ALWAYS THE SAME OLD STORY: HOW URBAN LEGENDS DEVELOP AND SPREAD IN MODERN AMERICA

A Thesis
by
STEPHANIE SUSETTE GARDNER

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Always the Same Old Story:
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Stephanie S. Gardner

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APPROVED BY:

Lynne Getz
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Peter Petschauer
Member, Thesis Committee

Gregory Reck
Member, Thesis Committee

Judith Domer
Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

ABSTRACT

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Stephanie Susette Gardner, M.A., Appalachian State University

B.A., Greensboro College

Thesis Chairperson: Lynne Getz

This thesis is a study of the common themes shared by traditional folklore and modern American urban legends. The author consulted expert mythologists such as Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Marie-Louise von Franz to research the prevalent themes of fairy tales and fables. She identified archetypes and psychological motifs in stories from the past and present. They show that the themes of these stories explain human existence and are repeated in cultures around the world as a means of social control.

The author then linked older mythology with urban legends. She studied modern mythological experts' works in order to identify the themes and purposes of these new stories. Comparisons between the older and newer

types of folklore show how the themes of human beings' adaptation to social culture remain the same.

Urban legends serve the same functions in current American society as fables and fairy tales did for earlier peoples. Through the telling of the stories, comparisons of themes and the consultation of experts on mythology, this study demonstrates how humankind's stories are remarkably similar.

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PREFACE

Themes and symbols of world mythology show striking similarities despite cultural differences of storytellers and the passage of time. My thesis demonstrates the universal nature of mythology by exploring parallels and similar archetypes of ancient and modern folklore.

Legends contain symbols of conflict between male and female, good and evil, and the total range of human emotions. Often such symbols in myths are images contained in the human mind since the beginning of time. The themes, including fear, desire, envy, greed and hope are often hidden by the entertaining scenes and fantastical characters of the stories.

This study, however, takes a deeper look at the commonality of past- and present-world stories. Following the ideas of such psychologists as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, myths are studied to learn about the themes generated in myth from the past to the present. In such theories of subconsciousness, myths are only second to dreams in laying bare the images of the basic human psyche. Jung and his followers found that myth demonstrates a universal, collective and unconscious side of human thought.

Though images in myths and dreams may seem ancient, it is possible that human unconscious thought has not changed much from past to present.

Jung even maintained that if all mythology were suddenly wiped away, humans would immediately begin to replace it with identical stories. This idea of a shared human mind that creates identical images in all times and places forms the basis of my comparison between primitive and modern mythology.

I narrate briefly both the ancient and current legends and then expose the hidden ideas. Through this comparison of the old and new, I show that modern American myth is not essentially different from stories that humans have told through the past.

CHAPTER ONE
MYTHOLOGY OLD AND NEW

Mythology is an open expression of the shared human psyche. Both ancient and modern folklore contains hidden images and universal unconscious symbols. The creation of myth serves as an outlet for these inherent ideas. Present and past mythology and legendary ritual also serve as a form of entertainment, a method of social control, and a way to discuss taboo topics.

Understanding the methodology by which myths are studied is important to conceive of the stories' values and universality. I begin with those experts who studied the archetypes in world mythology. One of the first scholars to regard legends as something more than mere entertainment was the Austrian psychologist Carl Jung. Jung wrote prolifically about the value of mythology as a reflection of the human unconscious. He found myth to be psychologically valuable, and identified many of the themes I explore. In his work, *Symbols and Transformation* (1911), Jung maintains that myths are like the dreams of a civilization.[1] He also stresses the idea that the fantasy thinking of mythology should not be regarded as something from the

distant past, an idea essential to understanding modern American folklore. Mythical ideas have changed little since primitive times, but the problems that they expose and explain are still relevant and often painful as demonstrated in this study. Jung contends, "What with us crops up only in dreams and fantasies was once either a conspicuous custom or a general belief."[2]

In the work *The Undiscovered Self* (1957), Jung concentrates on the value of mythology as a means of individual expression. He suggests that the magic of myth and power of religion could allow an individual to establish his or her own worth in a larger state. Jung recognizes how the unconscious is also feared for the "occult" images that hide in it, but stresses that exploration of the mind is crucial for the preservation of society.[3] An important part of my study is exploring the ways the occult images have been transformed from past to present and how modern Americans still fear them.

In *Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams* (1957), Jung once again notes how the human unconscious is largely unexplored. He borrows from Freudian psychology and notes that we produce symbols spontaneously in our dreams. His work also explores the subconscious makeup in which every human has a male, female, and "shadowy" makeup.

The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales (1945) is especially relevant to the present study. Jung once again establishes the value of myth, saying that while human instinct can be understood in dreams, myths do not require individual case histories.[4] The work is a serious study of fairy tales for their psychological motifs, the same basis as this study, although I will examine Jung's idea further by recognizing how myth is active today. Jung identifies how human consciousness was active in creating the motifs in fairy tales. The primitive and unchanging parts of the human mind are shown as symbols in the characters, settings and plots of the fantastical stories. Men and women of the stories behave as archetypal males and females. The evil characters are symbolic of personal evil or malevolent opposing forces. Jung saw how archetypes are buried within the entertainment of these romantic stories. I have found the same motifs within sensational modern stories.

In his work, *On the Nature of the Psyche* (1947), Jung pushes the bounds of scientific and psychological knowledge, even saying that the symbols of the unconscious allow us to speak to the dead and see the future. He does not view these experiences as any more paranormal than tribal mythologically based rituals, but sees them as a little recognized ability of the human psyche.[5] Jung places value on the powers of the unconscious for

giving intelligent and valuable advice. He speaks of the value of the "feeling archetype."[6] While I find the ideas of psychic abilities strange, the basic power of the archetype as recognized by Jung remains strong in the study of old and new legends. I agree with the psychologists that mythology is of great value because it holds the symbols of human existence.

This brief review of Jungian writing establishes that myth is necessary to human life and serves as a beginning to an examination of folklore. Because humans have changed the methods of creating fables, we must next discuss inborn mythological motifs in new ways. This thesis demonstrates that mythical thinking is not dead in the modern United States of America. In fact, it is widespread as a popular form of entertainment and a highly effective social control in the form of urban legends. They serve as a way to generate the symbols of myth for our culture.

Before looking at several examples, I examine how the study of mythology has progressed to the present. Mircea Eliade disagrees with Jung's theories in his work, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (1957). As a historian of religions, he criticizes the psychologists for overlooking cultural differences in order to expound the theory of mythical universality. Eliade holds that Western and Eastern beliefs are so different from one another that they must be analyzed separately and by knowledgeable historians. He

attacks Jung and his followers by stating, "The homology of the persons and the events of a myth with those of a dream does not imply any fundamental identity between them."[7]

Eliade would probably label the urban legends of this study as cultural ideas as opposed to true mythology. Eliade maintains that a scholar should not make sweeping generalizations in grouping past and present mythology; yet, even Eliade believed that myths contain similar themes in individual cultures.[8]

The widely-read Joseph Campbell is Jung's most famous student. His *Hero with One Thousand Faces* (1949) and the series *Masks of God* (1959-1968) made mythological study available as popular reading. The series includes *Primitive Mythology* (1959), *Oriental Mythology* (1961), *Occidental Mythology* (1964) and *Creative Mythology* (1968).[9] Campbell stresses that the universality of myths is the belief that all humans share a set of common elementary ideas. They are the needs and wants of all people, despite cultural differences. The idea is demonstrated in this text by parallels of old and new stories in which characters seek identical goals. Campbell also explores myth creation as a powerful form of social control. He shows how myths, like the urban legends highlighted in this study, function to control modern adolescent energy in the same way that primitive

tribal teachings instructed young people to behave. Like other depth-psychologists, Campbell's ideas can be applied to urban legends in showing how even ancient myths can be related to modern life because of the universal archetypes.

Campbell stresses the importance of myth in individual lives in his *Myths to Live By* (1972) and *The Power of Myth* (1988). The latter is Campbell's last work, set in an interview format with questions by Bill Moyers. Campbell affirmed the value of all world religions and found truth in each one, a great leap in the study of universal values and a scholarly approach to drawing parallels in world stories.[10]

Traditional mythology is only a part of the focus of my study. The understanding of contemporary legends requires a separate literary review. The study of modern mythology is a new and growing field pioneered by Jan Harold Brunvand, a professor of English at the University of Utah. Brunvand has commented on every widespread urban legend in his uniquely named anthologies of modern myths: *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1968), *The Choking Doberman* (1984), *The Mexican Pet* (1986) and *The Baby Train* (1994).[11] These odd titles are actually names of the most popular urban legends in America, many of which I analyze. Brunvand tells each story and then looks deeper for underlying themes, an approach I adopt for this work.

His success lies in familiarizing America with urban legends and their functions. Brunvand's other works include two textbooks, *The Study of American Folklore* (1968) and *Readings in American Folklore* (1979).[12]

Because electronic media spread many urban legends, it is fitting to review an author who specializes in modern folklore and communicates via the World-Wide Web. Barbara Mikkelson is the most contemporary of the authors that I consulted by way of her technological format and knowledge of popular culture. She maintains two WebSites, entitled *San Fernando Valley Folklore Society* and *Barbara's Tales of the Wooden Spoon.*[13] Mikkelson narrates hundreds of urban legends that she has researched for credibility. Her work has shown Americans, in an often-humorous way, that such stories are expressions of symbolic ideas through sensational fiction.

In this body of separate studies of ancient and contemporary mythology, there is no one work that links the two at length. Some urban legend anthologists point to similar older stories and ancient themes, but this study is original by drawing deep parallels between old and new.

