

Superstition is not an easy word to deal with. It has been used in numerous contexts, with roughly the same meaning, for at least six hundred years, but it is always the context in which the word appears that matters. By its very nature the concept of superstition is highly subjective, and this is seen most clearly in the use of the word as an adjective. Any person or group can call another 'superstitious', but this tells us nothing about the beliefs of those thus described. The only certainty is that the person using the word disapproves of, or wishes to belittle, the belief or custom which s/he is so labelling. In general, dominant elements in a society dismiss the beliefs of less powerful elements as superstitious.

It is because of this cultural baggage that modern folklorists tend to eschew the word 'superstition' and prefer to use terms such as 'alternative belief'. Unfortunately, such attempts to alter perception by changing language are rarely successful. Outside the strictly scientific spheres, meaning is not under the control of the specialist.

In most dictionary definitions of superstition, the central point is irrationality: 'Irrational belief usually founded on ignorance or fear and characterised by obsessive reverence for omens, charms, etc.' *Collins English Dictionary* (1986).

In the modern world, however, we are often uncomfortable with the assumption that there is only one valid form of 'rationality'. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is clearly uneasy on this point: 'Belief, half belief, or practice of which there appears to be no rational substance. Those who use the term imply that they have superior evidence for their own scientific, philosophic, or religious convictions. An ambiguous word, it probably cannot be used except subjectively.'

These descriptions pose the further question of what is 'belief'. Do people really believe, pay lip-service to, or simply know of the superstitions without following them? In many cases we have insufficient information about 'belief' as such, but can merely register that a superstition was recorded at a particular time and place.

In the human mind, 'belief' can vary over time according to situation, and we can happily 'half believe' something. We can even believe and not believe at the same time if we want to. We may notice omens on the way to an important interview but not on other days, and our belief can result in action at some times and not at others.

We are told by the folklorist Edward Lovett that the carrying of mascots and lucky charms increased dramatically during the First World War. Presumably, many individuals knew of mascots before but did not bother about them until a particular need arose. This seems to confirm that a key factor is the feeling of vulnerability, and that superstition thrives in an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, or perceived lack of control over one's fate. But this does not explain why some people are superstitious all the time, and others not. Superstition represents a failure to apply intelligence and proper inductive reasoning or to distinguish between appearance and reality. Erroneous connections are sometimes made by less than rigorous thinking.

Certainly the principles involved in most superstitions do not normally bear rational scrutiny, but people often manage to believe in the teeth of all evidence. It is clear that tradition plays a strong part in many of these beliefs, but other than that the problem is circular. Why do people believe strange things? Because they are superstitious. Why are they superstitious? Because they believe strange things.

But it has always been the case: many people in the early 19th century, for example, were firmly convinced that horsehairs placed in water turned into eels. It seems ridiculous now, but there are plenty of equally unfounded beliefs still in circulation, and probably always will be. Many people believe that your hair can turn white instantly through shock or fear. Others believe that it is illegal to place a stamp upside down on an envelope, or that a tooth placed in Coca Cola will dissolve overnight.

It is common in popular works on superstition to claim that we are still very superstitious; depending on your definition, this may be true, and anyway it makes good copy. Undoubtedly, there are still people who would be described as 'very superstitious', and it would be a very bold person who claimed to have no superstitious beliefs at all. But it is clear that, as a society, we are immeasurably less superstitious than we used to be.

It is only now that superstition plays such a minimal role in medicine and everyday life that we can afford to be nostalgic and say we regret its passing.

Superstition

INSTRUCTIONS

In the Reading paper, you often have to respond to statements with:

YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer

NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

Write **Y**, **N** or **NG** on each card

1 'Superstition' is a simple term.

N

2 The word 'superstitious' can be used in a scientific way.

N

3 The powerful tend to be less superstitious than the powerless.

NG

4 Modern folklorists avoid using the word 'superstition'.

Y

5 It is easy to influence the way people think by changing language.

N

6 Scientists have more control over the meanings of words than other specialists.

Y

7 The word 'rationality' has a less clear meaning than it used to.

Y

8 The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* contains the most modern ideas of its time.

NG

Superstition

9 In the past, many people knew of superstitions, but did not believe them. NG

10 Historians have a clear idea about what people used to believe. ~~Y~~ N

11 Soldiers tend to be more superstitious than most other people. NG

12 Difficult times increase superstition. ~~AG~~ Y

13 Superstition is a result of inadequate education. NG

14 Superstition is a result of faulty logic. Y

15 To some extent, superstitions are part of cultural tradition. Y

16 Nowadays, people tend not to have irrational beliefs. N

17 Some people believe that postage stamps have magic powers. ~~Y~~ G

18 Popular writers have made a lot of money by writing about superstitions. ~~Y~~ NG

19 Nowadays, the majority of people are not at all superstitious. N

20 We are fortunate that society is less superstitious than it used to be. X