

'Gretel & Hansel' is both a visually pleasing and an emotionally macabre update of an old tale

By **Murjani Rawls** - Jan 31, 2020



Photo Credit: Patrick Redmond / Universal Pictures

Fairy tales are a tough thing to adapt in a movie sense. Especially when they vary in length or have been ingrained in literary history for a long time. (In this case, Hansel and Gretel was originally published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812) Everybody should be familiar with the simple tale of a brother, a sister, an appetite, and a witch in the woods who is more than ready to provide food and shelter underlying a more insidious purpose.

Director Osgood Perkins has shown his inventive muscle within the horror genre with 2015's *The Blackcoat's Daughter* and 2016's *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*. How do you turn a very straightforward and sparse story into something tangible and engaging for the big screen? *Gretel & Hansel* excels it showing the unsettling nature of the visual setting and the motivations of our main antagonist. It's with that and the macabre nature of a character like Holda the Witch (Alice Krige) that protrudes outward into the setting of the movie.

All of the ingredients within the cauldron of Gretel and Hansel comes together to provide a rather eerie and unsettling feeling. The movie is tagged with a PG-13 rating, but it's not bogged

down by it like other horror films would be. Gretel & Hansel utilizes things like atmosphere and architecture to its advantage. The combination of production designer Jeremy Reed and cinematographer Galo Olivares makes the film feel both unique and unsettling. There are very few jump scares throughout the film. What is shown is a visual palette of imagery that wants to make you feel uncomfortable. It's the vastness of settings and sometimes the constricting spaces that the horrors show themselves the most.

Buildings within the woods feel like they are within their own world and untouched by their wild surroundings. For example, when you go within Holda's house, it has its own lighting pattern. The orange hues of sunlight are the only thing that penetrates the inside space. In seeing Gretel and Hansel's house, there are dark blues that invoke a coldness or a depression state. Colors often play off each other in the movie to invoke moods of characters or impending danger at times.

Wide shots are often used to make characters vary in size. You can feel how small Gretel and Hansel are against the backdrop of the woods or particular rooms. It often feels like the woods itself is a principal character in the early part of the movie. Camera views often switch in front of characters very tight to show hysteria or in back of them like you're following along within a storybook. The music throughout the film done by Robin Coudert bounces off the landscape of the woods and walls of the house to give the viewer a feeling of anxiety. These soundscapes both play off Gretel and Hansel to show that they cannot have a moment's rest.

The plot of the movie draws upon much of the simplistic nature of the original fairy tale with a modern twist. Both Perkins and writer Rob Hayes worked to try to give Gretel (Sophia Lillis), Hansel (Sam Leakey), and Holda a little bit more plot as far as their motivations are concerned. Within the time period of the film, death and starvation are plentiful. As noted in the opening scene as Gretel is seeking work to feed her family, women are looked upon as accessories. Nothing more, nothing less.

Where the relationship between Gretel and Hansel is of brother and sister on the surface, it's also one of maternal instincts as well. Gretel has to play more of the motherly figure to Hansel and thus, has to inhibit certain parts of herself because she has to care for the survival of another person. It's a clash of a young woman trying to find herself against her inheriting a job that was thrust upon her. In search of some sort of parental representative, Gretel and Hansel come

across Holda, a witch that has rejected the societal view of what women should be and has a relationship with an insatiable hunger for children.

There's a theme throughout the movie that nothing is given without something being taken. Even the simplest act of kindness should be called into question within a cold and unforgiving world. With this premise, while there are three main characters in this movie, it's the acting of both Sophia Lillis and Alice Krige that make this film come alive. Lillis is able to display a slow incline of confidence as Gretel as she comes into her gifts. Krige embodies the character both in look and on-screen motivations. Holda has taken on a very old and decrepit form in order to convey what she's become. It's not what you would normally picture how a witch would look. Her eyes are devoid of emotion, her fingers are blackened, and her skin is ravaged by time. Gretel's view of the world is very defensive and cynical and Holda is eager to play on that for her own reasons.

At 87 minutes, the movie doesn't feel as quick as its run time would show. Perkins takes the audience through a slow burn of evil escalation. It gets stuck within itself at points where you can tell the original story has been stretched out to its capacity. Dream sequences are used to fill in some of the blanks, but don't really serve to show anything new. The new attachments to the original plot give the movie just enough to cross the finish line. Despite that, Gretel & Hansel is a refreshing and visually inventive spin on a very old tale that cautions perception and things that lie beneath the surface.

Murjani Rawls

<http://mjrawls.com>

Journalist, Self-published author of five books, podcast host of The War Report and The Final Cut, and photographer since 2014, Murjani "MJ" Rawls has been stretching his capabilities of his creativity and passions, Rawls has a portfolio spanning through many mediums including music, television, movies, and more. Operating out of the New York area, Rawls has photographed over 200+ artists spanning many genres, written over 700 articles ranging displaying his passionate aspirations to keep evolving as his years in media continue.



