

# Memory, Folk Narratives, and Social Critique: Notes on Jane Addams and the “Devil Baby” Legend

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# Memory, Folk Narratives, and Social Critique: Notes on Jane Addams and the “Devil Baby” Legend

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the link between memory, folk narratives, and critical thinking. I suggest in particular that there are instances in which the transmission of a folkloric story, such as a legend or a tale, can intersect with a person's life experiences and facilitate the articulation of critical perspectives on society that might otherwise go unexpressed. The opportunity for discussing this idea is offered by the work of early twentieth-century Chicago sociologist Jane Addams. In her book *The Long Road of Woman's Memory* (1916) Addams dealt with the modern revival of an ancient legend and investigated its interplay with the recollections, grievances, and aspirations of working-class women.

## Keywords

Jane Addams – articulation – folklore – memory – relations to the past

## Introduction

At least since Nietzsche's untimely meditation on the uses and disadvantages of history for life, philosophers have been asking how the study of the past can support our orientation in the present, providing guidance for reflective thinking and the elaboration of new norms or values. Over the past century, two growing fields of study have given new shape and nourishment to this age-old philosophical question. The first field of studies investigates the role of narratives, both historical and otherwise, in shaping people's normative

commitments.<sup>1</sup> The second looks at practices of collective memory and non-academic uses of the past. Research in this area has allowed us to better understand how people derive normative orientation from practices as different as telling family stories, collecting souvenirs, visiting museums, erecting (or destroying) monuments, writing popular history, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I look at one specific phenomenon that lies at the crossroads between the study of memory and the study of folklore. I shall suggest that, under certain conditions, traditional narratives like legends or folktales offer a hitherto underexplored tool for normative orientation.

My starting point is the work of American sociologist, activist, and pragmatist philosopher Jane Addams (1860–1953) on the interweaving of biographical memory and folkloric stories. In a 1916 book entitled *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*,<sup>3</sup> Addams studied a supernatural legend that reacted with the biographical narrative of the people who transmitted it. The interplay between folklore and biographical memory, Addams argued, made it possible for those people to express facts of their lived experiences that would otherwise have remained unexpressed. While Addams's book has already been the subject of much valuable scholarship,<sup>4</sup> my paper focuses specifically on the relevance of

- 1 See W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), for a well-known perspective linking historical and non-historical narratives. The narrativist turn in the philosophy of history has taken up this idea and explored the role of narratives in historical understanding. Two classical accounts are A. C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1968] 2007), and H. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1973] 2014).
- 2 See, e.g., D. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and D. W. Cohen, *The Combining of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For more recent studies, see M. Day, "Our Relations with the Past", *Philosophia*, 36 (2008), 417–27, DOI: 10.1007/s11406-008-9127-7; H. Paul, "Relations to the Past: A Research Agenda for Historical Theorists", *Rethinking History*, 19 (2015), 450–58, DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2014.927615; A. Megill, "The Affective Dimension. What Theory of History Can Learn from Popular History" in Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, ed., *Philosophy of History. Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). For a useful recent survey of collective memory studies, see A. Sierp, "Memory Studies – Development, Debates and Directions" in M. Berek, K. Chmelar, O. Dimbath, H. Haag, M. Heinlein, N. Leonhard, V. Rauer, G. Sebald, eds., *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Gedächtnisforschung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2021), DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-26593-9\_42-1. A well-known critical discussion of the field is W. Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies", *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 179–97, DOI: 10.1111/0018-2656.00198.
- 3 J. Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, ed. C. H. Seigfried (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, [1916] 2002).
- 4 See, in particular, M. Fischer, "Trojan Women and Devil Baby Tales: Addams on Domestic Violence" in M. Hamington, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); T. R. Cromie, "Jane Addams and the 'Devil

her research to a more comprehensive study of the relationship between folkloric transmission, memory, and social critique.

In the first section of the essay, I consider Addams's writings on the legend of the "Devil Baby" which propagated in Chicago around 1913. In the second section, I explain in what sense this legend – as told by Addams – may have helped the people who transmitted it (particularly elderly, immigrant, working-class women) to express their critical views about society. To do so, I rely on the extensive literature on Addams as a crucial figure in the dialogue between feminist and pragmatist philosophy. In the third section, I ask to what extent we can conceptualize the transmission of a traditional legend as a relation to the past. This leads me to offer some final remarks on how Addams's work may contribute to the study of the cultural transmission of popular narratives, building a bridge between philosophy, history, folklore studies, and anthropology.

## 1 Chicago, 1913: The Devil Baby at Hull House

Jane Addams was one of the most prominent representatives of early twentieth-century North American social thought. Her work lies at the crossroads of sociology, philosophy, and political activism. Linked to the Chicago School of Sociology and philosophical pragmatism, she was also, from 1889, one of the founders of Hull House, a social settlement that offered services to the population of the Near West Side, one of Chicago's most troubled and disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

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Baby Tales': The Usefulness of Perplexity in 'Sympathetic Understanding,' a Tool in Learning Empathy", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 63 (2015), 101–36, DOI: 10.1177/10003065114568723; S. Sullivan, "On the Harms of Epistemic Injustice: Pragmatism and Transactional Epistemology" in I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, and G. Pohlhaus, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017); K. L. Renzi, *An Ethic of Innocence: Pragmatism, Modernity, and Women's Choice Not to Know* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019). In the recently published *Routledge Companion of Pragmatism*, ed. by S. F. Aikin and R. B. Talisse (New York/London: Routledge, 2023), the legend I shall analyze here is mentioned by Núria Sara Miras Boronat (39), Diana B. Heney (277), and Shannon Dea (384). For some passing references to the legend, see also the newly edited *Oxford Handbook of Jane Addams*, ed. by P. M. Shields, M. Hamington, and J. Soeters (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

- 5 See M. J. Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New York: Routledge, [1988] 2017); D. Cefai, "Politique pragmatiste et social settlements. De nouveaux publics aux États-Unis à l'ère progressiste", *Pragmata. Revue d'études pragmatistes*, 4 (2021), 341–518; N. S. Miras Boronat, "Jane Addams" in Aikin and Talisse, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Pragmatism*.

