

# **Black Dogs of England**

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The term 'Black Dog' is used to refer to apparitions of creatures that typically resemble black dogs, though it is also often used as a generic term for canine apparitions of other colours and types (Brown, 1978; Harte, 2005; Miller, 1984). Black dog apparitions have been widely reported in the past in Great Britain, especially in England<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Bord & Bord, 1985; Brown, 1985; Bunn, 1976; Harte, 2005a, 2005b; Jordan, 2000; Miller, 1984; Rudkin, 1938; Sherwood, 2000c, 2000d; Trubshaw, 2005; Westwood, 2005), and they are still being reported to this day. Black Dogs are sometimes known by specific names in specific areas: for example, in Norfolk, Black Shuck; in Suffolk, Galleytro; in Lancashire, Trash or Skriker; in Lincolnshire, Hairy Jack; in Staffordshire, Padfoot and so on (see Bord & Bord, 1985; McEwan, 1986). Theo Brown (1958, pp. 176-179) suggested that there are three types of Black Dog: type A is found in certain areas, and changes its shape; type B is always a black dog and associated with a definite place, sometimes a person or a family; type C appears in a certain locality on a particular date(s).

Black dog apparitions differ from normal dogs in terms of their size, their eyes and their behaviour (Bord & Bord, 1985). They are described as being bigger than an ordinary dog, often about the size of a calf (Bord & Bord, 1985; Miller, 1984). Their eyes are often described as glowing and as being rather large; one-eyed apparitions have also been reported (Bord & Bord, 1985; Brown, 1958; Miller, 1984). Sometimes these apparitions change in size or into a different animal or human form (Bord & Bord, 1985; Brown, 1958; Miles, 1908). For both human and black dog apparitions, they are not always complete; for example, certain body parts might be missing or only certain body parts might be seen (e.g., Brown, 1958; Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; McEwan, 1986).

### **Historical examples of Black Dog apparitions in England**

Two of the most famous English black dog sightings allegedly occurred in Suffolk on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1577. Shortly after 9am on a Sunday morning in Bungay there was a terrible thunderstorm during which a black dog appeared before the congregation in St Mary's Church. The dog ran through the church and a number of the members of the congregation were reportedly killed or injured, allegedly by the dog. The dog was later seen at Blythburgh church where three more people were reported to have been killed and another was burned by the dog. An account of the black dog's visit was written soon after the event, by a clergyman called Abraham Fleming, and was published in a pamphlet entitled 'A Strange and Terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bungay.' However, according to local historian Christopher Reeve (1988), Fleming lived in London and might not have ever visited Bungay. Reeve also notes that although records of events at the Bungay and Blythburgh churches corroborate some aspects of Fleming's account, e.g., the terrible thunderstorm, they do not mention a dog.

In his, 'The Book of Days' (1879, Vol. 2, p. 434), Chambers reported that, in 1856, a woman described her encounter with a black dog in the narrow lane, now called Hays Lane but formerly known as Dog Lane (Brown, 1982) in Uplyme on the Devon-Dorset border:

As I was returning to Lyme...one night with my husband down Dog Lane, as we reached about the middle of it, I saw an animal about the size of a dog meeting us. "What's that?" I said to my husband. "What?" said he, "I see nothing." I was so frightened I could say no more then, for the animal was within two or three yards of us, and had become as large as a young calf, but had the appearance of a black

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<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in black dogs in England should consult Jeremy Harte's (2005b) bibliography.

shaggy dog with fiery eyes.... He passed close by me, and made the air cold and dank as he passed along. Though I was afraid to speak, I could not help turning round to look after him, and I saw him growing bigger and bigger as he went along, till he was as high as the trees by the roadside, and then seeming to swell into a large cloud, he vanished in the air.

During a visit to the inn near Haye Lane in 1960, Theo Brown discovered another sighting in the lane from the previous summer by other guests; her mother also apparently had a sighting during their stay (Brown, 1982).

