

QLH-S01E01: The Witch

Sat, 2/5 1:14PM 33:51

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

witch, caleb, people, movie, william, watched, horror, film, happening, totally, philip, humans, accepts, catherine, talk, witchcraft, thomason, psychological, community, black

SPEAKERS

Jessi Chartier, Jen Myers

J Jessi Chartier 00:04

Welcome to Quiet Little Horrors. Here we talk about the films that creep under your skin and take up residence in the dark. Let's chat about The Witch.

J Jen Myers 00:17

Before we get started. As a reminder, when we talk about movies, we need to talk about everything in the movie. So there will be spoilers involved. If you haven't seen the movie or want to refresh your memory before you listen, you can stop now and do that before coming back.

J Jessi Chartier 00:33

And today, we're talking about the witch which follows a Puritan family that leaves the safety of a community and rely on their God and self determination to survive the magical wiles. And some really exciting adventures ensue. So let's get right to it. Jen, how did you hear about this film? And what how did you like come to discover it?

J Jen Myers 00:55

Yeah, I think that's a really good question. I don't remember. It's just it's just appeared magically, I guess. It definitely. I wasn't as into quote unquote, horror movies at the time I watched it. I do remember that. So I came to it with a little bit more of Oh, I like RD movies. I like psychological movies. I like movies that are a little bit weird, or kind of thriller, that type of thing. And so I came to it in the spirit of I know that this is a little bit strange. And I know there's like some weird psychological things going on it. And that when I watched it, that was what was foremost in my mind that like, Oh, this is just, this is all going on in people's heads. And that's really fascinating. And it really wasn't until I revisited it, that I was like, oh, maybe this actually

is witchcraft, it almost was a reversal of how I think most people watched it was seeing, Oh, this is a story about witchcraft, and then thinking, Oh, maybe there's psychological stuff underneath it. And I kind of did the flip of that. How about you?

J Jessi Chartier 01:58

Yeah, I didn't really discover the witch until after it had become kind of a cult following. It was a blip on my radar only when it was lumped in with all of the other horror films out there. And I'm not a horror fan. I'm very similar to you, like any kind of scary film has to be subtle for me to enjoy. And when I first watched it, I actually just was, I couldn't understand what was going on. Like, why are people who Why are so many people excited about this, like so many people were excited about saw, and I could not get into it. And yet this one is totally different. And yet, so many people love it. So I actually turned it off. For the first, I would say after the first 40 minutes, sorry for all those who put their hearts and efforts into the movie. But I initially turned it off. And then I thought to myself, alright, you know what, there's just enough talk about it, I should just give it it's my full attention. And I should just really just see it through to the end. And when I came back to it, I think I was just in a different mind space, I think I was my expectations were properly set, I wasn't expecting a typical horror film, I was really much more interested in watching it as a craft, like watching the craft of the movie, not as in the craft the movie, but like watching the craftsmanship of storytelling play out through the movie. And then I fell in love with it when I had that kind of angle on it and just allowed myself to be open to the story itself. I just fell in love with it. So that's how I came to it.

J Jen Myers 03:32

I was gonna say it was interesting, too, because I think a lot of the things you're describing or in the context of it is replicated. I think a lot of other people went through that, right. Like this film, I think was definitely one of the first of this, I don't I guess there's a current trend of these kind of quieter horror movies or more psychological horror movies, whatever you want to call it. And I think that this was one of the first that really broke through as a thing, and got a lot of attention as that sort of thing. And so there were probably a lot of people out there who had that same type of, oh, I don't know if this is for me. But then once you know, you kind of sit down with this film really got into it for that and yet for me I was really open to that but I'm like I'm more into war now. I feel like over the past couple years I've gotten more into I guess quote unquote war. That's part of what we're doing this podcast is like what does that even mean? I think but we'll we'll figure it out. But I also think that previous to this there was the horror tended to be a lot more I don't know if you know torture porn. I remember when I was little you mentioned saw and things like that. And you know, I remember when I was a little bit younger or even like college age in my 20s when I had more time to watch movies than you know you do as a working adult maybe that was the type of horror movies they feel ruled was these type of puzzle movies really gory type of things. And it's not that there's anything particularly wrong with that, but they didn't really grab me. And so I think that I kind of wrote off horror as a genre just because I just didn't feel like I was connecting with it in the form that it was presented to me as. But I feel like with the witch, there's been this kind of wave of horror movies that I feel like I connect a lot more with. And this really did feel like the first one for me was like, oh, yeah, okay, I'm into this. Let's go down this path, and see how that goes.



