

DING DONG, THE EVIL WITCH IS NOT DEAD: MONSTROSITY AND ECOPHOBIA IN *LAS BRUJAS DE WESTWOOD AND WYTCHES*

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ABSTRACT

Within the EcoGothic framework, this article examines how the graphic novels *Las brujas de Westwood* and *Wytches. Volume 1* depict the witch as a monstrous and abject figure that blurs the boundary between human and nonhuman nature. In these works, the witch embodies the chaotic and uncontrollable aspects of the natural world, disrupting conventional boundaries and redefining humanity's relationship with nature. This portrayal challenges the anthropocentric view that positions the environment as a resource to be dominated and exploited.

KEYWORDS: Witches, *Wytches*, Monstrosity, EcoGothic, Ecophobia.

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RESUMEN

Enmarcado en un punto de vista ecogótico, este artículo analiza las novelas gráficas *Las brujas de Westwood* y *Wytches. Volume 1* y su representación de la figura de la bruja como una entidad monstruosa y abyecta que desdibuja la frontera entre la naturaleza humana y no humana. En estas obras, la bruja encarna los aspectos caóticos e incontrolables del mundo natural, perturbando los límites convencionales y redefiniendo la relación de la humanidad con la naturaleza. Esta representación desafía la visión antropocéntrica que concibe al medio ambiente como un recurso destinado a ser dominado y explotado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: brujas, *Wytches*, monstruosidad, ecogótico, ecofobia.



In the words of Deanna Molnar, “Our cultural obsession with witches parallels our preoccupation with wilderness. This infatuation may provide insight into how we see our place in the natural world” (2019, par. 1). Over time, the figure of the witch has experienced significant transformations: she went from a wise woman who lived in harmony with nature and had an extensive knowledge of the healing properties of herbs and plants, to an evil creature in league with dark magic and the devil. Even nowadays, we still fear the witch because of her mysterious and untamed power, as well as her knowledge of nature’s secrets. *Las brujas de Westwood*¹ and *Wytches*, both graphic novels released in 2014, reimagine the wicked witch, present a confrontation with the supernatural forces lurking in the dark forest, and insist on the interweaving between human experience and the natural world, portraying nature as a vessel of horror and a mirror of inner chaos. Building upon the complex history of witchcraft, this article analyzes these two graphic novels from an ecoGothic point of view and explores the witch as abject, a monstrous creature who embodies dark and untamed aspects of the natural world that disrupt the boundary between human and nature, challenging the anthropocentric view of the environment as a resource to be controlled and exploited.

1. ABOUT WITCHES

Witches’ mythologies are very diverse. In every culture, there exists a woman who can manipulate the supernatural world and have immeasurable powers, but the perception of what a witch is changes depending on the historical era and the culture of those defining her. In some cultures, a witch is an insidious character associated with dark magic or evil spells. In other instances, the witch embodies wisdom and power, possessing knowledge of herbs, potions, and other healing remedies. Witches are considered to have held a profound spiritual and philosophical connection with the environment, as they saw the natural world as a manifestation of the divine’s creative force and believed in the interdependence of all life. For them, the environment was not merely a resource but a companion deserving of respect, which has prompted the idea that witches were sort of earthly environmentalists, living in harmony with nature and using their expertise to sustain life (Crowley 2019).

Throughout history, the witch figure has experienced significant transformations but maintained a strong connection to the natural world. At the end of the Middle Ages, and especially during the Modern Age, respect for the wise woman muted into open hostility towards the witch, as they were believed to be able to cast spells and hexes, having received their powers from the devil. This belief led to the

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¹ In this article I am analyzing the Spanish graphic novel *Las brujas de Westwood*. However, for language consistency, from now on I will refer to it as *The Witches of Westwood*. I have also translated into English the direct quotes from the graphic novel.



Great Witch Hunts, which spanned from 1450 to 1750, and resulted in the trial, torture, and execution of thousands of women accused of witchcraft.

When it comes to the Great Witch Hunts, there does not seem to be a clear consensus on the origins, motivations, or conditions that can sufficiently explain the phenomenon of witchcraft. A notable decline in living conditions, a series of population uprisings and revolts (Federici 2004), and an environment filled with superstitions and internal conflicts (Henningsen 1981) influenced the setting in which the Hunts took place. This breeding ground also included a time of religious wars, the persecution of heretics, alarming inflation, food shortages, rapid population growth, and a significant increase in poverty and violence in broad strata of society (Levack 1995).

