Course Description

Statistics indicate that an extremely large percentage of the American and Canadian population not only believe in the supernatural but, in fact, believe that they themselves have had a supernatural or paranormal experience. However, most social science disciplines consider supernatural beliefs to be either historical or marginal. If this is the case, two questions arise. First, why traditions that are predicted to decline with the rise of scientific rationalism have not? Second, why has the extent of belief in the supernatural gone unrecognized and underestimated by the academy for so long?

The general approach to the course will be ethnographic, focusing on the ethnography of belief systems in North America and other parts of the world. Through readings, lectures, and films, students will learn how folklorists have approached and studied the beliefs of others and how those beliefs have been commodified and adapted to new media. In particular, we will discuss examples of the following supernatural phenomena: the Old Hag, witches, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, elves, and fairies.

Readings


*Note: Unless otherwise stated, all articles are available online through the library system. Items marked “[RESERVE]” may be found at the QEII Reserve Desk. Other readings may be assigned as the course progresses.*

**Evaluation**

1) Participation 10%
2) Comment Slips 10%
3) Critical Review 20%
4) Collection Assignment 20%
5) Final Paper 40%

1) Participation

Active, respectful, participation is expected of all students. This includes asking and answering questions, arriving prepared with notes on readings, and contributing (usefully) to discussions. You do not have to come up with anything earth-shatteringly brilliant; just say something.

2) Comment Slips

Beginning the second week of classes, every Friday, at the end of class, students will be invited to write a comment/query slip. It can be a comment or a question related to topics and issues discussed in class and through assigned readings. You can also share some personal knowledge on a relevant theme. This is also a chance for you to request clarification for anything that was unclear. In total, you will write 10 comment slips. One slip is worth 1 point. At the end, you will
get 10 points if you complete 10 slips, 9 points if you complete 9 slips, etc. These slips will constitute 10% of the overall grade in the course. These comment sheets must be completed in class on the day they are assigned. They cannot be made up if missed.

3) Critical Review

Select a book, journal article, film, or television series (scholarly or not) with a supernatural theme and write a five page critical review. What does that mean? It means that I am looking for a thoughtful analysis that asks questions about your chosen publication. A review is not a summary; it includes a description of your topic (e.g.: who? what? where? and when?) but also involves critical thinking (e.g.: why? and how?).

If you select an academic publication, the review should describe the author’s main points and then engage with them: what do you think about it? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the argument? How many sources does the author use? What quality are they?

If you choose a non-academic publication, the review should provide a description of what you chose, why you chose it, how it represents the supernatural and how that relates to older folklore versions. Non-academic topics **MUST use at least one** academic book or journal article to back up your analysis.

Example: if you want to write on the *Twilight* films (positively or negatively), your review should be begin with a brief description of the story. The analysis should answer questions like “how do these films represent vampires?; “how does this representation fit with traditional folklore representations and beliefs? (which is where you will use an academic source); “What effect, if any, are these films having on the public/pop culture perception of vampire folklore?” The analysis should also include reflection: “How do you feel about it? Why?”

The review should be typed in 12pt Times New Roman font, single-sided and double-spaced, using Turabian Reference List style throughout. It should include page numbers and a title page with your name, student number, date and submitted.

4) Collection Assignment

Go out into the world and document supernatural folklore! This is a fieldwork assignment, requiring you to record an interview with one person about a supernatural experience that person has had (or beliefs that they hold) and write a five (5) page paper describing and analyzing the narrative. Does your Nan know any fairy stories? Has a sibling experienced the Old Hag? Does one of your friends believe he or she is a vampire? Is there a haunted place on campus?

Step 1: decide on a topic; Step 2: find an informant (person to interview about the topic); Step 3: obtain informed consent from informant; Step 4: interview informant; Step 5: write an analysis of the topic, using the interview and **at least one relevant academic book or journal article** as sources.

The goal of this assignment is to demonstrate what you have learned about the ethnography of
belief (i.e.: what kinds of questions to ask believers) and that you can discuss belief narratives using folkloristic terminology (e.g.: memorate, belief legend, etc.). The analysis should describe the phenomenon; explain why it is supernatural; what type of supernatural folklore it is; describe the interviewee, describe the context of the interview and how the interview went; where the informant heard/experienced the phenomenon/narrative; why he or she believes it, etc.

Interviews should be approx. 45min and recorded in the highest quality possible. The collection assignment should be typed in 12pt Times New Roman font, single-sided and double-spaced, using Turabian Reference List style throughout. It should include a brief recording outline (will be discussed in class, but essentially a highlight reel of interesting points in the interview with corresponding times) page numbers and a title page with your name, student number, date and submitted. Recordings of interviews (and the accompanying consent forms) MUST be submitted along with the paper and they should be submitted together in a sealed envelope (that way, papers won’t get separated from CDs and USB drives). Note: full transcriptions are NOT required, but you MUST include in your paper transcribed excerpts from your interview.

Collection projects should be familiar to Folklore majors. Fieldwork methods and interviewing techniques will, however, be discussed in class prior to the due date. If you have any questions or concerns about fieldwork or interviewing (looking at you, non-folklore majors), please do not hesitate to email me or visit me during my office hours.

