

# 'All About Mary': Children's use of the toilet ghost story as a mechanism for dealing with fear, but fear of what?

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Early in the 1990s I was walking around the grounds of a primary school in the north of England (in my role as an independent children's play consultant and advisor) making a play audit – an assessment of the way children were using the available play-space.<sup>1</sup> One of the children helping me pointed to a part of the school building and told me the story of a character said to live there. At the time the story seemed insignificant; I made a note of it and took the conversation no further. Six weeks later, the same character appeared during a play audit at a primary school in a different part of the country. Here the story was almost word-for-word the one I had been told at the first school, and, intriguingly, the central character of the story was said to occupy the same part of the school building. I decided, therefore, to add a question about this character to the list I would ask at the six play audits due to be carried out in schools across the United Kingdom that term. The character was mentioned in four out of the six and in all four cases the story was very similar and the location within each school was the same.

All the stories told by the children featured what some people call 'toilet ghosts' – a frightening character that resides in a toilet block at school. These characters are surprisingly common: of a study group of around 120 primary schools where I conducted play audits there was a toilet ghost story in more than 65 per cent. The structure and detail of these and other examples are remarkably consistent and this is not just confined to the British Isles as the same story is known to exist in other countries around the world, again with consistency in structure and detail.

The first part of this paper aims to describe the structure and detail of these stories, and the second to discuss the possible origins and purpose of them. The paper will concentrate mainly on the information learned in the British play audit case studies mentioned above and the limited previous research on this topic.

## Structure and detail

Where such a story existed in the case studies, it was well known among the middle years' children at the school (aged from around 8 to 12 years). On their own these stories might prove interesting but in addition, ". . . psychologists' concern with such figures has been with the light they can shed on children's ability to distinguish systematically between fantasy and reality . . . and therefore the role that fantasy plays in cognitive development" (Goldman 1998:176-77). Despite the toilet ghost story being very well known among children and even among some adults, ". . . a full-blown rendition of the entire story . . . appear[s] to be as rare as hen's teeth" (Emery 1999). In fact, research on this topic is limited and to provide a satisfactory explanation and further describe what, if any, role these stories play in the process of human development, it is necessary to combine a number of disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, folklore, and childlore.

There are a number of similarities, both in the structure and the detail of the stories collected from the schools in the study group. The first is the frequency with which the character is said to exist: in around 65 per cent of the schools in the study group the story was well known amongst the child population, even if some children said they did not take part in the rituals associated with the story. Despite some variations in detail, most of the story was consistent. In a further four per cent of schools there were stories that fitted the

structure of the toilet ghost story (at least in part) but no single named character was recorded. Very few adults within the schools knew of the existence of a toilet ghost character at their school and, of those who did, few gave any real significance to it. The type and general location of the school does not seem to be a factor, as the stories were collected in new and old schools, in both urban and rural areas, schools in predominately wealthy areas and those more disadvantaged, in schools provided by the state and by the church, in big schools and small.

It is the named character element of the stories that provides the second consistency. Within the study group the most common name used was 'The White Lady' (75 per cent). There was also occasional reference to 'The Green Lady' (two schools) and 'The Grey Lady' (two schools) but even in one of these the name 'White Lady' was known and in use. This comes as no surprise to some in the British Isles, as Winifred Haward writes, "The 'White Lady' is well-known to ghost-lore. Most ghosts are white, and the majority are women..." (Haward 1973a:14). In the 1970s Haward and her husband made a study of 100 houses in England where there was, or had been, a priest hole.<sup>2</sup> Many of these houses had local ghost legends and, in the case of this very specific type of story, "...in more than half, it was a White Lady. This was surprising [as] one would have expected a priest, or perhaps a monk" (Haward 1973a: 14).

In general, however, the White Lady proves to be a very common character and there are numerous local legends throughout the British Isles about mysterious women dressed in white who float across desolate moorland or haunt particular buildings, or who stand silently alongside dark isolated stretches of roadway. These stories have existed for many centuries and are known to exist in other countries where they have evolved and developed over time into a number of well known myths and ghost stories, including those such as the vanishing hitchhiker, which Janet Langlois has described as "...perhaps the most popular and best-documented revenant in American legendry" (Langlois 1978:197).<sup>3</sup>

Within all the schools at which a toilet ghost was said to exist, the character has also proved to be exclusively female, but there was occasional reference to 'Candyman' and to 'Chucky' or 'Charles', both names seemingly based on characters in horror films. The *Candyman* series of films, based on the short story 'The Forbidden' by Clive Barker, tells the story of a black American man before the abolition of slavery who, after being persecuted and killed, takes on the role of a violent vengeful ghostly character who can be called forth by chanting the words 'Candy Man' five times into a mirror.<sup>4</sup> Chucky is the name of the central character in the *Child's Play* series of films, also made in the US. Rather than being a human character, though, Chucky is a child's doll that comes to life with violent results. Both these characters are male and, with the exception of the chant used to call forth the 'Candy Man' and the connection with a mirror (elements Barker borrowed from folklore) the stories associated with them in their respective films do not match those of the toilet ghost. More significantly, where these characters were mentioned they were not talked about in the same way as the toilet ghost and were not generally referred to by children with any seriousness (more on this point later).<sup>5</sup>

