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TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Burn, Witch, Burn:  
The Stereotype of the Witch in  
American Horror Story, *Coven*

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## ABSTRACT

The Salem Witch Trials, which took place in 1692, were one of the most important events in American History, and its relevance has leaked onto our nowadays culture. One of the key elements is the stereotype of the early-modern witch, which originated during the witch hunts in Europe. The present dissertation aims at analysing the way in which the stereotype of the witch has been treated in American Horror Story, *Coven*. In order to do this, the different witches portrayed in the series will be analysed according to a series of traits. Results intend to offer an insight onto whether these characters are more or less stereotypical, also studying the relevance of their outcome.

Keywords: Salem, witch, American Horror Story, Coven, stereotype, woman.

## RESUMEN

Los procesos de Salem, en 1692, fueron uno de los eventos de mayor relevancia en la historia de los Estados Unidos, y su importancia ha permeado nuestra cultura actual. Uno de los elementos clave es el estereotipo de la bruja de principios del período moderno, que se creó durante la caza de brujas en Europa. El presente Trabajo de fin de Grado pretende analizar la forma en la que se ha tratado el estereotipo de la bruja en la serie American Horror Story, *Coven*. Para esto, se analizará a las brujas representadas en la serie de acuerdo con una serie de rasgos. Los resultados buscan establecer si estos personajes son más o menos estereotípicos, teniendo en cuenta la relevancia de su final en la serie.

Palabras clave: Salem, bruja, American Horror Story, Coven, estereotipo, mujer.



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1692, one of the most important events in New England took place: the Salem witch trials. In here, a high number of men and women were accused of practicing witchcraft and worshipping the Devil, and many were executed, after having suffered imprisonment, trials and ill-treatment. It is worth mentioning that most of the accused were women, probably due to the fact that they were seen as the “weaker” sex, and thus easier to be corrupted by the Devil.

Nevertheless, there is an ongoing debate regarding the reasons why more women were accused than men – some say the witch hunts were “sex-related”, although not “sex-specific” (Larner 2008, 254-255). As opposed to this, other scholars argue that women were targeted because they did not conform to the social rules of femininity, which were set by the ruling patriarchal model (Blécourt 2000, 285).

These witch-hunts had their antecedents in Europe, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many people from all countries were accused of practising witchcraft and were later condemned to die and executed. These people followed a series of stereotypes (both in Europe and in New England), which have contributed to the creation of the figure of the witch. Even though the stereotypical image of a witch nowadays differs from the one prevalent in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, there are some elements that have been inherited and remained the same, e.g. the fact that they are potion brewers. Other elements, such as the pointy, black hat, the pointy nose and the warts, have been added later on.

The following dissertation aims at studying whether the stereotypical figure of the witch in the early-modern period has been respected and used in the FX Networks series *American Horror Story* (which we will abbreviate as AHS from now on), more precisely in its third season: *Coven*. In general terms, witches were portrayed as middle-aged spinsters or widows, past their forties, with quite a poor economic background, bad tempers, and in general not conforming to the role the patriarchal society had placed them in. In Salem, this stereotype applied particularly to the three first accused (Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne) – nevertheless, this was modified afterwards. The fact that the stereotype has actually evolved from the one in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century posed the question of whether a contemporary TV series with an important background on the Salem witch hunts in 1692 would maintain the early-modern figure, thus demonstrating its relevance in nowadays culture.

This stereotype will be contrasted with the characters in the series. Additionally, the outcome that each one has will also be considered, given that this is a way for the creators of the series to express their real idea on these stereotypes: e.g. if a stereotypical character is killed, this could indicate that the screenwriters will reject certain stereotypes.

The main hypothesis before carrying this study out is that there will be some characters in the series (preferably with important roles) who will have been created according to the predominant vision of witches in New England. In contrast, there will be other ones that will break these stereotypes, either proposing a new one, or following a more-modern approach.

This project has been divided into two main sections: the first one includes a theoretical background on witchcraft and witch-hunts, both in Europe and in New Orleans. Additionally, it includes a subsection dealing with the television series, so that the reader can have a sufficient background on the topic at hand. In this section, we will also provide an exhaustive analysis of the figure of the stereotypical witch in the early-modern period and New England, with the establishment of a series of traits that characterised these people, as well as a description of the methodology followed. The second main part is an analysis on the characters – this will be carried out grouping them as a way of establishing relevant connections with regards to the level of stereotypification. Finally, this project will end with a number of conclusions extracted from the analysis, as a way of summarising the main findings.

