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“Supernatural” Beginnings in North American Folklore: The Vanishing Hitchhiker and La Llorona

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Rock music blares from the speakers of a car as it drives down a dark wooded road. The young man driving is speaking to his girlfriend on the phone explaining that he can't make it tonight because it's late and he has to work in the morning. Just when he hangs up, a beautiful woman in a flowing white dress appears on the side of the road. She stands staring at the car as he slows to a stop.

He asks if she needs a ride to which she mysteriously responds, “Take me home?”

He opens the passenger door and she gets in. As they drive, he takes notice of her skimpy, white attire.

“Coming from a Halloween party or something?”

Then, looking from her burgeoning cleavage to her morosely wandering eyes he says, “You know, a girl like you really shouldn't be alone out here.”

She responds by lifting her dress slowly over her knee “I'm with you,” she says. “Will you come home with me?”

Excitedly accepting, he speeds off arriving at an abandoned house some time later. He takes a look at the boarded up windows and dilapidated porch.

“Come on, you don't live here . . .” he says.

She looks at the house longingly.

“I can never go home.”

“What are you talking about? Nobody even lives here,” he says staring at the house. He turns to the woman in the passenger seat. “Where do you li”

She is no longer in the car. He gets out of the car searching for her.

“Ha, that’s good,” he says apprehensively. “Joke’s over okay? You want me to leave?”

He walks slowly up to the house only to be knocked off the porch by a bat flying out of the broken front door. Scared, he rushes back to his car and speeds away. But when he looks back at the house in his rear view mirror, the woman is suddenly in his back seat. He screams and his car squeals to a stop after running through a barrier blocking a rundown bridge. More screaming from inside the car, and then blood splatters on the inside of the windshield (Kripke, 2005).

So begins the first case investigated by the dynamic duo of Sam and Dean Winchester in the pilot episode of the television series “Supernatural.” Despite its extremely tawdry writing and sometimes overplayed acting, this show has gained a cult following and earned a place in many a teenage girl’s heart. The interestingly dark content somehow compliments the “soap opera-esque” plotlines and provides a framework for narratives examining unexplained phenomena of all sorts. This leads the show to base many of its episodes on common urban legends that have been researched by scholars in the field of folklore.

This particular episode in the series is possibly the easiest to explore with a folklorist’s perspective as it seems to be a conglomeration of two very well researched North American urban legends: “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” and “La Llorona.” The *Vanishing Hitchhiker* is a tale that has been around since the days of horse and carriage travel and as such, has spread all over the United States. *La Llorona*, also known as the *Woman in White*, is an urban legend that started in Mexico and has spread as far as Hawaii, Europe and Asia. These two urban legends work well together in the episode because of their narrative and thematic similarities.

It is also my assertion that these legends play off of similar societal fears and anxieties concerning travel. First I will provide a brief account of the two legends using the works of Jan Brunvand, Gloria Duarte and other scholars on the subject. Using the *Supernatural* pilot episode as a reference, I will then examine the similarities and differences in the tales, which will help to explain why this variant, which combines the two legends, works so well in the visual medium of narrative film.

“La Llorona” translates from Spanish as “the weeping woman,” which makes sense as the woman in the tale is said to be seen crying out as she looks for her children. The tale goes that a beautiful woman named Maria drowns her two children in order to be with a lover, who upon learning of her horrific actions denies her. Maria, now without her lover and unable to live with what she has done, drowns herself in the river. But upon reaching the gates of heaven she is refused access when she is asked where her children are. So she is now forced to wander the earth in search of them. Sightings of Maria’s ghost normally occur along the shores of rivers and other waterways, where she is heard crying, “Dónde están mis hijos?” (Where are my children?). This variant of the story is the most well-known; however, similar stories exist in German, Greek, Jewish and Philippine cultures.

The *Vanishing Hitchhiker* legend was researched extensively by folklorist Jan Brunvand in the 1980’s as the title urban legend for his book, “The vanishing hitchhiker: American urban legends and their meanings.” Though this tale has been around since horse drawn carriage was the standard in personal transport, the recurrence of the tale in popular media, oral tradition and even police reports caused it to become one of the best known American ghost stories. That the American public has always been so

enamored with automobile transportation only adds to the interest since the days of Henry Ford. It is also important to note that this book, among others, helped Brunvand coin the term “urban legend” and also propelled the study of American folklore in academia.

The story goes that a lone female hitchhiker is picked up by a driver in the middle of the night on a moonlight road. To the surprise of the driver this hitchhiker disappears in transit, and upon arriving at the hitchhiker’s destination it is revealed that she has been dead for years. Several variants include the leaving behind of identifiable clothing or a book, as well as the discovery of her gravestone or surviving parents (Brunvand, 1981). Other variants add a prophetic element to the tale when the ghost makes several claims about the near future of the driver and then usually some world event (i. e. the death of Hitler) before disappearing. When the first claim comes true, the driver is normally pushed to believe that the second will as well (Jacobson, 1984).

There are several obvious changes that were made from the most common *La Llorona* variants when *Supernatural* creator Eric Kripke wrote the pilot episode. Some of these changes were due to the addition of *Vanishing Hitchhiker* elements, but there were some that simply added to the development of the story itself.

