The Phantom Hitchhiker: An alternative perspective

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In her paper on the Phantom Hitchhiker (Bennett, 2011), Gillian Bennett's main proposal is that this legend typically deals with an unfulfilled life, as exemplified by the innocent young woman who is so frequently the phantom. We find this argument persuasively presented, based as it is on a careful quantitative analysis of a hundred texts. However, it is doubtful whether any legend, particularly one as widespread as this one, is likely to have only one function for those who hear or retell such stories. Accordingly we offer the following suggestion for a broader interpretation of the texts.

Our approach is based on our proposal that many urban legends owe their persistence in part at least to being told in the form of a *Substitute Personal Experience Narrative* (SPEN) (Main and Hobbs, 2007). This is characterised by (a) providing information in the same order as it was available to a protagonist (or protagonists) and (b) the protagonists and audience go through a similar cognitive shift in their understanding on the basis of new information becoming available, usually towards the end of the story. The latter is a feature described by Bennett and Smith (2007, xvii) as similar to the denouement of a detective story or the punchline of a joke. In setting out to analyse the Vanishing Hitchhiker (VH), as it is more commonly called, it appeared to us that this legend is likely to fit the SPEN pattern in that, typically, new information indicates that the apparently living person is actually dead.

We had to ask a preliminary question: which texts should be regarded as examples of The Vanishing Hitchhiker? That name became established after the early scholarly discussion by Beardsley and Hankey (1941). They presented 41 texts, which they divided into four subtypes, labelled A, B, C and D. However, there are other texts which might also be included, namely those termed The Corpse in the Car. Jones (1944) labels them BX, suggesting a link with Beardsley and Hankey's type B, but he nevertheless calls it a separate legend. Baughman (1966, 148-149) treats the prediction of a corpse in the car as an example of "the other evidence of ghostly nature which sometimes replaces the disappearance" of the hitchhiker. Is Jones correct to call it a separate legend? There is a problem here, in that none of the scholarly writers offer a formal definition. Taking as a starting point Beardsley and Hankey's 41 texts, we sought to infer a definition which would include all of the texts they report.

1. The definition we propose is that this legend contains the following elements:
2. A Protagonist (P) who travels in a vehicle on a road.
3. The P encounters an Other (O), who they regard as a normal human being.
4. Later, typically near the end of the story, P gains evidence that causes them to undergo a cognitive shift in their understanding of O. This reappraisal results in reinterpreting the O as a character who is not a normal human being.

The explicit or implicit conclusion is that the P has had a Supernatural encounter.

In VH texts, the O is typically a supernatural being who is a revenant ghost, as emphasised by Bennett (2011), but alternatively some variants of the legend make the supernatural figure a member of the pantheon of a particular religious belief system. For example Christian O figures include angels, Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary, while traditional Hawaiian stories can feature O in the form of Pele – the volcano goddess, and Mormon VH texts identify the O as a Nephite.

In the Corpse in the Car legends, a person met by P correctly predicts that in the near future there will be a dead person discovered within the P's vehicle. Thus our suggested VH definition may be broad enough to apply to many of the Corpse in the Car texts (CC), if one regards having an encounter with a person who demonstrates visionary prophetic powers as a facet of the Supernatural. Accordingly we decided to explore the 27 CC texts collected by Bonaparte (1946) which match the definition we propose (N = 20) alongside those which have been labelled VH. Since the VH legend is still in circulation we added a further sample of 41 texts which had been collected subsequent to Beardsley and Hankey's (1941) paper. (A full list is available from the authors on request). This was intended to give us information on changes which may be taking place in the legend over time. An examination of these texts also allows us to check how representative Bennett's (2011) sample is of the Phantom Hitchhiker story generally. As will be seen, in some respects we found confirmation of her interpretation but we also found some grounds for adding to, and modifying, her arguments.

The first finding to report is that, of the 102 (82 VH and 20 CC) texts examined, only 14 did not conform to the SPEN format. This we regard as evidence that this legend does indeed fall into the class of story whose survival is partly dependent on this form of narrative construction. It also indicates that reference to the SPEN format may be a helpful way of interpreting what an analysis of VH texts shows. Of particular relevance to consideration of these texts is the stress the SPEN analysis places on the cognitive shift at or near the end of the narrative. In VH stories the cognitive shift involves a tacit acceptance of the supernatural in order to explain the information from the earlier part of the story. The CC texts are fairly straightforward in this respect. A prediction has been made that there will be a corpse in the car, and in the text this subsequently happens, implying that the person making the prediction has a supernatural gift of prophetic powers. Generally this predictive power has a special significance in these texts because the O has also made a prediction of the imminent end of the war (the Bonaparte, 1946, Corpse in the Car texts being collected around the beginning of the Second World War). The Vanishing Hitchhiker texts are in some cases clearly more complex, as will be discussed below.

