

How Pop Culture Reclaimed the Gothic Female Autonomy

The depiction of female characters in Gothic literature assumes a rather equivocal viewpoint, where women are either victimized or empowered. Analyzing the portrayal of these women through a feminist discourse can be exemplified by the characterization of witches within literary and societal culture. Taking into account historical, real-world affairs regarding the history of witchcraft, the Salem witch trials are often cited as an irrefutable event. I consider the unlawful execution of women accused of witchcraft to be a deeply patriarchal motive, used to diminish women who possessed high levels of curiosity, independence, and intellectual abilities.

To counteract centuries of mistreatment, repression and misrepresentation, 20th-century pop culture has taken a stand in embracing the lighthearted, ethereal side of Wiccan culture and Occultism. Through musicians such as Stevie Nicks and Kate Bush, alongside films and television shows like *Practical Magic* and *American Horror Story: Coven*, the societal perspective on female Gothic characters, particularly witches, has undergone a profound transformation.

One of –if not the most– infamous witch trials occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 17th century. Over 200 individuals were accused of practicing dark magic and engaging in Satanic rituals, the majority of whom were women (Blumberg). The trials resulted in the wrongful conviction and execution of 10% of the accused individuals in Salem alone. The hysteria and paranoia surrounding supposed “witches” were not confined merely to the United States in 1692. As far back as the 1300s and into the late 1600s, tens of thousands of witches, predominantly women, were executed across Europe and the West, on the pretense of suspected “dark arts” or “devil's magic” (Blumberg).

An important factor that facilitated the “witch hysteria” was the publication of the text *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486, colloquially known as “Hammer of Witches” ([History.com](https://www.history.com)). Written by German clergymen, Johann Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer, this theological text was essentially regarded as a “how-to” guide on the extermination and persecution of witches ([history.com](https://www.history.com)). The *Malleus*’ core teaching was deeply influenced by Exodus 22:18, which states, “You shall not permit a sorceress to live” (Thomas). Many members of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches took to indoctrinating this text as a prime source of information when condemning witchcraft/Satanism as blasphemy (Britannica). While the text was not directly implemented during the Salem trials, many of the ideologies enforced were reminiscent of *Malleus Maleficarum*.

The Salem Witch Trials were fueled by more than just superstition but by a deeply embedded fear of female autonomy and deviation from strict Puritan norms. Women who defied social expectations, by speaking out of line or those who were even simply unmarried, were often scapegoated as witches. These events showcase how patriarchal structures used fear and theological dogma to repress and penalize nonconforming women.

As many patrons of colonial Massachusetts followed the Puritan beliefs of Christianity, Robert Eggers' 2016 film, *The Witch*, offers a cinematic dramatization of how accused individuals may have been perceived in Salem. Thomasin’s character at the beginning of the film is typical of a devout Puritan daughter, dedicated to serving and respecting her family. Yet, as the story continues, she becomes increasingly distant from her religious beliefs, beginning to challenge her father’s ability to lead the family. At 1:02:07, a pivotal moment occurs when Thomasin confronts her father about the lies he has told and things he allowed Thomasin to assume responsibility for, such as the disappearance of baby Samuel and the mother's missing

silver cup (Eggers). Displeased and frustrated with her father's continuous berating regarding her suspected witchcraft, Thomasin renounces the devout daughter qualities, expressing "You ask me to speak truth?.... You are a hypocrite!" (Eggers).

It is important to note that the depiction of a witch, such as Thomasin, does not hold an entirely positive or empowering connotation. While she may break free from the patriarchal limitations brought forth by her familial duties, she succumbs to the temptation of the Devil's power, implying that she is susceptible to male authority (Ionita). At 1:23:51, Thomasin conjures the Devil in the form of Black Philip, who speaks of enticing promises to Thomasin about "living deliciously" (Eggers). The "pretty dress" and "taste of butter" in which Black Philip is referring to are reminiscent of the Seven Deadly Sins, especially greed, gluttony and lust. As Thomasin falls into the allure of these pleasures, she solidifies her fate as a witch, ultimately shedding her clothes to join the coven in the forest. This ridding of her clothes can be viewed as a metaphor for Thomasin denouncing her religion and becoming reborn as a witch.

