

Boogeyman: A Creature Constructed by Location

Audience: 8-12, (6-7 advanced with some modification)

Time: 2-3 days depending on extension/class level

Materials: hard or digital copy of story, questions, rubric assignment

Boogeyman: A Creature Constructed by Location

Storytelling has many functions. Arguably the most important one is passing down culture - stories are a way to compare the past to the present, showing how older solutions impacted what we view as our communal identity. But there are dark sides to storytelling, such as enforcing negative stereotypes. A very common character around the world is created or adapted to the environment of that particular location for one purpose. That is the Boogeyman.

“A type of mythic creature used by adults to frighten children into good behavior. Bogeymen have no specific appearance and conceptions vary drastically by household and culture, but they are most commonly depicted as masculine or androgynous monsters that punish children for misbehavior”

Shimabukuro, Karra (2014). "The Bogeyman of Your Nightmares: Freddy Krueger's Folkloric Roots". Studies in Popular Culture, 36 (2), 45–65.

The Way I Heard It, by Jim Curtis

I grew up in Lake County, Florida and our Boogeyman wasn't a man at all. It was a women.

“She’s done it again,” we were told by the Junior Assistant Scoutmaster, as we sat around a campfire in Central Florida in the mid 60’s. “Another Boy Scout less than 25 miles away was ripped to shreds. He’d wandered off to look at the stars.”

“Probably snuck off to smoke a cigarette,” whispered one of the older boys.

“They keep saying it was a bear or a panther but my father’s friend who works at the hospital says it wasn’t like that. There is only one thing that could have done that. The Moss Lady.”

“Stop that now,” said one of the older scouts. “You’re gonna scare the new Scouts.”

“They got a right to know,” said another. “It was only last week, and only 25 miles away. Even Jim could make that walk,” pointing to one of the larger kids.

As the older Scouts laughed one of the new campers asked meekly, “Who is this Moss Lady?”

“Well, I heard she was a girl that was always bullied by the other kids because she was poor. When she got older the kids got meaner and meaner. For Prom her mom had made her a dress. The boys laughed and laughed at her, and began spilling food and drinks onto the dress. She ran out in the woods to cry. The moon was full and she looked down on the ruined dress.”

“I can’t go home and disappoint my mother,” she thought. The only thing she could do was to live in the woods, plus that was also the way for her new purpose in life; Getting revenge on the ones that taunted her. As her clothes fell apart she replaced them with moss. Pretty soon you couldn’t tell where the moss ended and the lady began. Her nails grew to be 6 inches long and she kept them sharpened like knives.”

“Then why would we worry about her? We didn’t do any of that stuff,” squeaked one of the new campers.

“Don’t you understand, she went plumb insane. She became so dangerous that law enforcement denies her existence. You don’t believe me, go ask a cop about the Moss Lady. They’ll deny she exists. She’s already escaped from Chatahoochee twice. They want nothin’ to do with her.”

“She doesn’t like fire and she doesn’t like groups of people. She likes to catch people that are alone. People that fall behind. That’s why two of the older Scouts are always behind the group. Never, EVER fall behind them.”

“You’d, be a goner that’s for sure.”

“So when you’re out camping with the troop stay by the fire at night. But most importantly, NEVER, EVER wander alone. ALWAYS have a buddy you can depend on, never get separated.”

“So if I was you I’d make sure my canteen was full and I picked someone I could trust even if the Moss Lady shows up. We’ll get on the Snipe hunt in about 15 minutes. So what do you new Scouts need to do?”

“Find someone I can trust,” they shouted in chorus.

“And fill your canteen,” said the littlest new Scout. He knew he’d be telling this story one day.

I researched the Moss Lady and there was no mention of her in Central Florida. I don't know if this actually counts as evidence today, but law enforcement still denies the existence of the Moss Lady.

Questions to ask:

When was Moss Lady first seen or the story about her first told?

(Most likely there is no known origin or originator. This is a common characteristic of folk culture. Another element is that a boogyman has a relationship to location, not to a particular time frame.)

How was the story passed on?

(By word of mouth, another characteristic of Folk Culture.)

How does the oral tradition add to the credibility of the story?

(Orators can adapt the story to their own environment, adding local characteristics, making the story seem much more “real”.)

Why didn't the Scoutmaster tell the story to the young Scouts?

(To add to the credibility of the story, especially with the older Scouts offering details.)

What was the purpose of the story?

(To control the behavior of the young scouts,

to keep them “safe” from things other than the Moss Lady

to make sure they have buddy when in the woods (which is important in the wild terrain) to

informally enforce rules of the existing group hierarchy

Would this form of control worked on you?

Assignment:

Research a boogyman from around the world.

Start with your family, ask if they had a boogyman when they grew up?

Grandparents may have better examples. Why? (the expansion/dominance of popular culture) What about their environment makes them different from the Moss Lady?

Why is the warning of the story directed at this group?

Time permitting:

Write a synopsis or a folk story based on your research to share with the class.

Develop a table and add your story:

Similarities	Differences caused by	
	Culture	Environment
Name Moss People	Moss Lady/most boogymen are male	German one green/woody/not too scary Florida one Grey/Flowing/pretty scary

Pass the stories to the groups in class. Have class choose best story based on following criteria:

Link to boogyman and environment

Demonstrates how story has clearly defined purpose

Clearly shows how the story is used for control

Give winning group(s) 10-15 points of extra credit they can use on any assignment. I would suggest you have three “winning” groups and have students decide which groups won. (If the work is really good I’d allow ties and wouldn’t split points).

Extension: Allow students to choose a story they can argue fit into one of the four categories in the description (passing of culture, solutions of earlier culture trying to fix something, extension of negative stereotype (like dragons or ogres are “bad,” or used to control).



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