In only one school was any serious mention made of a male equivalent to the White Lady that appeared to fit the basic structure of the toilet ghost story. This was at a primary school in Yorkshire at which a number of children reported a character they called 'Vaker', a name that appeared to be a local corruption of 'caretaker' (audit Sept 1995b). This seemed to be confirmed later by a number of others who stated that they knew that 'Vaker' had been a care-taker at the school many years ago. Quite how long ago no one could be certain but the main location of this character was said to be a basement room of the school (the present caretaker's room – an area of school buildings commonly associated with spooky stories) and the ghost could sometimes be seen by looking through an unusually large keyhole. 'Billy' also received a few mentions by some who said he was the son of 'Vaker'. This was an interesting ghost story but on closer investigation it

did not fit in with the tale of the toilet ghost. However, then someone added, "Oh yes: and Vaker has a daughter called the White Lady!" Further questioning revealed that this White Lady story did conform to the common structure of the toilet ghost story and in fact the White Lady was much more widely known throughout the school than was Vaker.

The toilet ghost story is not confined to the British Isles: 'she' is well known and recorded in the United States, Canada, Sweden, Holland, France, Australia, Japan and Thailand, to name but a few. Here the term 'she' has been used deliberately, as amongst all recorded versions of the story so far, the central character has been female. Despite occasional international references to 'De Witte Dame' (Holland) and 'La Dame Blanche' (France), however, there is considerable variation in the name given to the central character.

In a review of around 100 similar stories, Dan Norder reported that, "...the name Bloody Mary was by far the most prevalent, appearing about 50 per cent of the time..." (Norder 1999). The stories he studied were collected via postings on various Internet newsgroups, which included some postings from Great Britain, (although what proportion is not noted). In the study group the name 'Mary', or, more often, 'Bloody Mary' (and the similar 'Molly' or 'Bloody Molly') also proved to be significant and was the second most recorded name being used (12.5 per cent).

That this name might be used to describe a malicious character, especially a female one, should also not come as a great surprise —at least not in the United Kingdom. Allison Weir, who has written extensively about the Tudor Kings and Queens of England, notes that on beginning her reign, Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) ruled a country that was, "Superstitious in the extreme, they believed in witches, fairies, goblins and ghosts, and set great store by the predictions of seers, wizards and astrologers" (Weir 1998:5). Her sister, Mary I (1516-58), whom she succeeded in 1558 had reintroduced the, even then, highly controversial policy of burning heretics at the stake, condemning around 300 to this form of death during her short five-year reign. No small wonder then that she should earn the title Bloody Mary from her previous subjects.

These two principal names, the White Lady and Bloody Mary, have proved to be the most significant names in the UK study but as already noted there are many other names in use across the world. Other names recorded by the on-line *Urban Legends Research Centre*, for example, include a whole host of Mary's: Mary Worth, Mary Moore, Mary Jane, Mary Lou, Mary Johnson and Mary Worthington. Other names include, Sally, Kathy, Agnes, Black Agnes and Black Aggie (Emery 1999). However, which of these names refer to variants of ghost lore and legend other than the specific toilet ghost story is not clear. What is clear is that the need to be able to make reference to a specific character such as the toilet ghost requires the adoption of a special name and, like any long-standing myth, the name that is adopted is generally the same as that of the most commonly known similar local legend.

Thus, in the British Isles the name White Lady becomes the most commonly adopted name for the toilet ghost, and in Japan the centuries old legend of 'Hanako San' (the 'Little Flower Girl') who is also said to dress in white and/or red becomes the most common name for the school toilet ghost character in that country. This theory seems to be confirmed by other examples such as that of the 'Tennessee Bell Witch' in the United States. This local ghost legend, supposedly based on the story of a real family, uses a name that has also been adopted by some as that for the toilet ghost character, but the use of this name seems to be very specific to the locality of the original story, a story that differs greatly in structure from that of the toilet ghost. The same may also be true in the use of the name Mary Whales, which was originally reported by Janet Langlois (Langlois 1978) but which Dan Norder failed to find in his review, concluding that the name may have been a "...strictly local version" (Norder 1999, see also Klintberg 1988).

In all these different types of ghost legend the local name used for the central character appears to be a common element that runs through them. This may lead some people to

conclude that the root of these different stories is basically the same. However, Winifred Haward in studying the ghost legends associated with priest holes felt that there were enough characteristics in the stories that she collected to warrant a separate classification (Haward 1973a:14). This also appears to be the case with the toilet ghost stories as, although there are some elements of the tale that link to other common ghost stories which use the same character names, the general structure of the toilet ghost stories shares an identifiable and common structure of its own. The root origin of the various names in use for these stories may be the same but the different legends have very different structures and thus may not have come from the same root. As such the purpose these stories serve may also be very different.

It is important to note at this point that the toilet ghost stories are not the only type of ghost stories associated with school buildings —witness the story of ‘Vaker’ above: the apparent haunting of school corridors and particular rooms by long dead teachers, caretakers and cleaners is something reported in many schools. Nor is the toilet ghost known only at primary school. She has been reportedly invoked at secondary schools and colleges as well as in home bath-rooms at sleep-over parties.<sup>6</sup> What is significant in terms of the toilet ghost in the school context, though, is the frequency with which the toilet ghost story is reported both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere around the world. One would have thought that the institutional nature of the school might also mean that more adults would be familiar with the story too.

