

2014

# Severed Hands as Symbols of Humanity in Legend and Popular Narratives

Scott White

*Utah State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

White, Scott, "Severed Hands as Symbols of Humanity in Legend and Popular Narratives" (2014). *All Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 3556.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/3556>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [dylan.burns@usu.edu](mailto:dylan.burns@usu.edu).



SEVERED HANDS AS SYMBOLS OF HUMANITY IN LEGEND  
AND POPULAR NARRATIVES

by

Scott White

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies  
(Folklore)

Approved:

---

Dr. Lisa Gabbert  
Major Professor

---

Dr. Christine Cooper-Rompato  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Lynne McNeill  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Mark McLellan  
Vice President for Research and  
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2014

Copyright Scott White 2014

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

Severed Hands as Symbols of Humanity in Legends  
and Popular Narratives

by

Scott White, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2014

Major Professor: Dr. Lisa Gabbert  
Department: English

Building from an understanding of legends as discussions of potential belief, this thesis studies severed hands as they appear in contemporary legends and popular culture narratives. Severed hands appear as narrative elements within texts with connections that transcend traditional motifs. Identifying three hundred fifty appropriate texts in the Fife Folklore Archive at Utah State University, the study classifies texts by subject matter and interprets connections of evil, safety, and liminality in terms of belief about humanity expressed by contemporary legend. Explanations of why severed hands specifically fill these roles are drawn from the fields of folklore, disability studies, neuroscience, and psychology, and identify that humans are often defined in clinical studies by their ability to use tools, language, or form complex societies. Severed hands legends subvert this classification by portraying characters who are unable to use tools and do not positively contribute to their local communities, creating a group of stories about humans who are perceived as less than human. Pop culture narratives, including horror fiction, films, and

graphic novels, use severed hands in the same way as folklore, subjugating the characters with severed hands to victim, villain, or monster status.

(82 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Severed Hands as Symbols of Humanity in Legend  
and Popular Narrative

Scott White

Modern scholarly theories of oral folk narrative suggest that urban legends contain expressions of cultural beliefs that can be understood both through the contexts in which these stories are told and through the elements of the stories that remain constant across multiple tellings by various narrators. This study centers exclusively on stories and popular culture products that utilize missing or damaged fingers, hands, or arms, in order to identify the cultural values that are attached to hands in American culture. These stories in particular were chosen because the severed hand was perceived at the onset to be a common element within stories that had not been broadly analyzed. The particular theories that drive this study are drawn from the fields of folklore, disability studies, psychology, and neuroscience, and suggest that stories about severed hands express belief about the nature of humanity.

Once the hypothesis was formed, I turned to the Fife Folklore Archives of the Merrill-Cazier Library at Utah State University in order to collect transcripts of interviews in which severed hand legends had been told. Three hundred fifty potential texts were initially identified, and two hundred fifty featured a mention of severed hands. Those texts were then classified by what role the severed hand played in the course of the story into three distinct categories: villains with severed hands and prosthetics, victims who lose hands in the course of the narrative, and severed hands appearing in pranks or as contaminants. The narratives of each category were then analyzed, and themes of evil, risk, safety, and crossed boundaries began to emerge.

To verify the cultural themes of the textual study, popular culture narratives were then analyzed to determine if similar themes were expressed. This set of narratives included movies, television, comic books, and novels. While the same themes were expressed in these narratives, the categories of evil and crossed boundaries each featured subverted forms of heroism and hands as characters as well, all of which supported the original interpretation.

The results indicate that severed hands in American narratives represent lost humanity, and therefore that the hand is a vital part of how individuals within the culture might perceive their own humanity.

Dedicated to Jamie Shannon White, we'll always love you.



CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT .....	v
DEDICATION.....	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. EVIL HANDS.....	12
3. LOSS OF AGENCY .....	30
4. CROSSED BOUNDARIES.....	40
6. POPULAR CULTURE.....	52
7. CONCLUSION.....	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	71

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The course of this study has been guided by my research interest in macabre and unsettling subjects. I knew I was onto something when I told colleagues about my research into severed hands and folklore and they slowly edged away. This study has been a journey in reasonably defining what severed hands are, indentifying relevant texts in USU's Fife Folklore Archive, classifying texts by subject matter, and interpreting the connections between broad classes of contemporary legends. Ultimately my archival research into legend variants, folklore theories, and psychology studies has led me to see the hand as a narrative symbol of humanity that is highlighted by a discussion of hands outside the usual context of a human limb—severed hands express perceived loss of humanity in legend.

The precise definition of legend has been in flux for the last century. While the term originally referred to stories of saints' lives (Brunvand 1998, 198), the genre is now larger than just religious legends. William Bascom updated the definition, which is referenced in a 1971 address by Robert Georges, saying "A legend is a story or narrative, set in the recent or historical past, that is believed to be true by those by whom and to whom it is communicated" (Georges 1971,5). In that same address, Georges went on to show how many interactions recognized as legends failed to meet that definition. In 1982, the Sheffield school of legend scholarship started to crystallize, ultimately leading to two scholarly approaches to legend research. The first, Linda Dégh's, views legends generally as expressions of belief. Her interpretation treats legend as a conversation or debate in

context, and the goal of study is to determine what underlying belief is expressed by the legend telling event. The second approach is born from the Sheffield conferences on legends, which ultimately led to the creation of the International Society of Contemporary Legend Research. This approach studies the same belief uncovered by Dégh, but is directed more specifically at the context of the legend, uncovering the underlying controversy, interstitiality, and emergence of cultural issues (Ellis 2007). My own study of archival texts primarily follows Dégh's approach to classifying legends as platforms to discuss potential concerns because it allows for more textual analysis than interpretation of contextual issues. While controversy, interstitiality, and emergence are often present in the social contexts that surround contemporary legend, focusing on a belief across legend types has allowed me to identify themes across variants and contexts more naturally. I do not suggest that scholars ignore context altogether, though. Within this study, I consider potential contexts surrounding legends, particularly for "The Hook" and "The Murdered Boyfriend" while focusing on cultural perceptions of disability as my primary interpretive lens, which include beliefs like the madness, criminality, or monstrosity of the physically disabled.

One of the best known subgenres of legend, thanks to folklorist Jan Brunvand's syndicated newspaper column, is the urban or contemporary legend. The archival work within this study is limited to contemporary legend, as this type exhibits severed hands most often. Brunvand defines the subgenre as "a story in a contemporary setting (not necessarily a big city), reported as a true individual experience, with traditional variants that indicate its legendary character" (1998, 205). These legends often discuss events in a grey area between fiction and reality on subjects relevant to modern contexts. The

division between fact and fiction in these stories is blurred because the legend describes events that could happen, but without any proof or provenance of historical accuracy.

Within urban and any other legends, a motif is the most basic recognizable component of narrative. Brunvand defines motif as a “narrative element,” or any “striking or unusual unit” that appears within a narrative (1998, 179). Most folklore motifs are spelled out in the motif index (Thompson, 1955), but the texts in this study are linked by the singular image of severed hands, which transcends a single indexed motif. The image appears across the following motifs within this study: handless people F167.7, hand withers as punishment Q559.5.2, corpse’s hand used as charm by robber K437.2, silver hand used as if flesh F1002, soul in left hand H714.7, hand cut off as punishment Q451.0.1, mutilation/cutting off hand S161, robber’s hand cut off K912.0.2, and recognition by missing hand H57.4. While all these elements deal with hands, they are all treated in very different ways. The legends included in this project feature men who have lost hands and are identified by a prosthetic hook, generally titled “The Hook;” dogs biting off burglars’ fingers in legends classified as “The Choking Doberman;” and arms removed by accident in the course of daily life in safety legends. Some of the legends feature motifs outside Thompson’s index—hands and arms used in pranks, categorized in the Fife Archives as “Missing Head or Arms for a Good Scare;” and severed digits found in food contamination texts are common literary elements that deal with hands—but not motifs that are directly tied to the human hand. In short, this study centers around severed forelimbs, referred to generally as severed hands from this point forward. No matter the details, severed hands appear across legends of numerous types, and in mass American culture as well.

This research would not have been possible without the massive collection of fieldwork available at Utah State University, through the Merrill-Cazier Library's Fife Folklore Archives. Within the archives, I have drawn exclusively from Folk Collection Eight A, which is where individual items of folklore gathered by folklore students are located (Special Collections and Archives). Group seven of the collection contains the fieldwork texts on legends, and is the heart of my study. Within the group, roughly three hundred-fifty texts exhibit characteristics that identified them as potential severed hand narratives. Approximately two hundred-fifty focus specifically on a severed hand and were used in this analysis and evaluation. The viable texts were then classified based on what role the severed hand played within the text.

Those classifications fell into three distinct types: a villain who had previously lost a hand, characters losing hands through the course of the text, and severed hands appearing as independent objects. Once these texts had been classified and analyzed for thematic elements and potential beliefs, I turned to narratives in popular culture, including film, television, and literature. The goal of broadening the study was to verify that my findings applied to American cultural productions outside of traditional folklore, and to provide secondary evidence that the underlying belief was relevant within the society. The chapters that follow address concerns surrounding the importance of hands with an interdisciplinary analysis of severed hand narratives that range from contemporary legends collected in Utah State University's Fife Folklore Archives to the television show *Arrested Development*.

The study demonstrates that the severed hand in particular indicates a perceived loss of humanity. Psychologists and anthropologists generally define three traits that set

humans apart from other creatures: use of symbolic language, creation and use of tools, and complex social organizations (Tomasello 1999, 510). While Disability Studies rejects this definition because of its exclusive, functional basis, it does relate to public perception of what makes humans. Two of the three functions are clearly violated in severed hand legends. Within texts that feature a handless villain, the character actively ignores social norms against causing harm in the United States, and therefore acting outside of social structure. Characters who lose their hands in the course of legends are perceived to lose their ability to manipulate the constructed environment as efficiently as they could before. Severed hand legends demonstrate violations of both creation/use of tools and complex social organizations. Finally, outside of Tomasello's definition but still notably, characters within legends that feature hands as objects are forced to acknowledge the blurred lines between attached, functional human hands and non-functioning severed hands.

Alan Dundes argues that the specific symbol of the hand itself is not necessarily significant, but that any severed body part would be equivalent. In his 1989 book *Folklore Matters*, Dundes refers to research demonstrating the broad interpretations of dismemberment in folk narratives. He claims it has roots in Greek ritual; that in specific instances it may come from the phrase "hand in marriage;" that it represents castration anxiety; or that dismemberment is a punishment for masturbation in AT 706 (Dundes 1989, 140-142). While Dundes makes a sound case at the purely symbolic level, a functional analysis based on the traits of humanity outlined above suggests that not all body parts are as integrated into appearance, manipulation, or interaction as the hand.

Widening the discussion from exclusively oral folklore into customary lore, hands

continue to appear as objects of significance. The power of human bones, particularly the hand, has been documented in African-American conjuring lore (Ellis 2004, 106). While larger bones like the skull have made their way into folklore through scenes of warlords like Vlad Tepes drinking blood from human skulls or civil war veterans stealing any available body part from fallen enemies, the wrist and hand bones are commonly thought to be the most powerful and are often used in charms according to Bill Ellis. The hand bones are used because they supposedly allow the possessor to control whatever powers the original owner used. The new owner would use these powers to manipulate others, much as a gravestone relic would give the owner the blessings of the buried spirit (2004,109). Hand bones taken from someone who commonly denied authority have a similar purpose in conjure lore. In Ellis's research on fetishes, the bones of the hand were reported to give owners the ability to defy authority figures or escape risky situations.

Folklore research on body legends has focused on self-conception of the body, analysis of the situations surrounding organ theft and impairment, and study of vernacular risk perception. Metaphorically, the body is the fortress for the mind. This image of the fortress is how people have imagined their physical bodies and dates back to the medieval period (Bennett 2005). The role of the body is to protect and carry out the works of the mind, making it the physical, tangible vehicle of the human essence. Educator Ken Robinson during his talk at the 2006 TED Conference explains this image in terms of university professors, who use their body primarily as a way to get their brain from meeting to meeting. One of the basic imperatives of natural selection is that organisms prevent damage to themselves. Anything that could "breach the fortress,"

then, is a threat, no matter the reason for the breach, and body legends deal specifically with damage or intruders to the human body.

Anxiety over threats of breach appears in organ theft legends when analyzed using the Sheffield approach, which demonstrate power struggles between individuals and groups with social power (Campion-Vincent 2005). Wealthy customers or powerful governments stealing kidneys or corneas from impoverished citizens of third world countries often represent power struggles. Those legends discuss controversies between the strong and the weak, which the weak feel they consistently lose. This struggle in legends creates protagonists with physical reminders that their fortresses have been breached. The characters of body legends generally, and severed hand legends specifically, have physical, outward reminders that powerful factions treat them as less human. This reminder is particularly prevalent in “The Hook,” where the hook-handed man is the exclusive villain of the story, and carries a shiny, metal symbol of lost conflicts.

Along with perceived struggles against governments and the wealthy, body-centered legend studies also reveal that in legend telling events, risk is perceived to come from external threats believed to be fundamentally different from one’s self (Goldstein 2004). These legends illustrate perceptions of risk and focus on the boundary between safety and danger. The known and static are assumed to be safe, because no harm has yet come to the individual, and therefore the surrounding situation must be safe. For instance, in the “Choking Doberman,” the burglar is an outsider who represents an unknown danger to the occupant. Before the burglar broke in, and even before he is discovered, the house is considered a safe space. Because of this cultural understanding



of risk, many legends involve harm brought in by those from external groups. People are distrustful of individuals who have lost a hand because they are viewed as community outsiders. The severed hand itself represents a threat because it could taint objects or individuals with some kind of contagion, either with legitimate bacterial or viral disease that thrives on dead tissues or some sort of disability contagion.

