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# Hellhounds and Helpful Ghost Dogs: Conflicting Perceptions of “Man’s Best Friend” Encoded in Supernatural Narrative

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**Hellhounds and Helpful Ghost Dogs:  
Conflicting Perceptions of “Man’s Best Friend”  
Encoded in Supernatural Narrative**

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A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the English Department  
at Utah State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Folklore

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Written by Kiersten Carr  
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## **Chapter One:**

## Black Dog Specters in the British and European Tradition

In Katharine Brigg's *A Dictionary of British Folktales In the English Language*, there are many ghost stories, but none quite so identifiable as the black dog stories. These seem to relate encounters with a type of spectral entity that, according to legend and eyewitness accounts, has been haunting the British countryside for centuries. It is called the Gwyllgi in Wales, Black Shuck in East Anglia, Yeth hound or Wissthounds in Devonshire, Skriker in Lancashire, Barguest or Gytrash in Yorkshire, Padfoot in West Yorkshire, Hairy Jack in Lincolnshire, the Moddey Dhoo on the Isle of Man, the Gurt Dog in Somerset, the Muckle Black Tyke in Scotland, and the Grim, amongst other names. In these particular narratives, the figure of a supernatural dog, a hellhound or restless ghost in dog form, looms large. According to one account:

Within the parish of Tring, Hertford, a poor old woman was drowned in 1751 for suspected witchcraft. A chimney-sweeper, who was the principal perpetrator of this deed, was hanged and gibbeted near the place where the murder was committed; and while the gibbet stood, and long after it had disappeared, the spot was haunted by a black dog.

A correspondent of the *Book of Days* (ii, 433) says that he was told by the village schoolmaster, who had been 'abroad, that he himself had seen this diabolical dog. 'I was returning home,' said he, 'late at night in a gig with the person who was driving. When we came near the spot, where a portion of the gibbet had lately stood, he saw on the bank of the roadside a flame of fire as large as a man's hat. 'What's that?' I exclaimed. 'Hush!' said my companion, and suddenly pulling in his horse, made a dead stop. I then saw an immense black dog just in front of our horse, the strangest-looking creature I ever beheld. He was as big as a Newfoundland, but very gaunt, shaggy, with long ears and tail, eyes like balls of fire, and large, long teeth, for he opened his mouth and seemed to grin at us. In a few minutes the dog disappeared, seeming to vanish like a shadow, or to sink into the earth, and we drove on over the spot where he had lain (Briggs 2003, 9).

This account models a few common aspects of the black dog legend: namely the dog's unusual size and appearance as well as the tendency to vanish in unusual and startling ways. In many of these narratives, as well as being generally frightening, the black dog is unspeakably malevolent: assaulting travelers, frightening livestock to death, hunting the souls of men in packs, and heralding death or disaster.

This first tale also identifies another unifying aspect of black dog legends: that they are known to haunt gibbets and places of execution, as well as sites of murders or other violent deaths. According to common lore, black dogs also haunt graveyards and churchyards, indicating an overwhelming association with death and the afterlife. Black dogs are often said to be omens of death, besides. The Wishthounds in Wales, hunting in packs, were said to cause the death of anyone who is unfortunate to see or hear them within a year (Brown, 195). In popular culture, readers of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* will recall that “The Grim,” J.K. Rowling’s literary version of the black dog legend, was considered “the worst omen of death” in the wizarding world, paralleling beliefs from many parts of England about what the appearance of the black dog signified (Rowling 1999, 107).

One explanation for a dog’s association with death and graveyards may be due to the fact that it is a scavenger, liable to eat anything, including dead bodies. Folklorist Theo Brown, author of a broad survey of black dog sightings published in 1958, notes that because of this habit, dogs are “always associated with graveyards, from the earliest times in Egypt” (188). Paul Barber also makes a strong case for an implicit association between scavengers and the supernatural in his book *Vampires, Burial and Death*. He states that throughout history, in the absence of scientific observation, whenever people observed animals feeding on carcasses, one possible response was to assume that the “event was unnatural” and “conclude that the apparent animal was supernatural” (2010, 93). Barber speaks specifically of assumptions made about wolves that led to legends about werewolves and vampires, but the explicit association of black dogs with graveyards seems to indicate that similar assumptions could be made about them.

In fact, according to one story, they were. Barber relates a collected story about a mother who had “lost her child through death.” According to the narrative,

A few days after the burial they noticed an opening in the grave, which went as far down as the coffin lid. This was covered up, but the next day it was there again. Again it was covered up, but a man hid himself behind a bush and observed the grave. In the evening

he noticed a black dog that stopped at the grave and then dug a hole. He told the mother of the child what he had seen (Barber, 123).

Rather than attributing this phenomenon to natural causes, the mother was moved to “ask a pastor for advice as to how she could secure the peace of her child,” indicating that she saw the black dog's interference at the grave as a supernatural occurrence rather than just an animal trying to scavenge the carcass (Barber, 123).

The fact that the dog is black, specifically black, is also significant. One survey of eyewitness accounts of the black dog stated that “no matter how dark the night, the Dog can be seen because he is so much blacker” (Rudkin 1932, 130). Aside from the convenient contrast the color of the dog provides, the color black has a host of associations. In his essay on the connections between color and racism, Roger Bastide makes the case that “Christianity has been accompanied by a symbolism of color” most chiefly the symbolism of black and white (1967, 313). In the Christian culture of Britain, it is easy to associate black with “the infernal streams of the bowels of the earth, the pit of hell, the devil's color” (Bastide 1967, 315). Black is also implicitly associated with the mysterious and the unknown, simply because of its impression of darkness. In Western culture, black is the color worn at funerals and when in mourning. The black dog is perceived as more threatening because of its color, which lends to its association with the devil, death, and misfortune.

Black dog sightings are concentrated in Britain, but associations of the black dog with supernatural phenomenon and otherworldly functions is widespread across Europe, particularly tied to witchcraft and sorcery. Theo Brown notes that “The symbol of the Black Dog is used by the Devil, by the familiar, and by the witches themselves in transformation” (Brown 1958, 178). Barbara Woods, author of *The Devil in Dog Form: A Partial Type-index of Devil Legends*, points to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust*, in which the devil Mephisto, and later the devil himself, are introduced as black poodles to the aspiring sorcerer Faustus. She links this to a broad folkloric tradition, stating that

In Germany and the Continent in general...man's best friend has not always enjoyed a very desirable reputation. On the contrary, the dog has been suspect of aiding and abetting the archenemy: of providing him with a form in which to circulate among men, of guarding the underworld, of calling off men to the realm of the dead, of haunting bridges and roads to obstruct men's way or to lead them astray, of following night travellers--often frightening them to death (Woods 1954, 229).

It is all too easy to spot the similarities between the devil-as-dog and black dog traditions.

Woods goes on to state that these tales often "consider the weird dog a restless soul, in others, a devil, and in still others, make no attempt at all to account for the strange creature" (231).

Indeed, Woods does not draw a clear distinction, stating that "Because of the tabu [sic] against using the devil's name, we need not be unduly surprised that these stories do not more often name the culprit a devil," and that "we can see the close relationship between ghosts and haunts and the devil especially well where we have a complex of stories about the same dog" (231).

Whether it is the "same dog" however, may be a matter for debate, especially in the British tradition. In other stories, rather than causing harm, the black dog acts as a protector and guide to lost or endangered travelers, as in this account included in Katharine Briggs's *A Dictionary of British Folktales In the English Language*. In it, a "Mr. Wharton" relates a story about a man of his acquaintance who was to journey through a dark wood alone one night to visit a friend:

At the entrance of the wood a large black dog joined him, and pattered along by his side. He could not make out where it came from, but it never left him, and when the wood grew so dark that he could not see it, he still heard it pattering beside him. When he emerged from the wood, the dog had disappeared, and he could not tell where it had gone to. Well, Johnnie paid his visit, and set out to return the same way. At the entrance of the wood, the dog joined him, and pattered along beside him as before; but it never touched him, and he never spoke to it, and again, as he emerged from the wood, it ceased to be there.

Years after, two condemned prisoners in York Gaol told the chaplain that they had intended to rob and murder Johnnie that night in the wood, but that he had a large dog with him, and when they saw that, they felt that Johnnie and the dog together would be too much for them.

'Now that is what I call a useful ghostly apparition,' said Mr. Wharton (Briggs 2002, 14-15).

So on the one hand, the black dog is terrifying, equated with the devil, and often a malevolent omen of death, but on the other hand, it is also what many purveyors of internet dog memes would call “a good boy.” Ethel Rudkin, a folklorist who collected tales of black dog sightings in the 1920s and 30s, was the first to empirically categorize these different variations. “She divides the dogs into three types: (A) the Barguest, which is a shape-shifting demon dog; (B) the black dog, which is uniform in type, about the size of a calf, generally shaggy and intensely black; (C) a rare type which occurs in certain parts of the country in conjunction with a calendar cycle” (Briggs 2003, 3). Briggs herself adds that “three other divisions might be made: the demon dogs; the ghosts of human beings; and the black dogs which appear to exist in their own right, some of them ghosts of dogs” and offers a blanket categorization of simply calling them “dangerous” or “benevolent” dogs (2003, 3).

The attempts by folklorists and researchers to empirically categorize different types of black dogs does say something about the nature of this particular supernatural tradition. Ethel Rudkin, arguably the pioneering researcher on black dogs, was a native of the areas she was studying and states outright that she believes she was able to get “such good first-hand stories” due to the fact that “I have seen the Black Dog, and can therefore believe that the narrator has also seen him” (Rudkin 1938, 111). When examining this statement of belief, it is important to note that black dog sightings can definitely fall under what David Hufford terms “the experiential-source hypothesis,” in which “elements of experience that are independent of culture” are found in reported supernatural encounters (Hufford 1982,15). That is to say, the experience is not wholly invented on the part of the individual who says they have experienced it in order to fit with a cultural template. Unlike many other supernatural manifestations, you are unlikely to find many people willing to insist that there is no such thing as a black dog. With some of the more incredible accounts of black dog sightings, the ones involving hellfire and fantastic disappearances, there is room for doubt, but it is also completely within the realm of possibility



that those who say that they have had black dogs sightings have seen and experienced exactly what they said they did: a large black dog walking beside them down a stretch of road.

And often, with the “benevolent” types of black dog sightings, that is exactly what is reported, as is the case with this one, also found in Briggs’s *Dictionary of British Folktales* and titled, appropriately “A Good Black Dog:”

An old lady of 85 told me in 1960 of a black dog experience of hers in Canada. She had apparently carried the belief out with her from Somerset and brought it back again:

‘When I was a young girl I was living outside Toronto in Canada and I had to go to a farm some miles away one evening. There were woods on the way and I was greatly afraid, but a large black dog came with me and saw me safely to the door. When I had to return he again appeared, and walked with me till I was nearly home. *Then he vanished.*’ (Briggs 2003, 13-14).

Rudkin and Brown relate similar “benevolent” dog accounts, showcasing the black dog’s effectiveness as an escort. Many of these narratives, as in the earlier story related by Mr. Wharton, also involve the escorted person later discovering that there had been some threat to the individual’s safety that was warded off by the dog. Brown writes that, for this very reason, in Lincolnshire County “the Black Dog is never feared, and indeed is often a protector of lonely women. A dog-ghost has even escorted a woman protectively in Yorkshire because she came of a Lincolnshire family” demonstrating that the true black dog was perceived to have a certain amount of loyalty (and sensitivity to the fairer sex), just like an ideal dog (Brown 1958, 179).

