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Ghosts Moving Furniture

BY LIBBY TUCKER

Have you ever heard furniture moving on the floor above? “SCRREEK!”—a sharp, grating sound, like fingernails raking a blackboard. When people drag tables and chairs across a room, the source of this annoying noise is clear. Sometimes, however, no flesh-and-blood movers seem to be present, and ghosts get the blame. New York State has a long tradition of ghostly furniture movers, both in private homes and on college campuses.

“Furniture,” from the French *fournir*, means “the movable articles in a room.” In many Romance languages, the word for furniture (French *meubles*, Spanish *muebles*) means “movables,” so furniture is all about movability. In English, tables and chairs have “legs,” which express the dead or seldom noticed metaphor of furniture resembling a living creature that can walk around.

In the 1979 movie *The Amityville Horror*, a rocking chair rocks by itself, terrifying the new owners of a large old house on Long Island. Fascination with furniture that moves by itself has a long history. At the height of American Spiritualism, in the late 19th century, people claimed that tables rocked back and forth, jumped up, and climbed walls, as if they were living creatures. The sounds of tables moving helped to prove the presence of spirits. In the Spiritualist colony of Lily Dale in western New York, founded in 1879, early photographs show mediums moving their hands above tables to make them move. The astonishing idea that tables had a life of their own inspired New Yorkers to visit Lily Dale’s psychic mediums and to experiment with “table tipping” of their own.

Ernest Baughman, in his index, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), lists four stories about furniture-moving ghosts from New York. One of the best is the story of Aunt Sylvina, collected by Emelyn Gardner in 1914. Aunt Sylvina, who had always been very particular about the arrangement of her house, haunts the house after her death. Her younger relatives try to change the furniture around to suit their own taste, but she keeps

changing it back, making loud noises while doing so. Finally, the new occupants decide to let Aunt Sylvina keep the furniture as she wishes it to be. This legend shows that there should be “a place for everything and everything in its place,” and that older family members should maintain order, both during their lifetimes and after their deaths. In other words, older relatives rule.

In contrast to the story of Aunt Sylvina, a campus legend from Binghamton University describes what happens when a young Resident Assistant, Malika, is alone in her residence hall before new students arrive. Malika is a self-confident student leader who does not want ghosts to bother her. She explains:

I was all alone on my floor, making door tags for all the students who would be moving in soon, and it was really quiet. All of a sudden I heard furniture moving in the room on top of mine—SCRREEK! Really scary, because I knew nobody was there. The sounds kept coming—SCRREEK! And again, SCRREEK! After a while, I couldn’t stand it any more, so I shouted, “GO AWAY, GHOST! LEAVE ME ALONE!” That was it. The ghost went away. I never heard it again.

Malika takes the role of hero here, because, like the central character of the Grimms’ “The Youth Who Wanted to Find Out What Fear Is,” she confronts a spirit and puts it in its place. “Go away, ghost!” she shouts, and the ghost obeys. Who is this ghost, and why does it want to move furniture above her room? It can’t be the ghost of an elderly person like Aunt Sylvina, because older people don’t usually live in college dorms. Perhaps it is the ghost of a student who died in desperate circumstances and craves the attention of a Resident Assistant. For students in college, Resident Assistants rule.

The dark side of college emerges in legends about students who, when feeling overwhelmed by stress and pressure, take their own lives. One Binghamton University legend explains that Gus, a student of the 1970s, hanged himself in his residence hall’s

basement when academic pressure became too great. Since the early 1990s, students have made legend quests to this basement to see where Gus allegedly made the transition from the busy life of a college student to the limited existence of a ghost.

Furniture-moving ghosts signal the inexorability of change. “Move-In Day,” when college students arrive with their bags and boxes, marks the beginning of a new year of student life. Other kinds of moves mark different life passages: finding an apartment, investing in a small house, choosing a larger house to accommodate a growing family, and then, perhaps, downsizing to an apartment in an assisted living facility. Whenever furniture moves, a change takes place.

While writing this column, I have ordered baby furniture for my niece, moved chairs around in my English Department office to make room for students who are preparing to graduate, and, with my sister’s help, moved chairs and tables out of the halls of our father’s house to make room for a walker and a wheelchair. All of these moving objects with their own “legs” or wheels remind us of life’s progress. When ghosts move furniture, they remind us that they have crossed over to the realm of the dead. Oedipus solved the Sphinx riddle, “Which creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” with the answer “Man.” In their own eloquent, enigmatic way, ghost stories trace our progress through life and remind us of the mystery of life’s transitions. ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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