

## Phantom Hitchhikers and Bad Deaths

GILLIAN BENNETT

*Well, thirteen years ago today,  
In a wreck just down the road,  
Our darling Mary lost her life,  
And we miss her so.  
But thank you for your troubles,  
And the kindness you have shown,  
You're the thirteenth one who's been here,  
Bringing Mary home.*

(Concluding verse of song by “The Country Gentlemen” quoted by Jan Harold Brunvand in *The Mexican Pet*, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1986, p. 53).

### **Abstract:**

This essay updates and corrects more impressionistic discussions of this topic in earlier work (Bennett, 1997; Bennett, 1998). It brings together two of the author’s enduring interests as a folklorist – ghostlore and urban legend.

### **Introduction**

Perhaps the biggest problem in offering to write about ghosts is the variability of the concept. Even if one limits the discussion to the protestant tradition among northern Europeans and North Americans of European descent – as I intend to do – there is no constant, unified concept of what a ghost is and what it does. History, religion, education, literature and personal experience, among other things, all play a part in shaping cultural expectations. So there is not one tradition but many. Running through those traditions, however, is the notion that hauntings are not random effects but have discoverable causes. As a woman I interviewed some years ago said, after recounting an acquaintance’s poltergeist experience: “Now, I know to make the story real, I should say what had caused this, and [they] did connect it up to something ...” (Bennett, 1999, p. 43). It is these “connections”, this causal framework, that is the peg on which the cultural attitudes of the time and place are hung. So at one time or another, a poltergeist might have been “connected up” to the activity of witches or devils, or to the revelation of murder, or to a crisis of puberty.

When the apparition is of the dead in human form another set of assumptions comes into play. As the spectres *look* human, the cause of their appearing is sought in human emotions and motives. In the Middle Ages, these were customarily linked to the soul’s post-mortem experiences and both reflected and underpinned the teaching of the Church. In Keith Thomas’s words: “A ghost returned from Purgatory because of some unrequited crime; it could not rest until it had been confessed and absolved by the priest ... characteristic medieval ghosts included ... the priest who came to report that he had been damned for dissuading a colleague from becoming a monk; and the concubine who wanted her former lover to arrange masses for her soul in order to ease her pains” (Thomas, 1971, pp. 596-597).

In general, after the Reformation attempted to expunge the concept of Purgatory from the popular mind, ghosts tended to be restless for secular reasons – because of what was happening in the mundane world as a consequence of their earthly life and their manner of leaving it. The English antiquarian Francis Grose, for example, writing in 1787 but probably depicting the traditions of his grandfather’s generation, explained that ghosts return: “for some special errand such as the discovery of a murderer, or to procure restitution in land, or money unjustly withheld from an orphan or widow ...; sometimes [they] inform their heirs in what secret place ... they have hidden the title deeds of the estate, or buried their money or plate. ...” (Grose, 1787, pp. 5-6). In broad terms, this represents a gradual movement from a *forward-looking* emphasis which finds the reason for the return of the dead by looking at what-happens-after-death, to *backwards-looking* explanations which account for the appearance of the ghost in terms of what-happened-before-death.

I would suggest that, for the last hundred years or so, this causal time-frame has been squeezed in both directions, and that nowadays explanations given for the appearance of a lifelike ghost are more likely to focus on the *immediate moment*. So the modern narrator of a ghost story is likely to “connect up” the experience to the circumstances of the ghost’s own last moments, or to the present circumstances of those to whom it appears.

One can see this sort of process in a book-length collection of Kentucky ghost stories made in the latter half of the twentieth century (Montell, 1975), and in two brief surveys from the 1940s, one of the ghosts of New York (Jones, 1944) and one of California ghosts (Hankey, 1942). All reveal a diminution in the number and variety of reasons given for a ghost’s return. Only a few of these ghosts seem concerned with their post-mortem existence, and their concern for their past lives is restricted to only a few recurrent motifs. This paucity of functions is compensated by an increasing emphasis on the ghost’s manner of death as an explanation for the haunting, but these too are restricted to a handful of motives. More than a third of the New York ghosts are said to be restless because they died violent or sudden deaths, and among the Californian ghosts the principal causes of haunting are said to be murder and suicide. Both the book-length compilation and the two surveys also show a feature which, as far as I am aware, is absent from ghost accounts before about the middle of the nineteenth century but was a growing feature of twentieth-century accounts: that is, ghosts who haunt a location by re-enacting their own death or continuing their lifetime’s pursuits. By the middle of the last century, I would therefore suggest, narrators of ghost legends in the oral tradition show a growing preoccupation with sudden, violent and/or accidental death and also give evidence of the emergence of a concept of death as punishment or deprivation.

### **The Phantom Hitchhiker Legend Type**

One of the best known ghost legends from this period, perhaps *the* best known, is the story usually called the “Vanishing Hitchhiker”. Though its roots are in older folklore of roadside ghosts, the legend has taken its present form only in the last seventy years or so (see Beardsley and Hankey, 1942; Bennett, 1998). The core story concerns a traveller who offers a lift to a vulnerable-looking pedestrian, only to find the passenger has disappeared without

trace. Later investigations reveal that the hitchhiker was a supernatural entity, not a living human being. Stories like this have an almost worldwide distribution and have been collected from places as far apart as Kansas and Korea. They turn up in a variety of media – songs, literary works, printed story compilations, folklore journals, *Fate* magazine, *Fortean Times*, websites and emails, and as topical rumour reported orally, online or in newspapers. To date I have seen in the region of 700 texts of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend which were recorded within the last seventy years or so. Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of this story is that it is easily adjustable to cultural expectations. So the mysterious hitchhiker may be an alien in UFO literature (Roberts, 1986), Jesus in the bible belt of America (Fish, 1976), a Mormon prophet in Utah (Wilson, 1975), a goddess in Hawaii (Luomala, 1972), or a malevolent spirit in Guam (Mitchell, 1976).