The thesis is based on the belief that modern American adults are separated from the fairy tales and myths of older societies. These adults think such tales belong to the literature of childhood as bedtime stories and explanatory fables. Other Americans seek security for the truth of their

familiar beliefs while regarding the stories of other times and civilizations as primitive and pagan. The stories of the other people are viewed as literature to be studied or an exotic curiosity to enjoy. Such feelings of superiority about one's own mythology pose a trap for students of folklore. Jung maintains that the myths of ancient civilization were created with dedication and intelligence that is currently directed in other areas. He contends, "All the creative power that modern man pours into science, the man of antiquity devoted to myths."[14] When exploring any culture, an objective scholar must consider how elementary ideas and unique ethnic ideas lie deep inside the stories of the community. Thus, through comparisons of older folklore and urban legends, it may be seen how Americans incorporate primordial ideas in a technologically advanced society. In fact, many Americans would be surprised to learn that they care very much for folklore and are rapidly forming and transmitting their own legends that parallel those of the past. The blending of deeply rooted mythological motifs and urban culture leads to an interesting new type of folklore.

Fairy tales are those humorous or macabre stories that may have survived from the remnants of earlier literature and that have been broken apart and simplified for entertainment.[15] Quite possibly, fairy tales originated as dreams that were elaborated and related to an audience.[16] The

stories may also contain fragments of moral and religious teaching. Primitive legends are important for their treatment of situations, beings and deeds all humans fear as if by instinct, but that they rarely discuss. Themes of abandonment, greed, the conflict between male and female, the fear of strangers, strange characters and the most gruesome deeds imaginable are played out within the folktales and fairy stories of the world. Variations within the stories were repeated and changed until they were written down for picture books and presented in films. Many fairy tales currently spread in watered-down versions that are indeed relegated as children's stories. Yet the telling of legends and myths serves a purpose that American adults may have lost when they delegated fairytales to children. Campbell writes of myth creation and how stories are used for social control:

> When the primary urges of adolescence remain unsocialized, they become inevitably a threat to the harmony of the group. The paramount function of all myth and ritual, therefore has always been and surely must continue to be, to engage the individual both emotionally and intellectually in the local organization.[17]

In addition to teaching conformity within a society, myths warn people to stay away from harmful forces.

Fairytales and primitive folklore serve as a painless way of examining unexplained aspects of human behavior and emotion. Mythology allows adults to confront the sinister parts of their human consciousness. Marie-

Louis von Franz, a student of Carl Jung and a recognized psychoanalyst-folklorist in her own right, studied the messages of folklore and concluded that "evil in human nature" is something very important for us to know, because naturally one has such a primitive reaction in oneself as well. We have not gotten away from it, it is still…reality."[18] The stories that follow prove the truth of the "shadow" in the human unconscious. They show fear of primitive forces and personal evil in modern day America.

In the growing absence of fairy tales as entertainment for adolescents and adults, new myths and legends continue to evolve; and they contain all the satisfying, bizarre, and comically engaging elements of more primitive mythology. Urban legends, modern myths, or "friend of a friend" stories are the tales told by Americans as truth, when in fact they have little or no basis in reality. They are the bizarre "events" that happened to a friend of a friend and serve as a warning to monitor one's own behavior so as to avoid such a strange or gruesome situation. The Alternative Folklore Urban Group, which collects and analyzes urban legends, writes that the story "does not have to be false, although most are. Urban legends have a basis in fact, but it is the life-after-the-fact, especially in reference to the second and third points, that give them particular interest."[19] It would be difficult or impossible to prove that events of a certain story never occurred. The stories

that follow *could have happened* and this is part of their popularity. However, the stories classified as modern myths are defined by the way they are elaborated and repeated. While it is improbable that such events ever took place, modern mythology contends that they occur frequently.

Urban legends may be recognized by elements of comedy or horror blended into stories of modern American life. Like fairy tales, urban legends contain characters who violate the mores of society and are punished in bizarre ways for their carelessness. The strange twists of the stories entertain listeners and make them appealing to remember and repeat. In addition, urban legends are distinguishable by the ways they "appear mysteriously and spread spontaneously in varying forms."[20]

Certain groups in American society generate and spread their own legends. Parents have warned other parents how children are disguised by kidnappers and smuggled out of amusement parks. College women frighten friends with stories of murderers who brutally kill a woman while the others in the dormitory sleep soundly. African-Americans discuss the ways clothing designers discriminate by making clothes that only fit Caucasians. Office workers warn of damaging computer viruses that are transmitted through seemingly friendly e-mail messages. In fact, widespread use of the Internet has allowed for worldwide circulation of modern myths. Computer

users are adding new twists to the legends and spreading folklore electronically as well as verbally.

Urban legends may be so convincingly narrated that their believers "remember" hearing them on the news or reading the facts "somewhere." Reputable sources with no deliberate intention of spreading fallacies carry the misinformation to other sources. The myths continue to circulate by the ways they appeal to the senses of disgust, fear, and anger of urban Americans. All the legends, ancient and modern, explored in this thesis have been documented as fallacies; yet they continue to be repeated based on the stories that flow through the human mind.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] Carl Gustav Jung, "Two Kinds of Thinking," *Symbols and Transformation* in *The Basic Writings of CG Jung*, ed., Violet deLaszlo (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 10-36.

[2] *Jung, "Two* Kinds of Thinking," 30.

[3] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Undiscovered Self: With Symbols and Interpretations of Dreams*, in *Carl Gustav Jung: Selected Writings*, ed., Robert Coles (New York: Book of the Month Club, 1997), 141-284.

[4] Carl Gustav Jung, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," in *Carl Gustav Jung: Selected Writings*, ed., Robert Coles (New York: Book of the Month Club, 1997), 359-406.

[5] Carl Gustav Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*, in *The Basic Writings of C G Jung*, ed., Violet deLaszlo (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 37-104.

[6] Jung, *Nature of the Psyche*, 79.

[7] Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Torches, 1960), 17.

Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols, trans. Willard Trask, Alf Hiltebeitel, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978-1985).

[8] Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*.

[9] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, 3 vols (New York: Penguin, 1962-1991).

[10] Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyer, *The Power of Myth*, ed., Billy Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor, 1988).

[11] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: Norton, 1968).

Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends* (New York: Norton, 1984).

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Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends* (New York: Norton, 1994).

[12] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: Norton, 1968).

[13] Barbara Mikkelson and David Mikkelson, *Tales of the Wooden Spoon*, http://www.snopes.simplenet.com/spoons/.

San Fernando Valley Folklore Society, Barbara Mikkelson and David Mikkelson, *Urban Legend Reference Page*, http://www.snopes.simplenet.com/ulindex.html.

[14] Jung, "Two Kinds of Thinking," 24.

[15] Marie-Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* (Irving, Texas: Spring Publications, 1980), 11.

[16] von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*.

[17] Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God*, 467.

[18] von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*, 129.

[19] Alternative Folklore Urban, "Introduction to the Newsgroup AFU," http://www.urbanlegend.com/afu.faq/intro.html.

[20] Alternative Folklore Urban, "Introduction to the Newsgroup."

CHAPTER TWO
RUMORS OF WEALTH AND EVIL

Until 1991, Procter and Gamble packaged products with a corporate symbol showing the crescent face of a man-in-the moon surrounded by thirteen stars. Some Americans viewed the symbol, actually a packing mark that had evolved over time, as a mark of the Unification Church, the Moonies, or a satanic cult symbol. Other consumers found hidden rams' horns or contended the thirteen stars could be connected to form 666, the mark of the Beast in *The Book of Revelation.*[1] Customers became nervous about the symbol, wondering why such cultist markings were printed on each Procter and Gamble package. Some people went so far as to boycott the company's products for religious reasons. It may seem odd that modern Americans would be concerned with these markings on products, but in 1978 the controversy rose from a nuisance to a genuine publicity problem for Procter and Gamble.

The rumor of Procter and Gamble's ties to Satanism evolved during the 1980's and remained active into the 1990's. A story connected with the rumor is this: the unnamed president of the corporation was alleged to have

appeared on a leading television talk show in 1994 to announce he was in league with the devil. He confirmed that many of the company's profits were sent to the Church of Satan. Sensationalism was added into the myth when he supposedly added, "There weren't enough Christians in America to affect sales."[2] This president of Procter and Gamble was most often cited as appearing on *Donahue*, but other storytellers say he spoke on *60 Minutes, 20/20*, or *Merv Griffin*.[3] Religious groups helped to spread the rumor. Individuals and churches across America thought they were fortunate to have seen through the company's efforts to lure them into cult activities. They stopped buying Procter and Gamble products and told their friends to join the boycott. "Their packaging may not mean anything but a friend, who is a Christian, told me that they *really do* send their proceeds to the Church of Satan," explained one woman.[4]

It may seem odd that rams' horns in the shape of a man-in-the-moon surrounded by stars were perceived as scandalous, but the symbol actually does have an ancient connection to the occult. Because most Americans had no direct knowledge of the evil symbolized by horns, stars and moons, this uproar supports the notion of universal myth. Those who found symbols in the logo followed years of tradition in associating animals' horns with evil. Horns have long been associated with the demonic in the Christian faith.

The goat was considered a blessed animal in Greek and Roman mythology. Veiovis, one of the oldest Roman gods, is pictured as a young man with a goat at his side.[5] He was considered a god of healing. Lupercus, "the good shepherd," god of agriculture was also portrayed with goats.[6]

Goats were often associated with the benevolent Greek and Roman gods because of their use as sacrificial animals. As early Christian ideology turned the gods into idols and demons, the sacrificial animals also took on an evil persona. The sacrificial lamb of Christian symbolism became the animal of purity while the goat became a sign of sin. The ram, however, with the long curly horn and cloven hoof resembles the goat and is far from the gentle *Agnus Dei*, or sacrificial lamb of Christian faith.

Goats were driven out to the desert demon Azazel after the ancient Jewish Day of Atonement. Azazel was viewed as a powerful being in Moslem belief comparable to the Christian Devil. The figure refused to worship the supremacy of God and "fell" in the same manner as the Christian Satan. The name Azazel may be translated as "goat-god."[7]

A Grimm's fairy tale, "The Lord's Animals and the Devil's Animals," links the innocent lamb to God, and the crafty goat with its horn and hooves to Satan. Christians in the Middle Ages linked the emerging figure of Satan with the mythological Pan, Green Man, Horned Man and satyrs. These

pagan figures had the curving horns and cloven hooves of a ram or goat.[8] The portrayal of The Horned Man as a goat-man shifted to Satan in the Christian mind as older gods were replaced by the emerging figure of one devil. The devil is pictured as a long-horned animal in symbols such as those found in the tarot deck.

