

Vanishing Hitchhikers: Questions of Methodology

DAVID MAIN and SANDY HOBBS

Although folklorists have played the most prominent roles in the development of “contemporary” or “urban” legends as a field of scholarly study, the subject has also attracted the interest of other investigators in the humanities and social sciences. Work by researchers from different scholarly backgrounds may give rise to misinterpretation because of differing assumptions, conventions and practices. This problem is illustrated by the response of Gillian Bennett (2013) to our paper (Main and Hobbs, 2012). In our first paragraph we stated we were “impressed” by her paper and in our conclusion we acknowledged that her thesis that many Vanishing Hitchhiker texts “tell us that it is bad to die unfulfilled” (Bennett, 2011, 15) adequately fitted her sample. However, she appears to regard our paper as an attack on hers. Our aim here in this text is to correct some misunderstandings both by her and by ourselves, which we believe may at least in part be due to our different scholarly backgrounds.

The first issue which we must confront is one of definition. There are many references in the scholarly literature to a group of tales which are generally referred to as the Vanishing Hitchhiker (VH). Bennett and Smith in their *Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography* (1993) cited over 130 works dealing with it. It would seem that the VH term is sometimes employed as a matter of convenience only, as some of the narratives do not deal with a “hitchhiker” at all. Bennett (2011) considers a number of these tales and employs the label “Phantom Hitchhiker”. However, she did not precisely specify how a “Phantom Hitchhiker” text differs from other Vanishing Hitchhiker stories. On the basis of what she writes in her response to our paper (Bennett, 2013), we now take it that her use of “phantom” means the ghost of a dead person which consequently excludes other apparition possibilities, such as an angel or Christ. However, the term “phantom” can certainly be construed as a broader concept than a synonym for a ghost. Indeed the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives “ghost” as only one of many meanings of “phantom”, for instance, “mental illusion” being amongst the other potential meanings. Perhaps if Bennett had called her paper “The Revenant Hitchhiker”, her meaning would have been clearer. In suggesting that it would have been preferable for Bennett to provide a clearer definition in her first paper we are probably displaying the influence of our experiences in the traditions of empirical psychology. Psychological research involves the careful collection and sifting of evidence, often involving statistical analysis. For such processes to be meaningful requires precise specification of what is being studied, in other words an operational definition. The concept of “operational definition” is discussed in many texts on psychological research methods (see, for example, Breakwell et al., 2000, Wilson and MacLean, 2011). The main aspect of it which we wish to stress is that it specifies procedures which have been followed which allow one to identify and measure the concept being studied.

In our paper we offered a definition of a Vanishing Hitchhiker story:

1. A protagonist (P) travels in a vehicle on a road.

2. P encounters an Other (O) whom they regard as a normal human being.
3. Later, 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.

We devised our definition in the belief that no widely agreed definition already existed in the scholarly literature. Bennett disputes this and presents two quotations which she apparently considers adequate definitions. One, by Baughman (1966), describes motif E332.3.3.1 thus:

Ghost of a young woman asks for a ride in automobile, disappears from closed car without the driver's knowledge, after giving an address to which she wishes to be taken. The driver asks person at the address about the rider, finds she has been dead for some time.

This is followed by two qualifications indicating what the story “often” contains.

Contrast this description of the motif with our definition. We proposed that to decide whether a text may be included in a sample of this type of tale requires consideration of several questions. Is the protagonist travelling? Does the protagonist meet someone? Does the protagonist eventually discover information that the encounter has been a supernatural one? However, if one were to treat Baughman's description as a “definition”, one would ask different questions. Is the person who enters the vehicle a young woman? Does she give an address? Does she disappear from the car? Does someone at that address reveal that she has been dead for some time? Answering “no” to any of these questions would lead to the exclusion of many texts that Beardsley and Hankey have included in their original VH study (1941).

It seems clear to us that Baughman was not offering a “definition” with the same purpose as our more psychologically shaped definition. We have attempted to employ terms which would allow us to distinguish this type of story from other contemporary legend texts which have at least some similarities with VH types of stories. For instance, “The Devil in the Dancehall” (see, for example Glazer, 1984) shares with the Vanishing Hitchhiker the protagonist's encounter with someone beyond the normal, but differs from it in that the encounter does not take place while P is travelling in a vehicle.

The “definition” which Bennett (2013) calls “perfectly adequate” would have led to the exclusion of many of the texts in both her sample and in ours. Less than half of the hitchhikers in our “Later” (collected post 1941) sample were female and thus do not conform to Baughman's description which specifies a “young woman”. Similarly, in her Table on page 8 (Bennett, 2011) nine of the Hitchhikers are old women (or little old ladies), four are men and three are a “little girl”.