Ross Taylor reports a story that happened on her first day as headteacher of a primary school in the British city of Nottingham in 1984:

I was walking around the grounds of the school during class-time when I came across a girl of about nine years of age. She pointed to a toilet block and said, “Have you been in those toilets?” “No”, I said. She then told me, “You don’t want to go in there—there’s snakes and a woman in there.” This was a bit worrying so I asked the girl what she meant and was taken into the toilets. “In there”, she pointed to one of the toilet cubicles. When coming out we were joined by another girl from the same class. As we were walking back to their classroom the two girls pointed to a strip of very old lime trees on an area of uneven ground which is adjacent to the toilet block. They said, “we’ve got to stay off there because the woman comes on here: The woman out of the toilets”. Since then I have heard this story a number of times (personal correspondence, 1996).

In 1996 I conducted a play audit at this school and asked children about the character. She was still well known and was referred to as the ‘Green Lady’. The place she could be found was also the same toilet block reported by Ross in the 1984 story; in fact, children consistently pointed out the same toilet cubicle as the girl in the 1984 version.

It is from this point that the central character in this type of story receives the title of ‘Toilet Ghost’, as in all schools covered by the study group and other examples from schools around the world the principal location where she is found is a toilet block, often a specific cubicle. In the study group the toilet block has exclusively been a girls’ block, and where more than one existed within the school, it was always in the oldest girls’ block. Part of the reason for this may be the presence of a mirror—the use of mirrors sometimes forming a significant part of the ritual of calling forth the main character (a point also noted by Klintberg 1988 and Norder 1999). To use an example from the study group: “You say Bloody Mary in the mirror three times and she comes out [of the mirror]” (10 year old girl, East Yorkshire, July 1998b). However, not all the toilet blocks in the study group had a mirror and, even in those that did, the use of a mirror was not always vital to the ritual of calling the ghost into existence. The turning on of specific taps (sometimes more than one and in a specific sequence) or knocking on a particular cubicle door with a set number or pattern of knocks was among a number of strategies that were reported for doing this. Nor was the toilet ghost always said to actually appear in the mirror; she sometimes emerged from within a toilet cubicle, or even out of thin air.

In the four schools in the study group where a named character was not reported, it was reference to a toilet block and sometimes a mirror that pointed to the existence of a story that seemed to fit within the general category and prompted further investigation. For example, at one Lincolnshire school a number of unspecified actions on the part of one or more children was said to result in "strange noises from the toilet" (Lincolnshire, Oct. 1996b), the implication being that there was something, or someone, in there; and at another it was said that writing something on the mirror in the toilet block and then knocking three times leads to "...things happening" (East Yorkshire, Oct 1996a).

However, just because the principal location of the character is in a toilet block this does not seem to prevent her from going outside the school buildings. At one school it was reported that the White Lady was called forth by chanting into the mirror in the oldest girls' toilet block, but when she appeared it was actually in a small area of trees outside the school grounds. She could then be seen floating over the school field and entering into the toilet block to confront whoever called her forth (audit Sept 1997a). Also, at the Nottinghamshire school noted above, the same piece of ground beside the line of lime trees first reported to Ross Taylor in 1984 as a place where the mysterious lady could be found, was mentioned again by a number of boys in the 1996 audit at this school, who said that they "tiptoe" across this piece of ground when getting to the school's football pitch so that they would not "wake her up". There have been times when children have reported that the toilet ghost can be summoned from outside too, but even in these cases it has been accepted that the principal place she occupies is a toilet block.

It also seems consistent that some kind of rhyme is needed to command her to appear. For example, "...you stand in front of a mirror and say a rhyme [she could not remember what]. Then you flush a toilet and a headless lady comes out" (girl 10 years, Hull, Sept. 1997a). In most cases the exact rhyme to be used is well known throughout the school, and the most common rhyme recorded in the study group is remarkably consistent. Compare these three examples:

*"White Lady, White Lady, we've killed your white baby"* (audit March 1996a).

*"White Lady, White Lady, we killed your black baby"* (audit July 1997a).

*"White Lady, White Lady, what have you done with your white baby?"* (audit July 1998a).

In these and most other chants recorded in the study group there are a number of themes that run through them all: first, the name of the toilet ghost character is repeated at the beginning of the rhyme; second, a baby is mentioned; and third, something specific seems to have happened to this baby, with the inference being that it is either the toilet ghost herself or the person chanting who has done something.<sup>7</sup>

The chants recorded by children in the UK to call forth the toilet ghost have generally been found to include a child reference and it is interesting to note that of the White Ladies recorded in Winifrid Haward's investigation into ghosts associated with priest holes there was often a mother and child element to the stories (Haward 1973b:16). Further, Janet Langlois suggested in her paper that the origins of the story she collected might be based on a local legend called 'La Llorona', which is further based on the story of a woman who weeps for the loss of her children whom she herself has murdered.<sup>8</sup>