A more sinister image is that of Baphomet, a frightening idol of the Middle Ages. He is shown with the head of a goat, massive horns, curly black hair, a beard and a pentagram.[9] A half-crescent moon like that of the Procter and Gamble logo hangs below his throne. The image of Bahomet is sometimes used to portray the Devil. This image of a horned animal god is accessible to mainstream America.

Americans who connected with this mindset viewed the horns as evil and saw the textured pointing moon on the Procter and Gamble label as sinister. Perhaps, deep within our Western cultural consciousness, the curved horns still inspires distrust.

The origins of the Procter and Gamble legend are more easily traced than the beginnings of other modern myths. Barbara Mikkelson, the self-trained folklorist who makes a profession collecting and analyzing urban legends on the world's largest modern folklore web site, believes that the rumor originated with the salespersons of the Amway Corporation, Procter and

Gamble's closest competitor.[10] She calls the legend, "a cooked up bit of slander."[11] Mikkelson cites one case of the rumors' perpetuation and Procter and Gamble's efforts to stop it:

> The company [Procter and Gamble] sued Randy L. Hauugan an independent Amway Corporation distributor in Ogden, Utah, charging that he and unnamed others had made false and defamatory statements linking the company with Satanism. This is the sixth suit Procter and Gamble has filed involving an Amway distributor and the 15th [sic] overall since rumors began....[12]

Thus, as the stories spread, Procter and Gamble began legal actions, taking the legend's originators to court for defamation. In addition, its Public Relations Department combated the legend among consumers. First, the man-in-the-moon symbol was removed from company packaging. Procter and Gamble also launched an educational campaign to educate the public about their shipping logo. Publicists issued statements denying cult activity to religious groups and the press. Churches were asked to stop the spread of the rumor by understanding it as fiction. Today, an informational Web page deals specifically with the legend; graphics chronicle the evolution of the man-in-the-moon design from a shipping mark to a stylized logo.[13] The page also contains copies of letters from religious leaders, including Jerry Falwell and the Archbishop of Cincinnati, stating that they are saddened by the vicious rumors. Another letter from Phil Donahue confirms that he

never ran a show confirming the myth. Ironically, modern technology is being utilized both to fuel and comfort some of our most primitive fears.

Elements within the Procter and Gamble legend allow this story of demonology to spread and evolve in modern America. The legend associating the company with Satanism has circulated widely, and many people contributed to the popularity of the myth. Americans spread such urban legends out of a fascination with tales of devil worship carried into modern corporate dealings.

We may set this legend in context and study it in connection with other legends that link business and success with evil. This legend is not the only one that claims a company has ties to Satanism. In *Tales, Rumors, and Gossip,* Gail De Vos includes information about such "mercantile rumors" linking powerful corporations and extremists groups. Arm and Hammer, Exxon, Johnson & Johnson, and McDonalds have all been the subject of rumors concerning executive-level devil worship.[14]

Another element adding to the legend's popularity is the fear of material success that has been transmitted in mythology throughout history. Fairy tales and fables warn of the power of those who control money. The connection of wealth to evil may be an "elementary idea" continued through time. Campbell wrote that the connection of wealth and the occult had long

been established in the mythology of common people who believed gold came from "the bowels of the earth... the seat of hell."[15] Campbell links the "greatest flowering " of alchemy and the Occidental Arts to the period of the Middle Ages when ordinary citizens began to question "the authority of medieval dualism and the devil."[16] The quest to turn common metals into gold evolved with a new perspective of evil.

Aesop, the Greek storyteller, wrote of the connection of gold and destruction in the fable, "The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg:"

> A certain man had the good fortune to possess a Goose that lay a Golden Egg every day. But unhappy with only one egg a day, he decided to kill the Goose and get the whole treasure at once. But, when he cut her open, he found her just like any other goose. Moral: Those who have much want more and lose it all.[17]

The story demonstrates how fortune may lead to greed, violence, and ultimately destruction. Other mythological figures use wealth to trick, manipulate, and harm others. A more benign example is the fairy Rumpelstilzchen, who spins common straw into gold for the Miller's daughter, but only at the cost of her baubles and the promise of her firstborn child. The fairies of Celtic folklore are said to be excellent goldsmiths, but humans who accept the gifts of fairies are destined to spend a lifetime imprisoned within their world.[18]

Americans sometimes show a fear of wealth by contending that "money is the root of all evil." Many people who repeat this saying know it comes from Christian tradition, although the proverb is actually misquoted. Saint Paul's *First Epistle to Timothy* reads, "The *love of money* is the root of all kinds of evil."[19] Americans erroneously recite the passage to reflect their belief in the destructiveness of money. The proverb has been changed to imply that money is evil in itself. The message is the same through time; if a person is overly successful, he or she may be evil, has obtained power from an alliance with evil forces or will use the money to do evil things.

The continuation of success/evil legends is also exhibited in the stories surrounding the popular 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*. The movie won awards for excellent acting, writing, and directing and brought its director Quentin Tarantino esteem as an artist. Myths concerning the film are considered urban legends as opposed to common popular rumors because of its status of artistic merit. Criteria for defining an urban legend include the story being told by a reputable source. The credibility factor applies to the rumors about *Pulp Fiction*. Movie critics tell the story on well-designed websites. They seem more reputable than any amateur talking about a movie. In addition, there are already many quirks in the film, and the discovery of more come as no surprise. *Pulp Fiction* joins other popular and well-made films such as

The Wizard of Oz (1939), *Ben Hur* (1959), *Fargo* (1996) and *The Lion King* (1994) as the subjects of modern myths.

Urban legends surrounding *Pulp Fiction* revolve around speculation about the contents of a briefcase featured in the film's plot. Characters of *Pulp Fiction* murder and steal from one another to gain possession of its contents. Early in the movie, the briefcase is retrieved from young thieves by two hit men on request of their boss Marcellus Wallace, a powerful mob-leader. The characters open the mysterious case and admire its contents while their faces glow from an unnatural light. But, the object is never revealed to the film's audience.

Modern mythmakers speculate that the briefcase holds the soul of Marcellus Wallace and refer to events in the movie as evidence. Spread by electronic mail and the Internet, the story relies upon the anonymous testimony of "a friend of a friend of a friend who had a two hour conversation with Quentin Tarantino himself."[20] This unnamed source asserts that:

> If you all are anything like me, then you had no idea what was in the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction*....I now know, [sic] and thought I would pass on the information... remember the first time you were introduced to Marcellus Wallace. The first shot of him was in the back of his head, complete with Band-Aid. Then, remember the combination of the briefcase was 666. Then, remember that whenever anyone opened the briefcase, it glowed, and they were in amazement at how beautiful it was; they were speechless. Now bring in some

> *Bible* knowledge and remember that when the devil takes your soul, he takes it from the back of your head. Yep, you guessed it. Marcellus Wallace had sold his soul to the devil and was trying to buy it back.[21]

Despite director and producer Tarantino's insistence that the briefcase's contents rely on the imagination of each viewer, skeptical and curious viewers search for proof that the story contains demonic undercurrents. Such legends about Satan may seem outdated in modern culture, but they remind us of fairy tales and earlier religious myths. The stories surrounding Procter and Gamble and *Pulp Fiction* prove that modern Americans are interested in and even eager to spread such tales.

The linking of material power and evil has continued an appeal from the earliest world myths into American society. Marie-Louise von Franz describes mythology in the terms of Jung, her teacher. In her work entitled, *Shadows and Evil in Fairy Tales* (1980), Franz analyzes the psychological and social beliefs underlying legends of evil. She explains how material success may be linked with disaster. One story from South America demonstrates how success may initially lead to happiness and productivity and then to disaster:

> In the story of the Kurpuria who ate all the hunters, the hunters had especially good luck and their camp was full of the apes they had killed... This seems to hint that by killing too many animals the hunters annoyed the Kurpuria, who is Master of the Woods. Perhaps, though the story does not say so *expressive verbis*, what from a human

> standpoint is particularly good hunting luck had gone a bit far, beyond the usual measure, transcending the natural limit, and so the hunters have possibly attracted evil. [22]

In the primitive legend of Kurpuria, as with modern business executives and gang leaders, success becomes connected with evil in contemporary folklore. The agents of evil have transformed from horned animals and wood gods to the devil in the imagination of contemporary American culture. Von Franz views the figure of Satan as a symbol for the evil in human minds and consciousness. Her analysis portrays the devil as a personification and an expression of the evil in a society. She writes, "The devil himself exemplifies such a personification of a collective shadow. On the other hand, we could say that as long as collective demons get us, we may have a bit of them in us."[23] She implies that telling these stories of evil has always been a way for people to speak about the evil in themselves and each other. By claiming to believe in a unified symbol of evil, a society recognizes the presence of evil and the need to react against it.

Von Franz analyzes a folktale, "The King's Son and the Devil's Daughter," to demonstrate how the destructiveness within a society is portrayed in its folktales. The king in the tale realizes that his kingdom is failing. Hostile armies are threatening to end his rule and destroy the land. The king agrees to trade his son to the devil in exchange for the military

success necessary to save the kingdom. Von Franz argues that the king's lack of control over his land is symbolic of real " ruling and social orders" that lose the authority to reign.[24] De Vos offers a similar theory linking the lack of social control to an increase in legends concerning diabolical powers. She believes that:

> One of the major reasons for the renewed popularity of these legends is the social and economic flux that Western society is experiencing because satanic legends take symbolism both from secular and sacred realms, the battle against satanic movements can join often antagonistic groups.[25]

De Vos reminds her readers that the concept of Satan is uniquely Christian, and that Christian ideas of demonology are traceable to Christian Europeans.[26] The figure may be studied as the remnant of the ancient Greek and Roman gods, demonized to become the archenemy of the newly forming Christian religion. De Vos explains how the legends of Satan evolved during the years of the first millennium. She notes a similarity between development in European society, in the time when the legends evolved and modern American culture, noting such factors as "urban overcrowding; high unemployment and inflation; weakening of kinship and other social networks; rapid decrease in ethic and cultural heterogeneity; alienation of ordinary people from government, Church, and upper classes."[27] Thus as similar trends plague contemporary society, increasing interest in demonic

lore are seen. In the mid-1970's Peter Mass, author of *King of the Gypsies* (1975), drew attention to "the revival the devil has been experiencing recently" in connection to increased visits to fortune telling parlors, and fascination with the occult in popular culture most noticeable by "the advent of movies and books like *The Exorcist* [1973]."[28]

The fairy tale characters who sold their souls to the devil in exchange for their hearts' desires have been replaced by modern urban legends that continue to link success with evil. The modern mythology concerning Proctor and Gamble and *Pulp Fiction* survives with this renewed interest in Satanism in the United States of America. Whether viewed as the ultimate symbol in evil or as a powerful literary or religious character, Satan continues to appear in world mythology because humans fear being drawn away from the goodness of their society. When the mythological aspects of demonology are coupled with the fear of material success, legends assuming that corporate power derives from evil alliances are formed. In a society that fears for the integrity of powerful businesses and individuals, the stories continue to spread.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Barbara Mikkelson, "(trade)Mark of the Devil," *Urban Legends Reference Pages: Wooden Spoons*, http://www.snopes.simplenet.com/spoons/legends/procter.html.

