Political, Religious and Feminist Aspects of Witchraft in Contemporary Women's Writing

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SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Diplomski studij engleskog i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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Political, Religious, and Feminist Aspects of Witchcraft in Contemporary Women's Writing

Diplomski rad

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Abstract

This paper explores the political, religious, and feminist aspects of contemporary witchcraft novels. It discusses the novels: *A Discovery of Witches* (2011) by Deborah Harkness, *The Witching Hour*: *Lives of the Mayfair Witches* (1991) by Anne Rice, *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* (2009) by Katherine Howe, *Voodoo Dreams: A Story of Marie Leveau* (1995) by Jewell Parker Rhodes, and *Beautiful Creatures* (2009) by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl. The analysis pays special attention to these novels' references to social issues such as racism, intolerance, social status of women, and the social function of religion that are achieved not only through fictional depiction of social issues but also by referring to actual historical occurrences.

The chapter on political aspects of witchcraft discusses in depth the policies and social interactions between witches and elaborates on the moral issues of using magic for personal gain. The analysis of the religious aspect of contemporary fiction about witchcraft, conducted in the following chapter, points at the role of the Catholic Church in the persecutions of witches during the Middle Ages. This Chapter also analyzes the religious elements in witchcraft itself by comparing fictional rituals to practices of pre-Christian religions. The last chapter, dedicated to feminist aspects of these novels, provides evidence of fictional witches being strong, educated, and independent women.

In addition to social issues, the analysis of political, religious, and feminist aspects provides an insight into the complex character of a fictional witch. The novels included in this scrutiny show that contemporary authors turn away from the traditional way of depicting witches as villains by revolving the plot around their lives and experiences. They demonstrate that a witch need not always be a negative character but can also be good and kind. As these authors include important social issues into their writing, reference historical occurrences, and create multifaceted characters, it can be said that fiction about witchcraft must not necessarily be trivial.

Keywords: Anne Rice, Deborah Harkness, Katherine Howe, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Kami Garcia, Margaret Stohl, witchcraft, feminism, religion, magic

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Introduction

Among many other supernatural creatures like vampires or werewolves, witches have always been an interesting subject matter for a fictional work. Whether in film, a television show, a novel or a children's story, witches have always been a popular choice for a villain, most commonly known as an old crone who lures children into her cabin to eat them, or a spiteful queen who puts a curse on a beautiful princess. Besides the fact that they are evil, not much is known about the fictional witches. However, contemporary authors, even television and film writers, put more emphasis on the character of a witch. If she is evil, much thought is put into exploring the reasons why she is like that or how she became evil. An even more interesting trend in contemporary film and television production is to make a witch the main protagonist. While Maleficent in *The Sleeping Beauty* only appears on a couple of occasions to make the story more interesting, in the new 2014 film version of the story, she becomes the main character. Similarly, the evil queen in the traditional *Snow White* does not even have a name; however, in the television series *Once Upon a Time* fans of fairytales not only learn that her name is Regina but also find out the reason behind her evil deeds and how she became a witch. This trend is also noticeable in written fiction about witchcraft. It appears that today witches not only embody the role of a villain but that they can also be heroes, characters the readers identify with. Apart from being witches, these characters are also career women, mothers, and superheroes. They are strong and vulnerable; they fall in love, have fears and goals. Whereas some authors prefer to write fiction based on historical events or people, especially referencing the witch trials of the Middle Ages, others create entirely new worlds with characters based mostly on their own imagination.

This paper analyzes contemporary fiction about witchcraft based on three main criteria: politics, religion, and feminism, in order to provide an elaborate insight into the fictional character of a witch. The terms "witch" and "witchcraft" will be used as broad terms

to encompass various fictional practitioners of magic with strong or slight religious connotations. Furthermore, the analysis of these three aspects is aimed towards providing examples of fiction about witchcraft that is not necessarily trivial, but deals with socially relevant topics such as women's social status, intolerance, racism, religious freedom, and oppression.

As one of the goals is to focus on the female point of view and explore the feminist agenda in contemporary witchcraft fiction, the analysis will be based on novels written only by female writers, even though their topics may not necessarily be exclusive to female writing. The analysis is based on five texts which represent a broad spectrum of fictional witchcraft, spanning periods from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century. They include a variety of magical practices like Voodoo, ritualistic magic based on pre-Christian religions, and innate magical powers like telekinesis. The texts in focus are *The Witching Hour* (1994) by Anne Rice, *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* (2009) by Katherine Howe, *Voodoo Dreams* (1995) by Jewell Paker Rhodes, *A Discovery of Witches* (2011) by Deborah Harkness, and *Beautiful Creatures* (2009) by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl. Additionally, several other novels will be referenced – *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) by Maryse Condé and *From Dead to Worse, The Sookie Stackhouse Novels* (2008) by Charlaine Harris, as well as numerous non-fictional texts, books, articles, and essays that tackle the theme of witchcraft. Finally, a general overview of witchcraft constitutes an important part of the paper as the very definition of witchcraft and its historical background are necessary for the analysis of the fictional works that oftentimes reference or are entirely based on historical events.

1. Summaries of the Main Novels

1.1. A Discovery of Witches

A Discovery of Witches is the first novel in a trilogy written by Deborah Harkness, which was published in 2011. The story revolves around the character of Dr. Diana Bishop, a historian. The story starts with Diana Bishop's discovery of an alchemical manuscript in Oxford's Bodleian Library. Because of the death of her parents, who were witches, Diana refuses to acknowledge magic as a part of her life and returns the manuscript. As soon as she returns the manuscript, it disappears. Later, Diana learns that the manuscript is believed to contain the secrets of the origin of all the magical creatures – witches, demons, and vampires. As she is the only one who has been able to retrieve the enchanted document, Diana quickly becomes the center of attention of all the creatures interested in the manuscript's secrets. Amongst the creatures searching for the manuscript is the vampire Matthew Clairmont. Soon after meeting each other, Diana and Matthew start a relationship and embark on a search for the lost document and answers to what really happened to Diana's parents. As their relationship progresses, it begins to disrupt the agreement, which prohibits magical creatures from interacting with other kinds of creatures. Because of the dangers, which are the result of Diana's and Matthew's relationship and their search for the lost manuscript, Diana realizes that keeping magic out of her life is no longer possible.

1.2. *The Witching Hour: Lives of the Mayfair Witches*

The Witching Hour is the first novel in a trilogy about the Mayfair witches, published in 1991. The story describes the lives of the Mayfair family and the influence that a dangerous and seductive spirit named Lasher has over them. Most of the story is narrated by Aron, a member of an occult organization called Talamasca, whose purpose is to observe and

document supernatural occurences. Through Aron's narrative, the reader learns about the history of the Mayfair family and about ghost Lasher's plans to become a demon in flesh by exploiting the powers of Mayfair witches. The missing link to Lasher's success is the main protagonist Dr. Rowan Mayfair, the most powerful Mayfair witch so far. While learning about her ancestry, Rowan, together with her lover Michael Curry and Aron, tries to find a way to destroy Lasher, but finds herself tempted by the seductive being.

1.3. *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*

The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane is a novel by Katherine Howe, which was published in the year 2009. While spending the summer of 1991 in her grandmother's abandoned house near Salem, Connie Goodwine, the main protagonist, finds a key with a piece of parchment paper with the inscription "Deliverance (Hazeltine) Dane" written on it hidden in a Bible. As a Harvard graduate in American Colonial Studies, Connie is intrigued by the note and promptly starts researching the mysterious Deliverance Dane. The plot is interrupted on several occasions with flashbacks of the year 1962 in which the reader learns about Deliverance's trial and execution on the account of practicing witchcraft. Connie's research takes her on a quest for a long-lost book of powerful magic spells, which belonged to Deliverance. Soon after discovering the book, Connie learns that she is not the only one who was searching for it and that being in its possession puts her life at risk.

1.4. *Voodoo Dreams: A Story of Marie Leveau*

Voodoo Dreams is a novel written by Jewell Parker Rhodes, published in 1995. The story takes place in the mid-nineteenth century in New Orleans and is intended to represent a fictional biography of the Voodoo Queen Marie Leveau. The novel consists of three parts – the beginning, the middle, and the end. The story starts with the last part in which Marie kills

her lover John. Quickly, the plot shifts to the beginning part which depicts Marie growing up in a small town called Teche with her grandmother, a converted Christian, reluctant to share any information about her past or Marie's mother. As the storyline progresses towards the middle, the plot shifts to New Orleans where Marie's grandmother takes her to find her a husband. Soon after getting married, eighteen year old Marie abandons her husband for a Voodoo priest named John, who promises to tell her about her mother. Marie learns that her mother was murdered for trying to perform a ritual in the town's square. She gradually takes her mother's place as a Voodoo priestess. The fact that she is possessed by the African god Damballah brings her respect in the African community, but what her followers do not know is that she knows nothing about Voodoo and that John forces her to perform rituals in order to earn money. Despite John's physical and psychological abuse and his unwillingness to teach her about Voodoo, Marie manages to gather pieces of information about her religion and its origins through her followers and the communication with Damballah. After becoming pregnant, Marie becomes fearful that John will be using their daughter for exploiting the Voodoo tradition like he did with her. On her dying bed , Marie's grandmother tells her the story of Membe, her great grandmother. She tells her the story how Membe was instructed by Damballah to become a slave in order to come to America and carry on the tradition of Voodoo. Soon after learning about Membe, infuriated by John's persistent abuse and terrified that her daughter will experience the same suffering as she had, Marie decides to kill John.

