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## **Breaking Stereotypes: Analyzing the Evolving Representation of the 'Witch' in 20th Century America**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper explores the dynamic evolution of the portrayal of witches in American culture, tracing its intricate connection to shifting cultural, societal, and literary contexts. Originating from the historical backdrop of witchcraft trials in colonial America, the image of the witch has undergone continuous transformations over centuries. Examining diverse and often paradoxical representations, this research spans from the Salem trials to contemporary films, unraveling the rich literary tapestry that both reflects and shapes perceptions of witches in American culture. By delving into historical roots and employing a range of cinematic examples, including “The Wizard of Oz (1939),” “I Married a Witch (1942),” “Bell, Book and Candle (1958),” “Bewitched (1964-74),” “Sabrina, The Teenage Witch (1996-2000),” “Practical Magic (1998),” “The Witches of Eastwick (1987),” “The Craft (1996),” and “The Blair Witch Project (1999),” the paper aims to elucidate the layers of representation and interpretation contributing to the evolving depictions of witches in American culture.

**Keywords:** Feminist, America, Witch, representation, women.

### **Introduction**

The American cultural history represents a fascinating evolution and transformation of the depiction of witches intricately linked to the changing cultural, societal and literary milieu. Rooted in the historical narratives of witchcraft trials that transpired in colonial America, the image of the witch has persistently shaped and reshaped itself over the centuries. This paper embarks on a journey through time, exploring the multifaceted and often paradoxical portrayals of witches in American culture. From the haunting trials of Salem to the bewitching realms of contemporary fiction, this study delves into the rich literary landscape that has both mirrored and molded the perception of witches in American

culture. By tracing the historical roots of witchcraft in America, the aim is to unravel the layers of representation and interpretation that have contributed to the changing faces of witches within the context of American literature.

This scholarly inquiry endeavors to elucidate the transformative evolution of the conceptualization of 'witch' since the inception of the 20th century. Prior to an in-depth exploration of this evolution, it is imperative to establish a precise definition of the term 'witch.' According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a witch is characterized as "one that is credited with usually malignant supernatural powers; especially a woman practicing usually black witchcraft often with the aid of a devil or familiar." However, I posit that the quintessential representation of a witch in Western cultural consciousness is encapsulated by the enduring image of a woman holding a broomstick. This imagery comprises two integral components: the female persona and the broomstick. A woman devoid of the broomstick symbolizes an ordinary individual, whereas the inclusion of the broomstick distinguishes her as a witch, thus serving as an instrument of empowerment. The modality of empowerment may encompass practices such as black magic or a covenant with the devil. Additionally, the phallic symbolism inherent in the broomstick underscores the perceived necessity for a diabolical or male agency to confer empowerment upon women. Subsequent to the 1900s, the archetype of the 'witch' has metamorphosed into a metaphorical vessel for contemporary preoccupations, including but not limited to, themes of female sexuality and empowerment, which shall be expounded upon in the ensuing discourse.

## Discussion

By the beginning of 1900, four stereotypes of witches as women were competing in American thought, some of which would not achieve prominence until the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century. One was the exemplary feminist guru. Another was the powerful but inexplicable animal magnetist. A third was the deluded victim popularized by writers like Josiah G Holland and Frank Samuel Child. And the last was the original 17<sup>th</sup> century image, that of the satanic conspirator. But at the turn of the century a new synthesis came from a surprising quarter and ignored the negative images altogether. L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is populated by witches, many of whom were powerful and good. In this comic world of powerful women and witch-women, which Sally Wagner in her essay "Matilda Joselyn Gage: She Who Holds the Sky" calls a "church-free, female led utopia", the only person powerful enough to send Dorothy back home is the good witch Glinda. And the witch does so in a

significant way: she simply makes Dorothy aware that she always had the power she needed. The good sense, kindness and innate power of at least some of the witches are celebrated in the book. Baum's witches almost become liberal metaphors for female self-empowerment. But the 'self-empowered accepted witch' is not the Wicked Witch of the West but the Good witch Glinda, who is portrayed as full of femininity and motherly care for Dorothy. But the question remains, is the Wicked Witch, 'bad' or 'wicked' because she pursues 'power' as embodied in the ruby slippers? The idea of what makes a witch good or bad, accepted or unaccepted, will be further developed as my paper progresses. In all subsequent representations of witches in popular culture they fall into either of the two main prototypes set by *The Wizard of Oz*. They follow either the tradition of the feminine and maternal Glinda the good witch or the power seeking Wicked witch of the West.