The interdependence of scholarly and political engagement is one of the most significant aspects of Addams's intellectual profile. Hull House was not just a center of activism and social work but also an outpost of social research, an "information and interpretation bureau"<sup>6</sup> aimed at gathering data and advancing sociological understanding from a position that allowed proximity to the life experiences of social actors. The information gathered at Hull House was meant to enhance the incisiveness of political action. This interdependence of sociological research and activism pivoted on a "sympathetic understanding" of social issues that sought dialogue between the perspectives of social actors and of observers.<sup>7</sup>

Among the pieces of research that most strikingly highlight the specificity of Addams's style of inquiry is her interpretation of the legend of the Devil Baby that spread through Chicago in 1913. According to the legend, a baby with demonic features was born to a poor woman in the Near West Side and lived at Hull House. Addams published various accounts of this legend from 1914 onwards, most importantly in two of her best-known books: *The Long Road of Woman's Memory* (1916) and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1930).<sup>8</sup>

Addams told the story as follows. Three women, identified as Italians, came to Hull House demanding to see the demonic child, whom they were able to describe in detail: "with his cloven hoofs, his pointed ears and diminutive tail; the Devil Baby had ... been able to speak as soon as he was born and was most shockingly profane."<sup>9</sup> Following that episode (which might have been prompted by the actual birth of a disabled child in the Hull House neighborhood),<sup>10</sup> the urban legend gradually spread through Chicago, and a multitude of onlookers flooded Hull House for at least six weeks asking to see

6 J. Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House; with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 167. See also Cromie, "Jane Addams and the 'Devil Baby Tales'", 130.

7 See M. Hamington, "Hospitality as Moral Inquiry: Sympathetic Knowledge in the Guest-Host Encounter" in M. Hamington and C. Bardwell-Jones, eds., *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 2012); M. Striano, "The Educational Value of 'Mental Non-Resistance' and 'Understanding' in Fostering Intellectual and Social Life. A Lesson from Jane Addams" in N. S. Miras Boronat and M. Bella, eds., *Women in Pragmatism: Past, Present and Future* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

8 In chronological order: J. Addams, "Immigrant Woman as She Adjusts Herself to American Life" in General Federation of Women's Clubs, *Biennial Convention Official Report* (1914), <http://www.digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/9488> (accessed February 2023); "A Modern Devil-Baby", *American Journal of Sociology*, 20 (1914), 117–18; *The Long Road of Woman's Memory; The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 49–79.

9 J. Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 7–8.

10 See J. Addams, "A Modern Devil-Baby", 118.

the Devil Baby.<sup>11</sup> Addams singled out two versions of the legend, one Italian and one Jewish, both featuring numerous subvariants. According to the Italian version, the Devil Baby was born to a Catholic woman married to an atheist:

Her husband had torn a holy picture from the bedroom wall saying that he would quite as soon have a devil in the house as such a thing, whereupon the devil incarnated himself in her coming child. As soon as the Devil Baby was born, he ran about the table shaking his fingers in deep reproach at his father, who finally caught him and, in fear and trembling, brought him to Hull-House. When the residents there, in spite of the baby's shocking appearance, wishing to save his soul, took him to church for baptism, they found that the shawl was empty and the Devil Baby, fleeing from the holy water, was running lightly over the backs of the pews.<sup>12</sup>

In the Jewish version, it was again the man of the family who had been guilty of an abusive remark. A father of six girls, he “had said before the birth of a seventh child that he would rather have a devil in the family than another girl, where upon the Devil Child promptly appeared.”<sup>13</sup> Other occasional elements of the legend recorded by Addams are “a red automobile which occasionally figured in the story and a stray cigar which, in some versions, the new-born child had snatched from his father's lips.” But apart from these elements that suggest a modern setting, she went on to comment that “the tale might have been fashioned a thousand years ago.”<sup>14</sup>

Initially, Addams reacted with deep irritation to the spread of this legend. She attributed the phenomenon to a natural “contagion of emotion” and to the effects of “aesthetic sociability” (as when we drag our whole family to the window to observe a street parade, just for the sake of witnessing an extraordinary spectacle together). She also “quite revolted against such a vapid manifestation of even an admirable human trait.”<sup>15</sup> Over time, however, the eye of the sociologist trained in sympathetic understanding took over. Addams thus paused to notice that the legend seemed particularly successful among people belonging to a specific social category, namely elderly, poor, immigrant women, who were attracted to it not so much because of their supposed gullibility or superstition, but rather because they saw in the legend a vehicle for moral teaching.

11 J. Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 8.

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*

15 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 9.

In an earlier account, dating from 1914, she equated the nature of this moral teaching with the cautionary content of the tale. In all its variants, the legend explicitly suggested a causal link between the impious behavior of the husband and the birth of the Devil Baby. It could therefore be used to scare off the family men but also to admonish young girls who were eager to socialize with objectionable friends.<sup>16</sup> Addams based this interpretation on her belief that “fairy stories” frequently originated from a woman’s “effort to tame her mate and to make him a better father to her children.”<sup>17</sup>

In her 1916 book *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, however, Addams developed a more comprehensive account supported by the many conversations she’d had with Hull House visitors.<sup>18</sup> She reported that the women with whom she talked were inclined to use the folkloric story as an instrument of sense-making, which allowed them to look anew at their past experiences marked by hardship, sorrow, and domestic violence.<sup>19</sup> The narrative kernel of the story – a dreadful supernatural event that a woman must suffer because of a man’s reprehensible behavior – offered these women the opportunity to talk about their own experiences; it “stirred their minds and memories as with a magic touch, it loosened their tongues and revealed the inner life and thoughts of those who are so often inarticulate.”<sup>20</sup>

This new interpretation did not preclude the notion that the legend could serve as a cautionary tale. Rather, it integrated this notion into a broader framework, which pivoted on two separate, though interdependent, functions of the legend: the function of “reacting on life” (chap. 2) and that of “transmuting the past” (chap. 1). The women who believed in the Devil Baby were not

16 See Addams, “A Modern Devil-Baby”, 118; *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 20. Here Addams cited an anonymous letter that she received from a Chicago woman: “a girl what works in twine mill saw them [*some men*] talk with us we know her good and she say what youse talk with old drunk man ... she say oh if you will go with them you will get devils baby like some other girls did who we knows. she say Jane Addams she will show one like that in Hull House ...” (*ibid.*).

