel-rimmed glasses, he had plastered one hand over his face so that his palm was partially cupping his mouth, and his neck could have been on ball-bearings the way he was craning back over his shoulder.
>
> "Stop the car, Dennis! Go back!"
>
> Suddenly I understood. "Oh man, forget it, " I said. "If you mean that . . . thing we just passed –"
>
> "Go back!" He was almost screaming.
>
> I went back, thinking that maybe it was one of Arnie's subtle little jokes. But it wasn't. He was gone, lock, stock, and barrel. Arnie had fallen in love. (7)

Arnie has fallen in love with a car. At first the car does not seem to fit the description of the car in the contemporary legend. The car Arnie falls in love with is, as Dennis observes, not in good condition. To Dennis:

> She was a bad joke, and what Arnie saw in her that day I'll never know. The left side of her windshield was a snarled spiderweb of cracks. The right rear deck was bashed in, and an ugly nest of rust had grown in the paint-scraped valley. The back bumper was askew, the trunk-lid was ajar, and upholstery was bleeding out through several long tears in the seat covers, both front and back. It looked as if someone had worked on the upholstery with a knife. One tire was flat. The others were bald enough to show the canvas cording.
>
> Worst of all, there was a dark puddle of oil under the engine block. (7)

However, in spite of how Christine looks, Arnie sees something different. In spite of Christine's current condition, he is only able to see what the car could be. He tells Dennis that "she could be fixed up. She could. . . she could be tough. A moving unit, Dennis. A beauty" (8). The fact is that, from the start, Arnie has a vision of the car in good condition and thus he considers LeBay's, the owner, price a bargain, "'How much?' Arnie asked. And then he plunged ahead, 'Whatever you want for her, it's not enough" (9). Because for Arnie the car is a beauty and a steal at the asking price and because it is Arnie's car, it is clear the beginning premise of the novel is similar to the beginning of the contemporary legend as Arnie sees the old car and buys it.

The embellishment comes from the development of the connection between the car and Arnie and the suggestion that there is something supernatural about Christine and

the danger of her becoming an obsession. The supernatural nature of the car emerges in tandem with the change in how Dennis begins to view Christine. The change in Christine from just a car to an evil death car builds gradually from the moment Arnie buys Christine and moves her from LeBay's to a storage unit. At first the feeling of unease comes through Dennis and his half-formed thoughts. Then it bursts onto the scene through Dennis's subconscious, courtesy of two of Dennis's nightmares. Both of the nightmares concern Christine. In the first nightmare Christine changes from being inanimate to animate. Dennis can hear her thoughts and becomes afraid,

> Come on big guy. Let's go for a ride. Let's cruise
>
> *I shake my head. I don't want to get in there. I'm scared to get in there. I don't want to cruise. And suddenly the engine begins to rev and fall off, rev and fall off; it's a hungry sound, frightening, and each time the engine revs Christine seems to lunge forward a bit . . . .*
>
> Last chance, big guy
>
> *And before I can answer–or even think of an answer–there is the terrible scream of rubber kissing off concrete and Christine lunges out at me, her grille snarling like an open mouth full of chrome teeth, her headlights glaring* –[sic]. (64)

His second nightmare establishes the feeling of dread he has for Christine with something more tangible. He makes a connection between death and Christine. He dreams of a rotting corpse, a necessary part of the contemporary legend, in the car and he actually identifies it as a Death Car:

> That night I had a dream again, only in this one Christine was old – no,

> not just old; she was ancient, a terrible hulk of a car, something you'd expect to see in a Tarot deck: instead of the Hanged Man, the Death Car . . . .
>
> It wasn't empty. Roland D. LeBay was lolling behind the wheel. His eyes were open but they were glazed and dead. Each time the engine revved and Christine's rust-eaten body vibrated, he flopped like a ragdoll. His peeling skull nodded back and forth (83).

Dennis's view of Christine as a Death Car is soon reinforced. Roland D. LeBay dies and Arnie and Dennis go to the funeral, the latter to support the former. At the funeral they meet LeBay's brother George. George takes that opportunity to warn Arnie away from Christine, "'My advice to you is to forget the car,' he said to Arnie. 'Sell her. If no one will buy her whole, sell her for parts. If no one will buy her for parts, junk her. Do it quickly and completely. Do it the way you would quit a bad habit. I think you will be happier'" (89). George's view of the car prompts Dennis to meet with him. During their meeting Dennis learns that Christine truly is a death car. Le Bay's daughter Rita choked to death in the car when she was six.

Concerned over Arnie's increasing obsession with Christine, after a school football game Dennis examines Christine to see what Arnie has done to her. What he sees confuses him as there does not appear to be any logic behind the repairs that have been made. Even more surprising is Arnie's reaction:

> "Dennis, what are you doing?"

> I guess I was still more uneasy than I thought, because I was up on my knees like a shot with my heart beating in my throat. It was Arnie. He looked cold and angry.
>
> *Because I was looking at his car? Why should that make him mad?* Good question. But it had. That was obvious. (156)

The depth of Arnie's anger is inappropriate. Moreover Dennis observes that Arnie is driving with an improper sticker and a dealer plate, both supplied by Darnell, the owner of the garage where Arnie was fixing Christine, and for which Darnell could risk losing his state inspection certificate. When he asks why Darnell would do this for Arnie when Darnell "wouldn't give a crippled crab a crutch unless there was something in it for him," (158) Arnie responds, "I can take care of myself," and touching Christine loses the hard look in his eyes (158).

Arnie's willingness to accept Darnell's help, his anger towards Dennis for just looking at Christine, and his disinclination to discuss any of this with Dennis indicate that Arnie is changing. The only hope that this change in Arnie may not be permanent comes when Leigh, Arnie's girlfriend, approaches them. In noting how the Arnie and Leigh look at each other Dennis thinks, "I could tell, just by looking at him, that whenever Leigh smiled at him in that way, Christine was the farthest thing from his mind; she was demoted back to her proper place as an it, a means of transportation. I liked that just fine" (159). Nevertheless, Leigh's effect can only be temporary as she and Arnie do not spend all of their spare time together.

In buying Christine, Arnie has acted impulsively. In keeping Christine against the wishes of his parents, Arnie is behaving out of character. In choosing to store and repair

Christine at Darnell's, a local garage of which the owner, Darnell, is known to skate outside the law, Arnie is risking getting involved in things that may be dangerous. As well, spending most of his time working on Christine Arnie is becoming isolated from the only friend he has always had: Dennis. Thus, Dennis's awareness of how Arnie is changing and his linking of that change to Arnie's involvement with Christine hints at what is to come.

Part Two of the text is "Arnie – Teenage Love-Songs." This section of the novel develops the connection between the "Death Car" contemporary legend and Christine. Part Two also more obviously links the text with the contemporary legend as a smell likened to that of a rotting corpse is detected by all who ride in Christine *except* the new owner, Arnie. The inability of Arnie to detect the smell of rotting corpses compounded by the ability of others not only to smell the rotting corpses but to see them, is an expansion of the contemporary legend. It also further develops Labov's element Complicating Action: the evil nature of Christine and her control over Arnie as in this section. As well it introduces Labov's element of Evaluation as Leigh begins to evaluate what is happening with a view to determining what to do.

Most importantly, however, in Part Two Christine's role is augmented as she is given supernatural powers and an evil disposition which manifests itself through the character of LeBay who, even though he is dead, gradually overpowers and submerges Arnie's personality. Arnie is still present, but as the novel moves closer to Part Three Arnie appears less and less often.

In the contemporary legend, the car is non-sentient. However, in the novel Christine is a sentient being, one that is filled with the thirst for revenge. Christine has a

mind and a will of her own. In Part One, a gang of boys tried to attack Arnie. One of them had a switchblade. With help from Dennis, Arnie is not hurt and the boys, Buddy Repperton, Don Vandenberg and Moochie Welch, are kicked out of school (141-149). Repperton, the leader of the gang, promises Arnie he will get even. In Part Two, Repperton is tipped off by one of his friends, Sandy Galton, that Arnie parks his car where Sandy works, at the Long Term Parking lot at the Airport. Late one night when Sandy is working Repperton, Vandenberg, Welch and Richie Trelawney show up and, with agreement from Sandy to look the other way, they set about destroying Christine.

While Arnie may be unable to respond to this act, Christine is not. Her supernatural powers include being able to regenerate. In retaliation for their act Christine begins to stalk and then kill each person who participated in her destruction. Whenever this happens Arnie is out of town so no connection can be drawn to him and of course, as Christine regenerates any report of a car like her being involved in an act of destruction is invalid as she never shows any damage. Nonetheless, one of her intended victims draws a connection between what is happening to his friends and their destruction of Christine. As he is working one night Don realizes:

> They never should have trashed old Cuntface's car that night. Every single one of the guys in on that little prank had died horrible deaths. All of them, that was, except for him and Sandy Galton, and Sandy had gotten in that old, broken-down Mustang of his and taken off somewhere. On these long night shifts, Don often thought he would like to do the same.
>
> Outside the customer beeped his horn. (362)

Unfortunately, Don realizes this too late as the customer is Christine:

"Can I h – " he began, and the *h*-sound of *help you* became a high, hissing, strengthless scream . . .

Leaning out of the window, less than six inches from his own face, was a rotting corpse. Its eyes were wide, empty sockets, its mummified lips were drawn back from a few, yellowed, leaning teeth. One hand lay whitely on the steering wheel. The other, clicking horridly, reached out to touch him.

Don floundered backward, his heart a runaway engine in his chest, his terror a monstrous hot rock in his throat. The dead thing beckoned him, grinning, and the car's engine suddenly screamed, piling up revs.

"Fill it up," the corpse whispered, and in spite of his shock and horror, Don saw it was wearing the tattered and moss-slimed remains of an Army uniform. *"Fill it up, you shitter."* Skull-teeth grinned in the fluorescent light. Far back in that mouth a bit of gold twinkled.