[2] Mikkelson, "Trademark."

[3] Mikkelson, "Trademark."

[4] Interview by author, conversation with an anonymous speaker, 2 January 2000, Mills River, NC.

[5] Encyclopedia Mythica, *Veiovis*, http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/v/beiovis.html.

[6] Encyclopedia Mythica, *Lupercus*, http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/artilces/l/lupercus.html.

[7] Encyclopedia Mythica, *Azazel*, http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/a/azazel.html.

[8] Alexander Eliot, *The Universal Myths: Heroes, Gods, Tricksters and Others* (New York: Meridian Books), 29

[9] Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches & Witchcraft*, 2d ed., (New York: Facts on File, 1999), 16-17.

[10] Mikkelson, "Trademark."

[11] Mikkelson, "Trademark."

[12] Mikkelson, "Trademark."

[13] Procter and Gamble, "Trademark Facts," http://www.pg.com/rumor/.

[14] Gail de Vos, *Tales, Rumors, and Gossip: Exploring Contemporary Folk Literature in Grades 7-12*, (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1996), 280.

[15] Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 72.

[16] Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*.

[17] Aesop, "The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg," *Aesop's Fables* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc) 40.

[18] Brian Froud and Allen Lee, *Faeries* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), np.

[19] St. Pl. I Epistle to Tim. 6.10 NRS.

[20] Judy Johnson, "What's in the Briefcase?" Urban Legends Reference Page: Movies (Pulp Fiction), http://www.snopes.simplenet.com/movies/films/pulp.html .

[21] *Gwarf's Pulp Fiction Page: The Briefcase*, "The Soul," Unknown source, http://www.gwarf.pw.org/pulp/case.html.

[22] Marie- Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* (Irving, Texas: Spring Publications, 1980), 156.

[23] von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*.

[24] von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*, 264.

[25] De Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip*, 268.

[26] De Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip*.

[27] De Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip*.

[28] Peter Mass, *King of the Gypsies* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 63.

CHAPTER THREE
THE PET FROM MEXICO

An American couple takes a pleasure trip to Mexico. While the happy couple innocently enjoys the tour, a small hairless dog approaches and begins to follow them wherever they go. In different variations of the story, they find the dog near the ocean in Acapulco, by an open-air restaurant in Mexico City or on the dirty streets of a shantytown.[1] The couple grows fond of the dog and begins to enjoy its company. They find the small stature and affectionate nature of the animal so appealing that when it is time to go home they cannot bear to leave their new pet. They decide to smuggle the dog through United States Customs and take it into their home.

On the first day in America, all is well; but soon the animal shows signs of illness. The worried couple takes the dog to a veterinarian who examines it with distaste. In some versions the doctor asks the dog's owners where the animal was obtained. After confirming that the pet is very ill, the authoritative veterinarian reveals the hook of the story. The animal is not a dog at all, but a Mexican sewer rat infected with rabies!

In some versions of the story, the animal is given to a child as a special treat from Mexico. Other accounts tell of a single woman who is so attached to the dog that she takes it everywhere, even into her bed.

The story of the Americans who bring a sewer rat home from Mexico in the belief that it is a Chihuahua, a Mexican hairless, or other exotic breed of dog, commands widespread popularity. This urban legend illustrates the ambiguity and hidden meanings of urban mythology so well that it has appeared in the title of two books analyzing contemporary mythology.[2] The story has appeared in other contemporary forms such as a reference to modern folklore on the television situation comedy *Murphy Brown* and as "Sam's New Pet," in *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones* by Alvin Schwartz.[3]

The story is not restricted to the United States. A similar story circulates in France about a couple who bring what they believed to be a charming little dog home from Africa. After it kills the family cat, they learn it is a diseased rat.[4]

These stories contain unique, gruesome, and humorous aspects of urban folklore that encourage continued circulation. The huge, sickly rat disgusts audiences. Then there is an element of twisted humor in the ignorance of someone who would adopt such a strange and foreign animal as a pet. That

the couple finds the rat charming, and that anyone might think a sewer rat is appealing, adds even more humor to the story. Finally, there is a great deal of irony in the couple smuggling the vermin through Customs and into the cleanliness of their home.

However, the "Mexican Pet" story does not circulate solely on its appeal as an odd story. A closer analysis reveals underlying social and psychological factors of the story. Those who tell the story are often unaware that in addition to repeating an odd antidote, they are revealing information about human attitudes and American culture.

Central to the psychological meanings of the story is the masquerade the animal plays with the victims. A friendly domesticated dog, regarded as man's best friend, turns out to be a sewer rat, a dangerous spreader of disease. According to the Chinese Zodiac, those born in the Year of the Rat are prone to spend money freely and make few lasting friendships. Folklorist David Fontana argues that rats have long been symbolic of negativity. He writes:

> Some Renaissance thinkers saw both night and day as facets of the same process-the inexorable march of time. In this tradition, both carried negative connotations, standing for aging, decay and death; they were sometimes depicted as two large rats, one white and one black.[5]

Rats clearly stand as symbols of disease and death in the collective subconscious of Western culture, which associates them as vectors in the Black Death of Europe. Campbell links the spread of filth, symbolized to many Americans by the rat, as an imprint conditioned in infants.[6] De Vos shows that rats stand as symbols of urban decay because of their attraction to vermin and preference for living in filthy conditions.[7] Clearly, the rat is symbolic of more than an unattractive animal in this urban legend. Jung writes that birds appearing in dreams might symbolize angels. Rats may personify demons.

Yet, rats do not connote disease and filth in *all* folklore. My research on stories through the world proves that distaste towards the rodent is not an inherent subconscious idea like the ones that are seen flowing in such abundance through the other stories in this thesis.

Many cultures regard rats as neutral instead of negative animals in their symbolic stories. Native Americans include few stories about the rat in their animal tales. An ancient Finnish myth contains a god who cleverly turns himself into a rat.[8] It appears that modern Americans may be exaggerating this fear of vermin. It is a new trait and not an inherent idea.

Yet another important aspect of the story is the smuggling of the rat through Customs. In his study of urban legends, Brunvand draws attention

to versions of the story when a woman carries the rat in her coat, close to her body, symbolizing foolish trust.[9] The Americans who bring home the rat are proud of their ability to fool Customs officials when, in reality, they are fooling themselves. The "punishment" of realizing that their pet is a rat serves as a warning to obey authority figures who care for one's safety. Like all myths, the "Mexican Pet Story" serves as a form of social control. If the dog were found during the border inspection, it would not have been allowed into America. By deceiving the Customs officials, the characters have set themselves up for what Brunvand calls "the poetical justice, or got-what-he (or she)- deserved ending."[10] The punishment of the foolish is a satisfying conclusion taken from earlier mythology.

The "Mexican Pet" is one of many current American stories involving a grotesque animal. Stories about upsetting encounters with gruesome animals are such a common topic in urban mythology that they are usually given separate sections in contemporary folklore anthologies. This particular story could be classified as either an animal story or a horror legend. In the sheer value of grotesques, this story stands with those of the mouse found at the bottom of the Coke-A-Cola bottle and the rat served inside a Kentucky Fried Chicken box. There are those unfortunate few who

genuinely encounter such a stomach-churning situation but fortunately most tales are exaggerated![11]

"The Mexican Pet," however, is more than a gruesome tale. It is an illustration of the fear of strangers and foreign elements within modern America. The human characters of the story represent white middle-class Americans while the rat symbolizes Mexican immigrants. The American couple leaves a home it believes is safe and clean to take a temporary pleasure trip in a country regarded in American culture as unsanitary and poor. The people from the United States believe they have taken the best from Mexico while maintaining the standards of consumerism, hygiene, and exclusiveness common to white middle-class culture. The destructiveness of the Mexican element is only recognized as detrimental after the seemingly innocent "immigrant" has been taken in and welcomed.

The story demonstrates the American fear of Mexican immigration by graphically portraying a couple who violates the laws of American immigration, symbolized by Customs officials, and opens the country to perceived elements of strangeness, danger, and filth. At first, the animal appears exotic and friendly, but under the hospitality of the couple it becomes a menacing threat. The story can be used to illustrate the perceived dangers of immigration as well as xenophobic elements in American society.

On a subconscious level, the story illustrates that while Mexican immigrants may seem harmless at first, they can soon pose a danger to the security of the Americans who welcome them. This story is widely spread in areas where there is a fear of Mexicans replacing American workers.[12]

Examining American workers' fears of replacement, Latin American historian Joe R. Feagin notes that the numbers of new immigrants are "heralded, often with fanfare, as unprecedented."[13] Feagin contends that the American fears of foreign invasion are unjustified because the numbers of immigrants to the United States are dropping and remain much lower than those at the beginning of the century.[14] However, as the perceived fear of invasion continues, the story of the "Mexican Pet" is retold. When studied at its most basic symbolism, "The Mexican Pet," documents fear, racism, and distrust in American-Mexican relations.