By its severing, the hand becomes a nebulous thing that is no longer human, but also not meat. USU Instructor Lynne McNeill observed a similar phenomenon in the Fife Workshop on folklore and animals, which she told me about during the summer of 2013. During the workshop, the class visited the American West Heritage Center in Logan to see a chicken slaughtered. Somewhere between the bird being killed and plucked, many students commented that the chicken was no longer a chicken, but was not chicken either. While they do not become meat, severed hands do not fit neatly into a distinct category anymore. They become unfamiliar and are therefore perceived as a potential threat risk.

This work is also informed by disability studies. Disability scholars have noted that narratives featuring the disabled often conflate mental illness, mental disability, and physical disability. Paul Longmore identified a number of characters in television and movies whose physical disability—usually scarring or an amputated limb—translated into criminal actions, monstrousness, or jealousy of the able-bodied (Longmore 2003), and other scholars have noted that the social structures that surround disability and lead to exclusion are often present in cases of mental illness as well (Jones and Brown 2013, Kafai 2013, Wolframe 2013, Pilling 2013, Bishop 2013). In each of these cases, people with mental or psychological disabilities are treated as “other” from the “normal” population, leading to motifs of instability and violence, or, alternatively, heroism if they

can overcome their disability.

Individuals with impairment are perceived by society as less functional, and therefore treated as less human than the normal person. Because the amputees in legends, particularly variants of “The Hook,” have often removed themselves from the whole of society, or been separated by legal or mental health authority figures, they are viewed as even more removed from the assumed safety of civilization (Goodley 2011, 72). This perceived separation and loss of agency within legends create a character who is treated by narrators as less human. In that way, severed hand legends reflect negative perceptions of the disabled within American informal culture.

Psychology provides a sampling of reasons legends commonly feature severed hands. Neurologist Oliver Sacks has studied hallucinations in numerous forms. Individuals who have lost a limb commonly report feeling as if the amputated body part is still there. Medicine and psychology refer to this phenomenon as a “phantom limb,” referring to the hallucinatory nature of the sensation. Sack’s research has shown that phantom hands are the most common variety of phantom limb, appearing more often and much more persistently than phantom arms, feet, or legs (Sacks 2012, 275-276). Some individuals who have had most of the forelimb amputated have reported experiencing a phantom hand without a phantom arm to connect it to the physical shoulder. Sacks attributes this greater likelihood to the greater brain activation people experience when using their hands than when using any other body part. The presence of the phantom limb and relatively overwhelming occurrence of phantom hands demonstrate that hands have a hard-wired importance to humans outside of social and narrative conventions.

Also within the realm of perception and psychology, Masahiro Mori presents the

idea of an “uncanny valley,” a point when human-like things are similar enough in appearance that people think of them as being essentially human, but inhuman enough to trigger discomfort or disgust reflexes (2012). As robotic devices grew more human-like, for example people reacted to the robots in ways that a correlative model of perception would not predict. The expectation had been that as humanoid robots looked more human, people would react to them more favorably. However, there was instead a sharp drop in reaction when the robots looked mostly human, but not completely. At the very bottom of the initial valley proposed by Mori are corpses and zombies, because both appear almost human, but look distinctly different in death than in life. Mori’s theoretical corpses lacked minor movements of blinking or breathing, lost the shine on their eyes from lack of moisture, were arranged in positions that might appear uncomfortable, felt cold or stiff to the touch, and might have smelled just a bit putrid. Because of these minor differences, corpses register to human senses as fundamentally different from the self and people interacted with on a regular basis, and therefore inspire feelings of the uncanny. Just as dead bodies register to the mind as uncanny, so would dead or prosthetic hands.

According to the principles of psychoanalytic theory, the penis is massively important in the psyche, and represents power and agency. From the early days of psychoanalysis, followers of Freud learn that any limb can be treated as a surrogate for the penis (Freud 1953, 186). If the hand is a virtual penis, then a severed hand represents castration and a subsequent loss of power. Given this interpretation, legends discussing severed hands represent a negative shift in the balance of power, whether that means a villain in the legend has lost power and is acting inappropriately because of that loss, or a

victim has been stripped of power by some external force.

While these fields and theories individually do not provide compelling evidence that severed hands represent something important and unique within the mind or narrative, by combining them the potential for perceived loss of humanity is ideally represented in the image of a severed hand. In other words, this research has shown that severed hand legends provide a platform for three possible beliefs: first, characters with severed hands demonstrate lost humanity through criminal or monstrous actions; second, the human body is fragile, and any unsafe situation can lead to hands being severed; third, once hands are severed they can contaminate people and objects. Each of the following chapters deal with legends that express one of these three beliefs, and the final chapter identifies the specific ways popular culture has used severed hands as direct and subverted symbols of disability, and consequently symbols of lost humanity.

## CHAPTER 2

## EVIL HANDS

The night is dark. A young couple is at the local lover's lane, far away from the town. As they sit in their car, listening to the radio and doing what young couples do, a flash comes across the radio! "A maniac killer has escaped from the mental ward of the local prison! Easily identifiable by his hook hand, this killer was last seen near Makeout Point! Lock your doors, and don't leave the safety of your homes until this vicious killer has been apprehended!" As the announcement cuts out, Barry White begins singing again on the radio. The girl is frightened by the announcement, but the boy wants to continue doing what young couples do. Finally, he is persuaded to leave, partly by the clear terror the girl is feeling, and partly by the metal-on-metal scraping sound he hears coming from his rear passenger-side fender. He quickly starts the car and pulls away, while the tires screech and kick up a spray of loose gravel. When they arrive at the girl's house in town, the young man jumps out of the car to open the passenger door for his date. As he reaches for the young woman's door, he notices a bloody metal hook hanging from the car door!

Someone somewhere may have told that story exactly as it is written above. If so, that would be a lucky coincidence. That is only intended as a composite text, taking the most common and dramatic elements from most of the one hundred two variants of "The Hook" catalogued in the Utah State University Fife Folklore Archives (USUFFA). This chapter outlines scholarship on "The Hook" and other legends that feature protagonists who have severed hands, and my own interpretations of the Hookman as a symbol of physical disability leading to mental instability.

Scholarly interpretations of “The Hook” have varied greatly through the years. Jan Brunvand found that the story began to emerge in the late 1950s, getting national press through “Dear Abby” in 1960 (1981, 48). Linda Dégh’s research supports Brunvand’s timeline, saying “The great abundance in number and statements of verification of the listed variants makes it obvious that this is one of the most popular among the current horror legends that have been recorded mostly from teenagers and high school and college students since 1959” (1968, 97). She also posits the importance of modern horror legends as a part of the courtship process (1968, 98). Brunvand similarly interprets the legend’s popularity, claiming that part of the legend’s appeal is “the tidiness of the plot” (1981, 50), and how easily it can move locations because many towns have a local lover’s lane.

Bill Ellis has argued that the story could be an expression of the narrator’s desire to defy the moral strictures of the community and enjoy some good old-fashioned premarital sex, but the Hookman is acting “as a sexually repressed moral custodian, seeking to deny others’ natural drives” (1994, 64). This interpretation means the legend discusses either a perceived generational power struggle, or the youthful counter-culture dealing with puritanical underpinnings of the main culture. More importantly, Ellis broke down some of the assumptions scholars have made about the legend, summarized generally in his article titled “‘The Hook’ Reconsidered” (1994). He found that by the early nineties it was not necessarily a “female legend” (1994, 66), which meant that Dégh and Dundes’s presumptions of female chastity were not necessarily supported. His work also uncovered that there is not a typical form of the narrative, but rather numerous binary choices; whether or not the lover’s lane is named, what alerted the youths to the

dangerous presence, the Hookman's origin, which occupant of the car insists on leaving, how quickly they leave, and who finds the hook all vary from text to text (1994, 66). In other words, the legend changes rather dramatically from telling to telling. In response to Ellis's criticisms, Dégh claims that the goal of the 1968 article was to establish a type, one that is still being used today (1991).

My interpretation, drawn from this scholarship and the one hundred variants I have found, is that while scholarly interpretations of "The Hook" are likely to classify it as a gateway to discussing interpersonal and generational conflicts relating to sex, it's much more supportable to simply argue that the Hookman himself is a symbol of evil within the legend. He represents not only the evil of inappropriate sex, but also a cultural distrust of the disabled. The hook itself becomes a pure symbol of danger to the surviving teenagers.

With that understanding in mind, I will give credit where it is due. I have found that Ellis's dichotomies generally hold true of the texts in the Fife Archives. In many versions, the couple is in a canyon or the mountains around Logan or Salt Lake City, or on a secluded country road. Thirty-eight variants declare the killer escaped from prison, while thirty-six other narrators swear it was the local mental hospital. In sixty-nine variants, the couple learns of the escape from the radio, but in thirteen versions, they hear of the lunatic through rumor or some other source. The boy is angry that he did not get his way in twenty-two versions, while in forty-seven others he speeds away because he is just as scared as the girl is. In ninety-four texts, they find a hook on her door handle. In one variant involving a convertible, the hook is stuck in the upholstery of the back seat (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 7, 6.1.4.2.20). "The Hook" variants in the Fife

Archives exhibit five major plot points, listed below:

1. The villain has a hook for a hand (101 variants). In some variants, the teller specifically states that the Hookman has earned his name because at least one of his hands was removed, and has been replaced by a metal hook. Nineteen of the variants in the USUFFA specify that the left hand was removed, four declare it was the right, and two others clarify that both hands have been replaced by hooks. The single exception to this hooked element is a variant in which the attacker wields a bat.

2. The villain eludes the authorities (89 variants). The authorities are aware of the villain, but he has not been successfully detained. In a few, the killing spree has just begun, and he has not yet been apprehended. In most texts, he had previously been incarcerated in a state facility or was undergoing treatment in a mental hospital, but he escapes and is presumed dangerous. Wherever he has escaped from, the antagonist has often been physically removed from the protagonists' society by the legal system, making the hook-handed man an invader to the otherwise risk-free society.

3. A young couple is outside of town (102 variants). In every variant, the potential victims remove themselves from the safety of home, most commonly to the local makeout spot. Where that specific spot was depends on the location and the couple, but it is often makeout point or lover's lane. In a few variants, a couple is in transit between destinations and suffered car problems.

4. The young couple escapes safely (89 variants). The couple usually makes it home without being injured or killed. While the vehicle may have some paint damage, even that is uncommon. Everyone walks away just fine, except the Hookman.

5. The villain's hook is removed from his person (94 variants). Consistently,



the couple finds the hook on the door handle when they exit the vehicle. The hook is most commonly on the passenger side of the car, and the young man is often the discoverer as he chivalrously opens the door for his lady love so she can return home after their eventful evening.

Each of those five elements appears in at least eighty five percent of texts. One final theme appears quite often, but not as overwhelmingly. In sixty-nine variants, the couple learns of the villain through the radio. While they sit in the car, they leave the radio playing quietly, but the music is interrupted by the announcement that the Hookman is on the loose.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of the legend could indicate that the hook is phallic in nature, and that the maniac's efforts to enter the car are mirrored by the boyfriend's efforts to penetrate the girl (Dundes, referenced in Ellis 1994, 64). Because amputation is analogous to castration in psychoanalytic theory, and castration is considered a loss of power or male virility, the disempowered inmate would only be trying to assert his power over the occupants of the car. With this reading, "The Hook" acts as a story of the difficulties individuals may have when they feel disempowered.

In the USUFFA, if the legend specifies the Hookman's sex, it is without exception male, and he is without exception acting in ways that are considered unacceptable. Briefly considering that same principle of psychoanalysis, the reason for a hookMAN should be apparent: women suffer from penis envy, men experience castration anxiety. A hooked woman would not suffer as extensively from virtual castration because men are the ones who can definitionally be castrated, and would therefore need to express what power they still have as a way to placate the base levels of their psyche.

Following that line of reasoning falls slightly outside the scope of this project, but I hope folklorists with backgrounds in feminism and psychoanalysis revisit “The Hook” with that slant in mind.

The Hookman himself could be filling an anti-heroic role for the dominant culture. Rather than a moral custodian, as Ellis has suggested (1994), this legend discusses someone acting outside the moral code who is himself enforcing that very same code. Rather than treating the Hookman’s character as a villain because listeners empathize with the teenagers, he may be seen as a villain because he’s an uncomfortable necessity in a culture that demonizes premarital intercourse while still acknowledging that marital sex is perfectly acceptable and enjoyable. If the norms must be enforced but defy biological urges, the Hookman is a symbol of perceived adult hypocrisy by teens just reaching sexual maturity.

A sexually motivated interpretation of the legend is further supported by Goldstein’s theory of risk perception, in which perceived susceptibility to harm outweighs the reality of danger (2004, 63-68). As noted earlier, most variants in this study took place at a lover’s lane, far removed from the safety of a family home or a crowded gathering space. By physically removing themselves from socially accepted safe zones, the teens in “The Hook” are knowingly putting themselves in what adult society perceives as a risky situation. While the blatant risk is from hook-handed men, there is an implicit suggestion that the reason the teens left town in the first place is inherently unsafe. While the teens of the legends demonstrate their disagreement with that assumption of risk by visiting lover’s lane, the tellers of the legend likely feel that there is at least a potential for danger, even if that danger is not one spelled out in the

legend. Otherwise, they would have little reason to continue telling the legend.

Combining elements of Ellis's interpretation with traditional psychoanalysis, a struggle becomes apparent in which the youths represent the id, the base desires of an individual, and the Hookman is a physical manifestation of the superego. While this reading of the Hookman as a moral guardian subverts Dundes and Dégh's interpretations by discarding assumptions that girls seek to remain chaste above all else, it demonstrates another potential source of tension in which the impaired antagonist becomes a vehicle for discussion. Moving away from traditional Freudian language, and borrowing instead from behavioral economist Dan Ariely, the legend represents the individual's internal struggle with reconciling cold-state decisions with hot-state desires (2009,134).

Considering that context of internal struggle, Dégh's initial statement that legends are important to youth dating culture is entirely valid (1968, 98). After all, when might teens be faced with that dichotomy more often than while dating?