Another first-hand account of a black dog encounter was reported in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research in 1908 by Miles. The report was part of an investigation of strange animal apparitions that had been reported in a lane in Laburnham Villa. The apparitions were believed to be the spirit of a local farmer who had hung himself about a century earlier in an outhouse. One of the villagers gave the following account:

In the beginning of January, 1905, about half-past seven in the evening, I was walking up from the Halfway [a local inn]. I suddenly saw an animal that seemed to be like a large, black dog appear quite suddenly out of the hedge and run across the road quite close in front of me ; I thought it was the dog belonging to the curate. I was just going to call it to send it home, when it suddenly changed its shape, and turned into a black donkey standing on its hind legs. This creature had two glowing eyes, which appeared to me to be almost as big as saucers. I looked at it in astonishment for a minute or so, when it suddenly vanished. After that I hurried home, for the sight of this creature with the large shining eyes gave me a shock. The evening was a light one for the time of year. (Miles, 1908, p.259).

My interest in these apparitions stems from a personal experience that I had when I was about 4 years old and which I later described in a school topic book when I was about 9-10 years old:

The year was about 1974. I had been in bed a couple of hours. I awoke to hear a patter of feet. I looked up thinking it was my dog, but to my terror I saw a massive black animal probably with horns but perhaps ears, galloping along the landing towards my bedroom. I tried to scream but I found it impossible. The creature's eyes were bright yellow and as big as saucers. The animal got to my bedroom door and then vanished as quick as it had appeared.

At the time my parents tried to reassure me by providing me with rational explanations.

I believed this [my parents' explanation for my experience] until a few years later when I was reading a local paper which had an article about a haunted council house which was inhabited by a poltergeist. A variety of objects were hurled at the family's baby child. The father claimed that a black dog rushed at him and then disappeared. He also claimed that a black goat had been seen running around the house.... After reading this article I was convinced that what I thought had happened a few years back had most probably happened.

Encounters with black dogs are still being reported in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here is an account from Brackley in Northamptonshire from April 2005:

Until last night I had never heard of this phenomenon ....The time was 10pm. I left the house to make a phone call on my mobile due to receiving no phone signal inside....As I walked towards St Peter's church yard I regained the signal and so strolled through the gates and along the path of the south graveyard towards the church. After walking only a few metres along the path I heard a loud panting and galloping of feet in front of me. I wasn't sure what was coming but didn't have time to think as within seconds a large black shaggy dog was running towards me. It appeared frantic and ran incredibly quickly. It was dark and so it was hard to tell but it either had large flapping ears or horns upon its head. Its eyes were...black and glinting in the light. It ran right up to me, within inches and then was enveloped in darkness and faded away. I was naturally very scared and had a very sleepless night.

### **Scientific investigation of apparitions**

Although psychologists and parapsychologists<sup>2</sup> have studied and investigated apparitions, their research has concentrated upon human apparitions and there is very little mention of animal apparitions, even less so apparitions of Black Dogs. This is disappointing given that apparitions of Black Dogs are well-known in folklore, have been reported for centuries and still are being reported to this day. More attention needs to be paid to the features of the experiences, the circumstances in which they occur, the psychology of those who report them, the effects that such experiences can have on those concerned, and the interaction between relevant psychological, physiological and environmental variables. Within this article I shall be approaching the subject of Black Dogs from a psychological/parapsychological perspective and considering the circumstances in which black dog apparitions in England are encountered. To do so, it is necessary first to contextualise this specific type of apparition within the psychology/parapsychology of apparitions in general.

Apparitions are an important part of parapsychology given that surveys estimate that 17-32% of people have experienced one (see Irwin, 1994) and given that apparitions are considered to be possible evidence for the survival of bodily death (Braude, 1991, 2003; Gauld, 1977, 1982; Rogo, 1986; Stevenson, 1982). They have been investigated scientifically for over 100 years (e.g., Gauld & Cornell, 1979; Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886; Haraldsson, 1994; Hart, 1956; Harte, Black, Hollishead, & Mitchell, 2001; Houran & Lange, 2001; MacKenzie, 1982; Maher, 1999; McCue, 2002; Price, 1938-1939; Radin & Rebman, 1996; Sidgwick et al., 1894; Tyrrell, 1943/1973; Wiseman, Watt, Greening, Stevens, & O'Keefe, 2003) but there has been relatively little development of theories to explain them over the last 50 years (Hart, 1956; Houran & Lange, 2001; McCue, 2002).

