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Halloween and Classification

How are Rumpelstiltskin and Bats like Halloween?

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You remember Rumpelstiltskin, right? Ugly little dude with some serious spinning wheel skills. He rescues a fair maiden from doom by spinning straw into gold. But in return he extracts a terrible price: when she has a child, she must hand it over to him.

She eventually is able to escape this obligation because she guesses his name. Rumpelstiltskin doesn't take this well, and tears himself in half.

What does this have to do with Halloween?

When I was a youngster, I could never understand why this powerful, albeit ugly, guy couldn't just take the kid. Why is he rendered powerless when fair maiden (actually, I guess she's no longer a maiden at that point) guesses his name? As I got a little older, I learned that it is not uncommon, in the world's myths and religions, for [supernatural](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/magical-thinking%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20supernatural)figures to have secret names. For example, you may know that the ancient Israelis followed various practices intended to conceal the true name of God.

So, that's a hint: The power of a supernatural being is sometimes thought to depend on concealing its name. The reason for this was explained many years ago by anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. [Douglas](http://www.amazon.com/Purity-Danger-Analysis-Pollution-Routledge/dp/0415289955/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1256734853&sr=1-1) proposed a [cognitive](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/cognition%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20cognitive)theory to explain the power of the un-named: Every society has, built into its language and thought, systems of classification that divide the world into various categories. But there are always things that don't fit very well into any classification system. And, throughout history and across the globe, things that don't fit into classification systems are thought to be mysterious and powerful.

Consider, for example, the popular classification of living beings in English. Two of our important categories are animals and birds. For the most part, it's pretty obvious what goes where. But what about bats? Animals should have something under their feet; celebrity flying squirrels aside, no self-respecting creature with fur flies. And no self-respecting bird has fur. Before the advent of scientific classification, the bat was a complete anomaly. Therefore, we don't know just what it is. The bat is like a being without a name: eerie, mysterious, dangerous.

We also classify time into categories: day and night, this year and next year, and so on. Therefore, according to the theory, we should expect to find that the moments of time that stand between these categories are oddly powerful. And indeed, magical transformations are likely to occur at midnight, [religious](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/religion) groups hold their ceremonies at the end or the beginning of the week, and New Year's Eve is becomes the occasion for a wild party.

In parts of pre-Christian Europe, of course, Halloween was New Year's Eve, a moment when the very boundary between life and death was thought to dissolve. As [Turner](http://www.amazon.com/Forest-Symbols-Aspects-Ndembu-Ritual/dp/0801491010/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1256735045&sr=1-1" \t "_blank)pointed out, these moments of transition are not only unknown, they contain within themselves the awesome power of transformation, for through them, one thing becomes another thing.

And so we are reluctant to give up our celebrations of transformation. These days, on Halloween we don masks and disguises so that we too will be unknown; we attempt to appropriate the powers of the transitional to ourselves. Enjoy Halloween, and keep in mind that you are celebrating ideas that were probably first formulated in the Paleolithic era.

Stromberg, Peter. “Halloween and Classification.” Psychology Today. Web. 28 Oct. 2009.