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Demonic Possession and Fractured Patriarchies in Contemporary Fundamentalist Horror

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Demonic Possession and Fractured Patriarchies in Contemporary Fundamentalist Horror

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities

By

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B.A., Wright State University, 2013

2017
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Lindsey Slanker ENTITLED Demonic Possession and Fractured Patriarchies in Contemporary Fundamentalist Horror BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMANITIES.

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ABSTRACT


This thesis is a survey of contemporary horror films from the perspective of fundamentalist American audiences. Using Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity and religious studies scholarship as framework, I investigate how five visual texts perpetuate patriarchal family structures. The five texts I explore are The Last Exorcism (2010), The Conjuring (2013) and The Conjuring 2 (2016), The Witch: A New England Folk Tale (2015), and The Exorcist television series (2016). In each chapter, I analyze a key family member per patriarchal norms, and how violations of these norms contribute to the family’s supernatural crisis. The figures I analyze for each text is The Weak Father, The Bad Mother, and The Unstable Daughter. The texts’ shared, repetitious message implies that societal order can be (re)established once individuals adhere to fundamentalist patriarchal standards, reinforcing many scholars’ conclusions that fundamentalist Christianity continues to be a pervasive, dominant force in American culture.
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INTRODUCTION

“Diabolical forces are formidable. These forces are eternal, and they exist today. The fairy tale is true. The devil exists. God exists. And for us, as people, our very destiny hinges upon which one we elect to follow.” - Ed Warren, *The Conjuring*

“If the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary... a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its 'interior' signification on its surface?” - Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 139

Recent trends in the horror genre indicate an insistence on fundamentalist interpretations of satanic figures and possession. This thesis is a thematic survey of modern horror media and how it reinforces patriarchal gender norms. I investigate how fear of demonic possession drive families into crises, and how portrayal of these crises in the horror genre are so marketable today. The pieces I have chosen approach these crises from the fundamentalist patriarchal perspective. The recurring victims are female and/or children in families with compromised structures. The implication is that by fixing violations of traditional gender roles, order will be instituted and the supernatural threat will be overcome. However, families in these texts can only be saved if they recognize the reality of supernatural evil. The persistent motifs point to a fundamentalist backlash against secularism and feminism, a trend which has already been observed in scholarship. Susanne Scholz, scholar of gender and biblical studies, surveyed publications on modern gender trends by members of the Christian Right:

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1 *OED* defines fundamentalism as “A religious movement... based on strict adherence to certain tenets (e.g. the literal inerrancy of Scripture) held to be fundamental to the Christian faith.” Rather than Satan becoming a metaphor, an interpretation by mainstream Christians, recent horror works reinforce that the Devil and demons exist, and they try to kill or turn humans from Christianity. Therefore, the texts are not showing simply traditional Christianity, but a more fundamentalist Christianity.
Conservative evangelical publications have increased in number considerably since the early 1990s... Writings appeared already in the early 1980s, when American feminist scholarship became increasingly accepted in scholarly organizations... In hindsight, it is disquieting that the Christian Right was building its theological foundation at the same time when American feminism became increasingly visible in academia and religion. Certainly this visibility has diminished since the 1990s, as the conservative Christian agenda has begun to dominate American culture, religion, and politics. Slowly but surely, literature produced by complementarians has provided the intellectual and theological support for this change. (85)

Scholz considers the overall growth of fundamentalist rhetoric; for these texts, I focused on family dynamics. I argue that this heightened religiosity signifies a reactive desire to reaffirm the traditional patriarchal family model on a macro level. My thesis contributes to the discourse on dominant cultural messages and fundamentalism’s participation in our socialization. By analyzing the common themes and observing their function in macro- and micro-level social systems, we can use these trends to gauge fundamentalism’s cultural agency. Intense fear from viewing horror movies is a strong device for proliferating fundamentalist views. As a result, the films re-solidify fundamentalism for those who might be tempted to question patriarchal ideology. Christianity is a dominant, pervasive social force in America, and encouraging religious fear augments challenges to the gains made by feminism and the acceptance of alternative sexualities.

Movies and television series are the literature that connect viewers to the
signification about fundamentalist patriarchies in crisis. The five visual texts my thesis explores are *The Last Exorcism* (2010), *The Conjuring* (2013) and *The Conjuring 2* (2016), *The Witch: A New England Folk Tale* (2015), and *The Exorcist* television series (2016). These works reiterate similar themes that reflect fundamentalist Christian fears, particularly each family’s inconsistent religious practice and failure to follow the patriarchal model. Each family has the same figures: the weak father, the bad mother, and the unstable daughter. These characters, or archetypes, contribute to the belief that straying from traditional gender roles compromises the family unit and, by extension, society. In other words, these characters’ lifestyle choices, interpreted by Christians as sins, make them responsible for Satan’s earthly prevalence. According to the patriarchal model, honoring traditional gender roles is the only way to rectify these errors and save humanity from Satan. The philosophy manifesting repeatedly on screen reflects patriarchal concerns about family hierarchies. Religious fundamentalism is one of the last justifications for patriarchal social systems, because feminist advances in professional fields have nullified other rationalizations. That this rationale is still utilized, even in entertainment, shows modern America’s continued proclivity towards fundamentalist thinking, and my research contributes to this analysis.

Horror texts explore threats to society’s stability. Douglas E. Cowan, religious film scholar, astutely notes, "Horror tells us far more about the questions we ask than the answers we often so blithely and glibly provide" (“The Crack in the World,” 134). Pinpointing the nature of evil is the first concern in each of the works examined in this thesis. Unless the characters, especially the doubters, accept the reality of Satan and his cohorts, they will not be protected. Each film and the television series emphasize the
importance of choice. The choice to believe in the evil and the authenticity of the Bible is up to the characters. God does not show up and rescue the afflicted in any of these stories. The victims can only be saved through rejecting doubt and embracing their faith. One example of reinvigorated piety is in *The Last Exorcism*; the exorcist’s crisis of faith makes him unable to recognize the demon that has taken over the victim. When he realizes the truth, he is empowered to fight against the demon. The persistent emphasis on voluntary religious devotion places responsibility on the people in each story, and by implication on individual audience members who may doubt or refute the fundamentalist interpretation of evil. The theme of choosing to believe in a real Satan, rather than a metaphorical one, points out the tension surrounding a person’s impact on a macro scale.

One weak link can break a chain, so to speak, and so a singular person can lead to evil’s dominance. Additionally, there is always one character that recognizes the evil from the beginning, and whose warnings are ignored. This character’s function is to pull others, both on and off screen, into the fundamentalist way of thinking. When the plot confirms the demon’s existence, fundamentalist theories do not seem so far-fetched. In other words, they normalize the fundamentalist ideology for doubters. Each text has this archetype, highlighting the usefulness of the trope. Another layer of my project is that these five productions repeatedly present proof indicating the supernatural evil’s power stems from every breach of the patriarchal order, from rejection of gender roles to abject displays of femininity. Judith Butler’s insights into gender construction has provided the framework for my analysis.

Butler’s work on social constructivism and gender performativity has illuminated much in how gender roles are determined. Butler interprets all gender as performativity;
that is, everyone is ingrained with social expectations according to their assigned gender. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she says, “...[W]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performance---that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (25). The gender expectations are based on precarity, or a politically induced condition. Each action, including language, is an enactment of the “law,” an unofficial but clear set of regulations. Those who cross the law, what Butler calls subversive action, is corrected. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, she says, “What will and will not be included within the boundaries of ‘sex’ will be set by more or less tacit operation of exclusion” (11). However, Butler does not believe in individual agency. Based on the observation that gender roles are enforced from birth, Butler stipulates no one is given a chance to form a self-identity that is not socially ingrained. In *Excitable Speech: Contemporary Scenes of Politics*, she writes, “Agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts… acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset” (16). In other words, even subversive action is somewhat conditioned. These subversive actions are used to demonstrate what is accepted and unaccepted, according to the law. The result is the law is continually reinforced through actions and language. Since Butler’s theory does not invest in an essential self-identity, only preconditioned enforcements of the law, this destabilizes Freudian prioritization of the subconscious. Thus, fantastical products of the psyche, including notions of the supernatural, should not be prioritized: “Just as the subject is derived from conditions of power that precede it, so
the psychic operation of the norm is derived, though not mechanically or predictably, from prior social operations” (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 21). Butler considers these psychic elements only more symbols of the law repeatedly stabilizing itself. Butler’s theory applies to my project in two ways: the texts are correcting subversions and returning to the essentialist natures that Butler rejects.

The comprehensive application of Butler’s theory for these texts reaffirm my interpretation that they are displays of corrected subversions. In each text, there are family figures who do not fulfill their socially constructed roles. Cowan evokes the mythic effect that the family’s failures represent: “Horror movies are cinematic simulations that posit the effects of alternative unseen orders, illuminating what we imagine are the manifold threats to these socially constructed worlds… Cinema horror… exposes both the uncertainty of the visible order and the potential for disturbance and disintegration of the unseen order on which it depends” (65). Undeniably, the genre exposes holes in the societal structure; these texts seek to fill those holes. By the conclusion of each piece, the characters have either been corrected, corrupted by demonic forces, or killed. The texts are righting any destabilization by the characters’ subversions. Their basis for this move is to reassert traditional, patriarchal roles, but only based on the myth of essentialist nature. Butler rejects the assumption of a true or essential self, because the assertion of essential identity is as much a construction as any gender norm. An essential or true self is a construct reinforced through cultural discourse and gender practices. In that view, the texts’ logic is flawed.

Secondly, the demonic possessions simultaneously incorporate the elements of agency and the psychic. These elements can be directly linked to my discussion of Butler.
The demons, as fantastic beings, symbolize unconscious fears about the unknown. The demons are the delineating force between good and evil, based on previously constructed gender norms. For audiences, the demons’ innate wickedness leaves no question about with which side viewers should align. Also, demonic possession illustrates Butler’s view of agency: “To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of an essentialistic necessity… is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject… admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies” (Butler, Gender Trouble, 33). In other words, Butler questions how agency can even be trusted to be a reality, when one cannot measure how in-depth social constructions have been absorbed. Likewise, the possession victims have no agency, so what subversions they perform are blamed on the demon. It is an unintended display of Butler’s point about agency; the victims become puppets who maintain the “law.” Already identified as monstrous, their violent and inappropriate acts are just byproducts of demonic interaction, not reflective of how or what they “should” or “want” to be. When the victims are exorcised, they resume their traditional roles. Again, they are portrayed as returning to their “true” selves. In this way, the possessions are re-establishing the myth of essential natures, using myths about the supernatural to maintain the gender hierarchy’s status quo, and, unconsciously, acting out Butler’s point on individual agency. When characters divert from prescribed gender roles, like a weak father, bad mother, and unstable daughter, the texts become cautionary myths that perpetuate the law, as Butler describes.

These visual texts/cautionary myths have settings that harken back to America’s past, engaging in a form of nostalgia. Both movies in the Conjuring franchise are set in
the 1970s, when Ed and Lorraine Warren investigated the real cases the movies are based upon. *The Last Exorcism* takes places in rural Louisiana, and, apart from the film crew’s camera, no technology exists that confirms modernity. The sense is that these events are from an earlier period. *The Witch*’s director, Robert Eggers, took great pains for his film to be historically accurate within its 17th Century New England setting. He expressed that he did not want to repeat the myth; he wanted audiences to live it: “To understand why the witch stereotype archetype was important and interesting and powerful… we had to go back in time to the early modern period when the witch was a reality. And the only way I was going to do that, I decided, was by having it be insanely accurate” (qtd. in Crucchiola). Finally, *The Exorcist* television series is a sequel of the infamous 1973 film. The constant allusions to the film, including the resemblance to the iconic movie poster and reiteration of the film’s plot throughout the season, all contribute to a nostalgic experience. Audiences are invited to harken back to earlier cinematic representations of demonic possession. The use of nostalgic strategies in cinema has already been predicated by scholars to establish a film’s message.

Considering that these texts’ aims are to act as cautionary myths that reestablish patriarchal gender norms via fundamentalist terror, the contribution by the effects of nostalgic strategies should be considered. David R. Coon’s book, *Look Closer: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television*, analyzes dominant family narrative in popular culture. His analysis includes the effect of nostalgic settings:

> If nostalgia is an act of selective memory used to make meaning in the present, then the carefully designed nostalgic images in these materials may tell us something about the communities that the developers are
creating. By choosing to emphasize certain aspects of history while removing any negative images associated with the land…, these material present a ‘new and improved’ version of history, where conflict and oppression are forgotten. In the process, the histories of many group and individuals are conveniently erased from the communities’ imaginations. What is left is a safe and comfortable version of the past, used to create a safe and comfortable version of the past, used to create a safe and comfortable new community that subtly reinforce the ideologies of a white, heteronormative, middle-class society. (66)

Coon’s conclusion about nostalgia is largely correct. In other texts, returning to the period of “before” often exudes calm and distance, conflicting with the comparative complication of modernity. This is especially true for gender studies; “back when men were men” is a conservative ideal that, as Butler and Coon show, is a fiction. However, the texts in my project do not show the past as a “safe and comfortable” time. Rather, these settings are where the battle between good and evil on a cosmic scale take place, right in the house of a normal or traditional, American family. I do not think these texts are tainting or problematizing the idea of the past; rather, this is an effort to substantialize the fundamentalist’s divine battle against satanic forces. In other words, horror films about demonic possessions remind audiences that the battle against Satan and demons has always been a part of America’s history (i.e. when The Witch was set). The texts endeavor to remind audiences about the real conflict, and then prescribe the antidote, so to speak. They purport that if family structure can be corrected and traditional gender norms revitalized, satanic forces will have no foothold. It is another form of
essentializing, but on a larger scale. The texts’ recurring urge to revisit another time implies the fight between good and evil is a part of America’s history, a suggestion that parallels fundamentalist assertions. Coon notes the problems nostalgia can cause: “For example, when people label the nuclear family structure as ‘traditional’ and present it as a key characteristic of the ‘good old days,’ it becomes easier to demonize those whose families do not fit this mold… [C]linging too tightly to nostalgic versions of the past can have negative consequences for individuals and society in the present and future” (67). Surely, the texts ostracize non-fundamentalist and anti-patriarchal supporters. I would add that the recurring trend of fundamentalist beliefs in mass media indicates that these ideas are marketable, another aspect of the backlash against feminist and gender equality efforts.

These works share themes that perpetuate the patriarchal model supported by fundamentalist ideology. Specifically, all five texts assert that men should control the household and provide spiritual guidance, women should embrace their roles as unrelentingly self-sacrificing mothers, and daughters should maintain purity and faithfulness to grow into acceptable women. That the household is a metaphorical battleground for society at large is understood in scholarship, and horror scholars have thoroughly examined the emotional impact that a home setting can have on an audience.² Possession stories are the perfect examples of both applications because they simultaneously exhibit the threat of invasion on a macro scale. For instance, *The Exorcist* align the Rance family tragedies with the threat to the Pope and the Catholic Church, along with all its followers. When the family starts to deteriorate, the internal threat is

² See Cowen, Arnold, and Plate.
revealed, showing the pervasiveness of Satan's influence. As their problems worsen, we
learn how prolific the infestation is in the Chicago clergy. Finally, Angela's possession
climaxes in parallel with an assassination attempt on the Pope. When the Rances are at
peace in the end, the audience is meant to, like Angela, feel “safe.” Furthermore, the
intimate setting facilitates the internalization of the paranoia at the micro level, so the fear
and paranoia are more accessible for viewers, making the fundamentalist worldview more
attainable. In a mutually beneficent connection, the family’s reinforced religiosity
stabilizes the patriarchy.

The role of each family member in the plot also exposes much to consider. My
chapter organization centers on my examinations of each family member archetype. The
first chapter will analyze the weak father, the second chapter the bad mother, and the
third chapter the unstable daughter. This recurrent trend in representing the archetypes
indicates there is significant cultural tension about a breakdown in the patriarchal system,
and the focus on each family member’s gender roles calls for a consideration of gender
theory.

In the first chapter, I discuss what it means that each story features a weak father.
A father who cannot perform his traditional role of protector will make his family more
vulnerable. In the patriarchal sense, the father in each of these texts is weak by several
definitions. First, a father must provide protection from external threats; fathers with an
accurate understanding of Satan must maintain vigilance to prevent his family from being
victimized by Satan’s forces. In three of the five works I cover, the father is the primary
doubter that the family is being attacked by a supernatural evil. This fits with the concept
of the symbolic father, the one who adheres to logic and facts. However, the fathers in the
texts are understood to be delusional because of their skepticism. Their delusion compromises the family’s ability to cope with the crisis, therefore making them more vulnerable. A specific example is in *The Witch*; because William does not recognize the Witch in the Wood’s influence corrupting his land and family, he cannot properly protect his family. The father figure’s erroneous steadfastness to logic means he cannot truly protect his family, demonstrating a breach of the fundamentalist patriarchal system. In addition, his mistakes supplement the argument for fundamentalism further because no father wants to leave their family’s safety to chance due to a defiant attitude towards something he may not fully understand through secular means. In other words, fundamentalism is presented as a tool that, though may not be commonly practiced, is shown to be a reliable source for uncovering (and resolving) problems in the world.

The second way the father figure demonstrates weakness in each text is his lack of control in the household. Since possession is a threat from within, the connotation is that the father must protect his family by controlling them. The family members react negatively when his control is questioned or diminished, either from sickness, absence, or inferiority. In the five stories, all the children act out in defiance of their weak or absent paternal figure. Sons become more violent or disobedient, and daughters become overly emotional or sexual (usually both). The mothers are the ones who become most problematical. Like the daughters, they get too caught up in their own emotions, and begin to overtly display fear, depression, and anger. Conversations shown between the parents are usually exchanges of power; the father relinquishes his control when he allows his wife to correct, chide, or discount him. For example, in *The Exorcist* series, the father, Henry Rance, endures demeaning treatment from his wife. When he compromises
Angela’s authority by exposing her secret identity, she disparages him, as if he is not savvy enough to appreciate the turmoil she has endured. These exchanges let audiences grasp the flaws in the family’s hierarchy, which do not honor a traditional patriarchy. The implication is that this dynamic is a mistake, which adds to the family’s jeopardization. According to the patriarchal mode, a weak father cannot maintain control, which is especially dangerous if there is an aberrant female presence in the house. Characters that portray bad mothers and unstable daughters are typically the kind of threat often shown on screen that would take advantage of a weak father.

My second chapter examines the mother figure in each text. E. Ann Kaplan has extensively discussed the dichotomy of Good and Bad Mother figures. In her analysis of *Stella Dallas*, she defines the Good Mother archetype as the family member, “who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating -the ‘Angel of the House'. Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative” (“The Case of The Missing Mother” 81). Kaplan’s definitions of Good, Bad, and Heroic Mothers is intrinsic to my argument. However, the texts I have selected show that, rather than a fixed label of ‘Good’ or ‘Bad,’ possession can transform a Good Mother into a Bad Mother, and vice versa. This metamorphosis indicates that change can occur, again, only at the mother’s discretion. Her mistakes lead her to becoming the Bad Mother, but embracing her faith and motherhood role can purify her. I demonstrate that the mother’s relations with her husband and her children are highlighted to show how she makes these choices. When the mother has negative interactions with the others, it is understood that she is already a Bad Mother, or developing into one. Usually she flouts the husband’s authority, or she is an inadequate caregiver. The suggestion is that if she would strengthen these bonds and
respect the patriarchal hierarchy, the demon would not be able to infiltrate the home. For instance, in *The Conjuring 2*, Peggy Hodgson, the mother, is frustrated and angry about her poverty and divorce, and she takes these feelings out on her children. The weakened bond leads to the demonic infestation.

Within each text, the onscreen family is purified and strengthened when the mother embraces her role as caregiver and rejects other, more feminist efforts, such as becoming a stereotypical “career woman.” For example, in the *The Exorcist*, Angela Rance is clearly dedicated to her job, to the degree that she must be cajoled into spending time with her family. The texts insinuate that anything that distracts a mother from her caregiving makes her liable for the crisis. She should also be passing on the fundamentalist belief system to her children and providing insight into the supernatural crisis. If she fails to do this, the indication is that she is partially at fault for the possession.

For most the texts, the mother is also the character who recognizes the supernatural for what it is, rather than a mundane explanation like a psychological disorder. This trope fits with a fundamentalist interpretation of a mother’s duty to safeguard her family from internal threats, compared to the father’s responsibility for guarding them from external threats. If the father is weak, the mother is the dominant person in the house. A strong mother in charge of domestic duties would ensure that her children are thriving in an emotional and spiritual sense, such as reading their Bibles and saying their prayers. When her domestic obligations are combined with her ability to correctly identify the satanic threat, she is culpable for its ejection. The longer it takes for her to convince the others, either from a hesitant to share her suspicions or a lack of
influence, the worse the threat becomes. Her laxity and ineffectualness indicate a violation of her duties as faithful adherent and caretaker. Furthermore, if she does not accept responsibility for these sins, she is a hypocrite, compromising her integrity. Because patriarchy conflates the woman’s roles as mother and moral gatekeeper, she is responsible for the children’s understanding of evil. If she successfully passes on that knowledge, future generations maintain the traditional beliefs, and society will also maintain order. By contrast, mother figures from before the social and domestic order was instituted through patriarchy are the embodiments of chaos.

Since patriarchy is presented as the answer to disorder, an example must be given of what society was like before these regulations existed. Witches are common representations of this sinister past, both in a religious and feminine sense. Religiously, they symbolize the primordial chaos that preceded patriarchal control. In *The Conjuring*, Lorraine is alarmed when she discovers Bathsheba’s ancestor was executed in the Salem trials, alluding that a penchant for Satanism can be passed down, proliferating the evil. In the texts, witches are hazardous because they exemplify what society would lapse back into without religiosity. Cracks in a fundamentalist patriarchy are the kind of lapses that witches use to destroy the peace that fundamentalism brings to its adherents. In *The Witch*, the emotional and mental damage from the Witch’s attacks lead to Thomasin’s renunciation of Puritanism. In another way, witches represent unrestrained feminine natures; they embrace external and internal wilderesses, the boundaries where patriarchy has failed to constrain women.

In the horror genre, women who are symbolically hovering at the boundaries are depicted in ways that Julia Kristeva has conceptualized as “abject.” In *Powers of Horror*,
Kristeva uses physical examples to describe the abject, like blood, pus, excrement, vomit, and rotting corpses, but abjection goes beyond disgust. The abject causes one to question one’s self-identity and role in society. In the texts that I have chosen, the possessed female characters are manifestations of the abject because they embody those internal battles. They do things with their bodies that should not be physically possible or society considers reprehensible. They become oversexualized, sick, manipulative, and violent. These deplorable acts are threats to fundamentalist norms. Unrestrained behaviors are the primary source of fear to a fundamentalist patriarchy, because they echo primordial chaos. I will explore abjection in depth in the second chapter.

As a way to purify the abject, a ritual Kristeva recognizes in the horror genre, the texts argue that a woman should embrace patriarchal norms. These (conforming) characters are represented as having a better understanding of how to cure evil with order, or defeat Satan with Christian fervor. The woman who rejects her wild subconscious preserves society for everyone’s benefit; the best way to do this is leading by example. However, if a mother fails to recognize her own liability in Satan’s infiltration, the family’s hope goes to her successor, another persistent character: the eldest but unstable daughter.