So while some researchers link black dogs to the larger tradition of malevolent, literal hellhounds or analogs of Satan himself, there is a remarkably consistent tradition of portraying black dogs as friendly, helpful “man’s best friends,” if a little otherworldly. The purpose of this study will be to compare the two different types of narratives, both “dangerous” and “benevolent,” to see how the black dog is portrayed in both extremes and what these implied cultural attitudes reveal about the complexity of Western society’s relationship with dogs in general.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Man's Best Fiend: A Dog's Place in Human Society**

As we compare “dangerous” and “benevolent” black dog narratives, it may be useful to note that an empirical distinction is made in scholarly studies of the specter itself. In her cultural survey of black dog sightings, folklorist Theo Brown, building off of Ethel Rudkin’s initial study, takes great pains to distinguish a Barguest (one of the names for black dogs specters in the East Anglia region of England) from what she calls the “true black dog” (1958, 176). Barguests, she says, are “always ominous” (176). “Some are belligerent as well, and many are associated with burial-sites and churchyards. The most striking characteristic of the Barguest type is that it

goes out of its way to show the beholder it is no normal dog, but a monster from another world, having no one definite form — though it favours the black dog— and malevolent in character” (178). Barguests often are also described as a mix of natural dog form and something unnatural, such as being headless, having eyes as “big as saucers” or even just one eye in the middle of its forehead, or even having a feature like “twisted spiral horns” or goat feet or a shaggy, bear-like coat (Norman 2015, 90-94).

The “true black dog,” on the other hand, is defined as “that which is nearly always known as the Black Dog, is always black, and is always a dog and nothing else. It may appear like a normal dog, sometimes a retriever, smooth or curly-coated. It varies in size from normal — so that it is mistaken for a real dog —to enormous. The descriptions are remarkably consistent: ‘As big as a calf — donkey — Newfoundland — mastiff — two or three mastiffs’ (Brown 1958, 178) in contrast to the Barguest, which is malleable of shape and often appears as a goat, calf, horse, donkey, heifer, pig and sometimes even as a human (Brown, 176-7). These alternative forms are not used for good, as illustrated by the following account referring to the Barguest as a “Black Shuck:”

On occasions Shuck could take on human form. A tale was told around Lowestoft of a dark-complexioned stranger who suddenly appeared in the neighbourhood; an Italian, people said he was, although he spoke English well. He became friendly with a fisher boy whom he tried to persuade to accompany him to ‘foreign parts’. The lad, however, refused, so the stranger, telling him that he himself had to go, asked him to look after a large black dog, a dog which had been seen about the place since the Italian’s arrival though never, people had noticed, with his master.

The boy consented, the stranger left and soon the dog and its new owner were inseparable, often swimming together in the sea. One fateful day, however, the lad swam far out to sea and when he turned round to come back to the shore, he was horrified to find that the dog would not allow him to do so, but with horrible growling and snapping at his legs and neck compelled him to go farther out to sea, the dog keeping close behind him. The plight of the poor lad was terrible in the extreme, and a fearful death confronted him. On, on he swam, and ever behind him swam the much-dreaded Black Shuck. So frightened was he that he dared not turn his head to look at the beast, but at length he heard the panting and growling of the dog by his side and, turning his head, he was horrified to see, not the shaggy head of the dog but the head and saturnine face of the Italian. He bestowed upon the boy a hellish and triumphant grin, and then instantly resumed the form of the dog and again ‘flew’ at his neck with a savage snarl. Just as the boy felt that he must sink, a sailing-ship passed within hearing

distance, and he was hauled aboard, his neck fearfully lacerated by the dog's teeth. The animal dived like a whale and was seen no more (Porter 1974, 91-92).

Aside from the shape-shifting into human form, which we can safely say is not a characteristic of normal dogs, this story illustrates the murderous and deceptive tendencies of the Barguest just as Brown describes it. Not only does it “go out of its way to show the beholder it is no normal dog,” it also seems to go out of its way to cause harm, again unlike dogs and unlike most natural predators (Brown 1978, 178). Due to these characteristics, we can safely slot the Barguest variety into the “dangerous” category of black dog specters.

In contrast, the “true” black dog exhibits behavior that many would consider much more in line with natural dog behavior, including territorial behavior in relation to places and even people. Brown asserts that the “true” black dog “is always associated with a definite place or 'beat' on a road. It is always an individual. Sometimes it is associated with a person or a family. If it is a family dog, it haunts a house (or the vicinity), and seeing it usually means that a member of its family living there will shortly die” (Brown, 178). A strong association with death and bad omens is still present, but the behavior of the dog itself is much more in line with approved standards of dog behavior, up to the point of being likened to a family pet. In one story of the dog as an omen of death in the family, the dog was even fed. According a member of the Haynes family (a family rumored to be haunted by a black dog) in a letter written in 1958:

Once, when my Mother and I were on a driving tour of the West Coast, into Scotland .... at Durham a black dog accompanied us, and when we baited the cob<sup>1</sup>, my Mother ordered some food should be put in the stable for it. I never expected to see it again, but as we left Durham it appeared the usual hundred yards ahead of us and was still with us till we got over the Border - when it vanished. Well, my Mother was taken ill at Skelmorlie on the Clyde, taken home to Liverpool where she died. So we always said the Black Dog was a haunt (Norman 2015, 60).

While they can still actively cause calamity as well as just heralding it, including instances where “a man struck at the dog, and man, horse, waggon and load were all burnt to ashes,” and “a man fired at a dog, and the barrel burst” leaving the man severely shaken, Brown

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<sup>1</sup> Fed their horse.

at least is careful to demonstrate that “in general, most of the Black Dogs are not offensive,” going on to say that “most of those who have been injured were asking for trouble, either by attacking the dog or running away from it, which is *exactly what we should expect from a real dog*” (Brown 1958, 187, emphasis added). This assertion suggests that black dogs of this tradition were compared to real dogs and expected to have more “dog-like” standards of behavior regardless of their supernatural origin.

So, we must ask ourselves, what are “dog-like” standards of behavior and why are they used to differentiate between the “dangerous” and “benevolent” versions of black dog specters? It does seem, for the most part, that benevolence is equated with more natural dog-like behavior, although it is important to note that Brown does mention that that dog-like behavior is not always in and of itself, benevolent. But what is the standard of dog behavior is Brown is specifically referring to? What standards of dog behavior exist in society?

One set of societal standards might focus on usefulness to people. Many folktales and legends focus on the working function of dogs in society. Drawing from the long history and contemporary experience of dogs as hunters, herders, and protectors, folktale dogs often act in their master’s best interest, defending him and his property from threats that are sometimes supernatural in nature. One legend from Ghana, which scholar Christine Goldberg asserts has variants throughout the world, is related as follows:

A hunter had four dogs called Sniff-sniff, Lick-lick, Tie-in-knots, and Gulp-down. One day he told his wife that he had seen a kola tree laden with nuts. She told him to pick some because they had none to eat and none to sell. Leaving his dogs at home, he climbed the tree and picked some of the kola nuts. There he was confronted by a forest spirit who owned the tree and who said he would kill the hunter. The hunter called his dogs by name and they came running. Sniff-sniff sniffed the forest spirit. Lick-lick licked him, Tie-in-knots tied his throat in knots, and Gulp-down gulped him down. They returned home, and another incident follows (Goldberg 1998, 42).

In other variants, the dogs defend their master from an ogre, other ferocious animals, and in several cases, a demonic, cannibalistic sister (44).

One story that also plays on the theme of three unusually-named dogs (I-know, You-know, and Cumptico-Calico) defending their master from an evil creature is the story of the Taily-Po, from North America. Similar to the “dogs rescue master from tree” tale, this legend has many variants, but usually ends abruptly after the monster, the titular “Tailypo” creature, has successively eliminated the protagonist’s three hound dogs and attacks and presumably kills the man in order to revenge itself for the loss of its tail, which the man has chopped off and eaten out of hunger (“Tailypo”).

In both tales, the dogs are the last line of defense against a hostile, unexplainable world that is literally out to get the protagonist simply for trying to feed themselves and go about their business. Dogs are an incredible asset in this endeavor: when they leap to their master’s defense, the threat is nullified; either killed or driven away immediately. Even in the horrific ending of the Tailypo legend, the monster can only enact its revenge after all three hounds are no longer at their master’s beck and call.

“True” black dogs do seem to meet this criteria for protectiveness and usefulness, although, occupying the supernatural niche themselves, the threats they defend humans from are usually more mundane in nature, as in the following narrative from a correspondent of Theo Brown’s:

A great personal friend of the family, who, when only a girl in her teens, had a lonely walk along a road which climbed through dense woodland to her home village. One night in the gathering gloom, rather later than she could have wished, she was hurrying along when, to her alarm, she saw two disreputable tramps waiting just ahead. She hesitated, frightened and dismayed for a moment, when along in front of her there trotted a large black dog which she closely followed safely past the two men. They eyed her and the dog but did not dare to interfere. As she neared her home door, the dog was gone (Norman 2015, 77).

Here the threat is one that any young woman might face while walking home alone at night, but the non-supernatural “disreputable tramps” are still warded off by the presence of the dog, who appeared at the moment the danger was greatest and did not leave until it was safely past.

While they do mimic the behavior of guard dogs, however, “true” black dogs do still cause injury. Again, Theo Brown specifically mentions that “most of those who have been injured were asking for trouble,” by provoking the dog in some way, which Brown equates this behavior with the behavior of real dogs (Brown 1958, 187). We can infer, then, that this is culturally acceptable behavior for a dog, and that the behavior of a “true black dog” matches it while the behavior of a Barguest does not. The Barguest is neither useful nor protective and causes harm indiscriminately. The Barguest operates under different societal rules while the “true black dog” is subject to those rules in some form. But while black dogs achieve a healthy degree of respect from humans, this is not the case for rule-following dogs universally. The “true” black dog may repay in kind those who attempt to harm or meddle with it, but this aspect of their behavior does diverge from folktale traditions concerning dogs in general.

Dogs in general almost never achieve any significant action independently in many folk tales, to cause harm or otherwise. They are creatures without much agency. According to Bahaman animals fables in the tradition of Brer Rabbit, B’Dog is too foolish, too earnest, and too easily hoodwinked to avoid being taken advantage of by wiler or stronger animals (Edwards 1981). In early Arabic literary folktales, the dog is not even a character, merely a valuable object to be bartered or tricked away from other individuals (Lichtenstaedter 1940). Katherine Rogers, author of *First Friend: A History of Dogs and People*, notes that the role of the dog in French literary fairytales is almost never to be “supernaturally gifted or demonic” (Rogers 2009, 10). Rather, they function as “pretty little pets” that are “rarely endowed with the magical qualities attributed to wild animals, cats, and even horses.” Even when a dog does talk, as in Madame d’Aulnoy’s “Story of Pretty Goldilocks,” “it is only to fulfill the natural dog’s role of bringing comfort and encouragement to his mistreated master” (Rogers 2009, 10).

A dog speaking in this manner in a fairy tale does seem like a natural role, since “dogs are so close to us that we think of them as almost human” (Rogers 2005, 8). In the final analysis, however, “they remain animals without our speech and reason, so we do not see them

as equals. Therefore we tend to regard them not as independent animals but as lesser humans—not only less reasonable and less moral, but not deserving of the well-being and amenities proper for ourselves” (Rogers 2005, 8).

This attitude of dogs as less deserving than people also shows up in the use of dogs in our language and idiom:

Common expressions reinforce the idea that dogs are and should be subject to worse conditions than humans: for example, ‘work like a dog,’ ‘sick as a dog,’ ‘not fit for a dog,’ ‘in the doghouse.’ ‘Go to the dogs’ is to go to ruin. ‘It shouldn’t happen to a dog’ suggests that bad experiences are less unsuitable for dogs than humans. A person should never have to lead “a dog’s life,” and to ‘die like a dog’ is the ultimate degradation.

