The Witch

Or: Women Who Know Too Much
A reading & discussion resource · Essay No.1
For readers aged 16–18

Start here

About this resource

This resource goes with the essay The Witch by Hayley Davis – the first in the Monstrous collection, which looks at the myths that get attached to women and the stories that push back. Read the essay first (it's on the site, monstrouswomen.com), then use this to dig into how it works and what it's really arguing.

It's written for readers roughly 16 to 18 – in schools and sixth form, in book groups and community groups, or on your own. Teachers and facilitators: there are close-reading tasks, discussion questions and a creative brief you can lift straight into a lesson, a session or coursework, plus a curriculum panel at the end. The prompts work with a whole class, in small groups or in pairs, and don't assume any prior knowledge – use as much or as little as suits your group, in any order.

A note before you start. This essay is partly about being treated as a problem for being clever, or curious, or too much. If any of that lands close to home, that's not a coincidence – it's the point. The essay isn't saying there's something wrong with you. It's taking apart the story that says there is.

Warm up

Before you read

Two minutes, on your own or out loud. No wrong answers.

- Think of a time being good at something changed how people treated you – for better or worse. What changed?
- When you hear the word witch, what's the first image in your head? Where do you think it came from – a book, a film, a costume, a person?
- Name a woman – real, fictional, famous – who gets called "difficult", "too much" or "scary". What has she actually done to earn it?

The ideas

What the essay is doing

The essay opens like a memoir – a six-year-old starting a new school in Newtown, Birmingham, watching a boy snatch her Sticklebricks and a teacher shake a classmate. But it isn't really a school story. Davis uses her own childhood to unpick something much bigger: how a real girl gets quietly turned into a character in a story that was written long before she was born.

Story vs narrative

The essay pauses to make a distinction worth stealing for your own analysis:

"A story is a sequence of events… A narrative is how these events are crafted, ordered and framed to create meaning for the audience."

Same events, different framing, completely different meaning. That gap – between what happened and how it's told – is where power sits. It's also, conveniently, exactly what examiners mean when they ask how a writer shapes meaning.

Narrative sorting

Davis watches herself get filed. Once she's marked out as clever – reading to the class, sitting in the teacher's chair – the mood turns: conversations stop when she enters, eyes roll when her hand goes up. She stops being a curious child and becomes a stock character in an old script: the one who knows too much, who can't quite be trusted, who might think she's better than everyone. She becomes the Witch.

Repetition makes it feel inevitable

The essay points out that the more often we hear a story shaped the same way, the more its ending feels like fact rather than choice: be lovely and a prince will come; be curious and you'll be destroyed; clever old women are up to no good. Repetition is how a made-up pattern starts to look like the natural order of things.

The anatomy of a witch

Davis argues that the witch, across fairy tale, Disney and Dahl, is built from the same handful of traits. Keep these three in your head – you'll use them later:

1. Knowledge. Every witch is an expert. What gets called "magic" is usually years of hard-won study – the Grand High Witch and her Formula 86 is basically a CEO running R&D. Witches are never stupid, and that's what makes them impossible to dismiss.
2. Appetite. Witches want things, openly, and don't apologise for it. Ursula eats and covets a voice; the Hansel and Gretel witch has a whole house of cake and still wants more. Hunger she refuses to curb.
3. Resources. The overlooked one. Witches are often rich – castles, staff, property, "rolling in money". A woman with her own money and her own mind can leave, choose, refuse. Ask who that frightens.

The reframe: who benefits?

Having built the pattern, the essay pivots from what makes a woman a witch? to a sharper question:

"Maybe the witch isn't the problem… Who benefits from women who have very little power, options or agency?"

The witch stops being a monster and becomes a woman who is independent, educated and hard to control – and the "monster" label starts to look less like a description and more like a tool. Notice the essay doesn't announce this as a conclusion. It hands you the evidence and lets you arrive there yourself.

The ending: back to the playground

The essay doesn't stop on the idea – it returns to the memoir, and the theory is acted out in front of you. Picked at the last minute to dance in the end-of-year concert, Davis shines, and is immediately cut down by a classmate, Antoinette, who "determinedly, brutally, set about removing my wings" – warning her that people don't like someone who thinks they're good at everything. The Maleficent image from earlier in the essay becomes real, and it closes on the villagers "sharpening their pitchforks". The argument isn't concluded; it's demonstrated – and the braid of memory and analysis ends where it began.

Look closely

Close reading: how it's built

Three short tasks on craft. Good for unseen-prose practice and for building the kind of "how the writer does it" analysis exams reward.