J Jessi Chartier 05:27

Yeah, I agree. And I think that what's so interesting? Well, let's get let's just start talking about the film. Because I think that there's so many things we could talk about. And I know a lot of other podcasts. I mean, this is a movie from 2015. So I don't want to necessarily belabor the craftsmanship in regards to the period piece of it. Like there's so many other pieces out there that talk about how focused the movie was on creating a real representation of what was happening in Massachusetts in those early days or New England, not necessarily Massachusetts. But I'd love to talk about the at where the horrors themselves reside. You know, and I think that one of the things that struck me the first, I guess, like, things that is threatening, right, is that sense of isolation, you know, at the very beginning, William defiantly, stands up for what he believes and refuses to compromise. And by so by doing that he the there's a breaking of the ties, you know, the town says, well, then you need to leave, and he says, I'd be glad on it. And you can see the look of horror on Thomas's face, when she realizes they're going to be kicked out of the town. You know, here is a young woman who is at the, you know, she's coming of age story, who now no longer has the protection of the town and only can rely on her family. And Caleb kind of has it too, you can kind of see it creeping in. And the twins are just too young to know it. And Katherine has this moment, just a brief moment where she glances at her husband, when he says that,

J Jen Myers 07:12

yeah, you really get the sense in all of this, but the William is leading and the rest are kind of getting carried along with him. And Katherine, I think switches over pretty quickly kind of jumps in and be like, Okay, we're doing this, we'll put all of our faith in this. But there's definitely some misgivings I think, and there should be man like that is really a huge thing. Like they've already left England, they've already gone across the ocean to this place to does not have a civilization that like they're used to. And now they're even breaking away from that. So it just a huge break from everything.

J Jessi Chartier 07:53

Yeah, and when they get out into the wilds, it is, you know, I think that there's a sense of optimism with the parents. A sense of everybody, everyone in that family has to have faith that things are going to be okay. But when you are totally isolated from a community, you don't have the safety in numbers that you would have, if you were in a town, you totally have to be self reliant. And I think that that's one of William's biggest character faults is that he is convinced that his determination, his self will, and his faith in God is going to be the thing that gets him through this. And he learns very quickly that he can't do it alone. This family cannot do it alone. And he is way too prideful to think that he could suddenly become a farmer suddenly become a trapper, suddenly become a hunter, you know, all of these things that he clearly struggles with Now, whether or not he was any of those things in the past, in England, he is struggling to fulfill those roles here, you know, and no one has the ability to lean on anyone you look at Caleb, and how confused he is in his own sexuality, because the only female he's, like, able to see grow up or start to develop is Thomas and his sister. And you can see he's conflicted by that, you know,

J Jen Myers 09:20

definitely. And like you were saying, it's not only that there are leaving a community and they have to rely just on themselves, obviously, that's part of it. But they're also they're not going to have those connections with the community. They're not going to have other human beings around. And it's an interesting reversal of how a lot of you know kind of witch trial stories are talked about because usually they're talking about like you think like the crucible and things like that. It's kind of about like the horror of the community, right, like the human community is turning on you in the horror of other people. And so at the very beginning, this throws that out the window by cutting them off from the community, but then all these new wars come up of like Okay, now you don't have that. But there's plenty of other things to be frightened of. And isolation in a way is almost more terrifying than you know what other people can do. And I think that that's what they're like throwing themselves into and not realizing it.

