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# The Name of the Witch

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## **The Name of the Witch**

*by Fritz Muntean*

[1650w]

Back in the years right after the war, when I was a little kid growing up in a grimy steel town in the folds of the mountains of western Pennsylvania, my granny (who'd been born in the mid-1880s in Wales) warned me and my brother that if we stayed out late after dark we'd be 'stolen by the Witches'.

We were deeply impressed with these words of wisdom. We talked it over at great length, and finally decided that whatever 'the Witches' might be, the odds were that they'd be offering young kids a better deal than what was currently going down in what passed for polite society in the 1940s. So he and I took to sneaking out our bedroom window in the middle of the night and hanging out — in as ostentatious a manner as we could manage — in the darkest corners of our neighborhood, waiting to be carried away by the Witches.

For all I know, my brother may still be waiting.

Me, I finally decided to make up my own kind of Witches to run away with, and the rest, as we say, is (early Craft) history, and you can read about our adventures in any number of good books about the earliest days of the Craft in N America. We were all still standing around in the dark. But now we were, or so we fancied ourselves, the dreadful agents of cultural change that our parents (and grandparents) had once warned us about.

20-odd years on, though, when we became aware that Contemporary Paganism was beginning to grow into a sizeable New Religious Movement, the desire for acceptance by the broader culture began causing a mantle of genteel respectability to be drawn over some of the darker and more powerful aspects of the Craft. Many, under the otherwise laudable banner of Pagan public relations, began insisting that Witch power is only constructive and good, and that the darkness surrounding classical Witch mythology was the slanderous work of repressive patriarchal agencies.

From the middle '80s onward, several examples of this 'White Witch' mentality began to appear. First there was the campaign to protest and boycott Jim Henson's movie, 'The Witches'. Then there was that 'Burning Times' video, which promoted the belief that all those who were caught up in the Great European Witch Hunt were real Witches — innocent and benign

Goddess-worshipping Witches just like us — who'd been condemned by the Inquisition as 'Satanists'. And we wonder why the public confuses Paganism with Devil worship!

From a psychological perspective, the Witch derives her character from the study of dreams, myth, and fairytales. Much of the popular identity of the Pagan Witch, however (according to writers like Margo Adler), has its roots in the delusional accusations of the Inquisition, and the universal, if paranoid, belief in the persistent existence of 'a small clandestine society engaged in antihuman practices.' For example, much-quoted writers like Marie-Louis von Franz often point out that the Witch of dreams and fairytales is a solitary woman, living far from the habitats of people, whereas the popular concept of the Witch as covener appears to have originated with the Inquisition.

According to the Jungians, the Witch is the 'Shadow' (the opposite contained within) of the divine Feminine. The archetypal Witch represents many of the dark and violent aspects of the Great Mother, which exist within us all. If we abuse, neglect, or mistreat the Great Mother, what will manifest in the world as a result, is the power of the Witch — in the form, say, of roughly-dressed people chaining themselves to the gates of an arms factory or nuclear reactor. Personally, I can't help but wonder about the wisdom of invoking this Witch energy in those who have not yet begun working out the Mother role — those young women and men who are adrift in the adolescent passageway between Maiden and Mother. The word 'cannon fodder' and other not-so-positive terms of soldiery come to mind.

The psychological Witch has great value. Her harsh and violent energy is necessary for the destruction of harmful and outdated institutions. According to Ann Ulanov, the Witch's voracious and lusty appetites for the pleasures of sex and food help us cut through the harmful paradigms of 'virgin-or-whore' and 'beauty as thinness.' Most important to those of us in midlife, her selfish rejection of the all-giving and self-sacrificing milky-Mother-within-us-all, makes it possible for the hard-handed, steely-eyed Crone to emerge. Archetypally speaking, the Witch is not the Crone, but without this transformational Witch energy, the Crone cannot be manifest, and the conservative Mother will live on, victim and martyr, long after her role is played out, a tragic and harmful institution. (How many Mothers does it take to screw in a lightbulb? 'None, I'll just sit here in the dark!')