In all of these readings, the discussed potential involves tension surrounding sex. The boy's eagerness creates conflict with the girl's presumed desire to remain chaste, and the biological desires of the hormone-driven teenagers create tension within the puritanical society. Even if there were no other potential readings of this legend, those outlined from Dundes, Brunvand, Ellis and Dégh still work because the biological imperatives of sex are important to people, especially in the middle-to-high school age groups that often share the story.

Each of the previous readings is couched in psychoanalysis. Given the theory's roots in folklore, it makes sense that psychoanalysis would provide clear interpretations of narratives. The core of the legend, though, is that the Hookman is a symbol of evil.

He may be evil because of sex, but interpretations should never be confused with facts. Disability Studies provide a separate theory that guides reading in a different direction. Variants of “The Hook” are subtle legends of empowerment for impaired individuals. In six variants found in the USUFFA, listeners learn of the Hookman’s injury and history. In one version, he lost his hand in an unspecified mining accident. In another, he was a first-generation immigrant, tricked back into a mineshaft before it was destroyed by his coworkers. A third variant described him as the son of a hermit, who was refused hospital service after being maimed while chopping wood. Another variant described the Hookman giving himself the hook as penance for murdering his friend and business partner. These are all stories about men who were disabled because they were marginalized by the society within the legend, and they use their hook to make themselves seen again.

Another set of legends in the USUFFA tells the story of the “Hookman Horse Killer.” Each of the three variants of this text comes from Rock Springs, Wyoming. The dynamic storytelling and ostensive actions of a friend and older brother create a version of the Hookman native to the area. The following is one example of the Hookman Horse Killer legend:

There was this boy who lived in the trailer park next to the corrals by the Jumps where we kids would go to ride our bikes over the hills. And anyway, he was slightly crazy and instead of a hand he had a hook. And one night he just lost it and went over to the corrals and, using his hook, sliced a horse’s throat so that it died. After that, he was put in the psycho ward at the prison, but he escaped. And he came back and hid at the Jumps. He still lives around the Jumps, only now he’s trying to kill children instead of horses. That’s why you don’t go to the Jumps after dark. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 22, folder 3, 6.2.1.11.3)

Another variant with an expanded narrative and hints at the event’s texture is

below:

There's a place in Rock Springs called the Jumps, and that's where people will ride their bikes and jump over the hills, I guess. And it's by a bunch of horse corrals, and people would put their horses there. Anyway, some strange things started to happen. One day one of the--the horse people, or one who owns the horses--what are they called? Horse owners--owners of horses--Cowboys! Needless to say he was going to go ride his beautiful horse that he kept there. And it was an Arabian stallion. And he went to the gate to let it out so he could ride it, and he couldn't hear anything. And so he went in and there was his horse and its throat was cut out and there was blood all over the place. And there was on the wall a picture of a hook. And so the--the--the man was just, like, really ticked off because, you know, he spent a lot of money on the horse and it was a dear friend of his--if you can be friends with a horse. So anyway, he was really upset and the sooner--like a week or something passed and it happened again to a different owner, and again and again and again. And every time the horse's throat was cut out, you know, with one slash. There wasn't a lot of, like, tearing. At first they thought it was, like, wolves or something--or coyote--what do we have around there? Coyotes who were very hungry. Anyway, the man was never found. And he was known--you could see him, I guess, wandering the streets with a crazed expression on his face. That's all I remember.

And I remember, "And he looked like THIS!" And that's when Janet would pull out her bloody stump of a hand and, like, make little gnashing, scratching sounds. But it--the man instead of a hand, he had a hook. And he used to be a famous horseman, I guess, that won all the races and stuff, until one day a very angry horse stepped on his hand and, like, broke it off or something. And so he had to have, like, a hook. Anyway, I guess he started killing people after a while. I guess the horse--so, yeah, and that's why--and our parents would always say--and that's why our older sister, because she "cared" said, "stay away from the Jumps at night. The Hookman is there and he's waiting for fresh horses and he's waiting for fresh young children because they're easier to cut." I guess his hook kind of got rusted with age or whatever and it worked better on children's flesh. But I just remember being frightened the whole time and thinking to myself, "I'm so lucky to have a sister like Janet who will protect me from the Hookman be letting me know not to go out at the Jumps at like, midnight like I was planning to do all my life, anyway" (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 22, folder 3, 6.2.1.11.2).

Another entry about the Hookman Horse Killer discussed a legend trip based on the story, and featured the trippers finding a hole in a fence that looked like it had been made by a hook, stumbling across traces of blood and horse hair, and a friendly dog having his throat cut by a hook. In the Hookman Horse Killer texts, we see that the core idea Longman uncovered in his article “Screening Stereotypes” appears in folklore as well: characters who suffer physical trauma also exhibit symptoms of madness. The Hookman was “slightly crazy and instead of a hand he had a hook,” or “he had to have, like, a hook...he started killing people after a while.” These texts do not make it clear if the physical disability lead to mental instability, or if the hook is a symbol of his inner madness, but way physical and mental impairments are portrayed as equivalent in this text.

Again, this conflation of one disability leading to another appears within narratives, and proving or disproving the motif’s grounds within reality falls outside the scope of this project. The motif itself is noteworthy because it shows a slippery-slope perception drawn from the functional definition of humanity outlined in the introduction: people are defined by the things that they do, and when they do fewer of those things, they are less human. The perceptions that lead it it’s inclusion in narrative directly lead to the core statement of these legends that the physically disabled or the mad are less human than other characters in the narrative. Whatever caused the character to lose a hand and gain a hook in the Hookman texts, the impaired character exacts violence on his society by going to lover’s lane and killing the some of the most vulnerable members of the population—children, who are both vulnerable and who represent the future. It is of particular note that these are two of about a dozen texts in the archive that attempt to

explain the reason behind the Hookman's violence, even though the explanation is simply that was slightly crazy and "lost it." While the same information is given in many of the texts, it is usually an explanation of the villain's previous location rather than a pure statement of his character.

The Hookman is not exclusively a folkloric scapegoat for evil; research outside of literary analyses can create a sympathetic character in the impaired villain. Studies have demonstrated that a properly made prosthetic can function as a glove for a phantom limb (Sacks 2012). A good prosthetic does not act as a replacement for something missing, but rather as an extension of a truncated human body. With that image in mind, it is clear how a poor representation of the missing limb, like a hook, could frustrate the owner even more than the phantom limb. Combining that frustration with a heavy, unwieldy, and sharp appendage, storytellers could argue that the Hookman has cause to turn to a life of violence. In this way, the storytellers are discussing why they perceive the character has chosen to forsake social rules against violence; the Hookman literally became the lover's lane terrorist that he is because of his disability. Linda Dégh has taken the discussion to an even greater extreme, referring to "the natural dread of the handicapped" (1968, 98) in this set of legends. While calling that dread "natural" seems callous, disgust research and risk perception explain why a reminder of mortality and unfamiliarity of the hook might cause individuals to cringe. When combined with the perceived functional definition of humanity, legend tellers are providing a hyperbolic explanation of how physical disability could lead someone to act less human.

Just as villainous amputee legends could be read as empowering, they are also potential tools of disempowerment for the amputee community. In every text but one, the

attacker is physically disabled, and therefore becomes a representative of the disabled community within the legend. There were no legends or anti-legends in the corpus that involved the Hookman helping the young couple if they had car trouble, or scaring away aggressive wildlife. The escapee is presumably trying to kill or injure the individuals inside the car. In one lone variant, the couple is attacked by a man wielding a bat. In that telling, no indication is given that he was a convict or mental patient, and his reasons for attacking the youths remain entirely mysterious. While fear of impaired individuals may be irrational, my undergraduate mentor Adam Davis often reminded me that folklore is rarely a place to look for enlightened values. This core idea goes back to my point from the beginning of this chapter: characters with severed hands are less human in narratives and this lack of humanity is represented by the fact that they commit criminal or monstrous acts.

The stock character of the villainous amputee appears in disability studies, and has been termed “narrative prosthesis” (Mitchell and Snyder referenced in Goodley 2011, 15). The implicit demonization of the disabled subtly shows to an able-bodied society that having a physical impairment does not leave a person helpless. Rather, the character’s actions and the description of the Hookman as evil or crazy portrays these physically impaired characters as an untrustworthy “other,” who want little more than to destroy the peaceful life of American high school students and their families. This conception of the Hookman as evil, then, is grounded in actions and background, but symbolized by the metal hook.

Consider a different limb for a moment: the rabbit’s foot. This particular fetish is a symbol of luck in the United States, holding ranks with pennies found with the head



face-up, four-leaf clovers, and a horseshoe. The acquisition of a rabbit's foot is a symbol of bad luck heaped upon bad luck, with a collection ceremony that ideally includes visiting cemeteries at midnight during a new moon, walking over graves, and usually taking the left-hind leg of the animal (Ellis 2004, 92-94). The foot acts as a nexus of bad luck, which through severing and new ownership is inverted into good luck for the non-biological owner. Another interpretation that deals less directly with the ritual collection of the foot claims that the rabbit is a charismatic creature. By carrying a charm made of rabbit, the new owner can inherit some of the animal's charisma.

Much like the rabbit's foot, the hook represents the owner's evil choices. In contrast to the good luck brought by a hare's foot, the hook represents a lost limb, taken from someone who was incarcerated and failed to kill a pair of distracted youngsters, and lost the same limb in their car door a second time for his efforts. Like the rabbit's foot, the hook is a trophy; it is physical proof that the couple can succeed at surviving danger. Despite fulfilling the same role as the Hookman's hook within the narrative, the single variant that discusses a bat-wielding man does not mention the couple keeping the bat as a trophy. While no reason for this difference is mentioned in the text, it is unsurprising that the bat is left behind. Because the bat is a much more common item than a hook hand, it would not be as clear and lasting of a symbol. The power of the hook is in its symbolic value.

Door-bound hooks fulfill a second role for the protagonists: they are physical proof that the danger was real. In many of the texts, the teens never hear or see any sign of the Hookman until they get back to the girl's house, and without the hook on the door they could have discounted the entire event. The hook is a sign that reminds the kids they

survived, but it also serves as proof that they did not imagine it, and a warning that they could have just as easily died. Perhaps it is even a permanent reminder within the story that teens should avoid the activities that lead to car doors being hooked.

The hook on the car door raises a question: why did the maniac try to use his less dexterous hand to open the door? Only two variants specified that the killer had hooks for both hands. The use of the hook to open the door could be explained in part by the imbalance of which hand had been removed; if the killer was right handed in the first place, as most people are, the habit would be to use the right hand to open the car door. The legend may also include this detail to explain why the killer did not manage to enter the car. If the Hookman had used his good hand, the door would have easily opened, and there would be no fictional survivors to pass the story along to friends of friends.

Magic could provide another explanation of why the titular character is using his titular appendage despite a lack of fine motor skills. Two variants of *The Hook* silently invoke Frazer's law of sympathetic magic. In one, an outcast from the nearby town fashions crude prosthetic for his maimed son from a meat hook. The other version recounts that an owner of a meatpacking plant killed his partner, removed his own hand as an act of contrition, and now inhabits the plant with a meat hook as a replacement. In both of these texts, the amputee is described as crazy because they kill for reasons that are never explained. Frazer's law states that folk understandings of magic are driven by ideas of contagion and homeopathy (1913, 117). The rule of contagion states that things that were once in contact are always in contact, whereas the rule of homeopathy states that things resemble one another. Since the hooks were once used to hang meat, the hooks themselves could drive the inhuman acts these men commit. The hooks could

gently resonate with a desire to be buried in meat once again, and since human flesh is similar to a side of beef, they could magically encourage the poor amputees to commit horrible acts. The Hookman could be using their hooks to open car doors because the hook is the evil part of the body, the one that drives them to kill. If the men were otherwise resistant to the idea, the only option the “sentient” hook might have is to try to open the door itself.

The very nature of which hand is lost could also influence the actions of these Hookmen. Individuals with only a passing knowledge of languages should know that the Latin word for left is still used in English: sinister. The translation of right has remained part of English vernacular as well: dexter. While dexter is now commonly associated with an HBO show about a serial killer titled “Dexter,” the root is retained in the word “dexterous.” No matter the negative connotations associated with the left side, the majority of the world’s population is right-hand dominant (Alpenfels 1955). Even rabbit’s foot legendry states that the paw should come from the left side of the animal’s body because it has associations with evil and warding off bad luck (Ellis 2004). The association in humans between the left side and evil is reflected in the overwhelming number of texts that specify the killer had lost his right hand. Of the twenty-five texts that name which hand is missing, only four name the left hand. Nineteen directly state that the right hand is the one that was removed. Given the negative connotations of the left side, the killer has been reduced to one limb perceived as evil and one that is manmade and unnatural.

Some variants classified in the Fife Archives as “The Hook” borrow plot points from a similar legend titled “The Boyfriend’s Death,” particularly the dead boyfriend for

which the legend is named. “The Boyfriend’s Death” is another urban legend set near a car outside of town, but differs from the hook in that it often features a car that won’t start, and the title character is usually killed by the escapee when he walks back to town for help. I have designated variants of “The Hook” that feature that final point “death variants,” to distinguish them from the more common “escape variants” outlined above in which the couple return home safely. For example:

Once a couple in Wyoming headed up into the hills to be alone. As they sat in the car, they listened to the radio. A news flash announced that a man with a hook on his right arm, had just escaped from the police, after killing three people that very night, not too far away from where the young couple sat in their car. Hearing the news the couple decided to leave but their car would not start. The boy became worried and decided that he had better go for help. Before he left, he told his date to lay on the floor in the back of the car, and no matter what she was not to open the door until he returned with help. The frightened girl did as she was told. Soon after the boy had left, she began to hear a loud bang on the top of the car. She had no idea as to what was going on, and decided to keep still. A few hours later the girl heard voices and peeked out to find four police cars, and her dead boyfriend hanging from a tree above the car. He had been killed by the escaped man with a hook on his right arm. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 7, 6.1.4.2.1).