J Jessi Chartier 10:14

Yeah, absolutely. And I feel that it panders itself a little bit into the, the perceived evils that are happening. And one of the things that I really like about the witch is that early on, you have no idea whether the struggles that they're facing the horrors that they're facing, like Samuel getting taken. The crops being bad, like all of that little stuff. You don't know if that's real witchcraft, or if it's just their perception of reality, because they're isolated, because they're so heavy in their faith, that if God is not helping them, then they're assuming that someone is hurting them. And I mean, the audience is, is drawn to believe them because of things like you see, the woman, the the witch Tate, like scattering through the woods, and you see her in her hovel, etc. But you still don't know. There's still this question of how much of this is truth.

J Jen Myers 11:13

Right? And how much of it is a metaphor for what's going on in these people's heads? Yeah, everything is happening on five levels at once, which is kind of how things happened with actual humans, too. You know, I mentioned like, the first time I watched this, I totally took everything metaphorically, I was convinced the whole time. This is all just psychological metaphor for what's going on with a group of people who are oppressed, to really, really desperate circumstances, and then dealing with things like Thomas and dealing with growing up and coming of age in that sort of desperate circumstance. And then everything is about to do that. That's not to say that that is the only interpretation of it. Like I said, then I watched it again, I was like, Oh, but I guess I could see now this could just be witchcraft. But maybe it's not one thing or the other. It's everything going on at the same time. But definitely, there are so clear, such clear connections between what you see even when it's supernatural, or fantastical, and what's going on internally, and all of the characters and how they're interacting together.

J Jessi Chartier 12:15

Exactly like the the crops being bad crops. Probably has nothing, it happens, it probably has nothing to do with witchcraft, and actually has more to do with Williams farming ability, or the climate of that year or something. External that is not evil. It's just reality. Same thing is true

with a lot of the other things that are like, even let even Samuel disappear. And you are, you could argue, was a just a heightened reality of a wolf stealing a baby, which doesn't really often happen, but it can,

J Jen Myers 12:52

it can. And you know, and I guess saying, Oh, well, he wasn't moving around much of that time. And it does happen very quickly in the movie, having had little children myself, or like, I have one at least they do disappear audio, not like to that extent. But they're they can be unpredictable. And I mean, I can't imagine having a infant in a situation like that when you're trying to work. And like you have to work from dawn till dusk just to survive you and washing other kids at the same time. Like, I think that that's an exaggerated version of a real life event that could happen when you are in those types of circumstances trying to raise a bunch of kids, you've got an infant to care for, you know, you're just struggling to survive, how easy would it be to set a child down for a second and turn away to do something else you have to do and then turn back and it's gone?

J Jessi Chartier 13:42

Exactly. And there is that line to that Caleb has of saying Father showed me the tracks. Now, you could say, Wow, maybe there really was a wolf. But then you could also say, Well, we know that Williams bad Hunter. Yeah. So, you know, how realistic is that? And we know that William lies in order to placate and in order to keep the peace, that's so true. You know, there's but the reality is always in question. And what is causing suffering? What is causing joy is always in question. It's just, it's just a wonderful, wonderful, kind of. So that's why I think it's more of a psychological thriller, because these people are there in their own echo chamber. And they, as we have discovered with the Coronavirus isolation is not good for you mentally. It is, if you are trapped with the same people, for months on end, without any outside communication other than the occasional tradesman coming through. That's really really psychologically difficult. And even the twins kind of demonstrate that they are so wrapped up in their own thing that they start to create friends, right they start to say Oh, black Phillip is talking to me. Now if you're on the side of the blue leave that blank fill up really is the devil or is a some kind of demon that is, you know, showing up as a he, what is it a he goat? Then, you know that makes total sense. But maybe they're just making something up to like it's just,

J Jen Myers 15:13

although in their defense I do want to say that go looks like it has so much intelligence, doesn't it? It's like how did they got that go? And what was that process like where they're like, Okay, so we're talking, we're talking to farmers. It's like, Do you have any goats that just look evil that you actually think might be the devil I was looking for? Because he does look like like, you look at that goat and you're like, oh, yeah, I totally buy this. If I were a little kid, I'd be terrified of that thing.