The second general point to make is that, where comparisons are possible, our sample of texts show a greater variability in the characters and the settings than those employed by Bennett's (2011) sample. Systematic tabulation of the features considered allowed us to employ statistical analysis to assess the extent of differences between the samples. Restricting the comparison of features to the VH texts only (see Table 1 below), we can note that Bennett found that, overwhelmingly, there were sole Protagonists 87 out of 100 (87%), whereas there was a more even balance between a solitary P and multiple Ps in both our VH samples with 19 out of 41 (46.3%) for the Early sample ($p < .001$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test) and 23 out

of 41 (56.1%) for the Late sample featuring a solitary protagonist ($p < .001$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test). See Siegel (p. 195) for an explanation of the Fisher test. The Fisher tests indicating there is a significant difference in the proportions of lone and multiple protagonists between Bennett's sample and both our Early and Late VH samples, we cannot consider VH stories to be predominantly told featuring a solitary protagonist.

With respect to the O, Bennett found 96 out of 100 "hitchhikers" were female, a tendency reflected in our Early VH sample where all 41 texts had a female O. There is no significant difference in the proportions of these two samples ($p = .249$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test). However, the gender balance in our Later sample was essentially even, with only 20 of the 41 (48.8%) texts featuring a female O. Analysis of these frequencies indicate there is a significant difference in the proportions of the gender of the O between Bennett's predominantly female O and our Late sample's equal gender numbers. ($p < .001$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test). Thus, whilst on the basis of Bennett's sample it would be reasonable to treat a VH story as being an encounter by a lone traveller with a female O, this does not adequately describe our samples. This casts doubt on Bennett's sample as typical of the legend, and encourages us in seeking broader alternative interpretations.

Table 1: A comparison of Bennett's sample with our Early and Late samples on the frequency of story elements within 182 VH texts.

	Bennett (N =100)	VH Early (N = 41)	VH Late (N = 41)
P is solitary	87 (87%)	19 (46.3%)	23 (56.1%)
O is female	96 (96%)	41 (100%)	20 (48.8%)
Night setting	100 (100%)	14 (34.1%)	13 (31.7%)
Bad weather	33 (33%)	9 (22.0%)	6 (14.6%)

In following this line of thought, we noted another distinction between our samples and Bennett's. Although we found in most cases the O was a revenant ghost, as stressed by Bennett, there were also cases where the O was a religious figure. In Table 2, we present frequency information based on a separation out of cases where the O is clearly indicated to be a revenant ghost and those where the O is a supernatural religious figure. These are then further differentiated by considering the data separately for our Early and Late VH samples.

If one distinguishes between the texts on the basis of the character of the O, we can examine any potential differences in the storyteller's usage of textual devices that act as "evidence" or "convincers" that act to substantiate the premise that the P has had a supernatural experience. The most obvious supernatural aspect of these legends is that the O mysteriously vanishes. Indeed, we might consider the vanishing aspect of a VH story is essentially ubiquitous in such legends. Although there is a noticeable increase in the proportion of religious Os who disappear in comparison to texts featuring a revenant ghost, with 35 out of 56 (62.5%) revenant ghosts vanishing and 12 out of 14 (85.7%) religious

figures vanishing, statistically there is no significant difference between these two variations of VH texts ($p = .087$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test).

Another sort of narrative device that suggests that P has had a genuine supernatural encounter is that there is explicit reference made in a text to indicate that the P encounter with the O is far from unique, as there have been similar occurrences in the past. The frequency for this device is reasonably high for both types of O with 19 out of 56 (33.9%) revenant ghosts texts using this device compared to 6 out of 14 (42.9%), where the O is a religious figure. The usage of this device is greater in texts with a Religious O but the proportions across the samples are not significantly different ($p = .372$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test).