This tale blends four common elements of The Hook—the couple is removed from society, the radio announcement, the killer has eluded authorities, and the killer has a hook for a hand—with car trouble, the boyfriend going for help and being killed, a dripping, banging, or scratching outside the car, and the killer remaining unapprehended, all of which appear more commonly in variants of The Boyfriend’s Death. In contrast, a more typical version of the tale reads:

A guy and a girl were out on a date. They went to dinner and then to a movie. After the movie, the guy drove out of town and into the mountains. He parked in a secluded spot, with trees and shadows all around. They started kissing and making out.

The radio was on and the wind was blowing. The couple continued making out, and the guy started getting really aggressive when a news story came on the radio. The guy ignored it, but the girl listened. She heard that a crazy man had just escaped from an insane asylum, and he was probably hiding out in the nearby mountains. The man was really dangerous, and he had a hook on his right arm. He was put away years ago for cutting up young girls with his hook. The girl heard this and got really scared and pushed away her date. She said she was scared and wanted to go home, but the guy argued because he wanted to stay. The girl was so scared she was shaking and crying, so the guy eventually turned on his ignition and tore off. He cooled off on the way home, and when he pulled into the girl's driveway, he got out so he could help her out of the car. And there on her door handle hung a bloody hook. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 7, 6.1.4.2.2)

One recurring element of the death variants is the hook functioning as a symbol of contagion or disease transmission, playing out in a manner similar to the Headless Horseman in Irving's *Sleepy Hollow*. The idea of contagious disfigurement has been connected with the human hand since at least the 1770s, when the people of Lyon, France were panicked by stories of court surgeons kidnapping children and removing their arms to heal a disfigured prince (Campion-Vincent 2005, 48). AIDS legends dealing with risk perception, particularly the legends entitled AIDS Harry, AIDS Mary, and Welcome to the Wonderful World of AIDS demonstrate antagonists spreading their suffering as much as possible to innocent victims (Goldstein 2004). These new AIDS victims have the potential to become viral crusaders, people who would ignore the established norms against violence within American society. By discarding this rule, the victims could attempt to become powerful vectors of AIDS.

If caught by the Hookman, the unlucky boyfriend is often found dead with a hook in his back, dismembered, or in one version with his own newly severed hand replaced by a hook that's been wedged in the door of his car. In these tales, the narrator has made it the Hookman's goal to pass his impairment on to unsuspecting victims or possibly to heal

himself with the victim's hand. In the variant where the young man's hand is replaced, the villain takes things a step further and recreates the victim in his own likeness. While neither disability nor villainy are contagious as defined by Frazer's sympathetic magic or Pasteur's cell theory, the analogous treatment in variants of "The Hook" and "The Boyfriend's Death" that feature severed hands betray a cultural mistrust of the disabled through fear of contagion.

The characters discussed in this chapter are made less human than their whole-bodied counterparts. They are inhuman because they are enacting violence against young members of the dominant society. That violence goes against the cultural understanding, and its legal reflection, in the United States that murder is generally unacceptable. Whether Hookmen are moral custodians shunned from society for a deformity, men whose minds have been turned by an inadequate prosthetic, amputee crusaders with goals like those of a golden-age comics villain, a symbol of the disempowered trying to recapture his one-time virility, or a simple code word for "the natural dread of the handicapped," these men are all set as villains within their stories. The only thing they have in common beyond their ostracization is an impairment, and the impairment is often the only reason for their removal from society. These characters of these legends are treated as if they must be insane because they have prosthetic hooks, and in some cases there are implications that the madness stems from the hooks themselves. Whether disability or madness comes first is like the chicken and the egg, but the implications are the same either way: characters are treated as less human because of their physical disability or psychological instability, and the two are intricately interconnected.

## CHAPTER 3

### LOSS OF AGENCY

The previous chapter demonstrated how pre-existing loss of a hand led to evil in villains of legend. This chapter examines the same experience of hand severing as it occur during the narrative, looking at legends such as “The Choking Doberman,” “Smashed Hands,” and “Keep Head and Arms Inside the Vehicle.” In legends that discuss how people have lost their hands, a very specific theme emerges: damage to that part of the body leads to a perceived loss of humanity.

Throughout the variants explored here, two entwined themes appear repeatedly: punishment and safety. Use of mutilation as narrative shorthand to mean lost humanity makes sense because western society conceptualizes the body as a barrier between the inner works and the outside world. In the fourteenth century, Henri de Mondeville described the body using two metaphors: it is either a fortress or a series of nested containers. If the body is treated as a fortress, each part is a different section of the building, working together toward the good of the whole, and to defend itself from the outside world (Bennett 2005, 11-12). Any assault on the fortress that causes damage leaves it vulnerable to further attacks, as the whole system would suffer from the loss of a single department. In other words, when someone is acting in an unsafe manner, or being punished for violating societal norms, they are risking their own optimal agency.

Imagining the body as a fortress leads to another explanation of how anxiety is tied up in maiming legends. Burglary and assault are both themes found in legends that express potential for loss through force (Nicolaisen 2001, 139). When an individual is a victim of assault, they often feel traumatized or violated even when no physical harm

came to them. Burglaries are jarring because the fortress is not as safe as occupants had thought, and victims are rightfully on alert afterward. This concern is particularly prevalent in severed hand legends, because they express perceived loss of humanity through damage to the fortress.

One example of this theme of safety or punishment in legend is “The Choking Doberman:”

One night a woman came home from work to find blood and shredded pieces of cloth all over the place. She called the police to investigate but they could not figure out what happened. A few days later, the woman’s dog, a Doberman Pincer, became very sick so she took it to the veterinarian. After a thorough check-up, nothing was found to be the matter, so the doctor decided to take some x-rays. In the dog’s stomach was found a human hand. It was the hand of the man who broke into the woman’s house which was very well-protected by the dog. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, Box 22, Folder 15, 6.2.3.1.1)

At an official level, maiming is never an appropriate sentence for a crime in the United States. In Saudi Arabia, courts may sentence thieves to have their right hands removed according to Sharia Law (Bacchi 2013). In the United States, such punishments would be classified as cruel and unusual, violating the eighth amendment of the constitution. The cruelty perceived in this punishment could very well come from the cultural perception that underlies every narrative in this study: severed limbs represent a loss of humanity. Despite legal discomfort with severed hands as a form of punishment, legends texts seem to suggest that on some unofficial level, people want to cut off a thief’s hand. To fulfill the need for visceral justice, there is the “Choking Doberman.” While thieves in Saudi Arabia are rumored to have hands cut off by the legal system, thieves in legend have their fingers bitten off by four-legged security systems. Just as the Hookman from the last chapter operated outside of society and killed to enforce social



morals, Dobermans bite off burglars' fingers to satisfy a need for justice.

In these texts the villain of the piece, the burglar, is punished. The burglar rarely speaks, his motives are never explained, and his only necessarily human characteristics are his now-missing fingers and a possible specification of his ethnicity. If he did not have fingers to bite off, the legend would not even need the burglar. The burglar is a representation of danger, and that danger is so great that the woman must leave the house. The need to express potential dangers in the home relates to the theory of vernacular risk perception; accidents often happen at home, but people do not perceive the home as an unsafe location. The legend uses a burglar because he is a convenient representation of many potential forms that harm could take in the course of daily life.

In eight of the twenty-eight "Choking Doberman" texts in the archives, the owner is told the race and/or species of the finger's original owner. In the Fife Archives, if a race was attributed to the burglar, he was black. One informant declined being named because identifying the man's ethnicity was "off-color." The tale is generally associated with tension between ethnic groups, particularly between Caucasian and Hispanic groups or Caucasian and African American groups (Brunvand 1986, 11).

Closely related to the discussion of race is that storytellers felt the need to not only state an ethnicity, but also to specify that the fingers were human in four of the variants studied here. That is, the fingers belong to someone who is both an ethnic minority and a human being. The finger is the exclusive evolutionary province of mammals that spend much of their life in trees, namely primates like lemurs, great apes, and humans. If the fingers belong to a specific minority, of course they would belong to a human being. The overt stating of that fact suggests an underlying perception that

ethnic minorities are somehow less human than the majority group, much like the physically disabled in these legends are treated as less human. I believe the distinction of human fingers in this legend is specifically made because narrators are unconsciously communicating the same essential discussion of lost humanity that makes the foundation of any severed hand legend.

The comment of the fingers' species of origin could be made because the phone call is coming from the vet, a professional that may distinguish between species in conversation out of habit, but that would be a stretch. The most likely explanation for the clear statement of "human fingers" in the texts is an attempt by tellers to maximize the potential horror of the scene. Dr. Rachel Herz has discovered that the biological reflexes associated with disgust—vomiting, exhaling, withdrawing—all help prevent contamination and injury. These same reflexes are triggered whether an actual threat or reminder of a threat is present. Reminders include individuals who have lost a limb, or severed limbs (Herz 2012, 126). If the dog had been choking on something perfectly ordinary for dogs to eat, like a bit of shoe, or chew toy, the owner never would have been alerted to danger. Instead, however, the dog is choking on something disgusting, specifically relating to body disgust from the dog's perspective (Herz 2012, 37) and mutilation-deformity disgust for the owner (Herz 2012, 39). Body disgust is the type of disgust that involves having ingesting inappropriate parts of the body, which are usually fluids or waste products, but severed fingers would certainly qualify as well. Because the dog is effectively the owner's only friend or family, the legend is very nearly talking about a person choking to death on severed fingers.

Even more closely linked to conception of humanity, mutilation-deformity disgust

is the negative reaction to any sort of mutilation, from tattoos and piercings to fingers bitten off by dogs. While in the context of the legend the severing of those fingers saved the owner's life, listeners are still reminded of how fragile the human body can be, triggering that same disgust reflex (Herz 2012, 126). In short, stating that the fingers were human is unusual, yet a fourth of the USUFFA "Choking Doberman" texts were collected from tellers who included the detail, probably to heighten the disgust reflex in listeners.

"The Choking Doberman" also opens the door for conversation about gay rights. This interpretation springs from the two most common places in these texts for a burglar to be found after being injured are the coat closet and the bedroom closet. Granted, this location is partially out of convenience for the storyteller. If the burglar were passed out in the middle of the living room floor, the legend would need to address that to placate hostile audiences. However, given that "in the closet" refers to someone who identifies publically as heterosexual but privately as LGBTQA, it would seem that the event discusses discomfort with non-heterosexual individuals. In that way, risk perception explains the roles these characters play in the legend: characters who are "other" from the presumed white, female, heterosexual main characters are symbols of heightened danger simply because they are different from the central human of the story. While "The Choking Doberman" is enabling obvious conversations like risk and safety, the legend also brings up issues of equality between ethnicities and sexualities through subtle turns of phrase and the removal of hands. If removal of hands is symbolic of diminished humanity, this legend seems to be suggesting that alternate sexualities are also symbolic of reduced humanity. Admittedly, this analysis of the phrase is a bit of a stretch, and falls

a bit outside the scope of this project, but it seems worthy of a brief note in any case.

Taking symbolic interpretation a step further, in “Choking Doberman” legends, the home is an extension of the self. In legendry as a whole, including Hook legends, a car is often an extension of the home and consequently the self (Nicolaisen 2001). When a burglar breaks into a house, even if he does not take anything of value or interact directly with the occupants, the occupants often feel less secure as a result. The literal fortress has been breached, and as a result there is danger of the body-fortress being damaged as well.

As the expected safety of the home can be compromised, so can the car. A number of severed hand legends deal with interactions surrounding vehicles, particularly legends that act as a warning to small children and their parents like “Smashed Hands” and “Keep Arms and Head inside the Vehicle.” The eight variants of “Keep Arms and Head inside the Vehicle” in the USUFFA tell of people who were severely or fatally injured after disobeying basic traffic safety. One version tells the cautionary tale of Johnny:

Johnny was a hyperactive boy who just could not sit still he always had to be doing something. He had to ride the bus to go to school. The bus driver was always yelling at him for something, to sit down, to quit bothering somebody, to quit throwing things, keep away from the window.

One day Johnny was up to his normal antics. He was waving his arm out the window when all of a sudden a semi-truck passed by real close to the bus and mangled Johnny’s arm.

This is folklore. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 12, 6.1.4.15.2)

Rather than a lesson about crime and punishment, Johnny’s story is a clear warning that if kids do not straighten up and listen to authority figures, they will suffer consequences. Johnny’s story communicates the same perception outlined in the

previous chapter that mental disabilities like ADHD lead to physical disabilities. The natural consequence the teller provides is a severed hand, one of the most permanent—but still survivable—negative results of acting irresponsibly. The results are even worse if Johnny is a ringleader who can get the rest of the bus to follow his bad example, as happens in another text in the archives (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 12, 6.1.4.15.1). In that variant, half of the kids on the bus route become amputees because they listened to someone other than the legend's external voice of common sense, the salt of the earth bus driver. While the legends in the last chapter implied and warned that physical disabilities led to mental instability, these legends instead warn about safety and natural punishments. They are potential experiences for anyone who travels by car, whether adults or children. However, the people acting irresponsibly aren't the only potential audiences for these stories; bus drivers or parents learn what happens if they don't maintain constant control of both the vehicle and the passengers, other motorists are reminded that they could be involved in a very psychologically damaging accident through no fault of their own, and all of humanity is reminded how fragile the human body is when travelling sixty miles per hour.

The Smashed Hands legend also paints a grisly picture of how many people suffer when a parent does not follow the imperative that parents protect and care for their children.

