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The Witch's Sinister Tale of One's Own Destruction

We tend to watch horror films, maybe not quite knowing what to expect, but knowing that we are going to be scared. Fear can be very straightforward in these films. Our hearts start pounding and our palms sweat as we sink deeper into our seats, waiting for the jump scare. However, this fear is easy to recover from, because we know the cause; the film's main antagonist is easy to identify and recognize as the reason we're feeling this way. But what happens when we can't easily identify the source of our discomfort? We then start to feel agonizing paranoia and suspicion, as we struggle to see the film's real intentions. A film might not leave you with a clear-cut answer, using your distress to bring to light the social implications of the plot, calling attention to issues highlighted by disturbing and drastic events that one can't quite explain. Horror reflects our societal and cultural anxieties and fears, forcing us to confront them in an uncomfortable way (Wallace). Our fears make us extremely uncomfortable, and horror films can use certain elements to build on this discomfort. The result can be paranoia and suspense as we are forced to sit and face what a director wants us to.

Such is the case with Robert Eggers' 2015 film, *The Witch*, a film filled with discomfort as Eggers forces his audience to take part in the fears of his characters. Set in the 1630s New England, *The Witch* centers around a Puritan family cast out from their village and forced to set up a new, isolated, life at the edge of an eerie wood, home to a sinister

witch. When the youngest child, Samuel, goes missing under the care of the eldest daughter, Thomasin, tensions arise as the family is forced to confront evil forces at work. It should seem obvious who is to blame here, but we quickly find that the witch is not the actual problem for the family, she just is what pushes them to the edge. Their paranoia and fear turn them against each other, making them destroy themselves. The film is a reflection of the cultural and societal fears of Puritan society and how those fears can result in disastrous consequences. Cinematography plays an essential role in creating paranoia and suspicion in the film. The cinematic features force us to witness the societal fears of the Puritan era head-on. Combining elements such as sound, lighting, tense sequences, and strong dialogue, *The Witch* brings to life the horror behind a seemingly innocent family. Using these elements, Eggers creates a suspenseful and paranoid atmosphere, as the family, and the audience, are forced to confront their fears surrounding religion and sexuality.

Sound and lighting play a key role in the film. The gloomy lighting depicts a land where there is no hope, as if a dark shadow is constantly cast over the family. Often the music intensifies when we reach a particularly tense or eerie moment in the film. From the beginning, the family tries to maintain their relationship with God, but the film's atmosphere depicts a world that fills us with dread, a world where God does not exist. We immediately recognize that something is wrong with the persistent dim lighting throughout the whole film and the eerie music in the background. This sense of wrongness is evident in the scene where the family finds their new home. The mother and father, William and Katherine, are praying, hands locked and widespread in a supposed celebration that they have found hope, that God has blessed them. However, the increasing sound of a haunting orchestra as the camera zooms in on the wood in front of them suggests to us as the

audience the real tone of the film. The emphasis on the woods along with the music makes us uncomfortable, and our fear is targeted to what might happen because of who resides in those woods. This scene builds up tension, hinting that the family's prayers will not be answered. The cinematography sets the tone for the film, making us sense that the family depends on God to bless them, but He will not provide. Instead, the woods will draw out the sins they try to hide, leaning on God for support instead of facing them head-on.

These elements contribute to how the film builds on the fear that God is not evident as bad things keep happening. There are many tense sequences, combined with frightening dialogue and music, where the film depicts the tension that the family's sins create and the disturbance by the things they do for the sake of God. This tension is prevalent in the scene after William drags Thomasin into the house, after Caleb has died, yelling at the twins, Mercy and Jonas, to wake up and prove their evilness. The camera zooms in on their unconscious forms on the bed, and we can hear their heavy breathing, making us aware that something is wrong and paranoid because we do not know what is going on. They are partly obscured by the darkness, and the music in the background tells us that something bad has happened or will happen to them, creating fear as we cannot fully see them. By combining William's angry demeanor, music, and dialogue, the film makes us suspicious about what he might do to his own children. He calls them "Dissemblers! Grave pretenders all" cursing them for their apparent ungodly ways in the form of witchcraft. He orders his wife to grab a billhook saying, "I will smite Jonas as Abraham would have done his seed." The dialogue is horrifying to listen to as William's voice startles us, and we are scared, not knowing the outcome of the scene. The idea that he could grab a small child with the intent to kill, placing blame on his family for their faults fills us with dread. Throughout the whole

scene, William is put into a place of power and that is evident with his loud and deep voice, refusing to listen to the rest of his family. Confronted with a tense atmosphere, the audience sits paranoid about what William will do to his children in the name of God.