The first full-scale study of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend, undertaken by two young American anthropologists in the first half of the last century (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942), suggested there were four principal variants of the story, three featuring ghosts and a fourth featuring a spiritual being. Their typology has not stood the test of time (see Bennett, 1998), but nevertheless, it provides a set of convenient labels to use in any discussion, so I shall adopt their terms here.

Beardsley and Hankey’s versions A and C both feature ghosts, the “phantom hitchhikers” of my title, and are distinguished from each other by the means the narrator uses to establish that the mysterious hitchhiker is, in fact, not a living being. In Version A (the dominant type), the hitchhiker asks to be taken to a specific address but disappears from the vehicle *en route*; the traveller enquires at the address (usually a private house) and is told that his passenger has been dead some years. In Beardsley and Hankey’s Version C a man encounters a beautiful woman at a dance and offers to take her home; she is cold and borrows a sweater or coat from him; she asks to be put down in some remote location, often near a cemetery; she then disappears; later enquiries reveal that the girl is dead; the motorist’s coat is found on her grave. Stories of both types often contain some explanation about the manner of the hitchhiker’s death or the reason for her (or less commonly, his) return. These explanations may be put in the mouth of the person who answers the door to the traveller’s enquiry or embedded in the narrative or implied in the detail. They are the “connections” between dying and ghosts that the narrator chooses from within his or her cultural repertoire to make the story “real”. As such, they are indicative of that culture’s notions of what makes a spirit unable to rest.

My discussion is based on a random sample of 100 stories. Type A stories dominate (87) because they are the most common and because they are most likely to contain overt explanations of the hitchhiker’s manner of death. But for balance I have included eight typical Type C stories which include a call-at-the-house as well as the coat-on-the-grave motif and five less typical stories which may be regarded as variants of Type C (in this essay I call these Type C(b)). The bulk of this material comes from magazines, story compilations, student theses, and folklore journals from the 1940s to the 1990s, but it also includes stories I have myself collected from oral sources and a handful downloaded from YouTube, Snopes, and similar online sources (for list of sources, see the Appendix). I think we are entitled to

use them all – recent and less recent, oral and less oral – as evidence of popular attitudes today since, not only do such stories pass readily from word-of-mouth to print to electronic media and back over time, but have done so with few changes of detail or interpretation. A comparison of the three examples which follow bears this out, I believe.

### **Example of Type A Story**

This was told to me by a friend in the early 1980s as the true experience of a “FOAF”, a friend of her son’s schoolteacher. It is set on the wild and desolate moors that separate the UK counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

“Michael’s teacher ... they were talking one day about ghosts and she said that her friend at Leeds had been out for the evening with a friend of hers – a gentleman friend – and they’d spent the evening in Leeds and were driving home late, very late, on a very wet, dark night. And they lived on the outskirts of Leeds somewhere and as they were driving home, they passed a bus stop and there was a young girl – a youngish girl – standing at the bus stop, and they drove straight past and then thought it was odd she should be standing there so late ... So the young man said he would take his friend home and then go back and see if the young girl was still at the bus stop, and if she was still there he would give her a ride home. So he went back to the bus stop and found the young girl still there and asked if he could give her a ride because she was getting very wet and there were no more buses that night.

“So he asked her where she lived. She gave him the address. So they set off. Driven a little way when they came to some traffic lights – he had to stop at the traffic lights – and when he looked, she’d gone! Couldn’t be seen! He couldn’t understand it at all. Next morning he went round for his friend ... and told her what had happened. Very perplexed about it.

“So they decided they’d go to this address that the young girl had given. Knocked at the door. An elderly lady answered it and they said, did – you know – did a young lady or anybody, live there – because they’d given a ride to this young lady the night before who’d given this address and couldn’t find her. She’d just disappeared, didn’t know where she was. And the old lady burst into tears and said that was her daughter who had died years earlier on that same day in an accident at the traffic lights!” (Bennett and Smith, 2007, p. 291)

### **Example of Type C Story**

This was taken from a Master’s thesis published in 1966, the earliest and fullest collection of Vanishing Hitchhiker stories, so far as I am aware. The story was recorded in November 1945 in Brooklyn, New York and may be found in the Archive of the New York Folklore Society.

“Two men stopped at a ‘gin mill’ on the way home from work and saw a girl sitting at the bar and bought her a drink. When they were leaving they offered to take her home and she accepted. She had no wraps and it was a cold night so one of the men put his sweater around her shoulders. She gave them her address but asked to get out at a cemetery. The reason being that she did not want her parents

to know she was out with anyone. She left with the sweater. A few days later they returned to the given address and asked the lady about the girl. She showed them a picture and asked if it was the girl. They said it was and the lady went on to explain that it was her daughter who had been dead for over a year. She asked them to let her know if they saw her again. One of the men died a few days later and the other went to a doctor for advice on the situation. The doctor advised digging up the girl to prove she was dead. After many complications one story says that the doctor and man went to the grave and found footprints in the snow which led to the girl's tombstone and there hung the sweater. The doctor says they dug up the corpse and found the sweater on the corpse (Cox, 1966, pp. 137-138).