1 Why start with a memory?

Re-read from the opening to the Mr Spencer scene. The essay could have just stated its argument. Instead it makes you watch a small girl work out the rules of a violent playground.

- What does the Sticklebricks moment show you that a statement like "children can be selfish" wouldn't?
- Why do you trust the argument more because it grew out of a real experience? What would be lost if the memoir were cut?

2 Find the gear-change

Somewhere in the middle the writing shifts from telling a story to making an argument. Find the sentence where it turns (look near "I think it's useful here to clarify…").

- How does the language change – sentence length, vocabulary, how personal it feels?
- The essay then slides back into memory ("narrative sorting", becoming the Witch). Why braid the two together instead of keeping story and analysis in separate halves?

3 Why end with a scene, not a statement

The essay could have ended on its big idea – who benefits? Instead it goes back to the playground: the concert, the praise, and Antoinette "removing the wings".

- Why finish on a lived scene rather than a neat conclusion? What does showing the pattern happen do that explaining it wouldn't?
- Earlier the essay mentions Maleficent having her wings burned off. How does bringing that image back – Antoinette "removing my wings", the "pitchforks" – change how the ending lands?
- The essay opens with a small child learning the playground's rules and closes with her punished for breaking them. What's the effect of ending where it began?

Test the idea

The witch's anatomy – applied

Take the three traits – knowledge, appetite, resources – and put another witch under the same light. Pick one you know well:

the witches in Macbeth; the White Witch in Narnia; Circe (Homer, or Madeline Miller); the witches of The Crucible; Angela Carter's reworked fairy-tale women; Baba Yaga; or any witch from a film or game you love.

- Which of the three traits does she have? Point to specific moments.
- How is she punished, contained or killed – and by whom? A tower, a fire, exile, a fall?
- Now run Davis's final question on her: who is she dangerous to, and what would that person lose if she got what she wanted?

For coursework (NEA): this is a ready-made comparison. Set The Witch beside a canonical text with a witch figure and write about how each shapes our judgement of her – one through contemporary personal essay, one through drama, poetry or the fairy tale.

Talk it out

Discussion

For a class, a group, or a good argument with a friend. No settled answers.

- At the end, Antoinette warns Davis that people don't like someone who thinks they're "good at everything". Where do you see that same rule enforced on women in the public eye now – politicians, pop stars, women online?
- Is "difficult woman" ever a compliment? Who decides when it isn't?
- The essay reframes hunger and ambition as things women are punished for showing. Do boys and men get read the same way for wanting things openly? If not, why not?

- Has being clever ever cost you socially? Did you ever hide it? What happened?
- If the witch is really "a woman who is hard to control", who wrote the story that made her a monster – and what were they protecting?

Now you

Write your own

Davis's method, laid bare, is a structure you can borrow. Write a short piece (roughly 500–800 words) that moves through four gears:

1. The incident. One real moment where you were sorted – labelled, judged, put in a box – by other people. Small is fine. Make us see it, the way the Sticklebricks scene lets us see it.
2. The pattern. Step back. Was this just about you, or part of something that happens to lots of people like you?
3. The archetype. Name the stock character you were cast as – the Witch, the Know-it-all, the Teacher's Pet, the Show-off, the Try-hard, the Difficult One. Where else does that character appear in stories?
4. The turn. Don't end on a tidy lesson. Either turn the question over – who does this story actually serve? – or do what the essay does and close on a single moment that shows the pattern in action. Let the reader feel the point rather than be told it.

One rule: resist the urge to explain your feelings. Show the moment and trust the reader. The essay barely says "this hurt" – it lets the shaking, the eye-rolls and the silence do the work.

For teachers

Curriculum links

Indicative only – check against your current specification. The Witch works as:

- Unseen non-fiction / prose analysis: voice, structure, the braiding of anecdote and argument, register shift, and how a writer shapes a reader's judgement.
- A contemporary text for NEA comparative coursework, paired with a canonical work featuring a witch or "monstrous" woman (drama, poetry, the novel, or the fairy tale).
- An accessible way into feminist literary criticism and the study of archetype, myth and gender in narrative.
- A model text for original non-fiction writing (the creative brief above), with a clear, teachable structure.

Go further

Read, watch, listen

- Angela Carter, The Bloody Chamber – fairy tales rewritten to hand the power back.
- Madeline Miller, Circe – the archetypal witch given her own voice and interior life.
- Mona Chollet, In Defence of Witches – on the witch as a figure of independent womanhood (a meatier stretch read).
- Jack Zipes on fairy tales – how these stories were shaped, and who for.
- The Monstrous podcast episode, and the Monstrous Substack, for more from Hayley Davis.

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