A further potential narrative device which may act as a convincer of the supernatural aspect of a text is the discovery by the P of some sort of physical evidence left or moved by the O. This evidence might be an object left in the vehicle or an object lent to the O by the P turning up on the gravestone of the O. The need to supply such a convincer does seem to differ between VH texts featuring revenant ghosts and those using religious O. When the O is a revenant ghost rather than a religious character, there appears to be a greater emphasis on making reference to the presence of physical evidence left by the O. This type of convincer occurs in 18 out of 56 cases (32.1%), where the O is a revenant ghost, whereas this applied in only 1 case out of the 14 examples (7.1%) of stories with a religious O. The difference in the proportion of this narrative device in the two samples is on the borderline of significance ($p = .054$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test) indicating there is some evidence to suggest that usage of this narrative device is noticeably different depending upon the type of O featured in a VH story.

We also examined potential differences between our Early and Later VH samples, and found proportionally more cases in our later sample where the O was a supernatural religious figure such as an angel. With only 3 out of 37 (8.1%) Early texts featuring a Religious O, compared to 11 out of 33 (33.3%) of the Later texts. The increased prevalence of Religious Os in our Later sample is a significantly different proportion to that of the Early sample. ($p = .009$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test). The gender proportion of the O is also significantly different over the two samples with the Early sample of 37 texts consisting of entirely female Os compared to the Later sample where only 18 of the 33 (54.5%) Os were female ($p < .001$, one-tailed Fisher's exact test).

While it is common for all Os to disappear from the vehicle, if the O is a revenant ghost rather than a religious figure, then there is a greater likelihood that the story will make reference to physical evidence of the encounter being found by the P. Within the story, this evidence is useful in providing support for a supernatural encounter explanation rather than a hallucinatory experience for the P which would have left no physical evidence for P to find. We could further speculate that texts that feature a religious O do not seem to require the leaving of any physical evidence in the story as it might be presumed that the target audience for such stories are at least knowledgeable or more likely to be fellow believers of the faith of the particular religious figure who is cited as being the O. That is, believers of a particular faith, be it Christian, Mormon or traditional Hawaiian, use the perceived common shared

knowledge (faith) as being strong enough to make the events of the story "believable" without the need to add further explanatory convincers such as physical evidence.

Table 2: An examination of 41 Early and 41 Later gathered VH texts [a], broken down by type of "Other" and aspects of story content.

	Early Sample		Later Sample	
Type of Other	**Revenant Ghost**	**Religious**	**Revenant Ghost**	**Religious**
	(N = 34)	(N = 3)	(N = 22)	(N = 11)
O vanishes from the vehicle	22 *(64.7%)*	1 *(33.3%)*	13 *(59.1%)*	11 *(100%)*
Repetition: Happened before	9 *(26.5%)*	0 *(0%)*	10 *(45.5%)*	6 *(54.5%)*
Physical evidence is left	8 *(23.5%)*	0 *(0%)*	10 *(45.5%)*	1 *(9.1%)*
O is a Female	34 *(100%)*	3 *(100%)*	18 *(81.8%)*	0 *(0%)*

[a] In 4 of the Early and 8 of the Later texts it is unclear what the type of O is and hence these texts have been excluded from the data in Table 2.

A further evidence type that might be being exploited by the storyteller is the emphasis on frequency of occurrence. Many VH texts make quite explicit that the experience that P has had is not uncommon and that many other individuals have e.g. visited the parents of the O after a roadside encounter, or that some Ps report their VH encounter to an authority figure such as a policeman, only to be told they are the "nth" person that day to have reported this. By emphasising the high frequency of supernatural encounters in a VH story, the storyteller attempts to make the story more convincing by demonstrating that far from being a unique experience for the P (and via a SPEN story structure, the audience), that in reality such happenings are not isolated but are actually fairly widespread. An examination of Table 2 demonstrates that the usage of frequency convincers is reasonably common in our later VH texts regardless of whether the O is a ghost or a religious figure. However, in the older sample usage of frequency of occurrence as a potential convincer is much more limited and is not a typical aspect of these early VH stories. We might therefore note that, over time, storytellers of VH stories have evolved a story style that makes more use of a revelation of non-uniqueness of the experience of the P which reinforces the message of supernatural events being commonplace.

"It was a dark and stormy night" has become almost proverbial as setting the scene for a mysterious adventure. (The website www.Wikipedia.org has an entry devoted to this phrase.) As noted earlier in the article, Bennett found night characteristic of all her texts and bad weather in 33 of them. Of our 82 VH sample texts only 15 (18.3%) refer to inclement weather. This difference in scene setting compared to Bennett's sample is even more pronounced in the CC texts, where we found only two texts which took place at night and none where there was any mention of adverse weather.