In my final chapter, I will investigate the unstable daughter figure. Teenage daughters are especially seen as a threat to the patriarchy, and are often the ones who tend to challenge the family’s hierarchy. These five texts are especially concerned with the eldest daughter’s “lifestyle” choices. When the girls defy the patriarchal hierarchy, the demons target them. The trope most often seen in the horror genre is a daughter’s inappropriate sexuality. While inappropriate sexuality is a concern in these texts, the
more apparent tension surrounds a daughter who disrupts familial harmony. As previously mentioned, a method of purification can be an exorcism, but a daughter’s obedience is shown to be just as cleansing. Both *The Conjuring 2* and *The Exorcist* illustrate that when the daughters play with Ouija boards, counter to their mothers’ instructions, they are violating a barrier that keeps the family protected from supernatural forces. Again, an individual’s vigilance is the only way chaos does not overtake order.

Teenage daughters are especially contested sites of control for the patriarchy because they are at the crossroads of blamelessness and accountability. That is, they are innocent young girls maturing into women who are increasingly exposed to sinfulness. The patriarchy’s concern is that they may choose to adopt this sinfulness. As future agents in society, a teenage daughter’s choices are integral to a patriarchy’s sustainability. In a fundamentalist atmosphere, daughters are always future-wives and future-mothers. They are constantly groomed to fulfill those feminine roles. It is the fundamentalist imperative for the daughter to accept those feminine roles. The daughter must not give into temptation and deviate from her roles; otherwise, the patriarchy will collapse.

Because the daughter is a potential threat and a vulnerability for the patriarchy, her lifestyle choices illustrate society’s future, and any unorthodox behavior alludes to doom for fundamentalism and the patriarchy.

Thus, my research engages in a timely discussion about the impact of America’s religious fundamentalism and its prioritization of the patriarchal system. Contemporary horror works, like the texts I have selected, repeatedly express similar anxieties, personified by archetypal family characters who deviate from or subvert normative gender roles in common households, a metaphor for moral battlegrounds. These
productions exemplify the results of a breakdown in fundamentalist patriarchy, which reflect prevalent social concerns. Fundamentalist resistance to changing dynamics in gender roles, brought on by feminism and other trends, is still perceptible in American media, and determining the effects of this phenomenon is the aim of my thesis.
CHAPTER 1: THE WEAK FATHER

Per patriarchal expectations, a father’s primary aim is to protect his family. Butler’s theory on performativity begs the question if this is a role intrinsic to a man’s nature, or society’s construction of his abilities. The texts I have selected for analysis repeatedly test the fathers against certain qualities. Butler is interested by repetition in cultural texts: “The reason why repetition and resignification are so important to my work has everything to do with how I see opposition working from within the very terms by which power is reelaborated. The point is… to use them more, to exploit and restage them, subject them to abuse so they can no longer do their usual work” (Butler qtd. in Meijer and Prins, 279, emphasis original). While being “restaged” does indeed debase the argument for these prescribed father roles, the texts I examine argue that prescribed gender norms are intrinsic to a man’s nature. They purport that it is God’s will for a man to be the protector of a family, and anytime he fails in his duties is a win for Satan. Personifications of demons and witches directly confront and contrast with father figures in these texts. Their main object is to destabilize his authority within the family, or keep him from regaining lost control.

Kimberly Jackson's book, *Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-first Century Horror*, looks at 21st century horror films that center on the family and how they compare to family-centered horror films of the 20th century. While I agree with much of her analysis, I come to different conclusions about fatherhood in modern society. In the films that she analyzes, she noticed a trend in representations of the father’s passivity:
In general, the family violence portrayed in the twenty-first century horror presents the father as a guilty figure. His guilt stems from some form of weakness, whether his failure is moral, economic, professional, or personal… and he is unable to fight the malevolent forces that menace his kin, whether because he is disabled or killed or because he lacks the knowledge required to undo the family curse. Paternal absolution or redemption is thus impossible to achieve in most cases, even if the family survives physically, it is forever transformed by the violence it has undergone. (3)

In sum, Jackson finds that, in recent horror movies, the patriarch takes a backseat during the panic for his own well-being. This allows the mother figures to become the saviors, contrary to previous family horror films. In the texts I analyze, I find that, while the mothers do have a hand in fighting and banishing the demons, it is only because of their willingness to return to a traditional patriarchal structure (i.e. subordinate to the father). Moreover, the texts are fundamentalist expressions of concern about the rise in secularist thought. Despite the return to a traditional patriarchy that the texts clearly call for, they certainly portray logical fathers as contributing to the overall problem. The fathers in these works hold an adherence to rationality and logic that, in any other circumstance would serve them well. However, because demons are real, logic is of no help; this indicates a shift in the definition of manhood.

Masculinity studies analyzes idealized displays of masculinity at many social levels. For the purposes of my project, R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt’s work on regional displays -- “a society-wide level” -- reinforce the texts’ influence on constructing the ideal, hegemonic masculinity (838). They address recent, changing
definitions of masculinity, a concept that my texts refute in favor of an essentialist argument. The authors discuss the potential for this shift: “Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, ‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man, but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (841). In other words, the authors suggest that men move away from certain traditional stereotypes in favor of emphasizing some other characteristic. So, an advocate of the traditional patriarchy would consider adherence to scientific logic over blind faith a problem, demeaning scientific fields of study that would potentially have different answers to demonic possession. Since the texts frame this to be the correct, God-preferred view of the world, it is understood that this is how “man” was meant to think, and anything different is straying from a designated path.

David R. Coon better contextualizes this shift for American masculinities in the following quote: “The 9/11 attacks and the war in Iraq revealed an extraordinary degree of vulnerability, threatening the masculine ideal of self-defense and the nation’s myth of invincibility. [One] response was an emphasis on domesticity, as Americans turned away from the traumas outside in order to focus on the family home…” (150) Coon’s argument is insightful, and the texts in my project confer with his findings. A household is the micro application of patriarchal structure, and, when it does not function as it should, the patriarchal system implodes. Expanding this concern from a micro scenario, the individual family, to a macro scenario, the whole society, reveals contemporary anxieties about patriarchy’s failure. Coon frames this anxiety in the political view for the films in his work:
Placing these films in their post-9/11 context, the suburban home can be read as a metaphor for the nation. In both films, the suburban space comes under attack from enemies within, necessitating enhanced security measures to prevent further damage. This parallels the national post-9/11 anxieties about terrorists living within our country, ready to strike at any moment, and the resulting need to take preventative measures (177).

While my texts intend to be religious rather than political, Coon’s connection shows how far-reaching the impact of 9/11 has been for the country. It certainly has inspired fear about what cannot be seen even in plain sight, a descriptor for demonic forces as well as terrorism. Returning to conservative living is presented as a preventative measure for such invasions; similar “othered” groups in the contexts of gender present a similar problem for fundamentalists. They are interpreted as invaders against proper family structures, and every accomplishment in gender equality issues inspires more fundamentalist fear about the changing world, a trend seen in America’s current political scene and these visual texts. The fundamentalist, patriarchal family structure calls for a father who is religious, as well as an adequate provider and controller. A father who is not these things impairs his family, hence leaving them open to demonic attack.

A father is meant to be the spiritual head of the family. Without proper religiosity, fundamentalist Christians believe families are unprotected from a sinful world. As a religious adherent, the father should follow his Christian morals and ensure his family

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3 Unsurprisingly, Scholz found a backlash to feminist and gay rights advances in the fundamentalist publications she surveyed: “But the grip of feminist dogma on the modern psyche confronts us with a particular danger. Feminism attempts systematically to ban from the language patterns of thought that would be contrary to its program. . . The integrity of the Word of God has been compromised in the process” (Staunch qtd. in Scholz, 91). This quote, in which the author labels feminism as a threat to biblical living, is a method to inspire fear, much like my texts. Feminist efforts counter the patriarchal norms purported by the authors Scholz observes and my texts sanction.
does the same. Ordained Reverend Arie den Hartog of Protestant Reformed Churches in America writes on the father’s duties: “The Christian man has especially the responsibility to be the spiritual head of his home. He must make the spiritual welfare of his wife and children his chief concern… Any husband and father who neglects to pay attention to this is worse than an infidel.” Hartog shows the extent to which fundamentalists take this responsibility. Besides, one cannot competently protect without knowing the threat, and this requires squashing rationality in favor of the fundamentalist fear. Father characters who go through this process experience a kind of conversion.

In these texts, the “conversions” (so-called because three of the fathers revitalize the strength of previously held religiosity rather than cleave to it for the first time) are changing points in the plots. This moment normalizes the fundamentalist perspective. If fathers turn to other, more mundane explanations, they put their families at risk. For example, fathers who misjudge the possession victims as simply mentally ill would take them to a doctor, not a priest. A doctor cannot solve the problem, and extended possessions only grow more dangerous. Since there are no recorded instances of audiences leaving the theatres in droves screaming about “demons among us,” one cannot precisely judge the effectiveness in this message. However, theorist Michael J. Shapiro compellingly frames this issue:

Among other things, person’s self-understandings are shaped as much by the regulative ideal they receive from various media as they are by personal experience. People tend both to live in a family and to process information about families from diverse genres… And often the media trump face-to-face experience… As a result, given the significant gap in which the fictional family
precedes the actual one, in term of both configuration and the quality of emotional exchanges, fictional forms dominate contemporary understandings of family life. And, more specifically, the conjugal, patriarchal, heteronormal family, which historical evidence shows to be more a ‘regulative fiction than a reality,’ is a mythical entity shaping the contemporary conservative, family values movement.

(5) Shapiro’s quote reinforces the impact of the mass media on cultural understanding of family structure. Inserting fundamentalism into the heart of these structures forces the question of the common American’s fidelity (or lack thereof) to a religion. In the texts that I examine, there are three fathers who initially misinterpret the demonic threat, exposing their families to more danger: Roger Perron in *The Conjuring*, William in *The Witch*, and Henry Rance in *The Exorcist* series. Their doubt contrasts sharply with Ed Warren, the ideal spiritual protector in these texts. However, it should be acknowledged that spirituality is a luxury compared to the necessity of proper food and shelter, another responsibility for the father.

In the traditional patriarchy, a father must be the provider, or “breadwinner.” He must give his family food and shelter. Therefore, he must be a successful worker. Proper housing is also a concern. The fathers in these texts provide houses, but in the wrong locations. The house’s location, specifically in relation to a community, is involved in the consideration of what makes a house “proper.” These texts argue that removing a family from the community, as in suburbs, to a rural, isolated location is a mistake for two reasons. First, he removes his family from the protective presence of other Christians. For families in crisis, proper Christian communities would only bolster the family members.
The supernatural evil thrives in areas where there are no communities. Second, isolation leaves only one authority to check aberrations: the weak father. In a proper patriarchy, moving to an isolated home would not be a problem. Indeed, the final episode of *The Exorcist* exemplifies this concept, with Henry residing over his healing family in their new, rural home away from corrupted Chicago. However, in *The Conjuring*, *The Last Exorcism*, and *The Witch*, these fathers are weak, so the families are isolated in improper conditions. Jackson found a similar pattern in her analysis,

> Each film situates the main female character in isolation from mainstream society, where she must confront the truth; the patriarchal order has outrun the father, now portrayed as a defunct figure, and there is no discernable authority figure to take his place; gender relations, and the patriarchal power structure that has always reinforced them, now seem to be operating on autopilot. (10)

Though Jackson focuses on the effect of a weak patriarchal system in isolation for the female character’s perspective, she also aptly describes the cause of a patriarchy on autopilot: a father who cannot support it, and so is “defunct.” Certainly, these texts show patriarchal systems work their best when a father is not absent, sick, or unskilled. Since all the fathers in these texts are one or more of these things, they jeopardize their families. The father’s failures are contributing factors to his inability to protect his family.

If a father is unskilled, absent, or sick he cannot provide for his family, and his authority would then fall to the mother. When a father is not in charge for whatever reason, the mother must step in for the benefit of the children. However, since the texts portray her as inherently weaker, her elevation is a grievous error. The pattern goes
across all the texts, indicating cultural tension about fathers who fail to fulfill their gender role. This should come as no surprise, with America’s divorce rate at a steady 40-50% (American Psychological Association). The texts advocate that a father should put all his energy into providing and leading, so a mother should not have to take up the mantle of authority. Hartog says, “God has created a certain order for the family, an order of authority and obedience. It is His purpose that this order be maintained. This is for the welfare of every member of the Christian family, the blessing of the Lord, and the glory of His name.” Like Hartog, the texts signify that the families should avoid giving the mothers perpetual authority. Later in this chapter, I will discuss William from The Witch as the unskilled father, the absent fathers in The Conjuring series, and The Exorcist’s Henry Rance as the sick father.

Another factor is his lack of control, both over himself and his family members. As a system based on control, patriarchy relies on the father to maintain and enforce its regulations. Sally K. Gallagher and Christian Smith, sociologist scholars, surveyed evangelical fathers and mothers to understand the changes in their family dynamics. In response to what Gallagher and Smith call “postindustrial American economy,” many traditional Christian mothers forego a homemaker role due to financial constraints. However, many of the evangelical families Gallagher and Smith interviewed still considered men to be the head of household. The authors consider this practice a “compromise”: “Symbolic traditionalism both preserves men's pride and effectively obligates men to greater participation in the emotional, nurturing work that is central to our ideals of companionship marriage, as well as solidifying men’s responsibility for the economic well-being of a household” (Gallagher and Smith 228). However, these visual
fundamentalist texts tout that this kind of compromised family structure is society’s exact problem. Demonic forces, which they purport as realistic threats, are waiting for this kind of mistake. To clarify, none of the texts advocate violent control, but certainly for men to be head of household. This matches Gallagher and Smith’s research on new definitions of evangelical masculinity: “Second only to the idea of spiritual accountability, the third and perhaps most frequently cited component of men’s headship involved the responsibility for making decisions. Most commonly, this was described as making a ‘final decision,’ being the ‘primary decision maker…”’ (221). In short, men should establish themselves as the authority which their wives and children follow. Failure to exemplify correct behavior, even while preaching it, makes the father a hypocrite.

An authority figure who is a hypocrite compromises his status, weakening his control. The texts present stories that challenge the idea of a father who is above sin, or perfect. It is a new move in the genre, as Jackson showed, one that shows fathers are not always the saviors. It also supports Connell and Messerschmidt’s conclusion that masculinities which are tested become only more affirmed through the experiment: “A given pattern of hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic to the extent that it provides a solution to the tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions” (853) In other words, father characters who fail to meet the ideal model and then are attacked or die only confirm previous understandings of hegemonic masculinity. A confession is needed to absolve sin, and these texts situate the confessions in the climaxes. Once his conscience is cleared, reestablishes his authority, again illustrating Connell and Messerschmidt’s arguments; if he cannot redeem himself, he cannot validate his power. Without his power, he cannot control his wife.
For fundamentalist Christians, a woman cannot be the head of household. Hartog insists, “The man of the house must see his great responsibility to take up the authority which God gives him and exercise it. He may not let his wife or his children rule in his home.” These texts seem especially concerned with an overturning of this “natural order.” First, a quarrelsome wife is rebellious, one who disdains or badmouths her husband. It is especially damning if she demeans him in front of their children, because then she is not the only one who sees his weakness. *The Exorcist* and *The Witch* are the two texts which deal with a shrewish wife. Furthermore, a father who cannot control his children symbolizes a completely defective patriarchy. They are his legacy, and the society’s future. If a father cannot control his children, then he is especially inadequate. Children who are not possessed but still out of control are the ones who explicitly flout paternal authority. The most prominent example is Kat in *The Exorcist*, who goes out of her way to demean her father. Examples can also be found in *The Conjuring* and *The Witch*. In sum, the texts argue that father figures should be fundamentalist, an adequate provider, and in control of himself, his wife, and his children. Respectively, I will show how each father character fails at these responsibilities.

**Louis Sweetzer and Cotton Marcus in The Last Exorcism**

*The Last Exorcism* builds tension from the struggle between faith and science. It is aware that a modern audience would more likely sympathize with the secular, scientific approach. On one side, Louis Sweetzer, the father of the possession victim, Nell, believes wholeheartedly in demons. On the other side, Reverend Cotton Marcus, the protagonist, is a minister and an exorcist from Louisiana. Cotton is a doubting preacher. He asserts

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4 Cotton’s name is an allusion to Cotton Mather, the fire-and-brimstone preacher from colonial America. As I discussed in my introduction, this allusion harkens to America’s past, producing a nostalgic effect. It
that exorcisms are performative rituals that mask deeper psychological problems. In the
long run, he thinks they do more harm than good for the victims, particularly children.
Cotton Marcus is a father, but it is not his family who is under threat. Still, he looks after
Nell in a fatherly manner. In this text, he is the doubting father, while Louis is the faithful
adherent. The plot presents Nell’s possession episodes in spurts without revealing, until
the end, how the supernatural is in play.

Nell’s crisis exemplifies the consequences of disbelief. The film’s climax reveals
that she is indeed impregnated by the demon, whose birth would threaten the world.
However, because Cotton suspects her fundamentalist upbringing is a cover for
incestuous abuse, he first turns to the “wrong” authorities for solutions. Rather than
performing an exorcism with conviction, he tries to involve healthcare workers, who
cannot help Nell. When the demonic possession is confirmed at the end of the film,
Cotton looks like a fool. In this way, the texts favor fundamentalist teachings, inspiring
doubt in medical expertise. The implied message is that it is better to turn first to religion
for answers. Recall that Hartog backs this idea: “We need no worldly psychologist... We
need to know and put into practice the word of God in our homes.” Cotton’s doubt and
erroneous trust in science allows the demon to possess Nell even longer, and leads to
more violence. The film’s plot implies that, if Cotton had turned to religion like Louis,
Nell could have been saved. The confirmation of the supernatural after a heavy dose of
realism through the mockumentary film-making style makes the film’s message more
influential for audiences. 5 The conflict between the two patriarchs, one a steadfast

roots the issue of America’s religiosity into the country’s inception.
5 Matthew J. Raimondo comprehensively covers the effects of mock documentary, called
“mockumentaries.” Mockumentary horror films are meant to put the audience in cameraman’s place,
inundating the events and therefore intensifying terror. The shaking, blurry camerawork is supposed to be
believer and one a dishonest minister, represents two approaches to the crisis. It’s an oversimplification of a deeply complex issue, but the suggestion is that, during a conflict with evil, one has only two sides to choose from: God or man. The transparent conclusion is that preferring medical and scientific experts over religious interpretation puts the world and, more directly, innocents like Nell at great risk.

However, though Louis is a devotee, his son clearly denounces Christianity. While Louis and Nell pray during the exorcisms, his son stands as an observer. Louis appears to allow his son’s impiety and disrespect, which is counteractive to a fundamentalist patriarchy. Hartog explicitly provides this directive: “Fathers have the great responsibility to train and discipline their children. Everywhere scripture makes this chiefly the responsibility of fathers.” Louis' tolerance for his son's disbelief runs counter to Hartog’s advice. At the end, the movie reveals Caleb is part of a satanic cult. For fundamentalists, it would be Louis’ responsibility to enforce his son’s religiosity, and his failure to do so damns Caleb. Discipline is important, but the demonic possession complicates how a father should enact disciplinary measures.

To contrast with her brother, Nell is very religious, but when her the possession intensifies, she grows violent. After slicing her brother’s face, she has a breakdown, yelling for her mother. It is an understandable reaction; in tumultuous times, a daughter seeks those who provide comfort and safety. However, Louis shuts her down and does not show any compassion for her grief. Rather than controlling Nell through love and terrifying, because that is exactly how an untrained audience member would react to such events. They also evoke a response as if viewing a documentary, enhancing the desire for knowledge, what Raimondo calls epistephilia. Documentary is a genre in which audiences expect to complete understanding, and, combined with an intriguing topic like the demonic, audiences are more susceptible to fright. However, viewers never get full understanding of the monster. Indeed, we never see the demon or know why the cult is using Nell, so our hunger for knowledge goes unfulfilled. This style instills the movie’s message even further, inspiring debates about the reality of the events, like the audience response to The Blair Witch Project.
understanding, he uses an “Iron Fist.” This metaphor becomes literal when he chains his daughter to her bed after she attacks her brother. When Louis allows his anger to overtake his compassion, he creates a crack in their relationship that the demon Abalam exploits to hurt him and Nell. D. Trilling’s film review for *Sight and Sound* describes the effect of these scenes, “As the plot thickens, with viewers left unsure whether they are watching a story of child abuse or otherworldly evil, the isolated farmhouse becomes an increasingly claustrophobic setting, in which the various characters' suspicions are allowed to play off one another.” Indeed, Louis’ harsh treatment gives Cotton reason to suspect Nell is being abused. Yet, fundamentalist emphasis on patriarchal control justifies Louis’ actions. His measures are harsh to an educated, secular, or sympathetic mindset, but the reality of demons demands extreme regulations to prevent Nell from hurting herself or someone else. His actions and beliefs are confirmed by Abalam’s climactic appearance. The skepticism that the film promotes while simultaneously and subtly highlighting Nell’s symptoms is effective tension building, with many impactful examples.

The most dramatic display of Louis’ faith that embodies the clash between faith and logic is when he threatens to kill Nell to save her soul. He believes that Abalam defiled his daughter and, if the demon completely takes her over, she’ll never enter heaven. He tells Cotton, “Reverend, if you can't save my daughter's soul, I will.” The movie posits the question, “To what extent should a devotee take his belief in God’s mercy?” Louis’ response to such a question follows the fundamentalist belief, both in sacrificing what one must to prevent demonic infestation and that God would welcome a “pure” Nell, so her death would be, for fundamentalists, forgivable. His blind loyalty matches Scholz’s findings: “Biblical interpretations are based on a literalist hermeneutics
that is primarily concerned with ‘real-life’ consequences of biblical teachings. The traditionalist debate seems to take place solely in the narrow confines of the Christian Right, lacking any conversation with mainstream scholarship” (90). Indeed, Louis would rather shoot his daughter than take her to any outside help, just as Scholz’s sources refute all mainstream scholarship.

For most viewers, Louis is not a savior character, which follows what Jackson had noted in her own work; rather, he’s sinister. Still, the film invites sympathy for his views when his suspicions are confirmed at the end. Louis’ merciless method of control makes him an unapproachable father, but a correct fundamentalist adherent, contrary to Cotton Marcus’ secular inclinations.

A father must control himself and his children to be a proper representative of the patriarchy. This version of masculinity requires control and strength. Gilmore shows how hegemonic masculinity enforces this thinking: “It is clear that manhood cults are directly related to the degree of hardiness and self-discipline required for the male role… Manhood ideologies force men to shape up on penalty of being robbed of their identity, a threat apparently worse than death” (220-221). In other words, at risk of losing his
authority and identity as a man, a father must be in control. However, Louis is unable to self-regulate to maintain patriarchal structure. To his detriment, Louis maintains a strong connection to his late wife. This prioritizes his grief and selfishness over their family’s well-being, and gives a weakness for Abalam to exploit.

Louis lacks self-control in several ways which endangers his authority over his children. His biggest problem is an inability to control his emotions. Louis is clearly terrified for his daughter’s soul, which is the appropriate fundamentalist approach when faced with demonic possession. He is also afraid of losing another loved one. It's an expected emotional response considering his wife’s death, but a patriarchy expects its father figures to be stoic and unfeeling in times of crisis. Jason Helopoulos, writer for The Gospel Coalition, advises, “Husbands and fathers serve their family well when they are seeking to control their own anger, selfishness, pride, and tongue.” Louis is so terrified of Nell’s behavior and her possible damnation that he loses self-control, turning to angry, overcompensating disciplinary measures. In other words, he allows his negative emotions to overload his mind and prevent him from listening to reason. Caleb exploits this, mocking his faith, threatening Cotton, and displaying violent tendencies like his father. Modeling self-control for his children (in other words, appearing unshakable), would substantiate Louis’ authority. Since Louis gives in to his fear and anger, his son defies his authority and Louis is unable to help Nell. His lack of self-control causes other problems.