Because dogs are thought of as second-class people, ‘dog’ and ‘bitch’ are the epithets that leap to mind when we want to denigrate a human. Calling someone a dog is almost invariably an insult, in civilizations from our own to that of the ancient Aztecs. Although the Romans were generally fond of dogs, they called parasites and spiteful people *canis*. ‘Puppy’ is an impudent young person or upstart; ‘dog,’ ‘hound,’ and ‘cur’ describe contemptible or surly men; ‘bitch’ is used so automatically to abuse women that it has almost lost its canine denotation (Rogers 2005, 8).

So while human beings invariably hold a special place in their hearts for dogs because of their usefulness, loyalty, and perceived loving nature, the flip side of the coin is that we also hold dogs somewhat in contempt. In his famous manifesto “On the Sublime and Beautiful,” Edmund Burke states that dogs, while indeed “the most social, affectionate, and amiable animals of the whole brute creation” inspire a love in human beings that “approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined; and accordingly, though we caress dogs, we borrow from them an appellation of the most despicable kind, when we employ terms of reproach; and this appellation is the common mark of the last vileness and contempt in every language” (Burke 1757). As also noted by Katherine Rogers, to call a man a “dog” in any language is not remotely a compliment.

Burke then goes on to draw an important distinction, emphasizing what it is that dogs lack of the sublime: “Wolves have not more strength than several species of dogs; but, on account of their unmanageable fierceness, the idea of a wolf is not despicable; it is not excluded from grand descriptions and similitudes” (Burke 1757).



Again, this distinction plays out in folk narrative. A fable commonly attributed to Aesop goes as follows:

A Wolf, meeting a big well-fed Mastiff with a wooden collar about his neck asked him who it was that fed him so well and yet compelled him to drag that heavy log about wherever he went. 'The master,' he replied. Then said the Wolf: 'May no friend of mine ever be in such a plight; for the weight of this chain is enough to spoil the appetite' (Aesop).

Here the wolf, a wild creature that struggles for survival, believes that a full belly is not worth the loss of dignity that comes with subservience to mankind. As Burke suggests, human beings have a tendency to respect and admire wolves for their independence and ferocity, while dogs are viewed with a condescending fondness that at times edges into outright disregard.

In British black dog legends, however, this disregard is clearly subverted. Black dogs of any variety are not "pretty little pets" or subject to the whims of man; they are shrouded in mystery, heralds of a supernatural world that humans cannot control or fully comprehend. Their often frightening appearance and association with death, the devil and the underworld seems to be much closer to Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime as "analogous to terror" than a domesticated lapdog would be (Burke 1757).

This dichotomy plays out in attitudes towards dogs in Victorian England in particular. According to Claire McKechnie, during this period in Britain, "...the dog had become a reliable and much-loved human companion as well as an icon of moral virtue" (McKechnie 2013). Dogs in the 19th century "emblemized unwavering loyalty, faithfulness, and dedication," embodying "Victorian values more fully and consistently than did any other creature [and] were ranked among the highest of animals because of their moral nature" (McKechnie 2013). As far as morality went, dogs were regarded, again, as almost human. In addition to these positive attributes, "as people acquired the ability to create, alter, and improve dog breeds through artificial selection, [dogs] represented the kind of practical scientific success that supported an optimistic view of evolutionary progress" (McKechnie 2013). Therefore, not only were dogs inherently likable, they also represented man's triumphs over nature.

The advent of widespread rabies epidemics in the region during the 1870s complicated this image. According to McKechnie, this dreaded disease also took on symbolic proportions, posing “two main symbolic threats... First, it threatened to disrupt and destabilize social order-- the biology of the infected victim (be it human or animal) exceeded social and cultural limits and laws. Second...rabies emerged from the wilderness to invade organized spaces in the same way that the disease infiltrated the human body” (McKechnie 2013). It is interesting to note that the symbolic dimensions of rabies were a direct challenge to the desired symbolic connotations of the dog; where once the dog was a symbol of accepted moral conventions, rabies made it a threat to the social order, and where once the dog was a symbol of nature tamed, rabies made it a symbol of nature run amok.

This version of the dog as an outright threat comes out in Gothic literature of the time period, including the popular Sherlock Holmes adventure *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, first published in 1902. When Sherlock and Watson encounter the eponymous hound for the first time, its description seems to hark to the Barguest, commonly named as one of Doyle’s sources of inspiration:

A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog (Doyle quoted in McKechnie 2002).

A similarly frightening depiction of a supernatural black dog takes place in the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, first published in 1897. The vampire antagonist shapeshifts into an “immense” dog in order to leave the ship that has carried him to England, whereupon it is heavily implied that he engages in Barguest-like behavior, killing a large mastiff by ripping out its throat and slitting its belly “with a savage claw” in a mixture of natural and unnatural dog-like behavior (Stoker 2000, 108).

Such literature may have possibly cemented the dog, particularly the black dog, a permanent place in the order of the “sublime” while leaving the nature of dog’s relationship to people ambiguous. Of the portrayal of the dog in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, McKechnie states that “although finally rationalized by science [in the story], this fictional account of the black dog legend of British folklore makes use of Gothic imagery and rhetoric in much the same ways as medical and legal texts made use of rabies. Like the black dog into which Dracula metamorphoses on the ship to England, the hound of the Baskervilles is both real and spectral, respectable and diabolical, mysterious and rationalized, encapsulating, perhaps, the dichotomy in the figure of the dog” (McKechnie 2002).

For the purposes of this study, this “dichotomy in the figure of the dog” will be treated as a scale. On the one extreme, we have the Barguest, shape-shifting, deceptive, frightening, otherworldly, dangerous, and potentially preying on people, when it has anything to do with them at all. On the other, we have the popular conception of the domesticated dog; fixed in shape and role, faithful, comforting, useful, protective, and kind of dumb, totally dependent on and inferior to people. In the middle, a sea of ambiguity that contains a wide range of dog behavior and ways of relating to dogs.

This sliding scale of “doggy to demonic” will serve as a measuring stick for the true objects of this study: the “true” black dog named in Theo Brown’s cultural survey. As discussed in chapter one, it is highly possible that many reported supernatural black dog encounters have actually involved a real interaction with a black dog, but when these experiences are turned into narrative, attitudes and beliefs about dogs are revealed in the way the person chooses to describe the dog and the experience. Are “true” black dogs commonly given more societally-approved descriptors than the malevolent Barguest? Are they given more “sublime” (awe-ful and terror-inspiring) descriptors than a real dog might be given? These questions may be answered by examining black dog narratives as texts, which will be the aim of the next two

chapters. Gathering criteria for how the black dog is portrayed in both extremes may even shed light on the possible concept of an ideal dog as it relates to people and society.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **Black Dog Narratives**

The following is a collection of black dog narratives sorted partially by the classifications discussed by Ethel Rudkin and Katherine Briggs in Chapter One. Ethel Rudkin names these types “(A) the Barguest, which is a shape-shifting demon dog; (B) the black dog, which is uniform in type, about the size of a calf, generally shaggy and intensely black; (C) a rare type which occurs in certain parts of the country in conjunction with a calendar cycle” (Briggs 2003, 3). This chapter will mainly focus on types (A), the Barguest, and (B), the black dog, as a study including type (C) would require greater scope than can be permitted here. Briggs’ additional “three other divisions” will also be used; “the demon dogs; the ghosts of human beings; and the black dogs which appear to exist in their own right, some of them ghosts of dogs.” The term “true black dog” will be used to signify dogs under type B) that also “appear to exist in their own right,” being neither hellhounds nor conceivably the ghosts of human beings.

In addition to including the empirical classifications provided by Rudkin and Briggs, the narratives will be sorted according to behavior, on the scale of “doggy to demonic,” beginning with the most dog-like according to behavior and appearance. The criteria for sorting will focus mostly on physical appearance and the protagonist’s understanding of the dog’s true nature: namely, if the protagonist becomes aware that the dog is not a natural dog, the dog will be moved farther away from the “doggy” end of the scale.

The narratives are mostly selected from Mark Norman's *Black Dog Folklore* and Katherine Brigg's *Dictionary of Folk-tales in the English Language* due to the textual nature and the wide variety of the narratives presented in each.

### Item #1

"Guardian Angel Black Dog"

#### **Text:**

"My mother was not free from country superstitions, although she was a devoutly God fearing woman, with a firm faith in her God and a strong belief in the efficacy of prayer ... One moonlit summer night, as a girl of sixteen or seventeen, she found herself in circumstances which necessitated a walk ... from Sampford Courtenay to Okehampton. At one particular stage of the walk — which I think passed through a belt of woodland — she became very frightened for some reason that I cannot now remember, and in her fear prayed that she might have some companion to protect her. Very soon a large black dog appeared in the wood and paced quietly by her side until she was entering the outskirts of Okehampton."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Norman, Mark. 2015. *Black Dog Folklore*. 80. London: Troy Books.

### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Sampford Courtenay and Okehampton are both villages in Devonshire, about five miles apart. The informant for this particular story was writing to folklorist Ruth L. Tongue, in response to her inquiry about black dog encounters.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

The reference to "country superstitions" may refer to beliefs about fairies or ghosts and other non-religious ideas, which is why they are presented in opposition to the informant's mother being "a devoutly God fearing woman." Such superstitions would perhaps have inspired the sort of fear described after having to walk alone in the dark.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

Part of the protagonists "belief in the efficacy of prayer" surely included the idea that God answers prayers through tangible and specific means, therefore the appearance of the dog was explicitly linked to the prayer. This in turn leads to the idea that the dog was sent by God to guard the girl from danger, similar in concept to the idea of a guardian angel.

### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Type B, a "true black dog" in that it appears as nothing but a "large black dog." and exhibits no unnatural behaviors. The dog appears soon after the prayer, and "paced quietly by her side" until the girl reached her destination. The connection with the divine is especially at odds with the usually hellish Barguest.

Item #2

## “A Black Dog Protects a Priest”

**Text:**

In the April 1959 edition of *The Methodist Magazine*, Ethel Whitaker writes about her father-in-law, the Reverend Samuel Whitaker who: "was stationed in the Stroud circuit in the early half of the present century. When returning from his pastoral work late one afternoon he had to walk for some miles along a lonely lane in the country. He was a slight, short man. Just as he left the outskirts of one village he realised that there was a large black dog walking close beside him. He stopped and ordered the dog to go home but the dog remained at his side so he just had to continue his walk. Sometime later he heard footsteps approaching and in the half light he saw two men — large, brutal looking fellows — advancing towards him. When they saw the dog they stopped, scowled and passed on. When my father-in-law reached the outskirts of the next village, he found that the dog had disappeared. He made enquiries of the people in both villages all of whom he knew well, but no-one recognised the dog — nor did he ever see it again."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Norman, Mark. 2015. *Black Dog Folklore*. 79. London: Troy Books.

## CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Stroud district, named for the town of Stroud, is located in Gloucestershire England. Ethel Whittaker provides a literary account to a faith-based magazine of an experience that had happened to her husband's father, a Methodist minister. Also featuring two large men, "large, brutal looking fellows," who, it is implied, meant to attack the minister.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

Many ministers in the Methodist faith were, at the time the article was written, assigned to "circuits" as traveling ministers. Rather than having a church, they would travel throughout the parish and visit people in their homes and other convenient locations. This occupation obviously involved a lot of travel, which is the basis for this minister's experience.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

The Reverend Samuel Whittaker is described as "a short, slight man." This unimposing physical stature combined with his profession make him vulnerable, as it is believed that clergy are at risk of increased supernatural interference due to the nature of their profession. Luckily the supernatural element in this story seems to literally be on the side of the angels. See "The Black Dog and Donald Roy" for an alternative account of a priest encountering a black dog.

## BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Class B, a “true black dog,” described only as “a large black dog;” intimidating enough to deter thugs but not uncanny enough to really alarm anyone. Starts accompanying the Reverend,” walking close beside him,” before he encounters the men. Ignores the ministers attempt to send the dog away with a common dog command: “Go home!” Is explicitly not a part of the community, as no one saw the dog before or since.

### Item #3

“The Guardian Black Dog”

#### **Text:**

“Mr. Wharton said..., ‘When I was at the little inn in Ayscliffe, I met a Mr. Bond, who told me a story about my friend Johnnie Greenwood, of Swancliffe. Johnnie had to ride one night through a wood a mile long to the place he was going to.

‘At the entrance of the wood a large black dog joined him, and pattered along by his side. He could not make out where it came from, but it never left him, and when the wood grew so dark that he could not see it, he still heard it pattering beside him. When he emerged from the wood, the dog had disappeared, and he could not tell where it had gone to. Well, Johnnie paid his visit, and set out to return the same way. At the entrance of the wood, the dog joined him, and pattered along beside him as before; but it never touched him, and he never spoke to it, and again, as he emerged from the wood, it ceased to be there.

‘Years after, two condemned prisoners in York Gaol told the chaplain that they had intended to rob and murder Johnnie that night in the wood, but that he had a large dog with him, and when they saw that, they felt that Johnnie and the dog together would be too much for them.

‘Now that is what I call a useful ghostly apparition,’ said Mr. Wharton.”

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. “The Guardian Black Dog.” In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 14-15. New York: Routledge.

## CONTEXTUAL DATA

### **Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Mr. Wharton, the teller of the story, relates a story that he heard from Mr. Bond about a mutual acquaintance, echoing the “friend of a friend” narrative structure of many legends. The protagonist, the mutual acquaintance “Johnnie Greenwood,” is from Swancliffe or Swalcliffe, in Oxfordshire in Southern England, so presumably the story takes place near there, as it is also close to York, where the criminals are executed.

### **Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

“Gaol” is another term for a jail or prison, where presumably the two condemned prisoners confessed to their contemplated crime to the chaplain as part of their last religious rites before they were executed, presumably for crimes they had actually carried out.

### **Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

Being attacked by thieves in a remote location is a real societal concern, along with the idea that dogs ward off thieves. Katharine Briggs also notes in a footnote to the text that “this story was fairly widespread in the 1900s, when Augustus Hare (the

biography she found the narrative in) heard it" (Briggs 2003, 15). She indicates that she heard it herself as a child in 1910 with some of the details changed, showing that it was probably a widely-told legend as well as a literary account. This shows that the story was relevant to its audiences concerns, otherwise it would not have been shared so often.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Type B, the "true black dog," according to Theo Brown's classifications. Described as simply "large" and "black," but also specifically, later, as a "useful ghostly apparition." Protagonist could "not make out where it came from," and "could not tell where it had gone to" when it disappeared or "ceased to be there." "It never left him" while he was in the wood, joining him at the entrance to the wood both on the way to his destination and back, specifically "patter[ing] along beside him." The dog also notably "never touched him." It is unambiguously benevolent, only those planning evil are afraid of it.

#### Item #4

"The Old Lady and the Black Dog"

##### **Text:**

Miss Tongue tells that one branch of her family hails from Lincolnshire, where the dogs are friendly and she believes that this accounts for this experience of a relation who was living in Yorkshire about 1930:

"The old lady was visiting a niece who was ill and who lived in a gamekeeper's cottage a mile from the main road in a lonely district. She left the bus, laden with packages, and as no one met her began a long walk through the early evening. She was worried because the locality had a bad name for attacks on lonely people, but she became aware of a large black dog keeping alongside, about ten feet away. Her fears left her and she talked to him but got no response. There was a spinney ahead she had dreaded but all through its blackness she saw the dog with her. When she came out into the open her cousin's house was quite close but the dog wouldn't come in. The cousin and her husband, the gamekeeper, had seen some rough fellows run for their lives just before the solitary figure of the old lady appeared from the spinney. There was nothing with her."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Norman, Mark. 2015. *Black Dog Folklore*. 59. London: Troy Books.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Ruth L. Tongue was a folklorist who collaborated with Theo Brown on her cultural survey of black dog legends, and this is one of the stories she contributed. Ruth Tongue's relative, and unnamed old woman, is making a dangerous journey in a "lonely district" to visit a sick niece, living with her (either Tongue's or the old lady's) cousin and her husband, a gamekeeper. Other characters include the "rough fellows" (presumably the old lady's potential attackers who did not have a chance to actually attack.)

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

A "spinney" is a small area of trees, bushes, or other shrubs, presenting a danger to the old lady due to the darkness and the chance attackers might conceal themselves there.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**



The Lincolnshire and Lancashire tradition of “friendly” black dogs is well-discussed in Brown’s survey, with one of the chief characteristics seeming to be that this particular kind of black dog is attached to the people rather than the location. This is the reason implied for the black dog’s behavior in the text despite the setting of the story being Yorkshire. Again, there is a worry expressed about the dangers of traveling alone at night.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Another Class B, also a “true black dog.” Notably inspires fear in the “rough fellows,” who “run for their lives,” but actually calms the fears of the old lady. “A large black dog” is the chief and only descriptor. The dog doesn’t get too close to the old lady while keeping pace with her and does not respond to her talking to it. It does not enter the cousin’s house despite the implied offer to come in. This also implies that the old lady could see it after she came out of the spinney, while the cousin and her husband could not see anything.

#### Item #5

##### “A Good Black Dog”

#### **Text:**

“A more indisputably Somerset story was told me by a very sweet and gentle cottager who had once had occasion to climb the Quantocks one winter afternoon. When he had climbed up Weacombe to the top the sea-mist came down, and he felt he might be frozen to death before he got home. But as he was groping along he suddenly touched shaggy fur and thought that old Shep, his sheep-dog, had come out to look him. “Good dog, Shep. Whoame, boy!” he said. The dog turned and led him right to his cottage door, where he heard his own dog barking inside. He turned to look at the dog who had guided him, which grew gradually larger and then faded away. “It was the Black Dog, God bless it!” he would always say. It is unusual for anybody to touch the Black Dog without coming to harm.”

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. “A Good Black Dog.” In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 13-14. New York: Routledge.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

##### **Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

This is another story collected directly from an informant by Ruth L. Tongue. According to Wikipedia, the Quantock Hills are a range of hills west of Bridgewater in Somerset, England.” Weacombe is a nearby village but also the name of a path to the top, and the area is known to get misty.

##### **Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

Katharine Briggs notes that “Traditions of guardian black dogs are fairly widespread in this country-, but perhaps commonest in Somerset, where they are often associated with the church black dog, the ghost of a dog sacrificed at the opening of the churchyard, to be is guardian. Birdlip Hill, in Gloucestershire, is said to be haunted by a friendly black dog which guides lost travellers.”

##### **Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

There is an implicit expectation about the behavior of dogs, here. The cottager is not surprised to encounter a dog because he expects that his own dog would have come to find him.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Type B, a “true black dog” with some Barguest characteristics in its reveal as a supernatural dog. Tactile description is given here since the dog is actually touched; the dog's fur is described as “shaggy,” a common descriptor for supernatural black dogs. When the dog is revealed, it “grew gradually larger and then faded away.” In addition to the implication of unusual size, the growing is another characteristic commonly attributed to black dogs. Leads the man home when addressed, does not reveal anything out of the ordinary until the cottager realizes it is not his dog.

#### Item #6

“The Boy and the Barguest”

#### **Text:**

“As a child I was once staying in Norfolk with a friend whose mother told me the following story: Thirty years before her brother, then a boy, had been sent on an errand at dusk. On arriving at his destination, he found the house shut up, and he was just leaving when a large black dog rose up silently from the ground and put his paws on the child's shoulders. The boy had not seen the dog in the darkness and was not expecting to meet one. He was naturally very frightened, but recovered himself quickly and went home. He told his parents what had happened, but made little of it, and went on with his work for a forthcoming examination. Eventually he went to bed at his usual time. In the middle of the night he died from the delayed effects of shock. The people to whose house he had been sent had no dog of their own, and local superstition was quick to ascribe the occurrence and its terrible consequences to a barguest.”

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. “The Boy and the Barguest.” In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 10. New York: Routledge.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Norfolk is a county in East Anglia, an area of England with a strong black dog tradition.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

When the house is “shut up,” it means it is locked and no one is home. When the narrative states the boy “went on with his work for a forthcoming examination,” he was studying for a test.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

The black dog lore of the area usually names the black dog as an omen of death, although in this case it appears to also be the indirect cause.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

This dog was interpreted as a Type (A) Barguest, and a malevolent dog. Interestingly, it is described as just a “large black dog” with nothing supernatural about it aside from how quickly and unexpectedly it appeared. The putting of its paws on the boy's shoulders is an event in common with stories of other supernatural creatures, however, and perhaps helped lead the “local superstition” to name it a barguest.

Item #7

## "The Ghost of the Black Dog"

**Text:**

"A man having to walk from Princetown to Plymouth took the road which crosses Rowborough Down. He started at four o'clock from the Duchy Hotel, and as he walked at a good swinging pace, hoped to cover the sixteen miles in about three hours and a half.

It was a lovely evening in December, cold and frosty, the stars and a bright moon giving enough light to enable him to see the roadway distinctly zigzagged across the moor. Not a friendly pony or quiet Neddy crossed his path as he strode merrily onward whistling as he went. After a while the desolation of the scene seemed to strike him, and he felt terribly alone among the boulders and huge masses of gorse which hemmed him in. On, on he pressed, till he came to a village where wayside inn tempted him to rest awhile and have just one nip of something "short" to keep his spirits up.

Passing the reservoir beds, he came out on an open piece of road, with a pine copse on his right. Just then he fancied he heard the pit-pat of feet gaining upon him. Thinking it was a pedestrian bound for Plymouth, he turned to accost his fellow-traveller, but there was no one visible, nor were any footfalls then audible. Immediately on resuming his walk, pit-pat, pit-pat fell the echoes of feet again. And suddenly there appeared close to his right side an enormous dog, neither mastiff nor bloodhound, but what seemed to him to be a Newfoundland of immense size. Dogs were always fond of him, so he took no heed of this (to him) lovely canine specimen.

Presently he spoke to him. "Well, doggie, what a beauty you are; how far are you going?" at the same time lifting his hand to pat him. Great was the man's astonishment to find no resisting substance, though the form was certainly there, for his hand passed right through the seeming body of the animal. "Hulloh! what's this?" said the bewildered traveller. As he spoke the great glassy eyes gazed at him; then the beast yawned, and from his throat issued a stream of sulphurous breath. Well, thought the man, I am in for it now! I'll trudge on as fast as legs can carry me, without letting this queer customer think I am afraid of him. With heart bearing madly and feet actually flying over the stony way, he hurried down the hill, the dog never for a moment leaving him, or slackening his speed. They soon reached a crossway, not far from the fortifications, when suddenly the man was startled by a loud report, followed by a blinding flash, as of lightning, which struck him senseless to the ground. At day-break, he was found by the driver of the mail-cart, lying in the ditch at the roadside in an unconscious state. Tradition says, that a foul murder was many years ago committed at this spot, and the victim's dog is doomed to traverse this road and kill every man he encounters, until the perpetrator of the deed has perished by his instrumentality."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. "The Ghost of the Black Dog." In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 12-13. New York: Routledge.

CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Princeton and Plymouth are both in Devonshire, about 12 miles apart, so the unnamed man in the narrative really did have to go a fair distance alone.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

A “quiet Neddy” is a peculiar but harmless person, someone one might expect to see traveling at night.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

There is a preoccupation articulated here with murder being tied to supernatural events, with the “victim’s dog” roaming the site of the murder in ghost form. The idea of justice being wreaked from beyond the grave is also common, as is the idea of a dog being loyal to its master.

**BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATIONS**

This is definitely a “ghost of dog” classification, so it is not a Barguest nor a “true black dog,” although on the sliding scale of doggy to demonic it is probably closer to the later. It is described as an “enormous dog,” specifically of no identifiable breed, but similar to a “Newfoundland of immense size” with “great glassy eyes.” The enjoyable detail of the man being a dog lover helps back up the breed comparisons. Interestingly, no mention is made of the dog’s color. He appears to be a normal dog until the man tries to touch him and discovers he is intangible. Upon which, other uncanny behaviors are exhibited, including the “stream of sulphurous breath” that “issue[s] from his throat” during an otherwise normal dog-like yawn. It is important to note that the dog doesn’t explicitly attack the man; instead he is “startled by a loud report, followed by a blinding flash, as of lightning, which struck him senseless to the ground.” The attack is supernatural in nature, but besides the wrath-of-God type lightning strike it brings to mind being shot with a gun. Perhaps this is how the dog’s master was killed?

Item #8

“Family Encounters Black Shuck”

**Text:**

“Writing to the Fortean Times, Mr. G. E. Thompson tells of an encounter his family had in 1996 when his daughter, who was 19 at the time, worked for a holiday site in Norfolk. One night, close to midnight, her parents had met her from a late shift to walk her back to their caravan when they all heard movements from some nearby bushes, followed by a snarl unlike anything that they had ever heard before. From the light of a nearby house they could make out the shape of a large dog:

“It stood there snarling, but unlike any dog we had ever heard — and we have always had dogs. To say we were nervous would have been an understatement. To cap it all, it had glowing red eyes. There was no way it could have been a trick of the light as the house lights were behind it. It stood there as we walked fearfully past. After a few yards I looked back, as the snarling had stopped. The creature was nowhere to be seen, though we had heard no sound of it moving.”

Once back at the caravan, Mr. Thompson’s wife came across an article in a magazine on phantom black dogs in Norfolk and he noted that the description of the Shuck in this article tallied with what they had seen. He also notes that they suffered a lot of bad luck after seeing this animal.”

**Bibliographic Reference:** Norman, Mark. 2015. *Black Dog Folklore*. 103. London: Troy Books.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Norfolk is a county located in the East Anglia region, where the black dog is commonly known as “The Black Shuck.” The Thompson family, parents and their daughter, are the people involved in the sighting. *The Fortean Times* is a monthly magazine published in the U.K. and focused on “anomalous phenomena,” or “the strange and supernatural” and certainly would be interested in an experience like the Thompson’s. The text in quotation marks is direct from Mr. Thompson, with paraphrasing by Mark Norman.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

“Holiday site” can be understood as “campsite” in this context, and “caravan” means a camper/trailer.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

The Black Shuck in East Anglia is associated with bad luck, as well as death. This family reportedly only suffered the former.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Type (A) Barguest, as the dog is explicitly associated with a Black Shuck, commonly believed to be malevolent. “Glowing red eyes” and “snarling...unlike any dog we had ever heard.” It is important to note here that the dog is only compared to real dogs to show how unlike a real dog Mr. Thompson felt it was.

#### Item #9

“The Collingbourne Kingston Black Dog”

**Text:**

“There was a pair of robbers who were the terror of the countryside. They robbed on the Bath highway, rich and poor alike, three pennies or three guineas was all the same to them—they took it.

But when it came to setting thatch afire to rob a farm near Marlborough, to hide murder, the men of the Wiltshire Downs got together to catch and send them to Devizes Jail to be hanged next Sessions.

All the countryside had liked the old farmer and his wife, and neighbours often dropped by to give a hand, or bring a pie or a batch of new baked loaves, for the old wife was not as strong as she had been. One morning someone was coming by with some cream, when he saw the thatch ablaze, and roused the village with the horn; but when they dragged out the old couple, they found they had been killed with an iron bar. The hue and cry was up for miles, and the murderers dodged here and there, hiding by day and going on by night, until they had to cross the Downs from Everley to Collingbourne Kingston. There were woods down there that would give them cover, and time to rest, for the pursuit was coming up with them—but they forgot nobody ever went that way after dark if they could help it—especially those with evil consciences. Well, in their fear of pursuers behind them they forgot the worse fear before them until they were among the trees.

Now they were safe awhile.

But were they?

And then they remembered the Black Dog with his huge gleaming eyes like saucers. He brought ill luck to all who met him, and death to the evil doer. And these two had cruel murder on their minds.

As they hesitated, they heard distant shouting and ran deeper into the dark wood. But, as they paused for breath, there was a light—a green light from the Black Dog's eyes, and they screamed and stumbled away down another path.

When again they stopped all was quiet and dark, until a green light from ghostly eyes shone just by their shoulders.

They turned, screaming, and ran all the way back up on to the Downs, where the hue and cry were waiting for them.

They were put into handcuffs and taken in triumph to Devizes Jail. "We knew we'd get them when they ran down into the woods. All we had to do was wait outside, and let the Black Dog send 'em back," the villagers said.

The robbers were hanged in the eighteenth century, but the Black Dog has still been seen in the twentieth century.

So you need a clear conscience to travel the road to Collingbourne Kingston after dark."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. "The Collingbourne Kingston Black Dog." In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 10-11. New York: Routledge.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Very specific locations are used in this story. Marlborough, where the old farming couple is murdered, is a town in Wiltshire, here named as "the Wiltshire Downs." Collingbourne Kingston is a village about 8 miles south of Marlborough, a conceivable distance for a pair of murderous thieves to flee.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

A "hue and cry," while in a modern lexicon meaning only a public outcry, was actually a part of pre-modern English law. Inhabitants of a community had to raise a public outcry, and specifically a hunting party of community members, for the pursuit and capture of a criminal, or they would risk being legally liable for the damages caused by that criminal. Here the hue and cry seems to be formed more for emotion's sake than legal obligation, as the victims were described in detail as being well-loved.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

Even when considered dangerous, black dogs traditionally are considered the most dangerous to those on the wrong side of the law, perhaps evoking the idea of a hellhound tormenting sinners bound for hell.

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

This dog displays many of the characteristics of a Barguest, dangerous and otherworldly, but does not seem to be overtly malevolent in the context of the story, bringing justice rather than misfortune. Signified only by "huge gleaming eyes like saucers," which emit a ghostly green light. The robbers only see the dog's eyes. The dog "brought ill-luck to all who met him, and death to the evil doer." Nobody wanted to risk encountering the dog, with all the locals avoiding going near his haunts after dark. Interestingly enough, however, while it is stated that the dog brings "death to the evil doer," the residents specifically expected the Black Dog to "send 'em back" after the robbers ran into the woods.

Item #10

## "The Black Dog and Donald Roy"

**Text:**

"On a dark night, Donald Roy was walking alone on a solitary road when he was distressed by a series of blasphemous thoughts which came pouring into his mind, and which he had the hardest struggle to dispel. As he was gradually gaining the mastery of himself, he looked down, and saw a black dog trotting by his side. 'All!' he exclaimed, 'and so I have got company. I might have guessed it sooner.' The thing growled, and bounded ahead of Donald, emitting a hot bright jet of flame, which streamed back along the road, till it seemed to hiss and crackle right under his feet. He went steadily on, however, and the thing again bounded ahead, and spat out a second jet of flame. 'Na, na, it winna do,' said Donald; 'ye first tried to loose my haud o' my Master, and ye would now fain gie me a fleg: but I ken baith Him and you over weel for that.' The appearance, however, went on bounding ahead and spurting out flame by turns, till he reached the outer limits of his farm, when it vanished."

**Bibliographic References:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. "The Black Dog and Donald Roy." In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 8-9. New York: Routledge.

## CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

Donald Roy is a semi-legendary Scottish figure, so it can be assumed that the story is taking place in Scotland. Katharine Briggs notes that "Donald Roy, an Elder of the Scottish Church, died in January 1774, in the 108th year of his life and the 84th of his Eldership. Many strange stories are told of his sense and experience of the supernatural world." So in context, this is a legendary occurrence happening to a legendary figure, similar in structure to the American Tall Tale. According to a website on the Scottish Church, Donald Roy was one of the figures of, "a religious revival...which was eventually to influence much of the north of Scotland. Under the influence of the Rev John Balfour large numbers of people met for weekly prayer meetings and a prominent part was taken by leading lay preachers known as 'The Men.' Some of these were thought to have supernatural powers, prophesying and seeing visions. The most prominent of The Men was Donald Roy who died in 1774 at the age of 105" (niggoldtrust.org.uk). As we can see, the discrepancies between his reported ages at death from source to source indicate that there is some variation of events, as indicated in many legends.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

Donald's Scottish dialogue in the text that reads "Na, na, it winna do," said Donald; "ye first tried to loose my haud o' my Master, and ye would now fain gie me a fleg: but I ken baith Him and you over weel for that" can be translated: "No, no, it will not do. You first tried to loose my hold of my Master (referring to the blasphemous thoughts) and you would now gladly give me a scare, but I know both Him and you too well for that."

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

This story is in keeping with the usual characteristics of a folk hero story, including the hero encountering and overcoming some form of supernatural opposition. It also might serve as a cautionary tale against blasphemy, showing where such thoughts come from.

## BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Katharine Briggs explicitly links this story to “Motif G 303.3.3.1.1 [Devil in form of dog]” and the details certainly seem to make this particular dog a hellhound in the strictest sense. Described only as “a black dog” until it starts behaving oddly, thereafter referred to as “the thing” and “the appearance.” The appearance of the dog is connected with the torrent of “blasphemous thoughts” plaguing Donald Roy, implying that the dog is causing them. It exhibits threatening behavior as it growls and emits “a hot bright jet of flame, which streamed back along the road, till it seemed to hiss and crackle right under his feet.” The dog’s emitting of flames connects it further to the Devil, who is obviously a detractor of Donald Roy’s work as a clergyman.

#### Item #11

#### “Th’Skriker”

##### **Text:**

“One winter’s night a young man named Adam left the Patten Arms at Chipping to return to his cottage, three or four miles away on the banks of the Hodder. In the light of the moon Parlick, Longridge, Thornley height, and Kemple End could be seen, and far up the valley lay the fells beyond Whitewell.

About midnight a cloud covered the moon, the wind began to rise, and the noise of the rising storm seemed to Adam to bring with it such fiendish cries and shrieks, that his courage almost failed, and he longed to turn back. But he had already come far, and knew that if he could cross the bridge ahead of him, he would be out of reach of the spirits of that place, who were not able to cross the water. He struggled on, and had almost reached the bridge, when he heard footsteps in the crunching snow at his side, and a fearful howling began and was repeated as he stood transfixed with horror. At last he looked up, and saw, right in the middle of the bridge, a figure which he at once knew, from tales of former victims, to be the terrible Skriker, believed in those parts to be always a herald of death. It was covered with a shaggy black hide, and its huge eyes blazed like fire.

As Adam moved slowly towards the bridge, the Skriker seemed to glide in front of him, and as he moved, or stopped, the creature did the same, but he was over at last, and broke into a run. In his terror he ran on and on, with the monster close beside him, and never stopped till at last he stumbled over a stone. As he got painfully to his feet, he realized that he was alone—the Skriker had disappeared. Adam went on as best he could, for his terror had made him weak and exhausted; he passed the old house at Chaigely, and reached the bend in the road opposite the woods of Kemple End. Suddenly the wind dropped, the moon shone out again, and in the silence, as Adam passed into the dark shadow between the high banks, the terrible shriek sounded again and again.