How important are the differences and similarities emerging between the samples? We have praised Bennett for the systematic analysis of her sample, but a sample is just that, a

sample. If another sample turns out to have different characteristics it calls into question how representative that first sample was of the whole "population" of texts. In folkloristics we are bound to rely on sampling, since it is impossible to envisage having evidence about every occasion on which a particular legend, for example, was told. However, we can hope to strengthen the quality of the evidence we have to justify any particular interpretation.

Bennett's (2011) main argument is that the Phantom Hitchhiker story typically deals with an unfulfilled life, as exemplified by the innocent young woman who is so frequently the phantom. Our data does not conflict with Bennett's argument that these legends are potentially about an unfulfilled life, although we would suggest that the case she makes is not quite as strong when our evidence is taken into account. For instance, male Os of no particular age are equally as common as female Os in our Later sample, which perhaps indicates another possible way that the legend function changes over time.

If this legend is not simply about the poignancy of early death, what else may be said about it? We suggest that it may be helpful in understanding it to focus on the cognitive change that the protagonists and the audience are invited to accept. Unlike the shift found in other legends such as The Boyfriend's Death and The Surpriser Surprised (discussed by Main and Hobbs, 2007), the shift here involves acceptance of the supernatural as the only "logical" explanation of the events in the story. Some audiences may be resistant to such a shift and be sceptical towards such an explanation. A number of features in the texts may be regarded as the storyteller's attempt to inject "evidence" to bolster the supernatural explanation and counteract potential scepticism. Thus the "unfulfilled life" function of the legend proposed by Bennett seems to be less important to more recent tellers of VH stories, who appear to be more interested in making a case for belief in the existence of the supernatural.

The evidence inserted in the stories can take a number of forms; for instance, we have noted that, particularly in our samples as compared to Bennett's (2011) sample, frequently the protagonist is not alone (see Table 1). Why should this be? When there is more than one P in a text, there is seldom any significant action differentiating the travellers in the vehicle. The explanation of the phenomenon of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker", i.e. the disappearance of a passenger from a vehicle, has been suggested as due to sensory deprivation (Reed, 1972). A driver in the dark may hallucinate the presence of a passenger, and then be surprised by the subsequent absence of that passenger. This psychological explanation is a "rational" alternative to a "supernatural" explanation. If there are two or more people in the vehicle to witness the disappearance, the "psychological" explanation becomes less plausible, as it would assume that more than two or more persons simultaneously had the same hallucination.

The fact that a family member provides the significant information that the person seen by the P is dead not only supports Bennett's (2011) stress on the poignancy of early death, it also undermines potential audience scepticism about the supernatural nature of the P's encounter with O; this is achieved by stressing the closeness of the informant to the person who died. Could a mother get such an identification wrong? The need for this "irrefutable" identification would appear to be an important facet of VH texts with 75% of Bennett's sample of a hundred VH texts including this identification aspect within them. Our two

samples of forty one VH texts appeared to show markedly less reliance on this narrative device to identify the O. However, the lower frequencies in our samples and in particular the Later sample are deceptive. The family identification is rarer because the samples contain texts in which the O is a religious figure rather than a revenant ghost. Given this, it would be an impossibility to introduce a close family member into the text to provide a positive identification of the O. Hence samples of VH texts that contain religious O will, overall, have fewer instances of family identifications due to the nature of the O. Thus, if we only examined texts in our samples which featured revenant ghosts as the O then we can note that the usage of the identification of the O rises in the Early sample (50%, n = 34) and in the Later sample this rise is very pronounced (85.82%, N = 22).

The increase in the frequencies of the identification aspect of the story as a result of only using revenant ghost versions of VH texts illustrates the issue of adequately sampling Contemporary Legends. Bennett's texts would appear to have a large majority of revenant ghost versions compared to religious versions of the VH in her sample. Both of our own VH samples showed a much lower frequency of using the identification of the O by someone close to them. Partly this is caused by our samples having a number of religious versions of the VH legend. By definition these texts that feature a religious O will not include a family identification of the O. Rather, the O is recognised as an angel, or a prophet etc, by members of the same faith as the religious pantheon the O belongs to. The removal from our sample of the religious versions of the O does result in a closer similarity of identification frequency for our Later sample, but even removing the religious O texts from our Early sample results in an even split in the usage or non-usage of this identification device in VH stories. This difference between Early and Later gathered texts again raises the issue of the changing of VH plot devices over time. Although religious VH texts will not incorporate an identifying by someone close to the O in their texts regardless of when the stories were collected, for revenant ghost versions of the VH we can see a change from the Earlier texts which seem not to be so reliant on having a positive identification of the O by someone close to them, to a much heavier reliance on this plot device in our Later sample. The more modern versions we believe make a more deliberate attempt to broker the cognitive shift in considering O as a normal human to a supernatural being by providing P and hence the audience with "evidence" that the O is a ghost.