Louis’ disciplinary tactics are potentially more damaging than having no discipline at all. His mistake is forgetting the compassionate side of parenting. This is Louis’ weak point, and supports Cotton’s suspicion of abuse. Furthermore, his tendencies are based on ideas of hegemonic masculinity, which Connell and Messerschmidt show to
be erroneous: “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in a social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (836). The authors reinforce the fallacy of the essentialist argument, and concur with Butler’s conclusion about social constructions’ role in forming gender identity. Moreover, Connell and Messerschmidt point to the importance of using social action to substantiate gender identity; in other words, others must witness, engage, and affirm a father’s behavior per gender norms so he can establish his authority. Again, this attests to the unsupported logic of the essentialist argument: if someone’s true nature coincided with gender norms, social action would not be required. Louis exemplifies the extensive impact of hegemonic masculinity’s influence, based on fundamentalist rhetoric, to the point of attempted infanticide. Another example of masculine behavior that is based on others’ approval is his ability to properly provide for his family.

For a father to be a proper provider, he must give his family enough food and shelter to survive. Louis Sweetzer does well on the former, but poorly on the latter. He voluntarily moved his family to the country, claiming he did not want to expose his kids to worldly, negative influences. This is correct to fundamentalist thought, but he is an inadequate patriarch. He is harsh and obsessive, since he’s unable to let go of his grief and anger over his wife’s death. Indeed, she’s buried near the house. It’s clear that her grave site is not a place Louis thinks should be separate from daily life. Rather, he integrates this constant symbol into his home, praying in front of it often. His choice, though it honors his dead wife, does not benefit his children. Instead, he is selfishly staying at this house, away from a community who could help him, to covet her memory.
The poor location exposes his family to demonic threat, with no one to help him but a charlatan Christian minister. The text implies that a patriarch should strive to give his family community, which would also expose Louis’ mistakes to a more sympathetic community. Louis’ blunders are comparable to Roger Perron’s, as seen in the next film.

**Roger Perron and Ed Warren in *The Conjuring***

Roger Perron in *The Conjuring* is not an observant Christian. Gallagher and Smith outline what defines a religious observant, from their data: “In describing men's spiritual responsibility, both women and men typically provided concrete examples of these ideals, such as taking the initiative in ‘having daily devotions, going to church, joining in church activities’” (220). Roger does none of these things, so he does not enforce religiosity for his family. Furthermore, his skepticism towards the Warrens shows that he is not sufficiently aware of what fundamentalists believe is at stake.

![Figure 2: Carolyn Perron leans in, listening fascinatedly to the Warrens' insights to the Perron family’s haunting. In contrast, her husband Roger distances himself, maintaining a skeptic mentality (*The Conjuring)*.](image)

Roger constantly questions their actions, treating their research and decisions with suspicion. For an audience who saw what Lorraine and the Perron girls witnessed, his apprehension seems asinine. Roger’s skepticism especially becomes a problem at the climax. Carolyn gets dragged into the basement, screaming for her husband to help her. Yet, now Roger is surpassed by the supernatural, and he knows it. When Ed begins the exorcism, Roger helplessly watches his wife deteriorate. The film implies his inability to
help Carolyn is because of his lack of religiosity.

If Roger was a devotee, he would have known from the first sign who to contact and how to handle the demons. In the film, he does not even cross himself when Ed prays. When Carolyn vomits blood, Roger tries to stop Ed, protesting that the demonologist is killing Carolyn. Lorraine holds Roger back and yells, “Understand this, we are now fighting for her soul!” In this exclamation, Lorraine re-arranges Roger’s priorities in Carolyn’s possession. Roger, passive about issues of faith, did not consider more than the physical impact of demonic possession. The Warrens look at the crisis in a more fundamentalist and metaphysical way, that a soul is the most important aspect of a person (see Bruinsma, Graham, and Spangenberg). From their perspective, Roger’s worry about Carolyn’s health during her possession demonstrates how inept Roger is as protector of his family’s well-being. Despite the events that he and his family go through, Roger does not go through a clear conversion. He accepts what happened, but does not definitively embrace Christianity. Indeed, Roger exemplifies why modern society troubles fundamentalists. Scholz’s sources say sinfulness, an essentially human trait for fundamentalist, is the crux of contemporary society’s problems; the repercussions of a sinful nature are especially evident in gender and family relations:

Today’s women and men have the task to ‘recover’ what was lost after the Fall described in Genesis 3… Given that humans are not sinless anymore, evangelicals are asked to develop ‘mature’ manhood and womanhood. This state can be reached ‘when a husband leads like Christ and a wife responds like the bride of Christ.’ In other words, a mature husband is called to ‘biblical headship,’ which makes him take ‘primary
responsibility for leadership and teaching in the church,’ and a mature wife is called to ‘biblical submission’ to her husband. (88)

For fundamentalists, Roger’s lack of faith is another symptom of man’s nature, only to be corrected through accepting “biblical headship.” Moreover, fundamentalists who yearn for mankind’s “original,” devout nature perpetuate the effect generated from a nostalgic outlook. As shown, nostalgic thought perpetuated by essentialist arguments are erroneous; Butler says, “For me, the question of how one comes to know, or, indeed, the conditions of the possibility of establishing that one knows, are best answered through turning to a prior question: Who are ‘we’ such that this questions becomes a question for us. How has the ‘we’ been constructed in relation to this question of knowledge?” (qtd. in Meijer and Prins 278). In this quote, Butler points to the methods utilized for generating identity construction. The cautionary myth of the Fall, man’s essential, sinful nature, and the Bible’s capability to direct one out of sinfulness through biblical living are all constructs which contribute to identity construction. Furthermore, Butler’s inquiry invites the consideration that if these discourses set up who is ‘we’, it also sets up the ‘they’ who the ‘we’ opposes. Thus, the texts become further evidence of how the discourse constructs dichotomies; it also serves to provide examples of ideal masculinity, as with Ed Warren.

To contrast with Roger Perron, Ed is the epitome of a spiritual protector, and serves to reinforce the fundamentalist view. The Conjuring series presents Ed as the ideal spiritual protector. The opening credits praise Ed as “the only non-ordained Demonologist recognized by the Catholic church.” As the male half of the exemplar Warren couple, he is the franchise’s model Christian father and husband. Connell and
Messerschmidt show how his example works for the masses:

[In the regional level], there is a circulation of models of admired masculine conduct, which may be exalted by churches, by mass media, or celebrated by the state. Such models refer to, but also in various ways distort, the everyday realities of social practice… Furthermore, [these models] articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances. To the extent they do this, they contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole. (838)

Surely, while Roger flounders in the face of evil, Ed models physical and devotional strength at the cost of his and his wife’s safety. Ed also diagnoses the family's spiritual mistakes. He asks Roger Perron, “Have your children been baptized?” Sheepishly, Roger answers, “Uh, no, we never got around to that, We’re not really a churchgoing family.” Ed responds, “Well you may wanna rethink that.” Here, he is doing his first job as a spiritual protector: giving the children the best defense the religion has to offer. The film’s positive treatment of Ed positions him as the ideal father and husband. Even Roger’s wife, Carolyn, remarks on how safe their daughters feel with Ed around. Unlike the other fathers, Ed never makes the mistake of doubting the existence of the supernatural evil. Compared the paradigm Ed represents, Roger repeatedly falls short of patriarchal ideals.

Finally, Roger is also an inadequate provider. What initiates the crisis is when the Perrons move to a rural home. Roger is a truck driver, so he is away from home often. The stress caused by his poverty means he does not provide enough to turn down jobs
that have him gone for days. He leaves the first week after they move in, which is when the activity escalates to dangerous levels. Carolyn cannot be enough of a protector to foil Bathsheba. Indeed, Roger’s absence exposes his family to attacks from the witch. Even after the Warrens let him know what is happening, he leaves a possessed Carolyn alone with the girls, and she kidnaps the two youngest while he is away. Ed Warren is also susceptible to criticism on this point, since he and Lorraine leave their daughter, Judy, alone with his mother-in-law while they travel to fight paranormal battles. However, the film balances Ed’s absences with scenes where he and Lorraine play with their daughter lovingly. There are fewer instances with Roger and his daughters, who always seem to be underfoot. Therefore, the movie indicates longer absences, resulting from a father as a poor provider, divides the family. A similar contrast between the Warrens and the afflicted family can be found in the sequel.

**Ed Warren in *The Conjuring 2***

In *The Conjuring 2*, the Hodgsons’ father has run off, and his absence is the first thing Ed notices. Ed tells Lorraine that they need to remind the Hodgsons how to be a family again. Again, for fundamentalists, proper family structure means having the man residing as authority. Any other setup is defying God. Scholz reviews the discourse on this topic in her work:

A central feature of traditionalist writings is the sincere commitment with which all authors relate their Bible readings to contemporary gender practices in American church and society. They consider a discussion of biblical gender views not merely an academic exercise but a matter directly related to today’s societal and ecclesiastical life. To them, the
Bible connects to our world because the Bible is the single and most authoritative guide for evangelical Christian faith… The Bible is the foundation for traditionalists because they believe that we can relate biblical teachings to our society only after we have listened to the Bible.

(87)

Since the Hodgsons are not religiously observant, they could not apply biblical teachings to their family structure. This is something Ed looks to correct. Ed shows that being the religious head of a family, even if it’s not his own, is a man’s main responsibility. He informs them about the demonic activity, and shows Janet Hodgson how to find strength in God’s protection. He also gives her a cross to keep and later pass on, ensuring the proliferation of fundamentalist Christianity. He also seeks to lead by example.

When she begins to doubt their duty to fight demons, Ed inspires Lorraine, reminding her that they “don’t run from fights,” and that her visions are “a gift from God.” In these two statements, Ed is positioning himself and his wife as the front line against religious evil, and the climax is when his actions match his words. When Janet is completely possessed by the demon, Ed goes in alone to save her, suffering injury and facing almost certain death. The film positions his stalwart dedication to living his faith as the epitome of Christian masculinity, a trend that reflects online discourse. Variety’s Owen Gleiberman explains why Ed’s efforts are so moving for audiences:

Ed and Lorraine Warren, the ghost hunters in “The Conjuring 2,” want to send the demons back to where they came from, and as the film presents it, the only real tool they have is the power of their Christian love. A movie like this one teases out the secret underpinning of the haunted
-house genre — that whether we happen to be evangelicals or just good old moviegoers out for a scare, we all, in our childish hearts, want to believe. In the things that go bump in the night, and in the transcendent force that makes them go away. (“Is ‘The Conjuring 2’ the Evangelical Horror Hit of the Year?”)

The important part of Gleiberman’s observation for my analysis is how the Warrens justify audience’s fears and anxieties, that they want to believe in a “transcendent force” that can chase away evil. Ed’s repeated victories as a model for fundamentalist masculinity show the marketability of this portrayal.

In their research, Gallagher and Smith noted an overarching trend: “Throughout the interviews, men’s responsibility emerged as central to evangelical notions of headship. Both women and men saw men as being ultimately responsible for the family, a responsibility that ought to earn men the respect and deference of their wives and children” (217). However, Peggy Hodgson’s husband has abandoned them. Without a head of household, a father, Ed notes how the family has dissolved into chaotic disarray. Peggy has little authority and no comfort without a partner. In all ways but sexually, Ed fulfills that role for her and her children. In short, he becomes a pseudo-father and husband.
Ed provides strength, protection, and spiritual guidance for the Hodgsons, since they have no father to do so for them. He calls out the evil ghost on the first day, showing Peggy and her daughter Janet that they don’t have to be afraid. Helopoulos instructs religious adherents, “You are to willingly and gladly stand-up for your family, even if that costs you socially, professionally, emotionally, or even physically,” and Ed proves the rule.

These traits make Ed Warren an effective controller in the Hodgson household. He uses reassurance, friendliness, and strength to do so, but he controls them nonetheless. He even inspires the elder son, Johnny, to be more brave, a quality their father wasn’t there to teach. Within the movie, Ed shows how his exemplification of hegemonic masculinity works. Johnny Hodgson, typically a bully, decides to confront the evil himself. He is acting on advice from Ed Warren, who told the family to stand up for one another. Connell and Messerschmidt explain how Ed works as an exemplar:

Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities… Rather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity…, symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up
to them (846).

The part I want to emphasize in their observation is that it takes the witness’ participation to make an exemplar noteworthy, which is what Johnny does by challenging the ghost. This goes along with Butler’s ideas about gender construction at work. To fully carry out her logic, it is applicable to note that Ed is not acting on his own nature, but how the idea of masculinity was constructed for him: “If we call into question the fixity of the structuralist law that divides and bounds the ‘sexes’ by virtue of their dyadic differentiation within the heterosexual matrix, it will be from the exterior regions of that boundary… and it will constitute the disruptive return of the excluded from within the very logic of the heterosexual symbolic” (Butler, Bodies that Matter, 11-12). In other words, Butler proposes that recognizing the restrictions imposed by gender norms constructed on the idea of binary genders leads to the inclusion of “unacceptable” masculinities. However, the movies give Ed no space within which to explore alternative masculinities without risking another’s welfare. This treatment contributes to the texts’ assertion that the family’s safety is dependent on the father fulfillment of traditional masculinity.

In The Conjuring 2, the Hodgson father has permanently left his family. He also fails to send child support payments, so the house is falling apart. All these factors connect to make the perfect storm for the demon Valak to infiltrate the family. As Ed explains to Peggy, “They like to kick you when you’re down.” The father’s failure to provide, even from afar, puts the family in dire straits that Peggy cannot fix. When Ed arrives, he and Peggy discuss her ex-husband’s desertion:

*Ed:* If you don’t mind me asking, is your ex-husband still in the picture?

*Peggy:* No.
Ed: I’m sorry to hear that. Any chance of reconciliation?

Peggy: He had twins with a woman from ‘round the corner.

Ed: So I’m gonna take that as a no?

Peggy’s demeanor is what one would expect during this kind of questioning: she has an unyielding expression, clearly still bitter over her husband’s desertion. Then Ed inquires about the possibility of a reconciliation. His questioning response to her stony rebuttal comes with a serious look, indicating that, though worded lightly, he still considers reconciliation a viable option, necessitating a verifying nod from Peggy. This exchange shows the importance Ed lays on a father’s presence, whatever the circumstances of a separation.

As the ideal representative of the patriarchy, Ed emphasizes a paternal figure must be there to ensure a family’s well-being. Scholz’s sources confirm this: “At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships” (Piper qtd. in Scholz, 88). In other words, women deny their true nature when they endeavor to lead themselves. Peggy’s inadequate mothering is further proof for this idea, as I explore in the next chapter. The text’s main message is that, without a father present, a patriarchal structure cannot endure.

**William in *The Witch***

For fundamentalists, it is perplexing why someone would not recognize biblical authority. Even more disconcerting is when the father figure is an observant Christian, but discredits the possibility of supernatural evil. William in *The Witch* is an observant Puritan, an American group that is infamous for its pursuit of Satan’s presence on Earth. However, he discredits his wife’ warning that something “not natural” is affecting their
farm, or that it’s “cursed.” He wants to believe the land is a blessing from God, and repeats this, despite the evidence to the contrary. He is a fundamentalist Puritan, but he cannot accept the possibility that a witch could be hurting his family. In Jon Negroni’s article for *Relevant Magazine*, he argues that “The patriarch’s inability to be pure from his own sin directly leads to doubt, friction and chaos that erupts between his daughter and wife, making all of them easy prey for the lurking witch of the wood.” In other words, Negroni pinpoints the father’s corrupt nature as the reason he’s blinded to the truth about The Witch’s presence. William cannot recognize and respond to the supernatural evil which leads to his death and, as Negroni points out, exposes his family. Furthermore, he dies before his conversion moment, in other words, before he re-embraces the fundamentalist aspects of his faith. In addition to struggling with the reality of supernatural evil, he fails to recognize his own hypocrisy.

In *The Witch*, William and his family are banished from the Puritan community. The Court accuses him of “prideful conceit;” he counters, “I cannot be judged by false Christians, for I have done nothing, save preach Christ's true Gospel.” As I discussed, moving to an isolated location is a mistake, but it is important to understand that this mistake could have been prevented with self-control. Nayman observes, “The question of exactly how—or why—William has alienated the surrounding community is left provocatively open, and that ambiguity infuses everything that happens afterward. It’s hard to tell if his sin is a lack of faith, or a dangerous surfeit.” Nayman’s question pinpoints William’s lack of self-control. He cannot keep himself humble; he demands recognition as a leader. At first look, his steadfast faithfulness to what he considers the true gospel would be a good Christian virtue. Indeed, from a modern viewpoint, William
is making the right choice by, at the least, standing up for his beliefs in the face of adversity. Instead, the text argues that William is sacrificing his family’s welfare for his pride.

Figure 4: William leads his family to their new homestead and leads the family in blessing the land. The camera frames the vast woods that surround them while playing ominous music, indicating that William has led his family to their doom because his pride (*The Witch*).

*Think Christian* writer Josh Larsen points out, “Eager to prove themselves worthy of a triumphant Jesus Christ, the family in *The Witch* places their hope in moral standards that they cannot keep, and are therefore crushed when those standards are not met. It is the father’s insistence on living in purity, after all, that dooms his family to the woods.” In this quote, Larsen identifies William’s inability to connect to his community as the first step toward their destruction. As someone who thinks only he has the correct interpretation and the Council members are “false Christians,” he alienates the community and puts his family in exile.

In other words, Larsen points out that, even if the Council were preaching the wrong Gospel, William should have sacrificed his pride in his self-image to recognize that they live in “grace,” as Christian followers. Again, it is a minute point for a secular thinker, but, since his pride leads to his family’s starvation and the attack from the Witch,
it’s a deadly lack of self-control. Kathleen Troost-Cramer of Catholic365 explains the impact of William’s pride from a theological point of view: “Riddled with sinful pride, Will condemns himself and everyone he loves to separation from the church. . . When the faithful place themselves above the church and intentionally become a law unto themselves, they invite spiritual darkness into their lives and into the lives of their loved ones.” Troost-Cramer observes that it is William’s self-importance that brings his downfall. Considering that the father should discipline the family, exemplify correct behavior, and interpret religious doctrine for the family, William’s obliviousness weakens the family. He does eventually confess, but it is too late to save his family.

*The Witch* is particularly concerned with confessions; indeed, protagonist Thomasin’s first lines are confession. Despite this emphasis, William maintains his stubborn point of view, even in the face of dying children, famine, and infighting. When he finally breaks down, he weeps, “Corruption, thou art my father!” Thus, he recognizes his self-control, and he allows for healing and improvement. However, it is too late to truly repair the fallout from his self-importance. The movie implies that, if William had recognized his pride early on, his family would have survived, perhaps not even left the plantation at all. It is a mistake that his wife repeatedly points out to him, interactions which display his lack of control over his wife.

*Sight and Sound* critic Roger Clarke astutely notes Katherine’s role in the film: “...Dickie is given a somewhat thankless task as the shrewish and endlessly grieving mother; the secret sale of her silver cup by her husband to buy food robs her not only of a Christian communion chalice but also takes from her an archetypal symbol of female power.” In other words, Clarke represents the modern, secular view of Katherine and
William’s marriage, partially informed by feminist thought. A typical American mentality would be to sympathize with Katherine; to lose a child is the worst nightmare a mother could live through. However, for a patriarchy, Katherine’s priority should not be for herself, and William’s inept handling of his family leads to more serious consequences. Throughout the film, Katherine chastises William for hunting with Caleb, and stays in bed grieving for Sam, despite her husband’s suggestion for her to recover quickly. She even confesses that she’s been a shrew, but William still allows his pity for Katherine’s grief to override patriarchal expectation.

In addition, he doesn’t intercede on Thomasin’s behalf when Katherine chides her, a lack of control which snowballs into a larger issue. Someone who promotes patriarchal authority could argue that, since William doesn’t sufficiently check Katherine, her anger toward her oldest daughter intensified. At the end of the film, Katherine’s distrust boils over into anger, and she attacks her daughter. William should have interceded when he could, and made Katherine see Thomasin’s innocence. His actions could have prevented Thomasin eventually committing matricide. For adherents to a religious patriarchy, a man maintaining control over his wife prevents a chaotic household, and ultimately a chaotic society. This is also evident by how well he controls his children, which he repeatedly fails to do.

The film shows that William makes sure to spend a lot of time with his children. He takes Caleb hunting, and treats Thomasin respectfully. However, he still struggles with having authority over them. After the Witch takes Sam, Caleb receives a biblical lecture on original sin from William. It is a topic that Caleb clearly agonizes over, and William cannot calm him down:
William: Place faith in God – Caleb, mind thy hand, I say. We’ll speak no more on thy brother.

Caleb: Why? He hath disappeared not one week past, yet you and Mother utter not his name.

William: Caleb, look to thy work or I’ll lay [the trap] myself.

Caleb: Tell me… Is he in hell?

William: Caleb!… What is this?

Caleb: I hold evil in my heart. My sins are not pardoned. And if God will not hear my prayers? Tell me!

From a modern perspective, Caleb’s questions are perfectly natural. He applies his father’s lessons to a real situation, trying to show that he’s a faithful Christian, while struggling the idea of an innocent baby in Hell. However, Caleb’s insistent questioning, despite his father’s instruction to not talk about Sam anymore, is more a problem for William than Caleb. Since William cannot answer Caleb’s questions, he seems unwise and short-sighted. In other words, his authority as a father and religious expert is undermined. A father’s first duty is the religious authority for his children, so this interaction with Caleb is doubly damaging for William. Negroni’s conclusion about this scene is similar:

We’re all sinners, and though the characters of The Witch purport to understand this idea by directly quoting Scripture, what they live out looks nothing like the humility that comes from truly believing it. This is made apparent during a scene in which the patriarch’s son questions sin nature, only to be harshly silenced by his father for daring to doubt his father’s beliefs.
William's hypocrisy doesn’t go unnoticed by Caleb, and Thomasin also notices it in her father, an exchange I will analyze in The Unstable Daughter chapter. To sum up, a patriarchy cannot continue with a father who does not discipline. His inability to be a stable provider also endangers the patriarchy’s longevity.

Living in the wilderness would not be a problem if William is a proper provider, but he fails at this too. William initiated his family’s move to the wilderness, becoming their sole chance for survival. He considers this option preferable to remaining in a flawed community. This is his first misstep; he would not sacrifice his integrity, even by a small degree, to keep his family safe in a well-established community. He would rather isolate them, a great risk in colonial times. Unfortunately, the family quickly finds out how ineffective of a provider William is. He cannot hunt, manage livestock, or farm, forcing his son Caleb to find food for his family, a venture which leads to his death.