"Catch yourself a drink, asshole," another voice whispered hoarsely, and Buddy Repperton leaned forward in the back seat, extending a bottle of Texan Driver toward Don. Worms spilled and squirmed through his grin. Beetles crawled in what remained of his hair. *"I think you must need one."*

Don shrieked, the sound bulleting up and out of him. He whirled away, running through the snow in great leaping cartoon steps; he shrieked again as the car's engine screamed V-8 power; he looked back over his shoulder and saw that it was Christine standing by the pumps, Arnie's Christine, now moving, churning snow up behind her rear tires, and the things he had seen were gone – that was even worse somehow. The things were gone. The car was moving on its own.

> He had turned toward the street, and now he climbed up over the snowbank thrown up by passing plows and down the other side. Here the wind had swept the pavement clear of everything except an occasional blister of ice. Don skidded on one of these. His feet went out from under him. He landed on his back with a thump.
>
> A moment later the street was flooded with white light. Don rolled over and looked up, eyes straining wildly in their sockets, in time to see the huge white circles of Christine's headlights as she slammed through the snowbank and bore down on him like a locomotive. (362-363)

As we see in her stalking and killing of those who have harmed her, it is Christine who is death; she is, literally, a death car.

This realization of Christine's power over Arnie and her evil intent is what leads to Part Three: "Christine – Teenage Death-Songs." Part Three corresponds with the elements of Evaluation and Result/Resolution of the contemporary legend – the attempt to return/sell back the car. Although the contemporary legend informs Part Three, it does so with a twist. Instead of the owner of the car attempting to return it due to the smell, the attempt to get rid of the car is made by those who are closest to its new owner. In this section, Leigh and Dennis meet and compare their notes and feelings about Christine. Their conclusion is that Christine is evil and must be killed. They cannot return it to anyone as the previous owner is dead, and they cannot sell it to anyone, as its current owner is possessed by the car and so not approachable. However, because the car has been so obviously imbued with evil, merely to return or sell the car would be unconscionable even if it were possible. In a departure from the contemporary legend

Leigh and Dennis make plans to destroy Christine to free Arnie from her power. However, what is also different is that this car cannot be destroyed; it is supernatural; it is evil; it has been personified as the ultimate example of technology gone bad.

It is Dennis and Leigh who must act because, like the Losers in *IT,* they are the only ones truly able to see what is happening. They are close enough to Arnie to see the changes and young enough to recognize and believe from whence the changes are coming. Willing to accept that it is he who must act, Dennis takes a chance. During his last confrontation with Arnie, Arnie is able to subdue LeBay briefly. At this point Dennis asks if LeBay is always there and Arnie is able to tell him that LeBay is always there except "When Christine . . . when she goes, then he's with her. That's the only time . . ." (457). Once Dennis learns that, just as he thought, the only time LeBay is not in Arnie's body is when he and Christine are off killing someone he realizes that his plan to kill Christine is possible. All he and Leigh have to do is to wait for when Arnie goes out of town, and then he and Leigh can lure Christine someplace to kill her.

Preparing to destroy Christine, Leigh and Dennis rent a heavy tanker and set up Darnell's garage to trap Christine. The battle against the death car does not go easily. At one point, it looks as if Christine will win. But finally Dennis in the heavy tanker ruptures Christine's gas tank, and she explodes. To be sure, he puts the tanker in gear and proceeds to run over Christine again and again until Christine is "a spread-out pile of twisted, gored metal, puffs of upholstery, and glittering broken glass" (490). Christine appears to be destroyed. Her destruction is a departure from the contemporary legend.

Where the contemporary legend and the novel seemed to diverge at the end of Part Three, in the Epilogue the contemporary legend of the death car and the story of Christine

converge again. Structurally Labov's Coda the question "what happens then" is answered. Christine is not dead; it is intimated that she is not completely destroyed and is out there slowly making her way across the country, seeking revenge on those that played a hand in her destruction. She is still a death car. The contemporary legend death car has been reported from all across the country and if Dennis is right Christine will soon be reported as well. For if it was Christine who killed Sandy, a member of a group that attempted to destroy her, then she will soon be traveling all across the United States to kill those that have wronged her. Dennis concludes his narration with this movement in mind,

> I keep thinking of George LeBay in Ohio.
>
> His sister in Colorado.
>
> Leigh in New Mexico.
>
> What if it's started again?
>
> What if it's working its way east, finishing the job?
>
> Saving me for last?
>
> His single-minded purpose.
>
> *His unending fury.*[sic] (503)

Like the car in the contemporary legend, Christine is still out there for another buyer to fall victim to her power. What is not clear is why Christine changes from a she to a he, "His single-minded purpose. *His unending fury.*"

With Christine still alive, the story has begun and ended just as the contemporary legend. Indeed the contemporary legend has served as the framework for the text. Each part of the contemporary legend has corresponded to a section of the text. Even though

the story of the contemporary legend has been expanded and fleshed out and even changed in some ways, ultimately the basic story is the same as that of the contemporary legend. Both texts revolve around a car that is sold at a low price. The new owner discovers the smell of death in it and sells it back to the dealer or wherever it was purchased and learns that someone died in the car. And then the car is sold again and the story continues. The changes made to the contemporary legend serve to reinforce the themes of the text itself and to provide commentary on the expressed social and political anxieties.

King's *Christine* deals with a number of themes: impending adulthood faced by its teenaged characters, the moral growth of one of its main characters, the loss of innocence in another character, the fight between good and evil in each of its teenaged characters and the problem of technology gone out of control. All of these themes are themes that are echoed in the contemporary legend "The Death Car." Through these themes, *Christine* also makes a number of cultural comments including the role of the car in contemporary society, the dangers of sex, the dangers teens face during their maturation process and the requirements for moral growth.

> In discussing the role of the car in contemporary society Douglas E. Winter states:
>
> *Christine* laments the coming of age, but it also serves as a dark parable about the death of the American romance with the automobile. It is not coincidence that Christine is reborn twenty, going on twenty-one, years after her manufacture. The finned Plymouth is the last of its breed–the costumed-jeweled, chromed symbols of the Eisenhower era, of a lost American dream of clean air and unlimited gasoline, prosperity and peace.

> By 1978, the year in which *Christine* is set, the Chrysler Corporation, the Plymouth's manufacturer, was near bankruptcy. Automobiles were no longer symbols of success or freedom or youth; they were smaller, less powerful, less comforting, and–if only because of the catalytic converter – did not smell the same. They were no longer named by their owners– indeed, many were not even an American product. The automobile had become just a means of transportation. (125)

However, Winter is not completely accurate, for although the automobile in 1978 may be smaller, less powerful and less comforting to adults, for teenagers the car is still all about freedom and position in teen hierarchy.

For Arnie, as for many youth, a car equals freedom. Indeed, even before Arnie gets Christine road ready he spends many hours in her dreaming. His involvement with Christine provides an escape for him; he is able to avoid home and other unpleasant things while he is with her. Once Christine is road ready he spends many hours just driving. The needs Christine fills are similar to the needs a car fills for other youth; it is clear that this story is about a boy and his car. However, what is important is that it is not just any car but "The Death Car." It is through the connection of the story with "The Death Car" that the contrasting role of the car, freedom and life but also possible death, becomes evident and we are forced to recognize the deeper cultural commentary being made on the place and role of the car in our society.

Thematically and culturally, in looking at the place of the car in North American society, especially among young men, it is fair to say that the ownership of a car and the freedom it provides acts as a rite of passage in their coming of age. In discussing the

symbolism in *Christine,* Douglas E. Winter notes in *Art of Darkness*, "Christine symbolizes for Arnie Cunningham: the end of adolescence and the coming of age–sex, power, speed, freedom. . .and death. It is through Christine that Arnie first asserts his independence from his parents, first gains a sense of autonomy, and first falls in love" (121).

But the car does not only provide freedom it also demands responsibility and, if not treated well, can result in death. This is where the effect of the changes King makes to the contemporary legend can be seen. In the contemporary legend the Death Car is an ordinary car that smells of death. It has no supernatural powers. However, in *Christine* the car both smells of death and creates death.

By making the connection between Christine and the "Death Car" so specific, King is underscoring the idea that the idea of a death car is not far from the reality of owning a car. A car requires maintenance. Driving requires skill and attention. Unfortunately, most accidents among youth are caused by unskilled drivers or drivers who have ignored the responsibility inherent in owning a car, either in maintenance or in being sober, serious drivers. I doubt that many people have made it to adulthood without hearing of or knowing of someone who has been in a fatal or serious accident.

That Christine is an older car that has supernatural powers, whatever their origin, only adds to the commentary being made. In Arnie's relationship with Christine we see a reflection of our relationship with the automobile and its place in our society. The "Death Car" is, paradoxically, also a "Life Car." It symbolizes, in a way, both death and freedom. Literally misuse of the car can result in the actual death of its occupants or those near it. Figuratively it represents the death of innocence as it provides a passage

away from childhood into the more responsible arena of adulthood. But it also represents freedom. It represents freedom as it is through access to a car that we can become free from family and the routine of our life. It represents freedom because in a car we can explore. Yet, even as it provides freedom away from family and the freedom to pursue dreams and sex, the very act of pursuing these dreams results in little deaths. The eventual separation from family signifies the death of the family unit as you first know it, and the pursuit of dreams can lead to the death of openness and eagerness as people become jaded and cynical when reality does not match up to expectations.

Thematically and culturally, the pursuit of sex leads to the death of sexual innocence. Now that Arnie has a car, he *appears* to have matured. To a young girl, a male who possesses a car appears to be older and more of a man than a male who does not. Moreover, in Arnie's case for some reason his looks have improved. Dennis notices the improvement in Arnie's looks when Leigh Cabot enrolls in the school as a new student and is talking with Arnie,

> . . .Arnie Cunningham, Ole Pizza-Face himself, and Leigh Cabot. That was totally ridiculous. That was –
>
> Then the interior smile sort of dried up. I noticed for the third time–the definitive time– that Arnie's complexion was taking care of itself with almost stunning rapidity. The blemishes were gone. Some of them had left those small, pitted scars along his cheeks, true, but if a guy's face is a strong enough one, those pits don't seem to matter as much; in a crazy sort of way, they can even add character.
>
> Leigh and Arnie studied each other surreptitiously and I studied Arnie

> surreptitiously, wondering exactly when and how this miracle had taken place. The sunlight slanted through the windows of Mr. Thompson's room, delineating the lines of my friend's face clearly. He looked . . .older. As if he had beaten the blemishes and the acne not only by regular washing or the application of some special cream but by somehow turning the clock ahead about three years. He was wearing his hair differently, too – it was shorter, and the sideburns that he had affected ever since he could grow them (that was about eighteen months ago) were gone. (137-138)

Clearly, to Dennis, who has known Arnie all his life, Arnie is looking older and better. Thus it is not a surprise that a new girl in school who does not know the old Arnie could be attracted to him. And, shortly, Leigh becomes Arnie's girlfriend.