Jones's (1944) description is a second example of an “adequate” definition mentioned by Bennett (2013). This definition is less specific in describing the hitchhiker, but contains one feature which makes it incompatible as a definition with Baughman's (1966) description.

For Baughman, the hitchhiker disappears from the car (on route to a destination) and the driver then continues to the requested destination, whereas for Jones (1944) the hitchhiker is present throughout the journey and only disappears after the destination has been reached. Like Baughman, Jones does not appear to have had in mind “defining” what constitutes an example of the VH legend and was merely giving some general guidance to what the term covers.

On the other hand, Bennett (2013) acknowledges that there have been certain problems in definition. One of us (Hobbs and Cornwell, 1991) discussed this in a paper on the “Corpse in the Car” in terms which are similar to what Bennett (2013) states in her later paper. Jones (1944, 285) gave “The Corpse in the Car” the code “BX”, suggesting it was simply a version or subset of “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” version B. Yet, confusingly, on the same page he also said that B and BX were “entirely separate” stories.

In Baughman’s *Type and Motif-Index* (1966), however, we find the prediction of a corpse in the car reduced to an example of “other evidence of ghostly nature” which sometimes replaces the sudden disappearance by a ghostly hitchhiker (Hobbs and Cornwell, 1991, 99).

One of Bennett’s criticisms of our study relates to our inclusion of “Corpse in the Car” texts. She suggests that we have included them merely for polemical purposes (Bennett, 2013, 8). On the contrary, our decision to include them was a question resolved by examining texts that were identified via our operational definition of a VH text. If the protagonist of a story discovers that a stranger encountered has extraordinary prophetic powers we treat this as falling within our specification of a supernatural encounter. We are surprised that Bennett (2013) should be so keen to exclude the Corpse in the Car texts as being within the sphere of VH stories. Not only was it treated as such by Baughman (1966) but by Bennett herself in the book *Urban Legends* (Bennett and Smith, 2007). In chapter 9, which deals with “The Supernatural”, such Corpse in the Car tales are included as a seventh type of Vanishing Hitchhiker texts, under the label “Double Prophecy”.

Another source of confusion concerns sampling. In her original paper Bennett refers to her sample as “random” (Bennett, 2011, 5). However, on the basis of what she says in her response to our paper, we realise that she is not employing a “random sample” in the same way as experimental psychologists do, where, methodologically, a random sample has a specific meaning (see for example Wilson and MacLean, 2011). It would appear that rather than randomly sampling a corpus of texts, Bennett actually “selected” texts for inclusion in her analysis (Bennett, 2013, 1). The basis for this selection process is not reported. The inclusion of such details would have been helpful in understanding Bennett’s sample of texts. In our paper, we tried to establish for the reader what our samples included. First, a text had to fit our definition. Secondly it fell into the corpus from which the sample was drawn, comprising three subgroups: texts studied by Beardsley and Hankey (1941), texts reported by Bonaparte (1947), and an “opportunity” sample. This last category, as we reported in our previous paper (Main and Hobbs, 2012, 25), was the result of a search in Sandy Hobbs’s personal files and library to obtain a sample of the same size as that of Beardsley and Hankey (1941) but containing only texts which had been collected more recently than 1941. Note too

that, in deference to the uncertainty amongst folklorists about the relationship between Beardsley and Hankey texts on the one hand and those of Bonaparte (1947) on the other, we present our analysis of these sources separately, thus allowing anyone who prefers a different way of categorising the texts to be able to treat them as separate narrative groups.

One of the advantages of presenting an "operational definition" as we have done is that it makes clear to all interested parties the key parameters used to select a sample of texts for inclusion in our study. An operational definition does not close down debate but rather it allows debate to progress. If a critic does not like an operational definition, he or she may propose a different one and seek to demonstrate that it allows for a more meaningful interpretation of the evidence.

We have two further issues to consider concerning sampling. Bennett's approach to texts is to distinguish between "full" and "summary" texts, and use only the former. This seems to us problematic. We must all rely to some extent on other collectors, who do not always give a clear indication of the relationship between what they actually heard and what they actually report. We suggest that distinguishing a "summary" from a full text is not a straightforward matter. It is possible that a collector has reported only a summary of what an informant has provided, but it is also possible that what appears to us as a "summary" actually amounts to all that the informant said. Simply because we are aware of fuller versions of a legend does not in itself justify our labelling a short version a "summary". The version may be short for many different reasons. The story as heard by the informant may have been short. The informant's memory may be at fault. The informant may choose to tell the story in that way because of the circumstances. (For example, the informant might cut a story short if the audience shows signs of having heard it before.) Given that these are all significant elements in the transmission of legends, and given that we have limited information on the relationship between what the informant said and what the collector reports, we do not see how it can be justifiable to treat an apparent "summary" as less worthy of our attention than a fuller text.