There have been a small number of occasions when children have been able to shed more light on this themselves. For example, children at one school said that when they chanted "White Lady, White Lady, we killed your white baby", they were not referring to themselves, but they felt they were in some way atoning for the past deeds of someone else at the school (audit March 1996a). In another school the children reported that their

school was built on the site of what was once a lake (something that is not true) and that the baby, who they stated was the White Lady's child, had accidentally drowned there. They speculated that the White Lady might then have taken her own life in despair (audit July 1998c).<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, the cause of death of the White Lady (Green Lady in one case) was only reported at four schools in the study group; it was a fall or jump from a high roofed building or a tower (on two occasions from towers actually at the school). This again echoes something reported by Winifred Haward. In her two short papers published in 1973 she mentions a cause of death in only five examples of ghosts associated with priest holes: in one case it is murder, and in the other four cases it is the result of a fall or jump from a high place. In one example, Speke Hall in Liverpool, she reports the story of the master of the house who loses the family home through gambling and, "His wife was overwhelmed by despair when she heard the news, and threw herself and her child out of the window into the moat" (Haward 1973b:15).

When asking why the character is female, Dan Norder concludes that this is simply because more girls than boys seem to tell the story – so when looking into a mirror, "What else would you expect to see?" (Norder 1999). There may be an element of truth in this as, when children are asked to describe an ambiguous character or storyline/pretence character, they may be tempted to identify themselves with that character. Girls, therefore, when describing such a character, often say "she" whereas boys might say "he". When confronted with a toilet ghost, however, the title or name of the character may already be well known and have been simply transmitted on. The name "White Lady" dictates a female character, as do all the other name variants for the toilet ghost stories.

That there are more girls than boys reciting this story is itself a debatable point, but it should be remembered that although these stories may be relatively recent, the origin of the central character, or at least of the names that have been adopted, has been female since antiquity. The conclusion in terms of the toilet ghost stories, therefore, is that this character is female because the name implies this, and the name is drawn from similar ghostly characters that have been in existence for many generations. True, a female character may suggest more malevolence than a male character (as suggested by Norder 1999) but the screaming banshee, a mythic female Celtic character that appears dressed in white to portend death and which may herself form a root to the White Lady, has existed for many centuries.

There is also some consistency in what the White Lady does when she is finally called forth. In previous writings on the subject there are references to relatively benign acts on the part of the toilet ghost, such as generally portending the future or answering specific questions asked of her. However, the stories collected from the study group all involved something much more malevolent, with the White Lady being physically violent when she finally appears. She has even been described as having the power to kill those unfortunate enough to see her. It is interesting to note, though, that, in by far the majority of reports, those taking part in the ritual left the toilet block so quickly after she was said to have appeared that there was no time for a violent assault to be carried out. Such possible violent results of her appearance were mainly speculated on in discussions amongst the children after the event. Even when children reported no immediate violent actions on the part of the toilet ghost, it was almost always assumed that there would have been had they stayed around long enough to experience it! To summarize, the toilet ghost is not a friendly figure.

The White Lady character is not unique to the school environment, nor are some of the elements of the toilet ghost story. But when expressed in the school context there are a number of elements that are not present in other contexts. These include the institutional nature of the location (adults in more remote positions of authority, for example), the

large number of potential playmates, and, to a certain extent, the central location of a communal toilet block. Summarizing the stories, we have a malicious, female figure that has a special and well-known name (at least among the school child population), a specific ritual and rhyme to call her present, a violent reaction from the ghost that is discussed and embellished after the effect, speculation about who she is and the cause of her death, and a common location – a toilet block. We could add to this summary that there are also a seeming transmission and adoption of local legend both in the name used for the character and in some cases some structure of the story itself, such as the element of death from a fall or jump from a height, the references to a dead child, and the occasional references to a mirror.

There is one question yet to be tackled: How long have these stories existed? Although the character, or more accurately the local character name, of the toilet ghost may have been known for many generations, and elements of the storyline are obvious variations on a theme, the specific story of the school toilet ghost may be much more recent. But is it possible to identify when this story took on a separate and identifiable structure?

An apparent link between this type of story and ancient rituals involving the use of mirrors and water as a link to the supernatural has been speculated on in previous research into the topic. For example, “Some people believe the Bloody Mary legend and all its offshoots are mutated versions of these mirror rituals” (Norder 1999). Klintberg also concludes that, “... [this story] has its roots in magical rites for the purpose of calling forth spirits, practiced in Europe earlier on” (Klintberg 1988:162). That the various similar tales related to the school toilet ghost stories might all originate from such rituals is a question for specialists in ghost lore and mythology; however at the very least the possibility seems plausible. But the use of water and/or a mirror is not necessarily an essential element of the toilet ghost story; further, stories such as these have gone through a long and complex sequence of adaptation and transformation and have produced a tangled web of linked and interrelated stories.

The earliest published ‘Mary Whales’ stories that Janet Langlois collected from young teenage children attending a Catholic elementary school in Indianapolis date from 1972, but these contain a varied mix of elements from different legends. She notes similarities (but also differences) with the Mary Whales she collected and also the vanishing hitchhiker and the La Llorona (weeping woman) stories. She concludes that the different stories “form a set” (Langlois 1978:201) but with the benefit of hindsight it could also be said that in her transcripts can be seen the emergence of the school toilet ghost as a separate, identifiable story—the importance of a bathroom, and at times, a mirror, has already appeared. The various stories collected from the present study group of schools did not contain any elements relating to the vanishing hitchhiker but it is intriguing to consider that the first written recording of what appears to be the toilet ghost story was gathered in the institutional context of the school.