![Figure 5: Young, inexperienced Caleb braves the menacing woods so he can provide food for his starving family (The Witch).](image)

*Slate*’s David Ehrlich notes the family’s implosion due to William’s failure: “William is a particularly tortured creation; as the patriarch’s Christian guilt dovetails with his failings as a father and his emasculation as a hunter, [his wife] allows him to crumble with the care of a controlled demolition.” Here, Ehrlich describes William’s deficiency as a failing
on the most basic level of being a man. This matches with Gilmore’s work in masculinity studies:

Women who are found deficient or deviant according to these standards may be criticized as immoral, or they may be called unladylike or its equivalent and subjected to appropriate sanctions, but rarely is their right to a gender identity questioned in the same public, dramatic way that it is for men. The very paucity of linguistic labels for females echoing the epithets ‘effete,’ ‘unmanly,’ ‘effeminate,’ ‘emasculated,’ and so on, attest to this archetypal difference between sex judgments worldwide. And it is far more assaultive (and frequent) for men to be challenged in this way than for women. (11)

In other words, Gilmore notes that there are more punitive measures for men who fail in their ability to uphold ideals of hegemonic masculinity face. The film illustrates this idea, since William’s lack of skill exacerbates the demonic threat. When he cannot produce food, his family is weakened from starvation, thus amplifying tensions that Black Philip uses to destroy the family.

**Henry Rance in *The Exorcist***

Henry Rance is a weak protector because of his lack of faith. Despite being an observant Catholic, Henry is skeptical about his daughter’s possession, which compromises his capability to protect his family. When the family priest, Tomas, first tells the Rances that their daughter is possessed, Henry asks him with a slight quirk of a smile, “You’re a modern guy, Father. You don’t really believe in demons and the Devil and all that. I mean, those are just stories, right?” When Tomas responds that they should
consider the possibility that God has an adversary, Henry soberly reconsiders his position. However, this is not Henry’s full conversion moment; that comes later in the episode, when his teenage daughter rips off a man’s jaw. After this, Henry embraces the reality of demonic possession and only looks to solve the problem for his family. Neil Genzlinger, New York Times critic, notes, “The groundwork is laid for the show to explore matters of religious faith — styles of doctrinal interpretation and application, limits of belief, the meaning of temptation in the modern age.” Genzlinger’s observation contributes to my interpretation that these texts invite introspection about one’s limits of belief, perhaps inspired by modern, secular skepticism. To take Genzlinger’s point further, I argue that the fundamentalist perspective is normalized through Henry, an educated, upper class, male character who lives in modern Chicago, and thus identifiable for many Americans. His subsequent actions become more effectively protective, pinpointing breaches in his family’s spiritual “armor.” As an archetype, Henry invites much consideration on the father’s role as provider.

To be a sufficient provider, a father must be present mentally as well as physically, as The Exorcist argues. Henry Rance falls under the category of sick or injured father, and this compromises his ability to provide for his family. Shortly before the show’s beginning, Henry suffered a brain injury. He takes on child-like traits, becoming unfocused and unable to practice self-care. Consequently, he does not work and spends most of his time watching television. In other words, he is no longer capable of providing the funds for the family's upper middle class lifestyle. By the end of the season, the context is that the family is finally safe when Henry has returned to his role as head of house.
The Rances' story has a happy ending, but Henry still contributes to the pattern of fathers who don't provide. While getting injured is not Henry’s fault, the repercussions from his inability to provide go deeper than the family’s creature comforts.

In his stead, Henry’s wife Angela steps up to be head of household. She is someone who already has established a successful career, which often takes her out of the home. Now, she must be the provider and the caretaker for her sick husband. For traditional families, this move contradicts God’s wishes for a family structure. Scholz finds that traditionalists believe the following, “Contemporary gender roles for women and men have to adapt to the biblical vision, which is based on the text itself and assumes

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6 Angela’s move into the role of breadwinner reflects a cultural trend, perhaps intentionally so. Economic deficits dictate the need for women to move more into the workforce, empowered by the feminist movement. The Exorcist works as a fundamentalist text to point out the negative repercussions to the patriarchy from this trend. Gallagher and Smith explain, “Evangelicalism has historically been a middle-class and upper-middle-class phenomenon, increasing the opportunities for evangelical men to live out the ideal of breadwinner-family head. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, increasing reliance on women’s income has threatened to undermine that part of headship having to do with being the sole (or even primary) economic provider. As a result, evangelical gender ideals are increasingly in conflict with the realities of a two-income family” (214). In other words, patriarchies have had to redesign family structure, part of the consequences of the post-industrial economy, which precipitated the shift from single to dual income families. The shift also reflects women’s empowerment from the feminist movement, the effects which these texts resist.
gender roles as a biological given for female and male” (92). This view, along with the problem of Henry’s injury, means the Rances cannot be effectively protected from the demon’s attack. Her domineering traits only stress her inability to lead the family. In other words, for all her authoritativeness, she cannot control the household. Part of the reason is the dissension she causes from how she treats Henry. She cuts him down by treating him like a child, and, even when he starts to regain his senses, he lets her. Helopoulos advises, “Set the tone in your home. A Christian husband and father establishes the culture of his home more than anyone else. The moody teenager, fussy toddler, or even sullen wife are not the determining factor. You are.” Through Angela, the series asserts the fundamentalist notion that Angela cannot lead the family because she is a temperamental and demanding woman. The series’ representation of Angela, a career woman, represents the fundamentalist patriarchy’s backlash against feminism: a woman who does not recognize her subordinate place and a husband who does not enforce it causes problems that expand beyond the family. I will discuss Angela’s role in my analysis more extensively in Chapter 2.

Altogether, the texts argue that father figures should be a religious adherent, an adequate provider, and in control of himself, his wife, and his children. Failure to meet these requirements opens himself, his family, and, by extension, society to demonic attack. Gallagher and Smith give a fitting reminder about the stakes of these portrayals:

Concern about family values is really concern about social values; debating and defending families becomes a way to both critique and defend our culture as a whole, particularly in times of social change. Debates about family values are not just about families but are about
social and cultural change and the meanings we attach to these. Because family values reflect concern about social change, these values provide a lens through which to examine some of the core tensions and transitions under way in American society (211).

Gallagher and Smith conclude their findings that the rising trend of symbolic traditionalism represent the “last gasp” of the patriarchy. However, the texts I survey indicate the exact opposite; that they are acting within the discourse of the debate on family values show a shift, resurgence, and/or perpetuation of traditional gender hierarchy that is not symbolic, but unquestionably fundamentalist. How this discourse plays out for the mother characters in these texts further attests to this interpretation.
CHAPTER 2: THE BAD MOTHER

Changing gender dynamics, fueled by feminist efforts, has put motherhood on the forefront of fundamentalist concern. Children carry on traditions to ensure patriarchal longevity; David D. Gilmore emphasizes children’s importance here: “Society is a delicate perpetual motion machine that depends upon the replication of its primary structures, the family in particular, because without the family there is no context for socializing children and thus for perpetuating the culture” (225). Therefore, a mother’s duty to pass on a fundamentalist, patriarchal lifestyle is crucial. Therefore, in the texts, motherhood is unavoidably tied into religiosity. They use the essentialist argument that motherhood is inevitably tied to womanhood. Gallagher and Smith confirmed this in their interviews with evangelical families. “Natural, even God-given essences were argued to be the basis of masculine aggression, worldly wisdom, and rationality and its complement, feminine submission, purity, piety, and domesticity-- an argument that continues to be presented by a number of contemporary evangelical writers today…” (213). Again, to return to the argument that patriarchal norms are inherent to a person’s character is a tactic to make the norms more appealing.

Butler has well covered the fallacy of this assumption. In Gender Trouble, she says, “...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Focusing on motherhood over every other aspect a woman could have reveals fundamentalist patriarchy’s discontent with the idea of a woman becoming anything else.
For example, in the texts, mother characters who are “career women” or focus their energies on anything other than the happiness of their families are targeted by demonic forces. E. Ann Kaplan’s “The Case of the Missing Mother” outlines the way career women are shown in films: “Cold, angular career women… have come to dominate the popular media… But career women immediately lose their warm qualities, so that even if they do combine mothering and career, they cannot be Good Mothers” (85). Like weak fathers, bad mothers who do not implement correct Christian living leaves their families open to demonic attack.

Fundamentalist efforts to present motherhood as a woman’s sole source of redemption reduces her options. According to Kaplan, “The sentimentalizing motherhood discourse has also returned [in accordance with increased fundamentalist discourse on the importance of motherhood], but the new focus on the fetus perhaps even more than this discourse, marginalizes and oppresses the mother” (“Sex, Work and Motherhood: The Impossible Triangle,” 422). The resurgence of sentimentalized motherhood highlights the marketability of the idea, even after increased feminist efforts to celebrate womanhood beyond motherhood. Through tragedy, the texts compel the victimized women to return to patriarchal control, and in these fundamentalist texts, great emphasis is put on the kind of morals mothers pass on to children. Standards are set from religiously-based patriarchal models. (In)famous evangelist minister Billy Graham recently emphasized the importance of being the kind of fundamentalist mother these texts endorse: “Our nation is in desperate need of consecrated Christian mothers. If we had more Christian mothers, we would have less delinquency, less immorality, less ungodliness and fewer broken homes.” Clearly, fundamentalists consider “right” motherhood to be a deciding factor in
the country’s well-being, and use demonic threats as enforcements. The texts I examine emphasize maternal errors to exemplify the ramifications of breaches in the system. The message in each text is that the mother ought to adhere to “correct” lifestyles. Kaplan made similar conclusions in her research: “Narratives that do focus on the Mother usually take that focus because she resists her proper place. The work of the film is to reinscribe the Mother in the position patriarchy desires for her and, in so doing, teach the female audience the dangers of stepping out of the given position” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 82). Mothers must be perfect religious adherents, parents, and spouses. Those who are not become monstrous.

First, a mother must model and enforce biblical living. She encourages her children to read their bibles, attend service, say prayer, and follow the commandments. The father may make decisions about how to live religiously, but a mother administers such regulations to her children. As her husband’s helpmate and the one who exemplifies moral living for her children, the wife has an obligation to demonstrate model Christianity. Graham says, “Every mother owes it to her children to accept Christ as her personal Savior, so that she may be the influence for good in the lives of those whom Christ has graciously given to her.” Graham’s rhetoric has a tone found in all aspects of the mother’s duties: a mother should maintain a self-sacrificing mentality. When the demonic attacks begin, the self-sacrificing aspect becomes priority. The texts purport that the bigger the sacrifice, the more pleased authority figures, like her husband or God, will be with her. More importantly, her children will flourish. This idea goes across all five of the texts.

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7 For further insight into the religious responsibilities of a Christian mother, see Bruinsma, Spangenberg.
Like the father’s responsibility to favor fundamentalism over rationality, a mother’s instinct should trump common sense. When the demonic phenomenon starts, all the mothers instinctively know that something supernatural is the cause. This is a reverse of the assumption that patriarchal fathers are all-knowing. Kimberly Jackson explains why mothers know more than fathers:

...[T]he women and children in their lives have the ability-- or the curse-- of looking [the threat] dead in the face. In fact, knowledge of the extent to which their homes and even their own bodies and minds have been infiltrated by dangerous forces would be detrimental to a masculinity already in crisis. If the father is to maintain his rationality, his autonomy, his sense of power and control-- those very traits that make him a man-- then this blindness is essential. (Jackson 183-184)

The texts disagree that the father’s blindness is essential, since he comes around during his conversion; nevertheless, his knowledge is not as timely or steadfast as a mother’s instinct. Angela Rance in The Exorcist, Carolyn Perron and Lorraine Warren in The Conjuring, Peggy Hodgson in The Conjuring 2, and Katherine in The Witch know from the beginning when the family’s troubles are supernatural rather than mundane. Since most mothers in the texts are the first to detect the real issue, by “natural” instinct no less, this further embeds the essentialist argument that Butler resists. When the mother’s instincts are confirmed with the unveiling of the demonic presence, the fundamentalist worldview is reinforced. One is led to believe that the mothers are somehow more in tune with the truth. Still, recognizing the nature of evil is not sufficient; a mother’s duty is to get the rest of the family on board with her. The texts make it clear the mother is
ultimately responsible for her family’s inaccurate views. In each instance, it is presented that if these mothers had better explained themselves, not doubted her instincts, or gotten help in the beginning, their families would not suffer so much. In a way, her incompetence leaves the door open for the demon to attack at will. This incompetence counters the ideal “...Heroic Mother, who suffers and endures for the sake of husband and children… she shares her saintly qualities, but is more central to the action” (Kaplan, “The Case of the Missing Mother” 81-82) Therefore, it is her choice and voluntary actions that can protect her family.

In this setup, more of her choices center around modeling moral living, so the mother must be sure to exhibit moral ideals for her children. Graham instructs, “If you are a true Christian, you will not give way at home to bad temper, impatience, faultfinding, sarcasm, unkindness, suspicion, selfishness or laziness. Instead, you will reveal through your daily life the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, longsuffering and all the other Christian virtues that round out a Christlike personality.” However, the mothers in these texts are liars, angry, or overly critical; the exception is The Conjuring’s Lorraine Warren. When kids cannot look to the mother for a model of living, their upbringing has been compromised. At the very least, the children are not given a moral standard to live by, but, with the existence of demons, the issues multiply with deadly consequences. Considering that the mother is meant to be the moral gatekeeper of the family, exemplifying correct behavior and outlining taboos for children, her transgressions make her a hypocrite. As with the fathers, the mothers’ confessions in these texts give the women the opportunities to admit their misdeeds and correct themselves. The mothers who take advantage of the redemptive qualities of confession
are Peggy Hodgson in *The Conjuring 2*, Kat in *The Witch*, and Angela Rance in *The Exorcist*. Confessing is a type of self-abnegation, a characteristic that the patriarchy endorses for mothers.

At the mundane level, the mother is expected to sacrifice a lot. Kaplan’s archetype explains the high expectations and subsequent pressure for a mother: “...[T]he Mother is either idealized, as in the myths of the nurturing, ever-present but self-abnegating figure, or disparaged, as in the corollary myth of the sadistic, neglectful Mother who puts her needs first. The Mother as a complex person in her own right, with multiple roles to fill and conflicting needs and desires, is absent from patriarchal representations” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 81). Surely, the mother figures in these texts never share their dreams, goals, or aspirations that have nothing to do with their spiritual or familial needs. This keeps them in the one-dimensional view that Kaplan criticizes in her article. The ideal mother in a patriarchy gives her children what they need without being asked. She never fails to be there for her children if they need help. Aside from physical necessities like a clean house, clothing, and homemade food, her constant emotional availability is also expected. This paradigm does not leave room for a good mother to have a successful career or other pursuits. Kaplan puts this tension in the category of further examples of patriarchal anxiety over a woman’s sexual freedom or autonomy: “Issues of all three areas under discussion- sex, work, motherhood- were subsumed under the over-riding need for women to control their bodies in order to have choice about these three aspects of their lives. Emphasis was on women freeing themselves from a culturally imposed- and not necessarily desired- reproductive role that still prevail…” (Kaplan, “Sex, Work, and Motherhood,” 419). Indeed, in the texts, only
one mother expresses sexual desire; even then, sex is an expression of gratitude for finding a new house for them. The lack of sexuality underscores how unacceptable the fundamentalist patriarchy considers a mother who desires something for herself that does not benefit her family.

The fundamentalist patriarchy justifies these harsh expectations as a means for keeping the family unified. For characters, when these familial bonds are not fostered, the family becomes exposed to attacks from demons. Maribeth Spangenberg, writer for Crosswalk.com, exemplifies the perceived danger of a lax mother, as found in biblical scripture:

> God entrusted our children to us to raise in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord," to equip them for spiritual battle, to bring honor and glory to His name… Before their eyes are open to the realization that God is not just their Creator, but that He is also their Savior, they are unequipped for the power of Satan - ‘Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.’ (I Peter 5:8).

In other words, Spangenberg, like the texts, indicates demonic attacks can result from mothers who do not prepare their houses and families for satanic attacks, which fundamentalists consider imminent. In accordance with fundamentalist ideals, the texts advocate that, in these battles, mothers must be willing to sacrifice even their own lives for their children’s safety.

Fundamentalists purport that, in addition to being perfect, self-sacrificing mothers, women are supposed to be good wives to help support the patriarchal system. Traditionally, this means a wife should be obedient, supportive, and agreeable to her
husband. For the family and household to be controlled, especially with an unstable
daughter, the parents should be in a relationship where they work together. To
fundamentalist logic, it is in this way that control can be maintained, and the demon
cannot exploit the family’s weakness. Cindi Ferrini, writer for *Focus on the Family,*
testifies that this is a model to follow, “In a culture that continues to try to redefine
‘submission’, I've found it imperative to submit — to yield and follow my husband's lead.
He often sees things very differently than I... I have followed his lead because he often
sees what I'm missing.” In other words, Ferrini finds modern, feminist calls for a wife’s
individuality is misguided. Following the essentialist argument that fundamentalists
purport to be biblically correct, Ferrini seems to think her husband has more insight into
issues that she cannot. Of course, Butler contends that intelligence and insight can come
from either partner, and to think one gender has set advantages over another is simply the
law being acted out via the text: “[The] law is not literally internalized, but incorporated,
with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the
body” (*Gender Trouble*, 134-135). Disrespectful wives who counter the fundamentalist
subordination of women are a particular concern. In these texts, using the demonic threat
to punish rebellious wives show how fear is a tool to maintain boundaries and the status
quo.

Bad mothers cannot protect their children as they should, but they can protect
themselves even less. In *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcist,* the mothers are the victims of
demonic possession. When they are overtaken, they become figures that their family
cannot recognize. Namely, these women embody death and all its processes; death’s
possession of the woman who gave her family members life represents two opposing
forces in one body. To put another way, the taboo of death, rot, and blood infiltrates across social boundaries to infest the family. Julia Kristeva’s theory on the psychological effects of these displays, called abjection, contributes much to my analysis. The abject signs in these women represent manifestations of the taboo. Kristeva notes that for an audience, abrupt visualizations of the taboo inspire doubt in one’s self-identity and place within society: “[The abject] is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that the ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (9). Similarly, Butler maintains that one’s position within society are affirmed through discourse on acceptable gender norms. However, the social constructions that help define the “abject” are only reiterations of current systems of power. Butler expands on this in the following quote: “Indeed, one might argue that such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness...” (Bodies that Matter, 126). Here, she means society is threatened by homosexuality, but Kaplan’s work on Bad Mothers also fits into this concept. Bad Mothers must be excluded to maintain patriarchal authority. Women who embody the abject in these texts are possessed victims or witches. Kaplan describes the figures: “The Bad Mother or Witch... Sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life. Because of her 'evil' behaviour, this mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal...” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 81).

Certainly, abjection says more about the society which rejects it than the abject itself. Barbara Creed builds on Kristeva’s work about the monstrous female: “But the
feminine is not a monstrous sign *per se*; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse that reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific” (65). That is, the abject women in the texts are embodiments of male, religious fears about aberrant mothers, rather than the reality about women’s (dis)inclinations toward the role. For Kristeva, what the abject represents is the eruption of the Real for those offended by the abject; that is, grotesque images that symbolize death. Kristeva presents the rotting corpse as a powerful symbol of abjection, one that reminds the viewers that, one day, they will be like that: “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (71). Furthermore, the bodily fluids and rot combine to remind the onlooker that physical manifestations of the essence of life, such as blood, eventually transforms into the most disgusting substances. The decaying process is seen in visual representations of demonic possession. The victims become sick and their bodies become dirtier and infected. Women are commonly tied to the abject because menstruation is a process that emits multiple physical representations of the abject, as I will explore later. Because the texts focus on the victims’ character flaws that defy patriarchal norms, the insinuation is that their pollution is their own fault. Interaction with the abject necessitates purifying rituals and ceremonies which reinstate borders; in these texts, those rituals are exorcisms.

That 21st century horror emphasizes time and again that religion is the thin blue line (so to speak) against this abject evil, indicates the popularity of this idea. Audiences clearly observe the threats to their orderly society from these physical marks of otherness,
and repeatedly in women who defy the patriarchal standard. There are two abject women from the texts who are witches. Witches are figures who represent women outside of patriarchal control. Carol F. Karlsen, historian and author of *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, confirms this: “[The] repeated conflation of ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ in their discussion of female domination suggests that they saw as witches all women who were potential or actual threats to a social hierarchy favoring men” (158). There are clear parallels between witches and archaic mothers, another concept developed by Kristeva and Creed. “Archaic mother” is a psychological term signifying embodied chaos that haunts the patriarchal order and represents a child’s personal relationship with the mother during the semiotic stage. As chaotic forces for evil, the witch figures in these texts represent warnings about women who defy God and patriarchal control (for fundamentalists, they are the same). Certain features of the archaic mother/witch figures are rehashed in *The Conjuring* and *The Witch*.

I will apply Creed’s definition of the characteristics of archaic mother figures and their impact in horror texts to Bathsheba in *The Conjuring* and the Witch in the Woods from *The Witch*. First, Creed describes the archaic mother figure as “a negative force [and] is represented in her phantasmagoric aspects in many horror texts…” (57). The witch’s ability to change her appearance makes it easier for her to infiltrate the home. The indication is that the threat comes from within safe spaces, which means the abject is a stronger threat to self-identity. For example, both witches can move about the families’ property and home without any trouble, hurting whoever crosses their path. Next, Creed describes the real threat of the archaic mother:

[A common image] is the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that
signifies female genitalia as a monstrous sign threatening to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path... [T]he archaic mother is present... as the blackness of extinction--death. The desires and fears invoked by the image of the archaic mother, as a force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to, are always there in the horror text--all-pervasive, all-encompassing--because of the constant presence of death. The desire to return to the original one-ness of things, to return to the mother/womb, is primarily a desire for non-differentiation. (58)

The gaping hole that Creed describes is evident in both films. Both witch figures dwell in dark, womb-like places. To fundamentalists, what makes them deadlier, contrary to patriarchal ideals, is that the women have no God, Jesus, husband, or father who decided their fate. They independently chose their path, self-ascribing to the demonic evil. The world without the father (or his law) is the fundamentalist patriarchy’s greatest fear. Creed clarifies, “What is most interesting about the mythological figure of woman as the source of all life... is that, within patriarchal signifying practices, particularly the horror film, she is reconstructed and represented as a negative figure, one associated with the dread of the generative mother...” (56). The primal woman who exists before the father intervenes, especially on a personal level, is one who has no power left. The witches in these movies handle this issue by consuming (one way or another) children. The consumption is a way to regain power. The Witch in the Woods cannibalizes children, and Bathsheba possesses mothers to commit infanticide.

Walter Stephens’ book, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*,
contextualizes demonological studies surrounding these figures. Though he focuses on Early Modern texts about witches, his historical analysis exemplifies how religious phenomenon like the witch crazes of the Early Modern period work within fundamentalist discourses on gender and power. He says, “Depictions and suggestions of relations between women and demons reflected a specific theological tradition of witchcraft theory. They conditioned the spectator, including the illiterate one, to imagine— that is, to visualize— corporeal interaction with demons as real” (106). I would add that realizing demons and debasing women was the purpose of perpetuating the witchcraft myth, even today. I will refer to Stephens’ work more when I analyze archaic mothers in *The Conjuring* and *The Witch*.