J Jessi Chartier 15:44

I think that that I'm going to give a shout out to two people that I think that the

I think that that I'm going to give a shout out to two people that I think that the cinematographer, like the people who are doing the lighting and the actual camera work are probably a huge tip of the hat too, because they're the ones that set everything up. Right, so that you get that out of the go. Right. But I also I'm sure that, you know, you talked to enough of the animal wranglers in Hollywood, you probably could find the right one. And so that's probably what they did. But yes, I think that they capture that essence of like craftiness really well.

J Jen Myers 16:17

Totally, I guess also, you know, as we're talking about it, it's still the same metaphorical thing about how humans just naturally read into these natural elements, right. And it's the same thing that's happening in the film, they read into the dark forest. So they're surrounded with, they read into the crops not working out the way they wanted to, or things like that, or Yeah, dealing with some of these these burgeoning sexuality, feelings that they can't, they don't know what to do with and things of that nature. These are all like really natural things. But we as humans, are, that's just our own instinct is to read into them, and create stories around them and create justifications for them, because we don't know what else to do with them.

J Jessi Chartier 16:55

Exactly. When we can't explain it, we make something up. Let's talk a little bit about one of the things that I really loved about this film is how the male and female characters how they kind of fit into or did not, or were trying to force themselves into their sense of gender roles and expectations. I think that William represents probably the perfect example of masculine toxicity, because he is determined to be the one to provide for his family. And he is the he sees himself clearly as the head of the household with a direct line to faith with a direct line to their God, with the ability to farm with the ability to hunt and trap and all of these things. And I'd like to, we don't see him grieving Sam, though. That's not to say he doesn't. But he, we never see him show emotion unless it's anger. There is a brief moment where he sees Thomason, who was out all night, when Caleb was being attacked by the witch. We see him have a tender moment with his daughter, but that's it.

J Jen Myers 18:06

Yeah, he does seem I feel like in most of the tender moments are with Thomason he does seem to be I think fonder of her, which also kind of makes sense because she's the oldest right? And he does have I think he he has a decent relationship with Caleb. But I think that that is also he's very particularly trying to bring Caleb up in this mold that he's trying to fit himself in as well as like taking care of things and also keeping secrets. Like he brings Caleb into the secrets of, you know, the traps that he got by selling Catherine silver or trading Catherine's Cup, which he hasn't told her about. So he's like, we're trying to bring Caleb into the same mold of not saying truthful things that are probably kind of important for the sake of a greater good that he's decided on. Which, yeah, is a little problematic.

J Jessi Chartier 18:59

That's exactly you know, you nailed it right on the head. William is pushing what he sees as the greater good as he defines it.

J Jen Myers 19:07

Yes. And to his credit, he is doing that sincerely. Like I think he genuinely does think this is for the best and he's genuine. I do think that he genuinely like cares and is trying to take care of everything. And I think and also to his credit, I think later on the film where he does end up kind of blaming himself for the sin of pride. And that really, I mean, he's right that was a lot of the problem with all this is his own pride is what kind of led them down this path in the first place.

J Jessi Chartier 19:38

Yeah, I agree. I think his his reversal at the end where he actually just accepts his death from black Philip was shocking to me. I did not expect I expected him to go down fighting. I don't think because he had the hatchet I think or the axe in hand and he dropped it in If you look at that as like, specifically, the chopping of the wood is kind of like a metaphor for his pride or his, his anger or whatever you want to call it, because wherever he is caught in an uncomfortable situation, he's chopping wood. And it's like the one thing that he can do well, it's the directive, but productive. Exactly, exactly. And at the end, he takes the axe to harm black Philip, but then drops it. So it's almost like he accepts that that was, and he does, he has that line about pride. And he just kind of accepts it, and then it is crushed under underneath the firewood. I mean, talk about a good metaphor.