The reason for selecting this topic has to do with my own personal interest in the way in which culture, literature and history affect and are adapted to the screen, especially dealing with stereotypes and the portrayal of these in modern-day culture. The whole AHS franchise is exceptionally rich with regards to this aspect: each season includes different moral dilemmas and problems, which can be easily related to important problems that have great repercussion nowadays, for example exclusion, racism and feminism, among others. This research is interdisciplinary, since it touches various subjects included in the degree, especially those related to American Culture, American Literature and also Text Analysis.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1. American Horror Story

American Horror Story aired its first season (*Murder House*) in October 2011. Since then, there have been six more seasons: *Asylum*, *Coven* (which is the focus of this study), *Freak Show*, *Hotel*, *Roanoke* and *Cult*. It was created by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy and it has been received with open arms by a numerous audience.

Its premises are quite simple, but at the same time they recycle the format horror series followed some decades ago: even though the story told in each season is different, a unitary narration is constructed as the series adds more seasons – much like in older horror series:

El género del horror ha tenido y sigue teniendo una especial incidencia en la cultura popular. Frente a la enorme cantidad de producciones cinematográficas en las que el terror en sus múltiples variantes constituye el eje argumental central (Marriott y Newman, 2013), no va a ser hasta la década de los años cincuenta del pasado siglo cuando el terror se introduce en los hogares a través de la pequeña pantalla gracias a programas misceláneos en los que la idea de lo fantástico vertebrará series episódicas o sitcoms. (Trapero Llobera 2015, 71)

Regarding the time in AHS, even though the seasons are not chronologically ordered, they are set in a specific timeframe which is easily recognisable by the audience. For instance, a character's past (or its future outcome) might be explained in a later season, or maybe it will play a more important role. For instance, in the case of the young witch Queenie (played by Gabourey Sidibe), she appears in the third season, but she briefly reappears in *Hotel* (Season 5), where she checks in into the Hotel Cortez (the setting of this season) because she is planning to participate in a TV show contest, knowing that she is to win because she has learned the answers through magic. The time frame is later than in Season 3, and therefore some of the characters “remind” the audience of the previous season, as well as the events that took place.

Also, the series' cast is rarely changed, i.e. the same actors will play different roles throughout the seasons, which are totally opposite to the previous ones in some cases (e.g. Evan Peters plays the teenage ghost of Tate Langdon in season 1, *Murder House*, but he also plays a freak in *Freak Show*), or which have some elements in common (such as most of the characters played by Jessica Lange, who are generally powerful self-centred matriarchs). Some of the actors that can be easily linked to AHS are Evan Peters, Jessica Lange (both of which are mentioned above), Sarah Paulson and Lily Rabe. Also, there

are some actors who are widely known, e.g. Kathy Bates, Lady Gaga, Angela Basset, or Emma Roberts. This also creates a lot of intrigue among fans, who speculate about future appearances.

The series include many topics that are part of the horror movie genre. From ghosts and haunted houses to vampires, including witches and murderous clowns, as well as serial killers. These give viewers a taste of cult movies of the horror genre from the second part of the twentieth century.

### 1.1.1. *Coven*

The third season of AHS was released in the US in October 2013. The plot revolves around a school created with the purpose of protecting the integrity of a coven of witches, based in New Orleans. The witches in this series are treated as being the descendants of the ones who escaped the Salem witch trials, in 1692.

