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The Witch: A New England Folk Tale

Stephen Stensrud
stevesten8@aol.com

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The Witch: A New England Folk Tale

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Witch: A New England Folk Tale* (2016), directed by Robert Eggers.

At the end of *The Witch*, writer and director Robert Eggers informs the viewer that the film was inspired by many folk tales, fairy tales and written accounts, including journals, diaries and court records. Dialogue in the movie was taken from these sources as well. While the movie is very enjoyable as a horror film, for those interested in religion and film, it also provides a somewhat sensationalized portrait of how some Puritans may have viewed the threat of witchcraft to their community. Expert detail was given to the dialogue, costume designs and candle lit sets.

The Witch is a story of a family that moves from their village to an isolated farm, believing this is God's will for them, contrary to the will of their faith community. Here we focus on the family and their Puritan beliefs. *The Witch* shows the family living in a dualistic world – a world of high contrasts between right and wrong, good and evil. It is about the good Puritan family versus the evil forces of the unknown world. These evil forces manifest as Satan, witches and other evil agents. Rather than assuring our modern sensibilities about the highly superstitious minds of this family, we are brought face to face with evil from the outset of the film. A witch kidnaps and kills the family's yet-to-be baptized infant as a human sacrifice. A black goat, possibly representing Satan, communicates with the younger twins of this Puritan family. A rabbit and a crow are perhaps Familiars, observing and leading family members to their destruction. Soon, this unknown evil ruins their crops and taints their milk. The patriarch of the family, William, claims to be righteous and pious, but we learn that he lies to his wife out of pride. The primary character is the eldest daughter Thomasin, who is often outspoken. Since witches were feared for their power over men from the age of puberty, Thomasin is an ideal candidate for becoming a witch. Her mother fearfully notes to the father that Thomasin is "showing signs of womanhood." Her younger brother is shown on various occasions staring at her cleavage. The family members suffer shame and guilt; the heart of this family is rooted in sin.

The Witch clearly portrays the Puritan family as vile sinners, easily succumbing to the sins of the flesh, constantly harassed by Satan and his agents. Besides lust and theft, dishonesty and pride are prayed against. The onus is on them to protect themselves from their nature, through a life of constant prayer, worship and hard work. The faith community helps each other stay on the path of righteousness; rejection makes one more vulnerable. When this Puritan family moves away from their community and chooses to live on the edge of an ominous forest, we can quickly foresee that their lives have become even more difficult and onerous.

As a good horror story, the evil must continue, and it does, as Thomasin is seen at the end of the movie walking naked toward a coven of her sister witches, who are rapturously dancing and gyrating around a fire. While real life Puritans may have succumbed to their own paranoia in their persecution of innocent women, this film represents how they actually saw the world, as engaged in a fearful supernatural struggle between good and evil. It is a film that fills the viewer with dread from its very start, and keeps them enthralled between a historical period piece and a supernatural horror movie.