

A Journal of Undergraduate  
Writing

## The Bosom Serpent Legend Through History: How The Legend Changes To Address Modern Anxieties

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In its simplest form, the Bosom Serpent legend complex includes any story in which a person believes that an animal is living inside of their body. Normally the animal is a snake or lizard, although amphibians and worms are becoming the most common in modern variants (Bennett). Most Bosom Serpent legends begin in the same way: a person mysteriously becomes sick and complains that it feels like something is squirming around inside of them. Then, the patient goes to the doctor and explains that they believe a live animal is inside of them. The doctor does not believe the patient and sends them home. At this point, there are two common ways that Bosom Serpent legends will continue. In one of the common versions of the legend, the patient takes the doctor's advice and tries to ignore the pain and suffering. Eventually the patient dies and when a medical examiner opens up the body, animals are found inside of the victim. In the other common ending to the legend, the patient is dissatisfied with his or her doctor's advice and seeks help from someone who practices natural or traditional healing. The traditional healer, often portrayed as a "witch-doctor," instructs the patient on

how to coax the animal out usually using food. The coaxing works and the patient is cured by a traditional healing technique. Bosom Serpent legends have changed over time with respect to the type of creature that lives inside the patient, where the creature lives inside the patient, and how the creature got inside the patient in the first place. Over time, the Bosom Serpent legend has changed to reflect societal values. A legend that was originally a representation of guilt in the form of a serpent has morphed into tapeworms that induce weight loss in response to shifting cultural values.

An example of the Bosom Serpent legend in the media is the episode “Fresh Bones” of *The X-Files* (Season two, episode fifteen). In this episode, agents Mulder and Scully are investigating the deaths of two American soldiers who were stationed at a Haitian refugee camp. Voodoo plays a large role in this episode and while conducting interviews, a soldier tells Mulder and Scully that he believes Voodoo is behind the deaths at the camp. The soldier tells them a story about his fiancée who he believes was killed by a Voodoo ritual. The soldier says that his fiancée kept complaining about stomach pains and her doctors couldn’t find a way to help her, so she ended up dying in a hospital. During her autopsy, snakes crawled out of her stomach after it was cut open. Agents Mulder and Scully react differently upon hearing the variant of the Bosom Serpent legend. Mulder believes the story whereas Scully remains skeptical. The soldier’s story is a perfect example of a Bosom Serpent legend and follows the normal format for the legend. The account of the legend in *The X-Files* is unusual because it incorporates Voodoo as the means of acquiring the serpent. The scene is transcribed below.

Transcription of the Bosom Serpent legend

from *The X-Files* episode “Fresh Bones” (Season 2, episode 15):

**Private Dunham:** Back home, an associate of my daddy’s, Clyde Jessamin, once crossed a man on some kind of real estate deal. And not two weeks passed before Jessamin’s daughter took ill with something the doctors couldn’t make heads or tails of. All they could do was shoot her full of morphine the pain was so bad. She died five minutes past midnight on her wedding day, and when they did an autopsy to try to figure it out, all they could find was a bunch of snakes squirming around inside her belly.

**Scully:** Sounds like an old wives’ tale.

**Private Dunham:** No, ma’am. It’s not. You see I’m the one who was supposed to marry her.

[Mulder and Scully drive away.]

**Scully:** Think he’s telling the truth?

**Mulder:** Till I can figure out why he’d lie, yeah.

**Scully:** He’s superstitious, and superstition breeds fear. It’s what Voodoo is all about. It’s just as irrational as avoiding a crack in the sidewalk.

Variants of the Bosom Serpent legend complex have been in circulation since at least the twelfth century; however, the term “Bosom Serpent” comes from a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story written in 1843 called “Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent” (Bennett). Hawthorne’s story was about a man who had a serpent living inside of his chest. There has been some speculation regarding what might have inspired Hawthorne to write his story about a man with a serpent living inside his heart. Sargent Bush, a scholar of American and

Puritan literature, came up with a list of possible inspirations for Hawthorne's "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent." One possible influence on Hawthorne's story was several accounts in newspapers in the 1830s about doctors discovering and removing live animals from their patients (Bush). All of the newspaper stories from this time were about people who successfully removed the animal (Bush). There is much doubt and suspicion regarding the truthfulness of the news articles about Bosom Serpent stories during this period and most researchers regard them as examples of sensationalism that was based on rumors (Barnes). There were elements of classism in most news accounts of this nature because the victim was almost always living in a poor, rural area and the articles generally focused on how the victim was not smart enough to realize that if they had practiced better hygiene, there would have never been an opportunity for an animal to get inside of their body (Bennett, Bush).

Another possible influence for Hawthorne's story listed by Bush was medical history books that contained information about removing live animals from human bodies (Bush). Folklorist Gillian Bennett noted in her research "The belief that animals, especially reptiles and amphibians, could enter and be nourished in the body and cause disease seems to have been medical orthodoxy at one time."