1.5. *Beautiful Creatures*

The Novel *Beautiful Creatures* is written by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl; it was published in 2009. The story is set in a small town in the South of the United States called Gatelin and is narrated by a high school student named Ethan Wate. On the first day of his sophomore year, Ethan becomes fascinated with the new girl in school, named Lena

Duchannes. Even though she seems uninterested in socializing with her peers, after her car breaks down, Lena accepts a ride home from Ethan. Soon after, the two teenagers develop a friendship, which gradually turns into a relationship. As the relationship progresses, Ethan learns that Lena is a witch (in the novel, referred as a "caster") and is about to become a victim of a curse. Although reluctant to share the information about the curse, Lena confesses that every female caster in her family, after turning sixteen, gets "claimed" because of a curse. This means that on her next birthday, Lena will either be "claimed for the light" or for the "darkness." Being claimed to the darkness robs casters of free will. While attempting to break the curse, Lena and Ethan find themselves in a perilous situation because Lena’s mother, one of the most powerful dark casters, tries to stop them.

2. The Definition of the Term "Witchcraft"

According to Rosemary Ellen Guiley, who wrote an encyclopedia of witchcraft, "the belief in witchcraft is something universal, but there is no universal definition of it, for the term has different meanings in different cultures and has had different meanings at different times in history" (378). However, mentioning the word "witch," evokes a stereotypical portrait of an evil crone covered in wards, flying on a broom, or other similar depictions instilled into the public's perception by the media. In his non-fictional book *Witchcraft Today*, Gerald B. Gardner, a well-known author, addresses this misconception and demystifies such stereotypes:

> All sorts of false ideas were spread until the popular notion of a witch became that of the common definition: "a witch is an old woman who flies through the air on a broomstick." Now no witch ever flew through the air on a broomstick or on anything else, at least not until aeroplanes came in. There is indeed a fertility charm to bring good crops which is performed by riding on a pole, or broom, as a hobby-horse. Doubtless, ancient witches practised this rite, leaping high to make the crops grow. (15)

Gardner also gives the following explanation of what a "modern witch" actually is:

> They are the people who call themselves the Wida, the "wise people," who practise the age-old rites and who have, along with much superstition and herbal knowledge, preserved an occult teaching and working processes which they themselves think to be magic or witchcraft. (66)

In His essay *Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Walter Farber, a professor of Assyriology, stresses the importance of looking at ancient beliefs without any preconceived notion of magic and religion, but also admits the necessity of imposing criteria based on our own heritage in order to provide adequate explanations. The term "witchcraft,"

according to Farber, is a general term for different religious practices and beliefs in different cultures that are not based on rational thought or scientific scrutiny.

Taking into consideration Gardner's reference of pre-Christian religions when explaining modern witchcraft and Farber's general classification of magic as ancient religious practices, witchcraft can be described either as a religion, which primarily focuses on worshiping nature, healing, and/or the act of attempting to perform supernatural acts such as predicting the future. It is, of course, crucial to stress that the actual possibility of such supernatural acts is not as significant in the historical scrutiny of this subject matter as is the mere fact that individuals who attempt to perform them have existed and still exist.

3. Historical Background

3.1. Witchcraft in Ancient Civilizations

If the term "witchcraft" can be loosely applied to religious practices in various cultures in all periods of history, as suggested by Farber, evidence of witchcraft can be traced back to the Stone Age:

> Some observers speculate that the very first rituals had their origins in hunting magic. The bones of animals from the kill were laid out in anatomical order, perhaps with some form of magical dance, intended to bring the animal back to life, and hence ensure the success of future hunts. There has been some debate about whether this is an older belief than that of the immortality of the human soul, which may be based on it.
>
> (*Ritual from the Stone Age to the Present Day* 4)

Farber also claims that the presence of magic was omnipresent in many ancient civilizations, dating back to the Babylonians. Although the terms "magic" and "witchcraft" per se, as Farber explains, were completely unfamiliar to the ancient Babylonians, the presence of ghosts and demons was a part of everyday life, including the rituals designed to evoke or to protect oneself from them. In almost every society to this day the priests and priestesses have been the leading authority on the supernatural. Historical evidence that shows the belief of ancient Babylonians in the possibility of performing supernatural acts such as placing a spell upon an individual in order to do them harm is evident in the *Code of Hammurabi*, a compilation of Babylonian laws dating back to 1772 BCE, which states the following about witchcraft:

> If a man has put a spell upon another man and it is not justified, he upon whom the spell is laid shall go to the holy river; into the holy river shall he plunge. If the holy river overcomes him and he is drowned, the man who put the spell upon him shall take possession of his house.
>
> (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia article on Witchcraft*)

The article "Egyptian Witchcraft" explains that the grand Library of Alexandria provided plenty of evidence that suggested magic and rituals being practiced by royalty as well as the common people during the middle Egyptian era. The article explains how the evidence found there suggests that magic, or rather the belief in magic, was common to the extent of relying on it in every-day life. Certain rituals were performed on a daily basis in order to eradicate problems related to health, marriage, wealth, and many others:

> In the ancient Egypt, witchcraft was completely scientific and orderly. Though, it was heavily sprinkled with religious flavor, its practice was very precise, systematic, artistic and highly organized. Ancient mythologies religious texts, magic manual and occult sheets provided us an invaluable clue on the importance of occult science as a day-to-day activity. Egyptian witchcraft and occult practices also depend on various other subjects like alchemy, astrology, astronomy, herbal medicines and animal concoctions. The person who was a consistent practitioner was an expert, and he or she could proudly announce that there was the cream of the society. ("Egyptian Witchcraft")

Further on along the timeline of ancient civilizations, one can find many more examples of people practicing magical rites, bearing in mind that "magic" is a general term for anything considered supernatural today. Professor of Ancient History Daniel Ogden explored in his book *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds* this subject matter through ancient Greece and Rome. According to Ogden, magic seems to have been present in people's everyday life, as much as in ancient Babylon or Egypt. Some examples are the presence of priests, which Ogden refers to as shamans "characterized by the ability to manipulate their own souls, be it by detaching them temporarily from their bodies and sending them on voyages of discovery" (9), or through the common use of curses, which were put on a victim by writing or carvings on lead plates.

Many elements of the above-mentioned ancient magical practices such as priesthood, worshiping deities, or performing blessings can be found in modern witchcraft and even organized religions like Christianity.

3.2. The Development of Western Witchcraft

In his documentary *Witchcraft: Rebirth of the Old Religion*, Raymond Buckland, a renowned writer and historian of the occult, elaborates quite thoroughly the origins of modern witchcraft. He demystifies the term by illustrating the historical backdrop of witches' practices, the belief system and the causes of misconception, which ultimately led to the common conception of witches today in real life and literature. He explains that the tribes from the Paleolithic times believed in a god of hunting and a goddess of fertility. Since most of the animals had horns, the tribes believed that the god of hunting was horned himself. For the representation of the goddess of fertility, emphasis was placed on feminine attributes such as large breasts and stomach. Along with these early beginnings of religion, one finds the beginnings of magic. The rituals mostly consisted of playing out of a hunt to ensure the successful outcome during the actual hunt, or making clay models of animals copulating in order to increase their fertility. With the decline of the need for hunting, the god of hunting became a god of nature. The social changes caused a need for the development of a variety of rituals, out of which the priesthood developed. As the tribes spread across Asia and Europe, these early ideas of deities were carried along and developed further. In Britain, the followers of the old religion were and are still called Wiccans – the wise ones. With the coming of Christianity a slow conversion started. Up until 1000 A.D. England was half Christian, half Wiccan or Pagan, which were terms used to refer to the non-Christian population. The first ones to be converted were the sovereigns and the rulers, then the people in the cities. The majority of the common people, especially in the country, remained Pagan. After a saturation

point was reached and people were not willing to give up their religion, the church started applying pressure. The beliefs of the old religion were being distorted by false accusations. A mild example of such a distortion of the pagan tradition is the tall pointy hat, which used to be quite fashionable. After the appearance of Christianity, it began to go out of style and bear the mark of Paganism. Naturally, it took some time for this belief to seep to the people living in the county, where the majority were Pagan and still wore tall pointy hats. The people from the cities, who were largely Christians, were given the impression that the Pagan religion was behind the times. Another example of denigration of Paganism was the misinterpretation of the usage of the cauldron, which was believed to serve for boiling all sorts of evil-sounding ingredients like cat's eye, flesh and blood, or adder's tongue. In reality, the cauldron was used for preparing ordinary herbs with colorful names given to them according to the way they looked. As the Church grew impatient, a war on Paganism was declared. Pope Gregory the Great ordered the demolition of the ancient temples. The horned Pagan god was equated with the Christian devil. In that way a misconception was spread that witches worshipped the Devil and therefore were evil, even though Pagans, as all Pre-Christians, were actually unfamiliar with the concept of the Devil. Eventually, hysteria broke out; whole villages were destroyed as it was thought that one or two Pagans lived there (Buckland).

A similar example of anti-witch hysteria happened in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts where, based on the words of a group of children, a reign of terror swept through a small community, ending with twenty people being accused of witchcraft and sent to death. It is estimated that, during the course of persecution of witches throughout Europe, nine million people – men, women, and children, were put to death on the charge of witchcraft. As a matter of fact, many of the persecuted were devout Christians. Naturally, during such oppression, the religion of witchcraft could not be practiced openly. Meetings and rituals had to be held in secrecy, and for a long time it seemed that the old religion had died out under the

pressure of earthly representatives of the Christian God. It was not until 1951 that the laws against witchcraft were repealed (Buckland).