According to the parapsychological literature, more than 80% of apparitions are of humans (Green & McCreery, 1975/1989); animal apparitions are comparatively rare, and tend to be associated with domestic animals (Bayless, 1973). However, the folklore and 'popular' paranormal literature contains numerous reports of apparitions known as 'Black Dogs' (Bord & Bord, 1985; Brown, 1958, 1978, 1982; Miller, 1984; Rudkin, 1938). A lot of valuable research has been conducted by folklorists but as Brown (1978, p. 45) pointed out:

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<sup>2</sup> "*Parapsychology* is the scientific study of experiences which, if they are as they seem to be, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists." (Irwin, 1994, p. 1)

[A]s folklorists we are not concerned with proving the actuality of supernatural phenomena. We are in the business to study beliefs, particularly patterns of belief.

Surprisingly, despite the number of Black Dog experiences that have been reported, and are still being reported today, there is very little mention of them in the parapsychology literature (except MacKenzie, 1971; Miles, 1908; Sherwood, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). There has been no previous research into the psychology of these experiences (but see Sherwood, 2005) and there is scope for a great deal of original research in this area, particularly given the fact that anomalous experiences can have a significant impact upon those who report them (Bauer, 2004; Milton, 1992; Solfvin, 1995).

Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there has been no truly systematic analysis of the features contained in reports of black dog encounters and, although some folklorists (e.g., Brown, 1958) have suggested that there are different types of Black Dog, it is not yet clear whether this is the case or what features distinguish the different types. An experience-centred analysis of another anomalous experience, the Old Hag attack, which was, until this research was conducted, mainly the domain of folklorists, resulted in an often-cited book (Hufford, 1982) and later stimulated research by a number of psychologists and parapsychologists (e.g. Cheyne, Newby-Clark, & Rueffer, 1999; Conesa, 1995; Rose, Hogan, & Blackmore, 1997; Spanos et al., 1995) as well as my own PhD in psychology (Sherwood, 2000). Clearly there are opportunities for psychologists and parapsychologists to study black dogs too and I have been writing articles for publications read by parapsychologists over the last few years in the hope of at least raising awareness of this specific type of apparition (Sherwood, 2000c, 2000d, 2002).

Within parapsychology, definitions of apparitions in general vary quite considerably and some are more restrictive than others and often contain theoretical assumptions (e.g., that apparitions are non-physical). The philosopher/parapsychologist Stephen Braude (1991) attempted to produce a “theory-neutral definition of ‘apparition’” (p. 191):

S experiences an apparition of  $x$  = df ‘(a) it seems to S as if he perceives  $x$  through one or more of the recognized sensory modalities, (b) S does not perceive  $x$  through any of the recognized sense modalities, (c) S’s apparent perception is not produced by such familiar causes as drugs, stress, suggestion, optical illusion, etc. (p. 192).

Parapsychologists have attempted to classify apparitions and have proposed a number of different types: experimental<sup>3</sup> (where a living person attempts to create an apparition of him/herself elsewhere), crisis (where an apparition appears within 12 hours of them experiencing some form of crisis), post-mortem (the apparition has been dead for at least 12 hours), ghosts/hauntings (the same apparition is seen in the same location repeatedly over time by the same or different people) (Gauld, 1977; Green & McCreery, 1975/1989, Irwin, 1999; Tyrrell, 1943/1973). By this token, many black dog encounters would be considered hauntings.

In the preface to his 1976 book entitled *Phantoms: Experiences and Investigations*, parapsychologist D Scott Rogo wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> This is not the same as techniques designed to facilitate the appearance of apparitions before one’s own self, such as the use of a psychomanteum (e.g., Moody, 1994; Moody with Perry, 1993; Radin & Rebman, 1996; Sherwood, 2000b).

An apparition is a type of psychological phenomenon that cannot be isolated in the laboratory....To understand apparitions and hauntings we must delve into the chronicles of those who have had firsthand experiences with them. Placed side by side with the experiments carried out in parapsychological laboratories, human narrative and testimony is also a key to our understanding of the unexplored mysteries of human existence and the transcending abilities of the human mind.