*Coven* begins with one of the main characters, Zoe (played by Taissa Farmiga), discovering that she has a strange “genetic affliction”, and that she is a witch. She is taken to Miss Robichaux’s Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, where she is told that she will remain there for her own safety. After this, she meets the director of the academy, Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulson), and her mother, Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange). Fiona is the Supreme of the coven, a kind of head figure in a matriarchal society who is more powerful than any of the other witches. Fiona Goode does as she pleases, disregarding her duties as a Supreme, and looking for a way to stay young so that no other Supreme takes over her (when a Supreme is old, a new one rises). In her desperation, she finds Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates) alive - she had been buried by Marie Laveau (Angela Basset) in 1834, after being given a potion to have eternal life. Marie Laveau (also called the Voodoo Queen) is the most powerful black witch in New Orleans, and she is actually inspired by a real-life character: Marie Laveaux, “considered the legendary foremother of all spiritually powerful women of African heritage in New Orleans” (Estes 1998, 159). Fiona Goode discovers about Delphine LaLaurie’s curse/gift, and she is determined to achieve this for herself. At the same time, the coven has to face different threats, such as Marie Laveau’s rage, or the attacks of an organisation named Delphi Trust, which has as an objective to kill all witches, among others. Fiona Goode discovers that she is dying of cancer as another witch is rising (even though none of the witches in the coven knows

who it is). In order to find out who the new Supreme is, they will have to perform a ritual called “The Seven Wonders”, which consists of seven different tests they have to pass, each one being the demonstration of a different power (in the series, each witch is supposed to be able to use a certain number of powers, or abilities, except for the Supreme, who masters them all). In the end, it turns out that Cordelia, who is Fiona’s “repressed” daughter, is to be the next Supreme.

This season of AHS explores different themes. Some of the most important ones are the oppression of minorities, which we can see in the constant conflict between the “white” witches and the “black” ones; feminism, clearly depicted in the series by having a cast formed almost entirely by women who fight against the patriarchal system, disregarding what kind of witches they are (this can be clearly seen in 3.10 and 3.11, where Fiona Goode and Marie Laveau join forces to end the Delphi Trust organisation); and family, which runs throughout the whole season, especially regarding the relationship between Cordelia Foxx and her mother (Fiona), which is full of resentment and disappointment (Etkin and Prudom, 2013). Nevertheless, all the seasons have a high element of social awareness. The series is used, as well as to entertain an audience, to denounce some aspects of life that are not so much regarded by other series or movies.

## **1.2. The Witch Trials: Historical context**

### **1.2.1. Europe**

The notion of witchcraft has its origins in Ancient Greece and Rome, when magic was a cultural formation. Stratton, in her book *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology and Stereotypes in the Ancient World* (2007), quotes Sherry Ortner, who says that the fact that women identified with magic and any other sort of dangerous power “reflects women’s perceived power over men” (Stratton 2007, 178). However, it was not until the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, that the witch-hunt actually began in Europe, with the release of the *Malleus Malleficarum*, a treaty written by Heinrich Kramer in 1486 (Hoffman and Bortis 1999), where the topic of witchcraft and its prosecution was addressed. This book became the “Sacred Book” of all those who sought to eradicate witches, and pagans. This period of prosecution had its peak between 1580 and 1650 (Johnson 2017).

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were the period when The Great Witch-hunt took place all over Europe, in which men and women were prosecuted (in general, more women than

men, although there were some countries, as Rowlands points out (2013, 449), where this was the opposite, e.g. Iceland, Normandy and Russia). Rowlands discredits many authors who argued that men hunted women in order to impose the patriarchal system, by saying that this was already established. Women were accused of being witches because they did not follow the standards of that society, where they had to be subjected to male authority – witches were seen as a threat against the patriarchal order (Clark 1997, 111). The reason why a woman would be labelled out as being a witch was due to stereotypes that were created, or clichés, which we will discuss later on in this section.

### 1.2.2. Witchcraft in Salem

Before the witch-hunt craze began in Salem, there had been other instances of accusations and hangings of witches in New England, such as the case of the Goodwin children, in Boston, who were supposedly bewitched by a woman named Glover, who was hanged in 1688 (Rosenthal 1993, 2). These cases were minor, nevertheless, as was stated by Rosenthal: “More people were executed in the Salem witch trials of 1692 than had previously been executed for witchcraft in the whole history of New England” (1993, 2).

In Salem, the first woman to ever be accused of witchcraft in Massachusetts was a black slave named Tituba, who was charged for allegedly having bewitched two sisters when she was taking care of them – the daughters of Reverend Samuel Parris. She and other two women – Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne – were accused, questioned and judged. This was the beginning of a long and complex process, after which 20 of the more than 200 people accused of practising witchcraft were charged and executed (Blumberg 2007).

