

Chapter 6

On Witches and Chic Evil: A Psycho–Sociological Analysis of *The Love Witch*

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ABSTRACT

The Love Witch is a 2016 American film directed by Anna Biller. It tells the story of Elaine, a witch whose lovers happen to die one after the other. The film presents itself as a feminist view on gender roles and the dichotomy of femininity/masculinity. In this chapter, the author discusses the idea of evil and how it is portrayed in the film. Sociological and psychological perspectives are presented. The analysis shows that the main character can be viewed as a societal deviant or as a person struggling with a traumatic past, thus explaining her behavior that can be attributed to evil. Nevertheless, the film presents a novel view on feminine evil, showing that it is different, and it should not be compared with the masculine one.

INTRODUCTION

Modern society changed evil, from a solid and distinguishable phenomenon into an insidious and disorganized matter that flows indiscriminately through space and time (Bauman & Donskis, 2016). However, people are still interested in the image of evil and are still trying to understand it. The nature of evil has been a hot topic in films regardless of their era. Despite this interest, evil does not have as many faces as some would believe. The marginal, the weird or the psychopath are some of the archetypes of villainy, usually portrayed in the forms of drug dealers, disfigured killers or individuals who, at the surface, resemble us, but underneath, they are not like us. This creates a strong dichotomy between good and evil, one that reflects poorly on various real-life problems (Hills, M., & Schneider, 2007). If one thinks about horror movies, the evil takes even fewer forms. Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, Leatherface, and all the other standard slasher villains are similar, inhuman foes. Their cognitions are universally the same, their emotions are rarely a matter of interest and their motives are clear. They are oversimplified

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characters, usually possessing only one defining trait, their lust for murder (Norden, 2007). Another trait that most horror movies “big bads” share is their gender. For each Mrs. Voorhees, there are dozens of male killers and for each Samara/Sadako, there are countless other male ghosts or demons. Women are underrepresented as horror movie villains, but when they appear, they are usually portrayed in more complex manners.

This chapter proposes an analysis of a female villain, Elaine Parks from 2016’s *The Love Witch* (Biller). She is a witch who moves to a new town after the death of her husband. Soon, all the men she meets start falling in love with her with deadly results.

We consider that the film and its main character propose a different aspect of evil, a more humane one, with a strong psychological interpretation. The evil discussed here is charismatic but deadly, soft, but also scary. It is more than the “point of weakness” (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 254) that leads to the fall from the Garden of Eden. It is more complex and, through its characteristics, significant for our society. Firstly, the characters (and the movie) are viewed through larger, sociological lenses. The second part of the analysis narrows its purposes and presents the psychological motives behind evil. The third part is dedicated to an analysis of gender roles and how gender is portrayed throughout the movie. Finally, the last chapter discusses the personal meanings of evil.

A MODERN TRAGEDY WITH A THROWBACK STYLE

The Love Witch presents the story of Elaine, a young woman searching for a fresh start. She moves to a new town, renting a room in a Victorian mansion. There she meets Trish, an interior decorator who takes care of the house. After a brief discussion, Elaine proposes her main goal that of finding a man who is perfect for her, who wants to love her and be loved by her. This proves to be easy because soon men start falling in love with her regardless of whether they are married or not.

The twist is that Elaine is a witch, specializing in love (or sex) magic. However, she was not always a witch. She had a husband who left her and then died in a mysterious way. Heartbroken after his betrayal, she met a coven of witches who taught her magic, thus offering her a new purpose in life.

The first man that falls for Elaine is Wayne, a university teacher, who takes her to his cabin in the woods. There, she gives him a drink tainted with hallucinogenic drugs. After spending the night together, Wayne becomes extremely anxious and emotional and dies from a heart attack. Next, Elaine seduces Trish’s husband, Richard. He also becomes obsessed with her, which determines Elaine to end the relationship. Soon, he commits suicide. Wayne’s death does not remain unnoticed and puts a detective, Griff, on her tracks. However, he also falls in love with her. Their involvement is short because Griff finds some evidence linking Elaine to the previous deaths and tries to arrest her. Upset that no man can ever love her enough, Elaine stabs Griff to death.

The film was well-received by critics, who particularly praised its style. Using bold color palettes, lavish costumes, and set design, it is a throwback to the cinema of ’60 and ’70. However, the film is more than style over substance. It was named an important example of the female gaze (Garvey, 2017) as it proposes a woman’s vision (through its director, its main character and its spectators) on its main themes.

The Love Witch speaks about gender dynamics and gender differences. Women and men are mostly portrayed as incongruent. Their desires, expectations, and behaviors are different. Throughout the movie, they rarely get to know what others want. The characters see the world through some very thick lenses, they adhere to rigid gender norms and thus they become conflicted. In a way, this misunderstanding

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