**Mrs. Sweetzer in *The Last Exorcism***

Wilbur Bruinsma, writer for the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, advises women to make God the priority when raising children: “They need to be taught orderliness, respect for authority, and self-discipline and obedience. Likewise, they need to be taught their responsibilities toward God. They need to be carefully nurtured in the things of God’s kingdom. They must be shown their sin and then taken to the cross of Jesus Christ.” The emphasis on spirituality for women is supported in *The Last Exorcism*. Though Nell’s mother in *The Last Exorcism* has passed before the movie takes place, the most important thing she had done for her family was, according to her husband, “instill faith.” None of her other qualities are discussed. The implication is that it is the only quality worth knowing about the woman. This one-dimensional view reflects Kaplan’s theory about women in cinema: their focus should be on their role as mothers, as the idyllic reputation of Nell’s mother exemplifies.
Carolyn Perron, Lorraine Warren, and Bathsheba in *The Conjuring*

In *The Conjuring*, the Perrons are not a religious family in the beginning of the film. Viewers are meant to understand their lackadaisical approach to Christianity as a grievous error. Indeed, when the paranormal attacks reach the pinnacle of violence, the Catholic Church refuses to help them because they are not established members. Fundamentalist authorities like Billy Graham would consider Carolyn Perron at least partially responsible. He says, “Every mother owes it to her children to accept Christ as her personal Savior, so that she may be the influence for good in the lives of those whom Christ has graciously given to her.” Her apathetic efforts to pass on Christianity, apparently limited to minimal religious décor, is part of why Bathsheba is able to infiltrate the family.

To contrast, Lorraine is the all-seeing, all-knowing fundamentalist adherent and mother who fights evil on behalf of the Catholic faith. She is certainly the one good Christian other mothers are meant to copy. She always has a rosary wrapped around her wrist, a symbol of her constant faith.

*Figure 7:* Lorraine uses her steadfast faith to assist her husband in Carolyn's exorcism (*The Conjuring*).
Furthermore, she is the only one with the ability to explain what is happening. She, not her husband, is the first to believe Carolyn’s claims about the house. Throughout the investigation, she appeals to Ed to continue helping the Perrons, no matter the cost to her, because “This is why God brought us together.” She sees all but one of the ghosts, uncovers the historical research on Bathsheba, and is the first to recognize that Carolyn is the focus of the hauntings and when she has been possessed. Audiences are meant to believe in Lorraine’s claims about supernatural evil because she is confident, honest, and righteous. The epitome of her power is at the climax. Just as Carolyn is about to kill her daughter, Lorraine brings her back from damnation. The audience is led to admire Lorraine for her bravery which is motivated by strong compassion. When combined with the maternal enforcement exemplified by Lorraine Warren, to be simultaneously brave, self-sacrificing, and compassionate, the emphasis on a mother’s responsibility takes on a more divine connotation.

Lorraine’s compassionate and determined nature motivates her focus on women as mothers, including herself. She explains Bathsheba’s infanticide to Carolyn Perron: “It was never a child to her. She just used her God-given gift as the ultimate offense against him. Witches believe it elevates their status in the eyes of Satan.” This comment specifically shows that Lorraine considers motherhood a sacred aspect of womanhood. Her view matches Spangenberg’s advice that “Any woman, who has the blessed honor of birthing a child, has the immediate responsibility of caring physically for that child to the best of her ability.” The implications of Lorraine and Spangenberg’s belief are that pregnancy, child-rearing, and correct motherhood are sacred duties, and to fail in one aspect defies God. In the fundamentalist view, God made woman a mother, first and
foremost, and all other roles are subordinate. Likewise, the choice to not be a mother is an “offense against him.” Though Bathsheba revokes her motherhood in the most extreme method possible (an event I will explore thoroughly further on), the film’s context is still that any woman who is not a mother is denying a divine blessing, to her own detriment.

Kaplan defines a Good Mother as one “who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating - the ‘Angel of the House’. Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 81). Lorraine prioritizes the Perron children’s well-being, but Carolyn’s early behavior contradicts Lorraine’s attitude; April has to with plead her mother to spend time with her, and Carolyn cannot get her eldest daughter to obey her. After Bathsheba is exorcised, Carolyn experiences a complete change. She embraces her daughters enthusiastically, and all the girls follow her direction. Lorraine also has some problems with being a fully attentive mother. She and Ed prioritize other families in supernatural crisis over being with their daughter, Judy. In both movies, Judy is attacked by demons, but Lorraine swoops in at the best moment to put herself between her daughter and the attackers. In this way, the film still advocates Lorraine as the ideal mother figure. She is also framed as the best wife, in comparison to Carolyn.

Carolyn is not an inconsiderate wife, supporting her husband through his absences. She follows his direction to move their family to a new home, the first dialogue between them in the film. She tries to keep the house clean while they go through the process of moving. Finally, she also shows a sexual interest in him; on the first night in their new house, she invites Roger to “christen” it. These acts show her to be a “good”
wife, in the patriarchal view. Indeed, she is fulfilling the traditional role of a mother as the “Angel in the House,” as Kaplan argues. The fundamentalist mentality is that these are only natural to a woman’s inherent character. It is interesting that, despite the stress her family is under and her decreasing health, Carolyn does not lose her patience or temper at any point. Indeed, it is the only way she truly meets patriarchal expectations. Her conformity to this model indicates that the push for a return to patriarchy is working.

Heather Havrilesky, writer for The New York Times, confirms this hypothesis: “[T]he reigning cultural narrative tells us that we are no longer lively, inspired women with our own ideas and emotions so much as facilitators, meant to employ at all times the calm, helpful tones of diplomats.” Carolyn’s passivity affirms Havrilesky’s point. Lorraine is also a proper, yielding wife, but only to Ed’s lead.

When the time comes to exorcise Carolyn, Lorraine talks Ed into attempting the exorcism, even though he is not a priest. Her support gives Ed the strength to save Carolyn’s life. Furthermore, this moment is framed as the defining moment between them both, the quintessence of their marriage and their purpose. Ken Ham and Steve Ham, writers for Answers in Genesis, advocate, “Fathers are to be the overall spiritual head. Whenever and wherever possible, the father’s leadership should be obvious to the children as it is to the wife… She… continues to be a supportive substance, a gentle but strong balancing presence, a defender of Truth, a godly trainer of her children and a powerful mentor of women in the Lord.” In short, the authors perpetuate the patriarchal standard for women as supporters but not leaders. Theoretically, Lorraine could have also exorcised Carolyn, since neither she nor Ed are ordained priests. However, she chooses to step aside and allow him to lead the exorcism, providing a supportive role rather than a
leading one. It is not until Carolyn escapes and is about to kill the youngest Perron
daughter that Lorraine involves herself in the ritual. Since Ed and Lorraine “do exude the
soft interpersonal touch of Christian marriage counselors,” their marital practices are the
model which viewers are meant to follow (Gleiberman, “Why We Like Exorcist
Movies”). The divergence from Lorraine’s model is Bathsheba, the movie’s satanic force,
and example of the abject archaic mother figure.

Bathsheba is the demonic witch who originally owned the Perron farmhouse.
Lorraine reveals that she sacrificed her baby to Satan in exchange for power to keep her
homestead. Since her death, she possesses mothers to recreate her infanticide/suicide.
These sins irredeemably mark the land. Lorraine informs us, “She ran out to that tree by
the dock, climbed up, proclaimed her love to Satan, cursed anyone who tried to take her
land, and hung herself.” In the film, Bathsheba precipitates Carolyn’s lying, fugue states,
kidnap and attempted murder two of her daughters. Bathsheba represents abjection and
the archaic mother figure, two characters, typically female, often found in the horror
genre.

Bathsheba embodies abjection. First, she has masculine features, an allusion to the
fact that she acted like a male by deciding her own fate, selling her soul to own the land.
This is not an unintentional choice; the casting choice was a man, Joseph Bishara.
Bathsheba’s masculinity represents the fear at the heart of these texts; she is a woman
who acts like a man, who is violent, blasphemous, and thwarts patriarchal control. In
short, Bathsheba, as an embodiment of abjection, forces us to question exactly how to
identify the male. If she can perform the same actions as men, and force other women to
do the same, then the patriarchy is dismantled. In relation to Butler’s theory, Bathsheba
initiates her own agency that throws off endorsed gender norms. However, her display of subversion is only for the purposes of reminding audiences of what is evil. Butler says, “I would suggest as well that the notion of the subject carries with it a doubleness that is crucial to emphasize the subject is one who is presumed to be the presupposition of agency… but the subject is also one who is subjected to a set of rules or laws that precede the subject” (qtd. in Meijer and Prins 285). In other words, Bathsheba’s agency only exists to be punished within the narrative, to exemplify the consequences of such actions. She also represents abjection as related to physical decay.

In *The Conjuring*, Bathsheba possesses Carolyn through an abject medium: rotten blood. As Carolyn lies down for a nap, Bathsheba floats above her and, surprising Carolyn awake, vomits rotting blood into Carolyn’s mouth.

![Figure 8: Bathsheba vomits rotting blood into Carolyn's mouth, an act of forced cannibalism of abject waste (*The Conjuring*).](image)

Blood is a powerful symbol for females, often representing the menstrual cycle. Though Bathsheba is ejecting blood from her mouth and not her vagina, the effect is similar, as both are black holes from which blood comes. Creed discusses this when she describes the “hole” in context of the archaic mother, “…[T]he womb signifies ‘fullness’ or
‘emptiness’ but it always has its own point of reference” (58). Wombs are dark spaces where blood is emitted, but not from a dying subject. The archaic mother is immortal, haunting the patriarchy from a time before men. Moreover, Creed says the womb is its own point of reference; in other words, it is feminine which defines itself without patriarchal blessing. This is exactly what Bathsheba does, recalling that Lorraine said she “proclaimed her love for Satan.” Bathsheba used her voice, her words, from her mouth to separate from the fundamentalist patriarchy. Though her ghost is silent, she uses the blood from her mouth to continue to turn the system on its head. Upending the system causes identity crises, which matches Karlsen’s analysis of witch figures in American lore: “[The] repeated conflation of ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ in [contemporary theologians’] discussion of female domination suggests that they saw as witches all women who were potential or actual threats to a social hierarchy favoring men” (158). These black holes appear in the house as well, the thing for which Bathsheba sold her soul.

The first dark space is the farmhouse’s cellar, which is a black hole under the house. When the family discovers it on their first night in the house, Roger goes into the cellar while his wife and daughters hang back fearfully. Carolyn is relying on Roger to interpret her surroundings; he explores the newly discovered basement alone. He goes into the dark while the women wait at the edge, too scared (or knowing better?) than to go into the unknown. The cellar serves as the site of Carolyn’s first major ghost attack and exorcism. The leftover armoire where a child hid from his abusive mother also represents a black hole from which Bathsheba first manifests herself to the Perron daughters. Finally, the walls and floors of the farmhouse regularly break, allowing characters to fall or crawl through. Secrets about the house and Bathsheba are revealed in
these spaces, and the climax of the movie happens between floors. The most striking example is when Lorraine reaches through a hole in the kitchen floor, a traditionally feminine place, to touch Bathsheba/Carolyn and prevent her from executing her daughter. Clearly one of the movie’s concerns is the blurred lines between Good and Bad Mothers in the household. Of course, the Good Mother triumphs and the walls/floor, the in-between spaces, are closed off once again. It’s a re-establishment of assigned gender roles, and the audience is meant to be comforted by the closure. It’s dangerous to go outside the normal family spaces, and the children and Lorraine are certainly threatened in these areas. But, even outside these holes, Bathsheba invades personal space to control Carolyn.

Bathsheba (cannibalistically) forces her bloody, vomitus essence into Carolyn, and is thus forcing an infraction of one of the most primal taboos: consumption of putrid flesh. It is also a symbol of passing evil through blood, i.e. hereditarily. In *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*, Lucy Fischer contextualizes how menstruation inspires fear: “The belief in the ‘enchanted’ quality of woman is tied to the female’s relation to blood. In both menstruation and childbirth, she bleeds but does not die; it is ‘wounded,’ but does not expire” (147). By passing on her evil through blood, she forces Carolyn to consume blood, a symbol of life, an act reminiscent of the archaic mother.

Bathsheba is a representation of the archaic mother. As Creed shows, the archaic mother seeks to reincorporate what she once gave birth to, i.e. the children. The method in which she consumes the child is immaterial. By possessing the mothers to kill their children, she forces them to reincorporate, or consume, the children’s lives. Again, the infectious blood causes a self-identity crisis; Kristeva’s commentary on menstrual blood
coincides with this: “Menstrual blood… stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual) ...” (71). In addition, Bathsheba is an archaic mother because she embodies the past, wearing an old-fashioned nightgown, all covered in dirt.

Bathsheba’s symbolic connection to the past is strengthened when Lorraine identifies Mary Towne Estye, an accused and executed Salem witch, as Bathsheba’s ancestor. For *The Conjuring*, the hearkening back to Salem insinuates that evil can be hereditary, due to the emphasis Lorraine puts on Bathsheba’s ancestry. It is another argument for essentialist personality traits. If evil is genetic, then the movie is purporting that mothers who transgress societal norms should be wary of passing on evil habits to her children.

As an archaic mother, she remains outside patriarchal male control. Furthermore, she defies fundamentalist reverence for God. Her method of serving Satan is possession, which resembles an inner threat, on the individual, micro, and macro scales. For these texts, the abject female and archaic mother serve as a warning against changing gender norms. Hartog warns, “It is not only foolhardy when men seek to overthrow that order but it is rebellion and great wickedness against the Lord. Doing this will only create confusion in the family, which will in turn bring forth rebellion and misery and confusion in the world.” While he warns that men should not upset the order, Bathsheba’s punishment shows that the same rule applies for women.

**Peggy Hodgson and Lorraine Warren in *The Conjuring 2***

Peggy Hodgson has no fundamentalist beliefs. Her most egregious error is that she cannot provide adequate proof that her daughter truly is possessed, despite everything she had witnessed. To contrast, Lorraine repeats the same ideal behavior as in *The Conjuring*. She spearheads the efforts against the demonic attacks. She pinpoints the
demon’s deception, acting on her instinct and then finally exorcises Valak. Because she is the heroine, viewers are led to agree with her doubt in the scientific evidence. The audience, the Hodgsons, and Lorraine are vindicated when Lorraine receives a vision about Valak’s deception. Again, her adherence to fundamentalism places her as the model female character.

Peggy’s new single motherhood proves to be too much for her. To her friend, Peggy confesses that she’s half the mom she was before her husband left. She often quickly loses her temper towards the children, though their complaints are legitimate, and her punishments are reneged, making the home environment temperamental. Specifically, Peggy’s s anxieties over money makes her more easily incensed. When the girls first come to her about the ghost in their bedroom, she sees the bite on Janet and, horrified, goes to investigate. Despite that bad bite, she finds the Ouija board before any other proof, which dispels any faith in her daughters. She chastises the girls for keeping her from “a good night’s sleep,” damaging that trusting bond further.

Indeed, single motherhood has its challenges. However, feminist efforts for equal gender treatment in the workplace and in divorce settlements indicate single motherhood does not offer the hardships that would make life impossible. However, for fundamentalists, gender equality portends change, and families without fathers defy biblical direction. Scholz concluded as much from her data:

Complementarians assert repeatedly that biblical teachings help readers understand ‘God’s good design’ of ‘God-given’ gender identities… To traditionalists, then, the Bible supersedes contemporary convictions and customs… [For them, it is crucial to reconcile the sacred text with a culture
that is not Bible-centered and increasingly diverse in terms of religious, cultural, and gender practices. Fundamentalists oppose the ‘gender revolution’ that began in the 1960s, which traditionalists view as ‘a radical departure from biblical, apostolic Christianity.’ As a result, Christians should not endorse the ‘gender trouble’ of our time. Reading the Bible with this conviction in mind, traditionalists try to define gender through the lens of the divinely created order and speak of biblical ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood.’ (87)

Again, it is apparent traditional Christians believe that gender norms, like strength and being a breadwinner or raising children, are qualities which are inherent to a person’s nature, and only described in scripture, not dictated by social constructions. Peggy serves this narrative because she and her house fall apart until Ed arrives to correct everything. Yet, she is not a completely terrible mother.

To her credit, Peggy Hodgson is absolutely willing to sacrifice herself in the way of anything that attacks her children, regardless of the danger to herself. However, being a single mother means she cannot control her children or be there for them as easily as she might if there was a father. When Janet gets a fever and stays home, Peggy still must go to work instead of caring for her daughter. Again, her single motherhood exposes her children to danger, because Janet is attacked while she is alone. Peggy’s inability to be a good mother leaves her children defenseless, and her home decrepit.

**Katherine in The Witch**

In the beginning of The Witch, Katherine shows strict devotion. She joins her husband in blessing their new land and looked to her faith to comfort and inspire her.
However, after Sam’s disappearance, she confesses to William that she is aware she has been a terrible mother: “My heart has turned to stone. And, since Samuel disappeared, I have such a sad weakness of faith that I cannot shake it. I cannot see Christ’s help as near. I pray and pray but I cannot. . .” Without the spiritual strength she once had, the text purports that Katherine is open to other self-indulgences. She dies before she can correct herself because she cannot overcome her paranoia and pain. Moreover, Katherine still cannot convince William that something more than a wolf snatched her child. Despite inference that she is weak for not pushing her instincts enough, Connell and Messerschmidt indicate another reason why she might have failed, per the fundamentalist interpretation, “To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women” (844). In other words, the patriarchal system which dismisses women puts Katherine, who is wrought with grief stemming from trauma, at an automatic disadvantage. To compare to a more modern and equitable viewpoint, a mother who has lost a child would be offered endless support and assistance without portraying her grieving period as an injurious event for the family’s safety.

Instead, The Witch’s plot drives home the full consequences of her “mistake.” When she cannot persuade William about the Witch, she instead focuses on her suspicion towards Thomasin, and eventually she succumbs. She cannot conceptualize how else her children would be dying. Stephens’ work on witchcraft helps interpret her suspicions: “[T]ypically, [Christianity] preyed on its own numbers in a search for internal subversion already hints that the need to identify witches was the symptom of an awareness that, in some sense, one’s religion was not ‘working’” (99). In other words, Katherine loses her faith in Jesus, then in her daughter, because failure of faith is how Christianity explains
tragic events like a baby’s death. Though her instincts are correct, she fails her family by not showing them proof of supernatural evil.

In The Witch, Katherine does not focus on being a caregiver for her children who are still alive. She blames Thomasin for Sam’s disappearance, causing a rift between the two. She would rather grieve and pray than watch her kids or help on the farm. During a barren harvest, this is an especially terrible mentality. She refuses to put her grief behind her children’s needs to focus on how she might help them, leaving the children to sort out this crisis on their own and for her unskilled husband to ineffectively provide for their family. Kaplan explains that, “An analysis of the psychoanalytic barriers to ‘seeing’ the Mother needs to be accompanied by an analysis of cultural myths that define the Good Mother as absent, and the Bad Mother as present but resisting” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 85). To apply Kaplan’s insights, Katherine is a Bad Mother because she is absent mentally but persists in resisting the patriarchal order. Furthermore, the twins are susceptible to Satanic influence by cavorting with Black Phillip. Katherine is also quick to anger. Therefore, her children cannot count on her for stability; this minimizes her authority. Once her authority is minimized, she stops being a model for the children to follow. Her inadequate motherhood leaves her family alone in a time of need, and one less obstacle for the witch to deal with before they are destroyed. The film’s implication is that Katherine should have abandoned her own problems, at least temporarily, to help foster her family through a crisis. Similarly, the text insinuates that she should have focused her energies on being a good wife, rather than fostering in her grief.

In the beginning, Katherine supports her husband through their exile and in building a new home in the wilderness. However, Katherine completely changes after
Samuel dies. She grieves unceasingly for her lost baby, unable to get out of bed and help raise her children. Her constant praying shows devotion, but that she doesn’t quit indicates a too-strong attachment for her lost boy, especially since she should care for four other children.

*Figure 9:* Katherine's grief is amplified when Caleb dies; as with Sam, her grief overwhelms her good sense. Here, she climbs into Caleb's grave to hold him. She would rather enter death's symbolic realm, a grave, than leave her dead child (*The Witch*).

William tries to get her to let go when he reminds her that Sam is the only baby they have lost, in a time when infant mortality was terrifyingly high; however, this does not console Katherine. In her analysis of *Stella Dallas*, Kaplan discusses the kind of problematic motherhood Katherine practices:

...Stella violates the patriarchal myth of the self-abnegating Mother, who is supposed to be completely devoted and nurturing but not satisfy any of her needs through the relationship with her child. She is somehow supposed to keep herself apart while giving everything to the child; she is certainly not
supposed to prefer the child to the husband, since this kind of bonding threatens patriarchy ("Case of the Missing Mother" 84).

In other words, patriarchy mandates that Katherine should have focused her happiness on the living children, and moved on. This view can be interpreted as a grim, overly pragmatic sentiment, denying the mother any emotional space to grieve. Furthermore, Kaplan shows the detriment to the father because of a mother’s too-strong attachment. It is a terrible balancing act, probably an impossible one after just having lost a child. As a result of her emotional stressors, she becomes a shrew; she chides, disagrees with, and ignores William. To make matters worse, she is aware that she is a detriment to her husband. She admits, “I never wished to be a shrew to thee. I have become as Job’s wife, I know it...” In other words, Katherine acknowledges that she is culpable in their marriage’s failure, and that it is negatively impacting their children and the situation. What to take from this moment in the movie is the responsibility expected, without question, of the wife, namely to be a dutiful and agreeable wife. Because she spends so much time and energy belittling William, they both are too focused on each other to strengthen themselves against the true threat. Her attack on Thomasin is not unexpected, considering that her animosity for her daughter had gone mostly unchecked by William or herself. Her paranoia grows to affect her, almost like possession.

There are two abject figures in *The Witch*: Katherine who is not explicitly possessed but undergoes very similar changes, and the Witch in the Woods. The night before the climax, Katherine is approached by her dead children and asked to see a book. Shortly after, she sits in a chair while a crow pecks at her exposed breast. Jason Anderson of *Cinema Scope* discusses the underlying terror about the women in *The Witch:*
“...[P]erhaps the most sophisticated aspect of Eggers’ film is the relative subtlety with which it highlights the anxieties about women, sexuality, and power that fuel such tales of witches and demons. While it’s hardly the only recent horror film to venture into this infernal terrain… The Witch stands out as both the most disciplined and the most disturbing.” The scene with the crow exemplifies the subtlety that Anderson discusses.

What if women become witches, and nurture monsters?

*Figure 10*: Katherine "breastfeeds" the witch’s familiar, a crow. This is an abject version of an intimate motherhood ritual, and the result of her welcoming the ghosts of her dead sons—that is to say, inviting death into her home (*The Witch*).

In this scene, Katherine shares her breast milk, which becomes bloodied by the crow’s pecking, with a demon familiar. It is not sexual copulation with a demon, which is the fear that Stephens examines in *Demon Lover*, but Katherine is sharing her body, in an intimate motherly experience. The scene is a subversion of the breastfeeding ritual, and subverting rituals is a concern of Butler’s, “The ‘moment’ in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future
invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance” (*Excitable Speech* 3). To apply Butler’s idea, though the scene is indeed a subversion, it is still only a product of dominant discourse, in this case fundamentalist patriarchy. Katherine may have gone mad with grief, but the inferred conclusion is that if she had steeled herself against these forces, she would not have become someone her family didn’t recognize.