4. Witchcraft in Literature

4.1. Origins and Development of Witchcraft in Literature

In his documentary *Witchcraft: Rebirth of the Old Religion* Buckland touches on the topic of printed works dealing with the non-fictional topics related to witchcraft. As the invention of printing around 1450 overlapped with the period of massive persecutions of witches, the very first books on this subject were published by the Catholic Church. Not surprisingly, those publications were more than biased. The books that followed only continued this earlier propaganda; therefore, for hundreds of years, everything that was published on this subject matter reflected the opposite point of view. In her book *Vještice* (*Witches*), in which she discusses the persecutions of witches, Viktoria Faust mentions one of the books that depicted witchcraft from the point of view of the Church. The book she refers to is entitled *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*). It was published in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger and is constructed as a manual for the hunting of witches. Faust also explains that, according to *Malleus Maleficarum*, witches are believed to gain their powers through sexual intercourse with demons and spread diseases (Faust 103).

The Middle Ages influenced the fictional portrayal of witches immensely by adding the religious element to their stories. As previously elaborated, ancient religious practices can be classified as witchcraft, and witchcraft in that sense can be considered a religion. However, fiction about witchcraft written during the Middle Ages did not describe witchcraft as a pre-Christian religion, but identified it with Satanism:

> American writers in the earlier part of the 19th century wrote stories with heavy religious overtones, which lent themselves to very clear and easy villains: sinners. And perhaps the worst and most heinous of all of the sinners were those who danced with the Devil—namely, witches. (*Witches in Western Literature*)

Fictional literary accounts that deal with witchcraft have their origins in ancient Rome and Greece and can be traced to epic poems of Ovid and Homer:

> One example of such a [witch] woman is Circe, who appears in both – Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Circe's origins were never explained, but one can assume from her actions that she is the victim of a broken heart. In *Metamorphoses*, she turns the lover of her own beloved into a rock for scorning her. In *The Odyssey*, Circe tricks Odysseus's men into drinking a magic potion, turning them all into pigs. (*Witches in Western Literature*)

These two poems depict a witch or enchantress as a young and beautiful woman; however, the most common portrayal of a witch in fiction, as well as in other media, is that of an old evil hag. The article *Witches in Western Literature* traces this portrayal back to Greek and Roman mythology:

> Greek and Roman mythology also tells of a group of spirit sorceresses known in Greek mythology as the Graeae. The sisters were born of sea foam, and with the bodies of swans and heads of women, they are depicted with ragged clothes. They shared one eye and one tooth among them, which the hero Perseus stole from them to get information on how to kill their sister, the Gorgon Medusa. The Graeae were perhaps the first image of a hag that was connected to sorcery. (Witches in Western Literature)

Considering these examples of the first fictional and non-fictional literature dealing with witchcraft, it becomes apparent that witches are predominantly portrayed as negative characters. However, as our analysis of the novels by Parker Rhodes, Rice, Howe, Harkness, and Garcia and Stohl will show, contemporary fiction depicts witches not only as villains or sinners but also as heroes.

4.2. Witch as a Fictional Character in Contemporary Women's Writing

In the introductory part of the paper, witchcraft as an actual historical occurrence is defined as a broad term for either any belief system of an ancient civilization which is considered supernatural or superstitious, or the actual non-mainstream religion Wicca. In terms of fiction, many variations and facets are added to the term. Fictional witches, much like those in films, cartoons, or television series have many special abilities like telepathy, telekinesis, or the ability to cast spells. Much like the definition of historical witchcraft, the definition of the fictional one is quite complicated. That is mainly because the fictional witchcraft is subjected to a personal view and imagination of the writers themselves, though they are usually inspired by documented ancient magical practices. Historical novels based on actual occurrences are exceptions, but even those sometimes contain supernatural elements that are the products of the author's imagination. An example of such a historical novel is *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* by Katherine Howe whose story shifts back and forth between 1692 and 1991. Howe based her novel on the life story of Deliverance Dane, a woman accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials, and her descendant, a fictional character Connie Goodwin. In this novel, the witches are described as people with exceptional knowledge of herbs and healing abilities. A similar example is the novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé, also based on an actual person, Tituba, trialed and executed in Salem for allegedly being a witch. According to Jalalzai,

> Maryse Condé in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* plays a reluctant (albeit playful) historian, who suggestively reinterprets the historical Tituba, but who also illustrates significant problems in such appropriations of history for particular poetical or artistic aims. According to Condé, race, gender, and Tituba's naive spirituality contributed to her being one of the first formally accused witches of the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692. (413)

The Witches described by Rice, Harkness, and Howe have quite a few similarities. Each of the three stories – *The Witching Hour*, *A Discovery of Witches*, and *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* – is set in the twentieth or the twenty-first century, but originates in the Middle Ages. All of the characters are humans, but some of them are witches and have special abilities. Harkness' witches are able to control the elements, predict the future, fly, and even move through time, depending on how talented and experienced they are. Rice's and Condé's witches are graced with similar abilities like telepathy and telekinesis. *Beautiful Creatures* by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl, which is one of the most recent trilogies based on witches, represents the most unconventional story in terms of witchcraft, compared to the novels mentioned above. Garcia's and Stohl's witches refer to themselves as "casters," but what actually sets them apart from the above mentioned characters is the fact that casters are not humans. They are immortal creatures divided into different categories; each of the categories has a special set of abilities – for example, a "siren" is able to control the minds of others whereas a "natural" is a caster able to control the elements. However, in terms of the supernatural, the novel *Voodoo Dreams* represents a completely different category. As the title suggests, this novel is based on the Voodoo religion and the powers of the Voodoo followers and priests that come from being possessed by gods and ancestral ghosts. When possessed, they are able to perform supernatural acts such as walking on water or receiving visions of the past and the future. The list of various types of fictional witches would be quite extensive, though, since, as already mentioned, their definition depends on the imagination of the author. Therefore, the witches described by Howe, Condé, Rice, Harkness, Parker Rhodes, and Garcia and Stohl, can be considered as examples of the various possibilities of creating a fictional witch.

4.3. Themes and Motifs

All five novels discussed in this paper revolve around the idea that witchcraft empowers women and gives them independency. Considering how detailed Jewel Parker Rhodes describes and examines struggles of the main female protagonist, Marie Laveau, in her quest for independence and freedom, it can be said that *Voodoo Dreams* is a feminist themed work. Even though Voodoo in this particular novel encompasses many magical elements, it is primarily described as a religion. Therefore, a recurring motif in this case is, in fact, a combination of magic and religion, which provides power and comfort to certain characters. Other novels like *Beautiful Creatures* or *The Witching Hour*, and *A Discovery of Witches* also reveal a feminist theme by empowering the female characters through special abilities, but also through education. One of the motifs in these novels is Christian religion. It does not serve as a motif of empowerment but is used to describe oppression. Other important recurring themes are racism, intolerance, and prejudice. Given the fact that in fiction witches are either magical creatures or humans with special abilities, and keeping in mind the persecutions during the Middle Ages, it is natural that such themes are reflected in novels based on the topic of witchcraft. Even though a novel may not be set in the sixteenth-, but during the twenty-first century, it can still depict similar forms of physical and psychological abuse, fear of the unknown, hatred, and intolerance as in the novels whose plot is set in the past.

As a teenage love novel, *Beautiful Creatures* also focuses on the aspect of intolerance. The main character Lena Duchannes represents the outsider and everyone thinks that she is weird. As soon as the element of magic is introduced into the plot through Lena's incidental demonstration of power, the theme of intolerance becomes more dominant. The story is set in a small town called Gatelin in the South of the United States. Because of such a setting, many similarities are noticeable with stories set in the past times. For example, the prejudice Lena

experiences in Gatelin resembles the intolerance and cruelty towards Deliverance for being a witch in Salem Massachusetts during the sixteenth century (*The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane).* In a conservative Christian community not accustomed to strangers, the mistrust and intolerance towards the "new girl" in town, Lena, spreads quickly from her high school to the whole town. Consequently, Lena's unusual powers are attributed to devil worship, just like it was the case with Deliverance Dane.

Parker Rhodes is even more dedicated to the description of intolerance, since one of the main themes of *Voodoo Dreams* concerns the atrocities caused by racism. The story is set in the mid-nineteenth century in New Orleans and revolves around several free and enslaved African-American characters. The racism in this novel is expressed through descriptions of slavery – including vivid descriptions of brutal assaults, rape, and executions of African-Americans. By referencing parts of the Bible which supposedly condone slavery, Parker Rhodes suggests that racism in Voodoo Dreams is for the most part influenced by the preaching of the Catholic Clergy.

Besides feminism and religion, love is also an important theme that is present in each of the novels. While in some novels, like *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane,* romance develops along the way, as the main character Connie is on a personal quest of self-discovery, in *The Beautiful Creatures* and *A Discovery of Witches,* the plot revolves around an unlikely or potentially tragic romantic relationship. *A Discovery of Witches* describes a relationship between a vampire and a witch, which, according to the author, is an unlikely combination because of the species' biological incompatibility and violent behavior towards each other, historically speaking (189). Similarly, the central theme of *Beautiful Creatures* involves a relationship between a teenage witch and a human boy. Both of these love stories bare similarities because they describe two people from different backgrounds and origins and their struggle to peruse a relationship despite numerous obstacles. Besides the fact that such

relationships are unusual, they are also potentially perilous for one or even both lovers. The element of danger in such relationships can be considered a motif in both stories. In case of *A Discovery of Witches*, the main protagonist, Diana, finds herself in constant danger because of her relationship with a vampire. Even though he would never intentionally hurt her, because of his thirst for blood, the relationship beholds a potentially tragic outcome. Similarly, in *Beautiful Creatures*, Lena's magical powers prevent a physical relationship because it could cause death to a human such as her boyfriend. The motif of danger not only contributes to the theme of dangerous love but also suggests the notion that love conquers every obstacle.