This story shows distinct American opinions, as seen by the perception of the rat. The author found that once again, in the perception of strangers, the "Mexican Pet" moves away from strictly inherent ideas and begins to manifest American mainstream cultural opinions. Few other primitive or modern tales demonstrate such a fear of strangers.

On the contrary, hospitality and kindness to others is a lesson of world folklore. A Cherokee folklore expert reports that strangers were always

welcomed unless they came to cause discord. Most cultures show this type of welcoming attitude and a curiosity towards outsiders. Stories tell of how kindness to strangers can lead to great rewards. Psychologists have identified a number of stories about a strange old man who comes to test the worthiness of characters. Those judged to have a kind heart are given rewards and strength. At the end of the stories, the old man is often revealed to be a saint or king in disguise. One such story is studied in Chapter Five under the name of "How Urs'l became a Princess."

The American portrayal of the Mexican immigrant as a rat follows a pattern of dehumanization of outsiders and strangers. The portrayal of another race as savages or animals is a type of prejudice used to bolster one's opinion of his or her race and to separate them psychologically from others.[15]

Imagining an opponent as an animal is an effective way to dehumanize and justify atrocities. Cartoonists of World War Two portrayed the Allied War effort, especially towards the Japanese, as an extermination effort. Images of the Japanese as ants, spiders, or beetles were created as wartime propaganda. These swarms were shown waiting for American poison to end their menacing threat. Cartoonists of the time also pictured the Japanese as rats, often cornered and frightened.[16] The WWII American propaganda

effort led to signs such as "This Restaurant Poisons Both Rats and Japs," and "Slap a Jap Rat."[17] This type of dehumanization leads to cruelty by enabling one race literally to imagine another as vermin.[18]

When a single woman brings the rat home, the story takes on additional implications. In these versions, the rat symbolizes a perceived Hispanic threat to innocent white women. De Vos also believes that the story is told to illustrate the dangers of the independent modern woman.[19] The woman takes the rat into her bed without realizing the threatening situation in which she is involved. The sexual implication symbolizes the fear of a naïve woman choosing a diseased sexual partner and unknowingly risking contamination. If taken to its most extreme, rabies could be replaced with AIDS. The woman is only saved by the knowledge of the veterinarian who chastises her poor judgment.

Thus, the popularity of the "Mexican Pet" story in American culture represents fear of Hispanic invasion. Exploration of the story, in combination with other folklore, presents a scary scenario of how deeply this fear of Hispanics is rooted in our culture. The story is so widespread and appealing that the desire to tell it is a form of social control, warning against Mexican immigration. Many Americans would never tell their colleagues, friends, and family, "Beware of letting Mexicans into our Country." They

may feel comfortable, however, telling the "Mexican Pet" story and thus conveying this message every time they recite it.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 22.

[2] Jan Harold Brunvand, the leading expert on American urban legends, adopted the story for the title of his third anthology of modern myths. Brunvand published *The Mexican Pet* in 1986. Australian professor, Bill Scott, made reference to the story in the title of his 1998 work, *Pelicans, Chihuahuas and Other Urban Legends* (Queensland, Australia: Queensland Press, 1998).

[3] Alvin Schwartz, *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones* (New York: Harper and Collins, 1991), 55-56.

[4] Gail de Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip: Exploring Contemporary Folk Literature in Grades 7-12* (Engelwood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1996), 219.

[5] David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 117.

[6] Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 71-73.

[7] De Vos, *Tales Rumors and Gossip*, 137.

[8] Encyclopedia Mythica, *Ngurai*, http://www.pantheons.org/mythica/articles/n/ngurai.html.

[9] Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet*, 22.

[10] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1984), xiii.

[11] Dr. Peter Petschauer, an advisor to this work, has a friend who found a rat at the top of a vat of syrup at Selmoincos in New York City.

[12] Schwartz, *Scary Stories 3*, 102.

[13] Joe R. Feagin, "Old Poison in New Bottles: The Deep Roots of Modern Nativism," in *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan F. Perea (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 33.

[14] Feagin, "Old Poison in New Bottles."

[15] John D. Dower, War *Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 11..

[16] Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 92.

[17] Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 92.

[18] Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 92.

[19] De Vos, *Tales, Rumors and Gossip*, 137.

CHAPTER FOUR
AIDS MARY

This chapter examines the collective Western mentality towards sexuality as compared to sex and gender issues in earlier cultures. It is also a short study of the fear of AIDS in America as manifested in our mythology. Thus bizarre stories of dangerous sexual practice become another part of popular American urban folklore. This mythology functions as a form of social control, and tales warning against the dangers of unhealthy sexual relationships have been told for at least two thousand years before making their way to modern America.

Mythologists do not believe that all cultures viewed sexuality as something private and taboo. Campbell contends that a new way of thinking called "The Great Reversal" dramatically changed the way Western society perceived physical affection. He believes that "The Great Reversal" in Western mentality appeared in Greece between 582-500 B.C and in India between 563-483 B.C.[1] During these times, "the prevailing world view shifted from an affirmation of life to a negation of life, from the expectance of reward, comfort, and innocence, to the acceptance of punishment,

discomfort, and guilt."[2] " The Great Reversal" brought an end to goddess religions that focused on nurture and fertility and in which the human body was expressed in positive life-giving ways. These primitive religions, which are now experiencing a revival, held that people were conceived in a pleasurable act of love and returned to the womb of the Earth Mother at their deaths.

New religions linked the human body and sexuality with guilt and shame. Jewish, Buddhist, Greek, and Zoroastrian religious teachers began to portray the human body as doomed to sorrow and death. In the new view of life, humans were conceived in an act of sin and suffered onwards till their deaths. Judaism and Christianity teach that humans are doomed by the Original Sin of the first man and the first woman.

Jamake Highwater combines his knowledge of ancient mythology with modern social belief to understand how religions have taught perceptions of sexuality. He contends that while the early Jews monitored sexual behavior, Jewish literature often praised sexuality in writings such as the *Song of Songs*. Highwater sees this Jewish celebration of sensuality as a reflection of the Asian traditions that celebrated the human body.[3] Many Eastern myths convey romantic intimacy as something pleasurable to be shared. Other Eastern myths toy with the topic of sexual identity allowing characters

to switch bodies and genders. Highwater concludes that Christians borrowed only the negative elements of Judaic sexual mores and gradually devised "what is arguably the most sex-negative tradition of world history."[4] This negative attitude towards the human body is evidenced by Western traditions in folklore throughout European history and into the current American society.

One such story linking sex with destruction is the popular children's tale of "Little Red Riding Hood," which was probably told as a sermon story during the Middle Ages.[5] A young girl dressed in a red cape walks through a forest in order to deliver food and drink to her elderly grandmother. The girl does not realize that a wolf has donned the old woman's clothing and waits for her in her grandmother's bed. The wolf has already eaten the grandmother and prepares to lure the child into bed so that he may devour her alive. The wolf spends a great deal of time ceremoniously encouraging the child to undress and get into his bed, telling her to throw her clothes into the fire. A little cat inside the house calls the girl a "slut" even though she acts with childlike innocence. After the wolf lures the girl into his bed, he eats her and thus ends the story.[6] "Little Red Riding Hood" has been collected in over thirty-five variations. The happy ending where the girl

outwits the wolf was added by the time the story was published by the Grimm brothers in their *Kinder- und Häusmarchen.*

Obviously, the earlier versions of the cautionary tale are quite different from the modern children's story. In the versions of the story told to American children, the child outwits the wolf and a friendly woodcutter appears to save the family. Thus the earliest renditions of "Little Red Riding Hood" have been dramatically changed to meet the needs and mores of modern society; yet the story with the hidden symbolic content of sexual danger has remained popular for over a hundred years.

The earliest forms of this folktale were loaded with sexual motifs in order to teach listeners that inappropriate sexual practices lead to destruction and that sexual predators lurk throughout society. French folklorist Robert Darnton explains that European fairy tales developed during a time when children shared a bed with their parents, siblings, and even livestock for added warmth. He writes, "Children became participant observers of their parents' sexual activities. No one thought of them as innocent creatures or as childhood itself as a distinct phase of life."[7] Thus, this French fairy tale served both as entertainment and for teaching that the world is harsh and dangerous.

During the time when the earliest version of the story was told, the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" served as a symbol of sex and destruction. Modern Americans have similar tales of innocent and unsuspecting sexual encounters that end in tragedy. In recent years the destruction of the body through dangerous sexual activity has been linked with the fear of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

One of the earliest AIDS legends to surface in the United States is the story of "AIDS Mary." A beautiful woman seduces unfamiliar men who spend a night of romance with her. The next morning, the seduced men wake up alone. The strange woman has left, and the message; "Welcome To the AIDS Club" is scrawled with garish red lipstick on the bathroom mirror.[8] Each man later learns from a physician or a newspaper that his one-night lover was an angry woman who suffers from AIDS and who aims to contaminate as many men as possible.[9]

Disease has long been viewed as a punishment for sexual relations that conflict with the mores of a society. Highwater writes, "It exists at the core of our Western mentality and is reflected in many of our attitudes; the belief that illness is some sort of cosmic punishment for misconduct and the fear of misfortune is the result of evil behavior."[10] With promiscuous sexual relations viewed as a dangerous form of misconduct and predecessor of

disease throughout world folklore, it comes as no surprise that tales of AIDS are one of the most widespread groups of urban legends in modern America. "AIDS Mary" was one of the first urban legends to originate in the context of the worldwide spread of AIDS. Jan Harold Brunvand's contemporary, William Neville Smith, reported in 1996 that the story was "all the rage" in America and England.[11] He was certain that it would soon surface in Australian contemporary culture.

Campbell writes in *The Flight of the Wild Gander* that "Myths and legends may furnish entertainment incidentally but are essentially tutorial."[12] The AIDS legends demonstrate the function of myths as contemporary social control. The urban legends that concern themselves with the spread of AIDS to innocent characters draw the listeners' attention by entertaining twists and bizarre surprises. The stories entertain and surprise in order to spread the message that sex may lead to destruction while frightening hearers into social conformity. Warnings to practice safe-sex pale in comparison when set next to this story and the behavior changing fear it invokes.