Following the footsteps of the first stirrings of the re-definition of the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, comes the 1942 film, *I Married a Witch* directed by Rene Clair and an adaptation of the novel *The Passionate Witch* by Thorne Smith. The movie tells the story of a witch Jennifer, played by Veronica Lake. Jennifer had been burned at the stake in New England long ago when people still believed in witches. Her accusers were Puritan ancestors of Wallace Woolley, who is the male protagonist. Jennifer sets out to make Wallace fall in love with her, the idea being that married to the wrong woman, he would be tormented by forbidden passion. But mistakenly Jennifer loves her own love philter and fall in love with him. And then Jennifer's wizard father surfaces and opposes her marriage with Wallace. His machinations against the lovers is defeated but the price is important: Jennifer is stripped off her power and becomes a mere mortal. Thus she could marry Wallace and they could even live happily ever after.

*I Married a Witch* strongly affirms that domesticated witches are the only good kind. The problem with the undomesticated ones is the threat they pose to the omnipotence of the American male. The relative dating of the novel and the film is important. In the 1930's America was battered by the Depression, broken and looking for scape-goats. Women were being pushed out of the workforce to make way for men with families to feed and patriarchy was in desperate crisis. But by 1942, America had regained her confidence. American men were advancing the world over to avenge Pearl Harbour and the women were working alongside them. Economically speaking times were good for women at home and even at

work. But it was still clear that the best place for a woman was at home even if that meant the home front.

After the war the expectation was that women would be glad to get back to the kitchen and nursery. That was where Jennifer the married witch had ended her story. Some women, of course, did not want to do this. And the witchcraft comedy reflected this reluctance, its dangers and pleasures, in its next incarnation. The 1958 film *Bell, Book and Candle* went straight to the point by making witchcraft and women's other powers interchangeable, "a very bewitching comedy, on a very enchanting subject- sex". The impression that women's witchcraft was a straightforward metaphor for sex was strengthened immeasurably by *Bell, Book and Candle* especially because the film starred James Stewart and Kim Novak who had both appeared in the same year in *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's tragedy of sexual obsession.

Moving to the 1960's and 1970's, there is the television comedy *Bewitched* which ran from 1964 to 1972, and was an American icon by the time it ended. *Bewitched* is the best known example of the taming of the witch. It is interesting to note that the 60's and the 70's were the time of strong counter-culture movements. While Jenny of *Forrest Gump* is exploring her possibilities, here is Samantha of *Bewitched*, a witch, a 'woman with power', restraining and keeping in control her powers and becoming a model of traditional femininity. Samantha is pleasant and morally sound, she stays at home and shops sensibly while her husband Darrin works in his office. She cooks and cleans and supports her husband's career. Against the backdrop of an increasingly vicious battle between conservatives and radicals, here is a woman despite her 'power', who is happy to stay at home and cook for her husband. Here witchcraft is being used as a metaphor for women's aspirations. Samantha does not usually use magic to clean her house or whip up meals. Instead, she exemplified the housewife's version of the American frontier virtues, by making do and working hard, without magical advantages or expensive gadgets. There is a long history of equating witchcraft with labor saving technology and making the two interchangeable. One of the world's first steam-engine was named 'Lancashire Witch', several pioneering steamships were dubbed the 'Water Witch' and even an early computer was named W.I.T.C.H. Samantha chose to do without such technological help and without its traditional magical equivalents as well. Instead, she washed, scrubbed, chopped vegetables and roasted meat like generations of home-making women before her. This promoted the idea that the tensions surrounding women's place in workforce that had been so evident in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's were a

thing of the past. If women would accept their role in the home, their work there would be respected and they could join with men in sharing the benefits of the affluent society. So Samantha's hard work was rewarded with modern furniture, fashionable clothes and a smart car. Apparently even witches stayed home to make cookies and raise children and ordinary women might well do the same. The message is clear.