While *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* and *The Witching Hour* also include relationships between the main character, a female witch, and a human, they do not describe them in such potentially tragic fashion, but focus more on other themes. Among several important aspects which will be discussed in later chapters, personal quest seems to be the main focus of these novels. Even though their plots and motifs are completely different, the quest of each female character leads to self-discovery. In *Voodoo Dreams* Parker Rhodes uses motifs from Voodoo tradition not only as a form of escape from the cruel reality of racism and slavery but also as a tool which helps young Marie Leaveu learn about herself and her African heritage:

> Rhodes emphasizes how Black women implored African-based religious practices of Voodoo and conjuring to resist constraining domains of power, namely southern racism and gender oppression. More specifically, Marie's Voodoo practices allow her to find definition as a woman of African descent who is empowered by practicing the religion of her ancestors. She is further empowered by knowledge of her maternal history and this knowledge, as well as her willingness to engage in Voodoo, make it possible for her to emerge as an influential Black woman despite the restrictions of the slavery era for both free and enslaved Blacks. (Green 283-84)

Howe’s protagonist Connie also embarks on a quest of discovering herself as a witch and her heritage. While researching a mysterious *grimoire*, a book of spells, for her PhD, she gradually learns about her ancestral history and her own magical abilities. Rowan, Rice’s protagonist, also undertakes a quest of discovering herself as a witch through learning about her family history that she previously had no knowledge of.

Taking these three novels into consideration, it becomes obvious that all of them include a quest of self-discovery through learning about one's heritage and family history. Historically speaking, Voodoo followers, Pagans, and Wiccans were usually a part of a community or a coven with a specific set of rules, beliefs, and customs. Consequently, those communities were a part of one’s identity. For characters like Rowan, Marie, and Connie, who had no previous knowledge of their ancestry, learning about it is a crucial starting point for a quest of defining their own identity. Furthermore, the authors place great emphasis on the development of their characters’ spirituality and magical powers. Looking at these powers as a part of a witch’s identity, it becomes clear why its development is an intricate part of a personal quest. However, after learning about their abilities and their potential, the task at hand becomes to decide how to use those powers. Every character has to learn to distinguish between the responsible and the irresponsible use of magic because power brings responsibility. This, of course, inevitably leads to the question of ethics and morality behind the use of magic, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

5. Political Aspects of Witchcraft in Contemporary Women's Writing

5.1. Policies Within the Witches' Community

5.1.1. Secrecy

Politics within a community of witches, referring strictly to fiction, usually denotes the rules and regulations the witches abide by. The most common rule is keeping witchcraft a secret. This, of course, must not be true of all fiction that revolves around witches, since there are many different settings and each one of them depends on the imagination and a personal view of the writer. Therefore, it is also possible that an author chooses to create a setting in which witches live openly among humans. However, as the following examples will show, it is quite common for witches to keep their magical abilities and/or practices a secret. Reasons for this can again be traced back to historical events like the intolerance towards non-Christian religions during the Middle Ages across Europe and North America. Bearing these historical facts in mind, it can be said that the main reason for keeping witchcraft a secret is the fear for one's own safety and fear of not being accepted as an equal member of society. Hiding one's identity for fictional witches is usually an individual decision or a necessity, depending on their living environment, but in some cases, the policy of secrecy is presented on a much larger scale.

Likewise, in *A Discovery of Witches*, Deborah Harkness creates a secret society of supernatural beings. This novel also exemplifies political agendas, rules, and regulations within witches' society. By reading how the main protagonist, Dr. Diana Bishop, who is also a witch, little by little explores the world of magical beings, the reader gradually learns about a supernatural world with strict rules. In this novel, Herkness creates the so called "Congregation" which consists of all supernatural species, namely witches, demons, and vampires. The purpose of the Congregation is to set the rules for other supernatural beings

and to see to it that they are obeyed. The most important rule in Harkness' *A Discovery of Witches*, according to the Congregation, is to keep the existence of supernatural beings hidden from humans. Since different species together draw a lot of human attention, relationships between different supernatural species are strictly prohibited:

> "It was established during the Crusades to keep us from being exposed to humans. . . . When we mixed with one another, we were too conspicuous. When we became involved in human affairs, they grew suspicious of our cleverness". . . . "By 'mixing', you don't mean dinners and dancing?" "No dinners, no dancing – and no kissing and singing songs to each other," Ysbeau said pointedly. "And what comes after the dancing and kissing was forbidden as well. . . ." (Harkness 326)

By including the Congregation into the story, Harkness not only gives the plot a twist, since the main character, Dr. Bishop, is in love with a vampire, but she also provides explanations behind the rules and regulations, including secrecy. The fact that Harkness refers to the Crusades indicates a fusion of history and fiction.

Other novels, based on actual history, reveal similar policies. For example, in *Voodoo Dreams* it becomes even more apparent how human intolerance and fear cause the need for minorities to be secretive, in this case about their practices of Voodoo. Namely, the novel explores, among other things, how a Voodoo-practicing community of free and enslaved African-Americans functions during the nineteenth century. Considering the political position of African-Americans of that time shaped by the existence of slavery, the first rule of practicing Voodoo was secrecy, as Parker Rhodes' novel vividly depicts:

> Nattie closed her eyes. She regretted a great deal in her life, but nothing so much as helping the second Marie to her death. She and John had goaded Marie into performing Voodoo in Cathedral Square. . . . It didn't help that John miscalculated how threatened white folks would feel. Poor Marie had died because a pious Christian mob scared of hellfire had whipped her to death. (Parker Rhodes 143)

This example clearly shows how dangerous it was for those African American characters to practice of their religion.. Of course, as the time went on, both in fiction and reality, Voodoo was practiced more freely. However, generally, the example of Marie's execution gives an explanation as to why secrecy is important in many fictional works dealing with magic or anything with supernatural connotations.

5.1.2. Hierarchy

Besides keeping witchcraft a secret, one other distinctive feature is noticeable in fiction about witchcraft, namely hierarchy. As with most communities, especially small ones, there is a distinct hierarchy among its members. Considering the fact that communities of witches, more commonly known as *circles* or *covens,* are quite enclosed and in that sense almost tribal, a distinctive order of power is noticeable. In his documentary *Witches Today*, Gardner explains that the older witches, being usually wiser and more experienced, are higher on the hierarchy ladder. In fiction it is not necessarily that the elders lead a *coven*. Even young witches can be leaders if they have extraordinary powers, as the example of Marie Laveau will show. The fact that the young Voodoo priestess Marie is referred to as the "Voodoo Queen," indicates a distinct hierarchy within a small Voodoo-practicing community. The reason behind her becoming a figure of authority is the recurring possession by the African God Damballah, as was the case with her mother, grandmother, and her great grandmother. All four of those women were under the age of thirty when they became respected spiritual leaders. Rice's Mayfair witches were not a part of a coven per se, but a family, and as such, throughout every generation they had a head of the family that was always a female witch. All of the authoritative characters distinguished themselves through intelligence and strong magical abilities. An exception to this rule of female witches being heads of families is to be found in *Beautiful Creatures.* In their world of witchcraft male witches are just as present as

the female ones, which seems to be rare compared to the other novels mentioned. Furthermore, the authority figure in the family in *Beautiful Creatures* is a couple of centuries old male witch/demon named Macon.

5.2. Personal Gain and Ethics

Considering the possibility of performing magic, it is important to discuss the moral and ethical implications of using magic for personal gain. On the one hand, it can be argued that using magic to one's own advantage is completely justified since it is an innate gift or ability. Therefore, one should have the right to use it. On the other hand, it can also be argued that something acquired through magic would be ethically questionable since it implies an unfair advantage to those without magical abilities.

Even though Parker Rhodes refers to Voodoo as a religion because of its ritualistic elements, it can also be classified as magic, strictly in fictional terms. This chapter will focus only on its magical or ritualistic aspect. Although she is not a witch but a Voodoo practitioner, Nattie, a character from *Voodoo Dreams*, performs various rituals in order to provide help and protection, but also to harm other members of her community:

> "What did Ribaud put in the pail? His snakes?" "No the afterbirth and caul," said John. "I asked Ribaud to protect them. Nattie knows spells to hex a child. Don't you Nattie? Make a baby grow extra limbs. Turn blue. You know how to destroy second sight by burning a caul." (Parker Rhodes 400)

There are also services like love spells, which Marie Laveau is forced (by John) to offer, not only to the members of her community but also to just about anyone who pays for them. Considering the fact that Voodoo is used not only to help or cure but also to hurt or obtain revenge, it can be objectively claimed that the morality and ethics behind the use of Voodoo in *Voodoo Dreams* is questionable. According to Marie Leaveau, Voodoo itself is not evil; the

worshippers themselves decide whether they will use it to do good or evil. During the course of the novel this rarely gets addressed as a moral issue, but is accepted as part of the culture.

Discussing the concept of "good" and "evil" in *Beautiful Creatures*, Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl notice that the notion of using magic for good or evil revolves around witches' conscious decision to be either good or evil, which they refer to as "claiming":

> For the most casters, it's a conscious thing, just like it says here. The person of power, the caster, casts the eternal choice. They choose if they want to claim themselves light or dark. That's what the free will and agency is all about, like mortals chose to be good or bad, except, caters make the choice for all time. (Garcia and Stohl 359)

These two authors deal with the question of morality in a unique way by forcing their characters to choose between good and evil. This means that the characters make a conscious decision how they will use magic. Even though neither of the characters is actually entirely good or evil, there is a clear distinction between them. Such a life-changing decision, of course, causes a dilemma for some of the characters and makes them examine their personality in order to choose between good and evil.