Now that Arnie has a girlfriend, he has the opportunity to become emotionally and sexually active. This death of innocence is reflected in the unease that Christine instills in Leigh. As teenagers become more aware of those emotions felt in adulthood, childhood innocence is lost. As she becomes more involved with Arnie, the more Leigh cares about him. The more she cares about him, the more she becomes aware of how he changes when he is in Christine. Moreover, she does not like the car and feels threatened by it. During a make out session in the car Leigh stops, telling Arnie that she can't make out with him in the car. In examining her feelings on the way home Leigh realizes why this is so:

> Because the really crazy part was that she felt Christine was *watching* them. That she was jealous, disapproving, maybe hating. Because there were times...when she felt that the two of them–Arnie and Christine–

> were welded together in a disturbing parody of the act of love. Because Leigh did not feel that she *rode* in Christine; when she got in to go somewhere with Arnie she felt *swallowed* in Christine. And the act of kissing him, making love to him, seemed a perversion worse that voyeurism or exhibitionism–it was like making love inside the body of her rival. (196)

Leigh does not just dislike Christine; she hates her. All of her negative feelings about Christine struggle with her feelings of love for Arnie. She is unable to explain her feelings of unease to Arnie because she loves him. She does not want to hurt him, especially since he has done so much to restore Christine to her previous glory. She doesn't want to hurt Arnie but the truth is that

> there was one thing. . . . The smell–a rotten, thick smell under the aromas of new seat covers and the cleaning fluid he had used on the floormats. It was there, faint but terribly unpleasant. Almost stomach-turning. As if, at some time, something had crawled into the car and died there. (197)

Like Dennis, to Leigh, Christine smells of death.

Moreover, Leigh almost dies in Christine. It is when this happens that all of her thoughts about how Arnie has changed are expressed. The incident happens when Leigh and Arnie are returning home after going Christmas shopping. On the way, they stop to pick up a hitchhiker. Up until then, Arnie had been in a good mood. After they pick up the hitchhiker, his mood begins to change. Nonetheless, he stops at a fast food restaurant to pick up some food for himself and Leigh. As they are dropping off the hitchhiker, Leigh begins to choke on a piece of her hamburger. Fortunately, the hitchhiker notices

and saves her by performing the Heimlich maneuver. All Arnie had been doing was clapping her on the back. The hitchhiker explains his actions by mentioning that he had been trained in the maneuver because he had a job working in a cafeteria. After they drop him off, Leigh tells Arnie that if he really does love her he will sell Christine. If he does not get rid of Christine, she will never go out with him again. Arnie is angry that she would blame Christine for her choking so Leigh asks Arnie to listen so that she can explain,

> "When I choked. . .when I was choking. . . the instrument panel. . . the lights on it *changed.* They *changed.* They were. . . no, I won't go that far, but they *looked* like eyes."
>
> . . . "You told me you worked in the cafeteria at LHS your first three years. I've seen the Heimlich maneuver poster on the door to the kitchen. You must have seen it too. But you didn't try that on me, Arnie. You were getting ready to clap me on the back. That doesn't work. I had a job in a restaurant . . . and the first thing they teach you, even before they teach you the Heimlich Maneuver, is that *clapping a choking victim on the back doesn't work. "* (276)

Arnie tries to explain that people forget things in the heat of the moment and Leigh agrees, but she adds, "you seem to forget a lot of things in that car. Like how to be Arnie Cunningham" (276). Finally Leigh tells him

> I never had a supernatural experience in my life–I never even *believed* in stuff like that– but now I wonder just what's going on and what's happening to you. They

> looked like *eyes*, Arnie. And later . . .afterward. . . there was a smell. A horrible rotten smell. (276-7).

For Leigh, her relationship with Arnie, ,which is influenced by his relationship with Christine, leads not only to the death of her emotional and sexual innocence but to an actual close encounter with physical death. That this latter encounter is directly related to the malevolent influence of Christine underscores Christine's evilness and foreshadows what is to come if Arnie continues to be influenced by her.

Thematically and culturally, the novel and contemporary legend are also about obsession and the need to face the truth. In the contemporary legend, we have the obsession of the seller to sell the car and make a profit and the awareness that there is always someone who is looking for a deal. Because of the latter, the seller can continue to try to get rid of "The Death Car." In the novel, Arnie is obsessed with Christine. This obsession has led to the loss of his common sense as seen in his inability to respond as he should and as he has been trained during Leigh's choking incident. To him Christine is not just a car. Because Leigh recognizes that Christine is more than just a car to Arnie, she cannot commit to a physical relationship with him. Arnie is obsessed with Christine, and this obsession consumes him emotionally; there is no real room for Leigh as Leigh knows. In addition Christine is also obsessed, with revenge.

In both cases, the obsession leads to blindness and ultimately destruction. In the case of Arnie, his obsession can be linked to King's own greatest fear. In response to an interview question about King's greatest sexual fear, King replied "The vagina dentata, the vagina with teeth. The story where you were making love to a woman and it just slammed shut and cut your penis off. That'd do it." (*Bare Bones*, 189).

In her article "Take Me For a Ride in your Man-Eater: Gynophobia in Stephen King's *Christine*" and his article "The Vagina Dentata in Stephen King's *Christine:* 'Some Cunts have Teeth'" critics Sylvia Kelso and Bill Ellis comment on Christine as a contemporary version of the vagina dentata legend. Like Fannie Flagg in *Friend Green Tomatoes*, King is making use of more than one folklore text. In this legend, Ellis points out, "this motif is recognized by anthropologists and psychiatrists as an expression of male castration" (84). For Kelso the connection between Christine and the legend is also clear as she sees the monstrous-feminine images of the castrating mother, the *vagina dentata* being added to by King. For Kelso "King's lexicon adds the Belle Dame Sans Merci, the murderous Other Woman, a carnivorous female predator and the archaic or devouring mother. From these staples he constructs the red Plymouth Fury with the grille that snarls like "steel teeth" (77), the quintessential *vagina dentata* whose colour insists on the menstruating vagina that may have given the image its real power (Shuttle and Redgrove, 246). Arnie is figuratively and literally consumed by Christine. Unable to act independently, he is, in effect, castrated.

We see Christine's control of Arnie in a number of instances; however two in particular stand out. In the first instance Arnie and his father, Michael, are driving Christine to the parking garage where Michael has suggested Arnie store her. Arnie's life is not going well. After a lot of work, he has finally brought Christine home for his parents to see. He plans to park it in the driveway or on the street and to give up the expensive repair bay at Darnell's garage where he had been working on the car.

Unfortunately, the car is still a bone of contention between his parents and himself, especially his mother. For Arnie's mother, the existence of Christine is a

physical reminder of the beginning of her loss of control over her son. It is a reminder that he is growing up and away from her. In an attempt to ameliorate the problem, Arnie's father persuades Arnie to drive Christine out to the airport and to put it in the long term parking lot. He can park the car there for 5 dollars a month. Although it would not be as convenient as parking at home, he would still be taking the same bus that he did before when he had it parked at the garage and yet would be saving money. Moreover, it would not be a daily reminder to Arnie's mother about the changes in her relationship with him. Arnie's father drives out to the airport with Arnie; it is on this trip that we see his opinion of Christine and of Arnie's personality change. Interestingly enough, Christine runs smoothly during the drive which is taken up by Arnie and his father quarreling. However, the moment that they laugh together and appear to make peace Christine stalls,

> They looked at each other and both burst out laughing.
>
> At the instant that they did, Christine stalled. Up until then the engine had been ticking over with unobtrusive perfection. Now it just quit; the oil and lamp idiot lights came on.
>
> Michael raised his eyebrows. "Say what?"
>
> "I don't know," Arnie answered, frowning. "It never did that before." (187-8)

On its own, this is not unnatural behaviour for an old car that is being fixed up. However, in tandem with the suggestion that the car has supernatural powers the failing of the engine seems less of a mechanical problem and more of a negative personal response to Arnie being in accord with someone that Christine may see as a rival for Arnie's

affections. That this interpretation of the car's failing is valid is borne out later in the text.

The idea of Christine as a Death Car introduced by Dennis and reinforced by LeBay's brother is also highlighted through Michael's reaction to it. Significantly the last few paragraphs in the second chapter of this section reinforce the perception of the car as being evil. Now, as seen through Michael's eyes, the evil overtones in Christine and the changes in Arnie's character cannot be avoided, although Michael is impressed with the work his son has done on the car he does not like the car itself nor does he like the way his son behaves when he is in it:

> The source of the dislike was impossible to isolate. It had caused bitter trouble in the family, and he supposed that was the real reason. . . but it wasn't all. He hadn't liked the way Arnie *seemed* when he was behind the wheel: somehow arrogant and petulant at the same time, like a weak king. The impotent way he had railed about the insurance...his use of that ugly and striking word "shitters"...even the way the car had stalled when they laughed together. (188-89)

Although Michael does not appear to think that Christine controls Arnie, it is clear that he notices that Arnie has changed since he bought Christine. It is also clear that the change in Arnie is perceived to be negative.

The second time we see Christine's control over Arnie occurs when Arnie and Leigh are making up after a fight. After Leigh expresses her reservations about making out with Arnie in the car he drops her home and they make-up. As he stands on her doorstep, away from Christine, Leigh explains that she doesn't want to make out in a car;

she wants her first time making love to be special. Answering that he understands, Arnie thinks, "Up at the Embankment, in the car, he had felt a little angry with her. . . well, to be honest, he had been pretty goddamn pissed off. But now, standing here on her stoop, he thought he could understand–and marvel that he could want to deny her anything or cross her will in any way" (197). It is at this moment, the moment when Arnie feels in accord with Leigh, that Christine, who had been idling at the curb, cuts out. Christine only starts again after Arnie pleads with her and calls her terms of endearment.