Mary and Herbert Knapp in their book, *One Potato, Two Potato . . . The Secret Education of American Children* (1976) also quote a number of versions of the ‘Mary Worth’ story, which involve calling forth a malicious character from a mirror in the bathroom, but in these no specific references are made to school.<sup>10</sup> It seems, therefore, that although there are elements of the story in existence in the US before the 1970s, the earliest published references to the emerging toilet ghost stories in a school context so far date from the early 1970s.

Bengt af Klintberg, writing about the Swedish equivalent story in 1988, agrees. He concludes that the earliest examples of the Swedish versions of the story also date from the 1970s (and quotes a number of examples of such). He also reports that the various names then in use were mainly English: ‘Mary’, ‘Bloody Mary’ and ‘Black Molly’. Shortly after, “The [Swedish] name Svarta Madame (Black Madame) appeared on the scene, it spread quickly, and is now the completely dominant form” (Klintberg 1988:159). Klintberg also concludes that the national influence for these stories was American.

This view may have been supported by the fact that, in their major study of twentieth-century children's play and playlore, Iona and Peter Opie found that, "...the toilet ghost story was not known to British school children during the time we were running our surveys, that is in the 1950s, 60s and 70s" (personal correspondence, 2000). Using a personal example, I attended infant school in the United Kingdom in the early 1960s.<sup>11</sup> The school had a long, dark passageway leading to an outdoor toilet block and I remember stories concerning a mysterious 'someone' who lived there, someone who would grab you if you dared to go down to the toilets. Here was a story about a scary character associated with a toilet block; however, I cannot remember any specific names or even the sex of the character, nor any ritual used to invoke the ghost. Informal questioning of adults who had their school days around the same time often brings forth tales containing elements of the toilet ghost story, but no special names and rarely information on gender. However, the oldest clear reference to a toilet ghost story that the present study has revealed pre-dates the 1970s and the 1960s – and is also from a UK source.

A well-respected British child psychologist told me a story of her daughter whom she found apparently "... praying to herself in the bathroom. Her hands were clasped together and she was quietly talking to herself." No mirror was involved. When asked if she was alright, the girl burst into tears and told her mother about the "Green Lady" that was at school. She said, "... she could sometimes be seen peeping out from a cupboard during assembly" and that "she had never seen her, but lots of other people had so she must be real" (personal correspondence, 1995). The connection with the bathroom also appears related to school where this character was based in the school toilets. This would have been around 1957. Further, the school that her daughter attended at the time was the same Nottinghamshire school at which Ross Taylor reported the mysterious 'woman' in 1984, and at which children who attended the school in 1996 knew well and still called the 'Green Lady'. This presents us with a consistent school toilet ghost story with a named character that has remained known and repeated by the school's child population for around 40 years. To put this into context, this is similar to saying that the story has survived and remained consistent for around six generations of children attending this school.

### **Do these stories serve a purpose?**

Fantasy and pretence form a very significant part of the language and structure of children's play. Storylines and characterizations can be seen to continue for considerable lengths of time and act as the basic structure to a play episode. As pointed out by Peter K. Smith, "...shared knowledge of such a basic script is helpful if not essential if several children are to sustain a sociodramatic play episode over a period of time and through a sequence of actions" (Smith 1994:39). This is true of the play of older children as well as younger, but, whereas interest in the link between fantasy and pretence play and its role in human development has perhaps increased in recent decades (Goldman 1998), what research there is has tended to concentrate on the pretence play of younger children (especially pre-schoolers and those in their first few years of school). Although younger children in the study group of schools had a rich collection of tales and fantasy characters to report, no examples of a toilet ghost story were reported by any child below the age of eight. The age group from which most of these stories were collected was between eight and eleven years.<sup>12</sup>

The appearance of imagination and pretence in play is generally accepted to be positive, particularly in the areas of verbal fluency, innovation, creativity, and the ability to think in abstract terms (Moyles 1995, Sutton-Smith 1997, Goldman 1998). But many adults, in particular those professionals who spend time with children (such as child-care workers and teachers) can and do question what, if any, positive role there can be for such seemingly violent and destructive fantasies as those found in the toilet ghost stories. These stories seem so distant from reality that there appears to be a conflict with what



many might imagine pretence play to be about, i.e. deconstructing the 'real world' and making sense of it.<sup>13</sup> Such perceptions, however, do a disservice to the ability of children to distinguish between what is and is not real as, "Life in the ludic [the playful] lane can never be understood simply in terms of that which it interprets realistically, the so-called real world. It must also be about mockery as well as mimicry . . . Children know that they are manipulating their thoughts about reality, not reality itself; and they know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self" (Sutton-Smith 1997:159). As such, the fears expressed by adults towards such stories seem generally unwarranted, as to a child the 'real world' appears somewhat of a flexible concept.

Peter Narvaez has written about how it might be possible to exist in both the 'real world' and an imaginary or 'constructed world' at the same time, or at least construct a 'liminal space' through which it is possible to pass from one to the other through the use of ritual and pretence:

'Liminal' is a term derived from the Latin *limen* meaning 'threshold' . . . it is usually associated with that period during a rite of passage when a participant experiences the ambivalent realm between one social position and another. This temporal usage of liminality is here transferred to a spatial understanding of areas between known space (purity) and unknown space (danger) where one might experience the benign or the malignant (Narvaez 1987:16-17).