There are also other examples where these issues concerning the use of magic, especially the ethics behind its use for personal gain, are addressed in a more direct way, as opposed to how that is presented in *Voodoo Dreams*. In *A Discovery of Witches*, Harkness extensively explores the morality behind the use of magic through the main protagonist Diana. This novel also questions whether using magic in everyday life is justified, even if magic is an instinct-like ability that can hardly be controlled.

> It's a slippery slope, Em. I protect myself from a vampire in the library today, and tomorrow I protect myself from a hard question at a lecture. Soon I'll be picking research based on knowing how they'll turn out and applying for grants that I'm sure to win. It's important to me that I've made my reputation

> on my own. If I start using magic, nothing would belong entirely to me. (Harkness 30)

Because of her fear that using magic will compromise the integrity of her academic achievements or any other accomplishments, Diana makes a conscious decision to boycott her supernatural abilities. Diana, of course, eventually realizes that ignoring her abilities forever is not possible. Because of consistent questioning of ethics and morality behind the use of magic, *The Discovery of Witches* becomes a personal quest of accepting oneself as a witch and finding the balance between using magic for protection and personal gain.

When speaking about using magic for personal gain, another novel is worth mentioning, namely *The Witching Hour by* Anne Rice. In this novel, Rice documents the lives of the Mayfair witches through a span of several centuries. The Mayfair witches never questioned the ethics behind the use of their powers for personal gain, especially of the financial kind. As a matter of fact, everyone in the line of these witches used magic either for financial growth and/or to help improve their career.

> What characterized the family through the lifetime of Charlotte, Jeanne Louise, Angélique, and Marie Claudette is responsibility, wealth and power. Mayfair wealth was legendary within the Caribbean world, and those who entered into disputes with the Mayfairs met with violence. . . . It was said to be "unlucky" to fight with the Mayfair family. (Rice 472)

How the family used magic for the financial power and social status will be exemplified in depth in Chapter seven. A somewhat different approach to using magic is shown through the main protagonist of *The Witching Hour*, a young doctor named Rowan, the youngest witch of the Mayfair family. Rice dedicates a whole chapter to describing her healing powers:

> In sum, Rowan is the first Mayfair witch to be described as a healer since Marguerite Mayfair at Riverbend before 1835. Just about every nurse ever questioned about Rowan has some "fantastic" story to tell. Rowan could

> diagnose anything; Rowan knew just what to do. Rowan patched up people who looked like they were ready for the morgue. She can stop bleeding, I've seen her do it. She grabbed a hold of this boy's hand and looked at his nose, "Stop," she whispered, I heard her, and he just didn't bleed after that. (Rice 748)

It could be argued here that she in fact uses magic for personal gain since she is improving her career. However, she is also helping others. It is also important to state that Rowan's use of magic was more instinctive than intentional and was never used consciously to improve her career, but in order to help patients. The fact that she never intentionally used her abilities to benefit her career sets her apart from her ancestors and family members, who did.

These several examples show that using magic for personal gain cannot be characterized as only negative or only positive. Some of the characters mentioned use their power for improving their financial status. However, they are not necessarily hurting anyone by doing so. Others use magic to help or heal patients, which later gets recognized as exceptional medical skills, like in the case of Rowan Mayfair. In many situations, the use of magic for personal gain is balanced out with certain consequences. This can be traced back to traditional Pagan belief that anything done, good or evil, will come back to the doer three times stronger. Possibly inspired by this belief, Garcia and Stohl incorporate a curse into their plot, which comes as a consequence of using magic to resurrect a loved one. *Voodoo Dreams* also shows that the question of morality is especially hard to define when the plot refers to groups of people from different cultural backgrounds with possibly different moral concepts, set of rules and beliefs from those of Western readers. Whereas worshipping several deities and animal sacrifice would be considered blasphemous in religions like Islam or Christianity, for the practitioners of Voodoo that is a part of their culture.

6. Religious Aspects of Witchcraft in Contemporary Women's Writing

6.1. Influence of the Catholic Church in Contemporary Fiction about Witchcraft

In her book *Vještice* (Witches), Viktoria Faust elaborates on the involvement of the Catholic Church in the persecution of witches and how it influenced social interactions during the Middle Ages in Europe and North America. Even though the hunting, torturing and killing of those accused of witchcraft was not necessarily executed directly by the Catholic Clergy, Faust claims that those practices were motivated by the enforcement of Catholicism and even condoned by The Pope. Therefore it can be said that Catholicism was in fact one of the key motives for the persecutions (103).

The persecution of witches as an actual historical occurrence has naturally been the inspiration for many fictional accounts on the subject of witchcraft. Such stories, usually set in the Middle Ages, reveal multiple layers of social behavior in terms of people's relationships toward each other and towards the supernatural or the unknown. There are numerous novels by contemporary authors inspired by the persecutions such as *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* by Katherine Howe, *The Heretic's Daughter* by Kathleen Kent, and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé. In her novel *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, Howe explores the religious and political motives behind the persecution of witches. Furthermore, she shifts back and forth between the years 1692 and 1991 and draws parallels between modern and old witchcraft. The part of the novel set in 1692 revolves almost exclusively around the trial of Deliverance Dane, who stands in court against allegations of using witchcraft and worshiping the Devil. She is forced to defend her healing abilities to a court whose goal is to eliminate people whose behavior or religious practices are not Christian. Everything she says in court in order to defend herself becomes used against her. Ultimately, Deliverance is "proven" guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. At this point, many similarities between Faust's non-fictional documentation of witch trials and

Howe's fictional version of Deliverance's trial are noticeable. Both authors write about discrimination in a social and religious context. For example, Faust reports that during the Middle Ages people were accused of being witches for reasons as trivial as jealousy and personal disagreements. Similarly, Deliverance Dane is accused of being a witch because of her abilities to heal by using concoctions made of herbs. Following these accusations, motivated by jealousy of her neighbors, her execution is enforced by a court whose standpoint on witchcraft originates from that of the Church.

In *The Witching Hour*, Anne Rice refers to the Catholic Church on several occasions in order to emphasize the struggles that her witch characters have to go through. The main idea that Rice tries to bring across by involving the Church into the plot is the misconception of the nature of witchcraft and human cruelty:

> In the early days of the Christian Church, the Church fathers believed that these daimons were, in fact old gods of the pagans. That is they believed in the existence of those gods and that they were creatures of lesser power, a belief which the Church surely does not hold now. However the witch judges do hold this belief, crudely and in ignorance, for when they accuse the witch of riding out at night, they are accusing her in foolish words of the old belief in the goddess Diana . . . and the goat devil whom the witch kisses is none other than the pagan god Pan. But the witch judge does not know that this is what he is doing. Dogmatically he believes only in Satan. (Rice 396)

The way Rice writes about the misconceptions of witchcraft is similar to how Raymond Buckland elaborates on them in his documentary. The deities witches believed in were considered satanic by the Church. Rice addresses human cruelty by depicting the torture and execution of her character Deborah during the sixteenth century, which again relates to actual historical occurrences. The way Rice describes the torture of Deborah, conducted by her persecutors in order to obtain a confession and enable her execution by burning her at the stake (390), corresponds with Faust's report on the actual methods of torture of witches

during the Middle Ages that included impalements, crushing of bones, and many other similar methods. Just like Rice's character Deborah, many Middle Age "witches" were either burnt alive or drowned(cf. Faust 108).

In *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane,* Katherine Howe similarly exposes the Church's view of witchcraft:

> Him whose machinations you yourself claim not to know. How came you to believe that this is the work of our Savior?". . . . "Could you not in fact be serving the Devil, who deludes you with promises of wealth of fame, and tells you to pretend the work of God? (Howe 315)

Again, it becomes evident how the Church influenced public opinion by accusing witches of worshiping Satan. Howe goes even further in her exploration of the Church's disdain for witchcraft:

> Several pages were devoted to what looked like prayers, but which were more likely charms – all of them invoking assistance from the Almighty. Connie was surprised at the explicit religiosity of the text so far, of a type that alluded Christian practices from well before the Reformation. The text reflected a world in which Christianity was utterly bound to the conception of reality. No wonder Puritan theologians had found witchcraft – if that is what this was – so threatening. In a system of thought in which salvation, and therefore all goodness, could come by grace alone, in which one's actions were believed to have no effect on the state of the soul, and in which illness or misfortune were often read as signs of God's disfavor, a method that counteracts illness and misfortune by direct appeal to God, together with arcane proto-scientific practice, would have gone against everything that the Puritan power structure wanted to maintain. (Howe 304)

In this novel Howe shows how witches adapted their beliefs and rituals to those of the dominant Catholic Church by incorporating the Christian God into their own prayers.Howe

interprets the Church's disapproval of individuals seeking help from God directly as anits attempt to deprive individuals of any power by suggesting that the Catholic clergy is the only authority allowed to interpret the will of God. Everyone else is to obey God's rules without asking questions. Those who choose not to do so are to be persecuted and punished.

6.2. Voodoo as a Religion and Its Relation to Christianity

When talking about religious aspects of Witchcraft, it is important to include the tradition of Voodoo and explain how it is used as a religious element in fiction. Much like with witches, the general knowledge of the Voodoo tradition/religion has been highly influenced by the media. Films, television shows, and books, including those on Voodoo, tend to focus more on its magical aspect that includes curses or raising the dead. The religious aspect is often left out or stays in the background, although actually, for the true worshippers, Voodoo has little to do with voodoo dolls and zombies.

