



ARTIFACTS

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Reflections in a Black Mirror: Analyzing Bloody Mary and Her Presence in "The Wolf Among Us"

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It's a typical setting; a group of teens enjoying each others company at a sleepover, when suddenly, they decide to play a game. At the behest of the others, one of the teens gets up, goes to the bathroom, turns off all of the lights, and while staring into the mirror, she recites her name. The confidence that the teen feels for performing the ritual quickly turns to fear, however, once she looks up and sees a reflection in the mirror, and she realizes that she has summoned the terrible Bloody Mary. Now in this case, Bloody Mary actually turns out to be her friend's jerk of an older sister, but the fear that this young woman feels says enough about the power of the Bloody Mary legend, as it is the same fear that thousands have felt before her. As defined by Bill Ellis, a legend does not rely heavily on any major stylistic formats, instead, a legend must simply "be believed, by narrators, by their audiences, or, ideally, by both." These days, one would be hard-pressed to find someone of any age range that has not at least heard a small variant of the Bloody Mary legend. All over the world, people have performed the ritual in one way or another, and because of this popularity, the legend has even seen adaptations in visual mediums such as film, television, and recently, even video games. In the case of the latter, Telltale Games brought Bloody Mary to life in their episodic neo-noir game *The Wolf Among Us*, but in the form of a sadistic antagonist that has rarely been seen in legend. For those with interests in the study of folkloristics, a character such as this does not negatively impact the original legends, but, as a new variant, it must be analyzed; not only to see what it borrows from past variants, but to see what it brings to the table, and how it represents Bloody Mary's growth as a legend. With this in mind, I plan to analyze the major variants of the Bloody Mary legend and ritual, as well as the variant depicted in *The Wolf Among Us*, and I will see just what kind of effect this depiction has on the legend complex.



(Fig. 1) Queen Mary I

In order to fully understand this legend complex, defined by Michael Kinsella as a complex where “narratives, practices, and experiences build upon and reinforce one another,” one must understand what spawned this legend in the first place. After a bit of research, while many variants have their origin tale, many seem to agree on one constant source: Queen Mary I (see Fig. 1). It may seem odd to some that a member of the British Monarchy could spawn such a horrifying legend, but upon closer examination of her life, the ties start to make a bit of sense. From the start of her life, Mary’s was one of misfortune and uncertainty. As a child, Mary was passed around like a bargaining chip; forced to enter into engagements with royalty members much older than the young child, and after the birth of her half-sister Elizabeth, Mary was sent away from her home as a lady-in-waiting, where she was forbidden to see her mother, even on her death bed. However, after regaining favor with her father, King Henry, and after a long struggle in the royal court, Mary managed to ascend to the throne and began her rule of England, where we begin to see the supposed origins of the Bloody Mary legend. Upon marriage to her husband Phillip, Mary sought to restore the Catholic Church to the seat of power it had not held in England since her father’s reign; however, this meant that Mary now sought to rid England of the Protestants that gained prominence after the Church of England’s reformation. As James Gairdner explains in his Mary I biography, the bloodshed that followed was not exactly due to Mary’s inhumanity, but “when the kingdom was reconciled to Rome and absolved by Cardinal Pole, it followed, almost as a matter of necessity, that the old heresy laws should be revived, as they were then by Act of Parliament.” Regardless, this meant that due to the perceived threat that Protestants posed to the now dominant Catholic Church of England, Mary was bound by law to put these “heretics” to death. For almost four years, hundreds of people burned at the stake on the orders of Queen Mary, and only upon her death did the killing finally stop. As many have observed, “her name deserved better treatment than it has generally met with; for she was far from cruel” (Gairdner, n.p.), however, this does not change the fact that, due to the blood of hundreds of innocents on her hands, Queen Mary will always be, to some people, a murderer, and the source of the Bloody Mary legend complex.