The Witch in the Woods epitomizes the abject as a naked, old woman who cackles insanely. Director Robert Eggers repeatedly pauses the film to emphasize certain images in the film, and the witch’s naked, elderly body is one of those images. Elderly women are embodiments of abjection because they represent death, no longer the life-giving force a woman is meant to be, but now unable to bear children. Moreover, the Witch is within a different kind of patriarchy, a reversal of the fundamentalist patriarchy, with Satan at its head. Karlsen discusses the kind of woman who chose to became a witch, in the Early Modern understanding:

> Created intellectually, morally, and physically weaker than men, the argument continued, women were subject to deeper affections and passions, harbored more uncontrollable appetites, and were more susceptible to deception. Unwilling to accept their deficiencies and unable to satisfy their inordinate desires, they more readily turned to Satan to fulfill their needs and to provide them with the power to avenge themselves on those in more fortunate positions. (155)

Indeed, this witch uses children to satisfy her desire for supernatural powers and lust. This makes the character an archaic mother figure.
The Witch’s early introduction marks the film as religious horror, making the issue of evil the prime concern and source of tension. That her first appearance is stealing and killing a young baby boy, the embodiment of the patriarchy’s future, is a direct threat to the patriarchy. Without being seen and in a split second, the Witch infiltrates the homestead, steals the personification of innocence and the future (a male one, no less) and murders him coldly and ritualistically. The resulting fear, distress, and suspicion is understandable for modern audiences if they were considering the situation from the characters’ viewpoints. Butler comments on the effect these ‘other characters’ have within the discourse on gender and power. She says, “So, it is not as if the unthinkable, the unlivable, the unintelligible has no discursive life; it does have one. It just lives within discourse as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure for something that is not yet made real” (qtd. in Meijer and Prins, 281, emphasis original). In this quote, Butler contributes to the consideration that these witch figures are “uninterrogated”; truly none of them are ever asked directly about their decision to join Satan. For the patriarchy’s purposes, there is no need for such questions, because evil is inherent in these women. The understanding is that their innate evil nature cannot be overcome, and is the cause of their fall. In this view, they do not need to be interrogated. Thomasin is the personification of this idea. For the parents, as the last one to see Sam alive, Thomasin would be responsible for his death. Her parents did question her, but to no satisfaction since William discounts the Witch’s existence. Later in the film, her being at the center of Caleb’s disappearance, death, and then William and the twins’ further supports her apparent deception. Only the audience knows the Witch’s involvement, and the effect her anonymity has on the family’s deterioration makes her even more
terrifying, and only further rationalizes the fundamentalist fear. Indeed, that is a witch’s mythic, literary function, astutely noted by Roger Clarke of *Sight and Sound*: “It’s a film about evil. Those settlers didn’t come over and find the devil among the pagans, the film seems to say. They brought the very devil with them.”

Later in the film when she’s seducing young Caleb, her hand is monstrously disfigured, a strong contrast to the rest of her beautiful appearance. Creed says, “[T]he archaic mother-- constructed as a negative force-- is represented in her phantasmagoric aspects in many horror texts…” (57). To put another way, the Witch’s ability to transform into a beautiful woman gives another layer to the threat she personifies for the patriarchy. Rather than men using women for their own ends, she uses Caleb in exactly that way. Furthermore, the method of killing him strongly resembles the archaic mother who dwells in abjection. Caleb was poisoned with an apple stuck in his mouth. The strong oral imagery here connects to Kristeva’s thoughts on the abject being found in rotten food: “When food appears as a polluting object, it does so as oral object only to the extent that orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body. Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human” (75). The only contact viewers see the Witch have with Caleb is a hungry kiss, but she had him in her possession for hours. The image of her consuming Caleb through the kiss reveals her intentions; he is sexually consumed.
Later in the film, the twins are killed after she eats a goat, so in a way they are dessert.\textsuperscript{8}

The recurring pattern of the connection between food and death that the Witch is involved with echoes the fear about a nourishing, pre-patriarchal archaic mother who does not know when to stop consuming, threatening the boundary between herself and the children she looks to consume. Stephens has a relevant point about the origin and role of the infanticidal witch:

[Contemporary w]itchcraft theorists did not invent the infanticidal witch; they adopted her from the folk culture of their illiterate contemporaries. As elsewhere in witchcraft theory, however, there is more to the infanticidal witch than meets the eye. On her shoulders fell the task of defending the sacramental efficacy of baptism and, by extension, the goodness and

\textsuperscript{8} Witches who consume or eat children is a theme found in many fairy tales, such as Hansel and Gretel. Indeed, Jackson draws many connections between twenty-first century horror films and fairy tales in her work, as I will show in the next chapter. There is ample opportunity for The Witch to be examined as a modern fairy tale. I have not elected to use that term, but I argue it is a cautionary myth, like many children’s fairy tales.
providence of God. Her crimes were essential to understanding why the
innocent suffer and die, despite the protective powers of the sacraments, in a
world ruled by a loving God. (241)

In this quote, Stephens points out how witches were used to justify ritualistic practices,
like baptism. To put another way, these cleansing rituals were used to fight the fear of
hell after death for innocent babies while supplying an answer to the issue of original sin.

In addition, Stephens acknowledges the laymen’s contribution to witchcraft lore. This
supports Butler’s view of the abject in the context of performativity. Acknowledging the
origins of such discourse contributes to the study of how ontology is created in relation to
gender, as Butler argues:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a
highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the
appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of
gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive
appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for
those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police
the social appearance of gender (Gender Trouble 33).

In other words, Butler advocates the deconstruction of gender norms to re-evaluate how
they were made. Such considerations for mythic figures like the witch uncover the
dichotomy set by a fundamentalist patriarchy. Robert Eggers touches on this notion as
well when he discusses his movie, explaining how he was focused on giving audiences
the most authentically historical experience he could. He stated he wanted to resurrect
that fear of witches and bring it to modern audiences: “I wanted this film to be like a
nightmare from the past, like a Puritan’s nightmare that you could upload into the mind’s eye,” says Eggers in an interview for the British Film Institute (Bitel). Such an overused, often comic figure does not immediately lend itself to the category of ‘most fearful.’ Nonetheless, Eggers wanted the witch’s full potential to terrify, to come to life, an exercise in realizing religious fear for a secularized, modern audience. To explain his reasoning, in an interview for Filmmaker Magazine, he argues:

...[W]hether she exists or not, in a time period and a culture where they believe in [witches] flying on broomsticks as a metaphysical truth, then that shit’s real. When your kid dies and your crops don’t work and you can blame it on a witch, that witch is real to you. That was one of the most interesting things about the research we did — we know that witches don’t exist, and we’ve been taught about the horrors of persecuting innocent people. But, aside from the extreme intelligentsia, they did believe that the little lady down the lane was a Brothers Grimm witch who was cutting up children. (qtd. in Carolan)

In other words, Eggers wanted his audience to recognize the impact that fear could bring for the common people about someone whom they believed, regardless of proof, could harm them in ways they couldn’t see. Eggers’ work still speaks to a common fear: “...I think that the thing that is speaking the most for me is how the shadows of the past in the repression of feminine power and fear of feminine power and the dark feminine in the male-dominated society in the early modern period, how – even though that is a thing of the past – those shadows still exist today.” In short, feminine power outside of constricted
norms are still a point of concern for religious patriarchies, and witch figures continue to act as threatening embodies of their lack of control over such women.

**Angela Rance in The Exorcist**

Angela Rance in *The Exorcist* has a clear loyalty for the Catholic church; her first appearance shows her peacefully and attentively observing Mass. However, a mother must also enforce her children’s religiosity, and one member of the Rance family is absent: Kat, the oldest daughter. When Kat finds out about her mother’s suspicion that a demon is in the house, Kat mocks her, telling Tomas “That’s hysterical,” and that her mother’s apparent paranoia is very “embarrassing.” Rather than rebuking her daughter and sharing her experiences with the demon Pazuzu as Regan MacNeil, Angela lets Kat keep her misguided secular beliefs. Had Angela been honest with her daughters—testifying, to put it in more religious terms—Kat wouldn’t have interfered with Casey’s exorcism by calling the police later in the series because she would have known what was at stake. This also contributes to Angela’s failure to persuade others about the demonic threat. When Angela first comes to Father Tomas about the demon, she can’t explain herself better than just having a feeling.

*Father Tomas*: Angela, demons aren’t real. They are an invention to explain things like addiction or mental illness. There are no monsters or creatures. Demons are metaphors.

*Angela*: Do you think I don't know that? Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to sit here and sound like this? But there is a presence. I feel it. I'm not even going to try to convince you to believe me.
Of course, audiences know that Angela had more than just a feeling, and she could have better convinced Tomas if she had been honest about her past, which would have made everyone more prepared for the full possession. In *The Exorcist*, Angela reveals that her life with her family was built on a lie because she was using a false identity with them. She didn’t want them to know about her demonic possession as a child, and she also hid her grandchildren from her mother, Chris. She tells Father Tomas, “I reinvented myself, but it didn't matter. No matter what I did. I chose Angela. Angel. Like a name would protect me. Then I dreamed I could have a life, a chance. It didn't matter. It wasn't done with me.” In her confession, she admits that she lied to her family for self-preservation. While her experience was certainly traumatic, that she lied to her family and the priests meant they didn’t have all the information to effectively fight Pazuzu (never mind the other issue of mistrust after being lied to for so long). So, Angela allowed Casey to fall further into the possession, choosing to maintain her false identity at her daughter’s expense. A moral mother would not put her daughter at risk for herself, and Angela must redeem herself later in the series, or make a similar mistake.

There is a hint that Angela was not excited to become a mother, at least in the beginning. She had an abortion before her daughters were born, contrary to fundamentalist ideals, as Pazuzu reveals: “She scraped the first one out worried it would come out like her, rotten, filthy, putrid.” Her recurring absences indicate she is still not completely devoted to motherhood. In the first episode, she has to be cajoled into spending time with her family by her colleague, establishing her as a workaholic. She adamantly attaches herself to her work, even though her husband is mentally compromised and her eldest daughter is emotionally and physically crippled. The text
indicates that her absence and inattentiveness leaves Casey open to possession. Kaplan discusses the patriarchal consideration of an absent mother, which helps explain why Angela is later “punished” with demonic infestation:

What has she really done to violate patriarchy’s conception of the Mother?
The clue to answering this question lies in her initial resistance to Mothering, for ‘selfish’ reasons, and her subsequent enthusiastic embracing of Motherhood. The refusal and then the avid assumption of the role are linked from a patriarchal point of view through the same ‘fault,’ namely that [she] is interested in pleasing herself. (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 84, emphasis original)

In short, Angela takes too much pride in her work as a career woman to completely care for her children. Later in the series we learn that she picked that habit up from her mother, whose own absence led to Regan playing on a Ouija board and meeting Pazuzu. Havrilesky discusses the consequence of such an overarching emphasis, whereby “Motherhood has been elevated — or perhaps demoted — to the realm of lifestyle, an all-encompassing identity with demands and expectations that eclipse everything else in a woman’s life…” However, Butler would counter by pointing out that this trend is not new; instead, it is a recurring trend, recycled anew to maintain the patriarchy’s hierarchy. For fundamentalists, Angela is clearly not a woman who privileges her family’s needs above her own. However, by the end of the series’ season, Angela sacrifices herself and allows Pazuzu to possess her so Casey can be spared.
Figure 12: Angela allows Pazuzu to possess her instead of her daughter, Casey. Her sacrifice shows her willingness to fully commit to the Good Mother role the patriarchy demands of mothers (The Exorcist).

While she is its victim, Angela gathers strength to fight Pazuzu for the last time. In the final episode, Angela says, “I'm tired of looking over my shoulder and watching you hurt my family. I'm tired of letting you win! You want me? Come and get me.” Her speech shows that Angela has finally become ready to fully commit to this fight so her family can finally be safe. She relies on her motherhood to inspire her and cleanse her of her fear and weakness. Kaplan discusses the effects of this plot move, “Narratives that do focus on the Mother usually take that focus because she resists her proper place. The work of [this kind of narrative] is to reinscribe the Mother in the position patriarchy desires for her and, in so doing, teach the female audience the dangers of stepping out of the given position” (“The Case of the Missing Mother” 82). Indeed, by the end of the season, Angela has taken a backseat so Henry can resume his place as head of household.

From the beginning, it is clear that Angela’s husband, Henry, is deferential to his wife. A contributing factor to this relationship is his recent brain injury, but even in moments of lucidity, their relationship is plainly a reversal of the traditional patriarchal
standard. A fundamentalist patriarchy warns against this reversed setup, because, in their view, women cannot handle the demands of authority.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Figure 13: In a reversal of patriarchal gender roles, Angela is the head of the Rance household (*The Exorcist*).*

One scene presents the issues with this reversal of gender roles. Once Casey’s possession is confirmed, Henry defers to Angela’s decision about her treatment. However, during Casey’s exorcism, he asks her if she believes that “our actions are answerable to consequences from a higher power”; he poses a deep question, but it is not out of place considering the priests performing an exorcism in the house. It is a change from Henry’s previous, zombie-like demeanor, one that indicates he is thinking more deeply, something Angela should celebrate. However, she brushes him off, fussing over his health instead, and then chides him, saying “You need to be responsible for yourself. It can’t always be on me.” In this comment, she has demoted him to the level of a child, one who can’t even practice self-care. To regain control, but also to get to the point, he then asks if she has ever lied to him. She counters snidely, “I could use a little cooperation, is that too much to ask for?” This is a defensive, distractive technique to hide her secret identity, but it is also a wife lying to her husband when he knows, despite his mental limitations, that she has done something wrong. Still riding the wave of strong emotions, something Henry has not given into despite her belittling, she angrily accuses him of making her
responsible for the possession. Of course, it is ultimately revealed to be her fault, because Pazuzu’s end goal is to completely own her. However, Angela can’t be honest about her culpability, making her culpable for what happens to Casey. She allows her fear and anger to cloud her judgment, and refuses to give up authority to her husband, though he is the one thinking clearly for once. When Angela becomes possessed later in the series, she embodies the abject, which amplifies her anti-patriarchal behaviors.

In *The Exorcist*, both Casey and Angela become possession victims. As Casey’s possession worsens, her body deteriorates, with maggots crawling in her wounds, pus-filled sores covering her skin, and she moves her limbs in impossible directions. She is very young, and conflating her body with death images like the ones described symbolizes the threat to the patriarchy’s future from demonic infestation. When she is possessed, Angela becomes inappropriately sexual, domineering and belittling Henry in the bedroom and in public. When her family figures out she’s been possessed, Pazuzu used Angela to torture and manipulate them into hurting themselves and each other, all while being even more scornful and demeaning than Angela had been before Pazuzu possessed her.
Figure 14: When Pazuzu possesses her, Angela demonstrates the abject, becoming more violent and embracing bloody confrontations (*The Exorcist*).

Summarily, the fundamentalist patriarchy places high expectations on mothers. Anything short of being a perfect devotee, mother, and wife leads to becoming a woman like the witches. In short, a mother oversees her family’s unification, and any misstep can open them to attacks from a demonic infestation. It places a lot of pressure on the mother figures, and, by extension, women in society. However, there is a suggestion from within the same texts that such a high expectation can be met, even in a genre like horror. Owen Gleiberman explains why evangelical audiences are still drawn to these narratives:

They’re not the first audience you think of when you talk about over-the-top horror films, but to evangelical audiences, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* wasn’t just a horror bash — it was practically a documentary. And it opened the floodgates to a rash of exorcist films that have been playing out the primal clash of good and evil ever since. It wasn’t until I saw *The Conjuring*, *though*, with its heavy emphasis on families being torn apart (and coming back together), that I began to realize what the hidden appeal of this genre may be. (“Why We Like Exorcist Movies”)

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To add to Gleiberman, the same trend goes across these texts, but *The Last Exorcism* and *The Witch* does not portray such a happy ending as in *The Conjuring*, *The Conjuring 2*, and *The Exorcist*. For a fundamentalist patriarchy, a mother provides a good basis for the future by raising proper Christians. Furthermore, the unstable daughter figure, also found across the texts, symbolizes the society’s future, or what is at stake when parents do not fulfill their roles.
CHAPTER 3: THE UNSTABLE DAUGHTER

Contrary to the Weak Father and Bad Mother, the Unstable Daughter remains constant across all the texts here. The character’s consistent presence and common characteristics stress the importance of the figure for the fundamentalist patriarchy. Kimberly Jackson’s analysis of modern horror leads her to this conclusion: “As feminist critics… have pointed out, the perceived unruliness of female sexuality is treated particularly harshly in the horror genre. As such, pubescent young women appear in horror as the largest threat to the symbolic order and therefore undergo the greatest punishments when they fail to conform to certain acceptable roles” (36). Since they are the largest threat, special effort must be made to teach them their roles in society. Butler touches on this when she discusses gender construction:

Construction... is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. (Bodies that Matter 10)

Butler tackles several things in this section. First, she also notices the reiteration of gender norms for the subjects who are least likely to ascribe to them. The texts’ treatment
of the daughter figures exemplifies this technique. Second, Butler is criticizing the essentialist take on gender, as I have previously covered. For the daughters, fundamentalists use more fear of the demonic to herd them to their “rightful” and “true” role. An example is when the young women are disobedient to their parents. The resulting disharmony is temporary, until the girls correct themselves and the household becomes peaceful. The characters’ subsequent pleasure in the new, peaceful environment indicates her passivity was the goal all along. Finally, Butler allows for the possibility of subversion, something she usually does not emphasize. Agency is a contentious topic for Butler, because she theorizes that social influence dictates gender norms from even before one is born. This leaves few opportunities for rebellion. As young members of society who are typically rebellious (as they have less to gain as a woman in a fundamentalist patriarchy), the teenage daughters have the greatest hope of changing the social schema. However, as each text shows, they are better off staying within patriarchal limits. It is important for the daughter to learn this lesson so the fundamentalist patriarchy can extend into the future.

Her youth represents the future, and due to this, the texts make her the target of satanic forces. Her youth is a promise, but also a threat of what could happen to society if she uses it for norms outside the fundamentalist patriarchy. For example, in four of the five selected pieces, the daughter is the possession victim so she can illustrate the “wrong” potential she embodies. As children and youths are clear symbols of the future, the threat to the character implies that losing these young women to supernatural evil endangers future patriarchal society. For this reason, pressure is put on the daughters to be pure. The most common interpretation of purity is virginity, but texts advocate that
maintaining her soul’s purity is also a priority. They are groomed to be future mothers and wives. The fear is that the daughter will not completely embrace the prescribed lifestyle model set by the patriarchy. To fundamentalists, her failings will provide another weak spot for evil. Julie Ann, advocate for spiritual abuse victims, elaborates on this fear:

If adult daughters are not sold on the concept of first being comfortable at being stay-at-home daughters, and then stay-at-home moms, the authoritarian position of the Patriarch, and thus, the entire Movement, is diminished. Any diminishing of their role as Patriarch by a daughter challenging or questioning them would be looked at as disobedience and sin and divisive, just as in spiritual abuse patterns, any questioning of a pastor’s authority would be labeled as divisive.

For an unstable daughter to recover from any indiscretions and fit within the patriarchal model, she must embody the qualities of a good mother and wife, including being a good daughter, sister, virgin, and faithful devotee.

For younger women, their lifestyles choices indicate their potential for carrying on the patriarchal traditions. These texts are especially concerned with daughters who are not obedient or grateful to her parents. The bad daughter figure commonly flouts discipline and authority and is disrespectful and ungrateful. When they start making the wrong choices, the best procedure is to enforce more control, a job ideally given to the father, as discussed in Chapter 1. As future wives, daughters should be obedient. The disobedient daughters only exacerbate the current crises by compromising a family’s unity and safety. In the previous chapter, I covered the consequences of a disobedient wife, and daughters should avoid this quality even more so, as they are doubly
subordinate as children. Obedience also works as a diagnostic tool. When a normally easygoing girl flouts patriarchal control, authorities can justifiably jump in and correct the poor behavior. Jackson says, “Our cultural ambivalence toward the child lends itself both to idealized representations of children and childhood and also to terrifying ones…” (131). The extreme switch from good little girl to demonic child represent the extreme possibilities of the culture’s future. Moreover, demons are blamed for the corruption to begin with, so any bad behavior is easily excused, so long as she corrects herself. She is not only correcting herself for her parents’ peace of mind, but also to exemplify good behavior for her siblings.

As covered in earlier chapters, the biggest influence on the children in these pieces is the company and reliability of the parents. Elder daughters in particular are the bridge between adulthood and childhood, and the parents and other siblings. Missing or distracted parents give the eldest daughter opportunities to show how she would be an exceptional parent. Babysitting duties fall to the elder daughter in The Conjuring, The Conjuring 2, and The Witch. The parents can rely on a well-behaved elder daughter to care for her siblings. However, the texts make sure to point out that there is also the possibility that the daughter will fail in her role as a caregiver to younger siblings.

As a future mother, it is important that the eldest daughter can correctly assess the younger children’s needs, be a reliable babysitter, and adopt the ever-patient, self-sacrificing demeanor that an ideal mother would. Any missteps in following her established path put her charges and herself in danger. If a daughter figure attacks her siblings, whether verbally or physically, it is apparent she would be a deficient caregiver. Attacks can be verbal or physical, but the texts frame each sibling conflict as a mistake
on the daughter’s part. For instance, the elder daughters in *The Conjuring 2* and *The Witch* incite fights with younger siblings when they are supposed to be taking care of them. While sibling bickering is conventional enough, both daughters take the conflicts far beyond common bickering, as I will show. The texts frame these moments as diversions from prescribed paths. Future mothers, which is who the daughters are groomed to become, should not lose their tempers. These failings cause mistrust to grow between siblings, which the demonic forces use to attack the family. Inappropriate sexuality is another symptom of an unstable daughter.

Teenage daughters are contested sites of control for the patriarchy because they are at the crossroads of blamelessness and accountability. That is, they are innocent young girls maturing into women who are increasingly exposed to sinfulness. The patriarchy’s concern is that they may choose to adopt this sinfulness, discarding traditional views of sexuality in favor of more unconventional practices. In other words, teenage girls could thwart the patriarchally prescribed plan of using sex only to procreate, preferring instead to be promiscuous. The fear surrounding the young temptress or sexually deviant teen daughter encourages tighter restrictions by the parents; as covered in the Weak Father chapter, a dad who does not control his daughter’s sexuality is not fulfilling his gender role. The common horror trope is that a virgin can be saved, but a promiscuous girl will be killed. Interestingly, the texts for my project do not portray the girls as promiscuous. Only one of the daughters, Kat Rance from *The Exorcist*, is inappropriately sexual, since, to fundamentalists, homosexuality falls into the area of sexual deviance. However, the sexual taboo is only briefly breached, and the relationship is not consummated. In the texts, possession is far more likely to corrupt modest virgins.
The two possessed girls who turn inappropriately sexual are Casey from *The Exorcist* and Nell in *The Last Exorcism*. Complementary to the possessed mothers, female possession victims also expose themselves immodestly because indecency is how the demon uses her body to break down authority. Until these girls become possessed, they are modest, innocent virgins, showing no desire for inappropriate sexuality or improper relations. Like the disobedient daughter, the demon is blamed for any transgression, and Casey and Nell return to fundamentalist modesty after the demon is exorcised. The good daughter should still take pains to practice modesty, which *The Witch* touches on, as I will show. Putting the onus on the demons is another version of the essentialist argument. Without corruptive influences like demons, the daughters are good virgins with, presumably, no interest in sex. Butler challenges the social construction of “girls,” exposing the history behind gender norms:

To the extent that the naming of the ‘girl’ is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain ‘girling’ is compelled, the term, or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a ‘girl’, however, who is compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment (*Bodies That Matter* 232).

In the description of how gender norms are formed, Butler shows how “girling” is instituted in body as well as mind. For my purposes, the most important part of the quote
is the last sentence, which emphasizes the role of institutions in forming femininity for women. Undoubtedly, the church has proven to be a crucial role for girls’ identity forming, or at least the texts have perpetuated this idea.