Nowadays, after more than three centuries, the town of Salem has become one of the most emblematic cultural locations in the United States. There are lots of people who openly practise witchcraft there, such as Wiccans. The trials also had a huge impact on culture, and there have been numerous novels, short stories, cinema adaptations, etc. that deal with the topic of witchcraft, especially with the events occurred in Salem. Many film directors have portrayed the trials, for example in Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* (1950) (Mac 2007, 175-196), or in many of the film adaptations (from *Rose O’ Salem Town*, in 1910; to the *Salem Witch Trials* saga, released in 2003); while others have

focused more on the “image” of the witch (e.g. *Hocus Pocus*, which belongs to the Disney franchise, and is aired every Halloween on Disney Channel) (Mac 2007, 105, 131).

### **1.2.3. Witchcraft in New Orleans**

Given that the third season of the AHS is set in New Orleans, it was important as well to check what historians had to say about magic here. New Orleans is not famous for its witches, as in the case of Salem, but rather for its Spiritualist Churches, which proclaim their Christianity, rejecting the idea that Spiritualism and Voodoo are the same. Estes explains that Marie Laveau could be considered to be “the legendary foremother of all spiritually powerful women of African heritage in New Orleans” (Estes 1998, 159). The reason why this season was set there can be found in an interview to four of the leading actresses of the series in 2013, before the third series of AHS was released.

“It’s been interesting being in New Orleans because there’s such a regard and respect for who she was,” Bassett noted of Marie Laveau. “She was a very influential person in the city. My character’s based loosely on her (...).

Minear also revealed that it was Lange’s idea to set Season 3 in New Orleans. “We talked about what we wanted to do this year, we talked about witches ... Jessica had talked about New Orleans, and it made sense to set this show there,” he said. “We’re taking this idea of Salem and those witches fleeing to the south at some point.” (Etkin and Prudom 2013)

### **1.2.4. Mythology added in *Coven***

The first element that the series takes for granted is the fact that there was actually a coven of witches in Salem in 1692, and that those women truly had supernatural powers. The witches who appear in the series are supposed to be the descendants of the witches that escaped the trials in 1692. Apart from this assumption, which is the most important “myth” included in the series, there is a lot of mythology that does not belong to the stereotype of the Salem witch, and thus this will not be analysed in the characters.

Each of the different witches that appear throughout the series have a magical “power”, which is what makes them a witch. This is a license that the series took, since the stereotype of witches is not that each of them had a power specific to themselves, but that they could practise any kind of magic, create spells, potions, etc.

Next, in the coven that lives in Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Ladies, there is one of the witches who proves to be stronger than the rest of them, and who becomes the Supreme (matriarch). This is said to happen in every coven – nevertheless, this hierarchy did not take place in Salem, and has probably been included (as will be discussed when the different Supremes are studied further on) in order to add some sort of drive for the witches: Fiona Goode is looking for ways of prolongating her time as one, whereas the four girls (Zoey, Maddison, Queenie and Nan) are living together and learning about their powers, in order to see who of them will be strong enough to become the next Supreme.

Also, for a witch to become a Supreme, the series includes a sort of “exam” that the students must complete, consisting of seven different tasks to perform, each of them being the demonstration of a power. These are called the “Seven Wonders”. There are several reasons why this ritual could have this name, the first one being the fact that it could be adapted in order to fit the song with the same title by Fleetwood Mac used in 3.13, given that the lead singer of the group, Stevie Nicks, actually appears as a witch in the series. However, this name could also be motivated by the fact that the number “seven” is charged with lots of meaning: there are seven Deadly Sins, the seven Virtues, seven days in a week, etc. In fact, the number seven also means completeness: according to the Bible, God finished the creation of Earth on the seventh day. If we take into account the great number of elements in AHS that are based on real events or characters, or that have a real foundation, the choice of this number for the trials the students have to pass to prove they are the Supreme becomes quite significant.

Finally, in episode 8 of the season, the witches are forced to perform what they call a “Sacred Taking”, which is a process through which the Supreme commits suicide, so that another witch in the coven can become a Supreme in case of emergency. In fact, it is said that when the Salem witch trials took place, Prudence Mather (an obvious reference to Cotton and Increase Mather, both of which are historical figures key to the development of the Salem witch trials) went through this process and committed suicide in order for another Supreme to lead the coven to the South, to safety (which also explains the setting of this season of the series in New Orleans instead of in New England, where the witch trials had taken place). This reference is extremely ironic, attacking the prosecutors of witches in Salem by saying that one of the members of the Mather family was not only a witch, but a Supreme.