Brunvand links the urban legend back to another story of writing on the wall, also designed to teach ethics. In the *Old Testament* book of *Daniel*, a group of revelers defile communion cups by using them during a pagan

celebration. They find to their horror that they have sinned when a message appears on the wall of the room. The words tell the guests that they have been "weighed in the balance and found wanting."[13] Bad judgment and poor ethical decisions for the characters in both stories eventually lead to writing on the wall, spelling out their destruction. What a dramatic and sudden warning in both stories!

Younger Americans tell the story of "AIDS Mary" with a shocking variation. In one version, a male student spends the night with a beautiful young woman he has just met. He awakens to find her missing only to discover a lovely box beside the bed. The man opens it and finds a tiny coffin nicely gift-wrapped. Inside the coffin is the message, "Welcome to the AIDS Club," and a miniature skeleton.[14] The terrible gift is presented in such an elegant manner that the audience is horrified. The gift-wrapped coffin, like the writing on the wall, serves as a warning. This is a memorable twist to the stories teaching others to avoid such sexual situations.

One noteworthy element of the stories "AIDS Mary" and the "AIDS Club" stories is that a deceptive woman carries danger. "AIDS Mary," like the early sirens of folklore, uses pleasure to lure men to their destruction. Gail de Vos notes that the woman is wearing dark red lipstick that draws

men into her bed with the promise of romance and shadowy intrigue. When the lipstick is used to write the message of destruction on the mirror, the listener is taught not to succumb to the lure of such strange and exotic women. De Vos calls "AIDS Mary" a "scarlet woman" and links her with other beautiful and dangerous females in folklore.[15]

The fear of contamination through female sexuality has evolved through such historical folklore as the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, "Femme Fatale" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and developed into the "AIDS Mary" stories of modern America. Cultures, including the Ancient Greeks, Gypsies, Southern Slavs, Russians, Greeks, English, Malaysians, and Americans have linked unusually beautiful women with destruction and death.

One example is the Hebrew and Muslim tradition telling how Adam was married to Lilith, the first woman, before the creation of Eve. She left Adam in a rage at her inequality and mated with Satan. Her lustfulness, disobedience and preference for roaming the world at night quickly lost her favor with God and man. She is imagined as a demon of the night who strangles children, probably derived from the Greek Lamia.[16] The ancient idea is not lost on patrons of "Lillith Faire," a modern musical festival geared towards independent young women.

Adam fared little better with his second wife, Eve. The Judeo-Christian creation story tells how Eve succumbed to the temptation to eat from the one forbidden tree in paradise. She lured Adam to also try the forbidden fruit and thus created a gap between God and Man through the first sins.

Another example of the Deadly Beauty are the seductive sirens of Homer's *Odyssey* who tempt men with their seemingly peaceful songs. The beautiful music is enough to lure sailors out of their ships where they soon drown while the lovely sirens idly look on. Other sailors who hear the songs of these strange birdlike women forget to tend their crafts and capsize against rocks.

In the most extreme forms, this fear of female seduction is personified in the vampires of world mythology. An ancient Greek story tells of Apollonius saving a student's life by convincing him not to be deceived by the alluring *lamia* he is preparing to wed.[17] Apollonius tells his student, "These beings fall in love, and they are delights of Aphrodite, but especially to the flesh of a human being, and they decoy with such delights those whom they mean to devour in their feasts."[18] When the wise Apollonius confronts the *lamia,* she slowly disappears.[19] Obviously, the student is so blinded by the wiles of the beautiful young woman that he had no realization of his pending destruction.

Apuleius, the classical Greek author of *The Golden Ass,* also mentioned the *lamia* as a beautiful vampire who seduces and destroys men. He tells of the spirit draining her lover of blood before cutting out his heart. Gypsies believed that a dead woman could return to earth as a vampire. Although otherwise human, she would drain her husband's energy from her insatiable sexual needs.[20]

Although the discussion of vampirism reaches into the more bizarre realms of world folklore, the vampire stories follow the themes of the modern American AIDS legends. The comparison shows how cultures throughout history have warned of beautiful women with tainted blood who lead men to their destruction. Brunvand notes with irony that all the actual cases of deliberate AIDS transmission up to his time of writing involved the spread of the virus by men. He finds it interesting "that the person in the apocryphal story [of intentional AIDS transmission] is always a woman."[21]

The strangest element of the story is the ironic reality that a real person did prolifically spread AIDS through America during the epidemic's emergence in the 1980s. This individual was not a stunningly attractive but angry young woman, as the myths insist, but a stunningly attractive and angry young man.

Gaeten Dugas is also known as Patient Zero, the Canadian airline steward who spread the AIDS virus through his incalculable sexual contacts. Dugas was intimate with thousands of men despite his doctor's orders to remain celibate. He slept with thousands of partners, knowing he had the power to cause their deaths. Sometimes, like "AIDS Mary," Dugas revealed his secret immediately after a sexual encounter.[22] Ironically, in the face of timeless myths, the real "AIDS Mary" was a man!

When comparing "AIDS Mary" legends to earlier myths, one finds that a single idea has carried through into modern cultures, mainly that many humans have believed that sexual relationships lead to destruction. The legends reflect both earlier cultures and current American society in warning of the danger of breaking the sexual codes of a society.

Notes to Chapter Four

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[1] Jospeh Campbell, *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1968), 420.

[2] Jamake Highwater, *Myth and Sexuality* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991), 99.

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CHAPTER FIVE
KIDNEY THEFT

A man goes to a party and meets an attractive woman. They share several beers and the man suddenly loses consciousness. When he awakes, he finds that his clothing has been removed and he is in a bathtub filled with ice. The man is alone, but a phone is situated near the tub and the message "CALL 911 OR YOU WILL DIE" is scrawled on his chest with lipstick or taped as a note near the tub. When the man reaches help and is taken to a hospital, the doctors establish that his kidneys have been carefully but unscrupulously extracted by a group of skilled surgeons. The stories claim that all doctors are aware of such thefts and that the kidneys are sold on the black market. Each kidney is said to be worth $10,000 in the criminal underworld.[1]

Stories of kidney theft from living humans surfaced in urban America in 1991.[2] By 1995 the kidney thefts were said to occur especially among businessmen traveling in Las Vegas. A college-student version of the story that warned against alcohol and drug consumption at strangers' parties appeared in Houston and Austin, Texas. The version of the story that

appeared on the Internet in 1997 has received the most reaction of any of the kidney theft legends.[3] Believers in the story claim that a band of highly skilled doctors stalk and drug nightclub patrons in order to harvest their kidneys for the black-market organ trade. One sensational story surfaced in New Orleans during the time of Mardi Gras. The stories circulate in such messages as, "Travelers Beware" or "A Reason Not to Party Anymore." Since its first appearance, this story has been disseminated at an incredible pace in the form of electronic mail postings.

The evolution of this myth demonstrates the power of electronics as a tool for circulating urban legends in America. One urban legend research group compares such rumors to viruses. It writes how, like a disease, such legends:

> have traits that successfully induce one host to pass it along to others. One such trait is the ability to evoke... fear in its hearer for fear induces stress; and human beings often try to alleviate stress by sharing it with other. Viruses adapt to survive and this one has proven to be especially resilient.[4]

The story, "Reason Not to Party Anymore," first appeared at the University of Texas in Austin. The message cautions as follows:

> I wish to warn you about a new crime ring that is targeting business travelers. This ring is well organized, well funded, has very skilled personnel, and is currently in most major cities and recently very active in New Orleans. This is not a scam or out of a science fiction novel. It is real. It is documented and confirmed. If you travel or someone close to you travels, please be careful.[5]

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The message concludes with several testimonials as to its truth. It is signed with an obviously false name, address and phone number.

This story has circulated so widely that the National Kidney Foundation, United Network for Organ Sharing, the New Orleans Police Department and myth debunkers have taken steps to halt its spread. The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) is concerned "that the unfortunate rumors will affect the public's willingness to become an organ donor" at a time when such donations are much needed.[6] Like Procter and Gamble, NKF has fought against the spread of a myth by seeking to educate the public. The NKF developed a Website that stresses how transplants are only performed at centers certified by the United Network of Organ Sharing. [7] It has asked anyone who experienced a crime of kidney theft to contact the Organization; so far, it has received no response.[8]

The New Orleans Police Department received over one hundred calls concerning kidney theft in the period between 1996 and 1997.[9] In response the department created a WebSite and issued the following statement:

> Over the past six months the New Orleans Police Department has received numerous inquires from corporations and organizations around the United States warning travelers about a well organized crime ring operating in New Orleans. After an investigation into these allegations, the New Orleans Police Department has found them to be COMPLETELY WITHOUT MERIT AND WITHOUT FOUNDATION. The warnings that are being disseminated through

> the Internet are FICTITIOUS and may involve violation of criminal statutes....[10]

As intriguing and frightening as such stories prove to be, they are not new to America. African-Americans told stories of "night doctors" from the end of Reconstruction until World War I.[11] These "night doctors," "student doctors," "Ku Klux doctors," "night riders" or "night witches" were said to conduct their research on living black persons.[12] Night doctors were often linked to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. But, while the Klan was definitely active during this time, no confirmed reports indicate humans kidnapped for use in medical research.[13]

African-American folklorist, Patricia Turner, explains the link between immoral doctors and violent racists in her study, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture*. She maintains:

> The night doctors, like the Klansmen and the patrollers, were reputed to prowl after dark. Both medical students and the Klansmen are easily identified by their white garments. Those charged with upholding the law allowed both groups to function with little fear of reprisal; and both groups demonstrated a marked indifference to the physical well being of black bodies.[14]

It is possible that the earliest accounts of night doctors violating human bodies were created to frighten freepersons and keep them contained.[15]

It is also possible that the stories originated through fear of the secret societies that violently rule the night in Africa and Haiti. Such mysterious

groups threaten violence against any stranger they find walking at night. The night is theirs and those who walk by darkness show a dangerous lack of respect towards these ancient and mysterious societies.[16]

Campbell explained how such social control is the basis of all mythology. During Redemption, the period following Reconstruction in the South, African-Americans no longer faced vulnerability from a white plantation master, but they began to fear for their bodies' safety under the imagined threat of night doctors. The elements of fear over disembodiment and the need to warn potential victims allowed night doctor stories to spread through the communities of freed slaves always at the same rapid pace as the stories now spread on the Internet.