### **Example of Type C(b) Story**

This was posted on the internet in 2002 and downloaded in July, 2010. It differs from the regular Type C story in that, instead of the traveller meeting the girl ghost at a dance or in a bar, he meets her on the road, and takes her with him to a dance or party.

“On a cold and rainy night a young man is on his way to a party at a local dance hall and on his way there, he happens to offer a ride to an attractive young woman who agrees to go with him to the dance. Everyone at the party found her to be very charming and after the dance was over, the young man offered to drive her home as the night had turned quite chilly. She accepted, and because it was so cold out, he gave her his coat to wear.

“He asked for her address and she gave it to him and a short time later, they pulled into the driveway of the house where the girl said that she lived and the driver turned to tell her that they had arrived. To his astonishment, she was gone! The passenger seat of the car was empty, although the door had never been opened – the girl had simply vanished.

“Not knowing what else to do, the man went up to the door and knocked. An elderly woman answered the door and he explained to her what had happened. Right away she seemed to know exactly what he was talking about. The young girl he had taken to the dance was her daughter – but she had died ten years before in an auto accident.

“The horrified young man didn't believe her, even though the name of the girl he had taken to the dance, and the woman's daughter were the same. In order to convince him, the old woman even told him where to find the grave of the dead girl in the local cemetery. The young man quickly drove there following the directions he had been given, found the stone with the girl's name on it. Folded neatly over the top of the marker was the coat the girl had borrowed to ward off the night chill!” (Taylor, “Vanishing Hitchhikers: Real or Legend?” <http://www.prairieghosts.com/vanishing.html>).

An analysis of the 100 sample stories will show how far these stories are typical, and what other motifs are likely to be found in phantom hitchhiker legends. We can then go on to tease some conclusions and suggestions from the figures:

## Table Showing Themes and Motifs in 100 Phantom Hitchhiker Legends

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Traveller</b>  |     |
| lone young man in a car   | 77  |
| couple in car   | 6   |
| two or more men in car  | 4   |
| truck driver  | 3   |
| motor cyclist   | 2   |
| taxi driver   | 2   |
| clergyman   | 2   |
| three fraternity brothers   | 1   |
| musician and two friends  | 1   |
| bus driver  | 1   |
| family  | 1   |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Hitchhiker</b>   |     |
| (beautiful) (young) girl, lady, woman   | 84  |
| “old woman”/ “little old lady”  | 9   |
| man   | 4   |
| “little girl”   | 3   |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Cause of death</b>   |     |
| not specified   | 51  |
| car crash   | 34  |
| “killed”/ “died” (in unspecified accident)  | 5   |
| motorbike crash   | 2   |
| drowned   | 2   |
| murdered  | 1   |
| frozen to death   | 1   |
| carbon-monoxide poisoning (suicide?)  | 1   |
| sick girl dies after house-fire   | 1   |
| natural death   | 1   |
| no overt implication hitchhiker is dead   | 1   |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Mode of discovery</b>  |     |
| information gained at address ghost gives   |     |
| from mother   | 49  |
| from both parents   | 10  |
| from father   | 9   |
| from other relatives  | 7   |
| information gained from other source or at another location (e.g. police, doctor, preacher, landlady, “person”) | 8   |
| traveller “told” by unspecified person  | 17  |
| ghost also leaves coat/sweater/scarf on grave   | 13  |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Common Motifs</b>  |     |
| ghost appears at night-time   | 100 |
| ghost appears in bad weather (of which, rain or storms = 30)  | 33  |
| ghost dressed for dance   | 24  |
| ghost’s appearance is regular occurrence  | 20  |
| traveller(s) on way to dance, bar, party  | 13  |
| ghost is already at dance, bar, night-club  | 8   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| ghost appears on anniversary of death or burial | 8 |
| traveller goes mad                              | 7 |
| ghost is picked up or set down at cemetery      | 5 |
| ghost appears on birthday or Christmas          | 3 |
| ghost appears on other specified occasions      | 3 |
| ghost dressed for wedding                       | 3 |
| ghost crying                                    | 3 |
| traveller and girl meet more than once          | 3 |
| exhumation of girl's grave                      | 2 |
| traveller dies soon after                       | 1 |
| ghost later attempts to choke traveller         | 1 |
| traveller scared to go to dances now            | 1 |

## Discussion

Let us look first at the nature of the hitchhikers. All but a handful of them (nine old ladies and two of the four men) have died young. If it is reasonable, as I have suggested, to suppose that a restless ghost reveals a culture's notion of what makes dying specially hard – so hard that the spirit cannot consent to die – then these stories tell us that dying young is a bad way to go. But they also tell us that dying young *and female* is particularly hard. If gender was irrelevant, then we would expect to see roughly equal numbers of males and females among our young ghosts, but in these stories 87% of the ghosts are unmarried girls. What can be so specially sad about the death of a young female?