This young father had just purchased his first new 4X4 truck. He was so proud of it and always kept it clean. He came home one day for lunch and pulled his truck into the garage, out of the sun. His four-year-old son was in the garage pounding on a piece of wood. He said hello and went inside to eat a fast lunch. After a quick thirty-minute lunch, he kissed his wife goodbye and headed to the new truck in the garage. As he went to the garage door, he could hear his son still banging on the piece of wood. He thought how much fun he must be having. As he opened the door he was

stunned by what he saw. His son wasn't pounding on a piece of wood, but on his new truck. He had walked all the way around it several times hanging his hammer into the freshly waxed paint. The father was outraged and without thinking he grabbed the hammer from his sons hands. He started smashing his sons little hands, yelling at him, teaching him a lesson. The young child went into shock and the mother was too late to save her son from this terrible lesson. The father was out of his mind for those few split seconds, but he had smashed those little hands so badly they had to amputate them. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 19, 6.3.0.15.1)

For the rest of his life, the son will carry a reminder of that afternoon. The boy is so young he may not remember the event that lead to the accident, but the reminder is not just for him; anytime the father looks at his son, he will see those few moments that he became abusive and valued his material possessions more than his own son. For all the audience of the story knows, that could be the only time in the man's life that he made a mistake, but his son will take that mistake to the grave. The broader discussion this legend is bringing out is just how much someone's life can change in just a split second, how permanent some decisions and actions really are. The legend is also giving physical form to emotional abuse, providing an external image to internal issues. Just like the kids who would not stop hanging their arms out the window, the child in "Smashed Hands" might have just been set down the path to become a teen-murdering Hookman because the adult in the situation was not in control.

A darker version of "Smashed Hands" appears in the tale "Nubs." "Nubs" could be a prequel to a variant of "The Murdered Boyfriend."

I always heard that there were these old mines up in some canyon in Salt Lake where kids would go play, and one girl went there with her friends and they were playing around. So she accidentally gets run over by a mine cart, and it slices her arms off at the elbows and her legs at the knees, and leaves these little nubs. But her parents were too grossed out and didn't want people to see her, so they just left her there. So she sticks her nubs in the mud or something so they healed, and she learned how to scoot around

everywhere. She stayed alive because she stole food from people's picnic baskets when they came to camp there. She was fine until winter came, and then she had no food. So there's this starving little nub girl in the mountains, and I always heard that some boy scouts were camping and one of them wandered off...and she snagged him and killed him and ate him! (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 13, 6.3.4.5.32)

While the end of the tale is certainly in line with a campfire story, attention should focus back to the parents' reaction to their daughter's injury. Rather than care for her, or rush her to the hospital as the audience may expect, they simply leave her in the woods because they are disgusted by her freshly severed limbs. She is abandoned by the people charged with her care, the people who represent society to a young child. Just as Herz's theory would predict (2012, 127), the parents are disgusted by their daughter's injury. She loses her status of being worthy of love as a result, and begins behaving much like the Hookmen in the previous chapter out of necessity to survive.

The messages in "Nubs" are clear and harsh: children who act irresponsibly and play in dangerous places aren't worthy of parental love, parents should keep an eye on their children or else horrible things could happen, society should care for the physically disabled or else the results may be tragic, and Boy Scouts make for some good eatin'. Special attention should be paid to the idea that Nubs is unlovable because of her disability. That statement particularly reflects the idea that ties together this entire study: severed hands are representative of humanity. Because Nubs lost her arms and legs and has become disabled, her parents no longer value her. Once her hands are severed, she is no longer perceived as a human being.

The use of a Boy Scout as the victim is also noteworthy, since they often represent the conservative and pro-social elements of our culture through their service projects and citizenship merit badges. In that way, Nubs was not only attacking a youth,

she was attacking an idealized symbol of the society that allowed her to become what she is today. This demonstrates the perceived link between the physical body and mental states. Nubs makes poor choices, and is physically injured as a result. Once she is physically injured, she starts exhibiting aberrant behavior in the form of eating humans. Physical disability and madness once again follow from one another in the world of legends.

“Nubs” is a subtle reminder that if perfection is pursued at the expense of the impaired, the impaired might find new ways to meet their needs, and a link between the legends discussed in this chapter. Readers of the archived text see an innocent child transition from membership in the able-bodied community to someone denied any sort of group membership, much like the silent criminals of “The Choking Doberman.” She becomes a presumed member of a community defined by impairment, just like the children in “Keep Arms and Head inside the Vehicle” and “Smashed Hands.” Finally, she eats one of the Boy Scouts, triggering disgust reflexes and reinforcing ideas that risk comes from external threats who are treated as less human, all because a little girl wanted to play on the unsafe mine tracks.



## CHAPTER 4

### CROSSED BOUNDARIES

The study thus far has examined severed hands as representations of evil and as the result of danger/unsafe practices. The final form of severed hands in legend is the third party severed hand, which blurs the lines between a human and an object. In these texts, we are not focused on characters whose hands are severed, but on the hands that are severed from the body. Legends in this group include prank legends, some variants of Hook texts from the second chapter, and industrial accidents. American culture has embraced severed limbs in the form of the Lucky Rabbit's Foot, but the characters in legends react with disgust or insanity when introduced to a severed human hand. These legends discuss hands as perceived vectors of contamination or death through their unusual status apart from the human body.

Contemporary legends often feature severed hands as a tool in practical jokes. The USUFFA features a subcategory titled "Missing Head or Limb for a Good Scare," which features many legends using weaponized hands as a tool of tomfoolery. One detail to note is that of the eight texts in this subcategory of contemporary legends, only three feature the severed hand. This set is the only one I examined in which hands played such a more minor role, and most of the other texts focused on severed heads. Characters' excessive reactions to the unexpected exposure to severed hands in these legends mark the texts as particularly interesting to this study. The following text demonstrates the powerful reaction of bystanders who encounter severed hands that have been placed with malicious intent.

There was a young woman who was engaged to be married. She and her fiancé had gone out on a date and during the course of the evening they had gotten into an argument. He had wanted her to run away and get married immediately rather than wait for their planned wedding day. She had gone to a lot of trouble planning the wedding, however, and felt it would break her poor mother's heart if they were to elope. The young woman left her unhappy fiancé at the theater and walked home, because he was so angry and would not take "no" for an answer. As she walked home she began to feel sorry for allowing the discussion to accelerate into an argument. After all, he only wanted to elope with her because he loved her and wanted to be with her. She would hurry home to call him and tell him that she had changed her mind. When she arrived at her apartment, her fiancé's car was parked in front of her place. She hurriedly put her key in the lock and rushed into the room. There was a pull-cord hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room that would turn the light on. She reached for it and instead of the cord she felt a man's arm. Her parents found her the next day sitting on the floor with the arm in her hand. Her hair had turned completely white. Someone had broken into her apartment while she and her boyfriend had been out for the evening. When her boyfriend came back to her apartment, he had surprised the intruder, who then killed the young man, cut off his arm, and tied it to the light switch as a welcoming present for the young woman. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 10, 6.3.3.7.2).

Audience members should not be surprised that the burglar's intended outcome worked out in this text; the surprising location and the woman's relationship with the dead man both lead to mental scarring. Cradling the arm makes her appear insane, an insanity that only appeared after contact with the severed hand. This betrays a perception that contact with disability can lead to insanity. The following legend further explores that perception.

The Camp Director, Sister Byrd, lived in a small town near the Utah-Nevada border as a teenager. Her group of friends included 6 girls and 6 or 7 guys from a neighboring town. (However, they all went to the same high school). The girls and guys were constantly playing tricks and practical jokes, and always trying to out-do each other.

One weekend the guys all decided to go hunting--this was the perfect chance for the girls to "get them good." While they were gone, the girls got into one of the guy's homes and ransacked and sabotaged everything in sight. Nothing was left untouched--beds were short-sheeted, pants pockets were filled with cereal. In general, the entire house was "rigged." When they guys came back from their hunting trip and saw the effects of the joke, they decided not to say a word to the girls. The girls were dying to hear something--anything--about the guys' reactions, but three weeks passed without one word. However, the time came for the guys to "get even." The previous day, there had been a serious automobile accident in the small town. It happened that the local coroner was a friend of one of the guys and was aware of the "practical joke competition" existing between the girls and the guys. It also happened that the coroner has possession of one of the dismembered victims of the auto accident. The plan was this--one of the guys asked one of the girls out on a date. While on the date, the others sabotaged the girl's bedroom. When the girl got home and told her parents she was back, she went into her bedroom to get ready for bed.

A few minutes later, her parents heard hysterical screams coming from the bedroom.

It seemed the girl had climbed into the bed and felt her toes touch something under the covers. When she pulled back the quilt, she discovered a bloody and disfigured human arm. The shock and horror caused the girl to become hysterical and go completely berserk. She began clawing and gnawing at the arm.

It was at this point that her parents entered the room. They wrestled the arm from their daughter and tried to get her to "come to her senses," but without success. Later the parents found out that the guys had talked the coroner into giving them the dismembered arm as a prop in their practical joke.

Although it has been a number of years, the girl hasn't recovered and has spent her entire life in a mental institution. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 10, 6.3.3.7.6).

The victims of these legends undergo traumatic experiences and react accordingly. For example, they are unable to speak, a trait that narrators imply can last for the rest of their lives. In two particularly horrifying texts the victims begin to gnaw on the misplaced limb. All of these symptoms indicate that the victims suffer from a

psychotic break with reality. Following the traumatic experience with the severed hand, the victims are often institutionalized in a mental care facility. While the previous chapters showed disability leading to madness, or madness leading to disability, these tales introduce a new theme: contact with the disability causes madness. Even when the victim of the legend is not disabled, contact with a severed hand leads them to exhibit symptoms that are classically associated with insanity, specifically psychosis.

What is required to mentally break the characters seems to be surprisingly little. One text from the “Missing Head or Limb for a Good Scare” subcategory, titled “The Green Glove” by its collector, is a part of this group without even featuring a severed hand:

There was a big, old haunted house somewhere near here and it was situated on a corner. One night these three friends were on a dare to go into the house. Two of the three thought it would be funny if they made sure the third one got a good scare. So, they went into (in the daylight of course) the house and rigged up one of those green, plastic gloves. Y’know, the slimy, cold ones. Anyway, they rigged up on a wire that would swing down and hit the third in the face when he walked through this certain hall.

That night they entered the house. It was a perfect spooky night. The three walked around together for awhile looking for anything that was “haunted.” Then the two plotters conveniently separated themselves from the third. The one boy, now alone, went down the appropriate hall--as it was the only way to get out of the house. He tripped the wire and let a blood-curdling scream. The other two, on hearing this, dashed out. Once outside, they laughed for quite awhile, but after while they began to wonder where their friend was. They waited for about an hour for the other boy to come out. After debating whether to get help and risk punishment or go in a find him, they decided to go in. When they got in, they found their friend clutching the green hand, biting it for all he was worth--his hair was snow white and his eyes the size of coke bottle bottoms. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 10, 6.3.3.7.1)

Because of contact with something that is similar in shape to a severed hand, the

victim of the text exhibited signs that he had lost touch with reality. White hair is perceived as a symptom of shock or stress, and the wide eyes suggest that the unfortunate victim has retreated within his own shattered mindscape. His experience with something that is well removed from any sort of disability—not his own hand, nor even a real hand—but still contained in the same form suggests that the fear of contamination or contagion is quite strong.

Mental breakdown after encountering a severed hand appears in the legends examined in previous chapters, as well. In two variants of “The Boyfriend’s Death,” the girlfriend sees the love of her life dismembered and strewn around the car, and promptly disappears in the wilderness, earning names like “The Green Hatchet Lady” who become focal points of their own Hook-type legends (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 5, 6.1.4.1.49-50). In these tellings of “The Boyfriend’s Death,” the main character is struck not only by the encounter with severed limbs, which we’ve seen are already disturbing enough to cause a psychotic break from the prank tales, but also by the origin of the limb. In these cases, it belongs to someone with whom the victim had a personal and romantic connection, and had just seen in their “natural” or living and whole form very recently, much like the woman in the first legend presented in this chapter. The victims must then comprehend not only what used to be their loveable boyfriend, but also that the very same thing could happen to them at any moment.

While at an emotional and rational level listeners can empathize to a certain point with these scarred characters, the extreme reaction to the stimulus is explained further by neuroscience. The split reaction between curiosity and repulsion discussed in chapter one is the root cause of the characters’ mental breakdown. People usually interact with live

hands, whether attached to their own arm or the arm of someone nearby. The hands are usually warm, resilient, and move in predictable ways like a handshake or a wave. When the hand appears as a cold, slimy object, those rules no longer apply, and our problem-solving brains immediately set to work on determining why this interaction is different. Identifying the gap between our expectations and reality requires closer examination of the stimulus. The second reaction, related to the first, is the disgust reflex that functionally translates as “something is wrong, get it away” (Herz 2012, 39). Given that one reaction involves closer inspection, and the other reaction involves removing the very same object from the immediate vicinity, the individual cannot very well obey both reactions simultaneously. Some compromise or override must occur. The conflict between “I must examine this more closely” and “AUGH get it away,” if unreconciled, could explain why seemingly normal characters would develop physical signs of psychosis when slapped in the face with a cold, slimy latex glove that resembles a human hand. If the victims of the prank could examine the offending hand more closely and conclude that it was gross but acceptable, they would walk away from the prank disgusted, but not mentally damaged. If they could give into the uncanny reaction and bat it away and ignore or possibly examine from a psychologically safe distance, they would also walk away from the prank disgusted and possibly upset or angry, but without any irreparable mental harm. However, the loop is where the damage comes in, much like a computer trapped in a recursive set of code that ultimately crashes. There are certainly pranks that involve one of the two rational reactions to disgusting stimuli, but those make for rather uninteresting legend-telling sessions and would be changed or removed from the storyteller’s repertoire rather quickly.

In legends that use severed hands in pranks, the hand is moved to a subordinate functional role. Usually, primates use their hands to manipulate their environment. While this subordination is often direct manipulation, humans also indirectly manipulate with tools. Because the hands in these legends have been severed, they can no longer fulfill the manipulator role. Instead, they become a manipulated object, either a tool for a prank or a part of the environment. In that way they become liminal items that are simultaneously hands and not-hands. By crossing a functional boundary but maintaining the same appearance, these severed hands are in a blurry category. This understanding of reduced status is exactly like the rabbit's foot or wrist bones as charms; neither can fulfill the primary biological function for which it evolved, but in death and dismemberment they take on a new role, the role of a tool. The Uncanny Valley, proposed by Mori in 1970, explains the discomfort surrounding this inversion, and severed hands in general. Something not quite human is much more unsettling to people than things that are not at all human in nature. Hands in particular are under Mori's scrutiny because of the overlap between general robotics and prosthetics. In external perceptions, an uncanny hand is more unsettling than no hand at all because it escapes traditional classification.