Furthermore, the Little Ice Age exacerbated extreme weather events that marked the Early Modern period in Europe. As Behringer explains, “while many blamed witches for various misfortunes, an agrarian society places significant importance on weather. Crop failure caused increases in prices, malnutrition, rising infant mortality, and, finally, epidemics” (1999, 339). Treatises aimed at identifying and punishing witches reflected this belief, with the *Malleus Maleficarum* being the most famous example. Written by two Dominican inquisitor monks in 1486, the volume is a witch hunter’s manual that describes in detail who witches were, how to recognize them, and how to eradicate them. The *Malleus* accused witches not only of gathering on special dates to worship the devil in the form of a large black goat, but also of causing storms, ruining crops, poisoning wells, making livestock sick, killing babies, performing abortions, and spreading disease. Behringer argues that the Little Ice Age’s social and cultural impact transcended mere physical hardship. It cultivated an environment of fear, superstition, and scapegoating, leading to the persecution of individuals believed to be manipulating the very forces of nature on which society depended for survival.

Barstow (1994) and other historians argue that the patriarchal desire to control female sexuality, rooted in traditional family and gender concepts, motivated the Witch Hunts. Federici (2004, 2018) supports this view, arguing that the Great Witch Hunts were a tool for enforcing patriarchal domination over women. She believes that the persecution of witches intensified gender divisions by instilling fear of female power in men and increasing state control over women’s bodies, labor, and reproductive capacities. Ultimately, this reinforced a hierarchical and oppressive social order. Any woman who challenged patriarchal expectations in real or imagined ways was a target. Merchant elaborates on this idea, describing how dominant narratives have historically equated women with nature, portraying nature as virgin, pure, and light, a land that may be pristine or barren yet possess the potential for development. However, “as fallen Eve, nature is disorderly and chaotic; a wilderness, wasteland, or desert requiring improvement; dark and witchlike, the victim and mouthpiece of Satan as serpent” (2013, 32).

Thus, the association of the female body with knowledge –especially knowledge not commonly possessed by patriarchy and strongly connected with non-human nature– along with the defiance of traditional female gender roles, lead to the perception of these women as a threat and the subsequent labeling of them as witches.



2. FROM GOTHIC TO ECOGOTHIC

Both the historical reality of witchcraft and the witch in her folkloric and mythical dimensions have become a recurrent theme of artistic creation. While modern witchcraft is closely associated with Wicca, a nature-based religion, the stereotype of the evil witch has never left popular culture. Due to folklore and fairy tales, the image of the witch that often comes to mind is still that of a powerful yet malevolent figure—one who lurks in the depths of the forest with her black cat, likely concocting some evil plan, such as poisoning an apple to murder an unsuspecting victim. Since the 1960s, however, the Western collective unconscious has begun to question and redefine these iconographies, often analyzing the image of the witch from a feminist perspective as a representation of powerful women and their relationship with non-human nature.

Castro (2019) reflects on how the revival of Goddess movements, combined with the intersection of feminism and environmentalism, have revitalized the witch archetype and led to a reexamination of the tradition, folklore, and wisdom associated with it. These were not the traditional witches of old, but rather empowered women deeply connected to their bodies and the natural world—embracing life, trees, the sun, water, and nature itself. They were the embodiment of some kind of activism intertwining feminism, environmentalism, and nature-centered spirituality. Castro recalls that “as feminism and ecology began to converge, struck by the collusion between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, the witches’ in-tuneness with nature appeared as the model for a more respectful and less oppositional relationship to our non-human counterpart” (Castro 2019, par. 5). This vision is shared by authors like Callejo, who insist that witches have no connection with bloody rituals or satanic pacts and recognize themselves as “heirs to traditions of ancestral religions, the worship of the Goddess, and to connect with the language of sacred nature on solstitial dates, practices that have been persecuted and distorted over the centuries” (Ferrero Martínez 2021, 13-14). Sorelo (2021) adds that patriarchy has historically demonized and devalued mythical aspects of femininity, such as the knowledge of Mother Earth’s healing powers, its connection with the moon’s phases, and its representations in multiple aspects of an ancestral goddess. She considers these women’s contributions to the deconstruction of these aspects, which implicate a narrative of healing and communion rooted in the forces and energies of the cosmos and the Earth. Conversely, alternative interpretations emphasize a more conventional feminine identity and celebrate the witch as a manifestation of the feminine principle, aligning her with nature and emphasizing her role as a life-giver. Authors such as Ehrenreich and English (2010) emphasize the connection between the witch and nature, reclaiming her image as a wise herbalist who helped communities using their skills as healers and midwives.

However, as Alaimo notes, “Ecocriticism, for the most part, has ignored monstrous natures, directing its attention toward texts that portray nature more favorably” (2001, 179). Undoubtedly, ecofeminist rhetoric has reclaimed the witch as a symbol of feminist empowerment and ecological activism, connecting the subjugation of women with the exploitation of nature. However, we must acknowledge



that patriarchy continued to reject and demonize the feminine principle it projected onto witches, frequently associating the witch figure with chaos, irrationality, and danger. Gothic fiction became a fitting setting for the witch, as she aligned with the genre's defining characteristics, such as medieval settings and haunted landscapes, as well as its supernatural elements and themes of horror and decay.