J Jen Myers 20:42

I mean, he's, he's an example. I mean, he's much a kind of a little bit of a victim of this, too, right? Or what he's been trying, we talked about this mold, he's trying to fit his head soften or try to fit killed. And he's kind of a victim of that too, which is essentially what happens with toxic masculinity is that it creates this unrealistic set of standards that is going to end up hurting the person trying to fit themselves into it as well.

J Jessi Chartier 21:08

Right, right. And Caleb falls into that too. Like, he doesn't talk about how he's feeling. He hides it. He represses it. And then it gets he gets really confused. And so of course, if the witch is real, of course, she's going to prey on that aspect. I mean, if you watch carefully on how the witches or the witch tries to seduce, right, Caleb, but then for the women, the devil tries to recruit them in each have their own way. Like I love the fact that every female character is somehow drawn into and given an opportunity by black Philip to join his coven. So like, Mercy is the first one to accept. Because she comes to the at the brook at the scene of the book where she says I'm the witch of the wood. I'm the witch of the wood clickety clack, clickety clack. But then she says, I can do whatever I want black Philip told me, I can do whatever I want. And the fact that they play with him, and if you listen to the songs that they sing about black Philip, it's clear that she has accepted his offer. Then he comes to Catherine, when she has the mental breakdown, where she wakes up in the middle of the night and thinks she sees her dead sons.

And she's holding Sam and Caleb off screen, the dead Caleb off screen says, Would you like to see us every night? Or would you like to see us whenever you want? And of course, Katherine says yes. And then Caleb says, I have a book. May I read it? Read from it to you. And the book is such a big part of both the idea of witchcraft and the idea of faith. Right? In the Christian faith, the idea that the Bible is God's word has the flip side of it, where it's the devil has a black book. And so of course, Caleb, or this, the devil is like, Hey, can I read from this book? So there's the offer. And Catherine says, Hold on, I need to feed Samuel. So we and then we cut to the scene where it's not really Samuel, it's a bird and which is a crow, of course, which represents stuff, feeding off of the entity or the thing that gives life. You know, it's just it's such a great piece. So we don't know if Catherine actually accepted it. But you know, she also, the next morning looks very distraught. So who knows what happens, like

J Jen Myers 23:35

you said, like, breakdown was accurate, like she was, she was like on a downhill slide the whole time. Like she is the one who clearly. I mean, she says, literally, she missed England. And so it's not even the town that they left, like she doesn't even want to be in this country in the first place. And I mean, I can't even like I mentioned before, like, I can't even imagine the amount of work. I'm trying to do, you know, raise kids and that and they're just like, there's literally nothing else. And whatever little bits she had of her old life, like her silver cup, are just disappearing, and the thing and she blames Thomason for that, which that seems to be a really clear indication of she's also blaming Thomason for the fact that on Thomasson is young and blossoming and, you know, she's on she's on the opposite side of things kind of going downhill. And what she had, you know, like, her baby's just gone. So she's just losing things left and right. And she sees her daughter kind of coming. And then if you talk about like, yeah, mercy to there's these young women coming into power that she doesn't have.

J Jessi Chartier 24:44

And I think that she sees Tom it's clear that she sees Thomason as a threat. Oh, absolutely. When there's this great, the great scene of where she's undressing her father to go clean his clothes,

J Jen Myers 24:56

electric countless all over the place.

J Jessi Chartier 25:00

Oh, absolutely. And Catherine sees it and just well, at least that's her interpretation of it.