The final issue concerning sampling we have already hinted at. We analysed the texts on the assumption that they deal with a supernatural encounter. In contrast to the Bennett and Smith (2007) source already cited, Bennett argues that a double prophecy text she deals with is not about the supernatural but "what gypsies are traditionally supposed to do" (Bennett, 2013, 7). We suggest that most concepts of the supernatural would include powers of prophecy beyond the normal range of predictions based on common experience. With this in mind, we consider gypsy "prophecies" as implicitly invoking a character who possesses a paranormal ability and as such these narratives fall firmly within the sphere of tales where a normal protagonist is involved in a supernatural encounter.

We sympathise with Bennett's unwillingness to become involved in debates about the interpretation of statistical analysis. However, there is a weakness in her strategy of taking specific examples as a way of undermining an argument. None of the arguments in our paper are couched in terms which imply that some feature applies to every case. This, of course, is true of her arguments too. Not all of her texts deal with the return of a young woman cut down in her prime. The use of statistical analysis to compare different samples allows us to

make judgements about whether a feature of a group is distinctive enough to merit special explanation.

We believe it may be helpful for us to take this opportunity to restate our position on the nature of contemporary legends generally, and Vanishing Hitchhiker texts in particular, in a way which we hope folklorists and those working in other disciplines will find understandable, even if they disagree with it in whole or in part.

1. There is no scholarly agreement on the definition of a contemporary legend, and no agreed corpus of texts. We note, for example, that Bennett and Smith in their *Urban Legends* (2007, pp. xvi-xviii) do not attempt a definition but offer “guidelines” to features which commonly occur. It follows almost inevitably that there is no agreed systematic classification of Contemporary Legends (CL). Indeed, Bennett and Smith in this work organise their texts quite differently from the classificatory system proposed by Brunvand in *The Baby Train* (1992) and revised by him in his *Encyclopaedia of Urban Legends* (2012). We set out our ideas relating to issues of CL classification in our presentation at the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend conference held in Dublin (Main and Hobbs, 2008).
2. Given the lack of a consistent classification of CL, we have set out to tackle the problem of definition by an indirect method. This does not seek to be all-inclusive but to explore an aspect which seems to be common.
3. One particular subset of CL texts which have a distinct structure we term a Substitute Personal Experience Narrative (SPEN). Its key components are as follows: the story has a protagonist (P) or protagonists. Story information is given to the audience in the same order as it was given to P. At or near the end of the narrative, P and the audience receive some new crucial information which leads the audience to experience a cognitive shift in understanding the story, i.e. a reappraisal of how facts or events contained within the story are to be interpreted. As a result of the cognitive shift in story comprehension, there is also a high likelihood of an emotional response to the reappraised material by the audience which might consequently manifest itself behaviourally in the audience’s facial expressions and/or non-verbal responses for emotions such as disgust, fear or laughter. We initially reported our ideas on SPEN at the ISCLR conference in Dublin, 2008 and a more detailed examination of the ideas is provided in Main and Hobbs (2007). (NB the journal publication date is nominal, as the journal article was written and published some years after the presentation of the conference paper).
4. We suggested that this structure appears to typically apply to the contemporary legends generally known as the “Boyfriend’s Death” and the “Surpriser Surprised”, but it is absent in CL such as “Alligators in the Sewers”. In our more recent paper (Main and Hobbs, 2012) we also argued that the SPEN structure typically applied to the Vanishing Hitchhiker. A fuller review of contemporary legends would establish how common the SPEN structure is and what alternative structures or devices are typically present in CL narratives that might be collectively termed “non-SPEN”.