And as he drew near to the bridge spanning the Hodder, there he saw the monster shuffling its hairy feet through the snow, till it reached the middle of the bridge. Again, as Adam approached, it glided before him, and stopped at the door of his own cottage. Adam banged wildly on the door, and as he did so the spectre splashed away through the snow. Adam fell to the ground in a dead swoon, and it was long before his wife could revive him; and when he had told her his story, she was no less troubled than



he was. A few days later their eldest child was drowned, and Adam's wife, returning from his funeral, caught a fever, from which she too shortly afterwards died. Adam himself was driven mad by his terror, and for many years would wander along the roads around his cottage, in pursuit of imaginary spectres."

**Bibliographic Reference:** Briggs, Katharine. 2003. "Th'Skriker." In *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*. 18-19. New York: Routledge.

#### CONTEXTUAL DATA

**Details of setting where encounter occurred: location, participants, audience of text.**

The locales described are all, interestingly in Lancashire county England, where the more benevolent black dog stories are usually located. The Hodder river does indeed have bridges crossing it at several points. Adam, the protagonist, is accompanied by his wife and child in experiencing the brunt of the consequences in encountering the Skriker.

**Vocabulary or cultural practices needed to understand the text:**

The Skriker is another local name for a supernatural black dog or dog-like specter.

**Values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the interpretation of the encounter:**

This narrative supports the belief that a black dog specter is an omen of death or misfortune

#### BLACK DOG CLASSIFICATION

Described as "a figure...covered with a shaggy black hide, and its huge eyes blazed like fire." At no point is it referred to as a dog; instead the words "Skriker," "monster," "spectre," and "creature" are used. Interestingly, this specter makes a lot of noise, from its footsteps "in the crunching snow" to its "terrible howling." The way it moves is also described, as "gliding," and "splashing away through the snow." Its behavior is entirely ominous and threatening. It keeps pace with Adam, disappearing and reappearing to keep pace with him, and scares him with its howling and shrieking. It never directly attacks, but it definitely "transfix[es] [Adam] with horror." This is definitely a Type A Barguest, and the most malevolent dog on this list in terms of consequences of its appearance and its effects on the protagonist.

### Chapter Four:

#### **A Sliding Scale from Doggy to Demonic: Narrative Differences in Literary Black Dog Legends**

The Black Dog narratives in the previous chapter can be divided into types, according to the behavior of the dog towards people in each; benevolent dogs, malevolent dogs, and dogs

that are not clearly benevolent or malevolent. This chapter will analyze the narratives, firstly examining how the black dogs behave towards the people involved in each story, and how their behavior can be compared with the socially approved standards for canine behavior as discussed in Chapter Two. Usefulness, protectiveness, loyalty, reliability, and, additionally, an ability to detect good and evil in human beings<sup>2</sup> are all positive attributes ascribed to dogs, making them “an icon of moral virtue” during the Victorian era and throughout much of the 20th century (McKechnie 2013). Dogs that behave benevolently, therefore, may be said to be acting in accordance with at least some of these social mores, and the context of the dogs behavior will also be examined to prove this connection.

This chapter will also take note of how the dogs are described within the narrative and how those descriptions relate to their behavior, making the case that the supernatural black dogs that behave in a more “dog-like” fashion according to accepted social standards are more likely to be described in dog-like terms, while those supernatural black dogs that do not behave in a socially acceptable manner are described in more ambiguous terms.

### Benevolent Black Dogs

\_\_\_\_\_ Most of the “escort narratives” that this researcher has discovered feature benevolent dogs, in that their actions in the narrative are ultimately beneficial to the human protagonist. The dogs in “The Guardian Black Dog,” “The Old Lady and the Black Dog,” “The Guardian Angel Black Dog,” “A Black Dog Protects a Priest,” and “A Good Black Dog” all feature black dogs helping humans, usually protecting more vulnerable members of society from the threat of other humans. The beneficiaries of the dog’s presence vary, seeming to have no set age or gender; in “The Old Lady and the Black Dog” it is an old woman; in “The Guardian Angel Black Dog” and the first story in “A Good Black Dog” it is young women or girls; in the second story in “A Good Black Dog” and “A Black Dog Protects a Priest” they are mature men. However, the narrator of

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<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate how widely-credited this alleged ability is, search Google with the question “Are dogs good judges of character?”

“A Black Dog Protects a Priest” makes a point to say that the priest in question was “a short, slight man,” and the man in “A Good Black Dog” was lost in the sea-mist and “groping along,” making him vulnerable in that moment (Norman 2015, 79; Briggs 2003, 14). In fact, while there are other stories of men being helped, there are more black dog escort stories involving women being protected, as in this black dog encounter collected by Ethel Rudkin involving a woman being threatened on her way home:

Years ago, when Crosby and Scunthorpe were both villages, Mrs. D. 's mother had gone from old Crosby to do some shopping in Scunthorpe. She was returning, and noticed that a very large dog was walking behind her; this was a strange dog to her, one she had never seen before. Presently she passed some Irish labourers<sup>3</sup>, and she heard them say what they would do to the lone woman if that (something) dog hadn't been with her." She arrived home safely and called to her husband to come and see this fine animal, but they couldn't find it anywhere—it had completely vanished (Rudkin 1938, 117)

This is fairly typical for an escort narrative. These benevolent black dogs are often described as looking simply like “a large black dog,” in fact, a frequent feature of the escort narratives is that the person being escorted mistakes the black dog for an ordinary dog, and the only thing out of the ordinary is how fortuitously the dog appears, and then how it disappears when the escorted person reaches their destination, often never to be seen again.

Another feature of the escort narratives is the consistent behavior of the dog while it is with the protagonist. It is often quiet, doesn't respond to being addressed, and paces the individual it is escorting, either walking ahead or beside the individual. Being paced by a black dog is evidently not always a benign occurrence, as will be highlighted when other types of narratives are discussed, but in the escort narratives, the dog's presence gives a sense of the dog's reliability, and is usually said to bring comfort to the protagonist, as shown in “The Old

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<sup>3</sup> In this instance, the nature (or rather, nationality) of the threat betrays some possible prejudices, which lends credibility to the influence of culture in this experience. As was discussed in Chapter One, the real possibility of a black dog accompanying someone down a stretch of road puts most of the emphasis on how the experience is interpreted rather than whether or not it actually happened exactly as described.

Lady and the Black Dog” when the old woman’s “fears [of walking alone in a dangerous place] left her” (Norman 2015, 59).

The women in “A Good Black Dog” and “The Guardian Angel Black Dog” similarly were alone throughout their experience, with the dog seemingly protecting them only from their own fears. When there are other people involved, they always outnumber the protagonist. The minister in “A Black Dog Protects a Priest” is approached by two “large, brutal looking fellows” who are warded off by the presence of the dog accompanying him (Norman 2015, 79). Another escort narrative included in Mark Norman’s *Black Dog Folklore* featured a teenage girl who “had a lonely walk along a road which climbed through dense woodland” and was confronted by “two disreputable tramps waiting just ahead” who were similarly deterred from trying anything when a large black dog trotted in front of her, enabling her to follow it safely past them (Norman 2015, 77). The protagonist in “The Old Lady and the Black Dog” has a group of “some rough fellows” actively “run for their lives” out of her and the black dog’s presence (Norman 2015, 59).

From these details, we see more characteristics of the benevolent black dog narrative structure. The protagonist of an escort narrative is always alone, usually traveling through a remote or sparsely-populated region during or close to the night hours. Sometimes they are only frightened, sometimes they are (or at least feel) threatened by other people, sometimes without their knowledge, as in the case of Johnnie Greenwood and the two thieves in “The Guardian Black Dog,” related in Chapter One. When it is a human threat, the sources of the threat are described in less socially acceptable terms, “disreputable tramps,” “large, brutal-looking fellows,” “rough fellows,” and memorably, “Irish labourers.” When overt, the threat is never supernatural in nature, and the black dog never directly attacks. The threat of attack if something should be attempted, it seems, is enough, and it is also clear in these texts that the threatening men perceive the dog as threatening, whether they “run for their lives,” or simply “stop, scowl, and pass on” upon seeing it (Norman 2015, 59; 79).

According to Mark Norman, the perception of the black dog as threatening or comforting resides wholly in the individual perceiving it.

In its own right, the dog is usually a good and neutral animal<sup>4</sup>. Its nature is to cleave to its master, guarding him and his property. A trespasser on that property, especially an uninvited one, will view the dog's attitude very differently from the owner. To an intruder the animal will appear snarling, wild-eyed or violent. The master will see it as obedient, protective and doing its duty. We may carry these two sides of the same canine coin over into the apparitional dogs and ask, therefore, not whether they are good or evil but rather whose are they? Are we on their good side as observers, or are we trespassers or intruders? (Norman 2015, 68).

In the case of these stories of benevolent dogs, we can concur that they are always told from the perspective of the person being guarded, which cements their behavior as benevolent. If the narrative were told from another perspective, perhaps that of the less-socially-acceptable individuals, the characteristics of the dog might change. In fact, in another escort account collected by Ethel Rudkin that subverts some of the usual features, she states that in her neighborhood “Three years ago (i.e. 1934) one of the Irishmen who was working in Willoughton at potato-harvest time was much disturbed on account of an unnaturally large dog that followed him as he went along the road by Blyborough Fishpond. He was badly scared and seems to have realised that the dog was not normal” (Rudkin 1938, 125-126). This is in contrast to “Mrs. L,” a woman who was native to the same vicinity, who had a large black dog escort her to and from a friend’s house and “thought it ‘nice of the old Dog to wait for her”” on her way home (Rudkin 1938, 126). In the first instance, the Irishman was not native to the area, and one possible interpretation of his discomfort during his experience might be that he was being followed because he didn’t belong, while the woman, who did belong to the area, felt at ease in the dog’s presence. The nationality and social position of the participants, therefore, lead to certain interpretations on who the dog is defending and who is being deterred, even outside of whom the dog is actually escorting.

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<sup>4</sup> This statement betrays some definite preconceptions about the nature of real dogs, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

An more extreme take on this perspective flip is the story of “The Collingbourne Kingston Black Dog,” which is largely told from the point of view of a pair of murderers and thieves fleeing the “hue and cry” raised when they are discovered. Interestingly, the black dog in this story is well-known, with the narrative noting that “nobody ever went that way after dark if they could help it” and that the black dog “brought ill luck to all who met him, and death to the evil doer” (Briggs 2003, 10-11). This black dog’s description seems more in line with that of a Barguest-type than with the “true black dog” of the escort narratives, yet its behavior is rather similar. In this narrative, the protagonists are, just like many of the protagonists of the escort narratives, in a remote and dark wood, though they have fled there to evade the law rather than through any travel necessity, and the black dog appears as if from nowhere. Rather than seeing an innocuous black dog, however, the criminals are fully aware of the nature of their companion, as evinced by they way they run screaming from the woods when “a green light from ghostly eyes shone just by their shoulders” (Briggs 2003, 11). This “green light from the Black Dog’s eyes” is the only thing the protagonists see of the Black Dog of Collingbourne Kingston, “huge gleaming eyes like saucers” that are right in line with a description of a Barguest, the malevolent type of black dog as defined by Ethel Rudkin. The dog never attacks directly, however, instead behaving like an escort dog and simply using the threat of its presence. Evidently, when this Black Dog brought “death to the evil doer,” it was by ensuring they were brought to trial and conviction, placing this dog closer to the “obedient, protective and doing its duty” side of the coin as described by Mark Norman (2015, 68). In fact, from the way the villagers describe the event in the narrative, the Black Dog could almost be acting as a member of the community in its own right and doing its civic duty: “We knew we’d get them [the murderers] when they ran down into the woods. All we had to do was wait outside, and let the Black Dog send ‘em back,’ the villagers said” (Briggs 2003, 11).