The culturally assumed trajectory of a girl's life is a limited period of freedom and fun, then courtship, then marriage, then children. We all know, of course, that in "real life" (whatever that is) not all girls are decorous virgins waiting for Mr Right to transform them into wives and mothers. Nevertheless, the cultural stereotype endures and is the basis of many popular narratives. While young men are assumed to be sowing wild oats, young women are assumed to be "innocent". So in these brief and unsophisticated stories the youth and gender of the hitchhikers signals innocence. Maybe these girls are even more naive than usual. They have allowed themselves to be left unprotected in unsafe environments – alone in a corner at a dance or at the bar in a "gin mill", or standing on a deserted road, or outside a cemetery, or on the moors, or by a swamp, or in the woods, in the cold and dark and wet, often inadequately clad. They are "young and slightly built" (Jones, 1959, p. 163), alone and pitiable, sometimes in tears. "She seemed so lonely," says one typical traveller, "and we knew she needed help" (Burrison, 1989, p. 327).

The suggestion of virtue and innocence is further enhanced by the stress many narrators lay on the beauty of the hitchhiker's appearance. Twenty five of the 84 girls are explicitly said to be "lovely", "attractive", "beautiful", "charming". About a third of the female hitchhikers, young and old, are also said to be beautifully dressed – 24 are wearing evening dresses, 3 are in bridal gowns, and 5 are dressed in smart daywear. Their beautiful garments are integrated into descriptions of their lovely faces and figures:

"... her long blond hair seemed to flow with the wind along the soft material of her white dress." (Burrison, 1989, p. 327)

“... a beautiful, black-haired young girl [...] her long, sheer, white organdy dress made ripples about her legs as the cold wintry wind blew it close to her body.” (Musick, 1977, pp. 137-139)

“... a lovely young girl, dressed in the sheerest of evening gowns.” (Cerf, 1945, as quoted on Snopes website, August 2010)

Most storytellers would probably not “really believe” that beautiful faces signify beautiful souls. But the case is different when they step into traditional narrative mode. Here, beauty and virtue *are* linked and one may indeed signify the other. Consider, for example, the case of Princess Diana, perhaps the most famous woman to die in a traffic accident in our time. Diana was demonstrably not conventionally virtuous, but her youth and beauty led many people to assume that she was in one sense or another an “innocent” who did not deserve to die, and in the narrative of her death she was mourned as a quintessential victim. Still less would storytellers overtly claim that beautiful *dresses* signify beautiful minds. Nevertheless I would suggest that, on a subliminal level, the beautiful clothes also work to intensify the idea that this hitchhiker is something rather special. Like Diana, young, beautiful, and vulnerable, these hitchhiking girls “didn’t deserve to die”.

It is also significant that, though 24 of the female hitchhikers are said to be dressed for a dance and though a small number of them are picked up at a dance or are taken to a dance, only two of them are portrayed as wild or giddy (Hankey, 1942, 175; Botkin, 1954, pp. 524-527). The three little girls and the nine old women conform to a similar pattern. “Little girls” are by definition (if not in actuality) pretty and innocent, so need no further comment. Of the nine old women, most are called “little old ladies”, one is an “old soul”, another a “sweet old soul with snowy white hair” (Hankey, 1942, 74-75). All but two are explicitly on the way to visit sick, troubled or dying relatives. If we look at the four male hitchhikers, a similar pattern of innocence and vulnerability emerges. One is a “pale young man in white shirt and black trousers” who the traveller thinks may be a “deaf mute” (Goss, 1982, 1706); one is a tearful man with a “shadowy skinny frame” and “pitiful eyes” (Fonda, 1977, 56); one has been killed in a landslide and bravely seeks to prevent a similar accident happening to the traveller (Caskey, 1977, 8-9), and one is said to be a young man who may be one of “Judge Jeffries’ victims hanged along this road”, or maybe “the spirit of an American serviceman killed in a car crash”, or an “innocent man hanged for murder” (Goss, 1984, pp. 64-67).

I would suggest that there is a resemblance here, unlikely though it might seem, to the medieval concept of the “Mors Repentina” that Philippe Ariès discusses in the first chapter of his classic treatise, *The Hour of Our Death* (Ariès, 1981, pp. 10-13). “Mors Repentina” was untimely or unexpected death. Its unpredictability, Ariès says, “destroyed the order of the world” and led to death becoming “the absurd instrument of chance” rather than an ordered and expected occurrence. Ideally, good Christians could and should prepare for death by prayer and repentance and should depart this life with fitting (and public) ceremony. To die suddenly – alone or by violence or random accident, “without witness or ceremony” – was to die an ugly, and potentially shameful death (Ariès, 1981, pp. 10-11). Phantom hitchhiker

stories look to me like secularised versions of a similar set of attitudes, part of a medicalised worldview that sees death, not as an inevitable part of the trajectory of a life, but as something that wise actions and healthy life-choices can avoid or at least decently defer. To die young is therefore culpable – unless it can be proven that every precaution has been taken to avoid the disgrace. Hence the stress these stories lay on the “innocence” of these phantoms. So how did these paragons die?