The opening scene introducing the ghost of the deceased, in this case named Constance, does not place her near a waterway when she is picked up, though by the end of the sequence the bridge she jumped from to kill herself is revealed. She isn’t crying out for her children, though her somber demeanor evokes a deep despair when she says, “I can never go home.” The playing up of her sexuality also adds a new dimension to the character, as we discover once the Winchesters start looking into the related disappearances of male motorists. When questioning the girlfriend of the young man in the opening sequence, Sam and Dean are presented with an oral variant of the *Vanishing Hitchhiker* story.

“It’s kind of this local legend. This one girl, she got murdered out on centennial, like decades ago. Well, supposedly she’s still out there. She hitchhikes and whoever picks her up... well they disappear forever” (Kripke, 2005)

We learn in this interaction that those who pick up the female hitchhiker don’t just witness her disappearance, but they themselves vanish without a trace. Even the blood on the windshield from the opening sequence is gone once the police begin their investigation at the bridge. This is a blatant role reversal of the *Vanishing Hitchhiker* narrative, as the ghostly apparition known to vanish has begun to make others vanish themselves. In some ways the attacks are simply a representation of a malevolent *Vanishing Hitchhiker* tale, but the backstory explored during the questioning of Constance’s surviving husband adds depth to the ghost’s actions by connecting them to the *La Llorona* tale. Sam Winchester gives us his own variant of the *Woman in White* during his interrogation of the husband, Joseph Welch.

SAM: Mr. Welch, did you ever hear of a woman in white?

JOSEPH: A what?

SAM: A woman in white. Or sometimes weeping woman?

[JOSEPH just looks.]

SAM: It's a ghost story. Well, it's more of a phenomenon, really.

[SAM starts back toward JOSEPH.]

SAM: Um, they're spirits. They've been sighted for hundreds of years, dozens of places, in Hawaii, Mexico, lately in Arizona, Indiana. All these are different women. You understand. But all share the same story.

JOSEPH: Boy, I don't care much for nonsense.

[JOSEPH walks away. SAM follows.]

SAM: See, when they were alive, their husbands were unfaithful to them.

[JOSEPH stops]

SAM: And these women, basically suffering from temporary insanity, murdered their children.

[JOSEPH turns around]

SAM: Then once they realized what they had done, they took their own lives. So now their spirits are cursed, walking back roads, waterways. And if they find an unfaithful man, they kill him. And that man is never seen again.

JOSEPH: You think...you think that has something to do with...Constance? You smartass!

SAM: You tell me.

JOSEPH: I mean, maybe...maybe I made some mistakes. But no matter what I did, Constance, she never would have killed her own children. Now, you get the hell out of here! And you don't come back!
(Kripke, 2005)

In this variant, it is not the woman who is adulterous, but the husband. It is implied that Joseph Welch's betrayal motivated the drowning of the children, instead of (as the common *La Llorona* variant suggests) the wife's attempt to run away with another partner. So now, forced to spend eternity as the *La Llorona/Vanishing Hitchhiker* legend, Constance is propelled to seduce men into unfaithful action in order to kill them and redirect the anger from her children to a male figure like her husband. In a strange way, the ghost's actions represent another reversal of roles and the empowerment of a female character who was pushed to terminate the life she built.

She does not disappear en route either (as is the case in most *Vanishing Hitchhiker* variants), instead waiting for their arrival at the old house to pull off her magic trick. Her reappearance and ghostly attack on the terrified driver is also an addition to the tale that seems to signify an agency in death which she did not have in life. Though this agency now seems properly directed toward unfaithful men instead of her children, we see that her vengeance is still misguided. In the final confrontation with the ghost,

Sam Winchester is almost killed despite his display of unfaltering devotion to his girlfriend by denying the ghost’s sexual advances in the front seat of his brother’s Impala.

This ghost’s attraction to late night travelers is not a coincidence as it reflects her attempts to return home to her children. Thematically this attraction to transportation links the *Vanishing Hitchhiker* and *La Llorona* legends quite neatly, as the one is perpetually hitching rides towards a destination to which she can never return and the other searching for her children in order to finally find entrance into heaven. These themes are also pinned together with the motif of the bridge, which itself is a contrivance of travel.

There’s something creepy about bridges at night. During the day they simply transport you from one side of a natural boundary to the other. A portal of sorts, the bridge is a means of joining together what was once separated. But at night, when vision is disrupted by darkness and travel is normally avoided, those crossing a bridge can begin to doubt what they see in the sunlight. One can begin to wonder what’s on the other side of the bridge. If it can’t be seen, it becomes unknown. In the same way that walking into a pitch-black bedroom puts some on edge, traversing into unfamiliar territory by means of a bridge can induce anxiety. It is not a fear of the room or the bridge itself that frightens, it is the idea of stepping across a threshold into the unknown.

Irrational though it may seem, this thought process can take hold of a person when they’re faced with circumstances such as crossing a bridge at night or driving along a dark road alone. Reports of supernatural sightings and tales of other unexplainable phenomena can only loosely be related to this mindset, but certainly the symbolic use of the bridge as a means of traveling between two separated realms is no coincidence in this episode.

Through the use of motifs (such as the bridge, travel and vengeance) and character role reversals the creators of the pilot episode of “Supernatural” build a narrative that cleanly combines the urban legends of *La Llorona* and *the Vanishing Hitchhiker*. By applying the *La Llorona* tale as a backstory for the ghost of the *Vanishing Hitchhiker*, the creators are able to produce motivation for the hostile actions inflicted upon unsuspecting drivers by the ghost. In this way, they are also able to give these two legends, neither with any tangible history of aggression, a new means of interacting with living characters within the fictional world of “Supernatural.”

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