Such concerns are echoed by Cornell (2002, p. 7) in his book *Investigating the Paranormal*:

Perhaps the parapsychologist should return to the examination of the circumstances in which the paranormal naturally occurs. Far too long the preoccupation with laboratory methods has meant that the rich field of spontaneous cases has been ignored.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of parapsychological research these days still involves experimental psi<sup>4</sup> research (e.g., see Rush, 1986, p. 35) and there is relatively little research on phenomena, such as apparitions, which might relate to the issue of survival of bodily death (e.g., see Alvarado & Zingrone, 1995, p.386). Often apparitions and hauntings are simply described on a case by case basis (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1995). Attempts have been made to try and group cases together and to identify trends (e.g., Irwin, 1994, 1999) but there does not seem to have been much quantitative analysis of the features of apparitional and haunting experiences since the classic early research of the Society for Psychological Research (Gurney et al., 1886; Sidgwick et al., 1894).

Quantitative analyses that have been done have tended to focus mainly on the features of the phenomena rather than on the circumstances and the characteristics of those who experience it. Why is it, for example, that sometimes more than one person present can experience an apparition—such cases are referred to as collective apparitions—though not everyone present will necessarily experience the apparition (Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; Haraldsson, 1994; Palmer, 1979; Tyrrell, 1943/1973). Quantitative analyses can help to distinguish apparitional and haunting experiences from other experiences and help to identify possible different types of experience but knowledge of the circumstances and experiencers is needed to help develop explanatory models (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1995). In addition, we need to know whether different types of apparition occur in different circumstances to different people as this has obvious implications for potential explanations for them.

Irwin (2004, p. 197) argued that “In recent years there has been a growing appreciation that we need to study not the apparition per se but rather the apparitional experience; that is, it might be best to adopt a phenomenological approach in this field of study.” To this end, this reinforces the need to consider not just the apparition but the person(s) experiencing and the circumstances and context in which it is experienced (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1995). In terms of haunting apparitions, Gauld (1982, p. 246) argued that “Something in, or about or to do with *the place itself* plays a crucial role in generating the phenomena.” Part of his argument is based upon the fact that hauntings often involve a range of other phenomena in addition to, or instead of, apparitional phenomena, some of which appear to be of a physical nature. Haraldsson (1991, p. 214) also places the most emphasis on the circumstances rather than the person experiencing an apparition:

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Psi’ is a generic term used to refer to the processes of extrasensory perception (ESP) or psychokinesis (PK)

To sum up, apparitional experiences occur under a variety of circumstances, and there are indications that the state of mind of the percipient plays a minor role in the occurrence. These findings give some support to the theories of Myers, Hart (1959) and others that these encounters may take place relatively independently of the state of the person who has the experience.

One of the big questions is whether apparitions are objective or subjective (Braude, 1991, p. 193; Irwin, 1999, p. 255) but there is no conclusive answer as yet and such a question is possibly too narrow and simplistic (MacKenzie, 1982, p. 214; Osiris, 1986; Price, 1938-1939). Theo Brown (1958, p.188) also felt that we should not “let ourselves be bogged down with the objective-or-subjective controversy.” Perhaps it’s not a case of apparitions being either subjective or objective; perhaps they are the result of complex interactions between physical, neurophysiological and psychological variables and only occur when a particular combination of circumstances is present (e.g., Houran & Lange, 1998; MacKenzie, 1982, p. 208; Persinger, 1989; Radin & Rebman, 1996; Williams, 2001). There has been a recent surge of interest in environmental variables in apparitional and poltergeist cases in general (e.g., Harte et al., 2001; Houran & Lange, 1998, 2001; Maher, 2000; Wiseman et al., 2003). Williams (2001) provides a useful overview of evidence in support of the brain-environment interaction model<sup>5</sup> of the apparitional experience but, quite rightly, notes that “This model is only applicable to certain types of apparitional experiences, while other seemingly more complex ones remain unaccounted for.” (p. 364). However, whilst being extremely valuable, these fieldwork studies have focused on the physical variables rather than the circumstances and psychological characteristics of the experiencers.