Furthermore, the film's elements build on a fears surrounding gender and sexuality in Puritan times. The family is isolated and cannot deal with matters involving their children, their growth, and their questioning of the world without suspicion arising. They have no one to rely on except God, and even then it seems he has abandoned them. With the gloomy atmosphere and dim lighting, the audience can almost feel the family's isolation. It is as if Eggers has submerged us into the Puritan lifestyle, along with its anxieties. Tension is created with Thomasin's emerging sexuality. Shots of Caleb's glances at her chest and his immediate guilt as he looks away startle us, as it is a brother looking curiously at his sister. With these glances, we are further hit with the family's isolation as they cannot cope with normal aspects of life, only having each other to rely on and turn against. The film creates a world where Thomasin is forced to take on the guilt and shame her family puts on her for her womanhood. Her being blamed for Samuel's disappearance does not help with this guilt, as she failed in her role as a caregiver.

Certain sequences in the film contribute to the growing fear and shame toward Thomasin as a woman. After Caleb's death, before the twins are threatened by William, Thomasin runs outside crying after being accused of being a witch, and William goes to comfort her. He holds her as she is crying, telling her it's going to be alright and hinting at a future at the farm. The camera is level with them, and they are connected, and we see the father comforting his daughter. However, we are soon suspicious of William as he asks Thomasin to be honest and admit that she is a witch. Thomasin sits up, the camera focusing

on her, blurring William in the background. With this angle, we can better resonate with her and see the realization that her father does not believe her. A father turning against his daughter makes us paranoid, as Thomasin and William have always been close, but now that connection is broken. Until now, Thomasin has been the perfect daughter, doing whatever she can to please her parents and God. The film's lighting has always been gloomy, but here, it weighs even heavier, as the gloominess has overcome any hope for change; now Thomasin gives up on trying and no longer respects her father. Instead of being the perfect daughter, she spits his faults back in his face, bruising his pride. The film once again combines music and dialogue to create a tense, suspicious atmosphere. As Thomasin asks "You ask me to speak truth?", laying out her father's sins, the eerie music comes back, a warning of what's to come, of the switch in both characters' demeanors. We see William attempting to revert to his role as the "man" of the house, a role Thomasin is criticizing, forcing him to confront his fears about gender and sexuality. "I am thy father," an irritated William says, to which she responds, "You are a hypocrite!" Now, we start to see William break, making us fearful because we cannot predict what he will do to be the "man" and control his daughter.

The film forces us to face the battle each character faces with their internal sin and the chaos that erupts from it. Thomasin is blamed for things that are not her fault, and childish jokes about being a witch turn into serious accusations against her as a woman. Later, after William has been killed by Black Phillip, Thomasin is attacked by Kate, and dialogue is once again important in revealing the family's fears surrounding Thomasin. Katherine tells Thomasin everything is her fault for making a "covenant with death." We know what Katherine is saying is not true, but the family's paranoia and delusions have

turned them against each other. "You bewitched thy brother, proud slut! Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore?" Katherine says to her. Fast-paced music plays they move to the ground and Katherine begins to strangle Thomasin, who quickly strikes her mother with a knife, killing her. The music, the sounds of Thomasin crying, the slash of the knife, and the eventual silence all contribute to our fears and paranoia because they raise the tension and shock factor. This scene is critical as we see Thomasin shift into what her environment made her. Sitting in silence, the film's chaos is gone for a moment. The audience sits with Thomasin in a world without noise, a world where all the fear that was placed on us is gone. Thomasin is finally free from the restrictions placed on her by her family and the ideals placed on her of how she should have been. It ties to the end of the film, where we see Thomasin give in to evil and become a witch. The eerie sounds of chanting and the red atmosphere scare us, and we are horrified to watch as Thomasin turns to what she believes is the option that will free her. In the end, she flies free with the chanting coven, laughing and crying, as she is finally free to be a woman, to sin without the restraints of her family and God. This scene further arises paranoia as we are left to contemplate the consequences of the family's world of broken misogyny.

The Witch captures what suspicion and paranoia can do to an already broken family, who use God to redeem their sins and pins the blame on the eldest daughter for failing to meet their standard of what a woman should be. The witch in the film represents what the paranoia should come from, however, there is tension and suspense when we see the family turn and target that paranoia towards each other, instead of facing the actual problem that the audience can see. The film doesn't just create paranoia and suspense, it makes us face

the issues that give us anxiety head-on. We are put into an uncomfortable position the entire film, frustrated with what should be so obvious, but is not. The film takes away a sense of control over the issues at hand, creating paranoia and suspicion because we cannot make sense of what is right in front of us. The film's cinematic elements submerge us directly into the film, as if we were actually there, making our emotions feel all the more real. We can see ourselves in the characters of the film and that frightens us because it shows the possibility that we too can destroy ourselves. Our flaws are even more prevalent when we cannot understand what is happening around us, and so our way of approaching them is flawed. *The Witch* brings to light our fear of how we handle our fears and what we can turn into when we think we are finally free.

Works Cited

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