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# The Cemetery and the Fear of the Dead

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**ABSTRACT:** Fear is a characteristic feature of many legends. And the fear of the death is probably our deepest fear. Death is a crucial event in folk culture, as it triggers an existential crisis which must be duly managed. The living need to distance themselves from the dead in order not to lose their own “presence” in the world. To maintain this distance, people can rely on a dedicated place, the cemetery, where the fear of the dead can be mastered and framed in a sacred dimension. Cemetery may be regarded as a liminal, hybrid space, connecting life and death, the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible. Hence, it can turn into a critical, dangerous place, a “legend landscape”, where odd, mysterious, frightening encounters are possible or, at least, believable. This is especially so if one enters a cemetery at night, when it is forbidden to the living and the darkness creates the perfect stage for fearsome presences. In the ATU 1676B narrative type, an individual bets to enter a cemetery at night in order to show her/his courage and/or refute the belief of the dead as ghosts, but this gamble results in a death from fright. A different case concerns the fate of those who face the night in the cemetery with genuine courage and respect towards the dead, as in a folktale collected by W.B. Yeats (ATU 326), and a (true) story of a woman sleeping in the cemetery (Motif Index C735.2.5). Overall, the cemetery emerges as an ideal setting for a cautionary tale, through which local communities meditate on key issues such as death, fear and belief/non-belief.

**KEYWORDS:** fear, beliefs, death, cemetery, cautionary tale, wager

## Introduction

Death is a part of our lives. In fact, life and death are inseparable. As living creatures, we know (and hope) that life can be long-lasting, but we also know that it is not endless. Death is thus an atavistic source of distress, fright, fear. And it is a mystery pushing humans to ponder, fancy and even look for means

to gain or simply imagine immortality. Beside religious and supernatural beliefs, one of these means is folk narratives, especially those dealing with ghosts and revenants. As stated by Linda Dégh (2001: 399; emphasis mine):

Fear of death is the mystery with which people have to live. [...] Humans project their immortality in diverse religious contexts, imagining diverse deities, hierarchies, and structures that their own cultural experience can fill with meaning to make their future in “life after life” palpable. [...] Ghost stories, the narratives about encounters with revenants, are the proof that death does not rob people of everything – it is not the end but the opening of a new era, for the dead can return to earth. If they can return, we also will be able to, after we die.

However, even more frequently than to represent a proof of possible immortality, the dead feature in folk narratives as ghosts or revenants to express the fear(s) raised by the death and by the related supernatural beings and events<sup>1</sup>. Legends, in particular, “present us a complex system for manoeuvring around a world filled with mythological dangers” (Hiimäe 2004: 65).

In this article I will deal with a specific (and atypical) kind of ghost story, set in a specific place, the cemetery; a story that, as will be shown, puts literally into play individual and collective beliefs (and related fears)<sup>2</sup> about the dead as ghosts and their supernatural presence (or absence) in a cemetery.

### Death and a Crisis of Presence

Presence and, vicariously, absence are basic concepts in the historical and ethnographical research conducted by Ernesto de Martino in his *Morte e pianto rituale (Death and Ritual Mourning)*. In short, according to the Italian scholar, death triggers an individual and collective crisis of the presence<sup>3</sup>, resulting from a condition of absence, brought about by the passing of a family or community member; this absence puts at risk the presence of the living people who mourn their dead. This crisis entails a risk of losing one’s own individuality as well as the connection with the historical existence; as a consequence, a “sick presence losing itself and leaning toward the insanity” replaces a “healthy presence willing to the works and the days of human culture” (de Martino 2021: 25).

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1 Cf. Naithani (2008: 414): “The ghost story is a narrative genre characterized by the presence of a dead person, either as an apparent or disguised element – the ghost. [...] Ghosts [...] reflect the fears and anxieties of the narrators and their audiences. As a tale of the supernatural, the ghost story may inspire fear, but – based on cultural and religious ideas about right and wrong, life and death, this world and the otherworld – it may also be deeply moving”.

2 Typically, as stated by Hiimäe (2004: 65), “universally threatening situations are often expressed by individual experience in narratives”. This is precisely what happens in the narrative type/motif considered in this paper.

3 “Presence” can be intended as the “human effort of giving sense to nature and external reality through a general kind of *Kulturarbeit*” (Ciaramelli 2015).