> "Voodoo" is a word Americans use to describe frightening things. To many of us, it means pins stuck in dolls, zombies, and oilier kinds of magic practiced by African peoples, especially those in Haiti. Although a majority of Haitians carry on African religious traditions, they do not stick pins in dolls, make zombies, or practice black magic. Nor do they call their religion voodoo. Most Haitians are baptized and consider themselves Catholic, even while they serve the lwa (or loa), the Haitian name for African spirits. Haitians have no problems blending African and Catholic practices to meet their own religious needs. (Cosentino)

In *Voodoo Dreams*, Parker Rhodes mixes supernatural and religious elements in order to describe this tradition. While attempting to create a fictional biography based on Marie Laevau, a historic figure about whom little is known; Rhodes explores the rise of the Voodoo religion in North America during the nineteenth century. She covers several aspects of this religion like its origins, its power, and its relation to the Catholic faith through a depiction of a

young Voodoo Queen, Marie Laevau. Since the main character, young Marie Laevau, inherits the powers of her ancestors, she emerges as the leader of the faith, although, due to her grandmother's conversion to Christianity, she has no actual understanding of Voodoo. Her lack of knowledge of the religion she preaches also reveals a fraudulent side of Voodoo. As Marie desperately tries to learn about her inheritance, culture, and origins, she is forced to perform rituals, which are set out to be spectacular, but often have no actual meaning or effect:

> "Why do you need me John? Why can't you leave me alone?" John eyed her coolly. "Your are like the python. You attract paying customers." "With my performances?" "Yes." "Don't you believe something special happens to me? Something beyond belief?" "Fantasies." (Rhodes 206)

With depiction of elaborate performances, which include animal sacrifice, drumming, and dance, Rhodes also explores the possibilities of using religion for financial gain. Most of these elements are incorporated into the rituals in order to create a spectacle for the paying customers and to persuade them of Laevau's power. On the one hand, such a description of Voodoo resembles the one from the films and television shows as Rhode fills it with elements like snakes and sacrifice. On the other hand, it also makes Voodoo resemble an organized religion. Because the worshippers are expected to pay a certain fee in order to participate in Laevau's rituals, one is reminded of a church mass. Other than the financial aspect of these two religions, they do not have much in common. However, many Voodoo followers in *Voodoo Dreams* also believe in Christian saints, or actually are Christian. Even though Christianity is the religion of the white people, of those who enslaved them, they nevertheless turn to Christian God for comfort. The Voodoo Queen, Marie, herself turns to Christian saints:

> Mixed blood; mixed legends and faiths. This, then was real and crucial to survival. Marie felt she had to keep on doing what she had been doing, blending white and black saints, not choosing one over the other as Grandmère had done. Marie would pray to African and Christian gods because there wasn't a single truth, a single people. (Rhodes 341)

Naturally, during the nineteenth century, considering the fact that the majority of the black people were enslaved, Christians considered Voodoo evil, a kind of Satanism. Among the themes like slavery and cruelty towards black people, Rhodes also addresses the conflict between Christianity and Voodoo. This is most evident when she describes how Marie Laevau's mother is beaten to death because she tried to perform a ritual in public:

> Then the cathedral doors opened. A priest, red and scrawny, came out screaming, "Savages! Devil worshipers!" He waved a rosary. "In the name of Mary, repent, repent." My baby danced, her skirt twirling, swaying, her limbs covered with sweat. White folks were hooting and yelling like it was carnival. Men started touching her. One tore her dress. I couldn't get through. . . . My baby was slapping, kicking, crying out. The men got angry. I prayed to Damballah. (Rhodes 336)

During this struggle, Rhodes describes Grandmère summoning African gods to fight the men who were assaulting her daughter:

> I saw my baby rise from the ground. Damballah was going to save her. My heart fluttered. Everyone fell back, frightened, 'cause my baby was walking on air. I sang a chant to Guédé. I saw the spirits – Barons Samedi, La Croix, and Cimetière – bearing sabers, attacking the crowd. Several white men fell back with blood spurting from their chests. But the crowd kept coming. I called on Ogu, the warrior god, to help me. He used a broadsword, but his strength wasn't enough. For every man slain, there were a hundred more. The scrawny priest yelled "Devil. Crucify the devil!" (Rhodes 336-37)

This fight is significant since it symbolizes how powerless African-Americans are against the white people's oppression. The fact that a priest initiated the execution of Marie's mother

suggests a substantial involvement of the Church in the intolerant behavior toward African-American people. Even the Bible, in the Old Testament and the New Testament, in many verses condones slavery:

> However, you may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. You may also purchase the children of such resident foreigners, including those who have been born in your land. You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance. You may treat your slaves like this, but the people of Israel, your relatives, must never be treated this way. (Lev. 25.44-46)

Rhodes addresses this through a conversation of young Laevau with a Catholic priest. "Black people share the burden of Ham's curse. But the burden is edged with great potential to see and feel God's blessings. Slavery and servitude are tools of God" (Rhodes).

It is also important to mention that Rhodes not only focuses on the aspect of performance of Voodoo, but also includes genuine miracles that Marie performs, while possessed by the god Damballah, which, among others, include walking on water. She focuses on the spirituality of Voodoo and the struggles with faith: "Why did faith have to be based on pain? She didn't really care about faith, she just cared about Maman. But Maman was Voudon. She wondered: did Voudon have more joy and less pain?" (Rhodes 112). Eventually, the Voodoo Queen learns about the origins of her faith and its true meaning and purpose:

> Voodoo is a form of ancestor worship. Souls survive after death. It is a family's responsibility to see that these rest easy. Offering should be made to the family ancestors and to the family's spirit guardian. Souls who are shown proper respect by their families join in harmony with the other spirits of the world. They roam the earth, frolic and possess family members when necessary to convey guidance and advice. Beware those ancestral souls who are dishonored. These souls take every opportunity to wreak revenge on the family line. The sins of a mother can haunt a great-granddaughter and beyond.

> No one dies. Just as tree, water, and earth spirits exist forever . . . so, too, does the human soul go on. (Rhodes 270)

This passage from a fictional diary of Laveau's close friend, which is woven into the plot on several occasions, sums up the core of the Voodoo religion in a similar fashion to how Cosentin describes it in his article *VOODOO: It's Not What You Think* (cf. 1).

6.3. Religious Elements of Witchcraft in Contemporary Fiction

Fiction involving witchcraft predominantly focuses on the supernatural aspect. This usually involves giving witches powers similar to comic book heroes and villains. However, some of the writers also include a religious element to the concept of witchcraft. This can, of course, vary depending on the author, but the religious aspect is predominantly inspired by Wicca and/or Paganism. In a non-fictional context, the terms "Wicca," "Paganism," and "Witchcraft" are not the same:

> A pagan is generally defined as a follower of a nature religion that is not part of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Wicca is then a subset of Paganism. Wicca is a word first used around 50 years ago or so to define a type of religion reconstructed from what is thought to have been practiced by witches in ancient times, ie. a belief in the God and Goddess... Witchcraft can be defined as the worship of nature and the practice of magick. And witches may or may not subscribe to the same beliefs as Wiccans.
>
> (*What is the difference between Paganism, Wicca and Witchcraft?*)

However, in contemporary fiction these differences are not clearly distinguished. This again has to do with the fact that contemporary fiction focuses more on the supernatural aspect of witchcraft. Since the authors usually reference pre-Christian religions, elements of religion in their writing usually include worshiping deities, or at least acknowledging them. Other important element, when talking about religious aspects, is nature. Witches not only draw

their powers from nature but also worship nature. Therefore, the terms "God and/or Goddess" become interchangeable with "nature."

In *A Discovery of Witches,* Harkness focuses more on the scientific aspect of supernatural creatures such as the difference in the DNA structure between them and humans and the possibility of cross-species breeding, but she does include several elements which relate to what is considered traditional witchcraft. During a ritual in which the main character Diana attempts to save the life of her husband, she summons the Goddess, who appears in three personifications, namely, as a virgin, a mother, and a crone. According to Guiley, the Goddess is one of the key elements in Witchcraft:

> In contemporary Witchcraft, the Goddess embodies the very essence of the Craft: she is the Great Mother, whose limitless fertility brings forth all life; she is Mother Nature, the living biosphere of the planet and the forces of the elements; she is both creator and destroyer.... In the Craft, her most common name is Aradia, and she is most frequently recognized in a trinity, the Triple Goddess, a personification of her three faces as Virgin, Mother and Crone. Trinities of goddesses (and gods) have been worshiped since antiquity in various cultures. (Guiley 141)

Furthermore, Diana's use of white-handled dagger in this ritual also indicates Harkness' references to "traditional" Witchcraft. According to Guiley, a dagger, or *athame,* is one of the essential ritualistic tools, which corresponds to the element of fire. All these elements of ritualistic magic indicate a religious aspect, which can be traced back to pre-Christian religions. Even though Harkness incorporates the ritualistic aspect of witchcraft on several occasions during the course of the novel, which includes summoning of a deity and the use of tools and books, magic remains an innate power a witch is born with. This means that every witch is able to control the elements – water, earth, fire, and wind – or at least one of them. Rituals and incantations are used for more specific purposes such as for example revealing something hidden by magic.