For many, the bloodshed that stains the otherwise kind rule of Queen Mary I marks the beginning of the Bloody Mary legend, however, as with any legend, Bloody Mary’s backstory is a multiple-choice question. As we have already examined, many participants of the Bloody Mary legend reference Queen Mary I and her persecution of English Protestants, however, in other variations of this origin story, her “Bloody” title actually stems from the numerous miscarriages that Mary endured throughout her life. In this case, Mary’s spirit does not haunt the living due to her violent nature, but because of the sorrow that she feels for her lost children. In many other cases,

however, the variations do not name Queen Mary I, but others, such as the witch known as Mary Worth. In this variation, Blood Mary was actually a witch who, according to Abigail Smycken, "lived over 100 years ago and was practicing black magic. She was executed and she haunts whoever calls her name." Other versions of this variant even seem to indicate that Mary Worth kidnapped runaway slaves and mutilated them during her black magic rituals. In other less violent or horrific origin variants, however, Bloody Mary "is believed to be the spirit of a mother whose baby was stolen from her, making her mad and leading to her suicide" (Smycken, n.p.). Finally, in many variants, Mary was just a simple woman who, through some act of violence or some terrible accident, becomes severely mutilated. Whatever the case, it might be interesting to see what aspects of these variants make their way into the Bloody Mary variant found in *The Wolf Among Us*.

Before going in-depth with Telltale Games' reimagining of the character, however, it might help to understand the variations and the reasoning behind the rituals usually associated with the Bloody Mary Legend Complex. In each variant, the rules tend to vary a bit, but in chapter of Jan Harold Brunvand's "Encyclopedia of Urban Legends" titled "I Believe in Mary Worth," he manages to break it down into a simple formula. According to Brunvand, some form of Bloody Mary "is supposed to be chanted a set number of times (3, 10, 50, 100, etc.) while staring into a mirror in a darkened room (often the bathroom) – sometimes lit by candles – in order to summon out of the mirror the avenging spirit of a witch or ghoul." From here, the ritual variants usually have differing results, with variants including Mary simply appearing in the mirror, Mary marking the face of the person calling her name, or even Mary dragging her victim down to Hell. Regardless, no matter what the ritual, it seems like experts in folkloristics have a fairly decent idea as to why these rituals play out the way they do. As Alan Dundes examined in his research article, "Bloody Mary in the Mirror," given the bloody nature of the legend, "the 'Bloody Mary' ritual serves an analogous function for pre-pubescent American girls." As Dundes explains, the general age range of the ritual's performers rests somewhere around the age of puberty, and that the blood associated with the legend serves as a metaphor of a young girl's first menstruation; especially given reported feelings of excitement during the first menstruation associated with maturing, and the ritual's "excitement tinged with fear and apprehension as well" (Dundes, 126). In the case of Telltale Games' variation of Bloody Mary, however, the focus of the legend might not be as closely associated with the emotion of excitement as it is with the emotion of fear.

After focusing on some of the most popular variants on the Bloody Mary legend complex, now comes the time to take a closer look at *The Wolf Among Us* in order to see what the game has made of Bloody Mary.



(Fig. 2) Bloody Mary's first

appearance in "The Wolf Among Us"

For a bit of background information, the game starts out in 1986 in a section of New York City called Fabletown, where the protagonist, Bigby Wolf (The Big Bad Wolf) resides as a sheriff who upholds the law among the various residents within the area. During an investigation into a string of murders within the Fabletown community, Bigby, accompanied by aide to the deputy mayor, Snow White, come across a racketeering scandal that leads all the way to the deputy mayor Ichabod Crane, but when they confront Crane, the two run into an enforcer, Bloody Mary (see Fig. 1), employed by the game's main antagonist. During their first meeting in episode three, *A Crooked Mile*, Mary performs her own legend by explaining how she visits children at slumber parties who recite her name five times into a mirror before brutally murdering them, in a fashion that fits the formula given by Jan Brunvand. At the same time, she addresses how she does so purely out of the joy she gets from the act of killing. From here, she proceeds to critically wound Bigby and, at the request of Snow, leaves the scene with Crane in tow. In the next episode, *In Sheep's Clothing*, the player does not get much more information about the character, however, during Bigby's attempt to find Crane using the Magic Mirror from Snow White lore, Mary, miles away from the Fabletown offices, becomes aware of Bigby and Snow's surveillance of her. Upon determining their methods, Mary menacingly stares back at them through the mirror and attempts to enter the offices through the Mirror, which quickly ceases the surveillance due to the fear of her presence. Finally, in episode five, titled *Cry Wolf*, Mary appears through a mirror in the office of her employer, the Crooked Man, in order to aid his escape from Bigby Wolf. After a thrilling car chase, Bigby tracks the two down to a steel mill where Mary confronts him, and the two begin their final confrontation. Here, we see Mary cast off her human visage in favor of her true form (see Fig. 3); a pale, black eyed woman with glass protruding from her