Nonetheless, humans are aware that death is an unavoidable burden of their condition, the essence itself of a historical existence; something one must accept after all, in order to keep individuality and cultural identity intact. The role of culture, for de Martino, is exactly that of transcending and objectifying death, by framing it in a ritual and mythical form; in other words, we must “not die together with what has died, but let it die inside ourselves, by transcending it in the value” (de Martino 2021: 14). Funeral mourning is thus conceived as a means to transform an “irrelative” *planctus* (the immediate and disordered reaction to the loss of a beloved person) into a “ritualized” *planctus* (a culturally mediated and ordered reaction structured according to a traditional pattern), so as to put the mournful event and, as a result, the dead at a right distance. Otherwise, as strikingly exemplified by de Martino through a Greek tragedy – Euripides’ *Medea* (vv. 1205-1220) – someone dead can even grab a living person, leading her/him to a sudden death: the corpse of the young Glauce is mourned to such an extent by her father, the king Creon, that he cannot rise anymore and move away from her, so that he “lies dead” (de Martino 2021: 48).

### **The Cemetery, a Sacred Place for the Dead**

Beside (and after) the ritual complex described by de Martino, humans have also conceived a place where the dead can be suitably and safely accommodated. This place is the cemetery, which may be precisely regarded as a place for putting the dead at a right distance; they are thus transcended in a religious perspective and objectified in the material and symbolical form of a grave<sup>4</sup>. As liminal spaces, on a threshold between life and death, “heterotopia[s]” (Foucault 1986: 25), cemeteries are situated on the outskirts of the town or village – at least since the edict of Saint Cloud passed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1804<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, cemetery is a crucial space for the religious and cultural identity of a community<sup>6</sup>. What makes it so important is also the fact of providing a distinct and distant abode for the dead, in other words, for a lifeless body, which is perceived by folk culture as a radical and dangerous form of otherness. Therefore, the corpse, after being duly honoured, must be moved from a life-place (the house, where the life of the rest of family goes on) to a death-place, in order for it to acquire a manageable and sacred status. Accordingly, cemetery allows people to deal with death in a protected way and to move safely between life and death, between their own living presence and an

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4 As argued by John Lindow (2018: 42), “the graves, and especially the gravestones with their naming of the dead, created a link between the dead and the living, and this constituted a vertical rather than horizontal connection: the dead in the earth and the living on top of it”.

5 As clarified by Foucault (1986: 25): “Until the end of the eighteenth century, the cemetery was placed at the heart of the city, next to the church. [...] it is from the beginning of the nineteenth century that everyone has a right to her or his own little box for her or his own little personal decay; but on the other hand, it is only from that start of the nineteenth century that cemeteries began to be located at the outside border of cities”.

6 Cf. Colombo, Vlach (2021: 222): “Cemeteries embody a collective representation of basic community beliefs, identity, and values about what a society is, and what kind of people live in it”.

absence made symbolically present... at a right distance. As a circumscribed and protected space, cemetery provides a place where one can periodically commemorate their dead<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, modern cemeteries are public spaces; as such, there are some rules to be respected, in particular concerning the opening and closing hours. Just like other public areas, cemeteries usually open in the morning and close in the afternoon or in the evening; in other words, cemetery, at night, becomes a place reserved to the dead and forbidden to the living. As “a city of the dead [...] a temporary haven and resting place, where residents may interact socially” (Dégh 2001: 392), the cemetery at night must be kept at a right distance and seen as an inviolable receptacle where nobody is allowed to interfere with the mystery of death. Of course, these rules are easier to apply if the cemetery is a closed, fenced space, with walls and gates physically marking its boundaries. But we know that ancient and rural cemeteries were and are often open and defenceless spaces, i.e. it may be impossible to prevent unwanted guests from visiting the area.

### **The Cemetery, a Fearsome Place**

The best defence, indeed, should be granted by the fear of the dead, one of the most intense fears we share as human beings. This may be especially so if one believes that the dead can turn into ghosts or revenants. However, one can also be curious or bold to such an extent to want to enter a cemetery at night. And we know that when something is intensely wanted, fears and folk beliefs are frequently not enough to prevent people from doing what is commonly perceived as scary; on the contrary, they are often an additional incentive to do it. Having entered it, what would one find inside a cemetery at night? Basically an environment defined by isolation, the isolation of a living person who has moved away from a living place made of lights, sounds and people – thus, a place characterized by the presence of signs of life – to go into a place made of darkness, silence and solitude – thus, a place characterized by the absence of signs of life, or else by signs of death. In other words, this is the isolation of an individual symbolically traveling from life to death. In such a context, one measures against their deepest and irrational fears and beliefs, firstly those related to a dangerous kind of presence which is exactly suggested by the grim features of a cemetery at night.