The Gothic imagination capitalized on the sublime—a quality that provokes awe and terror through vast, overpowering landscapes—and the uncanny, a blurring of familiarity and strangeness to create a sense of dread. According to Botting, the Gothic imagination showcased “threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration, and spiritual corruption” (1996, 1), and remained captivated by elements and practices deemed as negative, irrational, immoral, and fantastic. In this context, the witch persisted as a symbol of the feminine aspect, relegated to the dark corner of the collective unconscious as the embodiment of what must remain hidden, such as irrational wisdom, an overflowing sensuality, and an uncontrollable power.

As Deckard declares, “new approaches to the ‘greening’ of Gothic explore how ecoGothic represents cultural anxieties about the human relationship to the non-human world through uncanny apparitions of monstrous nature” (2019, 174). EcoGothic is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between Gothic literature and environmental concerns. Smith and Hugues describe ecoGothic as “the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism” (2013, 3) and argue that Gothic literature, with its focus on anxieties and the darker aspects of human nature, provides a unique lens through which to explore ecological issues and explore Gothic themes like the sublime, the monstrous, and the uncanny in relation to environmental anxieties, such as pollution, climate change, and the exploitation of nature. The concept of “ecophobia”—an irrational fear and hatred toward the natural world—has made up much of the early works of ecoGothic literature and criticism. As Estok explains, “the ecophobic condition is a continuum that can embrace the possibilities of fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness, or some combination of these, toward the natural environment” (Estok 2009, 1). Hillard (2009) conceptualized “Gothic Nature” and urged ecocritics to adopt Gothic criticism in their study of natural landscapes, while Morton’s (2012) theorization of “dark ecology” pushed ecocriticism to engage with unsettling, polluted, and toxic environments, reflecting deep anxieties in society about nature.

Nature is also a place where fear occurs. Poland asserts that, “the EcoGothic provides a timely and important tool to interrogate environmental anxieties and to examine both the ecology in Gothic and ecology as Gothic” (Dang 2022, 117). Parker, whose work has significantly contributed to the field, believes that ecoGothic allows us to examine our darker, more complicated cultural representations of the non-human world, including our ecophobic anxieties and fears of nature. These examinations began by exploring the relationship between human and non-human nature, focusing on landscapes or natural spaces (Parker 2020, 36). In her seminal work, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* (2020), Parker dedicates a chapter to analyzing the “Gothicization” of nature by certain inhabitants. She identifies the witch as



one of the most prevalent monsters, “extensively linked to our cultural conceptions of the wilderness in the Western world” (140). She specifically refers to her as an “ecoGothic monster” (164), reinforcing Merchant’s view of the witch as a “symbol of the violence of nature” (1980, 127).

3. THE WITCH AS A “MONSTER IN NATURE”

Over time, it has become increasingly evident that monsters are complex creations that mirror the prevailing social issues of their era. Cohen (1996) argues that monsters defy categorization, embodying difference and challenging established boundaries. He claims that “the monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4), thus representing forbidden practices and serving as outlets for transgression, and postulates that monsters police cultural borders and highlight anxieties about the Other. Likewise, he underlines how the monstrous body often becomes a site for anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality, and women who defy these norms risk portraying themselves as the monstrous Lilith or the Gorgon (9). Weinstock (2020) defines the monster as an entity that challenges and threatens our understanding of the world, ourselves, and the relationships between them, while acknowledging that these understandings can vary across different times and geographies.

According to Doble (2019), when it comes to witches, those othered bodies evoke a sense of the uncanny as well as the abject, which both repels and attracts us. These elements of fascination and fear manifest in the form of a witch, a unique and dreaded entity due to the uncertainty surrounding their capabilities, the boundaries of their power, and their potential threat to the power hierarchy. Doble writes: “witches, then, are monstrous in nature” (3), and indeed they are, in more than one sense.

Barksdale (2019) has studied the intersection of witchcraft, ecophobia, and masculinity in American literature and film. She considers the witch as “a figure for the ugly, the wicked, or the abject side of nature. She is a figure who is both marginal and marginalized –a non-normative threat to the social order. The witch figure is a force of nature and a part of nature” (3). Barksdale adopts an ecocritical perspective and examines works such as Robert Eggers’s film *The Witch* (2016), L. Frank Baum’s novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and Andrew Fleming’s film *The Craft* (1996), and explores the displacement of such anxieties onto the othering of both women and nature. Barksdale views the witch as both the “discarded parts of nature” (1) and the “deviant and monstrous” (3), while she emphasizes how men have historically attempted to dominate and control both nature and women in order to assert their masculinity and alleviate existential anxieties.