In both cases Christine responds to Arnie only when his attention is focused wholly on her again. It is evident that Christine is more than just a car. Christine has a personality and that personality is stronger than Arnie's.

It is not only Christine that possesses Arnie but also Christine's first owner, LeBay. Christine was LeBay's car; he had her designed to his specifications. As such, it is LeBay who sits in the driver's seat. Thus, even though LeBay is now dead, as Christine is a supernatural death car, he is still her driver. As a result, the more Arnie gets absorbed by Christine, the more his personality changes to become like LeBay's. He changes from being nice, polite, caring and considerate to a hard, cold and callous. His speech begins to sound like LeBay's through the use of LeBay's expressions such as "shitter." He somehow ends up with a bad back just as LeBay had had. The character changes that Michael notices in Arnie are evidence that LeBay is beginning to control Arnie as well. Ultimately, we know that Arnie has been consumed by Christine and LeBay when Arnie/LeBay and Dennis have a confrontation.

There are two confrontations between Dennis and Arnie/LeBay. The first confrontation happens when Arnie sees Leigh and Dennis together outside a local fast

food joint. Unknown to Arnie, they are in the process of trying to figure out how to destroy Christine. In the middle of their conversation, they look up only to see Arnie looking at them. Dennis tries to call after Arnie and to follow him but because he is still recovering from a football accident he is too slow. However, it is his bad leg that saves him as he falls back into his car as Arnie in Christine drives towards him as if to ram him. This is something the old Arnie would never have done.

The second confrontation takes place in school. Dennis and Arnie/LeBay have words, and Arnie/LeBay accuses Dennis of stealing Leigh. During their argument, Dennis asks to whom he is speaking. In response to his question, LeBay's face takes over Arnie's, and it is LeBay who speaks to Dennis. Dennis tries to get Arnie to fight LeBay and seems to be successful for a brief moment. He reminds Arnie of all the things he and Arnie have done in the past, especially their ant farms. It is then that Arnie briefly peeks through:

> And suddenly the calm hardness broke. His face–his face roiled. I don't know how else to describe it. LeBay was there, furious at having to put down a kind of internal mutiny. Then Arnie was there–drawn, tired, ashamed, but, most of all, desperately unhappy . . .
>
> Dennis, I can't help it," he whispered. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not even here anymore. Help me, Dennis. Help me." (456)

Arnie's obsession with Christine has concluded with her devouring him. Like in the *vagina dentata* myth Arnie has been castrated by a female. She has eaten him whole and designed him into the image of the man who created her; he is unable to escape on his own. Arnie's only chance at being rescued lies with Dennis and Leigh. They have not

been blinded by Christine and are aware of what has happened to Arnie. That they still care about him means that they are willing to accept the responsibility for trying to save him.

Thematically and culturally, the novel is also about the obligations and cost of this responsibility and the role of responsibility in the attaining of moral growth. Recuperating in the hospital after his and Leigh's attempt to destroy Christine (he re-injured his leg driving the tanker), Dennis asks a police officer who is privy to the whole story what has happened to what is left of Christine. The officer replies

> "Why, I saw to that myself. . . His voice was light, almost joking, but his face was very, very serious. I had two fellows from the local police run all those pieces through the crusher out back of Darnell's Garage. Made a little cube about so big. He held his hands about two feet apart. One of those guys got a hell of a bad cut. Took stitches . . . . He said it bit him." (500-1)

For all intents and purposes, the story is over. Unlike the contemporary legend, the story has ended with the death car being destroyed. But has it been? In the epilogue we learn that the death car still exists. Dennis has nothing substantial to go on, just a news report, but it is enough to keep him alert. The news report concerns the death of Sandy Gaulton. Sandy was the person who told Buddy where Arnie was parking Christine and is therefore partly responsible for the destruction of Christine that followed. That Sandy is dead is not what worries Dennis. Dennis is worried because of how Sandy was killed. Sandy had been working in California at a drive-in movie theater when

> A car ripped right through one of the walls, plowed through the counter, smashed the popcorn machine, and got him as he was trying to unlock the

> door to the projection booth. The cops knew that was what he was doing when the car ran him down because they found the key in his hand. (503)

As he reads the news report "headed BIZARRE MURDER BY CAR IN LOS ANGELES" Dennis thinks about what Mercer had told him, "that last thing: *He said it bit him"* (503).

When we examine the contemporary legend in conjunction with the themes in the text, it is clear that the struggle between Christine and Dennis, as well as Leigh and Arnie, is reflective of the struggle to move from teenage to adulthood. Arnie's inability to take control of, or responsibility for, his actions, his inability to prevent Christine and LeBay from taking over his personality means he cannot complete the rite of passage from teenage to adulthood. The fact that his taking a step forward by finally embarking on a relationship also ends in failure means that Arnie will not grow up. He will not grow up because he is obsessed with and by Christine. He is unable to keep the place of the automobile where it should be, secondary to real life. And, indeed, he does not grow up because he is killed.

The growth in Dennis from stereotypical jock to a sensitive man is evidenced through his concern over Arnie and his willingness to risk himself to save him. Unlike Arnie, Dennis is able to recognize the needs of others. He is able to act outside of himself. He does not become obsessed with or by anything. Even though he is attracted to Leigh, he is able to recognize she is with Arnie and so, as a friend to Arnie he respects that relationship and does not try to encroach upon it. When he realizes that Arnie is in trouble, he acts to save Arnie at great cost to himself. Basically, in his willingness to

accept responsibility and to act, Dennis proves he is a man. Dennis is able to make the transition from teenage-hood to adulthood but not without confusion. The difference is that his confusion centers around his ability to realize that there is indeed evil in the world and that this evil can threaten his world. Once he makes this realization, Dennis is able to grow as a character, as too is Leigh.

Arnie's unwillingness or inability to face the threat of evil in Christine in part centres on the fact that Christine is a car, and the male relationship with the automobile. That technology can go out of control and that this can be seen even in the one kind of technology we rely on so heavily, the automobile, is one reality that naturally he would not be so open to see as this car is a symbol of manhood and his chance to be free. Arnie is unable to accept the adult responsibility that goes along with owning a car and so he is not able to move into adulthood.

Because the contemporary legend is the core upon which the story is built, *Christine* the novel and Christine the car provide a reflection of what it is to grow up, move away from childhood innocence and to become responsible and aware. Through the events in the text we are forced to remember that being young is not as easy as we remember. Growing up you face daily terrors whether they come from going to school as an Arnie, from the reality that you can get hurt just having fun, as Dennis is hurt during the football game, or from falling in love with the wrong person. Through the text and in particular through the character of Arnie we also see the dangers inherent in our reliance on technology. For Arnie Christine does not become a key to freedom as intended; instead, because of his reliance upon her, Arnie becomes enslaved. Christine is a Plymouth Fury that also personifies the emotion of fury as she attempts to negotiate her

own place in Arnie's life. In all of this the place of the car in our society can be seen as Douglas Winter says, "boat on the River Styx, a hungry ferry between the land of the living and the land of the dead" (121).

Chapter Nine

Stephen King's *Gerald's Game:* Hanging out with Batman!

Stephen King's *Gerald's Game* was published in 1992. In it, like the two other King novels previously discussed, the contemporary legend acts as a major functional device in the extended narrative. Unlike *Christine,* this novel is not divided into sections that correlate with parts of the contemporary legend, and unlike *IT* the contemporary legend does not function in a number of distinct ways. As well, unlike both *IT* and *Christine, Gerald's Game* does not create physical art horror so much as it does psychological art horror. However, similar to both *IT* and *Christine,* in *Gerald's Game*, the contemporary legend is the story. The novel is 332 pages long. The first 280 pages are an extended version of the contemporary legend. The last 52 pages deal with what happened after the conclusion of the contemporary legend.

The story of *Gerald's Game* is clearly related to the contemporary legend "Superhero Hijinks." In *The Baby Train,* Brunvand notes that the earliest version he has found of this contemporary legend "is in an English collection by Paul Smith called *The Book of Nasty Legends"* (41). Brunvand relates a version of this contemporary legend in his text *Too Good to be True*:

> One morning, in the fall of 1989, [a] woman was raking leaves on her front lawn when she head someone calling, "Help me, somebody help me!" At first she thought she was just hearing things, and nobody seemed to be around on this Saturday morning. But, the sound persisted, "Help me, somebody please help me." So, the woman took her rake and started walking across the yard toward the faint cry. It led her to a house a few

houses down from her own, and the woman went near the back door; she realized the cry was coming from inside the house.

. . .She . . .went inside, following the cries to the bedroom.

The lady of the house was completely naked, and her hands and feet were tied to the bedposts. On the floor was her husband, naked except for a Superman cape. It seems the man had stood on the bedroom dresser and made a flying leap to the bed, but he hit his head on the night table and was still out cold. The couple's children were at a religion class or something. The neighbor called the paramedics to come, and she covered both husband and wife with blankets, but she was unable to untie the wife. When the paramedics came in they couldn't stop laughing. (130)

Gerald's Game is the story of the contemporary legend, but it is also much more. In *Gerald's Game* the contemporary legend serves two functions. The primary function is to serve as a frame for the text. The secondary function is to be the key incident of the *Bildungsroman* that is the story, leading to Jessie's move into selfhood. The additional story of the bogeyman, a recognized folklore figure, serves as a test of her move into selfhood.

Jessie and Gerald have gone to their summer cabin for an afternoon of sexual fun and games. Because it is October the area is deserted. Their games for the day are bondage. The novel begins with Gerald, playing at being a pirate, like the man in the contemporary legend, securing Jessie's wrists to the "mahogany bedposts with two sets of handcuffs" (2).