At night, in fact, a cemetery, like many other places located on the outskirts of communities, becomes a “legend-landscape”, in Linda Dégh’s words, an otherworld on earth, a “‘numinous’ or ‘liminal’ territory, that is not governed by human rules. Spirits, good and evil, live there [...] and do not like to

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7 As pointed out by Colombo and Vlach (2021: 218), “a visit to the cemetery and remembrance of the dead is a way to confirm the link between life and death, and a tribute to a grave recalls the connection between the living and the dead”. Interestingly, Philippe Ariès devoted an entire chapter to “The visit to the cemetery” in his classic work about our relationship with death (Ariès 1977: 406–476).

be intercepted by mortals”. This is a place, therefore, “to be avoided if possible” (Dégh 2001: 384).

If we turn to Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index* (Thompson 1955–1958), we find out that the narrative motifs related to cemetery/graveyard are characterized by notions such as separation, borders, darkness, prohibition, or figures such as ghosts and evil spirits: it is a fearsome place, indeed, hence a perfect landscape for frightful, scary, horror legends. Not by chance, the most recurrent concept is that of tabu: basically, if you unluckily bump into a cemetery at night, there are some things you must abstain from doing. Here is a list of motifs related to cemetery/graveyard:

- C (Motifs of tabu) 334. Tabu: looking over cemetery walls, lest one see ghosts<sup>8</sup>.
- C735.2.5. Tabu: sleeping in cemetery.
- C752.1.5. Tabu: casting in graveyard after sunset.
- C883. Tabu: crossing graveyard without alighting.
- D (Magic) 1322.2. Light moving toward cemetery as a sign of death.
- E (The dead) 419.4. Dead move when cemetery moved.
- G (Ogres) 18.1. Cannibals live at cemetery.
- J (The wise and the foolish) 1499.9. Man disagrees to proposal to fence graveyards; those inside won’t try to get out; those outside won’t try to get in<sup>9</sup>.
- K (Deceptions) 335.0.5.2. Thief frightens priest as the latter crosses cemetery.
- X (Humor) 424. The devil in the cemetery.
- X1663.2. Lie: place so healthful that residents shoot man to start cemetery.

### **The Graveyard Wager, or to Die of Fear in a Cemetery**

Cemeteries are places “to be avoided if possible”, according to Linda Dégh. But what if one does not believe or is not frightened by beliefs and narratives describing them as fearsome places inhabited by fearsome beings? This is exactly the starting point of a folk narrative based on the wager of an individual entering a cemetery at night and then dying of fright because of an unfortunate accident. This plot corresponds both to a type in the ATU Index (Uther 2004) and a motif in the Motif-Index:

- ATU 1676B. Clothing caught in graveyard (man thinks that something terrifying is holding him and dies of fright).
- Motif-Index N 384.2. Death in the graveyard; person’s clothing is caught; the person thinks something awful is holding him; he dies of fright.

Ernest W. Baughman (1966: 373) supplies a more detailed description of this same motif:

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8 Here the walls form a physical barrier separating the living from dead/ghosts.  
 9 Here a physical barrier is regarded as unnecessary, given the strict separation between those dwelling outside and those dwelling inside a graveyard.

Person goes to cemetery on a dare: he is to plant a stake in a grave or stick a knife or fork or sword or nail into a grave (or coffin). The knife is driven through the person's loose cuff, or the nail is driven through part of the sleeve, or the stake is driven through the person's long coat tail.

Moreover, Jan H. Brunvand, in the section "Horrors" of his urban legends collection, has a paragraph specifically devoted to the "Graveyard Wager", about which he writes: "Variations on the basic theme have been recorded since the Middle Ages in Europe and have migrated to much of the world". Then he expounds on the variants of this migratory legend (Brunvand 1989: 80):

In some versions, a soldier bets that he has the courage to remain overnight in a cemetery, but he dies from fright after plunging his sword through his long cloak. In others, a drunken man drives his dagger through the hem of his overcoat. Sometimes the person visiting the grave is told to drive a nail into a wooden cross, and the nail goes through part of his garment. In a few versions the graveyard visitor suffers just a good scare and a cold night in the cemetery, rather than death.