17 Addams, “A Modern Devil-Baby”, 117.

18 Fischer, “Trojan Women and Devil Baby Tales”, 83, puts much emphasis on the difference between the 1914 and the 1916 accounts of the Devil Baby story. She explains this difference in great part by Jane Addams’s study of Greek tragedy, and in particular of Gilbert Murray’s work on Euripides. This work, Fischer goes on, provided Addams with a framework to link her analysis of the legend to the more specific topic of her 1916 book, namely the cultural role of biographical memory among Hull House inhabitants.

19 On this point, see Cromie, “Jane Addams and the ‘Devil Baby Tales’”; M. Hamington, “Jane Addams” in E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman, eds., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/addams-jane/>.

20 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 10, my emphasis.

only making use of the legend's "taming effects upon recalcitrant husbands and fathers".<sup>21</sup> They also saw in that legend the power to imbue the suffering they had endured in their life with a more general significance, or a moral lesson, which would make them feel part of something bigger.<sup>22</sup>

The Devil Baby story is a crucial component of Addams's more general account of the function of women's memory as developed in her 1916 book. Memory, she argues in the introduction to that book, is comparable to more sophisticated cultural activities such as literature or the arts, as it enables us to carry out a fundamental "transmutation of ... experiences."<sup>23</sup> Through memory, people generate stories out of their lived experiences. They bestow universal value upon those experiences by integrating them with the memory of other individuals. Moreover, they carry out a partial idealization of their most emotionally negative elements. The ancient Greeks' mythical conception of Mnemosyne as the mother of the Muses is an indirect recognition of this power of memory, a power that, according to Addams, becomes particularly strong when people approach old age.<sup>24</sup>

The analogy between memory and the arts betrays a democratic and anti-elitist impulse that may remind us of Dewey's pragmatist philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Addams's point is that memory has a sense-making function that is comparable to that of the arts but, unlike the arts, is distributed equally among people regardless of their level of education or social class. In a similar vein, Dewey

21 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 17.

22 See for instance Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 27, where Addams speaks about a woman whose daughter was traumatized as a child by her father's violence. "It was as if the young mother of the grotesque Devil Baby, that victim of wrongdoing on the part of others, had revealed to this tragic woman much more clearly than soft words had ever done, that the return of a deed of violence upon the head of the innocent is inevitable; as if she had realized that, although she was destined to walk all the days of her life with the piteous multitude who bear the underserved wrongs of the world, she would walk henceforth with a sense of companionship."

23 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 4–5.

24 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 3, cites Gilbert Murray's aforementioned work on Euripides as a pivotal influence on her conception of the idealizing function of memory and art. She also develops an analogy between old people's idealized memory of the past and young people's idealized expectation of the future, thereby suggesting a parallel with her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, ed. A. F. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, [1909] 1972).

25 See C. H. Seigfried, "Introduction" in J. Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, xx–xxxi.



emphasized the link between art and ordinary experience.<sup>26</sup> He also focused on the sense-making function of memory, claiming that it consists in letting us revive experience in a “vicarious” way, “without its strains, vicissitudes and troubles.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, he claimed, memory helps us to articulate our experience and charge it with intellectual or moral value. Memory is, therefore, the first, most basic, and universal cultural tool that we can deploy. And this is all the more true, according to Dewey, as culture is definable not as the domain of higher education or of humanistic values, but as entangled with everyday experience.<sup>28</sup>

In her analysis of the Devil Baby legend, Addams's views on memory overlap with her lifelong interest in folklore, a cultural domain traditionally set in opposition to highbrow culture, and thus particularly compatible with her democratic outlook.<sup>29</sup> In her analysis, the folk legend of the Devil Baby serves primarily to stimulate the autobiographical reminiscences of women. But it also represents a *sui generis* kind of memory: one that transcends the boundary of individual lives and allows twentieth-century women to establish a connection with the experiences of their predecessors. In Addams's words, this is

26 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in J. A. Boydston, ed., *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, [1934] 1987).

27 J. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in J. A. Boydston, ed., *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 12 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, [1920] 1976), 80–81.

28 See Dewey's posthumous second introduction to his *Experience and Nature*, in J. A. Boydston, ed., *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 1 (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, [1949–51] 1988). Here Dewey rejects the normative, humanistic conception of culture as high education that he associated with the English intellectual Matthew Arnold. Unlike Dewey, Addams had initially been heavily influenced by Arnold. Over the years, however, and possibly under the influence of Chicago pragmatism, her positions increasingly gravitated toward a more sociologically based conception of culture (On this point see V. Brown, *The Education of Jane Addams. Politics and Culture in Modern America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

29 On the different conceptualizations of the social roots of folklore from the nineteenth century on, see D. Noyes, *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), chaps. 3–4. Noyes also discusses the history of American folklore studies and the influence of the Chicago School (64, 108). Addams's precise role in this intellectual history still remains to be investigated. In her 1916 book, she makes a passing reference to the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, a prolific folklore scholar, who had given a lecture at Hull House in February 1904: “I once tried to collect some folk-lore for Mr. Yeats to prove that an Irish peasant does not lose his faith in the little people nor his knowledge of Gaelic phrases simply because he is living in a city” (Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 14). On Yeats's conference at Hull House see R. J. Finneran, G. M. Harper, and W. M. Murphy eds, *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 1:247.