Although the contemporary legend and the story in the text begin the same way, they differ in how Jessie is left in a precarious position needing to call for help. After being manacled to the bedposts, Jessie decides she does not want to play and tries to tell Gerald but he chooses not to listen. In response to Gerald's decision to ignore her wish to quit the game, Jessie kicks him. However, she does not do so lightly, as we see in the description of the act:

> she drew back her legs, her rising right knee barely missing the promontory of his chin, and then drove her bare feet out again like pistons. The sole and instep of her right foot drove deep into the bowl of his belly. The heel of her left smashed into the stiff root of his penis and the testicles hanging below it like pale, ripe fruit. (18)

Both the contemporary legend and the story have the man knocked out. The main difference is that in the former, the man is usually incapacitated due to his own actions not the actions of his partner. As well, another difference is that in the novel Gerald is not just knocked out; he is accidentally killed. In *Gerald's Game,* Gerald's death occurs 21 pages into the text; Gerald is clearly hurt because of the reactions of his wife; unfortunately, he dies because of this reaction. But these reactions do not come because of what Gerald does. In fact they come from an association with an event in her past.

Moreover, like the contemporary legend the next action involves the struggle of the woman to free herself and her calls for help. However, unlike the contemporary legend, there is no one to hear Jessie's cries. As a result, the bulk of the text, the next 221 pages, deal with Jessie's struggle to free herself from the handcuffs and her eventual success.

This is where King departs from the contemporary legend. In the contemporary legend, we have no idea about what the woman is thinking as she waits to be saved. The woman stays a two dimensional character. However, in *Gerald's Game,* King takes 24 hours and turns it into a book of Jessie's life. Caught in a moment of horror, the story of the contemporary legend, if Jessie is to understand any part of her life she must deal with her life and the horrors within it that she has submerged in her consciousness. She has to think about it all if she is going to move towards any chance of determining how to set herself free.

As Jessie struggles to free herself, we hear her internal thoughts. At the beginning, these thoughts are a monologue, but they soon change to a dialogue as Jessie converses with a variety of characters from her past or who represent parts of her personality. Jessie becomes three dimensional; she becomes someone the reader can empathize with as s/he realizes that Jessie too has parts of her past with which she has not come to terms. The conversations Jessie has with the voices representing various parts of her personality or characters from her past are what, in part, force her to face why she is in the predicament that she is in. Ultimately, a dialogue between one character from her past, Ruth, and herself forces Jessie to work back in her past to the memory of her father's abuse and the eclipse of the sun that is the metaphor for the darkness that has overcome her ever since. This darkness has allowed her to blot out unpleasant memories and affected the various choices she has made during her life.

The contemporary legend and the novel also differ in that Jessie is able to free herself; she does not have to face the embarrassment of being found naked, save for a pair of panties, handcuffed to a bed. However, although she is saved this direct

embarrassment, when the police do go to investigate the situation it is clear to all involved what games had been played that day. Nonetheless, unlike the female in the contemporary legend, Jessie is spared public ridicule as the real details of her ordeal are never made public. Jessie is spared this humiliation only because her husband had been a lawyer and his law firm has sent a minder to make sure no publicity that could be considered adverse to the interests of the law firm would ensue. As Jessie describes in a letter to her friend Ruth:

> Brandon was right beside me during the police interviews, with his little tape-recorder going. He politely but relentlessly pointed out to everyone present at every interview–including stenographers and nurses–that anyone who leaked the admittedly sensational details of the case would face all the nasty reprisals a large New England law-firm with an exceedingly tight ass could think up. Brandon must have been as convincing to them as he was to me, because no one in the know ever talked to the press (298)

Nonetheless, even though Jessie is spared public ridicule, she still feels embarrassed by the whole episode. Yet, unlike the old Jessie who would have allowed that unpleasant time to be blotted from her memory, the new, mentally healthy Jessie realizes that she needs to face all of that time and incorporate it into her life. She realizes that it is only if she does this that she will she be able to stay mentally whole.

Interestingly, Jessie's mental freedom is what allows her physical freedom to be attained. Like the Losers Club members in *IT* and Dennis and Leigh in *Christine,* Jessie has to move away from her version of the real, the concrete memories of her life to the

unreal, recognition and acceptance of those memories she has buried or considered fantasy in order to understand how to deal with the real if she is going to save herself.

Jessie is unable to get physically free until past and present are brought together; in effect, Jessie only attains freedom when her fragmented personality is made whole with her triumphing over those voices that would have her believe that she is powerless. Only then is Jessie able to act by doing the one thing she can do to free herself, cut herself so that the blood can serve as a lubricant for her to work her wrists through the handcuffs; only when she is free from the psychic pain is Jessie able to inflict the necessary physical pain needed to free herself.

In a departure from the contemporary legend King continues the story where the contemporary legend leaves off. The remainder of the book involves Jessie writing a letter to the friend whose voice was responsible for making Jessie integrate her past with her present. As a part of making herself whole, Jessie is typing the truth of what happened to her friend Ruth, the voice that mattered the most to her during her ordeal. In this letter she tells her friend about the ordeal, in effect repeating the contemporary legend and what happened after but using her own voice as the other voices in her head are not necessary. But, it is clear that her determination is still shaky. However, where the old Jessie would have acquiesced to the request from her helper to stop typing so as to not further damage her hand, Jessie gets the helper to agree that her hand is getting better and then adds:

> Well, now I'm trying to get the rest of me better. Step one is writing a letter to an old friend of mine. I promised myself–last October, during my hard time–that if I

got out of the mess I was in, I'd do that. But, I kept putting it off. Now I'm finally trying, and I don't dare stop. I might lose my guts if I do. (291)

The old Jessie would have given in, as she did to every request of Gerald's, but the new Jessie does not. Like Evelyn in *Fried Green Tomatoes,* Jessie has grown and with her acknowledgement of her past and with her acceptance of its place in her present she has attained self awareness and become a fully actualized person. Only because of the horrible lived experience of "Superhero Hijinks" has Jessie been able to find her own voice.

King also departs from the contemporary legend with his introduction of the theme of sexual abuse. Nonetheless the contemporary legend is still integral as a frame for the exploration of this theme. The self actualization of Jessie is only possible when she faces a key incident in her past. The main theme in *Gerald's Game* revolves around sex and sexual abuse. Though it appears that the sexual game is what leads to Gerald's death and Jessie's predicament, in fact it is an event from Jessie's past that has caused all of the problems. As Jessie struggles to free herself and talks with the different voices in her head, we learn that as a child Jessie's father molested her during an eclipse. He masturbated with her sitting on his lap while he touched her breasts and her clitoris through the dress she was wearing.

Jessie finds many ways to minimize this incident, even when she is being forced to face it by the voices in her head,

Poor, poor man. I wonder if any of the people he did business with over the years ever saw him as rattled as I did on the day of the eclipse. All that pain, and over what? A sexual accident about as serious as a stubbed toe.

Jesus, what a life it is. What a fucking life . . . .

Ruth Neary's voice spoke up so suddenly it made her jump. It was filled with disgusted wonder.

You're still making excuses for him, aren't you? Still letting him off the hook and blaming yourself, after all these years. Even now. Amazing.

"Quit it," she said hoarsely. "None of that has the slightest goddam thing to do with the mess I'm in now –"

What a piece of work you are, Jessie!

" – and even if it did, " she went on, raising her voice slightly, "*even if it did,* it doesn't it doesn't have the slightest goddam thing to do with getting *out* of the mess I'm in now, *so just give it a rest!"*

You weren't Lolita, Jessie, no matter what he might have made you think. You were about nine country miles from Lolita. (187)

Jessie is finally forced to recognize that she hit out at Gerald because of this incident when one of the voices, Nora, confronts her,

Just tell me one thing, Jessie, another voice said. No UFO here; it was the voice of Nora Callaghan. *One thing and we'll consider the subject closed, at least for now and probably forever. Okay?*

Jessie was silent, waiting, wary.

When you finally lost your temper yesterday afternoon – when you finally kicked out – who were you kicking at? Was it Gerald?

"Of *course* it was Ger–" she began, and then broke off as a single image, perfectly clear, filled her mind. It was the white string of drool which had

been hanging from Gerald's chin. She saw it elongate, saw it fall to her midriff just above the navel. Only a little spit, that was all, no big deal after all the years and all the passionate kisses with their mouths open and their tongues dueling; she and Gerald had swapped a fair amount of lubrication, and the only price they'd ever paid was a few shared colds.

No big deal, that was, until yesterday, when he'd refused to let her go when she wanted, needed, to be let go. No big deal until she'd smelled that flat sad mineral smell, the one she associated with the well-water at Dark Score, and with the lake itself on hot summer days . . . days like July 20th, 1963, for instance.

She had *seen* spit; she had *thought* spunk.

No, that's not true, she thought, but she didn't need to summon Ruth to play Devil's advocate this time; she knew it *was* true. *It's his goddam spunk* – that had been her exact thought, and after that she had ceased thinking altogether, at least for awhile.

Instead of thinking she had launched that reflexive countering movement, driving one foot into his stomach and the other into his balls. Not spit but spunk; not some new revulsion at Gerald's game but that old stinking horror suddenly surfacing like a sea-monster. (188-189)

Obviously, the problem leading to her predicament comes because of an old sexual trauma that she has not confronted.

Only when Jessie, at the urging of one of the voices she calls Punkin, forces herself to remember everything that happened during the eclipse does she realize a way to

free herself. Interestingly, Punkin is the name Jessie's father called her when she was young, including the day he molested her. At Punkin's urging to go back to the eclipse, Jessie revisits that day in her memory. During this process she recognizes that her father had intended to do what he did all along and that it was not her fault in any way. It was her father who had asked her to wear her too tight sundress and it was her father who had asked her if she wanted to sit on his knee during the eclipse. Moreover, her father had chosen to wear only a pair of shorts. Ultimately, though, Jessie realizes none of what happened was her fault when she remembers what her father said to her during his sexual advances,

> *Do you love me, Punkin?*
>
> *Yes, sure - ?*
>
> *Then don't worry about anything. I'd never hurt you.* Now his other hand was moving up her bare leg, pushing the sundress ahead of it, bunching it in her lap. *I want . . .*
>
> " *'I want to be sweet to you,'* " Jessie muttered, shifting a little against the headboard. Her face was sallow and drawn. "That's what he said. Good Christ, he actually *said* that." (227)

Once she has remembered what her father said she is able to realize that he had intended to do what he did all along. It is after she faces this realization that Jessie is able to, as she says "quit bitching and moaning and get down to business" (228). And so she allows herself to be directed to what happened before her father's sexual advances to find out what Punkin told her she needed to find. And she does, she remembers her father passing her the panes of glass used to shield the eyes during the eclipse and her father telling her

to be careful as he doesn't want his wife to come home to find "*a note saying, I've taken you (Jessie) to the Emergency Room so they can try to sew a couple of your fingers back on*" (231). It is when her memory of that day from start to finish is complete that Jessie is able to take something from it to set herself free. She realizes her only chance for freedom rests on her willingness to cut herself with the glass left on the headboard so that her blood can serve as the lubricant needed to allow her to slide the cuffs off of her hand. Only when Jessie faces the memory that has crippled her psychologically throughout her life is she able to see what needs to be done if she is to be physically free. Importantly, Jessie is only able to face this memory because of being caught in "Superhero Hijinks."