In *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* Howe incorporates more rituals and spells. Her witches are not a different species like those in *A Discovery of Witches*, but humans who possess the knowledge of manipulating the elements by using herbs, rituals, and incantations. Again, the inspiration is derived from Pagan religions, but in this case, heavily influenced by Christianity. As previously mentioned, Howe's witches adopted elements of Christianity into their rituals, or are in fact Christians, who still practice the old Pagan traditions. On several occasions, Howe describes instructions for rituals which contain elements of Christianity: "Throw the bottle into fire whilst reciting the Lord's Prayer followed by the most effective Incantation: Agla Pater Dominus, Tetragtamaton Adonai Heavenly Father I beseech thee bring the Evildoer unto me" (Howe 307). In the postscript of the novel, Howe elaborates on the use of some of the magical elements and their sources:

> The assorted magical elements woven throughout the story are based on research into grimoires held at the British Museum….The magical circle conjured on the door of the Milk Street house is based on a circle drawn in a manuscript in the Bibliothéque de L'Arsenal in Paris…. Similarly the "Abracadabra" healing charm derives from Roman talisman, the triangular shape of which was thought to draw illness out of the body…. Urine and witch bottles were a common tool of cunning folk, following the widespread logic that the small part of the body can be made to stand in for the whole. Anyone who has flipped a coin or shaken a magic eight ball in the course of making a decision has touched the modern descendants of these techniques. (Howe 366)

According to Guiley, all of the mentioned magical elements used in Howe's narrative can be traced back to the medieval times and correspond with the practices of different Pagan religions.

It is important not to focus only on magical elements based on Pagan practices from the medieval times, since the focus is on fiction. In *The Witching Hour*, Rice includes elements of ritualistic magic created mostly for the effect of horror, since no actual explanation of their purpose is offered:

> Lifting the lamp high, she saw this was a narrow storage chamber. It was filled with jars and bottles on makeshift shelves and the jars and the bottles were filled blackish murky fluid. Specimens in these containers. Rotting, putrid things…. But that was impossible what she saw there. That looked just like a human head. (Rice 803)

Even though scenes like these are used mostly for creating an eerie ambience, they also indicate the use of ritualistic black magic.

When talking about religious aspects of witchcraft in terms of fiction, its elements include not only the use of rituals and spells but also the relationship with nature. This is evident through Howe's characters' use of herbs both for rituals and for healing purposes. Similarly, in *A Discovery of Witches*, Harkness' characters derive their power from the nature. Taking into consideration *A Discovery of Witches*, *The Witching Hour*, and *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, one can conclude that a common element, in terms of religion, in all of these novels is the ritualistic aspect of witchcraft.

7. Feminist Aspects of Witchcraft in Contemporary Women's Writing

7.1. Female Witch as the Main Protagonist

As previously mentioned, early literature portrayed witches as villains or sinners, but it offered no explanation of the motives behind the witch-characters' actions. This is also noticeable in many later literary works, cartoons and movies. No insight is given into the inner world of a witch. The reader never learns about the reasons and motives behind their actions and behavior:

> Many of these haggard old women have no past; they exist merely to drive the plot of the story, to scare children into listening to their parents or not talking to strangers. A perfect example being the sorceress who turns a selfish young prince into a hideous monster in the French story *La Belle et La Bete* or *Beauty and the Beast*. The sorceress, as she is so called in the story, turns the prince into a beast as a punishment for his selfish ways. She does not appear in the story, nor is there ever an explanation of where she came from. And so the trend continued, even through the most talented storytellers in history. (*Witches in Western Literature*)

Witches stayed evil, anonymous entities and the reader was offered almost no explanation or evidence as to why they are evil, except that some of them worshipped the Devil. In recent years, however, there have been more fictional texts which primarily focus on the witches themselves. Many contemporary authors tend to make the witches the main protagonists; they show and explore their motives, and often explain their origin. The witch becomes the main focus of the story and is sometimes characterized as a positive character:

> In the 20th century, images of witches have changed substantially, they've taken aspects from literature's past and progress to create a vast variety of witches, good and evil, and place them on the page; it continues to evolve to this day! C.S. Lewis terrified his young readers with the White Witch, who

> cast an everlasting winter over Narnia in The *Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, teaching children not to trust just any beautiful woman offering Turkish delights; L. Frank Baum taught us that witches are sometimes good, and can help us find our way home; J.K. Rowling made an entire generation of children believe that, maybe, if they behave well enough, they may see an owl at their rafter with a letter bearing an embossed "H" in its beak.
>
> (*Witches in Western Literature*)

So far, this new trend of portraying women with supernatural powers as heroes, not as worshipers of the Devil, has been followed by many contemporary writers. This trend also extends to other media such as film and television. The newest Hollywood film based on the Disney cartoon *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, revolves around the main antagonist Maleficent. While in the "traditional" *Sleeping Beauty* Maleficent was only the plot driver, and not much is known about her except that she is evil, in the new version, the story is told from her point of view. She may still be evil, but the viewer is given the opportunity to learn more about her, her background and motives behind her deeds.

A witch in contemporary fiction is not only the main protagonist, but can actually be good. Even if she, in some cases, is not always following a noble cause, she is the character that the readers will mostly relate to. The reason for this is the fact that the reader is hearing the story from the witch's perspective. In terms of feminism, such focus on the witch is important because it gives a woman the opportunity to show her strength and intelligence and not to serve only as a fictional token which keeps the plot interesting. Gibson illustrates this idea in terms of films and television shows, which can easily be applied to literature, since some of them are novel adaptations. He states that the trend of witchcraft in films and television is not new, but became widely popular thanks to *The Craft*, a film released in 1996, which combined the popular format of a teenager film with witchcraft. The popularity of

fictional witchcraft started to decrease as the popularity of fiction based on vampires started to grow. For almost a decade, the most popular fictional characters were vampires from films and books like *Twilight,* and television shows like *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*. Gibson argues that with the most recent television shows like *The American Horror Story*: *Coven*; witchcraft has started to gain more attention and popularity.Such television shows are more beneficent for the young female audiences since they depict strong and capable women, unlike the lead characters in most of the vampire stories: "They might not always be noble, but they're certainly not weak or passive characters who sit on the sidelines while the men take charge. Fictional witches are well-rounded characters with rich interior lives" (Gibson). She also suggests that watching television shows like *The Coven*, viewers, during the course of several episodes, learn more about the female characters, than they do in all four *Twilight* novels and five films (Gibson).

Gibson also discusses the importance of women, who are concerning themselves with something other than men, as opposed to other characters from television shows like *Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries* that are based on novels:

> Witches are concerned with their relationships with themselves, like Gabourey Sidibe's Queenie on Coven adjusting to her place in the world, or with one another, like with the sisters' relationships on Charmed. One quick and easy way to determine which stories put more stock in their female characters would be to apply the Bechdel test. (The Bechdel test is an informal way of determining if a film has a gender bias: do two women appear on-screen alone together, discussing something other than a man?) Witches discuss themselves, their powers, nature, oppression and, yes, sometimes men. But finding a scene where two female characters discuss something other than a man is laughably easy in a show about witches. In a vampire story, much less so. (Gibson)

In terms of popular fiction with a heavy supernatural especially vampire-themed undertone, novels like the *Twilight Saga* or *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, that havebeen

made into a popular television series *True Blood*, portray female protagonists which are dependent on the male hero. In the case of *The Twilight Saga*, Stephanie Mayer creates a female character named Bella Swan, who is in a constant need of protection either by her vampire boyfriend Edward or her werewolf friend Jacob, and is by no means able to protect herself from any kind of danger until Edward turns her into a vampire. This is usually not the case with novels about witches. As fictional characters, they have supernatural powers and are capable of protecting themselves. Furthermore, they are usually intelligent and educated and therefore more self-sufficient, even without their magical powers. This, of course, should by no means suggest that female protagonists like Bella Swan are unintelligent or uneducated, just that these seem to be more prominent features in fiction with a witch as the main protagonist. In her novel *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, Katherine Howe creates a character who reflects all these characteristics. Connie Goodwin is a Harvard graduate student and a Ph.D. candidate; she is not only highly ambitious and intelligent but is also a witch. With Connie, Howe explores the option of a female witch taking a leading role in a story which is primarily driven by the character's ambition and academic curiosity. Moreover, such a character becomes the heroine of the story, not an evil nameless witch whose only purpose is to drive the plot or give it a twist. Rice's novels *The Witching Hour* and Harkness' *A Discovery of Witches* are no exceptions to this trend. Both Rice's main protagonist Rowan, a renowned doctor, and Harkness' Diana, an accomplished historian, are highly intelligent and self-sufficient women. Besides being successful at their carriers, they are powerful witches, who are capable of protecting themselves without any help of a male character.

7.2. The Role of Male Characters

The notion of women concerning themselves primarily with knowledge and power is of course detectable in a lot of contemporary literature on witchcraft. That, however, does not

mean that this kind of fiction portrays a world in which men are obsolete, or in which women generally hate them. Love is quite a popular theme in fiction based on witchcraft. Even though the protagonists may not necessarily always be human, they are usually male and female; therefore, the male characters also have a prominent presence in such literature. Male characters embody many roles such as that of a lover, a boyfriend, a husband or a villain.

What sets them apart from the characters described in texts like *Twilight*, is the fact that they usually do not take the role of a hero, but are oftentimes the ones who need to be protected by a woman, in this case a witch. In their novel *Beautiful Creatures*, Garcia and Stohl create a possible feminist answer to the *Twilight Saga*. Ethan Wate, a human, just like Bella Swan from *Twilight*, is in love with a supernatural creature, in his case, a caster named Lena Duchannes. The story is narrated by Ethan, but revolves entirely around his relationship with Lena, much like Bella's narration in the *Twilight Saga* that revolves around Edward. Even though Ethan is by no means described as a coward or a weak character, in comparison to Lena, who is one of the most powerful casters with the ability to control the elements, he seems to be physically inferior. Even though he is protective of Lena, towards the end of the first novel, he is the one in need of her protection. This is not only the case with this particular story. Each of the novels discussed so far includes a love story and therefore a male character as a love interest. In the case of *The Witching Hour* and *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, for example, the authors include male characters quite similar to Ethan – humans with no magical power who are oftentimes dependent on a witch's protection. For the male counterpart in her love story *A Discovery of Wiches* Harkness chooses a vampire. This creates a completely different dynamics compared to the other three novels, since both male and female characters exhibit physical strength and a high level of intelligence. As a result, an underlining struggle for dominance between the male and the female character is present throughout the whole plot. Even though Matthew, the vampire, provides Diana with

protection on numerous occasions throughout the novel, the ultimate showcase of power occurs towards the end of the novel when Diana, motivated by love, summons up all of her strength and resurrects Matthew from the dead.

