

The Witch Has One of Horror's Greatest Endings

Just in time for Halloween, we re-examine *The Witch* ending, and how it is a macabre triumph in storytelling and theme.

[David Crow](#) October 31, 2019



Photo: A24

*This article contains **The Witch** spoilers.*

The Witch is one of those special kind of moviegoing horror experiences. Rather than relying on jump scares, copious amounts of gore, or the kind of cheap thrills that mirror being at an amusement park, director [Robert Eggers](#) in his stunning debut picked up unsuspecting audiences and transported

them to 1630s New England. As deliberately paced as the modest lives of its Calvinist protagonists, [The Witch](#) takes its delicious time stirring the cauldron and, ever so slowly, increasing the demonic heat until only in the last moments do you realize how monstrous things are about to turn.

While the film may not ultimately be for everyone, it is an undeniably unique cinematic experience that feels authentically archaic in its superstitions, yet modern in its grim implications about oppression, misogyny, and the bitter fruits borne of distrust. It also features a baby being turned into a crimson body wash, thirsty ravens with acute oral fixations, and a talking goat that convinces a young girl to sell her soul.

It is a triumphant debut for Eggers with an ending that's true implications send chills up the spine once the gravity sinks in.

With that said, there is also apparently some apprehension online about why a good Christian girl who saw her family just slaughtered by Satan-worshipping witches would then join their killers!? How could someone raised not only to be a Puritan, but also so visibly long to *inhabit that ideal*, literally succumb to the Devil, surrendering her body and soul to his dubious charms mere hours after the Dark One took the shape of a beast and personally slaughtered her father?

Quite honestly, it is the only dramatically satisfying and queasily tragic outcome that could occur in this perverse nightmare...

First let it be said that Thomasin—wonderfully played by newcomer [Anya Taylor-Joy](#)—is a *good girl*. Or at least she really, really, really wants to be one. It is why she is so full of self-loathing before even her family turns on her. Indeed, from the very first scene, Thomasin is the single sheep in her father's flock to express visible and severe distress over their banishment from the Commonwealth. She is the last one to leave the church from which

her father William (Ralph Ineson) has sought separation, and she is the only one to look back, almost pleading for a chance to stay in the fledgling colony.

This is underscored in her first scene with dialogue where Thomasin is witnessed praying to God. Before the horrors of supernatural forces have even beset her family, Thomasin is filled with doubt about her faith and her worthiness for the Kingdom of Heaven. Nonetheless, she longs for Christ's love and begs for His mercy and His grace to save her soul from fiery torment. Implicitly, she is also asking to have her faith restored and to be happy with her father choosing to spirit her away into the wilderness.

After this point, she is marked by the Devil for acquisition. Aye, the entire point of this fantasy hither is about how Satan in the guise of Black Phillip, and along with his cackling followers, will recruit the young, virginal, and pure-hearted doubter to his coven.

And the reason she is such an easy target is that she is an outsider in her family since she longs for the "luxuries" of both first the Commonwealth and then that of dear departed England, whose charms and beautiful glasswork she recounts to her uncomprehending younger brother Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw). This ability to quietly covet worldly things is also why she hates her own weakness and, on a certain level, desires her family to loathe her too, hence "spinning fantasies" to young sister Mercy (Ellie Grainger) about selling her soul to Satan and eating flesh. The irony of course pays off in the bitter end.



As for why she makes the terrible decision to disrobe for Black Phillip and then sign her name in his ledger? In her moment of weakness and desperation, it was the only option left to her mind.

Thomasin loved her family dearly and took no joy or solace in their demise. But they are nonetheless dead, and Thomasin is alone. Thus, she has a series of grisly options before her.

She can either:

1. Starve to death on the abandoned farm.
2. Possibly die while trying to reach the Commonwealth on foot.
3. Or face potential charges of being a witch after arriving at the colony and explaining that her family was killed by supernatural forces (and her own blade in her mother's case). And again, death is a likely outcome at the end of a Puritan's rope—just ask the 20 descendants from this generation who were executed 60 years later.

But perhaps most damning of all in Thomasin's mind is the absence of God's presence in her life. She prayed—nay, begged—for His mercy and His grace, and instead she saw her family betray her and then die. With the exception of the beloved Caleb, her younger twin siblings bore false witness against her character, her father revealed himself to be a prideful hypocrite that poisoned the mother against the daughter by letting Thomasin take the blame for a stolen silver cup, and finally her mother simply believed Thomasin to be pure evil.

She saw Satan's power manifest on the farm to devastating effect, and she found herself lost in the dark as a result. And, worst of all for a Puritan, Thomasin likely believed she already broke her covenant with God by taking her mother's life. Granted, Katherine (Kate Dickie) was trying to strangle her daughter to death in a deranged and irrational fury, but self-defense is a legal nuance that would probably be alien to a 17th century Puritan who believes she already committed an irreparable sin in the eyes of an uncaring Lord.

All of this is to not say that what she did is *right* or that God had abandoned her. In fact, it is quite miserably tragic that in an act of desperation and despair, she turned her back on a God she loved for the meager charms of “butter, a pretty dress [and] to live deliciously.” However, that is the other strength of the movie’s finale.

Her family’s puritanical beliefs oppressed and marginalized Thomasin. They were prepared to sell her to another family partly due to disdain after Samuel’s disappearance but also because they implicitly distrusted her sexuality. By virtue of her gender and age, Thomasin was growing into a pretty young woman whose desirous appeal was even distracting the young, lonely, and repressed Caleb. This made her a burden to her parents and something to be wary of having in a plain, Christian household.

But upon taking the Devil to her proverbial bed, Thomasin is allowed to feel free and be accepted in the kinship of other equally liberated women in the woods. The magic with which her new master lifts her up—apparently causing wild physical pleasure and ecstasy to all the women present—is a form of acceptance she did not have at home.

She became a witch in part because her beliefs were so fervent that in absence of one religious covenant, Thomasin immediately sought an alternative from the only kind of replacement she knew. And the culture that bred her to be meek, subservient, and imminently guilty due to her sex pushed her to be that what they feared most: feminine and dangerous. Thus our 21st century understanding of the medieval and early modern fears about witchcraft (strong women) greater informs this nightmarish fever dream taken from the most hideously perverse Puritan superstitions.

Yet lest ye be one to view the ending as a pro-feminist one, consider for a moment another ancient, pre-Puritan legend about witches...

The earliest visions we know about of witches flying (on broomsticks or otherwise) dates back from the 14th century. While today, it is widely believed that the concept came from women pleasuring themselves with molded rye or "ergot," at the time, clergy prosecutors believed that witches could fly by placing a special ointment on their broomsticks—an ointment derived not from hallucinogenic bread, [but from "the boiled fat of a child."](#)

Now at the end of ***The Witch***, there is a glaring omission about what happened to Thomasin's young siblings; the twins who the old hag stole the night she slaughtered the family's innocent goats. The twins are never seen again, but by the time Thomasin reaches the coven, there is a *huge* bonfire burning with the clear effect of causing all the witches to fly....

Thus Thomasin's supposed liberation and sensual rapture comes from the smoking flesh of her dead baby siblings—a horror she will soon inflict on other families if she wishes to stay young and live "deliciously."

A happily ever after, this is not.

*This **The Witch** article was first published on Feb. 22, 2016. It is currently on Netflix along with these [horror gems on the streaming service](#).*

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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...

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