In just over half the stories, this is not specified, but in the remaining 47 stories all the ghosts have met sudden, violent deaths: 36 have died in vehicle crashes, with a further five said to have been “killed” in an accident (presumably run over?) at that spot. Murders and suicides are less common and are represented by only one example each; the remaining four deaths are also decidedly unpleasant (two drownings, one freezing to death, and finally a sick girl dying after being evacuated from a burning house). “Mors Repentina” again. As Ariès says, it is “the death of the traveller on the road, or the man who drowns in a river, or the stranger whose body is found at the edge of the field, or even the neighbour who is struck down for no reasons [...] It makes no difference that he was innocent; his sudden death marks him with a malediction” (Ariès, 1981, p. 11).

But what are they doing at the dance or on the road – where are they going and where have they come from? Occasionally the ghosts give the traveller this information. An old lady says she is on her way to see her dying son (Hankey, 1942, 175), a man is missing his wife and baby (Fonda, 1977), a young woman is going to visit her sick mother (Workers, 1941), another says she has “spent the evening at a dance and is anxious to get home” (“Urban Legends and Beliefs – The Phantom Hitchhiker”, online), and others are hurrying home in case their parents are worrying about them (Musick, 1977, p. 139; Jones and Ramsey, 1994, p. 237). Elsewhere a hitchhiker says she is going to the church to get married (White, 1990, 45) and the narrator of another dead bride story says that “some say” that she is on the road looking for her husband (McNeil, 1995, p. 151). But this is by no means a universal pattern: hitchhiking ghosts seldom state their purpose in the forthright manner of the early eighteenth-century revenants Francis Grose told of. Usually, it is left to audiences to deduce the ghost’s purpose from their own cultural knowledge or their familiarity with similar stories. The girls who ask to be set down at a cemetery and/or leave a coat on their tombstone, for example, will generally be assumed to be going back to their graves; and the old ladies that have been prevented from accomplishing some mercy mission will be understood to be trying to complete their journey. These are traditional patterns in ghostlore – the return-to-the-grave-before-cock-crow motif especially so. I shall return to discuss these stories later, but meanwhile, in the next three paragraphs, I shall focus on the eighty stories where the ghost-behaviour is less “traditional” (in the sense of “old”).

### **Type A: The Home-Going Ghost**

Apparently, none of these ghosts is going back to its grave. Instead, they give the traveller an address, which in all but a very small minority (5 cases) is the family home. So these ghosts are going home. The person who answers the door to the traveller’s knock is a family-member, most often a loving mother, who will often explain that her “darling daughter [is]

still trying to come home” (“Urban Legends and Beliefs – The Phantom Hitchhiker”, online), or “it often happens on rainy nights; that’s when she seems to want to get home” (Jones, 1959, p. 164). In many cases this is not an isolated occurrence. In over 26% of these stories the hitchhiker tries again and again to get home. The traveller is told that he is the fifth, the seventh, the ninth, the thirteenth person to enquire for “Mary”, or “Laura”, or “Rose”. In the Type C(b) story recorded from 1940s New York mentioned earlier, for example, “a man and his wife ... driving home from a party late in the evening” give a lift to a girl carrying a coat and suitcase, which are left in the car when the hitchhiker vanishes. On the suitcase there is an address, and when the couple call at the house and explain what has happened, an old lady tells them they are the tenth persons who have brought her a suitcase and a coat and shows them “nine other suitcases and coats of the same design in a closet” (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942, 318-319). Elsewhere, the relatives may tell the traveller that the girl tries to get home on the anniversary of her death or burial, or on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas, or “each year on that particular night” (Baughman, 1947).

Thus the most typical plot of a Type A phantom hitchhiker story tells how a young, vulnerable and “innocent” young person (most usually a beautiful young girl) who has died a violent death alone on the highway in a random accident, makes regular attempts to reunite herself with her grieving family. There are exceptions, of course, for as American folklorist Keith Cunningham once wisely remarked, narrators will tell their stories “any way they damn well please” (Cunningham, 1979, 48), but this outline applies in a general way to 80% of the sample I have been discussing. It is probably an exaggeration to say that the motif of the ghost who attempts to reunite itself with its family is unique to phantom hitchhiker stories, but I cannot think of more than handful of other stories that make this so obviously a central motif. True, there are older stories, such as the legend of the wraith of John Donne’s wife who, whilst he was abroad, appeared in his room carrying a still-born child (Beaumont, 1705, pp. 171-172) and the story of Mary Goffe, much discussed in the 1690s, whose wraith visited her children at a distant location whilst she was on her deathbed (Baxter, 1691, pp. 49-52; this story is quoted and discussed in Bennett, 1987, pp. 171-173). However, these legends concern wraiths (phantasms of the living) not ghosts (appearance of the dead).

If post-mortem behaviour reliably indicates what sorts of death are to be avoided – and I think it does – then the ghost which is restless because it died away from home, and which perpetually attempts to re-enter the family circle, indicates the importance attached today of not dying a “secret death”, alone and separated from those we love. Of course, none of the address-giving ghosts ever does get home; every journey is futile, they disappear from the car every time before they get to their destination. Nevertheless, they never give up trying.

### **Type C: The Party-Going Ghost**

Let us turn now to the thirteen Type C and Type C(b) stories. As I said earlier, eight of these ghosts are encountered at a bar or dance – boy meets girl and offers to take her home at the end of the evening – a further four are picked up on the road by boys on the way to a bar or

party and invited to join the fun, and finally there is the story recounted in Louis C. Jones's *Things That Go Bump in the Night*.