The final quality of a good daughter is that she must be a faithful adherent, like her parents. Hartog says, “Ideally the Christian family is the place where each new generation of the people of God are brought forth, taught the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and nurtured in the totality of their being, physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually.” The unstable daughter has religious influences from both parents, but also two ways of failing. If the daughter doubts the evil, like an irreligious father, or lets the demon in, like an incompetent mother, she intensifies the crisis. The former is clearly seen in The Exorcist, but the latter needs more explanation. To be clear, she is not as culpable for making everyone aware of the evil like the mother figure. The mother’s inability to warn or her willingness to ignore the danger leaves the metaphorical door open for the demon to invade. The daughters in The Conjuring, The Conjuring 2, The Witch, and The Exorcist invite the demonic forces.

For the daughters to help keep the evil influences out of the home, they must be wary of encountering the evil. One cannot avoid what one does not recognize, so she must believe in the supernatural evil as well. The Conjuring, The Conjuring 2, and The Exorcist invite the evil in via toys. In the horror genre, Ouija boards are common venues for a demon to infest the house. This is treated as a grievous error. Perhaps, the most infamous example is the original Exorcist movie. Regan contacts a spirit named Captain Howdy through a Ouija board that her mother lets her play with. The TV reboot

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9 Jackson reviews exposure to trauma via technology (115), a similar conversation. However, in these texts, the toys invite a more childish and therefore sinister method for evil to infiltrate the families.
continues this line of blame, treating Regan’s interactions with the board as Pazuzu’s method of infiltration. *The Conjuring 2* daughters also play with a spirit board, and both movies in the franchise involve a sinister music box. Clearly, these girls who use the toys are opening themselves up to the spirit world without proper guidance. Fundamentalism pushes traditional methods of spiritual outreach, like prayer. These sanctioned approaches are already controlled by a patriarchal system, and instituting the fear of the demonic herds young girls back to Christianity. However, to intentionally summon a demon is a worse sin than interacting with demonic toys. This is how *The Witch*’s Thomasin invites the demonic, so it is the most blatant display of blasphemy from a daughter figure. How these girls interact with evil reveals fundamentalist anxieties over their capability to disturb the patriarchal order.

Shapiro recognizes the logic of these texts, and indicates what is at stake in this discourse:

Under the banner of “family values,” a discursive campaign, in the form of a diverse set of closely associated conservative reactions, is being waged. At stake is control over contemporary national culture and the consciousness of succeeding generations… The aim, specifically, is to install a commitment to the moral and political importance of the traditional family, a regulative ideal that is represented as both contractual and natural: It is centered in a legally and religiously sanctioned marriage; it is heterosexual; it is child-oriented; and, especially in recent decade, it is threatened by non-’family friendly’ media representations of extrafamilial attachments, sexualities, and life styles. (1)
Shapiro’s conclusion is a reminder of the texts’ end goal. The texts reiterate that the daughters who are unstable, who stray from the prescribed patriarchal norms which are reinforced by fundamentalist fear, must be corrected for the good of the society. Daughters must be good to their parents, their siblings, and maintain their virginity and faith.

**Nell Sweetzer in *The Last Exorcism***

For Nell in *The Last Exorcism*, her mother’s death and subsequent alienation set back her emotional and social development, heightening her reliance on her father and brother. Nell expresses concern about her brother’s emotional state after their mother’s death, but otherwise is offered no chances to be a caregiver. Nell’s shortcomings in *The Last Exorcism* are too apparent. One of the first incidents Cotton and the crew witness is a possessed Nell drowning a baby doll in the bathtub. Though it is only a caricature of a real baby, the demon supernaturally adds baby cries to draw in the observers. The transparent connotation is that Nell, left to her own devices, would be responsible for the death of the future generation, which parallels with the fact she is literally used as a doorway to bring a demon to life. Her naiveté contributes to her vulnerability.

In the beginning, it is clear Nell is clueless about how to be around men she is not related to, taking Cotton’s compliments about her beauty in an overly saccharine manner. Like Thomasin, she seems oblivious to her body and how her new adulthood can affect men. She sits with her hands and knees clasped together, unconsciously restraining herself so she doesn’t touch anyone except her father. When she is possessed, she completely switches from virginal to suggestive.
She able to effortlessly go into splits and twists like a skilled contortionist, showing how far apart her legs can go; she also propositions Cotton. The sudden outburst of sexuality from previously pure Nell reflects Kaplan’ observation about violent sexuality within the family sphere: “That the confrontation between the discourses of released female sexuality and of the nuclear family had to be so violent suggests the enormous psychic (unconscious) tension in contemporary culture because of all the challenges to dominant 1960s sexual discourses that feminists made” (“Sex, Work, and Motherhood” 416). In other words, Nell’s exposed sexuality represents a cultural tension at large between fundamentalist regulations for young, female sexuality and the comparatively freeing discourse from the feminist movement. In relation to this, the film frames Nell’s inappropriateness as the result of a lack of motherly presence. Her sexual advances toward Cotton, instead of showing an inappropriate knowledge for someone so young, reveals her lack of sexual education, likely from the absence of her mother.

Her mother’s absence also confuses Nell about how women should treat each other. When camerawoman Iris acts motherly toward Nell, providing new boots, Nell is again saccharinely thankful. However, later in the hotel when she’s in the demon’s grip,
she licks Iris suggestively and pulls her onto the bed. This indicates misrecognition of platonic care for romantic feelings. Nell’s possession argues more for the importance of a maternal presence as protection from evil forces. Also, her untimely pregnancy shows how, unprotected, a teen girl’s sexuality can be a force for evil just as much as for good. In his analysis of why evangelicals flock to horror movies, Gleiberman says, “The Devil is here because, of course, he never left, and never will.” In other words, fundamentalists find confirmation for their beliefs in these films. Again, these texts are an illustration of how families should endeavor to preserve the future, because the satanic forces are ready to corrupt future generations.

Religious

*The Last Exorcism* is the only text in this selection intentionally plays on skepticism to build tension. In Gleiberman’s review for *Entertainment Weekly*, he says:

[The movie] is a nightmare vision of the rise of Christian fundamentalism. It’s about the dark side of piety — the cultish wrath that can emerge out of the high and the mighty. At the center of it all, once again, is a teenage girl’s gnashing madness.... The best thing in *The Last Exorcism* is Ashley Bell’s performance: she knows how to make rage the flip side of innocence. (“The Last Exorcism”)

Of course, Gleiberman keenly identifies that this film is a nightmare for fundamentalists, but, for them, the nightmare is the insistence that Nell’s possession is due to psychosis rather than real demons. For example, Nell in *The Last Exorcism* readily accepts that she is possessed on the diagnosis of her dad. Cotton tries to discuss other options, but she sticks with what her father believes, though she claims that she cannot remember
anything. The film indicates that her innocence is what is at stake, and the demon plays off this fear. The filmmakers use a combination of mock documentary style and the understanding of the tension between the scientific and the religious viewpoints. Modern American politics plays this tension out in several debates, such as evolutionary theory in public schools or the debate about the moment of conception. Playing on this social strain, *The Last Exorcism* spends most of the film pulling audiences in either direction, until it finally confirms the fundamentalist viewpoint. For every fantastical (but not overtly supernatural) occurrence, Cotton and his crew provide a logical, medical explanation for how it could have happened. Since audiences are given the most insight into Cotton’s viewpoint, they are more likely to side with him. The Black Mass and demonic birth in the finale reveal how erroneous his suppositions were, and how his secular proclivity doomed Nell.

**Andrea Perron in *The Conjuring***

In *The Conjuring*, Andrea Perron, the eldest, exemplifies the ungrateful, disrespectful, bad daughter. When the Perrons first show up at the farmhouse, Andrea doesn’t disguise how upset she is, sarcastically asking, “Do I get to pick my own room or do I have no choice in that either?” She clearly does not support their move to the country, though it’s important to her parents and probably a better living situation. Furthermore, she speaks derisively to her mother, while she clearly respects her father more, and toes the line with her behavior with him when he’s around. These are relatively small issues, compared to extreme examples found in other texts. However, that the film takes time to frame Andrea’s rebellion means her impact is worth noting. Shelley Stamp

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10 See footnote about mockumentary style in Chapter 1.
studies females in puberty in her article, “Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty.” She notes the discernable trend in the representation of young girls in horror: “What is striking about these films is not just the familial context in which the horror takes place, but the familial nature of the horror depicted: perverse social relations breed monstrosity” (330). Again, the patriarchy dictates that daughters must accept a subservient role, or the hierarchy is disturbed; in Stamp’s phrasing, “social relations breed monstrosity.” Because of this, Andrea must be corrected. Indeed, she is the first Perron daughter Bathsheba directly attacks. Once things escalate to indisputably supernatural danger, Andrea softens toward her mother, correcting her disrespectful attitude and valuing her family’s harmony over her frustration. After she becomes more obedient and pleasant to her parents, Andrea is given little screen time. She fades into the background, presumably to watch her sisters while her parents handle the supernatural crisis. Her absence demonstrates that her role, rather one-dimensional, was to learn to obey, therefore indicating that this is a patriarchy's prime concern when it comes to socializing young women.

Margaret and Janet Hodgson in The Conjuring 2

The Hodgsons in The Conjuring 2 had a missing father figure, so the daughters, Margaret and Janet are helping their mother raise their brothers. Margaret checks on her siblings after school, showing interest in them while her mother is arguing with others or being too angry to be attentive to her children. Since Margaret also cares for her younger siblings while her mother fights the demonic attacks, demonstrating that she would be a good caregiver. Though she keeps an eye on their well-being, she isn’t enough protection against Valak. The point is to show how much parents rely on elder daughters to help
with younger siblings, and that being a trustworthy daughter is a solid foundation for becoming a future mother.

Interestingly, Janet, the possession victim in this text, does not become oversexualized, unlike the other possession victims who are daughters. She has not yet reached puberty, which may be the reason. Her lack of sexuality emphasizes her innocence, which makes her possible death even more heart wrenching. Again, the text frames children as the innocent sufferers for mistakes in a patriarchal family setup.

Jackson makes a similar conclusion:

> In the realm of fairy tales, little children often suffer violence at the hands of parental figures, whether or not attempts on their lives are successful, and in mythic narratives, it is particularly young, virginal women who must suffer at the hands of gods and monsters, delivered oftentimes by their own parents. Yet again, these sacrifices tend to be transformative… The question becomes, what sociocultural transformation do the violent sacrifices in these films portend? (15)

In short, Jackson illustrates the parents’ liability for the daughters’ suffering, of which Janet is an example. Moreover, Jackson indicate the transformations that such incidents inspire; in the case of *The Conjuring 2*, Janet turns to Ed’s Christian advice to find peace.

The Hodgsons are not religious, and the Warrens do their best to pass on their beliefs without becoming overbearing. Janet is the Hodgson who comes closest to converting after the possession. She takes Ed’s cross and promises to pass it on. Likewise, Margaret, though she is not explicitly religious, easily accepts a supernatural explanation for her sister’s condition, despite the growing number of skeptics. At one
point, Janet notices something sinister in the kitchen. Rather than eschew Janet’s fear and siding with the skeptics, Margaret asks her to explain what she sees and helps her sister steel against the haunting. This support maintains their bond and further resists the spirit.

However, Janet and Margaret may be the cause of the demonic infestations because they use a spirit board, a cheap version of the Ouija board, to ask about their missing father. When their mother finds it, she angrily accuses the girls of scaring themselves, rather than treating it as an ordinary piece of cardboard.

That same night, the supernatural attacks begin. While the rest of the plot does not center around the board, the argument scene between the girls and Peggy is undeniably linked to the haunting.

**Thomasin in The Witch**

As I covered previously, Thomasin is typically a dependable helper to her parents. However, when they turn on her and accuse her of being a witch, she fights back. Her father confronts her after Caleb dies. Denying the allegations, Thomasin loses her patience, a replay of her earlier “sinful” outburst with Mercy, and reveals her bad opinion
of her father, pointing out his shortcomings and how it has negatively impacted them all:

_Thomasin:_ You want me to speak truth?... You took of mother’s cup and let her rail at me. Is that truth?

_William:_ Peace thee.

_Thomasin:_ I will not.

_William:_ I am thy father!

_Thomasin:_ You are a hypocrite!... You took Caleb to The Wood and let me take the blame of that too. You confessed not till it was too late. Is that truth? You let Mother be as thy master! You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! Is that truth enough?... Thou canst do nothing save cut wood!

Here Thomasin lists William’s faults, despite his explicit call for silence and obedience, subsequently showing that he is unable to manage his daughter. She uses his weakness to rail against him and break down his authority. Here was where Thomasin should have practiced self-control and obedience. Rather than push aside her hurt pride and focus on helping her family, which would have displayed self-sacrifice, she prioritizes self-justification and exposing all the wrongs committed against her. Her reaction simply solidifies her proclivity for insubordination, a dangerous quality to have during witch-hunting times. Karlsen outlines the origin of a witch’s danger, per contemporary fundamentalist thought, “In sum, women became witches because they were born female, not male, because they were dissatisfied with their natural inadequacies and limitations, and because they wanted revenge and retribution badly enough to sell their souls for it” (156). To apply it to the text, Thomasin’s acknowledgement of William’s shortcomings simultaneously displays her self-awareness about her low place in society. In other
words, if her father cannot even recognize his own issues, what authority does he have to accuse her of witchcraft? Her point is valid, but unwelcome in a fundamentalist patriarchy. Moreover, this conversation shows she wants to drag down other family members, conspicuously her parents, rather than unite against the evil forces invading their farm. Their lack of unity allows the Witch and Black Phillip to overtake the family, demonstrating the worst possible result of a daughter’s insubordination. The negative effects of mistreatment trickle down to the other children.

Since Thomasin’s mother is unapproachable and her father is fallible, she is the only dependable person in the family. Thomasin tries to ensure her siblings are behaving and have food, but the lack of appreciation for her efforts only substantiates her eventual choice to become a witch. Early in the film, Sam is kidnapped while under Thomasin’s watch. Though audiences know she would not have had a chance against the Witch in the Woods, her parents still treat her with suspicion. As Adam Nayman observes, “[Sam’s kidnapping is] a devastatingly well-staged moment that both kick-starts the plot and hovers suggestively over the action to come as a multivalent image of guilt, loss, and tragically mislaid responsibility.” In this quote, Nayman lists the fallout of losing a child, repercussions that any person in charge of child care should consider; his observation also provides insight into the responsibility of a good daughter in a patriarchy. Thomasin’s failure is debatable because the Witch took the baby; nevertheless, she is the first target of her parents’ blame.

Thomasin is well-behaved towards her siblings, considering how often the twins test her authority. However, when she does lose her patience, she tries to scare Mercy into obeying her. When Mercy complains, “I could go to the brook before you let the
Witch take Sam” (emphasis mine), Thomasin comes back with a blasphemous lie: “I am that very witch. When I sleep my spirit slips away from my body and dances naked with The Devil. That's how I signed his book... He bade me bring him an unbaptized babe, so I stole Sam, and I gave him to my master. And I'll make any man or thing else vanish I like.” She is cruelly teasing her sister, but in a society where testimony was the only way to spread awareness, Thomasin’s speech carries heavier consequences. Stephens discusses the consequences of testimony in Early Modernity here:

[Contemporary theologian Gianfresco] Pico understood that witch-hunting and witchcraft theory were essentially narrative enterprises: they depended on the multiplication and repetition of stories to make points and create convictions… [T]he reader had to be convinced that the reality of witchcraft was guaranteed by someone's lived experience--- and merely corroborated by the theologian’s expertise in supernatural matters.” (92)

In other words, Thomasin’s declaration takes the jest too far because it can easily be taken seriously; Caleb warns her as much, and the plot confirms it when she does finally fall. Thomasin’s impersonation of the Witch forecasts her readiness to abandon Puritanism, but also scares Mercy into silence. A good future mother would not adopt sinful disguises to threaten a child, or even lose her patience and become susceptible to a child’s teasing. Furthermore, that Thomasin says, “I'll make any man vanish,” indicates her push against the male authority in the society. For a patriarchal adherent, this antagonistic urge indicates her imminent downfall. Once she has declared her opposition to patriarchal authority, she marks herself as a potential insurgent who needs to be controlled. The film is certainly an exaggeration of the potential consequences of this
breach in the patriarchy, but also appropriate for the atmosphere. Moze Halperin describes the real-life application of such a tense environment: “In this film, and in life, ‘evil may be a silly and reductive notion, but the more people translate personal pain and loss into accusing others of it, the more that silly, reductive notion is reified into something that matches the horrific contents of hysterical collective imaginaries.” Thomasin’s lie could have been interpreted as a jest, but, just as in reality, lies that foster misunderstanding, whatever their intention, lead to deadly consequences. Indeed, later in the film, Mercy uses Thomasin’s lie to base her accusation of witchcraft. However, the film makes other hints toward Thomasin’s predilection for evil, particularly her immodesty.

Thomasin is unintentionally sexual and incestuous. She is alone in the wilderness with her family, which leaves no opportunities for her to approach boys immodestly. However, the movie’s treatment of her sexual development shows that she embodies patriarchy’s tension about ‘loose’ teenage girls. Specifically, Thomasin’s sin through a traditional viewpoint is that she’s not self-aware enough to understand how her developing body impacts her younger brother, Caleb.
Figure 17: Despite his protestations, Thomasin holds Caleb close to her bosom. For the audience, this is an uncomfortable moment because they witnessed Caleb staring at his sister's cleavage. The implication is that she should be more aware of her changing body and its effects on her brother (The Witch).

Slate’s David Ehrlich describes the impact Thomasin’s body has on Caleb and what it means for the society they grow up in:

...[T]he wide-eyed actress plays young Thomasin as a girl whose maturing body is as great a fount of evil as the woods outside her house. Oblivious to the lurid looks that her desperate brother casts at the lift of her blouse, Thomasin is nevertheless made to feel as though the devil lurks in her bones just as the witch resides in the forest, and when her father declares that his family ‘will conquer this wilderness,’ it’s clear that his words are spiked with double meaning.

Ehrlich interprets Thomasin’s sexual development as a horror like the Witch in the Wood because, for Caleb, she creates uncertain responses. Encountering puberty is a confusing time for any young person, but for Caleb, his attention to Thomasin is particularly problematic for someone beginning to understand himself, since incest is such a strong taboo. Stamp discusses the sexual threat that teenage girls pose to a fundamentalist
patriarchy with a strong fear of the taboo: “‘Exceptional states’ like menstruation and puberty foster taboo, Freud believes, because they elicit contradictory, yet equally acute sensation of veneration and dread. Poised between natural and supernatural realms, then, the menstruating adolescent girl, occupies a liminal state, an object of both aversion and desire” (334). In other words, Stamp’s analysis supports my interpretation that the text is framing the tension between the two siblings as Thomasin’s fault.

The problem is magnified by Caleb’s move to take up a grown man’s duties; in his future role as a leader, he takes his internal problems with him, which compromises his decision-making and actions. For example, in an effort to keep his sister in the house rather than working for another family, he runs into the woods to find food. Indeed, the Witch seems supernaturally aware of his predilection, using seduction to get to him as opposed to violence or illusions. As Ehrlich put it, Caleb has not conquered his wilderness. In the modern view Caleb is responsible for his own actions; but, in the traditional patriarchal view of women’s sexuality, Thomasin is largely responsible for her brother’s attraction. Specifically, it is her responsibility to maintain her modesty so as not to be a distraction or temptation for men, leaving her blouse open, revealing her cleavage. The film portrays Thomasin’s indiscretion and obliviousness about her impact on her brother as her mistake, one that compromises their relationship and his safety. Based on this logic, Bruinsma prescribes modesty for young women in a sermon called “The Godly Woman.” He says, “...[B]e shamefaced and sober in your adornment…. Dress in such a manner that he will be able to look at you without having to divert his eyes from certain areas of your body.” Bruinsma’s advice is based on the idea that men cannot help themselves from looking at a woman’s exposed parts, as they are biologically
predetermined to do so. Similar rhetoric can be found in modern discussions of rape culture. However, Butler shows that an essentialist argument derails this logic by pointing out the constructionist efforts within masculine discourse about sexuality: “My… emphasis on denaturalization was not so much an opposition to nature as it was an opposition to the invocation of nature as a way of setting necessary limits on gendered life” (qtd. in Meijer and Prins 277). Being aware of efforts found within fundamentalist discourse, like The Witch, aims to meet Butler’s recommendation. Indeed, the text takes this fundamentalist message about young female sexuality to the extreme in the climax.

Thomasin completely rejects notions of female modesty after her family is dead, readily undressing when Black Phillip asks her. This indicates that she was willing to resist binding decorum without much provocation, again an argument for a woman’s natural predilection towards sinfulness. Ehrlich further explains how her sin represents a larger problem:

The girl’s development is left discreet, but her sex is a consistent expression of original sin, and Taylor--Joy’s dizzying performance pushes Thomasin to recognize how she’s refracted through a male gaze and then spurs her to plot her escape from it. Perhaps, The Witch suggests, making women afraid to own their bodies is a sure route toward helping them recognize their power. Ehrlich is right that, in a feminist context, Thomasin’s refutation of constrictive sexuality regulations are empowering. However, to a fundamentalist patriarchy, that she embraces loose sexuality with other witches in the forest is a terrifying acceptance of unnatural compulsions. Thomasin and the other witches who embrace their nude bodies willingly are defying traditional virtue. However, as Butler argues, these women as literary
characters are representations of an ‘other’ as conceptualized by patriarchal fear, rather than inspired from reality. In her interview with Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, she says:

How is it that certain kinds of subjects lay claim to ontology, how is it that they count or qualify as real? In that case, we are talking about the distribution of ontological effects, which is an instrument of power, instrumentalized for purposes of hierarchy and subordination and also for purposes of exclusion and for producing domains of unthinkability. This whole domain of ontology that the good, the conceptually pure, philosopher takes for granted, is profoundly tainted from the start. (280, emphasis original)

To put Butler’s point another way, how do the female monstrous figures, like witches, take on the inherent quality of evil? Butler argues that they were, in a sense, assigned that quality by the dominant gender hierarchy, which supports witchcraft studies at large.

Thomasin abandons Christianity in the face of evil. At the end of The Witch, Thomasin goes to confront the ram, Black Philip, her curiosity aroused by the twins’ claim that they could converse with him. The twins had always danced, chased, and sung with him, but the audience had never seen the ram talk to them, so it was commonly understood to be children’s play. However, Thomasin does not approach him through play. She comes to him on the suspicion that he’s the devil. She says, “Black Phillip, I conjure thee to speak to me. Speak as thou dost speak to Jonas and Mercy. Dost thou understand my English tongue? Answer me.” For fundamentalists, the tie to the demon (probably Satan) is necessary to define a witch, as Stephens explains, “Witches were
imagined as saboteurs or secret agents, and they were discussed to explain why the ideals of Christianity remained unfulfilled… Their interest in demons was inseparable from their theological concern, not an eccentric sideline” (9). Between her magical choice of words (specifically, “conjure”) and her initiation of the summoning, the audience understands she has fully given herself over to Black Phillip, who is probably Satan, and therefore has fully abandoned Puritanism. I will further explore this scene at the end of this chapter, but Thomasin’s indoctrination as a witch is the prime example of the daughter knowingly inviting satanic forces to visit. When she recognizes the evil for what it is and still brings it in, this is worse than if she is a doubter.