Actually, this legend has migrated up to my hometown, Castellana (South of Italy, near Taranto), becoming a local legend that I have known since I was a child. It was told me by my mother Giuseppina (b. 1951) as a true story that happened in our cemetery<sup>10</sup>. She had previously heard it from her father (and my grandfather) Vito Giovanni (1903-1980). I asked my mother to tell me this story once again; the following is the transcript (translated from Italian) of her telling, recorded on 4 April 2021 (in italics my questions):

There were three university students – three daddy's boys – who, to kill boredom, challenged one another to enter the cemetery at night and to drive a nail into a gravestone. At the time – in the early twentieth century – everybody wore a cloak, especially the richest people. Then they went to the cemetery and two of these guys tried to drive the nail into a gravestone, but they failed. The third one, instead, managed to drive this nail. Thereafter, being scared, they ran away. The cloak of the third guy, however, got caught in the gravestone, so he couldn't escape from there. The day after the keeper, while walking as usual through the cemetery, found that guy dead, lying on the ground: he had died of fright.

*Fright of what?*

He thought he had been caught by a dead.

*Who told you this story?*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dorson (1947: 5): "My mother told me this, in Han[n]over, as an actual happening that had been told for generations"; Stewart (1991: 111): "The story is told, and sworn to be true, of a man who, on a wager, agreed to drive a nail into a grave". A similar story is told by the narrator as a first-hand experience of his grandfather in Paredes (1970: 166-167).

My father. It's a true story! A real event occurred in the cemetery of Castellaneta.

*Do you remember when you heard this story for the first time?*

I was a child, about 7-8 years old, so it was in the late 1950s.

The type 1676B is quite widespread in Italian folklore, based upon the several versions I have found both in oral narrative collections and in urban legends blogs. In broad terms, the plot is the same as that of my mother's story. For example, in *La storia di Piero* (Peter's Story), collected in Valle Trompia (Lombardy), the protagonist bets with his friends to remain in a cemetery all through the night, but at the dawn, when he is rising up to go away, his cloak gets caught in a gravestone; believing to be "seized by a mysterious hand", he dies of fright and is found dead by his friends (Raza 2015: 171-172). In another legend coming from Lombardy – *La leggenda sulla paura dei morti* (The Legend about the Fear of the Dead) – a young woman, in order to prove courage to her fiancé, bets to enter into a churchyard at night and to drive a spindle in the ground. In so doing, the spindle gets caught in her apron; believing to be pulled into a grave by someone dead, she dies of fright (Pantano 1998).

This type also features in literary works<sup>11</sup>. The earliest literary record, to my knowledge, is a *novella* by Giovanni Sagredo, included in his seventeenth century's work *L'Arcadia in Brenta*<sup>12</sup>. Here the protagonist is a priest who bets with a young woman to enter a cemetery at night and to stick her fan into the ground. Of course, he inadvertently sticks the fan into his long frock; he does not die of fright, but is "almost dead just like the dead of the cemetery [...] found pale and half-living by people summoned by his screams" (Sagredo 1693: 260-261).

Nonetheless, as pointed out by Brunvand, the type ATU 1676B has migrated all around the world, as proved by the material collected by European and North American folklorists throughout the twentieth century. All the stories fundamentally follow the plot we already know. They can differ in some features, but they all deal with some key contents, such as bravery, wager, disbelief, fear of the dead, scare, death.

There are twelve stories selected here<sup>13</sup>, coming from England, Ireland, France, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and United States, where this type appears to be very widespread, especially among young people (Bronner 1988: 146).

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11 Variants of it are mentioned, for instance, in three recent Italian novels: Emilia Fiani, *Gente di campagna* (2010); Mario Desiati, *Mare di zucchero* (2014); Susanna Ricciarelli, *Uomini da letto uomini da divano* (2016).

12 Commenting on this story, Giambattista Marchesi (1897: 93) wrote: "Small novella very common in folk tradition. I heard telling it many times in Lombardy and Emilia, with only one variant, a spindle instead of a fan as the object to drive in the ground".

13 According to the ATU Index there are also versions of the type 1676B coming from Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Catalonia, and Slovenia.