4. THE WITCHES OF WESTWOOD

Male anxieties are at the forefront of *The Witches of Westwood*, where the main character, Jack Kurtzberg, author of the best-selling novel *Walpurgis Passion*, is dealing with creative block following his book's sudden success. His agent, publisher, film producer, and wife are pressuring him to complete a sequel, only adding to his struggle. However, when he receives the tragic news that his brother Jim has died in an accident, Jack decides to return to his hometown for a fresh start and to search for lost inspiration. Once he is back in Westwood, Jack will soon find that nothing is what it seems. Returning to his boyhood town forces Jack to confront nature's wildness and the dark history of the place in order to ensure his own survival.

At first glance, Westwood looks like a peaceful and quaint little town, with its collection of picturesque houses surrounded by white picket fences. The first pages reveal that this is a fragile façade. The graphic novel begins with a man running for his life while he screams, "I know what you are. I know you want to kill me" (2). Very soon, the man finds himself in the woods at the feet of five women, who proceed to attack him in a savage way and use him as a sacrificial victim to invoke the demon Baphomet.

Thus, *The Witches of Westwood* portrays witches as the embodiment of abjection, a concept Kristeva (1982) defines as that which "disturbs identity, system, and order. What does not respect borders, positions, or rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject sits between two opposing categories, often relegated to the margins of society or completely rejected, closely linked to liminality and boundary violations, and it is distinguished by genuinely disturbing boundaries and limits, elicits a strong feeling of disgust, and emanates a sense of potential infection (Kristeva, 1982, 3-4). Creed (1993) argues that the formation of the monster as an abject body functions as a confrontation between the symbolic order and those who threaten its stability: "Patriarchal discourses define the witch as an abject figure, portraying her as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order" (76). The witches of Westwood, therefore, fall outside of the patriarchal system that traditionally defines women as other. They embody the ultimate male fear: powerful and uncontrollable females who threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined, or, as Berksdale claims, "her refusal to fall nicely into a category of social order, along with her supernatural powers, demonstrates how the witch ... threatens the patriarchal system of organized (imagined) power" (2019, 3).

This threat is vividly depicted in the domestic scenes, where the witches, under the guise of suburban wives, wield cruel and violent dominance over their husbands. Fear has these men entrapped. A committee of husbands, under threat from their wives, greets Jack upon his arrival in Westwood. This introduction highlights the witches' control over the town and the precarious position of men who dare defy them. Exchanges like "I said go now or I'll kill you" (13) or pretended jokes like "I have to go home now, or my wife will cook me for dinner" (13) emphasize the power dynamics at play with an inversion of traditional gender roles.

However, the witches' abject nature blossoms in the scenes set in the depths of the forest. Creed (1993) affirms that the abject confronts the symbolic order,



posing a threat to its stability, and it is when they are in the wilderness that they fully embrace abjection, existing outside the patriarchal system and embodying a monstrous femininity that defies societal norms. The forest functions as a liminal space, a threshold where the ordinary rules of reality are suspended. Within the forest, normality gives way to the uncanny, where bloody ceremonies and dark magic unfold. The witches of Westwood perform rituals that involve sacrificing male victims in a gore fashion, and they exhibit an unrestrained sexuality, further cementing the forest's role as a space where societal conventions are turned upside down and dark desires reign. They chant: "We dance under the changing red shadows of a dead moon; we call on our brothers on earth to guide us on the Left path; we hear the wolves salute those who rise on the wings of the night; we bathe in the essence of aconite, henbane, belladonna; with the skin of the snake we cover ourselves; And on sorghum leaves and wood we ride as we fly into the world of shadows" (36-37). In other words, the witches merge with the non-human environment challenging human specificity and identity. Instead of remaining separate from nature, they become part of it.

Wilderness, represented in the novel by the dark woods surrounding the town of Westwood, should not be read in the traditional sense of Gothic fiction, i.e., as a metaphor for the feelings or moods of the characters, but rather as an adversarial force against the protagonist. Nature is not depicted as nurturing, but rather as a wicked entity intertwined with the witches' power.

The forest's dark nature permeates everything it touches, spreading like an infection through the presence of familiars, and animals like spiders. The witches' familiars attack Jack in his own home, and we see one of the witches playing with a spider moments before causing a mass suicide as a ritual payment to Baphomet for a supernatural revelation. These creatures act as conduits of the forest's malevolent power, bridging the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds. The infection underlines the forest's role as a living entity, capable of exerting its dark influence beyond its threshold.

Westwood, thus, "with its brightly colored houses, the pantomime of friendly neighbors smiling at each other and people strolling through the clean streets" (72) reveals itself as a precarious space, affirming human rationality while bordering the wilderness that challenges its stability. This tension between civilization and the wild forms the crux of the narrative, as it openly shows the inherent fragility of human civilization and the sublime experience in the wilderness.