This contemporary legend is also bolstered by reference to folk concept, that of the bogeyman who is, as identified by John Widdowson, a threatening figure used as a verbal device used by parents to control their children. While she is trapped Jessie sees a tall thin man who comes into the cottage and watches her at night. She likens him to the bogeyman and it is the fear of him, for she knows he plans to kill her, sooner or later, that forces her not to give up. During the later part of the book she concludes her story by telling her friend Ruth who the bogeyman turned out to be and why facing him was so important that she pushed Brandon into setting up the opportunity for her. Jessie realizes that Brandon is willing to believe that the wicker box that Jessie had described Joubert, the bogeyman, as having was just a coincidence rather than "having to accept all the rest–most of all the fact that a monster like Joubert could actually touch the life of someone he knew and liked" (322). However, Jessie realizes that this is not something she can allow herself to do. As she writes to Ruth,

> And that insight was followed by a second one, an even clearer one: that

> I would do it, too. I could come to believe I had been wrong . . . [sic] but if I succeeded in doing that, my life would be ruined. The voices would start to come back–not just yours but Punkin's or Nora Callighan's, but my mother's and my sister's and my brother's and kids I'd chummed with in high school and people I met for ten minutes in doctor's offices and God alone knows how many others. I think that most of them would be those scary UFO voices. (322-23)

Moreover, she realizes why she can't allow this to happen,

> I couldn't bear that, Ruth, because in the two months after my hard time in the house by the lake, I remembered a lot of things I had spent a lot of years repressing. I think the most important of those memories came to the surface between the first operation on my hand and the second, when I was on "medication" (this is technical hospital term for "stoned out of your gourd) almost all the time. The memory was this: in the two years or so between the day of the eclipse and the day of my brother Will's birthday party–the one where he goosed me during the croquet game – *I heard all those voices almost constantly.* Maybe Will's goosing me acted as some kind of rough, accidental therapy. I suppose it's possible; don't they say that our ancestors invented cooking after eating what forest fires left behind? Although if some serendipitous therapy took place that day, I have an idea that it didn't come with the goose but when I hauled off and pounded Will one in the mouth for doing it. . . and at this point none of that matters. What matters is that, following that day on the deck, I spent two

> years sharing space in my head with a kind of whispering choir, dozens of voices that passed judgment on my every word and action. Some were kind and supportive, but most were the voices of people who were afraid, people who were confused, people who through Jessie was a worthless little baggage who deserved every bad thing that happened to her and who would have to pay double for every good thing. For two years I heard those voices, Ruth, and when they stopped, I forgot them. Not a little at a time, but all at once.
>
> How could a thing like that happen? I don't know, and in a very real sense, I don't care. I might if the change had made things worse, I suppose, but it didn't–it made them immeasurably better. I spent the two years between the eclipse and the birthday party in a kind of fugue state, with my conscious mind shattered into a lot of squabbling fragments, and the real epiphany was this: if I let nice, kind Brandon Milheron have this way, I'd end up right back where I started–headed down Nuthouse Lane by the way of Schizophrenia Boulevard. And this time there is no little brother around to administer crude shock therapy; this time I have to do it myself, just as I had to get out of Gerald's goddam handcuffs myself. (322-324)

Jessie has to face Joubert no matter the cost if she is to believe that she really is healed and has dealt with all of her monsters, from her father, to the bogeyman, to her time in handcuffs.

Those of us that have heard the contemporary legend "Superhero Hijinks" have wondered "what if no one heard the woman calling for help." In *Gerald's Game* we see

what happens when the "what if..." happens. Jessie calls for help but is not heard because no one is there. In Jessie's case, being locked up means that Jessie is no longer able to run from herself; she is forced to confront both her own demons and the demons that surround her. It is this process of psychological therapy that makes up the bulk of the text. This therapy would not be possible were it not for being caught in "Superhero Hijinks."

"Superhero Hijinks" is also about adult's fantasies and the way in which we view these fantasies. Pretending to be someone else, even if only for a little while, can be very liberating and allow people to act differently than they normally would. This idea of being someone else is often used in marriage counseling therapy encounters where each spouse takes on the role of their partner. However, ultimately why people play sex games and what sex games they play is private to them and all that is needed is a place where privacy and anonymity are guaranteed.

Unfortunately, on some level most people still think of sex games and the idea of bondage, even with scarves, as being a little risqué, a little naughty. The consequence of having what is private become public is ridicule and even condemnation. All of this is implied in the consequence of the contemporary legend. That is why it is told again and again. The implication in the telling is "of course I would never do this" and "this would never happen to me" because the tellers and the receivers of the contemporary legend are the 'good' boys and girls who will never need to be punished for aberrant behaviour. The players in the contemporary legend are all punished for breaking society's moral code. This aberrant behaviour, the common sense that you can be caught and the resulting punishment combined with the suggestion that you can never really hide, is what this

contemporary legend is all about. In effect Jessie, is the creator of her own dilemma, the anxiety associated with this act has been borne out as she is the one who engaged in a game that left her powerless and her punishment is the making public of this private act.

In this chapter I have shown how in *Gerald's Game* the contemporary legend is integral to the text as the working out of it is the whole story. I have illustrated how the story has, of course, been developed with the plot being fleshed out, setting detailed, characters developed and other elements of literature incorporated. I have looked at a possible theme or main intent for the story but shown how, nonetheless, the basic plot is recognizable as a contemporary legend. As such it can be seen the importance of the contemporary legend lies in how it informs the whole text and how it and the larger fiction act as mirrors reflecting each other (Dällenbach's *mise en abyme*) until, intertextually, neither one clearly stands on its own as both reflect and thus add to each other.

Moreover, the unknown horror of the contemporary legend, the possibility that woman's cries for help not be heard, has been shown to be integral to the movement of the plot. The horror of either dying in this position or being discovered in it forces Jessie to examine fully how to escape. Without her willingness to move from the real to unreal Jessie would not have been able to move back to real again. Had she not negotiated an understanding of her life and dealt with the one incident of sexual abuse in her past, Jessie would not have been able to develop the strength and ability to free herself.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the contemporary legend in regards to some literature texts. To do this I reviewed existing contemporary legend scholarship and created a definition of the contemporary legend as it pertains to literature. I then looked at some of the many writers whose works obviously contain contemporary legends, make reference to contemporary legends or are based on contemporary legends. I examined how in these cases the contemporary legends are used within the writer's text and how they meld with the text, intertextually and intratextually, to create a new text. Finally I have looked at what the contemporary legends have to say in conjunction with the text in which they appear for as Paul Smith states in his definition, contemporary legends "provide a vehicle for the discussion of relevant contemporary issues" (99).

As discussed earlier, literature is but one form of popular culture and popular culture has long been accepted as a mirror of society. One way that culture at the time of writing is reflected in fiction is through the folklore item(s) in the text.

As students of literature we take for granted that the study of literature is important. We accept the belief that literature expands our knowledge about ourselves and others. It broadens our worldview and heightens our imagination. Through the reading of literature, we learn about our past and our present and can be prompted to think about our possible futures as literature challenges and affirms our assumptions about reality.

As Orson Scott Card says in his introduction to *Ender's Game*:

> I think that most of us, anyway, read these stories that we know are not "true" because we're hungry for another kind of truth. The mythic truth about human nature in general, the particular truth about those life communities that define our own identity, and the most specific truth of all: our own self-story. Fiction, because it is not about somebody who actually lived in the real world, always has the possibility of being about ourself. (Intro xx)

And we read because when we read a text the reading becomes our own. We help to make the story. As Card states about the different interpretations of *Ender's Game*

> All these readings of the book are "correct."
>
> This is the essence of the transaction between storyteller and audience. The "true" story is the one that exists in my mind; it is certainly not the written words on the bound paper that you hold in your hands. The story in my mind is nothing but a hope; the text of the story is the tool that I created in order to try to make that hope a reality. The story itself, the true story, is the one that the audience members create in their own minds, guided and shaped by my text, but then transformed, elucidated, expanded, edited, and clarified by their own experiences, their desires, their hopes and fears. (xxi)

Obviously the study of folklore, like literature, helps us to learn more about ourselves and the world around us. Yet, to study folklore as a means to understand ourselves we need to recognize that a text is not just one thing. The words that make the written text can combine to present another text. Generally, however, the idea of a text is obvious for English. The text is the piece of literature, be it a poem, play, novel or a short story. For

folklore, the idea of a text is not so clear cut. Mary Ellen Lewis explains this in her article "The Study of Folklore in Literature: An Expanded View",

> . . .folkloric patterns may result in a house or a barn, a quilt or a pair of shoes, a loaf of bread or a jug of wine . . As behaviors, folklore has a *situation* or context in which the item, text, or thing is actualized where – a relationship exists between actor – performer/maker and audience/user. The *situation* includes not only the persons and particulars about them, but the specific setting and the general situational matrix. From the *situation* comes a *product*, the result – a test or item – which has a recognizable structural content or form, the analysis of which may yield equally recognizable structural patterns. Here belong all of the recognizable genres of folklore as well as more unconventional, or inchoately defined, genres, such as ideas, themes, worldview. And in the situation, to actualize the product, a medium is used – for example, in the verbal arts, language a style. Thus folklore involves a situation for which the process, a medium though which to realize it or actualize it, and a product, result. And each of these parts of folklore has both a descriptive and a structural level.
>
> In actuality situation/context, medium/language and style, product/text, item together form a whole artificially broken up into parts to facilitate analysis. (345)

Thus the item identified as folklore cannot truly exist alone. Instead it is a part of the whole that surrounds it. This whole is the culture. The situation that gives rise to the folklore item, the performance of the item, the result of the item is all a part of the text. When the folklore product/item is identified as a part of the literature text, all that

surrounds it must be identified. Only in the examination of the complete text of the folklore item and how it interacts within the larger text of the literature item will there be any value to the discussion of the folklore item's place within literature, its contribution to the piece of literature and the analysis of the literature itself. In other words the *how* and the *why* of that which is within the text is as of much, if not more, importance as the *what*.