Several reasons explain why stories of organ theft are frightening. Psychological interpretations push past explanations concerning only the simple fear of bodily harm. Historian Caroline Bynum believes that organ theft encourages people to face the question: "How can 'I' continue to be 'I' through time..."[17] This metaphysical theme is widely explored in the science fiction and fantasy creations of modern times. They deal with the issues brought on by the exchange of physical bodies. The stories are far-reaching and fantastical, but the questions remain moral and relevant.

Bynum and the characters of these stories question the identity of the human element despite change.

Science fiction delves into the question of human identity in our culture even as real life cloning experiments push the bounds of known, ethical science. Popular television programs such as *Star Trek* and the *X-Files* ponder questions of body swapping. They ask the questions: Could a displaced human soul keep a specific identity while residing in a "host body?" "Does a sentient mechanical being have control over his or her own body?" The questions entertaining us in fantastical television programs are the same questions entertaining and puzzling humans since ancient times. *Being John Malkovich* is an odd but highly acclaimed film about keeping one's soul in another body. Characters switch genders and are forced into the bodies of people with opposing personalities. They begin to wonder if they remain themselves. The popular, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* television series includes a character who switches bodies. The question is often asked whether a certain individual remains the same individual in a different body or a body that has been manipulated by others. These fictional tales of body snatching continue to entertain modern audiences because they pose metaphysical questions about what makes us human individuals. On a more realistic basis, Americans face the individuality

issue through cloning, genetic manipulation and new advances in theories of personalities.

In most cultures, the body is seen as a powerful symbol. Highwater writes, "Just as it is true that everything symbolizes the body, so it is equally true that the body symbolizes everything else."[18] In accordance with the ancient belief in an Earth Mother, Highwater argues that the body is symbolic of nature, the universe and chaos. He concludes, "The human body is a metaphor for nature and our vision of nature indicates how we think about our bodies."[19]

Assuming that the human body is a symbol of earth, one can understand how urban Americans are subconsciously linking the destruction of the natural world to the rumored violations of their bodies. Interestingly, the kidney theft rumors have resurfaced during the height of the environmental movement. Americans may subconsciously believe that their inability to protect the natural life of the planet includes a lack of control over their own bodies. Slogans calling us to care for Mother Earth bring the link between a central universal body and the condition of the earth closer together in our subconscious.

Moreover, when the themes of freedom and responsibility for the body are linked to the idea of the human body as a symbol of the world, the

kidney theft rumors take on new meanings. Humans are given the responsibility to care for earth, and a misuse of curiosity and knowledge can lead to destruction.

Other fears of dismemberment stem from the basic human disgust of bodily violation. While Eastern tales concern gods who sacrifice themselves by dividing their bodies into the cosmos, Western stories of dismemberment are gruesome. This concern was, for example, expressed in the French fairytale "Bluebeard." The story was first published in 1697 as "La Barba Blue."[20] It concerns a young woman who marries a strange man with a blue beard. The same story is told in England as "Reynardine" or "The Robber Bridegroom" and in the United States as "Mr. Fox." Other English variations call Reynardine "The Elven King" or "The Fairy Knight," though he is the same ghastly bridegroom in all the stories.

The husband goes on a journey and advises his young wife not to enter a certain room. But the woman's curiosity overcomes her fears. She unlocks the forbidden door with a golden key and finds the suspended and mutilated bodies of earlier wives. Blood from the bodies fall upon the key and when Bluebeard returns from his travels, he demands to see it and learns of his wife's disobedience. He condemns her to the same grisly death as his previous wives. In some versions, her siblings save her. The story contains

warnings including, "Ladies, you should never pry-/ You'll repent by and by."[21] Other warnings are "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not too Bold," and "Curiosity / In spite of its charm/ Too often causes a great deal of harm."[22]

On the surface, this story is a form of social control that warns women about too much curiosity; but the story moves past a warning against innocent forms of curiosity. The bride in this story is not simply precocious and inquisitive. She symbolically endangers herself by seeking forbidden knowledge and entering a situation that leads to bodily destruction. Underling the story is great fear for the vulnerability of the human body and the need to protect it by making intelligent choices.

The stories of kidney theft, night doctors, and Bluebeard demonstrate the power of fear regarding the vulnerability of the human body. In addition to serving as social control, the myths symbolize other aspects of the human condition. They demonstrate the link between destruction of the earth and destruction of the human body.

Most importantly, they show how responsibility over one's own body, and the earth as a universal body, has been perceived throughout history. The idea of the earth as a shared mother's body is both ancient and modern. We link it to the first fertility goddesses, and yet we constantly change our lives to better care for "Mother Earth." As we fear changes in the earth, we

create stories of danger that link mutilation of the planet to potential harm of our own bodies.

Notes to Chapter Five

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[3] Mikkelson, "You've Got to be Kidneying."

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[11] Patricia Turner, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 68.

[12] Turner, *Through the Grapevine*.

[13] Turner, *Through the Grapevine*, 69.

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[15] Turner, *Through the Grapevine*, 68.

[16] Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Society of Haitian Voodoo, Zombies and Magic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 221-267.

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[18] Jamake Highwater, Myth *and Sexuality* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 39.

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[20] Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 104.

[21] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 105.

[22] Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 105.

CHAPTER SIX
PULL-TAB MAGIC

The little silver pull-tabs that open the tops of soft drink and beer bottles have recently became collectors' items for Americans, who save them by the hundreds. These people believe that they are doing a good deed because the tabs will be redeemed someday for a charitable cause. Other collectors insist that their pull-tabs have monetary value even after being presented with evidence that this proposition is an urban legend. Most collectors are saddened when they find that their philanthropic effort has been in vain. One widely spread belief is that a collection of aluminum pull-tabs will finance kidney dialysis treatment for a needy child. Participants feel foolish for being duped into the false opportunity to do good.[1]

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on the "redemption rumors" that circulate throughout the modern United States of America. Americans have been disillusioned for years by urban legends insisting on the supposedly high redemption value of common and worthless items such as box tops, cigarette labels and pull-tabs from aluminum cans. The myths are circulated among families, civic groups, and churches, who collect these items for

mass donations to charities that do not exist. Collectors believe a kind-hearted corporation will redeem the massive donations of their household waste for great monetary value. Collections are often gathered to finance a type of medical care, such as a wheel chair or kidney dialysis, for those who cannot afford it.

The author heard the following conversation around 1987. A ten-year-old friend saw his mother move to throw away her cola can and announced, "Don't throw that away, Momma! Somebody can get an hour on a kidney machine if we save a hundred of them!"

"Oh, really!" his mother replied. They were already known in the community as a charitable family. "We'll certainly have to start saving them!"[2] She put the pull-tab in her pocket and probably kept ninety-nine more based on the rumor.

The author also found a small cardboard box holding hundreds of pull-tabs in her church during the 1990s. Saving the tabs turned into a continuous project. When asked which organization the pull-tabs were to be sent to for redemption, the manager replied that he did not know. He was assured that *his* collection was helping. He sent it off to "a friend who knew what he was doing."[3]

Jan Harold Brunvand defines the belief that such worthless collections can be turned in for money as "redemption rumors."[4] He describes the legends as "recurrent and totally fictional traditions about saving a large quality of useless things with the belief that one can redeem them with a manufacturer to provide a major medical benefit for a needy patient."[5] The myths' definition originated with a Tobacco Institute spokesperson who asked people to stop donating the empty cigarette packages and cellophane opening strips that were flooding his company.

Phil McEver of Houston's American Reclaiming Corporation complains of the inconvenience to recycling companies when the redemption rumor is acted upon:

> We don't even take tabs and we never advertised that we do. But it's not unusual to get 30 or 40 calls a day from people who say they've heard of these things. Some of them will come in with the gallon containers wanting $75 a gallon, and when we explain it's not worth $75 they pull out of the driveway mad.[6]

Barbara Mikkelson researched the value of pull-tabs and found that one million "have a recycle value of just under $300… that's before you factor in what it costs to collect, store, and transport them."[7] She ascertains that "A lot of really nice people end up sadly disappointed when they eventually discover that all their hard work…went for naught."[8] The media also debunks redemption rumors by calling the legends "a cruel hoax."[9]

There is no clear explanation for how redemption rumors originate. At times, corporations have offered money or services in exchange for collecting or recycling a product. For example, Campbell Soup sponsors label-collecting contests and donates money to winning schools. Certain bottles may have a resale or refill value. Cigarette manufactures sometimes offer promotions for saving packaging components, but these are especially marked pieces, like "Camel Cash." Manufactures of soft drinks and beer, however, have never claimed that *pull-tabs* are redeemable for large amounts of money. Sometimes claims surface that pull-tabs are being manufactured with a valuable metal. However, the collectors who believe the redemption rumors do so because they find a simple appeal in saving objects for a good cause.

Although the origins of the modern urban myths are often vague, the idea of gaining something for nothing is ancient. Tales of common items with extraordinary powers or value are one of the most appealing themes of fairy tales. Unlike the ghastly urban legends of violence and oddity, redemption rumors appeal to the compassionate side of urban Americans. They also let us exercise our hunter-gatherer nature. Considering that people have saved things instinctively since the beginning of time, it does not seem so odd that Americans collect little bits of metal.

Brunvand does not believe that the stories are the "cruel hoaxes" put forth by some myth debunkers.[10] He disagrees with the perception that redemption rumors were designed and spread with malicious intent or as a prank. He finds that "there is no evidence that anyone has ever deliberately planted such rumors either to increase sales or embarrass companies."[11] In fact, recycling companies, such as that of McEver's appeal to people to stop sending them worthless pull-tabs. In the end, no one benefits: yet the stories continue to spread on the appeal of an ordinary object gaining inexplicable value through the powers of a wealthy and benevolent corporation.