the memory “of history and tradition” rather than that of women themselves.<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Fischer has pointed out that this idea is indebted to nineteenth-century theories of organic or “race” memory.<sup>31</sup> Influenced by Lamarckism, these theories claimed that culture is transmitted from one generation to the other via biological inheritance. Today, the idea of a biological transmission of culture is no longer plausible. But we can nevertheless vindicate Addams’s attempt to view the folkloric tradition as a kind of memory by relating it to recent literature on cultural or collective memory.<sup>32</sup>

## 2 Articulation and Social Critique

There is one aspect of the Devil Baby legend that remains partially concealed in Addams’s account, and which I would like to bring into focus. This aspect is what I shall call its critical-normative potential. The story of the Devil Baby provided Hull House women with a tool not only to make sense of their individual experiences but also, more pointedly, to articulate a critique of the social forces that caused the worst suffering in their lives, such as the patriarchal family culture and the working conditions they had to endure.

This idea is consistent with Addams’s repeated emphasis on the role of biographical memory for the elaboration of normative considerations. Memory, she claimed, can act as a “selective” force in the criticism of ingrained conventions and in the parallel elaboration of new norms or values. In the biographical reminiscences of women who had for some reason deviated from “accepted standards” of behavior (for instance, with regard to their family history or their working conditions), it was often possible to recognize a “selective groping toward another standard.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Addams pointed out that individual reminiscences containing the germ of a “reproach”, or even of a “social disturbance”, may merge with those of other individuals. When this happens, individual memories “accumulate into a social protest ... against existing

30 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 11.

31 Fischer, “Trojan Women and Devil Baby Tales”, 87, 90–92.

32 See, e.g., Astrid Erll’s broad definition of cultural memory as encompassing all “those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate past and present (and future) in socio-cultural contexts.” A. Erll, “Cultural Memory” in M. Middeke, T. Müller, C. Wald, and H. Zapf, eds., *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2012), 238; J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1992] 2011), uses the concept in a more restricted sense which I shall not discuss here. For an overview of studies on social, cultural, and collective memory, see fn. 2 above.

33 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 4.

conventions.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in a chapter devoted to European women who lost their sons in World War I, Addams argued that the biographical recollections of those women helped them to transform a still vague “suspicion” about the moral unacceptability of war into a more explicit conviction: “[W]omen’s haunting memories instinctively challenge war as the implacable enemy of their age-long undertaking.”<sup>35</sup>

When speaking about the Devil Baby story, however, Addams did not place much emphasis on this critical or normative function of memory. As we saw in the previous section, she interpreted the story as having two functions: that of “transmuting the past” and that of “reacting on life.” The latter (which effectively amounts to an extension of the notion of a cautionary tale) can indeed be considered a link to the critical-normative function proper. Folkloric stories, Addams argued, are not merely used to warn husbands or daughters. They may point to a general moral lesson that informs the conduct of social actors in a host of different ways. Yet, overall, Addams presented the Devil Baby legend to be almost in “contrast” to the critical function of biographical memory.<sup>36</sup>

One reason for this cautious choice is, I believe, rather easy to see. Notwithstanding her readiness to practice sympathetic understanding toward the Hull House women who believed in the legend, she was not willing to close her eyes to its irrational and potentially obscurantist aspect.<sup>37</sup> She was aware that folklore far from always embodies progressive tendencies. Indeed, it sometimes encapsulates reactionary or even oppressive beliefs. In an unpublished fragment, Addams talks about the “terrible power” that popular traditions may occasionally have in “making permanent that which oftentimes were best

34 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 29. Addams goes on to note that this fact is evidence that social change is often brought about less by individual thinkers than by “a certain native and independent rationalism operating in great masses of men and women.” The last quotation is taken from a book on *The Emancipation of English Women* by the English politician and intellectual W. Lyon Bleasde: *The Emancipation of English Women* (London: Constable & Company, 1910), 85.

35 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 67. In this passage, Addams is drawing a parallel between the hope for a future social and cultural change that would declare war a moral taboo and what had already happened with regard to the permissibility of human sacrifice.

36 See Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 4, 29.

37 In her recent essay on the Devil Baby, Kerstin Renzi deals with a similar ambivalence in Addams’s attitude from a feminist perspective (*An Ethic of Innocence*, 37–70). See also Noyes’s brilliant remarks on the ambiguous status of folklore: “actors ... continue to invest in the hegemonic scheme of the moment, but they also grumble, and consciously or unconsciously they voice their doubt. These voicings, which cannot safely be made explicit even to their speakers, take shape as folklore. ... Folklore is unstable; it is inherently ambiguous. It oscillates between submission and rebellion.” (*Humble Theory*, 193).

changed.”<sup>38</sup> The case of the Devil Baby legend is particularly relevant here, as similar legends and stories have been traditionally used to justify the infanticide of disabled or otherwise unwanted children.<sup>39</sup>

On the whole, however, and with these caveats in mind, it is worth delving a little deeper than Addams herself did into the critical-normative potential of the Devil Baby story. In so doing, we can draw substantial help from the recent literature on Jane Addams, which interprets her as a pivotal figure in the twentieth-century dialogue between pragmatism and feminism.<sup>40</sup>

We can begin by noting that the Devil Baby story allowed women to speak and to acquire more authoritativeness vis-à-vis their interlocutors. Shannon Sullivan has made explicit the connection between this aspect of Addams’s thought and what philosopher Miranda Fricker has called “epistemic injustice.”<sup>41</sup> Sullivan notes in particular that the Chicago women were latching onto the Devil Baby story in order to overcome a specific variety of epistemic injustice that Fricker dubs “testimonial.” This is a kind of injustice that is inflicted on people who are not accorded the same degree of credibility as other people on account of prejudice or social marginalization.<sup>42</sup>