This interpretation would not hold if it were a teenage girl driven screaming from the woods, but it is socially acceptable for a dog to be frightening to two murderers. Perhaps the

stories of the escorting dogs would turn out to be more uncanny if they were told from the perspective of two tramps loitering in some woods one night, as well.

### Malevolent Black Dogs

Tempting as it may be to classify all black dog stories by perspective, however, we do have to acknowledge that some black dog stories feature canines that are much more unambiguously malevolent. Stories do exist where the behavior of the dog is threatening or dangerous to a human protagonist who was just out minding their own business, or even out doing God's business, as in the story "The Black Dog and Donald Roy." Interestingly enough, this story also has many features in common with an escort narrative, with the priestly protagonist Donald Roy being escorted home by "a black dog trotting by his side" that seemingly appeared from nowhere. Just like the murderers in "The Collingbourne Kingston Black Dog," however, Donald Roy recognizes that his companion is not an ordinary dog, and when he addresses it, rather than having it ignore him, "The thing growled, and bounded ahead of Donald, emitting a hot bright jet of flame, which streamed back along the road, till it seemed to hiss and crackle right under his feet" (Briggs 2003, 9). Donald Roy addresses the dog again, identifying it as the cause of the "blasphemous thoughts" he had previously been experiencing, and the dog breathes fire again, "bound[ing] ahead" of him all the way to the outer limits of his farm, where it vanishes (Briggs 2003, 10).

On the sliding scale of "doggy to demonic," this dog would seem to slide right down to "demonic," possibly even being a manifestation of Satan himself, if Katharine Brigg's note linking the story to "Motif G 303.3.3.1.1 [Devil in form of dog]" is anything to go by (2003, 10). Yet this dog as well never attacks the protagonist physically, the way an actual dog might, instead relying on mental attacks and intimidation. Also notably, after the dog starts behaving oddly, it is never referred to as a dog again, instead named "the thing" and "the appearance" (Briggs 2003, 10).

Another malevolent dog story where the dog uses similar tactics to threaten and intimidate the protagonist is “Th’Skriker,” where the protagonist, Adam, is “driven mad by his terror,” as well as having his wife and child die through indirect means within a few days of his encounter with the Skriker (Briggs 2003, 19). Heavy costs for someone who was only trying to make his way home after dark. While not explicitly linked with Satan as was the dog in “The Black Dog and Donald Roy,” the Skriker is similarly not called “a dog.” In fact, The Skriker is never referred to as “a dog” in the entire narrative. It is introduced with the description “It was covered with a shaggy black hide, and its huge eyes blazed like fire,” and for the rest of the story is denoted with such names as “the monster,” “the creature,” “the spectre,” and of course, “the Skriker” (Briggs 2003, 18-19). Its behavior is certainly outside the norm for a dog, from its “terrible shriek” to the way that it would “glide” in front of Adam as he crossed both bridges. Additionally, while more within the bounds of credulity, the idea of a dog lying in wait for and stalking a human being is certainly outside the bounds of socially acceptable canine behavior (Briggs 2003, 18-19).

Another example of socially acceptable dog behavior outweighing credulous dog behavior when it comes to defining a dog is the more modern 1996 narrative from the *Fortean Times*. This story features a black dog encounter in which the black dog portrays no overtly supernatural signs other than unsettling behavior and “glowing red eyes,” and yet is not described as a dog (Norman 2015, 103). The family in this narrative is also returning home after nightfall. Rather than pacing them throughout the journey, however, the black dog they encountered simply “stood there snarling...unlike any dog we had ever heard” (103). The family is able to pass by it safely, but “suffered a lot of bad luck” after their encounter, although without any deaths or madness (103). In this story, the dog’s behavior, like the Skriker’s, is inexplicable. It is threatening towards a presumably innocent family, deeply unsettling them, but it does not attack them directly and sticks to fairly mundane intimidation methods, despite the nature of its



snarl. Notably, the animal is only referred to as a dog obliquely, to demonstrate how unlike a real dog is actually is. When referred to directly in the narrative, it is called “the creature” (103).

It would seem, then, that socially acceptable behavior, rather than just ordinary behavior, is the deciding factor for what is and is not called a dog. The narrative “The Bargest of the Troller’s Gill,” similar to “Th’Skriker,” features a dangerous and supernaturally endowed black dog, but while the Skriker is deemed too horrible to call a dog, the Bargest is described as “a large dog, with long hair, and eyes as large as saucers and bright as fire” that “often drag[s] a clanking chain.” Unusual features notwithstanding, and despite the fact that a human being also dies in this narrative, the Bargest is referred to as “the hound,” when the Skriker received no such epithet. The Bargest is deemed malevolent due to the fact that it causes the death of the protagonist, but its behavior is much more dog-like, even acceptable. Returning to Mark Norman’s comment on how “to an intruder the animal will appear snarling, wild-eyed or violent,” we can definitely place the protagonist in “The Bargest of the Troller’s Gill” in an intruder role (Norman 2015, 68). According to the narrative:

A young man of the neighbourhood once resolved to see this monster for himself, and set out on a windy, moonlight night to make his way to the Gill. It was too steep for the moonbeams to penetrate, and in the darkness, amid the sound of the raging water, he suddenly heard a loud cry, ‘Forbear!’ He pressed on, however, and came to a great yew-tree, under which he drew on the ground a circle, uttering certain charms, bent down and kissed the ground three times, and called on the Spectre Hound to appear.

A whirlwind sprang up, fire flashed from every cleft in the rocks, and with a wild bark, the hound sprang into view. In the morning, passing shepherds found the young man’s dead body under the yew, with strange marks on his breast which seemed as though no human agency could have placed them there (Briggs 2003, 15-16).

It is only after the young man (against an injunction, no less) trespasses and actively calls upon the Bargest that the consequences are meted out. The hound responds “with a wild bark,” just as a person might reasonably expect a guard dog to react to an uninvited guest. The difference is, of course, that the Bargest of the Troller’s Gill has no discernable master, and therefore might just be defending its own territory. Still, the behavior has a recognizable dog-ness to it, despite the dog’s supernatural characteristics.

Even black dogs with masters might fall into the “malevolent” category while still maintaining some of the most important societal standards for dogs. In the narrative “The Ghost of the Black Dog,” the protagonist is also traveling at the time, and his story, like Donald Roy’s, also bears similarities to an escort narrative. In his case, however, being paced by the black dog is not a good thing for him. Unlike the protagonists of the escort narratives, the protagonist in “The Ghost of the Black Dog” attempts to touch the dog and discovers earlier than his journey’s end that the dog is not an ordinary dog, since “his hand passed right through the seeming body of the animal” (Briggs 2003, 13). After this, the dog reveals more un-canine characteristics, including “great glassy eyes” and “a stream of sulphurous breath,” scaring the man into increasing his pace until he is struck unconscious “by a blinding flash, as if by lightning” (Briggs 2003, 13). The occurrence is explained at the end of the text accordingly: “Tradition says, that a foul murder was many years ago committed at this spot, and the victim’s dog is doomed to traverse this road and kill every man he encounters, until the perpetrator of the deed has perished by his instrumentality” (Briggs 2003, 13). The innocent man notably survives the encounter, although the dog’s actions can hardly have been said to have been benevolent in his case. Examined from the perspective of the deceased master, however, the dog’s haunting of the location becomes a demonstration of loyalty, one of the most highly praised characteristics of a dog. And indeed, the dog in this narrative is never described as anything else but a dog.

From these narratives, then, we learn that while there is a very narrow definition of acceptable dog-like behavior for benevolent dogs (hence why all the escort narratives are very similar in structure), there is a range of ways for dogs to be technically malevolent (i.e., scaring or harming the protagonist) and still be recognizable to society as dogs. They simply have to behave in ways that people find relatable, and these ways include some of the same standards of loyalty and protectiveness (whether of people or places) that apply to benevolent dogs. When the dogs in the black dog narratives maintain no societal standards for acceptable dog behavior, they are described in increasingly un-doglike terms, as monsters and demons.

**Chapter Five:**  
**Dangerous and Defective:**  
**Black Dog Narratives as a Mirror of Human/Canine Relations**

Some may consider examining the different types of black dog legend as only an academic excursion into a localized folkloric tradition. Indeed, the particular spectral black dog traditions and legends are, in and of themselves, very interesting, and are valuable for the sake of learning more about the people who report and circulate this lore; whether those individuals are the folklorists who gather and interpret sightings, or the informants who share their knowledge and experiences. Most of the legends that have been examined in this paper are from around the turn of the last century, but black dog lore still circulates today, and sightings of black dogs are still reported.

As we consider the differences between literary black dog narratives and reported sightings shared in comments on social media, we encounter the interplay of interpretation and belief. The function of this paper has mostly been to analyze and interpret the experiences of others, but, as stated in Chapter Two, black dog legends are subject to cultural-source theory. This means that people who report black dog experiences do so because of the ability to interpret their own experiences through the lens of their beliefs, and black dog lore is often supported by a real belief in the existence of spectral black dogs.

Ethel Rudkin and Theo Brown, the folklorists who first extensively documented black dog lore, demonstrate the interplay of interpretation and belief in cultural-source theory in their writing. One of the themes they concern themselves with is the association of the dogs with place and belonging. Theo Brown writes that in Lincolnshire “county the Black Dog is never feared, and indeed is often a protector of lonely women. A dog-ghost has even escorted a woman protectively in Yorkshire because she came of a Lincolnshire family,” demonstrating that the true black dog was perceived to have a certain amount of loyalty, like an ideal dog, but also acted as a signifier of who belonged to the Lincolnshire community (Brown 1958, 179). Black dogs of this benevolent type were also often shown as guardians of objects and locations as well as people. Brown describes black dogs as being “associated with a definite place or 'beat' on a road” (178). The use of the word “beat” in quotation marks here is especially telling, showing that Brown--demonstrating throughout her essay that she has no problems accepting black dogs at face value--has apparently drawn a connection between black dogs appearing on certain sections of road and policemen doing their rounds. The idea of the black dog “patrolling” an area for trouble is actually brought up explicitly in the escort stories, as the persons being escorted are entering into a dangerous situation, like a woman walking home alone, or those that do not belong, like the poor Irish labourer who was followed and traumatized by a black dog, mentioned in Chapter Four. It is clear, in these stories, who does and does not belong to the community. These black dogs are used to signify ‘otherness,’ while downplaying their own. The implication is that good dogs are part of the community and have the ability to recognize others in the community.

These implications are mirrored in the human conception of real dogs. As briefly discussed in Chapter Two, dogs have a unique relationship with human beings. Many scientists agree that they were among the first, if not *the* first, result of human domestication of a wild species. Their long-standing companionship has earned them the moniker of “man’s best friend,” a title held by no other animal. As Katherine M. Rogers puts it in *First Friend: A History*

of *Dogs and Humans*, “For more than ten thousand years, humans have depended on dogs to help them hunt, herd their flocks, and guard their homes. During this time, the social primate and the social carnivore have formed the deepest emotional bonds. The dog became a member of the human family, the human felt a more intimate companionship with the dog than with any other animal” (Rogers 2005, 1).

As was also discussed in Chapter Two, this close relationship has led to the inclusion of dogs in human society, complete with their own set of what is and is not considered acceptable behavior. One function of dog-lore and dog-legends like the black dog legends is to manage this connection and to make it clear that dogs are expected to adhere to human standards of judgment. The dogs in the legends and in popular belief inherently know who is good and who is bad, who is a member of the community and who is not, and act accordingly, just as a human might.