Back before Zoroaster, people used to have fewer qualms about opposing polarities like good and bad, light and dark transformational and conservative, sublime and mundane, creative and destructive, energies being contained within the same Goddess or God. Ancient deities like Kali — who gives birth from the waist down, while cutting off heads from the waist up — embodied both the nurturing Mother and the destroying Witch.

In Anthropology, a tribal society's practitioner of helpful magic is usually called a Shaman. The word Witch is used to denote the magical evil-doer, the unscrupulous and selfish magician. The issue, according to Eliade, is not so much whether the magic is good or bad — that's more a matter of competence than intent — but whether the practitioner is contained within the society or operates from the outside. The positive Shaman most often works and lives inside the village, either physically or in terms of a mutual responsibility. By contrast, the Witch lives at a distance, an outcast, dangerous by way of being out of community control. This concept meshes well with the psychological idea of the Witch as outsider.

It's further interesting to note, that in matrist cultures like the Navaho, Witches are all men.

I think that much of our original enthusiasm for using the Witch word, back in the '60s, derived from the term 'witch hunt,' used in the aftermath of McCarthyism to denote the unfair and vicious persecution of progressive and liberal elements by the religious or political forces of repression. Our distaste for the twisted power-mongering of McCarthyism was so strong that we were all too eager to identify with its victims. A noble undertaking, but it does lead one to ask: 'Am I necessarily one with the enemies of my enemy?' I'd say, 'Yes, certainly if it serves a good purpose,' but perhaps we should be more than a little wary of taking such noble and quixotic gestures quite so literally.

It's one thing to challenge patriarchal authority by adopting the name of the Church and State's worst (if self-inflicted) nightmare — and quite another to then turn around and insist that Witches were never bad, were always only good, and that any information to the contrary is intentional defamation of our religion.

Ursula LeGuin says that superstition is caused by taking otherwise useful metaphors literally. That's a pretty good definition of fundamentalism as

well. I get very concerned when otherwise intelligent and well-educated Pagans neglect the study of psychology and anthropology because of the perceived insult to modern Wicca in the scholar's use of the word 'Witch.'"

Furthermore, what difference is there between the Pagans who protested and picketed that movie, 'The Witches', and the fundamentalist Christians and right-wing Catholics who protested and picketed 'Jesus Christ Superstar' and 'The Last Temptation of Christ'? I think that all these groups have been equally and deeply offended by being asked to look beneath the surface of their metaphors.

I've been calling myself a Witch for some time now — almost half a century. I believe the name of the Witch is a name of power, and that the power of the Witch is a power that can truly change the world.

But I have felt from the beginning that some elements of the power of the Witch are dark, destructive, and dangerous — and none the less valuable for being so. And that the wielding of Witch energy therefore requires serious training, great restraint, deep humility, and above all — enormous compassion and love.

This attempted sanitization of the Witch is not only having the effect of trivializing the powers involved — a sort of 'Pagan Disneyfication,' complete with cutesy unicorns, friendly dragons and Barbie doll elves — but I'm afraid that something far worse is happening. I'm afraid that by denying the darkness and the destructive energies inherent in the power of the Witch (and in ourselves) — and by the concomitant de-emphasis of training, restraint, humility, and compassion — we stand in some danger of turning this darkness loose upon our own Pagan communities. The tendency of conflicts in our communities to spin out of control, to take on a life of their own, and to turn into Witch Wars takes on new meaning in light of these concerns.

I don't believe that we are, necessarily, trying to work with forces beyond our control. I do believe that the forces involved require more respect than we're giving them, if we insist that Wicca is nothing but sweetness and light. I don't believe we have anything to gain by publicly emphasizing the darker and more dangerous aspects of our Craft — there is, after all, no need to unduly frighten the broader public. I do believe that if we start taking our own PR literally, we stand great danger of losing control of what I have

always believed to be the most powerful and effective forces available for the restructuring of our culture and the preservation of our planet.