In effect, the place where such ritual is carried out is an essential element in the creation of this liminal space and becomes as important as the ritual, structure and detail of the stories themselves. A school toilet block can be an eerie place full of echoes and strange sounds; it may also be poorly lit or have the kind of lighting that casts suggestive shadows, both of which contribute to the kind of environment that may result in spooky stories. In the context of the toilet ghost stories, it may also be significant, in terms of creating an effective liminal space, that these are places rarely visited by adults. This effectively creates an environment that easily lends itself to pretence and the imaginary, and which also provides privacy from unbelieving adults and time to experiment and share with other children the sensations that these stories create.<sup>14</sup>

What value children might gain from play that takes place without the direct involvement or even presence of adults is an element of play research that has not proved of much interest to mainstream researchers. Practitioners may also feel great concern at the very concept that children may benefit from a degree of privacy in order to make the most of some of their play experiences. However, as Brian Sutton-Smith points out, "... studies do show that children can comprehend and sustain very complex play microcosms together and paracosms by themselves, and that is indeed a testimony to play's independence, without which viable ludic transformations would probably not be possible" (Sutton-Smith 1997:157).

Children, and adults for that matter, certainly enjoy the thrill of fear (witness the popularity of scary theme park rides and horror films) and revel in the delight of passing on fear, either by the telling of spooky stories or jumping out from behind the door and shouting "Boo!" But the creation of liminal space in this context suggests something much more significant than simple enjoyment. In the context of the toilet ghost stories it has been generally concluded that the prime purpose of play such as this is in children developing a mechanism for dealing with fear. For example, Klintberg concludes, "This is perhaps the most important function of the [toilet ghost stories] in ... children's development. It means that they actively challenge and conquer fears" (Klintberg 1988:165-166). But fear of what? Although the answer to this question is not made clear, the implication appears to be that these stories serve as a practice for tackling real fears in the real world.

Janet Langlois reports that in her investigation of 'Mary Whales' stories, "The majority of stories students told in the group sessions clustered around this entrance of the unknown

into their known world. In some cases, revenants and their sinister counterparts —human intruders—enter homes literally through windows and doors” (Langlois 1978:203). There has been a significant rise in parental fear of strangers throughout the United Kingdom and some other parts of the industrialized world, which has at times reached almost hysterical levels. It may be that, as a result, children over the last 30 years or so have become more wary of strangers and have sought to deal with this potential risk by personifying it as an evil character that they can manipulate. However, children appear less concerned themselves about the question of ‘stranger danger’ either as being a real threat or as an exaggerated perception.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the toilet ghost stories may pre-date this rise in a perception of stranger danger.

School life can at times be stressful and fearful both in terms of educational attainment and in social relationships, so perhaps this and an increase in the fear of strangers provide external fears that such stories aim to tackle. If this hypothesis is correct then it makes sense that those children who are more at risk, or who perceive a greater risk, should be those children who engage in these stories more than those who do not. Although I have not investigated this possibility specifically, findings so far do not support this hypothesis. The possibility that such stories are part of a mechanism for dealing with external fears cannot be discounted but there seems to be little direct evidence available to support this view.

A second hypothesis, proposed by the late American anthropologist and folklorist Alan Dundes, also suggests a deeper psychological meaning behind the stories. He concludes that, “... the Bloody Mary ritual is a pre-pubescent fantasy about the imminent onset of menses ...” (Dundes 1998:129). His conclusion is based on a psychoanalytic interpretation of the content and structure of the stories. He cites references to blood, a bathroom and/or toilet flushing, the prevalence of the story amongst young girls, and “The consistent utilization of a mirror ...” as evidence. Although all these were present within the case studies, the only consistent element from amongst the above list has been the location of a toilet block. In particular, the presence of blood has not formed a prerequisite for the story. Dundes’ own paper reproduces ten sample texts of toilet ghost stories as “... a small but representative sample...” of over seventy-five examples collected in and around 1996 (Dundes 1998: 123). Blood is not mentioned in three of the ten and what proportion of the total have references to blood is not given.

Dundes also suggests that the name Bloody Mary and the host of alternate Mary’s mentioned above may link this character with that of the Virgin Mary of Christian faith, and thus virginity and purity. He expands this into a representation of the socialized role of girls and women stating:

A girl is socialized into believing that her “worth” as a female will be realized through achieving womanhood, marriage, bearing children, etc. To be, then, a worthy Mary, one must first become a woman, hence experience menarche. This, I suspect, is the reason why “Mary Worth” was selected as an alternative name for “Bloody Mary” (Dundes 1998:127).

This conclusion relies heavily on the commonality and symbolism of the name Bloody Mary and a transition into Mary Worth. However, although the name Bloody Mary and other Mary variants are probably the most common name form for the toilet ghost in the United States, throughout Europe, despite the existence of Bloody Mary, it is the White Lady that dominates.

Perhaps the strongest meaning that can be applied to the toilet ghost stories does, however, have a psychological connection and one that returns us to the question of fear. As stated above, the psychological basis of pretence in children’s play is something that is increasingly of interest to psychologists but research from this field may have concentrated until now on the negative effects of such play, and, “... the imagination is

typically examined as a psychological defensive against conflict rather than as a creative power of the mind" (Sutton-Smith 1997:156).