5) Final Paper

The goal of this assignment is a 15-20 page ethnographic essay that documents a supernatural phenomenon and, through analysis, makes an argument about it. Choose a supernatural-related topic; do library research to learn what academics have said about the topic; conduct two (2) interviews with people who have experience in some way with the topic, and write a paper using the library research to analyze the interviews in order to make some kind of claim about the phenomenon. For example, you might argue that fairy legends are alive and well in St. John’s; that *Twilight* is a serious departure from traditional Eastern European vampire lore; that the Old Hag is actually a supernatural entity, and not a side effect of sleep paralysis; that belief in witches plays an important social or cultural function in society; that commodifying folklore restricts or reinforces one particular version above all others or, conversely, that new media adaptations of folklore are creative and constantly re-mixed or mashed-up.

This assignment should include a bibliography of at least five (5) academic sources – all of which should be cited in the paper following Turabian Reference List style. The interviews should be approx. 45min in length and be submitted on some kind of storage device along with the paper and consent forms in a sealed envelope. If you chose an academic source for your critical review, you may use that source again for this paper. Similarly, depending on your topic, you may re-use the interview from the collection assignment, if applicable.

The final paper should be 15-20 pages, typed in 12pt Times New Roman font, single-sided and double-spaced with page numbers. A title page with name and date along with a bibliography (following Turabian) are also required. Include a recording outline, identifying highlights of your interviews.
Policies

Assignment Submission: Assignments must be submitted in hard copy in class on the due date; I do not accept submission by email. Every assignment must follow Turabian Reference List style, be typed in 12pt font Times New Roman, single-sided and double-spaced, must include your name, page numbers, and a bibliography if necessary.

Late Policy: Papers not submitted by the due date (without a legitimate reason (e.g.: a doctor’s note) will be subject to a 10% daily grade deduction for five (5) days (excluding weekends), after which they will no longer be accepted (unless prior arrangements have been made with the professor). Please refer to the University Calendar for information regarding doctor’s notes.

Lecture Notes & Slides: I do not lend out my lecture notes. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to borrow the notes from a classmate. I may provide copies of slides, but any slides I use are almost entirely visual and do not contain notes on the corresponding lecture.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is not cool. Integrity and reputation are crucial to academia, so academic dishonesty is taken very seriously. In accordance with university regulations, students are advised that passing in work that has been or will also be submitted in another course, without express permission from the course instructor(s), constitutes plagiarism. This, or any other instance of plagiarism, will result in a zero for the assignment, as well as the possibility of further disciplinary action by the university. For more details on the university’s plagiarism policy, see the University Calendar (5.11 Academic Misconduct).

Course Outline

September 4: Introduction

September 6: A Brief History of Folklore

September 9: Supernatural Experiences in the 21st Century
   Read: Goldstein (2007), “Introduction”

September 11: Genres of Belief
   Read: Honko (1964)
   Read: Dégh (1996)

September 13: Reading Supernatural Narratives
   Read: Goldstein (2007), Ch. 1

   Due: Comment slips

September 16: Comment slips discussion

September 18: Ethnography of Belief
   Read: Hufford (1983)
Read: Hufford (1995)

September 20: Ethnography of Belief
   Read: Goldstein, Ch. 2
   **Due: Comment slips**

September 23: Comment slips discussion

September 25: Phenomenology of the Old Hag

September 27: Historical Accounts of the Supernatural
   **Due: Comment slips**

September 30: Library Research Lecture & Comment slips discussion

October 2: Witches
   Rieti (2008), xi-11

October 4: Gender & the Supernatural
   Read: Rieti (2008), 19-28
   Read: Goldstein (2007), Ch. 3
   **Due: Comment slips**

October 7: Witches & Comment slips discussion
   Read: Rieti (2008), 28-70
   **Due: Critical Review**

October 9: Fieldwork Lecture

October 11: Religion & the Supernatural
   Read: Rieti (2008), 71-78
   Read: Hufford (1985)
   **Due: Comment slips**

October 16: Vernacular Religion & Comment slips discussion
   Hufford (1985)

October 18: Witches
   Read: Rieti (2008), 79-123

October 21: Witches
   Read: Rieti (2008), 125-150

October 23: Fairies

October 25: Haunted Places
Read: Goldstein (2007), Ch. 5
Due: Comment slips

October 28: Commodification of Belief
Read: Goldstein (2007), Ch. 6

October 30: Halloween

November 1: Folklore & Popular Culture
Due: Comment slips
Due: Collection Assignment

November 4: Supernatural Popular Culture & Comment slips discussion
Read: Goldstein (2007), “Conclusion”

November 6: Elves
Read: Simpson (2011)

November 8: Photogenic Ghosts
Read: Wojcik (2009)
Due: Comment slips

November 13: Film & Television & Comment slips discussion
Read: Koven (2003)

November 15: Tourism
Read: Holmes and Inglis (2004)
Due: Comment slips

November 18: Revenants & Comment slips discussion

November 20: Vampires

November 22: Werewolves
Due: Comment slips

November 25: The Virtual Supernatural & Comment slips discussion

November 27: Trolls, Ogres, and Giants

November 29: Lord of the Rings

December 2: Lord of the Rings
Due: Final Paper

December 4: Lord of the Rings