The following table summarizes and compares these stories according to their crucial features; it also includes my mother's story and *The Grave*, an episode of the renowned TV series "The Twilight Zone", whose protagonist is a gun-for-hire who must defend his reputation from accusations of cowardice<sup>14</sup>:

SOURCE	WHO BETS TO ENTER A CEMETERY AT NIGHT	WHO INSTIGATES AND/OR ACCEPTS THE WAGER	WHAT THE WAGERER MUST DO TO WIN THE WAGER	WHAT HAPPENS TO THE WAGERER
Wiltshire; England (Law 1900: 346) <sup>15</sup>	A man boasting about his courage	Not declared	To stick a knife into a grave	Coat got caught, fancying being seized by evil spirits, frightened out of his mind
South of Ireland (Law 1900: 346)	A man challenged to go into a vault	Not declared	To drive a nail into a coffin	Tail of coat nailed down, lost his senses
France (Bonnet 1912: 80–81)	One of the women gathered to spin for someone dead	The other spinning women <sup>16</sup>	To stick a spindle into the soil covering the grave	Apron under the spindle, believing the dead holding her, died of dread
Hannover; Germany (Dorson 1947: 5)	A soldier	A second soldier	To stay all night at the graveyard (whittling a stick with a knife as a pastime)	Knife put through the cape, thinking someone underneath pulling him, found dead by the fellow soldier
Puerto Rico (Hansen 1957: 146)	A youth	A second youth	To drive a nail with a hammer	Part of frock coat nailed down, thinking someone holding him, died of fright
Mexico (Paredes 1970: 166–167)	A man arguing with two men	Two men	To drive a stake into the grave at the centre of a graveyard exactly at midnight	Stake driven over the cloak, feeling something pulling him, died of fright

14 Admittedly, this is a transmedial narrative, concerning also filmmaking and popular press. In a 1910 Russian movie, *Midnight in the Grave, or The Fatal Wager*, a young man bets he can go to a graveyard at midnight and plunge his dagger into a grave cross, but "his cloak catches on to the cross, and, imagining that someone is holding him there, he goes mad for fright" (Leyda 1983: 39). Unfortunately, this movie was lost during the World War II. Additionally, in the American monthly magazine "Real Clue Crime Stories" (November 1947), there is a comic story entitled *New Kind of Murder*, where a supposed coward man is urged to go to a graveyard at midnight and drive a stake into the grave of Mannus, a man related to a dark legend. Deliberately provided by the instigator with a long cloak, the wagerer drives the stake in the cloak and, believing to be held by the ghost of Mannus, dies of fright.

15 In fact, the author refers to "common beliefs of the poor people in the fifties and sixties" of nineteenth century.

16 Their approval, indeed, can only be implied, because they "didn't say any word".



SOURCE	WHO BETS TO ENTER A CEMETERY AT NIGHT	WHO INSTIGATES AND/OR ACCEPTS THE WAGER	WHAT THE WAGERER MUST DO TO WIN THE WAGER	WHAT HAPPENS TO THE WAGERER
Indiana 1; USA (Baker 1982: 76)	A girl with long dark hair, wearing a long dress	Her friends	To stick a fork into an old man's grave at midnight	Long dress caught in the fork, thinking something holding her, hair turned white, died of fright
Indiana 2; USA (Baker 1982: 77) <sup>17</sup>	A teenage girl	Four or five teenage girls	To plunge a butcher knife into a grave	Apron anchored by the knife, died of fright
USA (Bronner 1988: 146)	A girl	A group of kids	To stick a knife in a tombstone	Knife stuck in the edge of the skirt, thinking a ghost holding her, died of fright
Kentucky; USA (Brunvand 1989: 79)	A girl laughing at a rumor about a man buried alive	Several girls	To drive a stake into the earth above the grave	Stake driven through the hem of the skirt, thinking the dead grabbing her, died instantly of fright
Greece (Stewart 1991: 111)	A man discussing a village belief with his companions	His companions	To drive a nail into a grave (believed as an invitation to be attacked by the deceased)	Nail driven through the breeches, thinking the spirit holding him by the leg, died of a heart attack
Lithuania (Skabeykite 2013: 92)	A guy	Other guys	To nail a stake into a grave at midnight	Tail of clothing nailed, thinking the dead holding him, died of fright
Castellaneta; Italy (personal recording, 2021)	Three university students	Themselves	To drive a nail into a gravestone	Cloak caught in the gravestone, thinking the dead holding him, died of fright
USA ( <i>The Grave</i> , 1961) <sup>18</sup>	Conny Miller, a gun-for-hire	The three men who had hired Conny	To stick a knife into the burial mound of an outlaw pursued by Conny	Knife pinning the coat to the ground, died of fright

From this comparative analysis it appears that the plot consists of six key elements:

1. the person who bets to enter a cemetery at night;
2. the person or people who instigate her/him to bet or accept the wager;

<sup>17</sup> This story dates back to the 1880s.

<sup>18</sup> *The Twilight Zone*, episode 7, season 3, CBS, United States of America 1961.