Hands appear as a tool in another legend in the USUFFA titled "Hand in the Lunch Bag." The text follows:

One day a physical plant worker at the University was making a routine check of one of the buildings. He opened a door which led to the roof of the building and discovered a brown paper sack on the roof. Upon opening the sack, he discovered that it contained a human hand. Alarmed, he took it to the USU police. After investigating the grisly apparent homicide, they discovered that it was the property of a pre-med student who had been "issued" the hand for an experiment in robotics. His roommates had objected to his keeping his project in the dorm refrigerator, so he had resorted to the cold rooftop as a repository. He had been alarmed at the disappearance of his experiment and after its recovery he rented cold

storage facilities at the University (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 19, 6.3.0.16.1)

The final lines of “The Hand in the Lunch Bag” demonstrate that the same principles of risk perception outlined both in disgust research (Herz 2012) and studies of AIDS legends (Goldstein 2004) emerge in severed hand legends as well. Because the hand was uncomfortably different from the usual debris found on the roof of a building, the maintenance man felt that it may be related to a recent crime and contacted the police. The roommates would not want a severed hand in their refrigerator because something they perceive as non-foodlike could potentially contaminate their food with real contagions like diseases, or psychological contagions like some sort of ethereal essence of humanity leaking from the ex-limb. Further, the hand’s presence in the fridge would relegate the hand itself to a less human status, reminding the inhabitants of the apartment that they’re not far removed from being ambulatory bags of meat and fluid themselves. The severed hand kept in the fridge is another example of these crossed boundaries and blurred lines: it is recognizable as a hand, but not functioning as a hand, and being treated as if it were food without any indication the student intends to eat it.

Another set of legends also blurs the line between hands and food in rather unsettling ways. “Lost Finger” legends feature consumers who find unwanted matter in products they have recently purchased. The USUFFA has eleven Lost Finger texts in the contaminations section of the contemporary legend collection, which is over twice the number appearing in any other set of contamination texts. This subcategory of “contaminated food” legendry normally begins with the consumer enjoying their food, often in a party setting. For instance, one variant says



Amanda's teacher had a friend that innocently bought a jar of whole pickles. One day she cut some of them up for a relish tray, but instead of pulling out a nice juicy pickle, there was mistakenly a thumb of one of the workers.

Later, she went to the plant to tell of the trauma. The supervisor gave her a refund for the pickles and reward for the missing thumb. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.1).

The collection features a similar variant with a few more narrative details:

The employees in one of the many other buildings owned by the company my father works for were having an office party. Each person had brought a different food item for the party; potato chips, hamburger buns, etc. Everyone had finished eating, and the clean up efforts were beginning. One lady was putting the lid back on the pickle jar, when she noticed an unusually shaped pickle in the bottom. When she pulled it out of the jar, she realized it was a human thumb. It had not been noticed earlier because the flesh had turned the same shade of green as the rest of the pickles. The people who had eaten these pickles, sued the Nalley food company, and won a sum of money to be split among the employees.

It turns out the finger was that of a maintenance man who worked for Nalley. His hand had gotten caught in one of the many belts at the plant, and had lost two fingers and a thumb. The two fingers had been found, but the thumb had gotten through somehow (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.7).

While at face value this sounds more like a discussion of good customer service and poor quality control, the manager offering a reward shows a certain fear of food contamination. In this legend group, the severed limb is not just in the same storage area as food, but has come in direct physical contact with food. The finger in the pickle jar disturbs the group because it looks far more pickle-like than a human finger should, while being less of a pickle than what one normally finds in such jars. Just like the hand in the lunch bag, the legend characters have no way of knowing what physical or metaphysical contaminants the finger has leached into the actual food, and the reminder of the character's mortality is certainly unnerving as well.

Another text tells of a business dinner gone awry:

There was this lady whose husband invited his boss and his boss's wife to come over for dinner. The lady's husband told her that the man's favorite thing to eat was spaghetti and he asked her if it would be too much trouble for her to make it for dinner. She reminded him that she couldn't make spaghetti sauce too well but she would go to the store and buy some pre-made spaghetti sauce. Her husband agreed, so the lady went to the store and purchased all the stuff she needed to make the dinner. She returned home and began to make the spaghetti dinner. She prepared all of the food except the heating of the spaghetti sauce. Their guests arrived early and were seated at the dinner table. When the lady's husband walked in to see what was taking her so long, he found his wife lying on the floor. He ran over to see what had happened to her and realized she had passed out. He quickly revived her and asked her what had happened. She slowly pointed to the opened jar of spaghetti sauce. When he went over to see what was in the jar, he saw floating on the top of the sauce was a human finger. The lady's husband, not even phased by the incident, took the finger out of the sauce and began to heat it. His boss and his boss's wife thanked them for a lovely dinner and promised he would be getting a raise (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.9).

In this text concerns of contamination and mortality are raised just as when the finger was in a pickle jar, but the husband seems much less concerned about contamination than the supervisor at the pickle plant was. It could be that he's more comfortable simply because the severed finger is still roughly finger-colored instead of the greenish shade one would expect from a brine-packed digit. He might also be a sociopath or rather unattached to his boss's health, but the goal here is not to prove that sort of claim.

Any legend that features human parts in food suggest the potential for unintentional cannibalism. Here, cannibalism does not refer to the spiritual rituals practiced by some cultures, but simply the ingestion of human flesh by other people. For the most part, the discussion takes an indirect form as the characters don't swallow the human bits, and the biggest worry is whether there's some sort of contamination of the human essence or if they may have eaten the human bit some other time without realizing

it. One such text takes place at a Boeing Factory:

At Boeing one fall afternoon, the food wagon (as it is called by the employees) which delivers lunch to the workers around the plant was making its daily run. Many of the employees eat from this convenient service daily and seem to like the food although they joke about what is used for different items of food such as dog or cat meat in the chili or how long the soup has "been alive." Well this one particular day a welder decided, along with his friends, that he wanted to have a hot dog. He hadn't had any breakfast that morning just a few hundred cups of coffee so he was ready to chow down a couple of super-duper, with everything on it, even the mystery chili, hotdog. Everyone continued to gather their lunches and take them to a place where everyone usually sits to bullshit and relax during the lunch break. As the guy with the deluxe hotdogs was eating he began to make a strange face. Everyone noticed something was wrong and watched as he spit out the chewed remains of his first hotdog into a paper towel. He looked into the chewed mess to find pieces of what resembled a human finger nail and pieces of a finger. The skin on the finger was of a dark complexion probably from a black guy. The guy eating the hot dog yakked all over the floor and just about passed out in front of everyone. His friends took him to the medical office and they called the food wagon to report the incident. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.2).

Another version tells the story of a man with a carton of contaminated ice cream:

There was a guy in Michigan who was eating ice cream one night when he started to chew on something hard. He was eating the ice cream with bubblegum pieces in it, so he didn't think too much of the hard piece as he ate it. After chewing on it a little, the guy was unable to bite all of the way through the bubblegum though, so he spit it out to see what the problem was. To his horror, he found he was eating a human finger, not bubblegum. He went to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. When they asked him what had happened, they were disgusted by what they were told. The people at the hospital then called up the ice cream company and told them what had happened. A few days later, the guy who ate the ice cream found out that the finger belonged to one of the workers at the ice cream company. He had accidentally put his hand in the way of some of the machinery. Because the finger had been preserved in the ice cream and then placed in the freezer after the guy found it in his ice cream, the worker was able to get his finger back and have it sewed on again (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.11).

In the hot dog and ice cream texts, the discussion is not about people finding bits of human they can pick out of their food; those texts both feature the unsuspecting consumers biting into the body part and engaging in a moment of cannibalism.

Concern of cannibalism tied into a creature's essence appears even outside legends dealing with human meat. The common stories about Chinese restaurants serving cats or dogs tap into the same sort of anxiety. In rumors, jokes, and legends that discuss such restaurants, the eaten animals are often pets. Pets bridge the gap between human and not human, becoming close members of the family (Walsh 2009, 481). When legends portray a character's horror at learning he could be eating animals that are considered to be members of the family, the legend is discussing horror at vernacular ideas of cannibalism in which the act is not culturally accepted or ritualized. The difference in species means that the discussion focuses more directly on a sort of contagion rather than on the meat itself.

In each legend from this chapter, severed hands have been treated as vectors of contagion. People who come in contact with severed hands go insane, or worry that hands in lunch bags or pickle jars might contaminate the food in the house. The hand has moved from a friendly limb at the end of an arm to a piece of matter, and because it is no longer functioning as expected, characters of legend react to it strongly. The exact nature of the contagion varies from text to text, whether it may be madness/disability or a microbial disease, but they still betray the same concern that hands are less trustworthy when removed from a body.

## CHAPTER 5

### POPULAR CULTURE

The importance of severed hands in folklore have painted a very clear picture about cultural perceptions in the United States that are represented in the symbolic severed hand: the relationship between disability and criminality, the fragility of the human body and psyche, and the contagiousness of disability all signify the perception of the loss of humanity. The previous chapters have demonstrated that severed hands occur repeatedly in the folk tradition, but the symbol also has been incorporated into mass culture. This chapter samples pop culture from the recent past and present that demonstrates how severed hands have been used to represent perceptions of humanity. The following chapter provides examples that should be more familiar to most readers than some of the legends presented earlier. The study demonstrates that both unofficial (folklore) and official (popular) culture link hands with humanity in a number of ways.

In the second chapter, the story of the Hookman showed social perceptions of the disabled as villains. In pop culture, that role is reprised by a variety of famous examples such as Peter Pan's Captain Hook, but it is also subverted by protagonists who lose a hand and yet retain their hero status. The examples starting on page 52 of this text will discuss characters from both of these groups.

The fourth chapter demonstrated severed hands representing natural or social punishment. In "The Choking Doberman," a burglar has some of his fingers or his whole hand bitten off because he broke into a house guarded by a dog. In the other legends from that chapter, we saw children who lost limbs because adults failed to protect them or enforce rules. In either case, a rule was violated and the characters of the legend were

punished through removal of hands. This same theme of hands being severed as a form of punishment appears in pop culture as well.

The third chapter portrayed severed hands as liminal symbols or representations of crossed boundaries. Characters were forced to deal with severed hands in unusual situations, whether that was an arm used as a light-pull or a finger in a jar of spaghetti. Rather than violating some definitive characteristic of humanity, these severed hands violate our expectations of where hands should be and what they should do, triggering reflexes of disgust in the audience. Pop culture uses this idea as well and exaggerates it to the point where the hand itself is an interactive character. Just as severed hands representing evil had an inverted form when used by pop culture, so do hands that cross boundaries. The following set portrays hands that have become more functional through their divorce from the human body. Scholars have found that in literature, the severed hand has represented anxiety of artists (Hiner 2002) or anxiety surrounding industrialization and colonization (Briefel 2008), but neither of those interpretations has application to this research. What does apply, however, are hands representing an ability to act within the world (Bann 2009). The hands in this section still cross boundaries between the standard roles hands play while attached to wrists and the full spectrum of roles humans play in daily life.

A note on the texts analyzed in the following pages: cataloging and classifying every severed hand that appears in popular culture would require a full encyclopedia of severed hands, many years in the making. The following examples were chosen because they were iconic, easily accessible, and fun. While the pop culture severed hands presented here are not an exhaustive list, they were not chosen because they perfectly fit

my theory of hands representing lost humanity, either.

The first work to consider is the series of classic sci-fi films, *Star Wars*. The filmmakers use severed hands repeatedly throughout the six films. The series was groundbreaking at the time of its premier and enjoys continuing popularity to this day. *Star Wars* itself has been parodied by and referenced in a variety of other television shows and movies. The heavy inclusion of severed hands in such an iconic piece of Western culture reveals the pervasiveness of the symbol.

Anakin Skywalker, who becomes Darth Vader, is the primary villain of the series. While in *The Phantom Menace* and the early part of *Attack of the Clones* Anakin is a heroic character, a series of events turn him to evil. Near the end of *The Clone Wars*, Count Dooku severs Anakin's hand in a lightsaber duel, replacing it later with a robotic prosthesis. When his own hand is severed, Anakin appears to question the code by which Jedi live, marking the beginning of his removal from his society. At this point in the series, Anakin has been struggling with the rules of the Jedi and the idea of morality. He loses his hand after disobeying his mentor, much like the children who disobeyed authority figures and were subsequently maimed in Chapter Two. In *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin severs both of Count Dooku's hands shortly before killing the Sith Lord, demonstrating he is continuing down the path to the Dark Side. By severing Dooku's hands, Anakin leaves the Count at his mercy. While the Sith lord is not completely incapacitated, he is maimed and unable to defend himself with his lightsaber. In that act, Anakin flaunts acceptable behavior for The Jedi, a group sworn to defend and protect. Anakin is at that moment an outsider, making him a potential risk to the Jedi according to Goldstein's research (2004). He passes his disability on to Dooku, demonstrating a

perception that disabilities are contagious. Later in the film, his former mentor, Obi-wan Kenobi, confronts Anakin. During their battle, Obi-Wan severs three of Anakin's limbs, leaving him in a similar state to Nubs from Chapter One. Anakin uses his mechanical hand to drag himself away from the molten lava river nearby and to safety. The film ends with Anakin being retrofitted into the mechanical black suit worn by the evil Darth Vader in Episodes Four, Five, and Six. In these scenes, audiences see the heroic Anakin become the villain of the original trilogy, and each one is marked by the severing of a hand. His increasingly severe disabilities reflect the increasingly evil nature of his mental state, something that Paul Longmore also observed in his studies of pop culture, noting: "Deformity of the body symbolizes deformity of the soul" (2003, 133). Anakin could still trigger reactions of mutilation disgust (Herz 2012, 37) and Uncanny Valley reactions in audience members (Mori 2012) through his injuries and unnatural prosthetics. Early in the series, by having Anakin's robotic hand function exactly like his organic hand did, the filmmakers minimize its otherness much more than a hook would have, but the suit of the first trilogy serves to emphasize Anakin's status as Darth Vader and marked as unique within society by his respirator and prosthetics.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke's hand is cut off during a lightsaber battle with Darth Vader. It was at that moment, with his own victory almost certain, that Vader reveals he did not kill Anakin Skywalker, as Luke had been told by his mentor, but instead that Vader himself was Anakin. He then extended an offer for Luke to join him in the Dark Side of the Force. During this conversation, Vader tries to capitalize on Luke's recent loss of a hand—and by extension, humanity—to persuade him toward evil. Luke refuses and leaps into the heart of Cloud City out of desperation, escaping Vader.