### **Circumstances in which apparitions are encountered**

The limited quantitative research specifically on the circumstances of apparitional experiences has suggested that the typical experiencer is physically inactive or at least engaged in minimal or automatic physical activity at the time (Campbell, 1991; Persinger, 1974, p. 158; Green and McCreery, 1975/1989, p. 124; Haraldsson, 1991, p. 214; Irwin, 2004, p. 204; Sidgwick et al., 1894, pp. 45-46). In addition, some of these experiences may occur in circumstances in which there is minimal sensory input and possible sensory deprivation and/or the person’s attention is internally-focused or the circumstances allow one to become easily absorbed in one’s own mentation (e.g., Gurney et al., 1886; see Irwin, 1994, 1999, p. 229; Moody with Perry, 1993). However, given the different types of apparitions that have been proposed, there is a need to see if this applies across all types or only selected ones. People who find themselves in these circumstances, and who may find it easier to enter and become absorbed in these purportedly psi-conducive circumstances, particularly ASCs, may be more likely to report anomalous experiences. Thus, in addition to the circumstances and state in which a person finds themselves, their individual traits might also affect their propensity to have an anomalous experience. Studies examining the personality characteristics of people who have experienced apparitions with a matched control group are rare (see Irwin, 2004, p. 204).

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<sup>5</sup> See Sherwood (2005) for a more detailed overview of possible psychological and parapsychological explanations for black dog apparitions.

Witnesses of apparitions do not always immediately recognise that they are experiencing, or have experienced, an apparition; many do not do so until afterwards (Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; Irwin, 1994). A wide range of reactions are reported ranging from indifference, puzzlement and curiosity to positive emotions, such as happiness or elation, through to negative emotions, such as alarm, panic and fear (Green & McCreery, 1975/1989).

Apparitions of humans, are usually seen in familiar surroundings, often indoors and particularly in the bedroom (Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; Hart et al., 1956; Persinger, 1974; Sidgwick et al., 1894). Perhaps, contrary to expectations, they are often seen in daylight or good artificial light (Haraldsson, 1991, 1994). A cluster analysis of 500 poltergeist and haunting cases found that 45% of the haunting cases were nocturnal (Gauld & Cornell, 1979, pp. 236-238). In contrast, black dogs seem to be more commonly encountered at night (Bord & Bord, 1985) although sightings in the daylight have been made (Brown, 1978; Sherwood, 2005); they are usually experienced outside, often in lonely rural settings (although a few indoor encounters have been reported in houses or churches) and are often associated with a particular place or area (Miller, 1984; Rudkin, 1938). Types of places associated with appearances of black dogs include: roads, crossroads, lanes, footpaths, bridges, gateways, doorways, staircases, boundaries, fields, hedges, green lanes, prehistoric and treasure sites, wayside burials, churchyards, graves and gallows, wells, trees, and places where tragic events have occurred (Brown, 1958, 1978; Bord & Bord, 1985; Harte, 2005; McEwan, 1986). Black dogs are often encountered near water, e.g. the sea, ponds, and bridges over streams or rivers (Bord & Bord, 1985). However, Bord & Bord (1985) note that "there are very few places in Britain where one is very far away from water (except in times of drought!)" (p.98). A consideration of possible normal and paranormal explanations for black dog apparitions is beyond the scope of this article but such coverage is available elsewhere (see Sherwood, 2005).

As with apparitions in general, most black dogs either vanish or gradually fade from sight or else they manoeuvre themselves out of sight. Sometimes the apparition may vanish if the witness's attention wanders or if attempts are made to touch it (e.g., Bord & Bord, 1985; Green & McCreery, 1975/1989; Tyrrell, 1943/1973). A few appearances and disappearances of black dogs have also been accompanied by flashes of light and explosions (McEwan, 1986).