38 See J. Addams, “The Devil Baby at Hull-House (Fragment)”, Jane Addams Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection available via the *Jane Addams Digital Edition*, <https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/10281> (accessed February 2023): “The flair for retaining the past at all hazards gives a terrible power to old women for making permanent that which oftentimes were best changed. It may easily be illustrated from our neighborhood by the Italian grandmothers who insist upon swaddling the babies in defiance of the young mothers’ conversion to the ways of the Infant Welfare Society, and from the old women who believe in the Evil Eye, in love potions, and even in the Mago. We were quite recently told of an old woman, far off in the mountains of Calabria, who sent a death over the ocean into a tenement near Hull House in which lived her eldest son and the girl he married against his mother’s will. When news came to her of the birth of a baby for revenge the old woman took a lemon and stuck it full of pins; as it withered and shrank, the baby pined away and died. Narduccia, the young mother, came and told us about it. She was born in Chicago, all her life had been spent in America[,] her childhood in our public schools[,] yet she knew the dark ways of Italian magic as well as if she were living in a Calabria, or had not her grandmother told them all about it.”

39 See D. F. Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13, 50–51.

40 See C. H. Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); M. Hamington, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); M. Hamington and C. Bardwell-Jones, eds., *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

41 M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

42 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1; Sullivan, “On the Harms of Epistemic Injustice”, 209.

This interpretation sits well with Addams's remarks that the women who were fond of talking about the Devil Baby legend were usually unable to make their voices heard. They suffered in particular from a lack of communication with the younger generation. This was not solely a result of their being women. Their older age contributed equally to epistemic marginalization. Moreover, the age difference was exacerbated by a cultural and linguistic gap between the first-generation immigrant women and the generation of young people who were born and raised in the USA ("More than half the time I can't tell what they are talking about,' is an oft-repeated complaint").<sup>43</sup> All this ensured that, most of the time, "no one would listen" to those women.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, the legend of the Devil Baby made it possible for them to "enjoy a moment of triumph" and to "secure them a hearing at home."<sup>45</sup> According to Addams, the fact that they were *both elderly and women* ensured them special proximity to the narrative form of the folktale, traditionally considered to fall within the special remit of old women's competencies, especially when used as a cautionary tale.<sup>46</sup> It also ensured proximity to the fundamental experiences that the legend of the Devil Baby was dealing with, namely childbirth and domestic life.

We can take a step further than this, however, if we note that the Devil Baby legend may have allowed Hull House women to tackle a second variety of epistemic injustice, which Fricker calls "hermeneutical." This is the kind of injustice that occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage *when it comes to making sense of their social experiences*."<sup>47</sup> In other words, hermeneutical injustice is caused by a lack of adequate tools of articulation.

Indeed, in the very same passage in which Addams talks about women's attempts to regain credibility by the transmission of the Devil Baby story, she also makes a further remark, one I have already quoted, in which she points out the legend's ability to "loosen the tongues" of Hull House women and to

43 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 10.

44 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 16.

45 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 10, 16. See also 13, where Addams reports her exchanges with an old woman "who had doggedly refused to believe that there was no Devil Baby at Hull House ... [T]he story of a Devil Baby, with his existence officially corroborated as it were, would give her a lodestone which would attract the neighbors far and wide and exalt her once more into the social importance she had twenty-four years before when I had first known her."

46 On the traditional association between old women and folklore, see Noyes (2016, 64) and Connerton (1989, 39).

47 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1, my emphasis.

“reveal the inner life and thoughts of those who are so often inarticulate.”<sup>48</sup> Let me unpack this idea and provide a more precise picture of how it was possible for a folkloric legend to make the thoughts of elderly women more articulate.

First, the story loosened the tongues of those women for the fundamental reason that it created a safe opportunity for them to speak out. In this sense, the issues of testimonial and of hermeneutical injustice seem very much to converge: articulacy about one's experiences is improved by the very basic fact that one is put in a position to talk safely about them.

Second, the legend provided the women interviewed by Addams with a symbolic tool to express what they more or less articulately thought was not right in their own life experiences. As I suggested above, the birth of a demonic baby becomes a symbol of the evil of which women were victims. This allowed a fairly specific identification of that evil, albeit in a figurative guise. Let me cite a passage in the book that illustrates this point vividly. One of Addams's interlocutors, in recounting how her son used to beat her, and in mentioning that her son's violence was passed on to him by his father, commented: “The ugliness was born in the boy as the mark of the Devil was born in the poor child up-stairs.”<sup>49</sup>

Third (and more hypothetically), the transmission of the story may have allowed for a generalization and integration of individual experiences. Through the legend, women were able to see their own biographical stories in a new light. The discrimination they faced in familial contexts was now seen as a universal fact, something that pertained not only to them as isolated individuals, but also to a whole category of people. This integration or generalization process is precisely what Addams took to be necessary for biographical memory to help “establish a new norm.”<sup>50</sup> In the case of the Devil Baby story, Addams did not speak explicitly of an integration or generalization process, but she did repeatedly suggest that the fact of its being a legend allowed women to see their individual experiences in a universal light.

We can once again detect a similarity between Addams's analysis and a pivotal idea of pragmatist philosophy, namely John Dewey's conception of articulation as a phase of social inquiry. According to Dewey, a problematic situation is first experienced in a vague and inchoate manner. Only through a process of articulation does it acquire clearly defined features.<sup>51</sup> This pragmatist insight

48 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 10. Fricker herself phrases hermeneutical injustice in terms of a lack of articulacy (see, for instance, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148).

49 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 11.

50 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 4.