His escape is only through luck and narrative convenience, though, since such a leap could have just as easily ended in his death. With his hand severed and his world rocked, Luke's leap risks his own death. It is interesting to note that Luke, like his father before him, lost his hand because he was disobeying the rules of his Jedi mentor and questioning the morality of the Jedi. He learns from his harsh lesson and by the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*, Luke's severed hand had been replaced with a lifelike robotic prosthesis. Unlike Anakin's, this prosthetic has natural looking skin concealing the working parts. It would be less likely provoke the same reactions of fear and disgust (Herz 2012, 37) as the robotic hand in Episodes II and III, so Luke has the opportunity to avoid the narrative prosthesis (Goodley 2011, 15) that plagues his father.

Unlike the legends analyzed in Chapter 2, which consistently presented characters with prosthetic arms as less human forces of evil, popular culture occasionally portrays characters with replacement hands as heroic. Through these heroic amputees are inversions of their villainous counterparts, the narratives still demonstrate a connection between hands and humanity. The connection is inverted in exactly the same way as the character's roles: losing a hand makes the character heroic because it gives them something to "overcome." Luke followed a similar path to his father, but by reacting to his lesson about obedience in a different way, then he is able to retain his humanity and his status as the hero.

If he had given into the Dark Side of the Force, Luke likely would have become the space opera version of the Hookman in the first chapter. Instead, the writers made him a classical hero, one who grows stronger because of his injury rather than being defeated. Luke's reaction mirrors reality more than legendry, as he goes on to live the

life he had already been living. He uses a prosthetic to overcome his impairment, and hides the exposed robotics with a glove to maintain appearances.

*Return of the Jedi* features a climactic battle similar to the one in *The Empire Strikes Back*. The key participants, Luke and Vader, remain the same, but this time Emperor Palpatine is present. In a pivotal moment of the battle, Luke uses his saber to cut off Vader's hand. The Emperor urges Luke to turn to the Dark Side and kill his father, just as he had done when Anakin fought Dooku. Luke saw robotics where the Sith Lord's hand had been removed, rather than flesh or bone. He looks to his own mechanical hand, and then turns off his lightsaber. In that moment, Luke understands that his connection to Vader goes deeper than genetics; they have suffered the same injury and been manipulated by the same man. Luke acknowledges his sacrificed hand, and resists the Emperor. The moment of compassion leads Vader to understand his own mistakes as well, because he then turns on the Emperor and saves his son. The two bond over their injury and that bond and community they form overrides quests for power. Their impaired, force-user, father and son connection makes one wonder what would have happened if the Hookman legend ever featured a high-school student with a prosthetic arm. Perhaps then, that legend as well would become a narrative of community and atonement, rather than violence and fear.

The newest *Star Wars* trilogy features additional examples of severed hands as warnings of safety in addition to its heroes and villains. Much as the legends discussed in Chapter 3, all of these characters are serving as a clear warning a person should not to start a fight that he isn't capable of winning. Early in *Attack of the Clones*, Jango Fett's bounty hunting partner attempts to kill a character that the Jedi are actively protecting. In

the ensuing chase, she loses her hand before being killed. It is later revealed that the bounty hunters are somehow connected to the Jedi and their mortal enemies, the Sith. The struggle between the Jedi and the Sith is a struggle between master swordsmen, but it is also a discussion of morality. Within this larger struggle are a number of smaller battles that end in the severing of hands. As discussed before, early in *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin severs the hands of Count Dooku. Obi-Wan cuts off two of General Grievous's four robotic hands in a duel. Shortly thereafter, Anakin saves Senator Palpatine by cutting off Mace Windu's hand, leaving the Jedi master defenseless against Palpatine. It is interesting to note all of these characters, except Mace Windu, are members of the evil Sith. General Grievous in particular is a disabled character from the start. He walks with a defined limp and is only alive because of a series of robotic limbs and implants. His excessive disabilities make him a villain that the audience can easily pick out since, as Longman found, in pop culture there is a close association between criminality and disability (2003,133-134). In *A New Hope* Obi-Wan severs a patron's hand in the Cantina, a tactic he had practiced well by that late stage of his life. These scenes demonstrate elements similar to the "Choking Doberman:" a character of ill intent acting inappropriately receives an injury to the hand through an obscure weapon. While the obscure weapon in *Star Wars* is an actual weapon, the lightsaber, compared to the Doberman of legend, both fulfill their purpose because the inappropriate character did not expect such items to be present.

Throughout *Star Wars*, severed hands were catalysts and symbols of both villainy and heroism in the Skywalker, and as punishments for villains. Anakin becomes evil due to a series of increasing injuries, Luke becomes a hero by overcoming his disability,

and Obi-Wan regularly cuts off villain's hands to end battles. While the films avoid the crossed boundaries interpretation presented in the third chapter of this paper, the theories from the first two chapters are clearly supported.

*Arrested Development* is a sitcom with a cult following that self-consciously uses common tropes from pop culture in unusual or hyperbolic ways for humor. The series is centered on a rather immature and selfish family. What makes this show an interesting example for this study is the storyline following the youngest son Buster. As he loses his hand and interacts with the world around him, the motifs found in this paper are referenced as obvious or familiar reactions to disability, but also often mocked or questioned. The writers of the show seem to assume that audiences already know these perceptions of disability and amputation, but hope that they might look at them in a different light.

Buster Bluth's actions serve as warnings about natural consequences. Lucille, his mother, tells Buster not to swim in the ocean. On the way to boot camp, Buster takes a detour to swim in the ocean when his hand is bitten off by a seal. Lucille feels guilty because she prayed that God would keep him from the army, a reflection of guilt felt by other parents who did not keep their children safe, like in the smashed hands legend of the third chapter. Because he disobeyed his mother's standing directive not to go to the ocean, Buster lost his hand, which was then replaced with a hook.

When he first comes home from the hospital, Buster accidentally rips the clothes of his family members, cuts a few of them, and when he forgets he has a hook he cuts his own forehead. In a fit of rage he uses his hook to slash the drapes and wallpaper of his mother's apartment. The rest of the Bluth family never knows how to react to Buster

when he is wearing his hook. They avoid him after the accident, and his own codependent mother snubs him. She replaces him at the annual mother-son pageant in favor of his nephew, George Michael. The family members demonstrate outward signs of disgust, presumably mutilation disgust (Herz 2012, 126), by ostracizing him from the family. These scenes also reveal the idea put forth by Longman that physical disability and a loss of self control are linked (2003, 135). Buster's family is not only disgusted by his disability, but they are also worried about Buster's temper. When they inadvertently reference Buster's hand, they worry that he will fly into fits of rage or madness, similar to the one he had when he came home from the hospital.

Buster Bluth's severed hand is the source of many jokes in *Arrested Development*. While the show uses Buster's physical impairment for comedy rather than the horror that appears in many legends, they drive home the idea that Buster feels like a monster because of his injury. He becomes the Hookman discussed in the first chapter during a camping trip, recognized in an ostensive legend event by his horrible cry of "Hey Campers!" From that moment forward in the series, after he injures or frightens people he cries, "I'm a monster!"

Despite all of the adverse situations writers created for Buster, and his cries of monstrosity, he still represents the empowering aspects of his impairment when compared to the other one-armed man in the series, J. Walter Weatherman. George Bluth Senior, the patriarch of the family, enforced his own rules within the family by creating skits that ended in Weatherman's prosthetic arm being pulled off, inspiring horror in the children. While Buster is often a victim trying to make the best of what he sees as tragic circumstances, George Sr. uses Weatherman's prosthetics as a means to an end. While

Weatherman himself is not particularly evil, he is acting as an active custodian of oppression, reinforcing the connection between villainy and disability explored in the first chapter of this paper.

Buster Bluth had a severed hand, but despite his pained screams of “I’m a monster!” he was no Hookman. When confronted with an opportunity to work in a toy store as a symbol of Sharia Law, holding a sign with his hook that read “this is what happens to shoplifters,” Buster rebelled. Refusing to become a frightening pawn in another man’s games, he quit the job, and later decided to teach his father and Weatherman a lesson about using amputees to teach lessons. While the humorous irony of teaching a lesson about teaching lessons is clear, Buster makes the same choice as Luke Skywalker: he would not become evil just because he had experienced suffering. Also like in *Star Wars*, the writers of *Arrested Development* use various prosthetics to help Buster maintain agency.

Throughout the series Buster has two different hooks, a non-functional prosthetic, and a massive robotic prosthetic by the US army. Buster’s prosthetics act as something that is simultaneously more than just a hand, but less than a hand as well. At one point in the series, his uncle/father Oscar uses Buster’s hook as a roach clip, reducing the status of the prosthetic even further. Buster gives up his realistic prosthetic when Oscar and Lucille use the lifelike hand as a sex toy. While the goal of these scenes is clearly humor, they also demonstrate my assertion from the discussion of the green glove legend that unattached, hand-like objects cross the same kinds of boundaries as real severed hands.

When Buster receives his new prosthetic from the army, he is dissatisfied with the monstrous hand at first and he sabotages his occupational therapy sessions, intentionally

crushing the items he's given to manipulate so that he doesn't have to use the bizarre replacement. Eventually he is given a kitten to pet, but refuses to crush it. In that moment he accepts the prosthetic as a part of his life, and demonstrates that his disability has not affected his mental state. With the prosthetic, he becomes an enforcer at the local high school to prevent bullying, and a symbolic member of a political campaign, showing that he is trying to use his disability and unnatural looking prosthetic for good.

*Arrested Development* and *Star Wars* films are mentioned here primarily as a self-conscious test of the two theories that have appeared throughout this research: first, that severed limbs open the door to discuss a perceived loss of humanity, and second, that the hand is the most expressive limb narratives can use, being more connected to humanity than the leg, but less necessary for survival than the head. After their injuries, Luke and Buster do not become less human monsters, reduced to living in the wilderness and attacking co-eds, nor do they wait for their impending death in a coat closet. They find prostheses suitable for their current situations, get over any lingering doubts and weaknesses, and come out the other side ready to save the world. Bluth and Skywalker incorporate missing limbs into their self-identity, but still function fully in their respective societies. They are examples of disabled heroes, and they invert the expectations set by the legends in previous chapters, as well as many of the other examples from pop culture. Buster and Weatherman provide examples of many of the motifs found in the legends of this study, while playing with and parodying the presumptions underlying those motifs. Buster takes a stand against stereotypes and his new default role as the "monster" of the family.

Having looked at *Star Wars* from the big screen, and *Arrested Development* from the little screen, I would like to turn the pop culture lens briefly to literature. J.K. Rowling's series *Harry Potter* contains another example of a villain identified by his prosthetic. While the series as a whole is defined by the good character Harry Potter fighting to stop the evil Lord Voldemort, it is not until the end of the fourth book that Voldemort even has his own body. Until that time, Voldemort's only way to interact with the world is to use a henchman to do his bidding, Peter Pettigrew. Admittedly, this is a minor character in the whole series, but his appearance throughout the series comes at pivotal moments for the plot, and much of the character's identity hinges on perceived disability.

Peter Pettigrew, or Wormtail, can change into a rat. He is first revealed in the third book, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, as one of the main character's pet rat who has been in hiding. Pettigrew had cut off his own finger before the events of the books in order to fake his own death, knowing that his "remains" could be identified by his finger. He did this to frame Sirius Black for murder and send him to prison. Pettigrew had been working for Voldemort and had sold out his friends. When he is revealed along with his crimes, he is painted as a disgusting and evil person. The choice of rat as the animal he can turn into makes sense; many people have contamination disgust reactions towards rats. Pettigrew escapes punishment and disappears until the end of the next book.

In the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Rowling 2000), Pettigrew takes part in a ritual to return The Dark Lord Voldemort to his human form. The ritual, which also included a bone from Voldemort's father and Harry's blood, was successful, and the Dark Lord returned to life. Voldemort rewarded Wormtail for his part



in the process with a magical prosthetic hand of silver.

Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder. (Rowling 2000, 649)

By helping the most evil wizard in the series return to power, Pettigrew gained a shiny new hand. He did not expect a prosthetic for his sacrifice, but the metallic hand is a blending of the natural form of his original hand and the hook of urban legend. This amalgamation clearly identifies Pettigrew as a villain who attacks children—which he had done nine pages earlier—but not one with the same steel and resolve as contemporary maniacs and prison escapees. Since one potential cause for the evil outlined in the first chapter was the poor quality of the prosthetics leading to issues with phantom limbs (Sacks 2012), readers could hope for just a moment that Pettigrew might avoid any further evil.