(Fig. 3) Mary reveals her true colors

body and blood dripping from the wounds that they create. She even reveals an ability to multiply herself, seemingly without end, before a fully transformed Wolf destroys her. As we can see, Telltale Games managed to create a truly menacing villain with their variation of Bloody Mary, but how does it compare to other variations of the Bloody Mary?

The Wolf Among Us' Bloody Mary definitely has many original aspects of her character, but she also owes a great deal to some older variants of the legend complex. Interestingly enough, during my initial research into this analysis, I was almost positive that *The Wolf Among Us* might make at least some reference to the character's ties to

Queen Mary I, but, as I discovered, the character really does not seem to mention this popular variant at all. However, upon closer examination, I do believe this new Mary's origins share similarities with two other variants: Mary Worth and the mutilated woman. While not explicitly stated, the new Mary's abilities, from her replicating to her enhanced spatial awareness, seem to be based in magic; due to the witch-like markings on her real body and the widespread use of magic in the world and narrative of *The Wolf Among Us*. Adding to these markings, the shards of glass that seem to penetrate her body in her true form and the blood that drips from these wounds also seem to match the mutilation variation nicely. Finally, the blood that covers Mary's body in her true form and her performance of her own legend, seem to harken back to the theory established by Alan Dundes that Mary's ritual can be seen as a rite of passage for young girls experiencing their first menses. However, from here, I believe the new Mary starts to diverge from the other variants in terms of themes.

As Dundes explains, "the Bloody Mary ritual evokes feelings of excitement on the part of participants, excitement tinged with fear and apprehension as well" (Dundes, 126), but in the case of this new variation, I believe the developers at Telltale Games chose to highlight the fear associated with the ritual instead of the excitement. Unlike most variations, this new Bloody Mary actually displays a personality and acts as something other than the ghost you see in your reflection. Because of this, while many variations of the character seem to act without emotion, this variation does display emotion when regarding the murder of others. Unfortunately, the emotion that she displays usually takes the form of sadistic joy, which usually shows up as a slight grin, an arching of eyebrows, and wide eyes during times of violence. With this kind of depiction, we can see that, while *The Wolf Among Us*' version of Bloody Mary definitely borrows much from her predecessors, her personality and actions bring much to the table for this ever-expanding legend complex.

With all of this information on past variants of the Bloody Mary legend complex, along with the information gathered and analyzed regarding the newest variation found in Telltale Games' *The Wolf Among Us*, one question still remains: what does this mean for the future of the legend complex? As I stated earlier in this paper, most people around the world only need to hear the name Bloody Mary to trigger thoughts of adolescent rituals in front of the mirror in dark bathrooms. With this knowledge, any folklorist would easily categorize this legend as a metonym; a legend reduced to "a simple allusion to one of its distinctive elements" (Ellis, 65). However, with *The Wolf Among Us*, that might no longer be the case. In the game's variation of the legend, we see plenty of familiar elements found in other variations in the complex, but we also see plenty of new elements that can terrify those already familiar with the legend, as well as entice a new generation of participants into the fear of the Bloody Mary legend complex. With any luck, Telltale Games might just be the first of many to continue the growth of a legend so familiar to so many people. The legend of Bloody Mary has aged quite a bit, but thanks to new forms of media and new variations such as that of *The Wolf Among Us*, the chances are high that, for years to come, children will continue to stand in their dark bathrooms in front of the mirror and whisper: "... I believe in Bloody Mary."

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