Jack decides to confront the witches in the woods. It is then revealed that Jack and his brother summoned a demon at the witch stones located in the depth of the Westwood forest when they were children, and the witches of Westwood are nothing more than Jack's own creation, "characters of a bad story, puppets of an unconscious puppeteer" (89). Jack, as the story's creator, decides the ending: an angry mob arrives, apprehends, and burns the witches, "because in the stories the evil witches die at the stake" (95). We also discover that the man who was sacrificed at the beginning of the story was none other than Jack's brother, thereby completing the story's circle. Meanwhile, the few pages Jack penned for the *Walpurgis Passion* sequel mysteriously burn.



5. FROM WITCHES TO WYTCHEs

Keeping with the old adage of “into the woods you shan’t go,” *Wytches*. *Volume 1* centers on the Rooks family and their entanglement with the ancient, primal wytches that inhabit the forests near their new home, the small town of Litchfield, New Hampshire. Charlie, the father, is a man with a past alcoholism addiction, looking for a new start for his family after his wife Lucy had a car accident that left her paralyzed, and their daughter Sailor went through terrible events related with bullying. She was relentlessly and viciously bullied by a girl named Annie, who went missing after she and Sailor had an altercation in the woods, which prompted the rumor that Sailor killed her.

Once again, the story opens with a sacrifice in the woods. In a prologue that takes place in 1919, a woman is trapped inside a tree and asking her son for help, as he observes the scene and asks her what she is doing there. As his mother explains that she has been “pledged” to the “wytches,” and they are coming for her, we witness the child hitting his mother’s face with a stone and incapacitating her, and muttering the words “pledge is pledge” (5), while the sound “chhhit chhhit chhhit” warns us that something is coming, and that these “wytches” might be something we have never encountered before.

The first chapter of the graphic novel, in effect, opens with a definition of the word “witch” in the manner of a dictionary entry—very close to the one in Collins dictionary—that covers many acceptations of the term, such as “a person, esp. a woman, having supernatural power as by a pact with the devil or evil spirits; sorceress; an ugly and ill-tempered old woman; hag; crone; a practitioner or follower of white magic or of Wicca” (2). However, the next page shows the same definitions completely scratched off, maybe by a claw, as Snyder boldly invites us to forget everything we know about witches. In his own words, “We’re trying to really signal that the witches in our series are very different from the green-skin, goofy-hat, broom-riding hags that you see in other movies and books and comics” (Betancourt 2014, par. 10).

Accordingly, we learn that those who were persecuted, imprisoned and executed for witchcraft were not witches. Instead, they died protecting a secret: the fact that wytches—the real ones—exist, and they are ancient, mysterious, and deadly creatures that are rarely seen. They will do one’s bidding, but in exchange one must “pledge” someone else’s life by smearing the victims with a green liquid that identifies them as a sacrifice, and also attracts the wytches to them. And as we already know, “pledge is pledge.”

If *The Witches of Westwood* dealt with male anxieties mainly related with sexuality, *Wytches* shows how fatherhood, traditionally seen as a role of guidance and protection, becomes a source of immense stress and fear. In *Wytches*, the father is not the hero who overcomes the monstrous threat, but rather a figure consumed by his own fears and failings. *Wytches* establishes from the beginning a family dynamic emphasizing the close relationship between Sailor and her father. Charlie is a graphic artist who creates stories about the adventures of a child whose grandfather owns a magic amusement park, where he projects the excitement of children’s adventures but also the fears of childhood, elements that are central to the plot’s development.



As Snyder states: “For me, [‘Wytches’] is really about the terror that you feel as a parent at your own inability to protect your children from things in the world. You do the best you can, but you can’t protect them all day every day, and the thing you really can’t protect them from is the cruelty or the behavior of other people when you’re not around” (Betancourt 2014, par. 7).

Thus, from the beginning of the story, Charlie has to live with the consequences of having endangered Sailor in the past while intoxicated, deal with the repercussions of Lucy’s paralysis after her car accident, as well as worrying about the aftermath of the bullying suffered by his daughter, and the rumors that have followed his family to their new home. As strange incidents begin to occur around him, his terror transforms into a primal fear deeply rooted in nature. Very soon, he must confront the fact that something sinister and powerful is lurking in the woods of Lichfield, with a particular interest in Sailor.

Charlie’s fears are not unfounded. The “pledging” process, which involves marking someone for the wytches, instills a constant sense of dread from the outset of the story. The ominous appearance of symbols and mysterious whispers surrounding pledges creates an atmosphere of impending doom for the chosen victims. In a flashback, we witness what actually happened to Annie, Sailor’s bully, whom threatened Sailor with a gun in the woods, until something emerged from a tree and dragged Annie inside it. Annie’s disappearance is the reader’s first real encounter with the wytches that haunt the story, and create a sense of corruption of the land, and of nature as a corrupting influence.