Clearly, both folklore and literature are reflections of culture. But, what is culture? Raymond Williams in his text *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* discusses the various meanings of the word. He states:

> Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (76-77).

Williams then continues on with a discussion of the various uses of the word and its history. However, he concludes that

> ... we have to recognize three broad active categories of usage. . . (1) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. . .(ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, or a period or group. . .(iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. ..

> . . .It is clear that, within a discipline, conceptual usage has to be clarified. But in general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence. (80-81)

Culture, then, if we combine the three general uses identified by Williams, is the act of living, be it physical, spiritual, emotional, social or artistic within a large specific or general community setting. Furthermore, culture can be recognized as existing on a series of different sub-levels as within the larger community will be many smaller communities that centre around various activities such as work, and places such as home and school. Clearly, literature and folklore, each reflect this definition of culture. Moreover, as folklore is a pervasive part of our lives how it is spread needs to be acknowledged. In particular, when we look at the contemporary legend and its appearance as a part of television shows, references to them as news items in the papers, their spread through the internet and other forms of mass media the connection between culture, media and folklore must be examined.

This connection between mass culture, media and folklore is examined by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vazsonyi in their article "Magic for Sale: Märchen and Legend in TV Advertising." Here they state, "it might sound strange to those early theorists of folklore, but television is the main dispenser of certain forms of folklore, including the tale" (49). Indeed, in an earlier article, "The Dialectics of the Legend," Dégh and Vazsonyi claimed:

> It is not enough to acknowledge that mass media has a "role" in modern legend-transmission. It is closer to the truth that the mass media are part of

> folklore–maybe the greater part. The legend makes a part of its way–presumably the lesser–on foot and continues on the longer trail through the speedy modern vehicle. (37)

Clearly, television, mass culture and mass media are main dispensers of certain forms of folklore through their transmission of folklore forms. Building on Dégh's contention, in her article "The Belief Legend in Modern Society," that social and historical changes influence the legend, Ronald L. Baker elaborates on this connection. In his article "The Influence of Mass Culture on Modern Legends," he notes that "there is plenty of evidence suggesting that mass culture nourishes legendry–providing it with fresh subject matter and speeding its dissemination" (367). He goes on to state that:

> It follows, then that such a pervasive force as mass culture naturally would influence the nature of modern legends. On the one hand, the products, institutions, and heroes of mass culture have had an enormous impact on the subject matter of contemporary legends; and, on the other hand, television, radio, newspaper, and other mass media have engulfed and spread a number of legendary themes. (368)

There is no doubt that forms of mass media have engulfed and spread a number of legendary themes. In his article, Baker documents a number of instances of legends that have been influenced by mass culture through the mass media. He discusses, among others, legends generated by the automobile including "The Death Car," which I discussed in chapter 8, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," and contemporary legends concerning department stores such as K-Mart, which were spread via interviews and a popular radio talk show. However, it is not just through television, radio and the internet

and other quasi-oral or performance-oriented media, that such narratives are circulated, but also within the more stable form of print. An example of how print media is involved in the spread of folklore can be seen in the following letter,

> Dear Abby:
>
> If you are interested in teenagers, you will print this story. I don't know whether it is true or not, but it doesn't matter because it served its purpose for me:
>
> A fellow and his date pulled into their favorite "lover's lane" to listen to the radio and do a little necking. The music was interrupted by an announcer who said there was an escaped convict in the area who had served time for rape and robbery. He was described as having a hook instead of a right hand. The couple became frightened and drove away. When the boy took his girl home, he went around to open the car door for her. Then he saw it–a hook on the door handle! I don't think I will ever park to make out as long as I live. I hope this does the same for other kids.
>
> Jeanette

Published in a 1960 Dear Abby column, here the contemporary legend "The Hook"[38] was disseminated throughout North America in a nationally syndicated column;

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[38] Published as a letter to newspaper advice columnist Abigal van Buren on November 8th, 1960. The story being presented by Jeanette is clearly that of the contemporary legend "The Hook." This contemporary legend is a classic. It has been used by Paul Smith and Gillian Bennett in their 1996 text *Contemporary Legend A Reader* (xxi) to jumpstart their discussion of contemporary legend definition. It has also been used by Jan Harold Brunvand in his book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (1981) 48-9.

it appeared simultaneously in a number of newspapers across North America. Clearly then there is no set manner of transmission for folklore such as contemporary legends as they can be transmitted through word of mouth or through the internet or they may appear in newspapers or magazines as news or gossip. [39]

Regarding contemporary legends, their mutable nature is in part the result of how they are transmitted, which changes depending on the situation. Moreover, while contemporary legends are spread orally, through e-mail, the news and other media they are present in texts, the static nature of which affects how they are retold, if at all.

As scholars from different disciplines become aware of the contemporary legend and the impact it has upon their field of study, they will add shades of use and understanding to the contemporary legend's form, content, and functions through their approaches. Just as a critical approach to reading a piece of literature can shift the focus of its theme, so too can the different critical approaches to a contemporary legend alter what is perceived as its message, challenge or even its function.

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[39] As an example of how contemporary legends are influenced by mass media one may visit http://www.snopes.com/. Snopes is an urban legend reference site. On the main page it is possible to access pages dealing with contemporary legends spread by and about television, radio and the internet. Moreover, a listing of internet hoaxes, email rumors and urban legends Web sites that deal with internet lore present at the time of writing abound. Some of the more interesting ones include: The AFU and Urban Legends Archive http://urbanlegends.miningco.com/library/blhoax.htm http://www.urbanlegends.com; CNET Special Report: I Swear It's All True! http://www.cnet.com/specialreports/0-6014-7-1427917.html; Current Netlore http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blhoax.htm; Scams, Hoaxes and Urban Legends http://www.nursehealer.com/Scam.htm; TruthorFiction.Com - Attack on America http://www.truthorfiction.com./index-wtc.htm ; Urban Legends: Don't believe everything you read http://www.scambusters.org/legends.html ; The Urban Legend Combat Kit

Nonetheless, as a whole the functions of the contemporary legend appear to make us think about that which we are expressing or have a concern with, or about, society. They are there to provide us with a means through which to express, vicariously, feelings that may or may not be considered appropriate, important or valid. As such the contemporary legend serves to enable us to continue to negotiate our role and place within our mutable and sometimes frightening world.

Within literature, the contemporary legend serves a number of roles. The strength of the contemporary legend is such that the inclusion of or the allusion to a contemporary legend within a larger piece of fiction functions in four main ways.

First, for texts that were written in a time before the reader's contemporary time, the contemporary legend provides a window into the concerns of the cultural time of the text's creation; as seen in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers.*

Second, the contemporary legend acts as a communicative device within literature. In this instance they reflect, reinforce or foreshadow one of the themes of the text and they show the relationship between the characters in the text. This role was examined in Dave Klein's novel *Blind Side.* In addition they illustrate the connection or relationship between the characters in the text and reveal the character traits of one of the characters in the text. This role was examined though Sue Grafton's *H is for Homicide.* Moreover, when they are used as a communicative device within literature they show the development of the relationship between the characters in the text and/or a narrative event, and reveal the character traits of one of the characters in the text. This role was examined through Gail Bowen's *The Wandering Soul Murders.* As well, as a minor communicative device the contemporary legend may be used as an aside in which case it

adds a moment of lightness to the text but adds nothing to the development of plot or character. This role was illustrated through Howard Engel's *The Suicide Murders.*

Third, the contemporary legend acts as a functional device in that it acts as the key incident in the rising action leading to the climax and the conclusion of the text. More specifically, the contemporary legend is the pivotal event in the plot through which change that is occurring in a character is reflected, in particular in the *Bildungsroman.* This function was examined in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café,* Anthony Burgess' *The Pianoplayer*, and, peripherally, *Gerald's Game*.

Fourth, the contemporary serves as the frame of reference for the whole text. This function was examined in Stephen King's *It, Christine* and *Gerald's Game*.

In all cases, contemporary legends uphold or undermine their society's hegemony as they invite the expression of diverse points of view. This is achieved, in part, through the focus of the contemporary legend; contemporary legends transmit stories whose focus, upon reflection, seems like common or good sense. The common sense message either reinforces accepted behaviour, thinking and morality or, alternatively, when the message of the contemporary legend is discussed or debated, it supplies an alternative means of disruption. This disruption occurs when what seems like common sense or status quo is challenged. Thus no matter what form contemporary legends may take or how fragmentary they may appear, in a text, their use is important because of their function.

Moreover, that contemporary legends reach beyond the boundaries of county and country, suggests that the concerns/fears/beliefs that they communicate are international;

contemporary society is indeed becoming a global village. In addition, that the form, if not the story itself, as active contemporary legends change, is a part of our collective memory, suggests that contemporary legends form a part of our cultural literacy.