51 On Dewey's concept of articulation, see M. Jung, *Der bewusste Ausdruck. Anthropologie der Artikulation* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter 2009), 210–17; R. Frega, *Practice, Judgment,*

is, in turn, compatible with the idea, advocated by several feminist thinkers, that the ability to articulate one's experiences plays a key role in the expression of social critique. Miranda Fricker has suggested, for instance, that consciousness-raising movements are particularly effective in overcoming hermeneutical injustice when they create a new name for a feeling of injustice that was, until that point, hard to put into words. Her best-known example is the history of how the concept of "sexual harassment" was coined.<sup>52</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that the spreading of rumors about the Devil Baby at Hull House is comparable to an episode of mature consciousness-raising. The women who seized upon that legend to articulate their experiences never reached the point of explicit critique. Observed from the perspective of Addams's book, the work of integrating individual biographical reminiscences into something more general appears unfinished. It is also mixed up with many other motives that may have guided the spreading of the legend, and of which we still know too little. Moreover, Addams made it clear that the women's attempts at a reflective articulation of their experiences proceeded in parallel with the other paramount function of biographical memory, namely the "transmutation of the past," which covered the episodes of past suffering with an idealizing veil.

However, Addams also recognized that the idealizing veil of Mnemosyne is never entirely homogeneous nor entirely resistant to the expression of trauma accumulated in individual experience. Occasionally, the veil would tear open, and "baffled desires, sharp cries of pain, echoes of justices unfulfilled, the original material from which such tales are fashioned, would defy Memory's appeasing power."<sup>53</sup>

We should also, crucially, recognize that Addams's activity as interpreter and translator is a fundamental prerequisite to the unveiling of the legend's

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*and the Challenge of Moral and Political Disagreement. A Pragmatist Account* (Lanham etc.: Lexington Books, 2012), 53–54; M. Santarelli, "Between Problemization and Evaluation. Some Remarks on Pragmatism and Genealogy", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 13 (2021), DOI: 10.4000/ejrap.2450; J. Serrano Zamora, *Democratization and Struggles against Injustice: A Pragmatist Approach to the Epistemic Practices of Social Movements* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), chap. 8.

52 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148–51, 162. On articulation and consciousness-raising, see also S. Haslanger, "Methods of Social Critique" in A. Siegetsleitner, A. Oberprantacher, M.-L. Frick and U. Metschl, eds., *Crisis and Critique: Philosophical Analysis and Current Events*, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021). Haslanger has also worked on Jane Addams: "Epistemic Housekeeping and the Philosophical Canon: A Reflection on Jane Addams's 'Women and Public Housekeeping'" in E. Schliesser, ed., *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

53 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 21.

critical-normative potential. Without Addams's interpretation, and without the quite special conditions created by the very existence of Hull House, it would have been very hard for us to detect a link between the transmission of an ancient folk legend and the development of a critical perspective about society. This remark may seem innocuous, but it actually raises some crucial questions. First, *whose* work of articulation are we really talking about? How far can we go in saying that the articulation is carried out by the women interviewed by Addams, rather than by Addams herself (or by us, taking up Addams's analysis and expanding it)? We can even ask to what extent this attempt to let "the subaltern speak" through an interpretation of their words is legitimate.<sup>54</sup> Without having the space to fully address the implications of these questions, let me simply note that Addams's dialogical and "experimentalist" attitudes, as well as her ethnographic precision, provided her with useful tools to avoid an overly paternalistic attitude or a superimposition of her viewpoint onto the viewpoint of social actors.<sup>55</sup>

### 3 Where is the Past in Folklore?

In the previous section, I suggested that the transmission of the legend of the Devil Baby among the women of Hull House might contain the seed of social critique. I defended this idea by highlighting the legend's ability to "loosen the tongues" of disenfranchised individuals and help them bring their experiences into focus. To return to the main theme of this article, however, we now ought to ask: what is the specific role of memory, narrative, and tradition in this mechanism of articulation? Or to put the same question in slightly different terms, why shouldn't we content ourselves with saying that the women of Hull House were articulating their grievances and concerns by dint of a cultural resource that only incidentally happened to have a historical dimension or take the form of tradition?

The obvious starting point for answering this question lies in Jane Addams's own convictions about the ancient roots of the legend. Her main thesis was

54 See G. C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education 1988).

55 See Fischer, "Trojan Women and Devil Baby Tales", 94 on the danger of paternalism that lurks in Addams's interpretation of the legend. On Addams's experimentalism, see G. McMillan, "Keeping the Conversation Going: Jane Addams's Rhetorical Strategies in 'A Modern Lear.'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 32 (2002), 61–75, DOI: 10.1080/02773940209391234; J. A. Skorburg, "Jane Addams as Experimental Philosopher", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26 (2018), 918–38, DOI: 10.1080/09608788.2017.1336985.



that the women of Hull House were reviving an ancient story in order to make sense of their own life experiences. The analogy she drew between individual and cultural memory provided a crucial support to this strategy. It allowed her to suggest that women think critically about their life by turning specifically toward the past – *both* their own biographical past *and* the past of previous generations.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the mechanism Addams described rests on two crucial components. The first is a layer of cultural memory that originates in the deep past of humanity. Because of its historical depth, this layer of culture serves to convey certain experiences that are “fundamental” or “basic” to the human condition.<sup>57</sup> The second component is the process of biographical recollection that is awakened by contact with those cultural memories.

A similar pattern is discernible in another chapter of the book, perhaps the most problematic, in which Addams offers a first-person account of certain biographical memories that surfaced during a trip she made to Egypt.<sup>58</sup> Through contact with Egyptian antiquities, which appeared to her to embody an everlasting past and a simpler, more fundamental condition of humanity, memories of her childhood are reawakened. The most puzzling element here is Addams’s shift from the idea – certainly noteworthy, though to be handled with care – that there are some fundamental experiences of human nature, to the much less interesting idea that these fundamental experiences are indicative of a supposedly “primitive” layer of culture. The concept of primitive culture (quite widespread in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology) occasionally figures in Addams’s book as shorthand for the culture of lower-class individuals.<sup>59</sup>

56 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 41: “[W]oman deals most efficiently with fresh experiences when she coalesces them into the impressions Memory has kept in store for her. Eagerly seeking continuity with the past by her own secret tests of affinity, she reinforces and encourages Memory’s instinctive process of selection.” Addams additionally claimed that elderly women, owing to their advanced age, are even more likely to look to the past as a repository of meaning and orientation (13).