Coming to the 1990's, where witches were allowed a number of modern freedoms, they were again made safe by being contained in the family. The 1990's television series *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* and *Charmed* and the 1998 film *Practical Magic* used this trick to domesticate their witches. The leading witches of *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* and *Practical Magic*, that is Sabrina and Sally, lived with their witch aunts. Both were pretty, heterosexual and keen to please those around them by working hard and doing domestic chores. "Sally was Glinda Good Witch", perceptively says Sandra Bullock in an interview who played the part of Sally in *Practical Magic*. By linking Sally of 1998 and Glinda Good Witch of the 1900's, it is easy to see that not much have changed in the basic conception of who a 'good' witch is, that is someone who is willing to be domesticated and someone who controls and suppresses her power and uses it only for the good of the others.

In opposition to Glinda Good Witch and her train of followers is the Wicked Witch of the West and her successors. I will deal with three films, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *The Craft* (1996) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), to prove my point that the 'power' which the Wicked Witch of the West was pursuing is transformed and personified as assertive, clever and sexually assured women. And how these women are perceived as threats and hence witches. *The Witches of Eastwick*, is directed by George Miller and stars Jack Nicholson as the devil and Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer as the three witches. The story revolves around how through Nicholson's character, the three women experience the seductive nature of power. But by the end discovers that this very power becomes a threat to their own existence. The film *The Craft* also tells the similar story of temporary empowerment with serious consequences. In both films, witchcraft is a seductive "masculine" power, that women can't handle sensibly, and which lures them with a promise of legitimate gain, only to expose them to danger and self doubt. Each film leaves the witches where they began, battling a demoniac patriarchal force, more devastated than before, because they dared to venture outside their limits.

The intersection between the images of the witch and the women is reinforced in the most famed millennial event, *The Blair Witch Project*. The film focuses on the film-making team of Heather, Josh and Mike headed by Heather who hikes into the Black Hills near Burkittsville, to film a documentary about a local legend known as Blair Witch, and subsequently goes missing. Towards the end of the movie after the disappearance/death of Mike and Josh, Heather records her famous apology:

I just want to apologize to Mike's mom and Josh's mom, and I'm sorry to everyone . . . I am so so sorry for everything that has happened, because, in spite of what Mike says now, it is my fault, because it was my project, and I insisted. I insisted on everything . . . everything had to be my way, and this is where we've ended up...

The equation between assertive women, lone women and witches is inescapable. It was Heather who was the wicked woman, alone in the woods, apologizing to real mothers and good women. The implications are clear Heather should not have been practicing the magic of film-making, believing she was in control of words and images. Heather was the child-killer, depriving Josh's and Mike's mothers of their sons. Viewers never get to see the Blair Witch on the screen but they don't need to. It was obvious who she was, everyone died because of Heather including herself. Metaphorically, Heather had become the Blair Witch.

## Conclusion

And to come to my conclusion, early American nation also had its own melancholy experience of the extermination of an indigenous culture and faced with the charge that witch-hunting had been a sexist activity, later America had to show some tolerance and in a way, acceptance of witches. But in order to be accepted, witches in popular culture often had to be framed within the traditional setting of marriage and family which often undercut their metaphorical significance as empowered women. While women pursuing power is denounced especially by showing them suffering tragic consequences and disillusionment, women who settle down and marry and willing to domesticate their potential or power is glorified. Jenny of *Forrest Gump* attains redemption only after marrying Forrest and settling down. 'Good' witch and 'bad' witch hence metaphorically stand for what a woman is expected to do in society and what she is not expected to do. The central argument posited in

this thesis asserts that historical allegations of witchcraft were, to a significant extent, characterized by manipulative motives, such as the acquisition of wealth from affluent widows, motivations rooted in revenge and jealousy, and zealous adherence to religious and puritanical ideologies. Moreover, the contemporary portrayal of the 'witch' persists as a tool of manipulation wielded by prevailing patriarchal forces. This utilization indirectly communicates a formidable threat, cautioning against the consequences faced by women who deviate from established societal norms.

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