5. We do not argue that any given legend will always consistently be told with a SPEN structure. Using a SPEN story structure provides a storyteller with an effective rhetorical technique, irrespective of whether or not the teller employs it consciously. The creation of a surprise ending which involves a reappraisal of previous information is not dissimilar to a punchline in a joke, as the alternative perspective in what or why something has occurred in the story now takes on a new light. The verbal “cleverness” of the change in viewpoint and the empathy an audience can feel for the P in the story as they undergo a cognitive shift in thinking, can be particularly effective in creating a vivid story. The potential to evoke emotional responses such as fear, disgust or contempt for a character in the story may also unconsciously or consciously “tag” the story as being worthy of memorising for later use by audience members, thus aiding the survival value of SPEN structured legends.
6. The presence of Non-SPEN versions of CL which are (we believe) normally told using a SPEN format is probably best explained by two sorts of factor. First, there are individual differences in audience members’ memory ability (both at the encoding and recalling stages of memory usage) and to the ability of each individual to retell a story previously heard. Good storytellers will retain a good structure but might embellish or revise story information to suit their own style or to localise the events. A poor storyteller may try to recall many of the key facts of the story they have heard but during reproduction, fail to give the story a structure that will recreate the cognitive shift characteristic of a SPEN story. This process is a verbal performance attribute many people will have encountered when hearing someone, who is not a good joke teller, failing to properly structure information they have in memory when retelling a joke they have heard. Secondly, there are differences in circumstances. In a conversation, an individual may deem it appropriate to refer to a story they had heard without necessarily thinking it appropriate to relate the whole story in detail.
7. In itself SPEN obviously cannot account for the survival of legends which are not generally told with that structure. (We are at present seeking ways of characterising such non-SPEN legends.) Nor can SPEN be regarded as the sole reason for the spread of those legends which lend themselves to such a mode of telling. However, we consider that evaluating basic structural differences within the corpus of CL narratives is an important facet in building a workable classification system to aid in future CL research.
8. Data presented in our previous paper (Main and Hobbs, 2012) suggests that Vanishing Hitchhiker texts are typically, but not invariably, told in the SPEN format. Vanishing Hitchhiker texts have been widely collected and there are many possible explanations for its persistence. We suggest that most texts may be regarded as a storyteller’s attempt at providing “evidence” for the reality of some supernatural force (the storyteller does not have to believe in such forces, but might be acting on the conviction that their audience does believe). Specific subcategories

of texts may have other more precise uses. For example, “Corpse in the Car” legends predicting Hitler’s death or the end of the war would have been highly attractive to audiences in pre-war Europe, or in allied and occupied territories during the Second World War.

9. Texts where the “hitchhiker” is the ghost of a woman who died young may be effective because they allow the expression of the poignancy of a life cut short, as proposed by Bennett (2011). Other VH subcategories provide evidence for specific religious belief systems, such as Christian, Mormon or Hawaiian folk religion. This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

We believe that Gillian Bennett has made many valuable contributions to the understanding of contemporary folklore. She employed an insightful simile in one of her books where she compared her approach to studying CL to Paul Klee’s consideration of drawing, as taking a line for a walk (Bennett, 2005, pp. xiv-xv). We are sorry if our “walk” with SPEN seemed to her to be an invasion of her garden. We consider ourselves as simply having been digging in the garden next door.

References

- Baughman, E. W., *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, The Hague, Mouton, 1966.
- Beardsley, R. K., and Hankey, R., “The Vanishing Hitchhiker”, *California Folklore Quarterly*, 1 (1942), 303-335.
- Bennett, G., *Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legends*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- Bennett, G., “Phantom Hitchhikers and Bad Deaths”, *Tradition Today*, 1 (2011), 3-18.
- Bennett, G., “Phantoms, Cars and Corpses: A Response to Main and Hobbs”, *Tradition Today*, 3 (2013), 1-10.
- Bennett, G., and P. Smith, *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2007.
- Bonaparte, M., *Myths of War*, London, Imago, 1947.
- Breakwell, G. M., S. Hammond, and C. Fife-Schaw, eds, *Research Methods in Psychology*, 2nd edn, London, Sage, 2000.
- Brunvand, J. H., *The Baby Train*, New York, Norton, 1992.
- Brunvand, J. H., *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, 2nd edn, Santa Barbara, California, ABC-CLIO, 2012.
- Glazer, M., “Continuity and Change in Legendry: Two Mexican-American Examples”, in P. Smith, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend*, Sheffield, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, 1984, pp. 108-127.
- Hobbs, S., and D. Cornwell, “A Behavior Analysis Model of Contemporary Legend”, *Contemporary Legend*, 1 (1992), 93-106.
- Jones, L. O., “Hitchhiking Ghosts in New York”, *California Folklore Quarterly*, 3 (1944), 284-293.
- Main, D., and S. Hobbs, “The Substitute Personal Experience Narrative in Contemporary Legend”, *Contemporary Legend, new series*, 10 (2007), 38-51.
- Main, D., and S. Hobbs, “Classifying Contemporary Legends by their Psychological Function: A New Look”, paper presented at the 26th Perspectives on Contemporary International Legend Conference, Dublin, 2008.

Main, D., and S. Hobbs, "The Phantom Hitchhiker: An Alternative Approach", *Tradition Today*, 2 (2012), 24-32.
Wilson, S., and R. McLean, *Research Methods and Data Analysis for Psychology*, London, McGraw-Hill, 2011.

David Main and Sandy Hobbs
Psychology section
University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, Scotland