In these stories a sexual element, suppressed for the most part in stories of home-going ghosts which usually stress the maidenliness of the hitchhiker, comes to the fore. As the earliest students of the Vanishing Hitchhiker complex disapprovingly observed, "The situation is not that of a hitchhiker" but of a " 'pick up' " (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942, 311). The character of these stories shows most clearly in Louis Jones's story. Though it seems almost perversely divergent, this narrative can actually be used as an exemplar of Type C and Type C(b) because it makes explicit the theme that underlies the others. In this version, a "young chap" picks up a hitchhiker on the road one evening and offers her a ride. He likes her so much that he suggests a date for the following evening and they agree to meet "right where they had that night, at the same hour". For nearly two weeks, each night "they met and played and partied at her door". Then one night she is not at the meeting place. The young chap knocks on the door and asks if Mary is at home, only to find, of course, that she has been dead ten years (Jones, 1959, p. 173).

There are two other stories in which the man and the ghost meet at least once after the original pick-up. Beardsley and Hankey suggest these ghosts, and the other party-going revenants, are "evil female spirit[s]" and they link them to vampire literature (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942, 324-325). One can see the reasons for this opinion – Type C phantom hitchhiker stories are probably distantly related to the "Devil at the Dance" legend complex, and one can also see how easy it would be for a narrator to treat them as encounters with succubi – but I do not think this is what is happening here. With only one exception, the ghosts are not intentionally malign.

If they were malign, one would expect that the stories would customarily end in some macabre or unpleasant occurrence. In my sample "macabre or unpleasant occurrences" are represented by "going mad", or the death of the traveller, or the exhumation of the girl's grave, or an assault by the ghost, or fear of going to dances (or by some combination of these motifs). But in Beardsley and Hankey's corpus only two out of their ten Type C stories end in any of these ways, nor are these endings confined to Type C legends. Similarly, in my own sample, of the nine stories which conclude with one or more of these motifs, four are stories of innocent home-going ghosts. Also, if the story does end with a tragic or macabre interlude, the narrator tends to say that these disasters happen because the travellers have "bad nerves" or are unduly sensitive. A Type C(b) recorded in New York in 1940, for example, ends: "The man's wife, being a nervous sort of person, took sick immediately afterward and was committed to an insane asylum. He nearly went wacky himself" (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942, 319). In my opinion, it is much more likely that these motifs merely represent narrators' attempts to underline the seriousness of the encounter (and its seriously supernatural nature).

It should also be noted that though, as I said earlier, the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend type probably evolved from an earlier tradition of roadside ghosts, modern phantom hitchhikers bear no resemblance to nineteenth-century roadside revenants. These earlier spectres were usually malevolent apparitions such as Charlotte Burne's Madame Piggot who

haunted a road at Chetwynd, Shropshire, and jumped on the backs of horses ridden by passing travellers (Burne, 1883-86, pp. 124-26) or the “man monkey” who accosted passers-by on a bridge over the Birmingham to Liverpool canal (Burne, 1883-86, pp. 106-107). Not one among the 87 ghosts in the Type A stories in my sample has any evil intent nor is the traveller in any danger from the encounter. Whilst they are together, he is not even alarmed by his passenger. The thrill of horror only comes when the journey is over and the supernatural nature of the hitchhiker is revealed. Some phantom hitchhikers are even benign and attempt to prevent an accident similar to the one which killed them (see, for example, Beardsley and Hankey, 1942, 320; Caskey, 1977), but the overwhelming majority are not active for either good or ill. This is as true for Type C stories as for Type A. In only one story does the ghost appear to attack the traveller or willingly bring him to a bad end. This is another story from Louis C. Jones’s *Things that Go Bump in the Night* (Jones, 1959). Jones says he was told the story by a (named) officer of New York City Police Department who was told it by a colleague (also named) as his own personal experience. In Jones’s story, the body of the girl is exhumed, one of the men who try to take her home is institutionalised (the narrator), the other is drowned when crossing a plank to a barge moored on the river:

“He got in the middle of the thing and he began to choke; he put his hands up to his throat as though someone was strangling him, and when he did he lost his balance and fell into the water, between the barge and the dock. So far as we could tell, he never came up. Not even once.” (Jones, 1959, p. 182)

Overall, though, with very few exceptions, these ghosts are not threatening. Instead of seeing these partying ghosts as “evil spirits”, it makes better sense to see them as “blithe spirits” – ghosts who still want to have a good time, and who do not want death to spoil their fun.

I would suggest that Type C narratives and their narrators, like Type A narratives and narrators, are concerned with what it means to die before one’s time, but they are approaching it from a different angle. Instead of focusing on the implications of a lonely “secret death”, they circle round a concept of death as deprivation. I think that the party motif indicates a cultural consensus that it is bad to die before having tasted life’s joys – the courtship, the wedding, the graduation, the dance.

This courtship-and-party theme is, of course, not confined to Type C narratives, though it is more evident there. It also has echoes in a substantial number of Type A stories which feature young females. It is implicit, for example, in the large number of stories that feature a young man meeting a beautiful girl (77% of the travellers are lone young men). It is also implicit in the “dressed for a dance” detail, which does double duty – not only suggesting beauty of soul, as I discussed earlier, but indicating that the dead girl was on her way to or from some special occasion when she was killed. In addition, the theme may be more obliquely suggested by the narrator’s saying that the travellers are themselves on the way to a dance or party even if the motif is not followed through by having the travellers invite the hitchhiker to attend the dance with them (there are 8 stories of this type). Adding all these together produces a total of 46 stories in which the courtship-and-party motif

features more or less directly, so I think one can say that the “death as deprivation” theme plays a part in a substantial number of phantom hitchhiker stories.