J Jen Myers 25:05

I mean, it was also my interpretation. I think that's supposed to be deliberate. I mean, I guess I guess we could be revealing a lot about ourselves here. But no, I think it's, you're supposed to be reading this in the film, because we were talking about it too, like, because they're removed

be reading this in the film, because we were talking about it too, like, because they're removed from other community, the rest of the town and everything like that they this family becomes a microcosm of, of how humans behave. And as humans grow, if you don't have anybody else to, you know, relate to in any way, you're going to, you know, use the people who are near you. And so all of these things start coming out and it the type of things that you would want to have happen with family members, they have no other choice. Yeah, so yeah, I think definitely, there's, there's a lot and when we do see the tenderness between Thomasin and her father, there's just another bit of kind of the relationship between the father and mother is also deteriorating at the same time. So everything is getting turned upside down.

J Jessi Chartier 26:02

Yeah, everybody's falling apart. And I think that that's why this movie fits in so well, with our theme of the quiet little horse, because everything is subtext. And the horrors are so baked into. I don't know behaviors and beliefs, rather than things have that it's more internal than it is external, they internalize what is going around, outside of them into something that is destroying them from from the inside. It's like, you know, a cancer from inside.

J Jen Myers 26:35

Right? This is a really clear indication, even I said at the beginning, this is a little bit different than our typical these type of period, which stories because it doesn't involve the community. But it does give you a very, very clear indication of how all of that stuff could have happened. Because this is this is how it happens when you are in desperate circumstances. And you don't have any other explanations for things that you desperately need. explanations for. This is what happens, this sort of thing happens. You turn on the people you are near you start believing in things that would otherwise be you know, ridiculous. This is just what humans do.

J Jessi Chartier 27:13

Yes, exactly. Especially when they feel when they feel their power is threatened or where they see an opportunity to have power. You know, you look at Mercy and Catherine, they're perfect examples of that. Catherine feels like she's losing power. Mercy feels like she's gaining it.

J Jen Myers 27:26

It's also kind of caught in between, totally caught

J Jessi Chartier 27:29

in between, you know, and I don't know, I just I do find it very interesting. At the last scene, that you can help me with this. Go ahead.

J Jen Myers 27:41

I was actually just going to bring that up. I was gonna say like, so what, what happened? What do you think happens at the end?

J Jessi Chartier 27:46

So what I find most interesting about the ending, and here's what I find interesting about the ending, and that happens even before Catherine's dead, even before William dies, it's the scene where she wakes up after the night where the witch has theoretically come into the hold the pen and everything, but her is dead and black Philip is gone. Right? So when we have the scene just before that, where we see the witch eating a goat, the back of the witch, at least eating the goat, and we see the twins, where's Thomasson? She's not in the frame. So I think that I don't know if that was. I don't know if that was done purposely like or if that was we had a shot of Thomasson and ended up on the cutting room floor. Or I just totally missed it. But I just it's like one thing that nags at me is like, well, where the heck is she then?

J Jen Myers 28:41

So are you thinking that she the witch? Or is it? Are we looking through her eyes imagining this?

J Jessi Chartier 28:49

I don't know. I mean, anytime the witch shows up, Thomason is alone. Like she's alone with Sam. She's alone with Caleb, like, and she got knocked out on off the horse in the woods with with Caleb. So I don't know. I don't I don't have an answer. The audience is meant to think that it's not her right. We're meant to believe it's not her, especially in that is reinforced that the Yeah, and I mean, it is reinforced at the end when Black Philip becomes, takes a human form and offers to have her sign his book. So theoretically, she couldn't have been a witch before then because she hadn't signed the devils book. But it does. It just felt off but that's okay. Like that's what I like about the film is like, Sure,

J Jen Myers 29:36

and I think it's still all could be happening in her head is yeah, like, even if it wasn't like specifically, her witchcraft, it this all could be in even to the end, it could still all be some sort of extension of her own psychological issue.

J Jessi Chartier 29:55

Right? Absolutely. Like, who knows. I mean, she did end up seeing her father die and killed her mother. So we wouldn't go off the deep end at that point.