The depiction of the woods surrounding the Rooks family’s home is dark, twisted, and unsettling. Strange noises, distorted trees, and shadows give the sense that something malevolent is always watching. Right after moving to their new home, a deer enters the Rooks’ home, but the initial awe gives way to horror, as the animal bites off its own tongue, and spits its bloody remnants.

Likewise, the unseen influence of the wytches can manipulate memories and perceptions, leaving characters uncertain of reality itself, and experiencing a growing sense of paranoia and fear. Sailor develops a bump on the side of her neck, which she occasionally sees as an open eye, and at night, she hears her name called from the woods. Meanwhile, Charlie experiences visions of his own deteriorating body bearing the words “here.” This apprehension culminates in Charlie’s worst nightmare, as the wytches kidnap Sailor, prompting him to search for her. Meanwhile, Lucy’s memories of Sailor appear to have vanished.

The search for his daughter leads Charlie to learn that the inhabitants of Litchfield are eager participants in the power exchange with the creatures in the woods. As Sheriff Petal explains: “We are all selfish creatures, and they are the gods of selfishness. They can smell it in us” (103).

The wytches live beneath the earth, emerging from the forest to feed on human flesh in exchange for granting their followers power and longevity. As Charlie learns, no one knows exactly their origin. For some, “they are evolution gone wrong. Mutations from thousands of years ago, maybe formed apart ... in the ground. They are above us in the food chain. Kids is their favorite. Someone rubs pledge on you and the wytches come” (85). Their subterranean existence aligns



them with the earth and its primordial forces, suggesting that they are ancient, pre-human entities.

Snyder's wyitches are depicted as abject. They are neither human, nor are they entirely otherworldly. They exist in a liminal space, deeply connected to the earth and the natural world, yet operating outside of its known laws. However, while the witches of Westwood seem to have stepped out straight from the pages of the *Malleus Malleficarum*, Snyder's are monstrous others that exist beyond the boundaries of human civilization.

The wyitches are feral and predatory. They do not simply wield the forces of nature; they are part of it, creatures made of mud, bark, and bone. They exist as a natural part of the forest, reflecting a symbiotic relationship with the land. As Snyder points out, "the wyitches are so elementally scary because they are so unknown and unfamiliar. Even their eyes are designed to be these large black reflective pupils that hide in trees and look at you through holes in trees. They have no sympathy and no mercy, they give you what you want to get what they want," and admits he wanted to move away from a gendered design of them, focusing instead on a design of "unfamiliar, asexual, and predatory" creatures (Thompson 2014, par. 21-22), although we must point out that they are still referred to as "she." The graphic novel's ending is particularly bleak, but Snyder gives us enough hints to know that the story is not over. We learn that Lucy pledged Sailor in order to walk again, and that she is a descendant of the young child we met in the prologue, and who pledged his own parents to escape the horror of Lichfield's wyitches' burrow, as his own parents had conceived him as a pledge. The wyitches provoked Lucy's traffic accident, prompting her to pledge Annie. However, her pledge proved insufficient, leading her to pledge her own daughter instead. Thus, *Wyitches* offers no resolution or triumph over the forces of nature. Instead, Charlie sacrifices himself and pledges Lucy, so Sailor can escape and find a group of witch hunters, aptly named "The Irons", but the ending strongly suggests that the wyitches will continue to hunt and consume those who cross into their territory.

6. WITCHES, NATURE, AND HUMAN DOMINANCE

While both graphic novels deliver familiar tropes of supernatural terror, they also engage deeply with themes of ecological dread and humanity's troubled relationship with the natural environment. Both *The Witches of Westwood* and *Wyitches*, offer a contrasting view to the ecofeminist rhetoric of the witch as a symbol of feminist empowerment and ecological activism, emphasizing the darker and more unsettling aspects of the natural world. The woods in the analyzed works serve as a symbol of humanity's fraught relationship with nature. On one hand, nature is a source of life and sustenance; on the other, it is a site of danger and death. This ambivalence is central to the concept of ecophobia, where nature is both feared and desired, with the deep woods serving as a liminal space where the boundaries between human and nonhuman blur. The witches, and especially the wyitches, are deeply connected to the natural world, embodying the primal and untamed aspects of nature.



In *The Witches of Westwood*, the witches' relationship to nature is one of manipulation and control through their rituals and sacrifices, while the wytches represent more than simple supernatural villains; they symbolize ecological forces beyond human control, embodying both ecological anxiety and the fear of human insignificance in a world governed by nature's brutal, indifferent power. Thus, witches –and wytches– are presented as complex figures that encapsulate the intersection of supernatural fear, environmental concerns, and the sublime.

At a surface level, *The Witches of Westwood* and *Wytches* offer many similarities. They present an unsuspecting group of characters who move to an apparently idyllic location in order to start anew, and where the wilderness becomes not just a scenery for horror, but an active force that threatens human survival and identity. However, they develop in opposite ways.