3. the task the wagerer must perform in order to validate the wager, as well as the inappropriate way she/he performs it;
4. the reaction of the wagerer to her/his inappropriate performance (which she/he ignores);
5. the items deciding the course of the story, i.e. long clothing and a sharp tool (nail, knife, spindle, stake, fork) to be driven into a grave(stone);
6. the person or people who find the wagerer died, namely the witnesses of the fatal event (usually they correspond with instigators/accepters).

If we turn to the narrative structure, it is intriguing to note that this legend consists of four separate parts, and each of them seems to express both a different degree of believing and a changing relationship with fears raised by a cemetery at night. They could be also interpreted as four different narrative sub-genres, marking the development of the whole narrative. These four parts can be identified as follows:

1. mockery/dare: hero mocks friends' or community's fears caused by folk beliefs;
2. trip/adventure: hero leaves and goes into the cemetery to test her/his courage and/or contradict folk beliefs;
3. ghost experience (with no ghosts): hero's bravery/non-belief is overcome and punished by an accident revealing a hidden fear of the dead as ghosts; what is more, this is a form of self-punishment, because the hero is killed not by a ghost but by her/his hurried carelessness<sup>19</sup>;
4. exemplum/moral: the sad fate of the mocker/non-believer as the consequence of an unconfessed or underestimated fear of the dead.

### **A Legend about Believing or Not Believing in Ghosts?**

Given this structure, rather than a mere anecdote/joke about a stupid man or an unlucky accident, as may be inferred from Thompson's taxonomy, the story about the graveyard wager should be considered a cautionary tale<sup>20</sup>, intended to warn (young) individuals to respect and not to defy the traditional beliefs shared by their community about the dead and the supernatural<sup>21</sup>; accordingly, they are warned not to overestimate their own bravery and underestimate commonly accepted norms and fears. In other words: in the daytime living people are allowed to stay with the dead in a cemetery and interact with them; in the night-time, cemetery becomes the exclusive kingdom of the dead, hence living people must stay outside it, in order to avoid dangerous

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19 Or perhaps by their belief in supernatural; cf. Koski (2018: 70): "It is possible to interpret the outcome as a punishment, although one could also use the story to state it was superstition and fear that killed the dare-taker".

20 Cf. Valk (2008: 170): "A cautionary tale is a narrative that demonstrates the consequences of wrongdoing and thus reinforces moral and behavioral norms. Cautionary tales tend to have unhappy endings". In fact, all our stories have an unhappy, even tragic ending.

21 As summarized by Law (1900: 46): "One of the most common beliefs of the poor people in the fifties and sixties [of nineteenth century] was the fear of the corpse, the dread of ghosts, and the unwillingness to enter graveyard at night".

encounters<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, especially for a young person – half of the protagonists of the previously examined stories are young people – such an act of bravery can be regarded as a rite of passage – and cemetery is probably the main destination of the so called “legend tripping”<sup>23</sup> – from boyhood to adulthood. Nevertheless, this kind of wager is a violation of a sacred space, an infringement of the respectful distance the living must keep from the dead. In addition, the act of driving a nail or another item into a gravestone is a physical, impious trespass of an even more sacred and intimate border between the living and the dead<sup>24</sup>.

In this light, what makes the type ATU 1676B more significant and effective is that there are no actual dead or supernatural beings scaring or attacking a living person. Their presence is only imagined, as a consequence of a trivial accident (a long clothing nailed to a gravestone), and is inferred on the basis of a belief in ghosts dwelling in the cemeteries; this belief, supported by darkness, silence and solitude (namely by the absence of signs of life), triggers a frightened reaction in the protagonists, leading them to a sudden death. As written by Simon Bronner (1988: 260):

Rather than a tale about ghosts, this story shifts attention to the believers. In my observations, it sometimes was offered as a commentary when discussions of ghosts come up, or as a follow-up to a tale dwelling on the reality of ghosts.

To sum up: some people (allegedly the majority, in a folklore context) believe in ghosts and, for good measure, stay away from those space-times (like a cemetery at night) where they might be present; someone else, instead, doubts their presence, and there is even someone ready to bet on their absence, just to discover – too late, indeed – to be a believer or, at least, a fear-bearer like the others.