Inga Sylvander and Maj Ödman ask the question, "What is fear?" They conclude:

The word is associated with worrying of some kind—of many different kinds. For most people fear is something exclusively negative. Nevertheless fear is essential for life, a fundamental requirement for our survival. Fear is like hunger, tiredness, pain, a warning signal to avoid physical or psychological ill-health. Fear can be devastating and paralyzing but it can also be stimulating and a protection (Sylvander & Ödman 1985: 11).<sup>16</sup>

Sylvander and Ödman conducted a research project in the 1960s that involved collecting essays written by children from around the world in which they expressed their fears. This included material from countries both at war and in peace and included a small number from around the United Kingdom. The project was repeated on a smaller scale in 1985. In general, their findings showed that children around the world expressed very similar fears; more specifically "*fysisk fara*" (physical danger) and "*inbillad fysisk fara*" (imagined physical danger) were the two most recorded fears expressed by both girls and boys in their earlier study at 21.6 per cent and 30.1 per cent respectively (1985:148, Tabell I). Interestingly, the 1985 study, in which fewer stories were collected from countries at war, shows a significant drop in the fear of imagined physical danger (18.5 per cent) whereas the figure recorded for "*inre upplevelse*" (internal experiences) doubles (from 7.8 percent to 15 per cent). These internal experiences were defined as such things as dreams and imaginary characters (1985:46). Amongst all the imaginary characters that frightened children it was ghosts they were the most afraid of (Sylvander and Ödman 1969:103).

There is a dilemma concerning children's seemingly irrational fears of the unreal, as pointed out by Harris et al., who refer to this as a paradox. "Young children appear to have a firm grasp of the distinction between fantasy and reality. They understand that the products of their imagination are not publicly visible or real. On the other hand they sometimes respond as if such imaginary creatures could actually exist" (Harris et al. 1991:120). In a review of experimental work on children's reactions and thoughts about this element of fear, Johnson and Harris concluded that children's explanations for unusual acts might be naive or incorrect, but that they rarely invoke a magical explanation (Johnson & Harris 1994:36).

Harris is writing here of younger children but this may apply to children in their middle years too. For example, earlier in this paper references were made to the occasional mentions of characters such as the Candyman and Chucky when discussing the toilet ghost. In this context it is interesting to note that there were a number of times in the case studies when children said such things as (to use just one example), "We know the Candyman's not real, but we're not sure about the White Lady" (11 year old girl, Hull Primary 1997). These views, expressed by children themselves, appear to confirm the idea that although children may not fully understand the reasoning behind their fears and the 'spooky stories' they tell, they are unwilling to accept that such stories are "real" and yet they could not possibly be untrue either—could they? This is in essence the paradox proposed by Harris et al.

If there is a meaning and purpose behind examples of play involving malevolent characters and storylines (of which the 'toilet ghost' is one) there are a number of possible explanations, but we must also bear in mind that such stories may not serve any developmental role. Despite the fact that the role of play in human development has received increasing recognition, it should still be acknowledged that children do sometimes play purely for the sake of it and use play as an enjoyable way of passing time. That is not to say that the consequences of that play might not have negative and/or positive developmental effects on the individual but that this form of play might be seen like this—interesting, but not particularly significant. However, the consistency and

structure given to these stories appear to form at a specific age/stage in an individual's development (from around 8 years of age) which might suggest that this is maturational, biological and, therefore, may have developmental consequences.

What little has been written on this topic so far generally concludes that these stories serve as a mechanism that allows children to tackle and conquer fear by personifying a real or perceived but undefined external anxiety. However, it is unclear what children's own opinions about this are, and this view does not explain why these types of stories, although extremely common, do not apply to all. Nor does there appear to be a connection between these stories and those children who, it might be felt, are more 'at risk' and who would therefore personify their fears as a way of practicing dealing with this external threat, more than those less at risk. Making a comparison between 'dreams' and imagination in children's play, Sutton-Smith makes the point that, "[this] does not explain why children dream such dreams [have imaginary play in this way]; why some dream them forcefully and continually and others very little" (Sutton-Smith 1997:157).

There is another possibility which is that children use these stories as a reaction to undefined fears and anxieties which are generated from within rather than are created to tackle fears from without; "... [this] implies that acts of fantasy can generate *ex nihilo* entities that have no pre-existing likelihood and project them onto the outside world [thus] ... young children should sometimes credit their own imagination with the power to bring about violations of the known laws of object permanence and displacement" (Harris et al. 1991:122, italics in original). In other words these types of stories may exist and take on the significance they do because they are dealing with fears created internally within the development of the psychosocial 'self' rather than are created to tackle an external anxiety; "... are they [frightening characters], as Roheim suggests, ultimately reflections of childhood psycho-dynamic process?" (Goldman 1998:175). This hypothesis would explain the difficulty that children seem to find in explaining 'why' they tell these stories as well as their confusion over whether the toilet ghost is real or not.

If children appreciate that when they can conjure up such creatures in their imagination, they are neither real nor publicly visible, the persistence of their fear—sometimes into middle childhood—remains unexplained. It is possible to argue, however, that certain types of imagined creature arouse fear, and it is precisely because they arouse fear that children start to regard them as real (Harris et al. 1991:109).