The Witches of Westwood is, at the end, what Valerie Plumwood (1993) defines as “disabling story.” In her own words: “The reason/nature story has been the master story of western culture. It is a story which has spoken mainly of conquest and control, of capture and use, of destruction and incorporation” (196). In *The Witches of Westwood*, men are lured into the forest, a place where the energy of the witches disrupts and redefines traditional gender roles, and then becomes a testing ground for masculinity, where those who enter often meet their demise. The overflowing sexuality of the witches' rituals emasculate men around them: both their husbands turned into obedient familiars and Jack, who is facing impotence in the form of creative block, and only overcomes it by burning the witches once he has depowered them by revealing that they are nothing but figments of his imagination. If as Barksdale states: “witches, specifically the wicked witches, reveal where the different axes of domination between women and nature intersect” (38), by extension, the bewitched Westwood forest undermines the affirmation of human superiority by threatening the very distinction between the human and the non-human. Thus, Jack, a writer, an embodiment of the patriarchal reason and logic, kills the witch and purifies the forest, as Barksdale points out, as a consequence of the “fear the male characters felt when nature and witch-women threaten their sense of authority, masculinity, and sovereignty” (14). As a result, at the end the witches are no longer a threat, since they have been contained and incorporated into the dominant culture as mere characters of a book written by a man, that is, commodified objects ready to be consumed, which ensures the domestication of both wild women and wild nature, which don't pose a threat to patriarchal hegemony anymore. The potential peril that ensues from the tension between civilization and the primal has been averted.

On the other hand, *Wytches* engages with themes of ecological apocalypse, suggesting that the natural world, in the form of the wytches, will eventually reassert its dominance over humanity. The graphic novel portrays nature as a force that cannot be tamed or contained, and which will inevitably rise up to reclaim its territory. This apocalyptic vision is grounded in a deep sense of human vulnerability, as the Rooks family find themselves powerless against the overwhelming force of the wytches and the wilderness they inhabit.

Throughout the graphic novel, Snyder emphasizes the futility of human efforts to control or escape nature. The Rooks family's attempts to flee from the



wytches only serve to draw them deeper into the forest, mirroring humanity's inability to escape its dependence on and vulnerability to the natural world. The wytches' ultimate victory over the Rooks suggests that nature will always have the upper hand, no matter how much humans seek to dominate it, and emphasizes their fragility in the face of environmental forces that are beyond their control.

The ending of *Wytches* is particularly poignant in this regard. Contrary to *The Witches of Westwood*, the novel concludes not with the triumph of human reason or power, but with the Rooks' capitulation to the wytches. Sailor's fate is left in the air, and we don't know what will happen when and if she meets "The Irons", but at the end of *Wytches. Volume 1* the message is clear: Humanity's attempts to control Nature are ultimately doomed to failure, and the natural world will always reclaim what is rightfully its own.

7. THE WITCH AS AN ECOGOTHIC MONSTER: FEAR, POWER, AND THE CHAOTIC FORCES OF NATURE

Thus, both *The Witches of Westwood* and *Wytches* show the re-emergence of the evil witch as an ecoGothic monster, a figure that embodies both human anxiety about the environment and the chaotic, uncontrollable power of nature, while invokes fear and fascination, illustrating the dynamic tension between humans and nature, and the consequences of human intervention in the natural world. They also work as a reminder of the lingering fears of witchcraft particularly when faced with inexplicable phenomena. The folklore of witches permeates both texts, and the portrayal of nature as both a victim and a perpetrator of horror reflects a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of human and environmental systems, as well as the potential consequences of disrupting that balance. In both graphic novels, the artwork plays a critical role in amplifying the eerie, monstrous nature of the titular creatures.

In *The Witches of Westwood*, El Torres openly acknowledges that his perspective on witches resembles a "mythical monster," and reinforces the monstrosity of the graphic novel's nominal witches by inserting recreations of Goya's engravings between its four episodes, and claiming that his Westwood witches originate from the witch who "tries to cook Hansel, poisons Snow White, flies on a broomstick, and you see her on Halloween posters" (2014, 104).

The linework used to portray the witches is often sharp, raw, and aggressive. The graphic novel depicts the witches as beautiful and oversexualized women, clad in tight and revealing clothes. Their facial expressions, often characterized by wide, unsettling grins or snarling features, give them a predatory and malevolent appearance.

The illustrations' use of shadow and light instills a sense of menace in the witches, particularly when they are in the woods, illuminating only parts of their bodies, implying that they conceal much of their power and inhabit locations beyond the reach of ordinary humans. In this sense, the forest takes on a life of its own, as the trees have roots and branches that seem to reach out like claws, and it feels as monstrous as the witches themselves.