Pages earlier, Peter used the remainder of the hand to cast a spell that restored Voldemort to his own body:

He pulled out a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs. 'Flesh—of the servant—willingly given—you will—revive—your master.' He stretched his right hand out in front of him—the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung upward. Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened—he closed his eyes as tightly as he could but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail's anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron (Rowling 2000, 639-640)

Restoring Voldemort to life required pieces of three different individuals. The amount and type of “flesh of the servant” was left unspecified in the story, but Pettigrew’s choice to use his hand bears a strong resemblance to the power of wrist bones revealed in the previous discussion of voodoo. Despite his connections to themes of villainy, the focus here is on Pettigrew’s choice to remove his hand’s functionality. He had already cut off his own finger as a way to fake his own death, pushing the digit into an unusual category of finger without a hand. With a flick of the knife, his hand stops being his hand, and instead becomes a component of a spell. It splashes in the cauldron just as everything else called for in the incantation. Harry is sickened by the splashing noise, even more than he was disgusted when his own blood was used in the spell. This demonstrates Herz’s principle of disgust, and suggests that mutilation disgust (2012, 39) might override body disgust (2012, 37), or at the very least that the two types are cumulative. While specific sensitivity to each will vary from person to person, the scene does clearly demonstrate Mr. Potter’s vulnerabilities to the blurring of lines.

In the final book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Pettigrew’s silver hand returns, and events make it clear that the hand is not entirely under the owner’s control. While choking Harry in the Malfoy dungeon, Wormtail’s assault with the silver appendage briefly slackens in response to an emotional appeal from the boy wizard (Rowling 2007, 470). Moments later, in response, the hand changes course. “The silver tool that Voldemort had given his most cowardly servant had turned upon its disarmed and useless owner; Pettigrew was reaping his reward for his hesitation, his moment of pity; he was being strangled before their eyes!” (2007, 470-471). The prosthetic hand was attached to Pettigrew, and had appeared to restore his natural ability

to interact with the world. Rowling makes it clear, however, that it was never fully under his control. The restoration of his agency was a lie, as the hand itself belonged to Voldemort, and only performed the actions Wormtail requested when those were in line with the Dark Lord's wishes. That moment of final betrayal demonstrates that the hand was never a glove for a Pettigrew's phantom hand to inhabit, it was an extension of Voldemort's will, and any agency it had given him was only an illusion. Just as the Hookman was possibly driven to evil by frustration or sympathetic magic imbued by his hook, Pettigrew was dragged to evil, and ultimately death, by his missing hand. More importantly in this scene, readers see an inversion of the themes from the third chapter of this project. Rather than dealing with blurred lines through hands that have lost their agency, Pettigrew highlights hands that have gained agency beyond their physical owners. This inversion harkens back to Bann's thesis that hands that act as their own characters intimate issues of agency (2009). While such arguments fall slightly outside the scope of this project, the ideas are still close enough that I hope some future scholar is inspired to explore the connection in detail.

Within the first three chapters of this project, I demonstrated that severed hands in legends represent an understanding of humanity through contrast with lost humanity. The elements of lost humanity the study uncovered included evil acts, safety and punishment, and confusion surrounding blurred categories. In this chapter, I performed the same sort of analysis on an entirely different set of narrative genres to determine if the ideas I uncovered in folklore were present in popular culture as well. The analysis in this chapter identified the same three ideas that appeared in legends, along with two inversions. In popular culture, severed hands can become a sign of villains or the

motivation for the amputee to become a hero, and hands that cross boundaries can either lose agency or gain it. While both of these symbolic inversions could raise questions about the original theories, they still demonstrate the underlying concept that hands are directly linked to beliefs about humanity.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The legends and stories within this study have reinforced two truths to audiences. The first and largest is that the human form is linked to notions of humanity. People live out their entire lives in the same body, and it is our way of interacting with the world. Most western religions believe that humans spend their entire existence in a single vessel. If that body is damaged in a way that does not heal, there are few options. The person can live a life that is treated as somehow incomplete, because he or she can no longer perform all the same actions they once could, or they can try to regain that functionality through artificial means.

Injured legs lead to crutches, a wheelchair, or a false leg to restore the same level of mobility that the individual attained before. Individuals with damaged forelimbs could replace the injured hand with a hook, an immobile prosthetic, or a mechanical replacement to help the users maintain the ability to manipulate objects. Damaged ears are augmented with hearing aids or implants, and injured hearts are strengthened with tiny, electronic metronomes to help the muscle keep the proper beat. Whatever the damage, people seek to replace it, so that the individual and the people around them are inconvenienced by the injury as little as possible, and can go on living their human lives just as they had before. Research has not demonstrated that people require prosthetics to live happy lives, or that the injured or disabled are any less happy than the able bodied (Gilbert 2006,44-51), but reality does not always influence beliefs as much as scientists would like.

On a narrative level, these replacements are not the same, and disability scholars

have argued that is because the world is built by the able-bodied for the able-bodied. The narratives analyzed here have shown that there is a distrust of the disabled. Narrators tell stories of evil Hookmen slaughtering coeds, because amputees must be mentally unstable, and that must be what a mentally unstable amputee would do. Burglars of legend have their fingers bitten off so that they can never break into a house quite as easily as they did in the first place. High schoolers use severed hands to terrify their friends and incite the disgust reflex. Pranksters create facsimiles of hands that cause victims of pranks to go white-haired and insane because the victims cannot reconcile the uncanny experience. Students resort to hiding school projects on the roof because their roommates fear a severed hand would taint the entire refrigerator. Careless workers pollute our pickles, beans, and ice cream with whole thumbs or fingertips, and somehow their human essence is infused into the food. Stories contain a presumption that a severed hand is unnatural because it is not “normal,” and the discussion takes place is hidden in campfire fictions.

Audiences continue to consume these stories as well. Readers love stories of Long John Silver, the one-legged pirate. His hook handed counterpart in Peter Pan must be evil because he hates children and has a shiny, curved piece of metal instead of a hand. As a self-inflicted punishment, Oedipus tears out his own eyes, the things he uses to perceive the world from a distance, and the windows to his soul. Goldfinger and Dr. Claw are villains identified by their metallic hands. Rowling gave Peter Pettigrew the same identifying trait. Readers cheer through the horror when the hand turns and chokes Pettigrew and saves Harry Potter and his friends. Stephen King uses a mutilated little boy to start a story about the scariest clown imaginable in *IT*. These stories communicate

an otherwise unspoken idea that injury is somehow loss of self for reasons that nobody can really explain, but always betrays a functional understanding of humanity.

These stories propagate because of the second truth they share with audiences; the hand itself is more important than other limbs. Villainous pirates may be missing a leg, but then storytellers need to explain why the peg is exposed rather than hidden by pants or shoes. Organ theft legends often revolve around missing kidneys or corneas, but neither of those is easily accessible, and would be hard to identify in the dark of a lover's lane or a coat closet. Irving's Headless Horseman was terrifying. The horseman lives in a world of suspended disbelief though. He shares that world with dragons and unicorns because the three-pound meatloaf inside the skull is in charge of the rest of the body. Humans die when the head and brain it contains are gone, so legends and narratives turn to the hand instead.

The world of legend uses hands because the hand is open, plain, and important. In the United States, people shake hands when they meet each other, and individuals have specific beliefs about what a handshake says about a person. For the last century, criminals have been identified by the prints their fingers leave at a crime scene. Law enforcement uses the prints because they are unique to each person, and difficult to fake or remove, which ties identity up in the hands. Bill Ellis demonstrated that traditions fetishes and voodoo that wrist bones hold some sort of power. What that power is exactly, scientists have not learned to measure quite yet, but people still discuss it in stories. The hand holds a special power in minds and stories as a symbol for humanity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Primary Sources

*Arrested Development*. 2003-2013. Mitchell Hurwitz creator. Imagine Entertainment and Twentieth Century Fox. Netflix.

“Hand in the Lunch Bag.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 19, 6.3.0.16.1). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Hookman Horse Killer.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 22, folder 3, 6.2.1.11.1-3). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Keep Arms and Head Inside the Vehicle.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 12, 6.1.4.15.1-2). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Lost Finger.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 26, folder 3, 6.7.2.7.1-11). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Missing Head or Limb for a Good Scare.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 10, 6.3.3.7.1-8). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Nubs.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 13, 6.3.4.5.32). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“Smashed Hands.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 23, folder 19, 6.3.0.15.1). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

Rowling, JK. 2000. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

---- 2007. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

*Star Wars: Episode I- The Phantom Menace*. 1999. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2007.

*Star Wars: Episode II- Attack of the Clones*. 2002. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and



Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2005.

*Star Wars: Episode III- Revenge of the Sith*. 2005. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2005.

*Star Wars Episode IV- A New Hope*. 1977. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2004.

*Star Wars Episode V- The Empire Strikes Back*. 1980. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2004.

*Star Wars Episode VI- Return of the Jedi*. 1983. George Lucas dir. Lucasfilm and Twentieth Century Fox. DVD 2004.

“The Boyfriend’s Death.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 4-6, 6.1.4.1.1-80). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“The Choking Doberman.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 22, folder 15, 6.2.3.1.1-28). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

“The Hook.” USU Student Folklore Genre collection: Contemporary Legends, 1960-2011. (FOLK COLL 8a: Group 7, box 20, folder 7-10, 6.1.4.2.1-99). Utah State University. Special Collections and Archives Department.

## Secondary Sources

Alpenfels, Ethel J. 1955. The anthropology and social significance of the human hand. *Artificial Limbs* 2 (2): 4-21. *Digital Resource Foundation for the Orthotics & Prosthetics Community, Virtual Library Project*.

Anonymous. 1888. Superstitions connected with the human hand. *Journal of American Folklore* 1 (1): 83. JSTOR.

Ariely, Dan. 2009. *Predictably irrational, revised and expanded edition*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Kindle eBook.

Bacchi Umberto. 2013. Execution central: Saudi Arabia’s bloody chop-chop square. *International Business Times* April 3, 2013. Web.

Bann, Jennifer. 2009. Ghostly hands and ghostly agency: The changing figure of the nineteenth-century Specter. *Victorian Studies* 51 (4): 663-685. *Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost*.

- Bennett, Gillian. 2005. *Bodies: Sex, violence, disease, and seath in contemporary legend*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Bishop, Benjamin P. 2013. Nature for mental health and social inclusion. Special Issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33 (1). Web.
- Briefel, Aviva. 2008. Hands of beauty, hands of horror: Fear and Egyptian art at the *fin de Siècle*. *Victorian Studies* 50 (2): 263-271. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.
- Brunvand, Jan H. 1981. *The vanishing hitchhiker: American urban legends and their meanings*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- 1986. *The choking doberman and other "new" urban legends*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- 1998. *The study of American folklore: An introduction*. 4th ed. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- 2004. *Be afraid, be very afraid: The book of scary urban legends*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Campion-Vincent, Veronique. 2005. *Organ theft legends*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Dégh, Linda. 1968. The hook. *Indiana Folklore* 1 (1):92-100.
- Dégh, Linda. 1991. Speculations about "the hook" - Bill Ellis doesn't need any more theoretical concepts. *Folklore Forum* 24(2):68-76.
- Dundes, Alan. 1989. *Folklore matters*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
- Ellis, Bill. 1994. "The Hook" Reconsidered: Problems in Classifying and Interpreting Adolescent Horror Legends. *Folklore* 105: 61-75. *JSTOR*.
- 2004. *Lucifer ascending: The occult in folklore and popular culture*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- 2007. *The 'Sheffield approach' to contemporary legend: A quarter-century retrospective*. International Society of Contemporary Legend Research annual meeting: Logan, UT.
- Frazer, James George. 1913. The Principles of sympathetic magic. In *International folkloristics*, ed. Alan Dundes, 109-118. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Flynn, James. 2013. Why our IQ levels are higher than our grandparents'. *Ted.com*. Web Video.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1919. The uncanny. In *New Literary History* 7 (3), ed. James Strachey, Helene Cixous, and Robert Dennome: 619-645. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- , 1953. Symbolism in dreams. In *International Folkloristics*, ed. Alan Dundes, 177-195. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Georges, Robert A. 1971. The general concept of legend: Some assumptions to be reexamined and reassessed. In *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, ed. Wayland D. Hand, 1-19. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gilbert, Daniel. 2006. *Stumbling on happiness*. New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf. Kindle eBook.
- Goldstein, Diane E. 2004. *Once upon a virus: AIDS legends and vernacular risk perception*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Goodley, Dan. 2011. *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Herz, Rachel. 2012. *That's disgusting: Unraveling the mysteries of repulsion*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hiner, Susan. 2002. Hand writing: Dismembering and re-membering in Nodier, Derval, and Maupaussant. *Nineteenth Century French Studies* 30 (3/4): 301-315. *Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost*.
- Jones, Nev and Robyn Brown. 2013. The absence of psychiatric C/S/X perspectives in academic discourse: Consequences and implications. Special Issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33 (1). Web.
- Kafai, Shayda. 2013. The mad border body: A political in-betweenness. Special Issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33 (1). Web.
- Longmore, Paul. 2003. *Why I burned my book and Other essays on disability*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press
- Mori, Masahiro. 2012. The uncanny valley. trans MacDorman, Karl F. and Norri Kageki. *IEEE Spectrum*. Web.
- Nicolaisen, W. F. H. 2001. Burglars and burglaries in contemporary legends. *Folklore* 112 (2): 137-46. *JSTOR*.

- Pilling, Merrick Daniel. 2013. Invisible identity in the workplace: Intersectional madness and processes of disclosure at work. Special Issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33 (1). Web.
- Sacks, Oliver. 2012. *Hallucinations*. New York, NY: Knopf Publishing.
- Schermer, Michael. 2006. Why people believe weird things. *Ted.com*. Web Video.
- Thompson, S. 1955. *Motif-index of literature: A classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, medieval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Tomasello, Michael. 1999. The human adaptation for culture. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1):509-529.
- Tucker, Elizabeth. 2005. *Campus legends: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Walsh, Froma. 2009. Human-animal bonds II: The role of pets in family systems and family therapy. *Family Process* 48 (4): 481-499.
- Wolframe, PhebeAnn Marjory. 2013. The madwoman in the academy, or, revealing the invisible straightjacket: Theorizing and teaching saneism and sane privilege. Special Issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33 (1). Web.