The redemption rumors have strong parallels with older stories of magical beings that grant wishes to enhance the lives of humble people. The redemption rumors may be traced to the wish fulfillment stories of world folklore. They are the belief in granting of earnest wishes in a society that no longer believes in primitive magic. The appeal of such wishes, or magical objects that grant wishes, is as appealing to modern Americans as it was to the narrators and audiences of fairytales.

The Austrian folkstory, "How Urs'l became a Princess," concerns the adventures of three sisters: Proud Kat'l, Lazy Gret'l, and Foolish Urs'l. Each young woman is sent in the high mountains to herd the family's cattle.

On the way to the meadow, each woman meets a strange dwarf who calls for help after falling down a precipice. Kat'l and Gret'l are too apathetic and lazy to help the old man. But Urs'l shows that she is kind, even though she is called foolish. She helps the dwarf, who turns out to be a prince in disguise. Urs'l moves from a simple cottage to become the queen of a castle and all because of her desire to assist in a simple way.

One of the most familiar fairytales illustrating the fascination with mundane objects that take on miraculous powers is the British, Australian and Appalachian American "Jack and the Bean Stalk" or "Jack and the Bean Tree." Although the story has British origins, it is now found throughout the world. The story is highly popular in Jamaica. Such diffusion supports Jung's idea that any culture will find a universal idea appealing when it is set into their own surroundings.

In this tale, Jack and his mother are forced to sell their only cow "to buy food and keep themselves alive."[12] Jack forgets about how much he needs money and accepts some brightly colored beans from a strange old man in exchange for the animal. Jack is fascinated like a child with the treasure while his mother berates him and cries, "Now we shall starve. These beans are useless. Why haven't you got more sense?"[13] She punishes Jack by sending him to bed without dinner; by the time the two have awakened the

beans have grown into a magical tree reaching high into the clouds. Thus, the gift of the beans proves to be of amazing value. Jack gains a hen that lays golden eggs, a singing harp, money and a beautiful castle after defeating the giant who lived at the top of the beanstalk. His mother finds that, through the gift of the beans which she thought so useless, "We shall never go hungry again."[14]

In the Appalachian version, which is based on the oral traditions of the combined "Jack Tales," the hero is a bit craftier. He climbs the bean tree to the giants' house where he deceives the wife and steals from the husband. The giants destroy their house chasing after the thief, and Jack and his mother are able to steal all the fine china after the house tumbles to the ground. All of this happens because Jack was making so much noise that his mother flippantly gave him a bean to keep him from trouble. Her first opinion of the great bean's worth is recorded in mountain dialect, "Here, run plant this bean. It'll make ye a bean tree."[15]

The story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" teaches that there is potential value in the most mundane of objects when one has good intentions. Jack becomes a hero because of his simple belief and trust in the gift of a magical being. The mother moves from disbelief to fascination and gratitude. The desire to believe in such miracles allows for the continued spread of fairy

tales like "Jack and the Bean Stalk" and redemption rumors such as "Pull-tabs for Dialysis." The sadness that Mickkelson describes when collectors learn the truth about the pull-tab's value leads to the shattering of their belief in magic. Bruno Bettelheim tells of the appeal of believing in magic in his work, *The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. He explains:

> It is general agreement that myths and fairy tales speak to us in the language of symbols representing unconscious content. Their appeal is simultaneously to our conscious and unconscious mind. This makes it very effective. Although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable, they are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me.[16]

The comparison of magical gifts that appear ordinary with junk items collected for charity illustrate the lasting attraction of such stories.

There is another reason for the appeal of the "Pull-tabs for Dialysis" rumor besides a desire to believe in magic and unconscious gathering instincts. The tabs are collected from beer and soda cans. Many Americans regard both drinks as mildly damaging to their health. Donating the pull-tabs is one way to alleviate the guilt for consuming these low-nutrient drinks. The collectors feel they are helping others while they gratify themselves. Gail de Vos has also defined this aspect of the redemption rumors, saying such stories focus around "the three legal drugs in our culture: caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol."[17]

The redemption rumors are so powerful that those who find out the true value of their collections respond with strong feelings of disenchantment, anger, and sadness and ask for corporate help. Some large companies have decided to respond to the rumors, not by combating them, but by donating funds to healthcare organizations in return for aluminum. The tabs continue to have little monetary value, but the corporations allow them to serve as symbolic tokens of a donation to charity.

McDonalds has responded with a "Pop Tab Collection" project. Ronald McDonald Houses average proceeds of about 40 cents per pound after accepting pull-tab collections and recycling them with sponsors. The money is indeed donated to a nearby Ronald McDonald House in order to help pay lodging for families of hospitalized children. A manager for the Ronald McDonald House in Chapel Hill, North Carolina confirms that the value of the program is not in recycling the tabs, but in the community and environmental lessons it teaches. He noted that his unit accepts donations as small as a dozen pull-tabs.[18]

The National Kidney Foundation has also recognized the durability of redemption rumors, particularly those claiming that pull-tabs may be collected for time on a kidney dialysis machine. The rumor has plagued the NKF since 1970 and made a dramatic resurfacing in 1998. The organization

speculates that the rumor is currently widespread on the Internet. The NKF encourages people to recycle large aluminum items and donate the proceeds. The contributions go to research, public, and professional programs. They welcome these donations and ask that they and the aluminum industry no longer be bothered by the pull-tab rumors.[19] The donations focus on a metal of value, not on pull-tabs.

Such charitable programs demonstrate the power that myth and unconscious instinct hold in modern American society. Unfortunately, the "Pull-Tabs for Dialysis" legend continues as people across the country collect pull-tabs for charities that do not exist. It is an urban rumor that has swept across America, not by appealing to the worst parts of the human consciousness, but by linking modern people with a belief in magic and a simple desire to gather and keep many things.

Notes to Chapter Six

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[1] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet: More New Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites* (New York: W.W Norton, 1886), 169.

[2] Interview by the author, anonymous speakers, circa 1985, Horse Shoe, NC.

[3] Interview by the author, anonymous speaker, 15 May 1999, Horse Shoe, NC.

[4] Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet*, 169.

[5] Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet*, 169.

[6] Barbara Mikkelson, "Pull-Tabs for Dialysis?" *Tales from the Wooden Spoon*, http://www.host20.bluehill.com/snopes.

[7] Mikkelson, "Pull-Tabs."

[8] Mikkelson, "Pull-Tabs."

[9] Mikkelson, "Pull-Tabs."

[10] Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet*, 172.

[11] Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet*, 171.

[12] *Dean's a Book of Fairy Tales* (New York: Playmore, 1977), 43.

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[15] Richard Chase, *The Jack Tales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 31.

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[17] Gale de Vos, *Tales Rumors and Gossip: Exploring Contemporary Folk Literature in Grades 7-12* (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1996), 78.

[18] Interview with the author, Ronald McDonald House, Weekend Manger, Jerry Reid, 26 February 2000, Chapel Hill, NC. Information on the "Pop Tab Collection Program" is also found at: "Ronald McDonald House Charities," http://www.rmhc.com/about/programs/education/rmh/poptab.html.

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CONCLUSION

The journey through mythology takes one across time and through the world. Yet, the underlying themes of the stories are parallel, as if the same legends are being told over and again. This thesis explores some of the reasons that folklore attains such universality.

First, folklore expresses the shared desires of humanity. The idea of universal archetypes is examined by studying works of psychologists such as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, who explained that all myth comes from the same primitive images in the human subconscious. They maintain that folklore must be told as a way to express the symbols of humanity. An example is the irrational hope of wish fulfillment for those heroes who are good hearted. "How Urs'l became a Princess" is a fairy tale about a girl who gains favor because of kindness. Some Americans believe that they can collect worthless bits of metal and help those in need. Indeed, rewards for those who are worthy remain a hope and expectation in our society.

Second, the stories influence behavior through the grotesque punishments sentenced upon those who defy cultural norms. For example,

the "Mexican Pet" comes from a fear of Hispanic immigration though it appears to only be a grotesque story about a sick rat. "AIDS Mary" is not just about a certain woman, but follows centuries of legends warning against the dangers of sensuality and promiscuity including the familiar story of "Adam and Eve." Stories like those surrounding Procter and Gamble's trademark warn hearers to shun evil forces and greed. They are like the ancient tales of demonic creatures who encourage the foolish to trade their souls for wealth and success.

Third, folklore is entertaining. Urban legends are designed to give the audience a shock or a laugh. Entertainment value assures that people will remember and retell them. Primitive legends and fairy tales were also designed on the surface for entertainment. The humor of stories such as the traditional Jack tales is as fresh for modern audiences as it was for pioneer families.

In addition, modern folklore has evolved to the entertaining jokes and warnings that now spread through email and the Internet. Sensational and gratifying stories can spread very quickly by the use of electronic media because everyone wants to tell them. The National Kidney Foundation realized the power of modern technology when pull-tab redemption rumors

were distributed by computer. Ironically, those bothered by urban legends often use the Internet as a source to debunk the stories.

Australian folklorist Bill Scott contends that, "I have often expressed the opinion that there are no really original contemporary legends and that they all have their origins in antiquity. Once again demonstrating how difficult it is to kill a truly good story."[1] I demonstrate how popular and necessary these stories are both in our culture and in much older ones. Folklore is necessary in expressing the human condition and people enjoy the stories.

Notes to Conclusion

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1 Bill Scott, *Pelicans and Chihuahuas and Other Urban Legends* (Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), 13.

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VITA

Stephanie Susette Gardner was born in Ithaca, New York, on August 27, 1974. Her family moved to Henderson County, North Carolina, when she was two-years-old and has made their home in the area since that time.

Stephanie graduated from West Henderson High School in May of 1992. She holds an Associate of Arts degree from Brevard College and a Bachelor of History with minors in English and religion from Greensboro College. She is currently seeking employment in the field of museum work, living history, or interpretive history.

The author is a member of Phi Alpha Theta Historical Honor Society in which she served as historian during 1999. She is also a member of Alpha Chi English Honor Society in which she served as secretary during 1994. She sat on the Brevard College Judicial Board and was awarded the Marvin Scaggs Award for Excellence in the Study of History upon graduation from Greensboro College. Her parents are Ruthie and Randy Gardner of Horse Shoe, North Carolina. She has one brother, Steven, and many pets.