### 1.3. The Stereotypical Witch

Throughout History, the stereotype of the witch has changed substantially, especially from the one in the Salem witch trials to the one today. Levack, in Chapter 5 of his book *The Witch in Early Modern Europe* (1987), explained that although it is difficult to establish what were the characteristics of a witch's personality, there are some social groups that were more prone to being accused of practicing magic. The traits that are going to be established in order to carry out the analysis are going to be extracted from his analysis, with the exception of the last one ("Supernatural Powers"), which has been added.

The present work deals with one of the many stereotypes of witches, specifically with the one that appeared in the New England witch trials, not with the one that nowadays is more widespread, which includes witches having pointy hats and noses, and riding on top of broomsticks, among other traits.

We are going to see the seven traits that will be considered when analysing the characters in the season. Some background will also be included for each one of them as well.

#### 1.3.1. Sex

Those accused of witchcraft, contrary to what common belief has today, were not always women. There was also a number of men accused of practicing witchcraft, both in Europe and later on in New England. Having said this, it is also necessary to clarify that most of those accused were women. The stereotype that has transcended, however is that of witches being women (this is only regarding the "traditional" stereotypes of witches, there are other instances where there is a distinction established between witches and wizards, e.g. in the *Harry Potter* saga, by J.K. Rowling).

There is a very important debate that remains open. There are some scholars who defend that witch-hunting equals woman-hunting. Christina Larner attacks the view some researchers have on the way the authorities treated the women accused, by saying that this argument "does, however, draw attention to the more substantial objection that the crime of witchcraft, while sex-related, was not sex-specific." She defends that most of the accusations of witchcraft were made against women (2008, 254-255).

On the other hand, Blécourt discredits Lerner's statement, by explaining that her thesis has some inconsistencies. He also argues that women "were accused of behaving as non-women, of failing to adhere to the social norm of femininity" (2000, 289). They feared being identified with women who did not conform to the image men had of them (2000, 295).

Adding to this, Diane Purkiss theorises on the figure of the witch and the reason why it appeared:

I argue that the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy, but that women also invested heavily in the figure as a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires, centring on the question of motherhood and children (2005, 2).

As we have seen throughout this section, the issue of sex is very controversial, and still today, it sparks debates on the reasons why more women were accused of witchcraft than men. It is undeniable, nevertheless, that the prosecution of witches was directly related to the patriarchal system.

### **1.3.2. Age**

Levack explains that during the witch hunts in Europe, those women who were generally older than fifty were more prone to the practice of witchcraft, the reason for this being that men were afraid of women who were not able to bear children any longer, since that was a way of controlling them (1987, 141-144). Another scholar, Robin Briggs, said that the typical age range of a woman accused of practising witchcraft was between 40 and 60, because their powers were reaching a peak (1996, 257-286). Maybe some of the women had been suspected to be witches for a long time, but it was not until their "powers" were at their highest that they would be accused and tried. During the Salem witch trials in New England, the first women to be accused of witchcraft were still in the age of child-bearing, which breaks this age stereotype. Nevertheless, many of the women targeted were middle-aged.

### **1.3.3. Marital Status**

If a woman was either a spinster or a widow, she had many chances of being labelled a witch. In a patriarchal society, not being subjected to the authority of a male figure (either the father, the brother or the husband – even the woman's sons) was

considered to be a “suspicious” and a dangerous issue, and thus many women were accused of witchcraft due to this. There were cases as well in which “witches” were married, such as the case of Sarah Good – her daughter, Dorcas, accused her of being a witch, while her husband “offered hostile testimony against her” (Rosenthal 1993, 16). It was also thought that these women were more likely to be seduced by the devil.

#### **1.3.4. Social and economic status**

Regarding the social and economic status of the witches, Levack explains that it was a frequent practice to accuse women in the lower levels of society, that would serve as “scapegoats”. In fact, talking about the trials in New England, Levack says: “In New England, the great majority of women accused of witchcraft before the Salem episode of 1692 were dependent members of the community who qualified for poor relief” (1987, 150). Also, women living from a low wage or in any sort of precarious conditions were less likely to be believed than some other ones who were richer, even though there were also some women accused coming from wealthier environments, especially in Salem.