The interpretation of and reaction to encounters with black dog apparitions seem to vary, ranging from the negative through indifference to the positive, depending partly upon where they are encountered and what the dog does. For example, in East Anglia McEwan (1986, p. 129) reported that black dog encounters are often unpleasant, at best indifferent and at worst hostile yet in Lincolnshire the black dog is apparently never feared and is often a protector of women out alone (see Brown, 1958, p. 179; Harte, 2005a, pp. 16-18; Rudkin, 1938, p. 130). The appearance of a black dog is sometimes considered to be a bad omen, especially of an impending death, either of the witness or a family member (Harte, 2005a, pp. 15-16; McEwan, 1986; Reeve, 1988, pp. 67-68; Westwood, 2005, p. 66). Current local knowledge, beliefs, needs and expectations might have some effect on how someone reacts to an encounter (Harte, 2005a, p. 16; Westwood, 2005) and, if black dogs are subjective and imaginary in nature, these might also affect the appearance and behaviour of the dog itself. The characteristics of the person are also likely to have an effect, such as the extent to which they believe in the existence of paranormal and supernatural phenomena and whether they are frightened of dogs in general. Whilst I am not trying to generalise to all cases, I have noticed some features that seem to affect how some encounters are perceived: in some cases in which the encounter is considered positive, the dog appears to a person alone at night and either trots alongside or in front of them, perhaps even

accompanying them home in what is perceived to be a protective capacity; in more neutral cases, the dog crosses the path in front of the witness and seems unaware of their presence; in negative cases, the dog tends to walk or run directly towards the witness(es) or sits or stands directly in their path, possibly staring, snarling or baring its teeth, which is perceived to be threatening.

Another anomalous experience, which has benefitted from research by both folklorists, psychologists, and medical professionals, is sleep paralysis—a sleep disorder that occurs just as one is falling asleep or waking from sleep and involves a temporary inability to move that might be accompanied by imagery and sensations in various sensory modalities (e.g., American Sleep Disorders Association, 1990, p. 166; Cheyne, 2001, 2002; Hufford, 1982; Spanos, McNulty, DuBreuil, Pires, & Burgess, 1995; Terrillon, & Marques-Bonham, 2001). Sleep paralysis appears to be a core component of a number of experiences in different cultures that have been attributed to paranormal and supernatural causes, e.g., Old Hag attacks (Hufford, 1982), kanashibari (Fukuda, Miyasita, Inugami, & Ishihara, 1987) and ghost oppression attacks (Wing, Lee & Chen, 1994). Recent research has suggested that certain sleep paralysis features might cluster together resulting in different types of experience (Cheyne, 2001, 2002; Cheyne, Rueffer, & Newby-Clark, 1999; Rose, 2000)—perhaps the same is true of black dog encounters. The sleep paralysis experience itself appears to be the result of the interpretation and translation of internal and external, imaginary and real, input to the brain (Cheyne, Newby-Clark, et al., 1999; Cheyne, Rueffer, et al., 1999; Terrillon & Marques-Bonham, 2001). Parts of the brain that have been associated and implicated as being involved with a variety of anomalous experiences include the temporal lobes (Neppe, 1990; Persinger, 1989; Persinger & Makarec, 1993). Furthermore, sleep paralysis, its features and its interpretation seem to be affected by situational variables (Cheyne, 2002), environmental variables, such as geomagnetic (Conesa, 1995, 1997) and electromagnetic fields (Sandyk, 1997), as well as by the individual characteristics of those having the experience (e.g., Spanos et al., 1995; Yeoman, 2002) and their cultural context (Cheyne, Newby-Clark, et al., 1999; Cheyne, Rueffer, et al., 1999; Hufford, 1982; Yeoman, 2002). Perhaps the same is also true of apparitional experiences in general.

So in terms of black dog apparitions, there is a need to try to identify the features of the experience, and whether these might cluster together to form distinct types of experience, but there is also a need to consider the circumstances of these experiences and potential environmental influences, as well as the characteristics of those having the experiences, if we are to reach an integrated understanding and explanation(s) for this phenomenon. The contribution and integration of research and ideas from different disciplines would be helpful too. Any decent theory of apparitions needs to explain all types of apparitions, including those of animals and objects. Black dog apparitions provide an unusual and interesting challenge to current theories and explanations for apparitions.

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