## Conclusions

Phantom hitchhiker stories rely on only a limited number of ghostly motifs: it might even be said that they are most remarkable for what they miss out. They are totally secular; they cannot be fitted into a religious scheme; there is no lesson to be learnt by their lives, no moral to be pointed by their deaths. Nor are these ghosts the murderers, brutes and sinners of nineteenth-century legend-collections who have to be exorcised with bell, book and candle or conjured into a bottle and cast into the Red Sea. However, there are perhaps still things we can learn from them.

I would conclude that modern phantom hitchhikers tell us that it is bad to die unfulfilled, peremptorily denied life’s joys. They also tell us that it is bad to die a “secret” death – alone, unwitnessed and uncomforted – away from family and without leave-taking. I think we can also conclude that, even though a large percentage of people in the Western world have openly or tacitly stopped believing in an afterlife – and despite what many of us profess – we do not want to die unprepared.

These are the “bad ways to go”.

## Appendix : Sources of Sample 100 Phantom Hitchhikers Narratives

“Urban Legends and Beliefs – The Phantom Hitchhiker”

<http://www.unexplainedstuff.com/Superstitions-Strange-Customs-Taboos-and-Urban-Legends/Urban-Legends-and-Beliefs-The-phantom-hitchhiker.html>. Accessed 21 July 2010.

Anon, “The Lady of White Rock Lake”, *Texas Monthly* (October, 1978), 136.

Baughman, Ernest W., “The Hitchhiking Ghost”, *Hoosier Folklore*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (1947), 77-78.

Baylor, Dorothy J., ‘Folklore from Socorro, New Mexico’, *Hoosier Folklore*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (1947), 91-100 and 138-50. See 94-95.

Beardsley, Richard K., and Rosalie Hankey, “The Vanishing Hitchhiker”, *California Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. I (1942), 303-335. See 303-304, 306-307, 318-320.

Bennett, Gillian, and Paul Smith, *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors*, Westport, Connecticut and London, Greenwood Press, 2007, p. 290.

Botkin, B.A., ed., *Sidewalks of America*, Indianapolis and New York, Bobbs Merrill, 1954, pp. 524-527.

Brunvand, Jan Harold, *The Mexican Pet: More “New” Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites*, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1986, pp. 52-53.

Brunvand, Jan Harold, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings*, New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1981, pp. 24-26.

Burrison, John A, ed., *Storytellers: Folktales and Legends from the South*, Athens and London, University Press of Georgia, 1989, pp. 216-220.

Carmer, Carl, “The Lavender Evening Dress”, in John T. Flanagan and Arthur Palmer Hudson, eds, *Folklore in American Literature*, Evanston, Illinois and White Plains, New York, Row, Peterson, 1958, pp. 99-101.

- Caskey, Tessilyn, "Twelve Ghost Stories from Vernon Parish, Louisiana", *Louisiana Folklore*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1977), 4-23. See 6-7 and 8-9.
- Cerf, Bennett, *Try and Stop Me*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1945, pp. 281-282.
- Colby, C. B., *Strangely Enough!*, New York, Popular Library, 1959, pp 11-12.
- Cox, Janson L., *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. Unpublished MA thesis submitted to State University College, Oneonta, New York, 1966, pp. 33, 42-43, 69-70, 76, 81-82 and 136-139.
- Cunningham, Keith, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Arizona – Almost", *Southwest Folklore*, Vol. 3 (1979), 46-50.
- Eds (contrib). "Vanishing Hitchhiker", "Folklore in the News" column, *Western Folklore*, Vol. 13 (1954), 54. Extract from Matt Weinstock's column in *Los Angeles Daily News*, 12 June, 1953.
- Emrich, Duncan, *Folklore on the American Land*, Boston and Toronto, Little, Brown, 1972, pp. 336-337.
- Fish, Lydia M., "Jesus on the Thruway: The Vanishing Hitchhiker Strikes Again", *Indiana Folklore*, Vol. 9 (1976), 5-13.
- Fonda, Jesse, "I Met the Real Phantom Hitchhiker", *Fate*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January, 1977), 55-57.
- Fowke, Edith, *Tales Told in Canada*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 1986, pp. 121-124.
- Furnier, William, "The Coat on the Grave", *The New Mexico Folklore Record*, Vol. V (1950-51), 33-34.
- Goss, Michael, *The Evidence for Phantom Hitchhikers*, Wellingborough, Aquarius Press in Association with the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena, 1984, pp. 64-67.
- Goss, Michael, "Taken for a Ride", *The Unexplained*, Vol. 8 (1982), 1706-1709.
- Hankey, Rosalie, "California Ghosts", *California Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April, 1942), 155-177. See 173-77.
- Harrison, Peter, and Mary Harrison, "Ghost Stories". Letter to *The Glasgow Guardian* (23 June, 1989), 6. Contributed by Sandy Hobbs to *Dear Mr Thoms*, Vol. 14 (January, 1990), p. 15.
- Healey, Austin, extract from "Austin Healey's Diary", *The Scotsman* (29 November, 1997). Contributed by Bill Nicolaisen to *Letters to Ambrose Merton*, Vol. 13 (March, 1998), 25.
- Healey, Phil, and Rick Glanvill, *Urban Myths*, London, Virgin Books, 1992, p. 5.
- Hind, Cynthia, "Girl-Ghost Hitches Ride", *Fate*, Vol. 32, No. 7 (July, 1979), 54-59.
- Hurley, Gerard T., "The Vanishing Hitchhiker Again", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 11 (1952), 46.
- Inglis, Beth, ed., "Current Ohio Folklore", *Journal of the Ohio Folklore Society*, Vol. I, No. 3 (December, 1972), 46-52. See 48-49.
- Jansen, William Hugh, "Folklore Items from a Teacher's Notebook", *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, Vol. II, No. 1 (June, 1943), 1-8. See 2-4.
- Jones, Louis C., *Things that Go Bump in the Night*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1959, pp. 162-164, 170-171, 171-172, 173-174 and 178-183.
- Jones, Suzi, and Jarold Ramsey, eds, *The Stories We Tell: An Anthology of Oregon Folk Literature*, Corvallis, Oregon, Oregon State University Press, 1994, pp. 237-239.
- Larson, Mildred, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker Again", *New York Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 9 (1953), 51-52.
- McMillan, Douglas J., "The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Eastern North Carolina", *North Carolina Folklore*, Vol. 20 (August, 1972), 124-126.
- McNeil, W. K., *Ozark Country*, Jackson, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 151.
- Miller, Wm Marion, "Another Vanishing Hitchhiker Story", *Hoosier Folklore*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (1947), 76.