### **Staying Fearlessly in a Cemetery at Night**

If the cemetery at night is therefore a place inherently connected with our deepest fears, to the point that a trivial accident is enough to make one believe in a haunted cemetery and turn a fear test into a death of fear, there are also narratives showing that this atavistic dread can be mastered, as historically and ethnographically argued by de Martino. I propose two examples, one extremely distant from another, but having in common the attitude of their

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22 Cf. Dégh (2001: 393): “The dead may react in diverse ways to a curious visitor’s friendly or hostile intrusions, as the legends tell us. It is more common to expect that the graveyard challenger who disturbs the slumber of the dead will be punished [...]”.

23 Cf. Dégh (2001: 392): “Visitors who are seeking a rite of passage are fascinated by cemeteries [...]. At many locations, cemeteries are known as the favorite hangouts for youngsters”.

24 Cf. Stewart (1991: 111): “He and his companions had been discussing the village belief that to do so is to invite attack from the spirit of the deceased”.

heroes: a brave and proper attitude, which restores, in contrast with what occurs in the wager story, a correct and respectful relationship between the living and the dead, thus preserving the sacredness owed to the death and the place devoted to it, the cemetery.

The first example comes from a narrative edited by W.B. Yeats, *The Man Who Never Knew Fear*, an unpublished folktale provided and translated from Gaelic by Douglas Hyde. This is a composite story, corresponding to the type ATU 326: The youth who wanted to learn what fear is. It consists of a set of tasks the hero must undertake to prove his courage. Among the fear tests related to this type there is the motif H1416: Spending night by grave. This is the very first test that Lawrence, the protagonist of Yeats' story, is requested to take on by his brother Carrol. Here is an excerpt (Yeats 1892: 124-126):

[...] When the mother of Carrol and Lawrence died, Carrol said to Lawrence: "You say that nothing ever made you afraid yet, but I'll make a bet with you that you haven't courage to watch your mother's tomb tonight". "I'll make a bet with you that I have", said Lawrence. When the darkness of the night was coming, Lawrence put on his sword and went to the burying-ground. He sat down on a tombstone near his mother's grave till it was far in the night and sleep was coming upon him. Then he saw a big black thing coming to him, and when it came near him he saw that it was a head without a body that was in it. He drew the sword to give it a blow if it should come any nearer, but it didn't come. Lawrence remained looking at it until the light of the day was coming, then the head-without-body went, and Lawrence came home. Carrol asked him, did he see anything in the graveyard. "I did", said Lawrence, "and my mother's body would be gone, but that I was guarding it". [...] About the middle of the night he heard a great sound coming. A big black thing came as far as the grave and began rooting up the clay. Lawrence drew back his sword, and with one blow he made two halves of the big black thing, and with the second blow he made two halves of each half, and he saw it no more [...].

Like the protagonists of ATU 1676B, Lawrence is introduced as a brave man but, unlike them, is not a wagerer. Actually, the wager is proposed by his cowardly brother, who is instead a fearful man. Lawrence, being confident of his courage, takes up the challenge. He manages to stay all night in the cemetery, thus proving to be a real brave man, unlike the ATU 1676B wagerers. More importantly, by doing what he does, Lawrence does not merely win a bet, but chiefly protects a just buried corpse – his mother's corpse – from impious attacks<sup>25</sup>, thus safeguarding the respect owed to a dead person as well as the

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25 Cf. Yeats (1892: 123-124): "It was the custom at that time when a person died for people to watch the dead person's grave in turn, one after another; for there used to be destroyers going about stealing the corpses".

sacredness of the place where she is enshrined. In addition, through his act of bravery, Lawrence shows not only that ghosts and evil spirits are actual – and not just imagined – presences haunting the cemeteries at night, but also that they can be overcome, if tackled in the right way.

The second example comes again from my mother, who told me another story related to my town's cemetery. It is a supposedly personal experience she heard from the protagonist herself, a woman called Irene. Formally identifiable as a version of the tabu motif "Sleeping in cemetery" (C735.2.5)<sup>26</sup>, in fact this (true) story successfully breaks the tabu and may be reasonably regarded as an "anti-legend"<sup>27</sup>; its ordinary and even trivial unfolding ends up neutralizing beliefs and fears related to the cemetery at night, thus undermining the function of the latter as a (dark) legend-landscape. The following is the transcript (translated from Italian) of my mother's narration, recorded on April 4, 2021 (in italics my questions):

*Is this the only story you know about our cemetery?*

There is also the story of Irene. Irene was a sort of nurse; she would make injections at home. My family and I knew her well, she was a stout and brave woman. One day, as usual, she had gone to the cemetery to visit her dearly departed, but, going to the exit, she found the gate closed. It was raining, therefore she entered a mortuary chapel, because she was not scared, and stayed there all the night until the next morning. At least that was what she told us.