#### **1.3.5. Personality**

Talking about their personality, Larner pointed out the following: “The women who went to the stake during the witch-hunt went cursing, often for the crime of cursing” (2008, 254). Adding to this, Levack said:

... Witches were often described as sharp-tongued, bad-tempered and quarrelsome – traits that naturally involved them in disputes with their neighbours and directed no-specific, communal resentment against them. Witches were very often the village scolds who, among other things, were prone to cursing – a habit that could easily be interpreted as an act of sorcery and the cause of a neighbour’s misfortune. In colonial New England those women accused of witchcraft had a reputation for their threatening and “disorderly” speech. (1987, 152).

Women who behaved in this way (cursing, quarrelling, causing disorder, etc.) were always an easy target, as they did not conform to the established order. This led them to be lynched, often because they were aged women who might just be talking nonsense.

### **1.3.6. Rebellion**

Another one of the most common traits “witches” had was an element of rebellion, usually against the patriarchal system. This could be seen from many perspectives, and in most cases, this “trait” generally includes the rest of them or is influenced by them – all the traits are interrelated, since, for example, a spinster is kind of rebelling against the power of men, given that she is not subjected to a male authority. In fact, nowadays witches are used as a symbol of the rebellion against misogyny, embodying many of the aspects that modern-day feminism upholds.

### **1.3.7. Supernatural Powers**

Taking into account that this research deals with the stereotypes of witches, it was deemed necessary to include their most defining characteristic: the owning of supernatural powers. This section will also include herbalists or healers, because the use of herbs, lotions and ointments (among others) was also a defining element of witches. Most scholars who have studied the Salem witch trials, witchcraft in Europe or witches in general consider all the previous stereotypes, studying what made women prone of being accused of practising witchcraft, and the reasons for this. Nevertheless, the possibility that these women actually had some sort of powers has not been studied.

## **1.4. Method**

In this project, I have decided to analyse eight characters appearing in the series in total, excluding some characters such as Marie Laveau who, although has magical powers, she is a Voodooist rather than a “witch”. Characters such as this one should be studied in some further research, given that it involves different stereotypes and approaches. I will analyse each character individually, using Table 1, which includes the different traits a stereotypical witch has, and checking which ones each witch shares, to then establish a progression from the most stereotypical to the least one, also considering the circumstances in which each witch is in. Finally, I will focus on the outcome of each character, taking into account how stereotyped it is (for example, if a very stereotyped character dies, it could be interpreted as if the directors were symbolically rejecting this stereotype).

The following diagram shows the different traits that will be analysed:

Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female</li> </ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 40</li> <li>• Under 40</li> </ul>
Marital status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Married / In a relationship</li> <li>• Spinster / Widow</li> </ul>
Social and economic status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rich background</li> <li>• Humble background</li> </ul>
Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there any change from the beginning to the end?</li> </ul>
Rebellion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the character rebel?</li> <li>• Against what?</li> </ul>
Supernatural powers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the character possess any?</li> <li>• Are these stereotypical or not?</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** Traits for the analysis of the witches

Apart from the ones mentioned above, different circumstances will be considered, regarding each individual character, which might influence this view, even if it is slightly unrelated to the seven standards that are going to be followed. As an example of this, the different powers the witches have will be studied, as well as their relations with other characters throughout the season.



## 2. ANALYSIS

After studying the previous background, the different characters that appear in AHS, *Coven* will be analysed now. Instead of studying each character on their own, they will be grouped regarding their age ranges, since Zoe, Madison, Queenie and Nan are all teenagers, Cordelia Foxx and Misty Day are middle-aged women, and then Myrtle Snow and Fiona Goode are the oldest of the witches. This division also allows us to have a vision of the figure of the different witches: first, the four younger girls are the future of the coven, they represent the potential the coven has. Then, Cordelia and Misty embody the present, and finally, the older women are a portrayal of the past of the coven, which is coming to an end.