According to Bush, one more possible influence for Hawthorne's short story came from the puritanical preachers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries who wrote many sermons about snakes living inside of a sinner's heart as an allegory for the guilt the sinner carried with them. Hawthorne's main character in "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent" leaves his wife and then shortly after discovers the snake living inside of his

heart, which has many similarities to the approach of the puritanical preachers (Bush). In the puritanical Bosom Serpent sermons, the snake cannot be dispelled even if, like Hawthorne's character, the sinner tries many different methods for removal (Bush). In puritanical forms of the legend, the snake is generally living inside the heart, whereas in later variants and other variants from the same time, the snake (or other animal) is normally living in the patient's intestines or stomach.

Bennett has a unique theory that a main function of Bosom Serpent legends is to show that science, doctors, and modern medicine are not always right and cannot be blindly trusted. Throughout time there have been people who were weary of the progression of modern medicine and scientific practices, which helps explain why Bosom Serpent legends have been in circulation for so long. Even today, most people have some degree of anxiety related to scientific progress. No matter which of the two endings a Bosom Serpent legend takes, both options shed a negative light on the scientific and medical communities. If, at the end of the story the patient lives by taking advice from a healer using an unscientific, but more traditional approach, it makes the doctor look foolish, untrustworthy, and unknowledgeable. In the variants where the patient listens to the doctor and ignores the pain, it results in their death. Even though the doctor believed that based on scientific research it was an impossible ailment, modern medical practices failed. The episode of *The X-Files* called, "Fresh Bones" mentioned a victim who believed that something was living in her stomach. When the victim visited the doctor, he did not believe her and did not provide any treatment, which resulted in her death. When the medical examiner opened her stomach snakes

crawled out, which is a perfect example of how modern medicine and scientific research was wrong and that more traditional healing methods may be more efficient. It is, of course, important to note that the episode of *The X-Files* where the legend appears has many supernatural elements to the story and is not realistic. Mistrust of modern medicine and science is a major theme in most variants of the Bosom Serpent legend and can be seen when the patient is forced to choose between believing their doctor and seeking a second opinion from a healer who has not been medically trained.

Bosom Serpent legends are still in circulation today, but they normally involve worms rather than snakes and lizards (Bennett). A widespread modern adaptation of the Bosom Serpent legend is that there are diet pills being sold that contain tapeworms (Bennett). In theory, the tapeworm would consume most of the dieter's food, resulting in a major weight loss. The famous opera singer Maria Callas was accused of using tapeworms to lose sixty pounds in 1953, but that rumor has now been disproven (Grabianowski). In fact, there has been no evidence that anyone has ever intentionally swallowed a tapeworm for weight loss or that companies have ever used tapeworms in diet pills (Grabianowski). The tapeworm diet pill variant of the Bosom Serpent legend is unusual because a person wants to be parasitized by the tapeworm and intentionally swallows it whereas in older variants of the legend the person never wanted to have the animal living inside their body.

Grabianowski says that modern science has debunked the theory that tapeworms can be coaxed out of the body. Many variants of the legend involve a patient not eating for a few days (to starve the tapeworm) and then

putting food (usually milk) in front of their mouth to coax the worm to leave the body. Grabianowski says that tapeworms are too simple to be able to sense food outside of the body that they're infesting.

The folklorist Harold Schechter studied how legends are interpreted by both popular and serious art forms. He uses Hawthorne's "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent" as an example of a "serious" art and the film 1979 film *Alien* as the example of "popular art" for the Bosom Serpent legend. Schechter argued that, "...serious art transforms the raw material of folk literature, popular art simply transmits it." Schechter continued, "The difference between the serious and the popular artist in relation to folklore is that, almost invariably, the former will utilize a folk motif as a way of achieving some larger (frequently thematic) end." Hawthorne used the Bosom Serpent metaphorically in his short story, which aligns with Schechter's theory that "serious" artists can transform folklore into something bigger with a meaning. In *Alien* and "Fresh Bones" from *The X-Files* the Bosom Serpent legend is portrayed in a very direct and literal fashion, which according to Schechter, is more typical of art that is intended for popular culture.

The earliest accounts of Bosom Serpent legends are different from the modern variants in a few key ways. First of all, the legend complex was originally used as an allegory for guilt that involved a serpent occupying the hearts of sinners representing the sin they had committed. The metaphorical serpent could not be removed just as the sinner could not get over their guilt. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United States when preachers were employing the Bosom Serpent legend, complex, puritanical beliefs

had reached a peak and societal anxiety about sin was high. In other cases the legend was involved in classism and the hygiene “ignorance” of lower class people, which was covered in newspapers during the 1700s. Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stories about using tapeworms as a diet aid began circulating. Today’s culture has put a major emphasis on appearance and weight, so it makes sense that the tapeworm legend is the most common variant in the present day and that today’s “Bosom Serpent” is used as a weight loss method. Shifting societal anxieties and cultural values over time seem to have influenced many aspects of the evolution of the Bosom Serpent legend complex.

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**Part of *Issue 8*, published in May 2013**

**Topics: *Culture***

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*Artifacts* is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

*Artifacts* is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

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