Indeed as Ronald L. Baker writes:

> Although written literature frequently is considered as something more individual than social, the literary artist as well as the folk artist works with materials belonging to the whole community, as Crews suggests. Regardless of whether the "meta-personal" element is held pre-consciously, as Jungians believe, or consciously, as Crews discovered, the literary artist works within a cultural framework; and the form or content of his or her art will be shaped by culturally determined circumstances beyond the artist's control. (1976:109)

Thus, for these reasons further critical study of texts which use contemporary legends is needed. This examination of the roles contemporary legends play when they exist within larger pieces of fiction is important for what contemporary legends reveal about the text itself and the cultural context of the text's creation. In order to understand the role of contemporary legends within larger pieces of fiction, this study examined the structure, forms and roles of the contemporary legend within literature and illustrated how the contemporary legend acts as a mirror of, or a window into, the text itself and/or the cultural context of the text's creation. Ultimately, contemporary legends in literature need to be examined as the two narrative texts are intertwined; they affect each other. When contemporary legends are included into literature by authors such as King then they serve a purpose within the text. However, at the same time the texts which incorporate the contemporary legends are themselves disseminating the legends thus

keeping the contemporary legend in the public consciousness as long as the text is read. As long the contemporary legend is kept current then it may become incorporated into yet another text. Clearly each narrative form has an impact upon the other and for that reason as well the two narrative forms need to be studied together, not alone.

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Appendix A

Paul Smith. Definitional Characteristics of the Contemporary Legend." *Foaftale News* 44, May (1999): 5-8

A: CHARACTERISTICS WHICH DESCRIBE THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY ARE OR ARE NOT

A1: Narrative Status

a: A contemporary legend is a type of traditional discourse.

b: Contemporary legends appear to be anonymous creations.

c: Contemporary legends do not exist as single, unique items and many examples of any one text will be in circulation at any one time

d: Contemporary legends demonstrate a high propensity for mutability. As such all aspects of the contemporary legend are capable of change or prone to being changed. As such, they are not static, and no two examples of supposedly the same story are exactly alike.

A2: Form

a: The contemporary legend is primarily a conversational genre

A3: Structure

a: Contemporary legends vary in terms of structure

b: Contemporary legends, in general, comprise only a single episode or motif.

c: Contemporary legends, in general, have no formulaic openings and closings

d: Contemporary legends have no definitive text and, consequently, their traditional nature is not always immediately apparent.

A4: Style

a: Contemporary legends, in general, do not have an artistically developed form, and no effort is made to polish the story.

b: Contemporary legends, in general, use informal and/or colloquial language.

A5: Dissemination

a: Contemporary legends in general have a wide, sometimes international, distribution.

b: Contemporary legends are communicated primarily by word of mouth, although they are also frequently disseminated through the mass media (eg., films, television, radio, newspapers), office communications technology (eg., fax, photocopiers, email), as well as novels and short stories.

A6: Narrators

a: in general, we are all potential narrators / communicators of contemporary legends.

b: contemporary legends require no specialist performers and so there is no dividing line between the narrators and the listeners.

c: contemporary legend narrators are, in general, unaware that they are telling a traditional narrative which has previously been told by others

d: Contemporary legends are not considered to be the property of any one individual

A7: Context of narration

a: Contemporary legends have no specific context for performance but instead are performed in a wide variety of contexts

b: Contemporary legends are, in general, presented to the listener within the context of an existing group relationship.

c: The "narration" of a contemporary legend is an interactive process.

d: The "narration" of a contemporary legend stems from normal conversation rather than in response to a request for someone to tell a tale.

A8: Content

a: Themes: Contemporary legends are the expressions of a variety of legendary themes, motifs, and allomotifs — not a fixed body of material. Contemporary legends are broadly related thematically, in that they emerge out of current physical and social contexts as well as social interaction, and they describe culturally proscribed behaviours (implied or explicit) of one kind or another.

b: Plausibility: Contemporary legends, in general, appear to be plausible, and even possible, in that they present descriptions and discussions of mundane and ordinary, rather than extraordinary and sensational, experiences and events (although often having an unusual twist).

c: Temporality: Contemporary legends are set in the "her and now," as if they happened recently —although the stories may have historical antecedents, roots in historical fact, or make reference to the past or reflect age-old concerns.

d: Contemporaneity: Contemporary legends are not simple traditional legends which have been modernized and/or "rationalized" and which are in circulation today.

e: Principal Characteristics: Contemporary legends are set in the real world and focus in ordinary individuals whom we encounter in the course of our everyday lives.

f: Setting: Contemporary legends are set in the real world and focus on familiar places we recognize and inhabit.

g: Events: Contemporary legends portray situations which we, or someone we know, may have experienced, are currently experiencing, or could possibly experience.

h: Secular / Sacred Status: Contemporary legends are primarily secular (as opposed to sacred).

i: Supernatural Status: Contemporary legends are, in general, non-supernatural.

j: Connotation: ---

k: Ostension: ---

A9: Truth

a: Contemporary legends are presented as describing true events, even when they are intended as "lies," "Hoaxes," and "jokes."

b: With contemporary legends, as often as not, the question of the truthfulness of the events described is overlooked because the tales sound so plausible and possible, even when they may have an odd flaw in the logic or story line.

c: verisimilitude: Contemporary legends, although probably unsubstantial, nevertheless appear to be substantiated through the inclusion of details such as names, times, and places.

d: The fact that the participants in the events described are named is not validation that these individuals exist or that events ever took place

e: Rarely are the narrators identified as the participants in the story. Instead they distance themselves, though not necessarily intentionally, from the events they

describe by the inclusion of such phrases as "...it happened to a friend," thereby making themselves less accountable for the truth of the story.

A10: Belief

a: Contemporary legends vary in terms of the level of belief in the story exhibited by the narrators or listeners

b: Contemporary legends, in general, do not require that the narrators or listeners subscribe to any new or special belief(s) or belief system, but rather they emerge out of the existing beliefs of a given group.

c: Contemporary legends, in general, include some implicit or explicit, positive or negative "statement of belief" out of which arises "dialogue" and "debate" in the form of confirmation or challenge by participants

A11: Selection

a: The selection of an appropriate contemporary legend for narration is primarily based on the current context of the discourse taking place; that is, they are usually proffered in response to a preceding item of conversation.

b: The selection of contemporary legend for narration generally focuses on topics and issues which are perceived as important by the speaker and/or listener alike.

c: some contemporary Legend described scenarios which are perceived to be more important to the narrators and listeners than others, and so cycles of tales will be circulating simultaneously.

A12: Meaning

a: Contemporary legends have no single meaning and so can have different meanings for different individuals

A13: Function

a: Contemporary legends have a wide variety of functions for both their telling and narrative content. As such, any one contemporary legend may be informative and/or entertaining while carrying other messages, all at the same time.

b: Contemporary legends have no single function and so can have different functions for different individuals

c: Contemporary legends provide an opportunity for speakers to introduce some statement or debate about a "contemporary" issue from his/her chosen perspective

B: CHARACTERISTICS WHICH DESCRIBE CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS IN TERMS OF WHAT THEY MAY OR MAY NOT BE

B1: Narrative Status

a: Although contemporary legends appear to be anonymous creations, they may have discoverable sources.

b: Although contemporary legends appear to be anonymous creations, it is not unknown for texts to have spuriously attributed authorship

B2: Form

a: Although the contemporary legend is primarily a conversational genre, they may be found embedded in other types of traditional discourse (eg., joke, memorate, dite, rumour, gossip, personal experience narrative) and in diverse settings — ranging from news-reporting to after-dinner speeches.

b: A contemporary legend may or may not be an elaborate, underdeveloped or fragmentary narrative or find expression as a kernel narrative, a digest, or a statement of belief, or as a reference or allusion to a narrative or photo-narrative.

B3: Structure

a: Contemporary legends may or may not have reflective descriptions added,

B4: Style

a: Contemporary legends may or may not be dramatic in their presentation

b: Contemporary legends my or may not use "politically correct" language

B5: Dissemination: ---.

B6: Narrators: ---.

B7: Context of Narration:

a: The setting of a contemporary legend may or may not include much interaction between the speaker and the listener

B8: Content:

a: Themes: ---.

b: Plausibility: ---.

c: Temporality: ---.

d: Contemporaneity: A contemporary legend may or may not contain specifically contemporary material. Contemporary legends may or may not be updated narratives (historical and otherwise) which deal with contemporary issues, characters, settings, etc. A contemporary legend may or may not have historical antecedents in terms of plots and texts.

e: Principal Characters: ---.

f: Setting: ---.

g: Events: A contemporary legend may or may not describe what are perceived to be newly emergent events (threats, problems, and the like) that are in the physical and social contexts of the narrator and/or the listener

h: Secular / Sacred Status:---.

i: Supernatural Status: ---.

j: Connotation: A contemporary legend may or may not be "politically correct."

k: Ostension: A contemporary legend may or may not suggest or call for action on the part of the narrators or listeners.

B9: Truth

a: A contemporary legend may or may not, in whole or part, be true. This may not necessarily be literal truth, but perhaps truth which comes from typifying life in the twentieth century.

B10: Belief

a: A contemporary legend may or may not be believed (in whole or part) to be true.

b: A contemporary legend may or may not involve the suspension of disbelief.

B11: Selection: ---.

B12: Meaning: ---.

B13: Function

a: A contemporary legend may or may not be used to validate other aspects of culture — for example collective beliefs.

b: A contemporary legend may or may not provide justifications as to why we behave or should behave in particular ways in certain situations

c: A contemporary legend may or may not be used to integrate knowledge within a culture and so maintain group cohesion

d: A contemporary legend may or may not be used to compensate and to fill a gap in our empirical knowledge with suppositions about the way the world works.

e: A contemporary legend may or may not reconcile us to the lives we are experiencing rather than the lives we would like to experience.

f: A contemporary legend may or may not be didactic (eg., etiological and/or etymological) in that they may be employed to explore, explain, or illustrate a particular point.

g: A contemporary legend may or may not be used to present a rational explanation of some issue or phenomena which is ambiguous or beyond our control

h: A contemporary legend may or may not function to provide a forum for social control in that they may deliver meaningful moral, personal, and political messages.

i: A contemporary legend may or may not function to substantiate something said in the current or the previous conversation

j: A contemporary legend may or may not function as an emotional response to a situation, in that it may allow us to express our fears and provide commentary and explanations of abnormal situations or strange behaviour or be offered as a warning against involvement in particular types of situations.

k: A contemporary legend may or may not function as an aesthetic response to a situation

Conclusions

This multi-faceted definition of the contemporary legend embraces many points of view and many options. Because of the variety of interests and orientations it reflects, it is hoped that this may prove to be more universally applicable than many of the existing definitions