57 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 17–8.

58 Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 68–79.

59 See, in particular, Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, 34: “[S]imple mothers ... have been impelled by the same primitive emotion which the Devil Baby had obviously released in so many old women. This is an overwhelming pity and sense of tender comprehension, doubtless closely related to the compunction characteristic of all primitive people which in the earliest stage of social development long performed the first rude offices of a sense of justice. This early trait is still a factor in the social struggle, for as has often been pointed out, our social state is like a countryside – of a complex geological structure, with outcrops of strata of very diverse ages.” In the very same years in which Addams was working on the Devil Baby, the concept of primitive culture was profoundly

If we are interested in pointing out the contemporary relevance of Addams's approach, it is necessary to leave the concept of primitive aside and highlight instead the more genuinely sociological dimension of her work. Addams's comments about the social conditions of the women who transmitted the Devil Baby legend are far more to the point than their supposed primitivism. Acknowledging this fact does not necessarily mean that we should refrain from talking about the return of a very distant past in the story of the Devil Baby. But we should do so by means of a concrete examination of the legend's history rather than by deploying the shortcut of primitive culture.

Moreover, we should be aware of the existence of a tension that is deep-seated in folklore studies. This is the tension between a sociologically oriented and a historically oriented approach to folklore. The first focuses on the specific social situation in which a given cultural element is deployed whereas the second is more inclined to look at historical origins. But the point to be emphasized here is that the two approaches need not be opposed to one another. As folklore scholar Dorothy Noyes puts it, investigating the historical dimension of a certain story may help us bring into focus those stylistic properties that make the story particularly suitable to "the expression of discontent" of social actors. These stylistic properties include, for instance, "lack of easy referential transparency," or hitting a different register from the products of hegemonic culture.<sup>60</sup> This remains true even in such cases as the one we are examining, in which it seems safe to assume that the women who transmitted the Devil Baby legend had no awareness of its ancient historical roots.

Noyes's remarks suggest an answer to our first question – in what sense the legend of the Devil Baby constitutes a normative use of tradition – which is partly different from the explanation provided by Addams. Addams insisted on folklore's ability to bring the deepest and most fundamental layer of human experience back to the surface of consciousness. This, in turn, explained how the women of Hull House could use the legend of the Devil Baby to cast their life experiences in a critical light. I have instead proposed, on the basis of Noyes's observations, that the critical potential of the story should be sought in those stylistic features that mark it off as a piece of traditional culture. As I indicated in the previous section, however, this kind of explanation is not entirely alien to Addams's perspective, as she herself provided some insights

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rearticulated by the appearance of Franz Boas's book *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York, etc.: The Macmillan Company, [1911] 1938). Boas was Dewey's colleague and collaborator at Columbia University. If I am not mistaken, research into the intellectual links between Boas and Addams is still to be conducted.

60 Noyes, *Humble Theory*, 108.

into the specific stylistic elements that enabled the Devil Baby legend to give voice to the experiences of Hull House women and make their thoughts less inarticulate.<sup>61</sup>

#### 4 Studying Cultural Transmission

Finally, we may give a second type of answer to the question of the role of history and tradition in the study of folk legends. Rather than emphasizing the stylistic and rhetorical features of traditional stories, this second type of answer focuses on the study of cultural transmission and on the capacity of certain stories to endure over time better than others. If it is true that the legend of the Devil Baby has a long history, one may wonder whether its ability to convey the expressive needs of actors and trigger processes of articulation may have had an influence on this cultural success.

The work of cognitive anthropologists, in particular, offers a wealth of hypotheses about the factors that might explain the cultural success of certain stories.<sup>62</sup> However, an attempt to provide a satisfactory answer to the question I just posed would require combining this cognitive approach with a more contextual examination of the social and historical circumstances in which the Devil Baby legend was transmitted. This would help us better comprehend whether the specific function that the story served among Hull House women was due to exceptional and unrepeatable social circumstances or if it was present in other variations of the legend.

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61 To further substantiate this suggestion, it would be worthwhile to bring Addams's work to bear on other intellectual traditions that have emphasized the critical potential of folklore and popular culture. The most important strand of scholarship on folklore as a form of social criticism is probably the Marxist-Gramscian school. To quote Noyes again (*Humble Theory*, 108), Gramsci conceived of folklore as "the heterogeneous scraps of learning salvaged and kept over time by people in a scarce-resource cultural environment. His Italian followers will assert that folk tradition retains ancient practices in rejection of an oppressive social order in the present." As Noyes indicates elsewhere, however, the influence of Gramsci goes well beyond the boundaries of Italy. It reached American anthropology and South-Asian "Subaltern Studies."