Additionally, ritual sacrifices, dismembered bodies, and other gory elements are depicted in vivid detail often showcasing the witches' power in violent, bloody ways. The brutality of their actions is a clear reminder of their monstrous nature, making them not just manipulative and powerful but also physically dangerous.

In the case of *Wytches*, a very distinct visual style, combined with an atmospheric color palette, contributes to a sense of dread and terror throughout the story. They render the wytches in a grotesque, inhuman manner, with distorted, elongated limbs, sharp features, and gaping mouths, giving them an otherworldly quality that distances them from any sense of humanity.

The use of shadows and deep blacks makes the wytches appear as if they are emerging from the darkness itself. Often, only parts of their bodies or faces are visible, hiding their full form and enhancing their sense of menace, which plays with the reader's perception, leaving much to the imagination and making them even more terrifying because they are not fully seen or understood.

The backgrounds in *Wytches* are often abstract, with swirling, chaotic patterns which blur the line between reality and nightmare, enhancing the disorienting nature of the wytches, as if their very presence warped the environment around them. Colors further intensify the monstrous presence of both the witches of Westwood and the wytches. The use of harsh, contrasting colors—deep reds, greens, and yellows—create an atmosphere that mirrors the physical corruption the monstrous beings bring. The texture adds a sense of decay and rot, particularly in the case of *Wytches*, which echoes the creatures' corrupting nature.

Together, these artistic choices create nightmarish worlds where monstrous creatures exist, as the visuals do not just depict their appearance, but evoke the primal fear they represent, conjuring a visceral reaction from the readers.

8. TIMES OF CRISES, TIMES OF WITCHES

We are currently facing a modern ecocultural crisis, illustrated by numerous threatening, interconnected, and deeply self-reinforcing challenges, including extreme weather events, critical changes to Earth systems, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem collapse. These issues stem from a variety of concerns, including fossil fuel addiction, the imperatives of cheap energy, and the intricacies of human and non-human bonds.

Since the 2010s, there has been an increasing literary and artistic production centered around anxiety about climate and environmental change, and we can argue that this production and the fears associated with it are deeply interconnected with the rise of the fictional witch figure that we have witnessed for years now. We have observed that the depiction of the witch often portrays her as a wise and powerful figure, possessing knowledge of the natural world and its rhythms, and the capacity to utilize this knowledge for healing and environmental protection. Witches can also serve as a symbol of resistance against the destructive forces of modernization and industrialization, often portrayed as detrimental to the natural world. They are able to wield nature's power and punish those who seek to destroy or exploit it, serving as a reminder of the dangers of ignoring the natural world and the importance

of respecting and protecting the environment. In any case, they are a force to be reckoned with.

To name only a few, witches have populated TV shows like *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), The reboot of *Charmed* (2018), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2019), *A Discovery of Witches* (2020) or *Sanctuary: A Witch's Tale* (2024-present), films like *The Witch* (2015), *The Love Witch* (2016), and the revision of the classic *The Craft*, entitled *The Craft: Legacy* (2020). They are also popular in comic books. When it comes to Marvel comics, we must mention Scarlet Witch, who masters chaos magic and reality-warping powers, which has immense destructive potential, and Agatha Harkness, always tiptoeing the line between hero and villain. Zatanna is one of the most powerful sorceresses in DC comics. She wields real magic by speaking spells backwards. Morgaine, also from the DC universe and inspired by the Arthurian legend, is a sorceress who often opposes heroes such as Wonder Woman and Superman. The Three Witches, also known as the Maiden, Mother, and Crone, are the witches in DC Vertigo's *The Sandman*. Conversely, the witches of Dark Horse Comics feature Willow Rosenberg, a character from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or Baba Yaga, a Slavic folklore-inspired figure who wields immense power and terror in the *Hellboy* universe. Of course, we can't forget the original teenage witch Sabrina Spellman by Archie Comics.

The proliferation of witches' narratives during times of crisis, such as the climate emergency today and the Little Ice Age in the 16th and 17th centuries, must be considered as an indicator of social, economic, and psychological stress. The exploration of witches' narratives in both historical and contemporary contexts reveals profound insights about societal responses to crises. By understanding how fear, scapegoating, and power dynamics play out during times of instability, we can better navigate the challenges posed by climate change today.

In conclusion, witches' narratives frequently encapsulated fears of the unknown and the breakdown of social order. Today, narratives about witches or witch-like figures may emerge in response to the perceived chaos brought on by climate change, reflecting anxiety about losing control over nature and society. Once again, the unruly aspects of nature connect with the witch's embodiment of gender, power, and fear. The witch's monstrous nature resurfaces, embodying cultural fears and anxieties about the environment and the boundaries between human and non-human nature. By examining these connections, we can see how the themes of crisis, fear, and control recur in witch narratives across different historical contexts, revealing much about societal responses to environmental challenges.



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