Male characters in novels based on witchcraft are not necessarily always the love interest of the female witch. In some cases, they are the antagonists. As is the case with almost any other novel based on supernatural creatures, in these novels there is one villain or more of them. Yet, the mere fact that the villain is male does not give the story a feminist character. However, novels which revolve around women's struggle against male oppression can be called feminist, or at least be labeled as novels with a feminist theme. In *The Witching Hour*, Anne Rice incorporates two significant male characters. The character that stands out the most is a ghostlike creature named Lasher. He is described as a demon who feeds off of the magic of most powerful witches in the Mayfair family. With Lasher, Rice puts the strength of her female characters to the test, since he takes a form of a handsome man in order to seduce the Mayfair witches and feed on their power. The ones who are able to resist his charm or manipulations are faced with the more difficult task of fighting him off with their abilities:

> When he speaks into your ear so that no one can hear, he will say he is your slave, that he's passed to you from Deirdre. But that's a lie, my dear, a vicious lie. He'll make you his and drive you mad if you refuse to do his will. That is what he's done to them all. (Rice 787)

The character of Lasher is significant in the context of feminist aspects in literature because of his choice of victims, namely female witches. His way of gaining power through seduction and manipulation of the powerful female witches is symbolically significant because it introduces a concept of a world in which women have more power than men. Furthermore, the element of seduction also indicates a struggle between sexes. In this case it means that witches, who succumb to the charm of Lasher, are in fact weak because giving in to Lasher

symbolizes a shift in power. Those who allow themselves to be seduced by Lasher are willingly giving their powers to him.

Another interesting male character in Rice's novel is Julian, a powerful male witch and also a Mayfair. Even though he is a member of the family, Julian represents an oppressive power to his female family members. By forcing his sisters and daughters to bear his children, in order to create more powerful witches, he embodies not only a negative character but also a witch with a weak will. Since the breeding of powerful witches is part of Lasher's plan, Julian is merely a tool of the main antagonist.

A similar concept involving exploitation of female power is introduced in Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams*. Just as Lasher used the magic of the Mayfair witches for the growth of his own power in *The Witching Hour*, John used Marie Laveau for financial gain by making her perform Voodoo rituals for people in need of help and comfort. John's dominance over Marie manifests itself through several stages. The first stage was a sexual relationship, which made Marie vulnerable to later psychological and physical abuse. Similarly to Lasher, John uses sex for manipulation and assertion of his dominance over Marie:

> John's control of Marie's body moves from sexual manipulation to life-threatening physical violence. As is common with abuse, he sets parameters in regards to her movements. She is not allowed to leave the house, and when she does Ribaud must accompany her. It is his job to report to John where Marie goes and whom she speaks with. In one significant scene, John rapes Marie. Later, after she walks on water, he feels humiliated by her growing power and almost chokes her to death. (Green 295)

Because of Marie's emotional attachment to John, a Voodoo priest with no actual power of his own, he is able to exploit the influence and the power of the young Marie. Even though he makes her seem weak and dependent, his abuse gradually makes her stronger until eventually she is able to free herself from his oppression.

By challenging the physical and mental strength of their female characters through oppression and abuse by the male antagonists, authors like Rice and Parker Rhodes create a multifaceted character of a witch whose complexity makes it "possible for the same image to carry multiple meanings. The witch [comes] to represent both strong, active women and the victims of misogyny" (Toivo).

7.3. The Importance of Physical and Mental Strength of Witches

Since the female witch as a fictional character in almost any story possesses magical powers and is described as a strong woman, it is necessary to examine to which degree these powers reflect the female emancipation. Given the fact that, with their magical powers, witches are capable of inflicting pain and causing damage, one can classify them according to their physical strength. The physical abilities naturally give the witches a certain sense of security and power; they enable them to protect their loved ones and themselves. Some authors include the use of ritualistic magic resembling the practices of pre-Christian religions, as is the case in The *Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*. Others take a more contemporary approach by giving their characters powers usually associated with superheroes. Harkness exemplifies this on several occasions in *The Discovery of Witches*:

> The witch muttered, and my body spun around then flattened against the floor, facedown. The impact knocked the wind out of me. A circle of fire licked up from the cold stones, the flames green and noxious. Something white-hot seared my back. It curved from shoulder to shoulder like a shooting star. . . . Satu’s magic held me fast, making it impossible to wriggle away. The pain was unspeakable, but before the welcoming blackness could take me, she held off. (Harkness 441-42)

The intention of the author may not have been to make a statement about feminism by introducing scenes in which witches fight like superheroes, or villains; however, being

imbued by such powers, they become strong and self-sufficient characters. This, albeit not intentional, does reflect certain feminist ideas. It is of course important to stress that the feminist aspect of this book is not reflected through the violence of certain female characters, but through their power. Power in case of *A Discovery of Witches*, becomes a symbol for independence and self-sufficiency. Diana, the main character of Harkness' novel tries to repress her magical abilities out of fear that she will not be able to control them and uses them only when necessary. However, when she finds herself in danger, her powers become essential for her survival. Once she accepts the fact that she is a witch and that magic is an inseparable part of not only her life but also her DNA, she becomes one of the most powerful witches of her time. In *Beautiful Creatures*, this superhero element is taken even further by amplifying the powers and classifying them into different categories. As already mentioned in chapter "Witch as a Fictional Character in Contemporary Women's Writing," witches, or casters in this novel, are categorized by their abilities which vary from caster to caster. Apart from physical strength, female writers also place importance on education, knowledge, and intelligence of their protagonists. This is the second important element which reflects feminist ideas in contemporary women's writing based on witches. Since the ability of self-defense and muscle or magical power is not enough to create a complete self-sufficient female character, feminist writers make sure that their characters are also intelligent and educated. Consequently, female witches have successful careers and good or even exceptional economic status. Again, Harkness' character Diana can be taken as an example since she is a highly educated woman with a PhD in history. Likewise, in her novel *The Witching Hour*, Anne Rice focuses more on the economic statuses of her female witch protagonists. The reader is able to observe several generations of powerful and wealthy female witches of the Mayfair family:

> Even a casual examination of Mary Beth's financial achievements indicates that she was a financial genius. She was far more interested in making money than Julian had ever been, and she possessed an obvious knack for knowing

> what was going to happen before it did. . . . In fact, Mary Beth's diversified investments defy conventional explanations. She was, as they say, "into" everything. She engaged directly in cotton brokering, real estate, and later bootlegging. She continuously invested in highly unlikely ventures that proved astonishingly successful. (Rice 550)

Mary Beth is not only financially independent but is also known for her exceptional physical strength in combination with powerful magical skills:

> It was told to us several times, that Mary Beth didn't just dress like a man, she turned into a man when she went out in her suit with her cane and hat. And she was strong enough at such times to beat off any other man who assaulted her. One early morning when she was riding her horse on St. Charles Avenue alone a man tried to pull her from the horse, at which time she herself turned into a man and beat him half to death with her fist, and then dragged him at the end of a rope behind the horse to the local police station. (Rice 548)

The character of Mary Beth is only one in the line of many Mayfair women to exhibit such abilities. In terms of feminism, the Mayfair family is an excellent example, since the women are the ones who make all the important decisions and money: "The men of the family never attempted to claim the plantation or to control the money, though under the French law they were entitled to both. On the contrary, they tended to accept the dominance of the chosen women. . ." (Rice 473). A slightly different female protagonist is Rhode's Marie Laveau. In the beginning of her story, she is neither educated nor as strong as Diana, Rowan, or Mary Beth. Even though all of these characters go through a quest in order to discover their strength and gradually become more powerful, for Marie the quest involves much more struggling and endurance By setting her story in the nineteenth century during which slavery was common and legal, Rhode depicts the effort of an African-American woman in her strife for independence:

> Rhodes's Marie Laveau uses Voodoo as a form of empowerment in an effort to stand strong against sexism and racism. Laveau's relationship with Damballah challenges Christian traditions and formally places a woman of African descent, though of mixed blood, in the position to restore a community of people to their spiritual origins. Once she becomes aware of cultural practices and family history, Marie is able to find her own place despite those who desire to oppress her and to, in effect, strip her of her power. Marie makes conscious decisions to resist oppression. Marie Laveau, Voodoo feminist. (Green 301)

The trend to depict witches as such strong characters may not be exclusive to female writing; it is, however, more prominent with female authors. When talking about such trends, it is worth mentioning again that witches are popular characters not only in books but also in television series whose makers are not only women. The characters in such series exhibit either similar or the same characteristics as many characters from the books, as is the case with Mary Beth and Diana. The television series such as *Charmed* by Aaron Spelling or the already mentioned *American Horror Storiy*: *The Coven* by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy revolve around female characters who have magical powers, are confident and dependent women. Accordingly, one could say that as fictional characters, female witches are quite suitable and a popular choice for expressing feminist ideas, often regardless of the gender of the author or the creator.

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