In comparison to Eggers' film, the novella *Carmilla*, written by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, explores an ambivalent representation of women in Gothic literature. While Carmilla is not a witch, her connection to the Gothic female autonomy is highly significant, as she exemplifies anxieties regarding female sexuality in the Victorian Era (Shokr). The allure of Carmilla's character is that while she is described as beautiful and enchanting, she maintains an undeniable sense of danger. Carmilla embodies the femme fatale, as she utilizes her seductive nature to disrupt the patriarchal norm, especially regarding her relationship with Laura. The influence of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* goes far beyond simply Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; she illuminated the archetype of the Gothic temptress. While Thomasin represents a horrifically captivating story of a woman reclaiming autonomy through witchcraft, Carmilla and the vampiress also showcase a

connection between female sovereignty and societal fear, in a more subtle, yet still radical characterization of Gothic women. A quote from Laura's father truly showcases the Victorian fear of women gaining authority, as he describes womanhood as "girls [being] caterpillars while they live in the world, to finally be butterflies when summer comes; but in the meantime, there are grubs and larvae" (La Fanu). With this phrase, he implies that a woman must grow into a "mature" yet domestically passive relationship to reach a sense of fulfillment.

Regarding historical depictions of female witches, the cultural consensus has portrayed them as ugly old women, adorned with hunchbacks, warts, and crooked noses. I believe a driving factor in this depiction is a result of a patriarchal motive employed to discourage women from engaging in so-called "witchcraft" in an attempt to contain female agency. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, "When a woman thinks alone, she is evil." (Manair). This claim is a deeply misogynistic way of thinking, which undermines any intellectual thinking from a woman as the result of a Satanic practice. Due to the refusal to be submissive and to obey a man, independent women were seen as abject in societal culture and, as a result, must be associated with "witchcraft" (Blackmore & Pugh). Yet the witch has begun to redefine her societal depiction, breaking free of patriarchal constraints that attempt to contain the abject woman (Blackmore & Pugh).

To counteract preconceived notions of witchcraft, modern interpretations of witches in film/television have welcomed a reinvigorated, younger and more beautiful depiction. The 1998 film, *Practical Magic*, features Hollywood stars Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman as the Owens sisters, who come from a long line of powerful witches. In this film, the Owens sisters are portrayed not as wicked, vengeful women, but rather kindhearted, intelligent young women who find comfort in one another and their magical practices. Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story*:

Coven offers another positive representation of witches, highlighting a sense of community and female empowerment derived from witchcraft. This series showcases seemingly “normal” women and girls who possess unique supernatural abilities linked to Occultism and Wiccan culture. *Coven* and *Practical Magic* compellingly illustrate witchcraft with their deep notions of belonging and togetherness, while maintaining a Gothic yet mystifying narrative.

The positive depiction of witches in modern media can also be examined through popular musicians Stevie Nicks and Kate Bush. As a prominent pop culture figure since the early 1970s, Stevie Nicks exudes a whimsical aura, reminiscent of Wiccan culture, within her stage persona and the music she produces. Following the release of the 1975 hit song “Rhiannon,” rumours sparked regarding the singer's suspected association with witchcraft and the Occult, due to the history embedded in the song's lyrics. After discovering the novel *Triad* by Mary Leader, Nicks was taken with the mystifying story of the Welsh character, leading to the alleged inspiration for the song (Bergen). Although the novel did not explicitly depict the character as a witch (more so an emphatic goddess), Nicks regularly introduced the track by stating “this song is about a Welsh witch,” alluding to her connection to Wiccan culture (Bergen). Coupled with her perplexing melodic lyrics, Stevie Nicks is frequently adorned with flowing, black chiffon shawls on and off stage. This stylistic choice influenced many women and individuals during the peak of her fame in the 1970s, giving a contemporary, ethereal take on the so-called “hippie” fashion of the time (Traver).

Another noteworthy female musician who encouraged enlightened depictions of witches is Kate Bush. With her ghostly vocals featured on tracks such as “Wuthering Heights” and “Waking the Witch”, she displays an angelic, yet still quite haunting, persona. Her enchanting voice and enigmatic stylistic choices make her a mysterious figure in pop culture and the music

industry. Kate Bush's Gothic, yet whimsical undertone assisted in dismantling the stereotypical conceptions of witches and Gothic women.

By utilizing influential musicians and popular television shows and films as a catalyst for female empowerment, 20th-century pop culture has reimagined the once-perceived image of witches. The Gothic female figure, once confined to the label of a victim or a wicked temptress, has now transformed into a symbolic representation of feminine power and self-declaration. Closely analyzing fictional characters like Thomasin and Carmilla, and real-life inspirational figures such as Stevie Nicks and Kate Bush, showcases how the Gothic feminine mystique is something to be celebrated, rather than feared or condemned. By embracing magic, sensuality, and sovereignty, these pop culture mediums and figures allow women to reclaim the very qualities that once led to their persecution. The contemporary Gothic woman is no longer a monstrous outcast but a radiant force—ethereal, emotionally complex, and defiantly autonomous.

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