*Did you hear this story from her?*

Yes, directly from her, when she came to make injections to my sister Antonietta. Anyway, in the morning, when she noticed that the keeper was approaching, said: "Hey, don't be afraid, I'm Irene. I'm Irene, I've found the gate closed and, because it was raining, I've taken shelter within this chapel." She was so brave to stay all the night in the cemetery.

*Didn't she tell anything about spooky apparitions?*

No, she didn't. [...] She often boasted of being a brave woman.

Irene, like Lawrence, is a brave person. Her courage, however, is connected to a respectful familiarity with the cemetery and their inhabitants. She stays with the dead, instead of betting against them; she does not decide to enter

26 Broadly speaking, what is experienced by Irene can be also interpreted as an accidental and disinterested form of *incubatio*, a ritual practice consisting in sleeping in a sacred area, usually at night, in order to come in contact with supernatural beings or forces (cf. Canetti 2010: in particular 149-152).

27 According to Linda Dégh and Andrew Vászony (1976: 112), there is "a whole group of well established legends that are built up against commonly known and confirmed belief concepts with the intent to discredit them". These legends are identified by various names, but the most effective is certainly "anti-legend" (cf. Hameršák 2011: in particular 148-149).

the cemetery at night, but finds herself unintentionally trapped inside it and then complies with this situation; her night stay derives from a vital necessity, not from a deliberate challenge to the beliefs concerning the cemetery at night. Ultimately, by resting in the cemetery at night, Irene is congruent with the place (unlike the acting presence of the wagerer; literally, a cemetery is a “resting place”): her lying in a mortuary chapel, her silent sleep, indeed, is a sort of temporary death (an absence in a place of supposedly absent people). Thus, she acts as a proper and legitimate inhabitant of the cemetery... at least until the sun and the keeper – namely the light of the day and a living presence – come back, allowing her to legitimately return to life and to the world of living people.

### Conclusion

As a threshold between life/ the living and death/ the dead, a cemetery turns out to be a crucial and critical place for groups, families and individuals. As argued by Ernesto de Martino, death is something humans need to accurately master by ritualizing and distancing it, in order not to be overwhelmed by the crisis of presence. As a threshold, indeed, a cemetery is, in Bakhtinian terms, a chronotope of crisis and break in life (Bakhtin 2002: 21), hence a liminal space-time where one puts at stake her/his life as well as her/his beliefs relating to the death and, as a consequence, the fear of death. In fact, as shown by ATU 1676B narratives, a cemetery is seen, depending on the characters and their roles, as a forbidden place to keep at a reverent distance – reserved as it is (at least at night) to the dead and not to the living – or as a dangerous but fascinating place where one can test her/his courage and, at the same time, prove the inconsistency of collective fears about the dead and their persistency as ghosts.

What is more, a cemetery is an ambivalent threshold, because its status changes according to the moment of the day it is considered: an open, welcoming and unifying space-time when it functions as a threshold joining living people with their beloved departed (from the morning to the afternoon); a closed, repulsing and discriminating space-time when it acts as a sacred threshold separating death and life, the dead and the living (from the evening to the dawn).

In this light, cemetery may also be seen as a performative area, namely a place where potential heroes enter to perform an individual task that nobody else in the community dares to perform. The failure of the hero – seemingly a victim of her/his non-belief, but actually condemned by her/his careless behaviour – corresponds to the success of those who have betted against her/him, but also to the reaffirmation of the beliefs – and fears – connoting the local folklore. Therefore, I think that this narrative type perfectly embodies the “conversational, dialectic-polyphonic nature” that, according to Linda Dégh, defines (belief) legend as a folklore genre. As Dégh argues (2001: 2), “legends appear as products of conflicting opinions, expressed in conversation”; and, what is

more, “they deal with the most crucial questions of the world and human life”. One of these questions, indeed, may just concern the existence and believability of ghosts and other supernatural beings in a cemetery. Significantly, it is exactly a “legend process” that the type ATU 1676B subsumes in its opening part, where “advocates of belief and non-belief face each other” (Dégh 2001: 1); actually, the plot itself arises from a conversation between believers and non-believer(s), a conversation resulting in a wager and a related performance meant to provide a solution to the debated question. And the solution, as one would expect from a legend, is ironically and tragically ambivalent: while there were no actual ghosts in that cemetery that night, the wagerer, believing to be grabbed by a supernatural presence – and then dying – demonstrated, if nothing else, that it is more advisable not to enter a cemetery at night.

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