62 To give just one example, cognitive anthropologists have been interested in the role of counterintuitive representations of monsters and other supernatural beings in cultural transmission. See P. Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). On cultural transmission more generally, see O. Morin, *How Traditions Live and Die* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

All this is, of course, dependent on whether the legend of the Devil Baby in fact had a history behind it – something Jane Addams took largely for granted<sup>63</sup> without providing any substantial evidence. Subsequent scholarship seems, however, to have confirmed her hypothesis. Historians and folklore scholars have unearthed a long history of legends about monstrous births, cursed children, “changelings,” and demonic babies in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, there are pronounced similarities between the legend told by Jane Addams and other legends or folktales in American and British contexts.<sup>65</sup>

This work of historical contextualization becomes even more relevant if we zoom in on the first half of the twentieth century. A story that appears to have spread within Russia and Ukraine in the 1920s presents very similar traits to the case examined by Jane Addams.<sup>66</sup> The story is about a woman who gives

- 63 See Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, 9. Archival material reveals, furthermore, that in June 1914 Addams was informed by one of her correspondents that the story of the Devil Baby had been alive in Pittsburgh three decades earlier. See Edward K. Williams's letter to Jane Addams, June 1914, Swarthmore College Peace Collections, available at <http://www.digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/7382> (accessed: February 2023): “[I]t may interest you to know that the story of the ‘Devil child’ was related to me in [Pittsburgh] Pennsylvania more than 27 years ago. It was supposed to be confined in an institution of [blind] north of Allegheny city. It came into the world as a punishment for the remark ‘I would as soon have a Devil on the wall as those pictures’ meaning religious pictures. It was believed mostly by Catholic young people”
- 64 See C. Haffter, “The Changeling: History and Psychodynamics of Attitudes to Handicapped Children in European Folklore”, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 4 (1968), 55–61; L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Chapel Hill: Cornell University Press, 2019), chap. 4; T. Braccini, *Miti vaganti: leggende metropolitane tra gli antichi e noi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), chap. 10.
- 65 See E. W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), 29; H. Halpert, “Supernatural Sanctions and the Legend” in V. J. Newall, ed., *Folklore Studies in the Twentieth Century. Proceedings of the Centenary Conference of the Folklore Society* (Suffolk/Totowa: D. S. Brewer/Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 228–29, 232; F. J. Esposito and B. Regel, *The Secret History of the Jersey Devil* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). Roman Polanski's movie *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) is perhaps the most significant example of the late twentieth-century fortune of devil child legends. It would be worth exploring the historical link with Jane Addams's work, possibly through the author of the novel on which the movie is based: I. Levin, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York: Simon and Schuster [1967] 2014).
- 66 P. Bogatyřev, *Vampires in the Carpathians. Magical Acts, Rites, and Beliefs in Subcarpathian Rus'*, trans. S. Reynolds and P. A. Krafcik (New York: Columbia University Press [1929] 1998), 143; A. A. Panchenko, “Pochemu rodilsya chert: Syuzhet o kommunistse-svyatotatse, novorozhdennye monstry i granicy religioznoy didaktiki” [Why was a baby devil born: The legend about a blasphemous communist, monstrous births, and the limits of religious didactics], *Studia Litterarum* 3 (2018), 252–87, DOI: 10.22455/2500-4247-2018-3-2-252-287.

birth to a devil after her husband, a communist atheist, has disrespected traditional customs and religion. The historical links between the American and the Russian-Ukrainian version of the legend still await exploration (and my linguistic limitations prevent me from a deep analysis).<sup>67</sup> It is nonetheless worth noting that the Russian-Ukrainian version, too, seems to highlight the legend's potential to articulate a criticism of society. As in the American version, the story suggests that the woman gave birth to a devil as a supernatural punishment for her husband's infringement of a moral code. This time, however, the infringement is related to the clash between the woman's popular religiosity and the post-revolutionary communist ideals incarnated by the husband.

It is also worth noting that both the American and the Russian-Ukrainian legend seem to operate on what we might call a "feminist twist" if compared with their historical antecedents. The idea that a demonic or cursed baby is a punishment for a parent's impious behavior is very old.<sup>68</sup> But the idea that the mother is the victim of such impious behavior – rather than the main culprit – is, to my knowledge, comparatively new. This novelty may indicate a change in the social conditions under which the ancient story spread.

## 5 Conclusion

It is perhaps useful to sum up the main steps of the argument that I have laid out in this paper. I began by presenting Addams's interpretation of the Devil Baby legend as a major component of her philosophical account of memory. According to Addams, the legend preserves an aspect of cultural memory that, in combination with the biographical memory of women, fulfills two functions: an idealizing-comforting function ("transmuting the past") and a practical-cautionary function ("reacting on life").

In a second step, I focused on Addams's idea that the legend could have helped the women of Hull House to articulate their experiences. However, I insisted more explicitly than Addams herself on the idea that the increase in articulacy involved the seeds of social critique. (This is what I called the critical-normative potential of the legend,) I did so by relying on the Deweyan concept of articulation and on insights from feminist philosophy.

The issue of memory remains open, however, because I have simultaneously cast doubt on one of Addams's main theoretical assumptions, namely the idea that the folk legend was making accessible to the inhabitants of Hull House a host of ancient memories about the fundamental experiences of women. This

67 But many thanks to Alexandra Dimitrova for her invaluable linguistic help.

68 See Halpert, "Supernatural Sanctions and the Legend."

idea is imbued with nineteenth-century Lamarckism and relies on an untenable conception of primitive culture. But if we abandon it, we are left with the task of formulating a new answer to the problem I began with, namely the extent to which the Devil Baby legend is a cultural representation that derives its normative force from tradition.

I tried to answer this question in two ways. First, I suggested looking at the legend as a cultural tool that marginalized individuals could draw upon in order to express their discontent and grievances, in virtue of its rhetorical and stylistic contrast to hegemonic culture. This idea is supported by an extensive literature on folklore and popular traditions as tools for social contestation. Second, I shifted the focus on to the problem of cultural transmission. An investigation into the actual history of the Devil Baby legend shows in more detail how exactly a traditional folkloric story could acquire the specific expressive function that we found to be at work in 1913 Chicago. The latter point in particular will, I hope, contribute to shedding new light on current attempts to explain the cultural success of popular narratives.<sup>69</sup> It will also prove relevant to historiographic debates on how to use folkloric material as a historical source.<sup>70</sup>

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69 See, for example, J. Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

70 A classical text in this debate is R. Darnton, "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose" in Id., *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). For a more recent contribution, see D. Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).