A variety of other story elements found in VH texts might also be considered as information that on reflection supports, or is "evidence" for the post cognitive shift by both the P and the reader/listener to a premise that O is a supernatural character. These narrative elements include:

a. O disappearing from a vehicle moving at speed.
b. O leaving physical evidence of an encounter behind. For instance, the O borrows a coat from the P. O then later disappears and at the end of the story the P finds the coat they lent left hanging on the O's gravestone.
c. O's various "odd" behaviours such as a continued silence when P attempts to converse with them, or the O wearing clothing that seems "dated" or inappropriate for the time of day/ weather etc.

Considered individually these aspects of a text may not appear particularly significant but taken together they may be regarded as contributing to the broad picture intended by the tellers, which we believe to be to attempt to convince sceptics of a supernatural occurrence.

Conclusions

We suggest that the following conclusions emerge from the evidence we have presented. First, we suggest that our evidence is relevant to the issue of whether VH and CC are "the same" legend. The great majority of CC texts discussed were collected just before or just after the outbreak of the Second World War. They were thus being told in an environment where the War, or the death of Hitler, was of great significance to the audience. If the O figure does indeed have prophetic powers, the implications are that the story contains good news. Thus there is no need for it to take place on a "dark and stormy night". Most of the VH texts considered do not have a "happy ending", which may be considered the main reason for the differences between VH and CC texts. If it is accepted that a legend may have varying and changing functions, then CC texts may be a version of a supernatural encounter which took on a specific form when communities shared a particular common concern, such as war.

Secondly, we would argue that we have provided additional evidence for the value of the concept of a Substitute Personal Experience Narrative. In VH texts, the SPEN concept with its emphasis on a crucial cognitive shift taking place in the protagonist of the legend puts an emphasis on the question of belief. We argued before that an audience will not necessarily accept an event as being supernatural. This allows us to account for some of the changes that take place in the story as "convincers" which act to increase the possibility of the crucial proposition for belief. The significance of this for a story dealing with the supernatural is clear. However, we suggest that it has a wider significance for the interpretation of many other urban legends.

Finally, we consider the implications of our evidence for Bennett's (2011) proposal. Bennett's thesis is an adequate description of her data set but we consider that a larger and (importantly) chronologically later gathered sample is not as well served by the "unfulfilled life" interpretation of the VH. Our argument is that with a different sample we can see major deviations in the VH stories that would seem to if not to contradict, at least weaken the "unfulfilled life" explanation. For instance, our later sample of texts includes many male hitchhikers or hitchhikers with unspecified ages. We consider that urban legends in general have many functions. These include providing "evidence" to support a particular belief. The telling of a VH or CC story can thus be seen as an attempt to provide a story that "confirms" that there is more to the world than science can explain. These stories are in our opinion primarily concerned with convincing people that supernatural or paranormal incidents really do occur. As such the "motif" of the revenant ghost can be thought of as a subset of a broader supernatural belief system. It is interesting to note that the revenant ghost in the VH stories is in no way deliberately aggressive or harmful to the P of the story. Indeed in some versions the hitchhiker ghost is helpful towards the P. In the CC stories the supernatural occurrence of

a prophecy is a sign of hope and encouragement to the P as the war is predicted to end soon, so CC texts are stories that associate supernatural powers and with positive outcomes. On the other hand, some VH versions demonstrate that the power of a supernatural encounter is actually dangerous as an encounter can subsequently turn a P mad. However, in general in most VH stories the ghost is essentially neutral, non-threatening and often courteous, e.g. returning borrowed clothing to P. To this extent a revenant ghost easily fulfils the requirements of a non-terrifying face of the supernatural world and it is not overly surprising that many VH stories utilise such a character, but the broader spectrum of VH stories shows that a reverent ghost is not actually essential to creating a non-threatening or non-terrifying apparition. The slightly clichéd ghost of a young woman can be changed by age or gender without surrendering the overall story of an unusual supernatural encounter which challenges a secular, rational or scientific belief system.

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