Instead of being a frivolous but interesting waste of time or a mechanism for dealing with external fear, the real meaning behind the toilet ghost stories may be that characters such as the 'White Lady', 'Bloody Mary' and all her other toilet ghost manifestations are actually creating this sense of fear in the first place. So, rather than being a mechanism for dealing with real, malicious and possibly life-threatening situations, they may be more about dealing with irrational fears triggered within children at a particular stage in their development. These stories, therefore, may actually be an outward manifestation of the developing human mind itself.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the education system of England and Wales, a primary school is one that caters for the education of children from around five to eleven or twelve years of age. A play audit records what and where children are playing during their free-time periods when away from the control of adults.
- <sup>2</sup> "Priest Hole" is a term used to describe the hiding places built into houses during the Elizabethan and early Jacobean period to hide the material and sometimes the person of the Catholic priests who were prepared to deliver what was, at the time, the illegal act of the mass. These spaces are sometimes literally holes built into the fabric of the house but are also occasionally whole rooms that can be very elaborately hidden.
- <sup>3</sup> The vanishing hitchhiker stories vary considerably, but the basic story is that an individual once stopped to pick up a hitchhiker by the side of the road. Sometimes this is a young girl or an adult woman, often dressed in white. The hitchhiker asks to be taken to a specific address only to have the driver told on arriving that either the hitchhiker, who has now disappeared, is not known at that address, or is known but had died in a road accident or a drowning some years before. The hitchhiker is also sometimes said to leave behind a puddle of water or blood on the seat she had used in the car.
- <sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of the *Candyman* series of films see Koven (1999).
- <sup>5</sup> There are a number of "Toilet Ghost" stories that have made it to the small and big screens, including an episode of *The X Files* called "Syzygy" (3.13, 1996) which features the calling forth of a female spirit through the mirror in a washroom (toilet block), and the US film, *Urban Legend* (Blanks, 1998), which tells the story of a group of US college students enacting a number of urban legends which then begin to come true. The most prolific celluloid versions of the story, however, are to be found in Japan, where the Japanese version of the White Lady, Hanako-San (The Little Flower Girl), features in a number of graphic horror films that have gained cult status, such as *Gakkou no Kaidan* (Hirayama, 1995) and a number of sequels. However, none of these can claim to be the root of the toilet ghost as there are recorded examples of toilet ghost stories that pre-date the above examples (see for example, Klintberg 1988).
- <sup>6</sup> All the case study examples in this study are of primary schools, but for examples from older participants and other locations see Thomas (1991) and Goldstein, Grider and Thomas (2007).
- <sup>7</sup> One exception to this came from a Hull primary school (Feb 1997a) where the most common chant was said to be "White Lady, White Lady show us your pale face." This had to be recited into a mirror (see also Klintberg 1988). However, when this was mentioned, one person in the group also added, "Isn't there something about 'Black Lady, Black Lady, we've somethinged your baby' . . . I think it's 'kidnapped' your baby?"
- <sup>8</sup> Others have suggested that the Llorona story may also be based on the German *Die Weisse Frau*, another White Lady character (see for example Kirtley 1960).
- <sup>9</sup> The idea among school children that their school has been built on something such as a park, a lake, or, most common of all, an old graveyard, is regularly reported. In fact, during questioning of children at this same school during a different occasion and researching another topic, other children here said that their school field had once been part of the disused graveyard that is alongside their school; this is also not true.
- <sup>10</sup> Bengt af Klintberg notes that the name "Mary Worth" may originate with a US cartoon character of the same name that dates from 1940. However, he also notes that this character bears no resemblance to the malicious toilet ghost.

- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Stratton Primary school, Hull, built towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but now demolished.
- <sup>12</sup> There are forms of play engaged in by younger children that are complex and just as consistent in shared knowledge through the school's child population as are the toilet ghost stories. These forms of play, which usually involve the use of gathered natural materials such as sticks, stones and berries, etc., are even more common than the toilet ghost stories among older children but they take place exclusively outdoors and have a very different structure from that of the toilet ghost.
- <sup>13</sup> On an anecdotal note, the most common reaction I have experienced from adults after describing the existence of a toilet ghost in their school has been surprise and, often, amusement. However, what I have found very surprising has been the number of times I have been asked things such as: "Is this dangerous?", and "Should we stop it?"
- <sup>14</sup> It is important to point out that I am not suggesting that adults never visit the school toilet blocks. Indeed, in some schools adults regularly visit these places as part of a whole school anti-bullying strategy. But certainly in the case of those schools in the study group adults did not routinely visit the toilet blocks during the school day.
- <sup>15</sup> See for example Furedi (1998).
- <sup>16</sup> "Ordet förknippas med oro av något slag – av många slag. För de flesta människor är rädsla något enbart negativt. Och ändå är rädsla en livsnödvändighet, en fundamental förutsättning för vår överlevnad. Rädsla är liksom hunger, trötthet, smärta en varningssignal för att undvika fysisk eller psykisk ohälsa. Rädsla kan vara förödande och förlamande, men den också vara stimulerande och ett skydd." [author's own translation].

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- Hull Primary school – September 1995  
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Hull Primary school – July 1998