- Moravec, Mark (contrib.), "Haunted by a Song", *Dear Mr Thoms*, Vol. 30 (April, 1993), 35-36.
- Mosher, Edith, "Haunting Hitchhikers", in *Haunted: Tales of the Unexplained*, Hantsport, Nova Scotia, Lancelot Press, 1982, p. 121.
- Musick, Ruth Ann, *Coffin Hollow and Other Ghost Tales*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1977, pp. 137-139, 140-141, 143-145 and 153-154.
- Randolph, Vance, "Folktales from Arkansas", *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, Vol. 65 (1952), 159-166. See 163-164.
- Smith, Paul (contrib.), "A Haunting We Will Go", extract from readers' letters to *Pittsburg Post Gazette* (31 October, 1995), in *Letters to Ambrose Merton*, Vol. 5 (March, 1996), 29-30.
- Taylor, Troy, "Ghosts of the Prairie: American History and Hauntings: Haunted North Carolina. The Greensboro Hitchhiker, Greensboro, North Carolina".  
<http://paranormal.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/xj&zTi=1&sdn=paranorm...2&bt=O&bts=O7zu=http%3A//www.prairieghosts.com/greensboro.html>. Posted 2002. Accessed 21 July, 2010.
- Taylor, Troy, "Vanishing Hitchhikers: Real or Legend?"  
<http://www.prairieghosts.com/vanishing.html>. Posted 2002.
- West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore*, Little Rock, Arkansas, August House, 1988, pp. 80-81.
- White, Theron S., " 'It's Hard to Believe, But ...': Teenage Folklore from Northeast Baton Rouge", *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (1990), 37-48. See 45-46.
- Workers of the Writers' Program of the WPA, *South Carolina Folktales: Animals and Supernatural Beings*, Columbia, University of South Carolina, 1941, pp. 72-74.

### Other References Cited

- Ariès, Philippe, *The Hour of our Death*, translated from the French by Helen Weaver, London, Allen Lane, 1981.
- Baxter, Richard, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits Fully Evinced*, London, H. Howell, 1691.
- Beaumont, John, *An Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcrafts and Other Magical Practices*, London, D. Browne, 1705.
- Bennett, Gillian, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker at Fifty-Five", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 57 (1998), 1-19.
- Bennett, Gillian, *Traditions of Belief*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987.
- Bennett, Gillian, "Alas, Poor Ghost!": *Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse*, Logan, Utah, Utah University Press, 1999.
- Burne, Charlotte Sophia, *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings from the Notebooks of Georgina F. Jackson*, Shrewsbury/Chester/London, Adnitt and Naunton/Minshull and Hughes/Trübner, 1883-1886.
- Grose, Francis, *A Provincial Glossary*, London, S. Hooper, 1787.
- Jones, Louis C., "Hitchhiking Ghosts in New York", *California Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (1944), 284-291.
- Luomala, Katharine, "Disintegration and Regeneration, the Hawaiian Phantom Hitchhiker Legend", *Fabula*, Vol. 13 (1972), 20-59.
- Mitchell, Roger, "Ancestral Spirits and Hitchhiking Ghosts: Syncretism on Guam", *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1976), 45-55.
- Montell, William Lynwood, *Ghosts Along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1978.
- Roberts, Andy, "'Ere, Mate, You Goin' to Venus?" *Folklore Frontiers*, Vol. 3 (1986), 11-12.

Thomas, Keith, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Letchworth, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1971.

Wilson, William A., "The Vanishing Hitchhiker Among the Mormons", *Indiana Folklore*, Vol. 8 (1975), 79-97.