In Chapter Four it was concluded that these standards also extend to spectral creatures that look like dogs, and to some degree are played out in the narratives and reports of encounters with spectral black dogs across Britain. My conclusion was that “when the dogs in the black dog narratives maintain no societal standards for acceptable dog behavior, they are described in increasingly un-doglike terms, as monsters and demons” (Chapter Four). In other words, when a dog’s behavior is outside the narrow bounds of what *humans* consider to be doglike behavior, its status as a dog is questioned. It is not a “real” dog in human eyes. When this thinking is applied to indisputably real dogs, rather than questioning whether or not the dog is actually a ghost or a demon in disguise, we tend to describe the wayward dog in terms of undesirability and defectiveness.

There are several sets of standards affecting our judgement of dogs in the modern era. The first was discussed in Chapter Two as the Victorian ideal, namely that dogs “embematized unwavering loyalty, faithfulness, and dedication,” and were a symbol of man’s control over the natural world ((McKechnie 2013). The positive attributes of usefulness and protectiveness were

extrapolated from the common functions of dogs in society as guardians of property and livestock, and their submissive and loyal qualities were added to the list from characterizing the ideal relationship of dogs to their masters. Today, people have added another positive quality to the definition of dogs: the unconditional love and acceptance that dogs are said to provide. Glancing at any social media hub will grant the viewer a wealth of dog pictures, videos, memes and tweets, all fixated on this particular quality, as well as the general appeal of dogs. Many internet denizens express a preference for dog's company to people's.<sup>5</sup> According to Rogers, "our sympathy may flow more freely because our positive feelings for dogs are not tainted by the ambivalence we feel toward people" (Rogers 2005, 4). Indeed, humans seem to feel such a kinship with dogs that some studies suggest that dogs are more likely to receive human sympathy than other humans, at least when those humans are adults (Li 2017).

Babies edge out dogs by only a narrow margin, perhaps because dogs are often also perceived as innocent and vulnerable, adding to the sympathy humans feel for them. Who can forget, for example, the infamous ASPCA commercials featuring singer Sarah McLachlan mournfully accompanying video clips of sad looking rescue dogs (and a few cats)? In addition to being seen as loyal, loving animals, dogs are also viewed as totally dependent on human beings, which may explain why so many dog-owners treat their dogs as children. According to a 2011 article in *Psychology Today*, unprecedented numbers of pet owners now consider their pets, especially their dogs, as having a status and importance equal to children in the home.

The research shows that pets have become such an important part of the family that more than half of the dog owners (58%) are comfortable using nicknames for themselves such as 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' when talking about themselves in reference to their dogs. In fact 35% even refer to their dog as 'son' or 'daughter.' The idea that we are thinking about our dogs more like parents than pet owners is also supported by the fact that 10% of the dog owners celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day with their dog (Coran 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> For one example of many, see BuzzFeed's "12 Reasons Dogs Are Better Than People." Unconditional love is number 12 on the list.

Dogs, like children, then, are seen as dependent on human adults, and consequently of a lower social status. In Chapter Two, I named a general sense of contempt, alongside the admiration of dog's good qualities, as a byproduct of dog's social inferiority. We love and coddle dogs, but we do not often respect and fear them.

In short, we can conclude that the popular conception of dogs is that they are loyal, dependable, innocent, trustworthy, and love people unconditionally, while being socially inferior to and dependent upon people. Supernatural black dog narratives feature animals that break at least some of these rules while upholding others, and therefore the human reaction to and interpretation of them is mixed.

Black dogs specters violate our preconceived notions about dogs in several ways. Most obviously, they call the ideals of unwavering loyalty, faithfulness, and dedication towards people into question. Many malevolent dogs certainly do not display any of these characteristics; their only form of dedication, as in the tale of "The Sk'riker," being how effectively they stalk their victims. Even in the escort narratives that feature benevolent dogs, we are not exactly sure where the dog's loyalties lie. They display protectiveness toward the person being escorted, but it is made clear that that person is not the dog's master.

The concept of a dog not being subservient to people is another violation of societal expectations for dogs. The idea that black dogs may not have a master, and act under their own power, following whims and instincts of their own while remaining a dog, is very nearly an alien concept. Often, to get around this, the sense is given in the narrative that the dog was *sent* to the escorted individual, especially when the black dogs appear as an answer to prayer, as in "The Guardian Angel Black Dog," or as a result of the escorted person's profession as a clergyman, as in "A Black Dog Protects a Priest." This type of narrative takes away the uneasiness about the dog's origins, and is sometimes even applied in narratives of malevolent dogs as in "The Black Dog and Donald Roy," where it is strongly implied that the dog is either

the Devil himself, or at least working for him. In these cases, however, the dog is not called a dog, as it violates another dog-rule: that of goodness and trustworthiness.

On the other hand, supernatural black dogs also uphold some ideals of human/dog interactions, one of which is the alleged ability of dogs to discern between good and evil intentions or to be “a good judge of character.” A quick trip to Google with the query, “are dogs good judges of character” brings up 4,830,000 results, many of which seem to support the idea that dogs can indeed judge human intentions through their instinct or sense of smell. While conclusive evidence is lacking (why would dogs live with someone like Adolf Hitler if this were true?), the idea that dogs can sense whether a person is good or bad is a widespread belief. This belief certainly seems to play out in the black dog narratives, particularly in “The Black Dog of Collingbourne Kingston.” As discussed in Chapter Four, in many black dog stories, malevolent and otherwise, the black dogs are unerringly threatening or frightening to the right people, identified, as previously stated, by their “otherness.” When they break this rule and threaten socially accepted individuals, as in “The Sk’riker” and “The Boy and the Barguest,” they are not identified as dogs, but as monsters.

Supernatural black dog narratives, then, can be seen as a microcosm of Western society’s larger relationship to dogs in general. When the standards of dog behavior are violated, we as people think the dog is not a dog, or that it is a defective dog. This can be a problem for both humans and dogs, as the human ideal of dog behavior is often not the reality.

For example, the ability of dogs to physically attack humans, when demonstrated, is certainly behavior that falls outside the bounds of the socially acceptable concept of a dog. The possibility of a dog causing physical harm is sidestepped in all the benevolent black dog narratives. Never does the dog physically attack anyone, even the undesirable and threatening human characters. Even in the stories of malevolent dogs, the attack is often supernatural in nature, with the protagonist being driven to madness in “The Sk’riker” and indirectly assaulted by “a blinding flash, as of lightning, which struck him senseless to the ground” in “The Ghost of



the Black Dog” (Briggs 2003, 13). In fact, one of the only accounts where the black dog does physically attack the protagonist is the story recounted in Chapter Two, of the Black Shuck that changed into human form to deceive the fisher boy. The boy in that story had “his neck fearfully lacerated by the dog’s teeth” (Porter 1974, 91-92). That dog, in the final analysis, was identified with a foreigner; so it was perhaps a monster, an evil sorcerer, or the Devil in disguise, but it was safely not a dog. In all other accounts where the black dog is closer to the “dog-like” end of the scale, physical attacks never occur.

Despite all protestations of dog behavior being naturally loving and loyal, however, real dogs are in fact physically capable of harming people. Some of them are big enough to be a serious threat, and their teeth are sharp. Moreover, physical attacks have been known to happen. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 4.5 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs every year, and 20 to 30 of these are serious enough to result in death (CDC). When evidence is presented of a real dog’s capacity to seriously harm or even kill people, however, the facts are often met with real resistance. One news story from December 2017 relates a community’s disbelief at the idea that a young 22-year-old woman had been mauled to death by her own dogs while taking them for a walk. One of the victim’s friends summed up the disbelief by stating “Those dogs would not attack her. They’d kill you with kisses” (Londberg and Darby 2017). This particular news story was rehashed by many media outlets within a few days of the event, and I was struck by how many people in the comments similarly expressed doubt that the dogs could be responsible for their owner’s death. In fact, speculation that the dogs had been defending her from another, unidentified threat grew so prevalent that within a few days the sheriff overseeing the investigation was compelled to release more evidence, previously considered too disturbing,<sup>6</sup> to support the conclusion that the dogs had, in fact, been responsible (Londberg 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> The dogs were found at the scene eating their owner’s body.

The disbelief of some of the victim's friends and family that the dogs had fatally attacked their loved one echoes the disbelief expressed at many similar events. Dogs fatally attacking a human, especially when it seems to be unprovoked, is definitely outside the bounds of acceptable dog behavior. While there is significant evidence in favor of the fact that many dogs that fatally attack humans have pre-existing behavioral issues, are under stress, or are not properly socialized with people, the idea that dogs are *always* naturally disinclined to physically harm humans is a dangerous one. Yet it is a sentiment that we often see even in narratives about supernatural dogs.

Other harmful assumptions about dog behavior that we can pick up from society's conception of dogs include the concept of dogs providing "unconditional love" to their owners. The prevailing view of dogs as "man's best friend," is often reflected in this stereotype, but, as in black dog legends, the narrative is much more complicated than a simple picture of a faithful Lassie-type companion. According to Donna Haraway, author of *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, the ideal of "unconditional love" causes dissatisfaction with the behavior of real dogs in ways that are often dangerous for the dog.

Commonly in the US, dogs are attributed with the capacity for 'unconditional love.' According to this belief, people, burdened with misrecognition, contradiction, and complexity in their relations with other humans, find solace in unconditional love from their dogs. In turn, people love their dogs as children. In my opinion, both of these beliefs are not only based on mistakes, if not lies, but also they are in themselves abusive—to dogs and to humans. A cursory glance shows that dogs and humans have always had a vast range of ways of relating. But even among the pet-keeping folk of contemporary cultures, or maybe especially among these people, belief in 'unconditional love' is pernicious (Haraway 2003, 33).

Haraway goes on to say that this belief leads to many dogs being abandoned or given to shelters due to the perception that they are not the right kind of "affectionate" or "demonstrative enough" (Haraway 2003, 34).

This is unfortunate, because there is a long list of reasons why a dog might not live up to these expectations. Firstly, the expectations are often unrealistic. Haraway points out that a dog may not have any particular reason to love their owner unconditionally, at least, not

according to the owner's ideal. Some dogs are disinclined to have that kind of relationship with people for various reasons, yet still may be considered useful and rewarding to work with in their own right. In my own experience, some dogs are just less affectionate than the societal ideal, and attempting to hold them to that standard ignores the many different types of relationships and "ways of relating" that exists for dogs and for humans (Harraway 2003, 33).

Perhaps the biggest challenge when it comes to operating outside of societal expectations for dogs is implicit recognition of the fact that dogs can have a life outside of their relationship to people. The senses of a dog may present a world that is vastly different from the one we see every day, and there may be behaviors that are perfectly natural responses to that world that are completely inexplicable to us. We cannot fully understand dogs, and therefore should probably account for this more often in our interactions with them, as well as acknowledging that they do not fully understand us or our intentions as they are usually expected to.

Supernatural black dog narratives are unique when placed in the context of dog-human relations, therefore, because they simultaneously interpret dogs as not only the familiar and comforting "man's best friend," only harming those who deserve it, but an animal that can go about mysterious business of its own and be inexplicably menacing. Allowing dogs to be scary, or at least to be beyond our complete understanding without naming them as defective, may be the healthiest way to negotiate their presence in our lives.

This sentiment may be surprising to those of us who profess to be "dog-lovers," but folk narrative in general certainly does point to "a vast range of ways of relating" when it comes to dogs. As mankind's most important companion species, dogs are just as multifaceted and complex in the ways they can be interpreted and represented. One narrative does not outweigh another, and all are equally valid ways of examining dogs and the meanings that they can have in the lives of human beings; as companions, protectors, partners, and yes, even as antagonists and the stuff of nightmares. Perhaps in turn we should reevaluate our relationships to actual

dogs to reflect this multiplicity, and recognize that, just like the spectral black dogs of Britain, not all dogs, pets or otherwise, can be measured by the same yardstick. Their behavior and their relationships to humans can be just as varied, and just as mysterious to us, as a Black Shuck's.

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