Thomasin embraces, rather than rejects, “living deliciously,” as Black Phillip puts it. She sheds her restrictive clothing, adopting the taboo of nudity and free sexuality. Certainly, her naked flight through the woods seems more favorable, satisfying, and rewarding than fundamentalism.

![Figure 18: Thomasin flies naked into the night in the final scene. Critics have interpreted her exultation over her new life as a feminist celebration of a life without fundamentalist patriarchal control (The Witch).](image)

This scene has been interpreted by critics as Thomasin “radicalizing following the realization that her society was uninhabitable” (Halperin). Adam Nayman of Cinema Scope more effectively considers this scene in totality, and his analysis is representative of a feminist critique of the film:
Thomasin’s failures as a mother substitute, whether real or perceived, are left behind in her transformation, as are her weaknesses as a young woman at the mercy of patriarchy. Instead, she explicitly embraces a lifestyle—and with it, a worldview—that privileges pleasure (on whose terms is unclear). This could seem like a pure exploitation-movie move, throwing over the more sober study of Puritan mania for the stuff of fire-lit fantasy. But by making this shift so abrupt, and by . . . accentuating the positive of Thomasin’s choice (however manipulated it may be), Eggers is staking out fertile terrain.

Nayman’s and other critics’ pro-feminist angle is compelling; Puritanism certainly was a lifestyle that offered little flexibility for women, and demanded nothing less than perfect zealousness. It is satisfying for a modern, feminist audience to view *The Witch*’s final scene as female liberation, like Ehrlich does: “As the world continues to grapple with the patriarchal horrors visited upon women’s bodies, women’s rights, and women’s identities, we are drawn to stories in which they tap reservoirs of hidden strength and take the reins.” But I would like to consider the film’s impact from a modern fundamentalist viewer’s perspective, particularly one anxious about a patriarchy’s powerlessness.

Thomasin’s struggle to stay pure and pious even in difficult physical and emotional circumstances is the kind of faith that fundamentalists would find admirable. The few errors in judgment that she commits before the end, like losing her patience and mocking her misbehaving siblings, are relatively minor and a normal part of adolescence. However, these moments symbolize a larger female issue for fundamentalists. In Scholz’ survey of fundamentalist literature, she found that “[t]hey also insist on the first woman’s
greater vulnerability to sinful behavior than the first man’s (Gen. 3)” (91). Therefore, Thomasin’s fall from grace is almost predicted, considering the environment. It is only after she becomes her family’s scapegoat for the Witch in the Woods, and is wrongfully treated as guilty without proof that her faith begins to wane until she eventually falls for the Devil’s influence. That this tragedy coincides with her recently budding sexuality implies she was at a crossroads in her development, and therefore more susceptible for the Devil’s recruitment. For a fundamentalist, her fall from grace would be the most tragic and horrific aspect of the movie. Unlike The Conjuring, Thomasin is given no assistance against the Devil, and therefore finds no reason to not “live deliciously.” For someone who believes the Devil exists and can tempt people away from God like Thomasin has been, The Witch would be a cautionary myth. In other words, the film acts as the example of what happens when someone’s faith fails under extreme adversity, and the final scene is the terrifying climax that symbolizes the future for an irreverent society outside patriarchal control.

My analysis is supported by Kathleen Troost-Cramer’s review of The Witch, titled “‘The Witch:’ A (Theological) Movie Review,” who shows that Christians take The Witch as more of a warning than a snub. In her piece for Catholic365.com, “The end of the film can look like freedom. . . However, given the overall context of the film, the final scene can also look an awful lot like license, which is very different than freedom. That our culture has lost the ability to distinguish between the two only makes the conclusion of all the more terrifying” (emphasis original). The differentiation between license and freedom, which Troost-Cramer highlights, is a thin line, but one that the fundamentalist patriarchy hinges on. Pleasure and freedom of choice as opposed to rigidity and strictness
is not the point for traditional patriarchies; it’s the importance of what they perceive to be right and wrong.

Moze Halperin, in his article “Feminism, Radicalization, and Injustice: The Enduring Power of the Witch Narrative,” gives another angle to consider about Thomasin’s surrender: “…[J]oining this unabashedly cruel coven is essentially an indoctrination into yet another extremist cult, another resignation of freedom, despite the fact that it feels ecstatic and freeing, even to the audience. Which is what an actual cult would want you to feel — all the while subjecting you to a new form of servitude to extremist mores.” In other words, Halperin recognizes that Thomasin may be revoking Puritanism, but she has not changed her role; she is still following another father figure.

The effect of this interpretation is that the freedom is illusory, so the temptations are hollow, a cautionary warning often repeated by Christians about the Devil’s “rewards.” So, reading Thomasin’s “escape” from the patriarchy as an emancipation misses the context given from a traditionally religious viewpoint about the corruptive element of evil.

Figure 19: Though her new freedom is a triumph for the character, fundamentalist audiences consider this scene the most terrifying of all, since the young woman has foregone her piety and modesty for a satanic lifestyle. Moreover, she symbolizes the patriarchal society’s impending doom, should other daughters like Thomasin also opt for “living deliciously” (The Witch).
Correspondingly, *The Witch* is highly self-reflective, another aspect that critics have noted. As Roger Clarke of *Sight and Sound* writes, “Those settlers didn’t come over and find the devil among the pagans, the film seems to say. They brought the very devil with them.” In other words, the Devil’s influence is found in the weaknesses of the society that he afflicts. Again, the emphasis is that only through vigilance and correct lifestyle can Satan be kept at bay. Since the young, pretty girl is singled out as the one Satan chooses, it indicates that young women are particularly susceptible to Satan’s manipulation. Thomasin’s chilling fall from grace and wildly sensual escape into the woods is the visual example of this belief.

**Casey and Kat Rance in *The Exorcist***

In a review for *The Exorcist, Variety* writer Maureen Ryan observes, “[*The Exorcist*] takes the fear that a mother doesn’t know her own children, and magnifies it in visually arresting and thematically ambiguous ways, while suggesting that even in families that mean well, connections can be more tenuous than anyone ever guessed.” In other words, Ryan points out that in the show, Angela Rance’s daughters have undetected weaknesses and shortcomings that allow Pazuzu to corrupt them, which weakens their familial relationships. Casey Rance is an obedient daughter, following her parents’ directions and showing reliability; by all appearances, she embodies the prescribed patriarchal norm. However, it is revealed in the first episode that she is possessed. The hidden nature of the possession (indeed, an important plot device for the series) supports Jackson’s analysis: “Popular horror films produced in the past decade suggest that the bourgeois nuclear family, once seen as the exemplary embodiment of patriarchal culture, now suffers grave consequences in the face of this cultural standstill, trapped between a
future it cannot envision and a past it cannot forget” (1). The cultural standstill that Jackson references is the stasis between fundamentalist preservation and growing gender equality. Casey embodies the innocence that potentially is the battle ground. However, her sister is an actor in the discourse, meant to show the potential consequences from a daughter’s poor lifestyle choices.

Kat Rance consistently flouts her parents’ authority. Henry Rance is recovering from a head injury, and his wife Angela clearly has her hands full trying to help him get back to his full capabilities while being mindful of his new disability. Kat is nowhere near as supportive of her father. In the first episode, when Father Tomas is over for dinner, Kat mocks her father to show that he’s not much more than “a vegetable,” snapping her fingers in his face and yelling at him. Henry looks confused rather than angry, and Angela doesn’t have enough authority over her daughter to keep her from humiliating her father in front of an important community figure. Afterward, Tomas corrects her, saying “[K]eep your damn hands out of his face.” Instead of apologizing, Kat leaves the table, continuing her rude inconsideration of others. I discussed Henry’s culpability in this exchange, but Kat also holds some responsibility. However, by the end of the season, she becomes more loving toward her parents, saving her antagonistic attitude for the demon inside her mother. That she keeps her angry demeanor but uses that energy differently insinuates a change within the fundamentalist discourse about “ladylike” behavior. Perhaps, if that energy is devoted to protecting the patriarchal hierarchy, it is acceptable? This would also support Butler’s point about constructivist norms; docility is not intrinsic to a woman’s character. Likely unintentionally, the text shows that women can be energetic and outspoken, but should use that correctly. In other
words, the gender norm is not fixed, and Kat’s actions defy the fundamentalist essentialist argument while simultaneously supporting patriarchy.

Kat further defies authority later in the series, but in a more serious fashion. While Father Marcus is exorcising Casey, Kat is told to keep away from the room. When it escalates, Kat, disregarding her parents’ wishes and the priest’s insistence that they not be bothered, calls the police to report Casey’s abuse, physically holding her mother back when the officers come in the door. While reporting abuse is commonly understood as the right and safe move, in the context of fighting demons, Kat’s move is shown as a dangerous error that results in the death of two EMTs and allows Casey’s possession to deteriorate even more quickly. Victoria Lee Sweatman confirms this interpretation in her article for Relevant Magazine, “What Horror Movies Teach Us about Christianity;” she writes: “Horror Shows Us the Consequences of Putting Our Faith in Science or in Man, Instead of in God… No genre deals with both science and the supernatural as frequently or as directly as the horror genre. By illustrating the dangers of both, horror allows us to see the folly of relying only on ourselves for our salvation.” To apply Sweatman’s thoughts to my analysis, since Kat turns to mundane authorities and questions her priests’ intentions for her sister rather than keeping the faith and following her parents’ wishes, she is portrayed as an uninformed youth who doesn’t listen to wiser authorities. Indeed, by the next episode, she is already repentant, finally realizing that Casey truly is possessed. Her sexuality is another issue for the patriarchal text to contend with, along with her possessed sister’s impropriety.

Casey’s sexuality is typical in terms of exorcism depictions. Pazuzu entices her to dress in a low-cut dress; as a result, Casey has to literally beat away men. Once he fully
takes her over with a passionate kiss, she makes inappropriate suggestions to the men in the house, including her father.

Figure 20: A possessed Casey makes inappropriate sexual advances toward her father, horrifying Henry and sowing discord (*The Exorcist*).

Pazuzu uses her body as a display item to hurt her parents, realizing their fears about their daughter not taking care of herself. This is also meant to invoke discord between parents and daughter, an example of which is Louis’ overly violent reactions to his daughter’s pregnancy, as I covered in Chapter 1. However, Kat’s sexuality invites more in depth analysis.

The only example of homosexuality in the five texts is Kat Rance. Kat’s sexuality is another moment when she seemingly defies fundamentalist patriarchal norms and substantiates them. In the following quote, Kaplan explains traditional portrayals of feminine sexuality: “Recent images, uncannily like those in the 1950s, have insisted first that the only good female sexuality is that within marriage, and second, that woman’s sexuality is dangerous if freely released.” (“Sex, Work, and Motherhood” 422). Kat’s homosexuality is connected to Kaplan’s point because she is doing both things Kaplan’s
quote warns against. Homosexuality is a sin, and Kat’s is connected to the bigger issue of feminine homosexuality: she invites a relationship without male regulation. Furthermore, female homosexuality involves sex that cannot result in babies. The text is certainly concerned with these two points, but the minimal treatment of her homosexuality indicates it is not so problematic.

Kat never acts on her romantic interest in her co-dancer, but the plot leaves no ambiguity about the immorality of her sexual attraction to the other girl. Kat is driving with her same-sex crush when they both express interest in each other. She starts describing the physical features that inspired her attraction, when the other girl commands Kat to look at her. It is this relatively small gesture towards cementing their relationship that causes Kat to crash; the text insinuates that the demon appears in the road to make her swerve and hit a pole. Her friend dies and Kat’s knee is smashed, probably ending her dance career. However, Kat’s sexuality is never explored again. The repercussions of this exchange, along with Kat’s ensuing silence about the event or her love life, indicates at the very least that her homosexuality is not worth being explored, or her lapse in appropriate sexuality has been punished and corrected.

Kat’s choice to engage with her alternative sexuality is acting on an anti-patriarchal urge; gay daughters cannot become future mothers, and, worse, excludes the male authority. She also shouldn’t abandon a traditional family structure; indeed, it appears that she abandons her sexuality, which would alienate her further from her heteronormative family, to maintain family unity as Casey’s possession worsens. The show’s treatment of Kat’s homosexuality does not explicitly censure homosexuality, but attributes it to the most troublesome member of the Rance family. Moreover, this short
flirtation is associated with Kat’s injury and the accident that gives her so much guilt over her friend’s death. At the very least, the text attributes negative connotations to the whole issue, which is at least indicative of denunciation. Fundamentalist rhetoric about the dangers of homosexuality is well-known; however, the text’s minimal treatment of Kat’s homosexuality is reminiscent of its treatment of her aggressive nature. The implication is that she could indeed be gay (as opposed to bisexual or merely experimenting), but, so long as she does not display it, it is not worth exploring. The supernatural crisis is a more immediate concern, and indeed, Kat focuses on her sister and mother’s safety rather than deal with her loss.

Kat’s conversion is the most obvious of all the daughters in the texts. Kat begins the series mocking her mother’s faith, but gradually realizes the truth about Casey’s demonic possession after she kills two EMTs. After Casey goes missing, Kat and Chris have conversations about the demon’s origins, and we can see Kat’s gradual acceptance, despite her previous skepticism. During her sister’s disappearance, she starts attending Mass with her parents.

*Figure 21:* Kat becomes religiously observant, attending Mass with her parents, a contrast to her previous absences (*The Exorcist*).
In the finale, undeterred by the danger and her smashed knee, she goes back into the crumbling Rance house to help Casey and Tomas exorcise her mother. This is also the first time the text shows her actively praying, displaying her acceptance of God’s strength even in the face of evil. When it most matters, she does not succumb to her doubts and chooses to support and protect her family at risk to herself. Clearly the text presents Kat as the unstable daughter who has fully converted into the faith. Moreover, she has abandoned her adherent sexuality (or at least isn’t dealing with it), following the church’s aversion to homosexuality. Also, she reunites with her family, joining them in dinners and in religious services. During her mother’s exorcism, she sacrifices her knee and therefore her dancing career for their safety. Her conversion experience reinforces patriarchal prerogatives about the correctness of their beliefs. Compared to the bad daughter she was before, her new, angelic personality is more congenial and attractive for patriarchal and fundamentalist audiences alike.

The unstable daughter characters embody the future, and their instability symbolizes all the questions the fundamentalist patriarchy holds about its longevity. Her role within the family reintroduces the problem of boundaries because parents should pass them on. Indeed, Shapiro explains, “Historically, the ‘family’ is a contingent form of association with unstable boundaries and varying structures. As an object of appropriation in the contemporary culture wars, however, it is represented as a historically stable, noncontingent result of natural inclinations and morally appropriate choices” (2). However, Butler recognizes the erroneousness of depicting the family as a stable entity: “I endow ontology to precisely that which has been systematically deprived of the privilege of ontology. The domain of ontology is a regulated domain: what gets
produced inside of it, what gets excluded from it in order for the domain to be constituted is itself an effect of power” (Butler qtd. in Meijer and Prins 280). The unstable daughters act exactly to thwart these norms, a Butler describes. However, by the end, those norms and the fundamentalist patriarchy are corrected, either from the daughter’s death, fall from grace, or corrected behavior. Yet, the pattern of rebellious daughters indicates the inherent tension around the daughters, as figures who are situated on the edge of what is within patriarchal control. Indeed, Eggers focuses on this unexplored area: “But I think that the thing that is speaking the most for me is how the shadows of the past in the repression of feminine power and fear of feminine power and the dark feminine in the male-dominated society in the early modern period, how – even though that is a thing of the past – those shadows still exist today,” says Eggers (qtd. in Bitel). My work concludes similarly with Eggers’ notion: that society is haunted by the unrestrained female who epitomizes the future.
CONCLUSION

The pieces I have chosen advocate fundamentalist patriarchal structure as the answer to religious crises. The constant theme of families maintaining errant versions of patriarchal structures indicates that the demonic attacks result from the weakened structures. The texts imply that the family members must return to traditional gender roles to preserve peace and safety. A father must protect his family by being an effective adherent, controller, and provider. The texts advocate that if he would retain these characteristics, the patriarchal hierarchy would perpetuate and provide order and protection. A mother should promote religiosity by practicing and enforcing fundamentalist beliefs. In addition, she must embrace her role as caregiver before any other position, and obey her husband’s directives. The women who cannot fulfill these obligation echo or transform into witches, archetypes of the uncontrollable woman that a fundamentalist patriarchy fears. Parents only have part of the responsibility to keep their families, representative of society at large, safe from inner, supernatural threats like demons. Teenage daughters, figures who symbolize the future of the patriarchal society, are closely regulated to ensure they become proper followers. Unstable daughters who challenge patriarchal authority represent the threat to the patriarchy from social forces like gender equality, feminist movements, and secular authorities. For fundamentalists, it is essential for the daughter to accept patriarchal authority, validated by fundamentalist dogma, to preserve the traditional system.

When characters divert from prescribed gender roles, like a weak father, bad
mother, and unstable daughter, texts like the ones in my thesis become cautionary myth. Judith Butler extensively discusses the effect of conservative discourses on gender construction. In addition, she discusses attempted subversions against established gender norms, which cautionary myths like these texts seek to correct. They illustrate Butler’s point that any subversions are just reiterations of power structures, represented by negative examples like the weak father, bad mother, and unstable daughter archetypes. Therefore, fundamentalist, patriarchal gender norms are protected, supported by the myth of essentialist natures. Butler’s rejection of essentialist arguments refutes this logic, as essential identity is as much a construction as any gender norm. My thesis contributes to scholarships that questions these constructions, and the other assertions founded on essentialist, fundamentalist, and/or patriarchal systems.

Walter Stephens ends Demon Lover with the following question: “To what degree does Christian morality continue to be invoked, even in post-Christian, secularized form, to reinforce belief in spirits and human immorality?” (371). My thesis seeks to provide a partial answer to this question, yet the impact is hard to quantify. Audience reception is difficult, if not impossible, to judge in a cohesive manner because of the diversity of responses to a film. Movies are created to provide audiences with an escape from their daily lives so they can experience something magical or peculiar, perhaps as a form of escapism. Ritualistic ceremonies function in a similar way, giving attendants an otherworldly experience.11 Religion and film scholar Douglas E. Cowan frames the importance of understanding how these films impact an audience: “We may tell ourselves that we are becoming more sophisticated in our worldview, that we have left behind the

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11 Refer to S. Brent Plate’s critical religious film theory for more on the parallels between horror films as mythmaking experiences.
superstitions of the past, that our explanations for unexpected phenomena now account for their origin and power without reference to supernatural beings or powers, and that religion is no longer a necessary component of social life—but in North America, at least, most of the data available to us indicate otherwise” (Sacred Terror 50-51). Indeed, the audiences for these texts had religious experiences are hard to definitively measure, but are not imperceptible. Twitter feedback from viewers recommended future attendants bring Bibles with them, and priests in the Philippines blessed audiences before the movie started in cinemas (Rybakin). Finally, The Witch started online discussions across many different websites about faith and hypocrisy in Christianity.

Authenticity in religious experiences cannot be measured, but it is clear these movies generate anxiety, specifically about Satan’s proliferation on Earth. These texts partly rely on such anxieties to exist, and marketed their work around the assumption these tensions exist. The Last Exorcism was released with a protection prayer in the special features for audiences to recite in case they had “experiences” after watching the film. For a screening of The Conjuring, Warner Bros. offered to set up meetings with a priest for audiences so that they could have “spiritual support and/or… a personal blessing.”
As I explained in the introduction, this method is used to heighten audience reception to the message within the texts, thereby making Christianity an attractive answer to their fears. Bobby Downes, president of EchoLight studios, which is committed to making and distributing family-friendly Christian fare said, “the horror genre is exactly where Christian filmmakers need to be. ‘The Gospel is sharing this idea that it can take only a small amount of light to dispel a whole lot of darkness,’ ‘This is one avenue where we can powerfully communicate the Gospel in a way that’s attractive’” (Eckstrom). In other words, Christian audience members find the horror genre to be the medium through which important conversations happen about what and whom to fear. Indeed, the last scene in *The Conjuring* shares a quote from Ed Warren: “The devil exists. God exists. And for us, as people, our very destiny hinges upon which one we elect to follow.” This quote is the last screenshot which means it is the most important point from the movie for the audience to ponder. It is a fear-based mentality that the viewers are to remain in even
after leaving the movie. The taboos outlined in religious doctrine are horrifically
dramatized in the demonic villains while the tragic victims exemplify what happens to
family members who stray from religiously established, patriarchally dictated paths.

Mass media is the site where these images of gender performance battle, so that
my texts are reinforcing traditional, binary gender roles – based on assumed
predeterminants – is another battle in the semiotic war. Conservative backlash against
fluid gender performances, which Butler advocates. While masculinity studies are a
considerable faction in this discourse, most of the subversive characters are female,
indicating a particular anxiety about women who disrupt the patriarchally established
gender norms. Kaplan makes similar conclusions: “Because commercial productions
must command an audience sufficient for the handsome profit, producers are clever at
sensing the fantasies, fears and desires that preoccupy a majority of the people in a given
period” (“Sex, Work, and Motherhood” 410). The film market is ripe for sending cultural
messages to women. The Motion Picture Association of America identified women as
54% of box office profits in 2015; 25-39 years old was the largest moviegoing
demographic (Theatrical Market Statistics). These facts contribute to Butler’s discussion
about how gender constructed through cultural discourse, including film and television.
Moreover, the norms performed in these texts are repeated to strengthen the impact of the
message, a trend Butler discusses in Bodies that Matter: “Performativity is thus not a
singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that
it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of
which it is a repetition” (12). Gender norms are reiterated more than one way, as Coon
shows.
Another method that these texts use to substantiate their portrayal of the religious war that contains and surrounds the discourse on patriarchal family structure is nostalgia. Coons says, “Both memory and tradition act as specialized forms of knowledge. Based on personal and collective memories, we think we ‘know’ what happened to us and to others in the past. When we invest in and continue traditions, we imagine that we are reproducing certain activities and ideas based on what we ‘know’ about how events occurred in the past” (53). Indeed, in this thesis, I show how each text depends on the effects of nostalgia to root their discussion of demonic possession and gender norms. They posit that “returning” to a “traditional” setup will solve many of these families’ problems, and improve society as a result. Cowan says, “More than any other genre, horror culture remains one of the principal means by which we challenge the conventional, convenient, and comfortable understanding that the universe is a friendly place and that if there is a Creator it either knows or cares about us” (139). These texts purport that such a Creator figure does indeed care for these families, provided they retain the hierarchy described by sources like the authors in the research by Scholz, Gallagher, and Smith.

However, it is important to understand that construction of gender roles is not the only discourse the fundamentalist patriarchy considers problematic, as evident in the horror genre. Discussions about class distinctions, bureaucracy within religious organizations, inherently evil children, and more topics are seen in the texts I surveyed for my thesis. Butler concurs with these findings in the context of contested social practices: “However, to prevent any misunderstanding beforehand: the abject for me is in no way restricted to sex and heteronormativity. It relates to all kinds of bodies whose
lives are not considered to be ‘lives’ and whose materiality is understood not to ‘matter’” (qtd. In Meijer and Prins 281). In other words, Butler urges scholars to consider analyzing the archetypes in these texts, within and outside the family structure, to understand how “othered” bodies lose their significance in the viewpoint of dominant forces like Christianity. Indeed, America’s current political status, with the conservative party holding the majority in Congress and a Republican president in the White House, the evidence of the power of these discourses is perceptible in many social spheres. My aim is to illuminate how these discourses work through popular media for audiences as large, specifically the ones working against the efforts of the gender equality movements in a – presumably—poststructuralist American culture.
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