### 2.1. The girls

The four girls are the youngest members of the coven, having to study in order to develop and control their powers, so that one of them will become a Supreme in the future. These younger witches are Zoe Benson (played by Taissa Farmiga), Madison Montgomery (played by Emma Roberts), Queenie (played by Gabourey Sidibe), and Nan (played by Jamie Brewer). All of them live in Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies. Some background knowledge will be provided for each character, since it is relevant to establish the relation between their supernatural powers.

Zoe Benson is the first witch appearing in the third season of AHS. She accidentally kills her boyfriend when they are about to have relations, and thus she learns that she has supernatural powers. Her mother explains to her that she has a "genetic affliction", which skipped one generation: Zoe's grandmother was also a witch, but her mother is not one. She is accepted into Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Ladies, where she learns to use her powers. She falls in love with Kyle, a teenage student who dies in a bus crash caused by Madison Montgomery, after she is gang-raped by some other students in his same fraternity. Both girls bring Kyle back to life, and this will cause a confrontation between them, because they both fall in love with him. By the end of the season, Zoe decides to perform the Seven Wonders, convinced that she is to be the next Supreme. However, when performing the fourth test, Transmutation, she is playing with the other girls, and she casts the spell wrong, ending impaled on the spikes of a fence.

Next, we have Madison Montgomery, one of the first witches Zoe meets when she arrives at the Academy. She is a movie superstar with a very strong temper, always getting what she wants. In the first few episodes, her powers seem to get stronger (a sign of the rising of a new Supreme), and so the Supreme, Fiona Goode, murders her to continue being the head of the coven for more time. Madison is brought back to life by Misty Day in 3.6, and when she meets Kyle, she too falls in love with him. When Zoe is impaled and dies in the fourth trial during the Seven Wonders, she refuses to revive her, due to the “feud” they had over Kyle. She continues the trials, but eventually fails in one of the tests (Divination), and her chance of being the Supreme fades away. She gets angry, and packs her suitcase to leave, after threatening the rest of the witches that she would expose the coven for what they had done to her. Kyle then murders her, accusing her of not having brought Zoe back to life.

The character of Nan is a very representative one in the series. She has the power of Clairvoyance: she is able to read people’s minds. During the whole season, she is underestimated by Madison, who thinks of her as being simple-minded. When the question of who will be next Supreme arises, Nan, just like what happens with the other girls, sees an increase in her powers. However, her hopes of becoming the next Supreme are truncated when Fiona Goode and Marie Laveau team up and decide to drown her, after she discovers Laveau’s plans of murdering an innocent baby to fulfil a deal she and Papa Legba (a Voodoo deity) have: she has to sacrifice an innocent soul every year, and he in exchange grants her the gift of immortality.

We move on now to one of the most complex characters in this season of AHS, Queenie. She is a black teenager who fluctuates between the two factions in the season, the one led by Fiona Goode, and the one led by Marie Laveau. This is due to the fact that she argues she is the descendant of Tituba. In the series, witches and practitioners of Voodoo are said to be totally different. Queenie first stays in Miss Robichaux’s Academy for Exceptional Ladies. When she meets Marie Laveau in her salon, she has an internal conflict, and she decides to abandon the coven for the sake of joining those who she considers her own. The episodes in which she has to deal with this dilemma are charged with ideas against racism, promoting equality: Queenie decides to leave because Laveau convinces her that the rest of the witches will never consider her as being the same as her, because they are white and she is not. Nevertheless, in the end, she decides to go back to the Academy, realising that the other students do see her as an equal.

If we analyse all these characters, we can see that there are some elements they have in common. They share the same age range, and they all share the same “marital” status, more or less: all the girls either have been in a relationship, or they are in one during the series. Zoe and Madison are both in love with Kyle, Nan falls in love with Luke (their neighbour) and Queenie feels identified with the Minotaur, sent to attack the coven by Marie Laveau, when she sees him. Nevertheless, in the case of Zoe and Madison, these relationships are kind of “reversed”: instead of being subject to a male authority, which is what the patriarchal system established, they are the ones in charge of the relationships. Zoe “controls” Kyle, since he was resurrected, and he had an almost zombie-like behaviour. Madison also has this sort of control over him. In Nan’s case, her relationship with Luke does not develop a lot in the series, probably because she has a more secondary role than Zoe, Madison, or even Queenie. The latter one does not really have any relationships, but she feels lonely and would like to be in love with someone. We can see this in 3.3, where she understands the Minotaur, because they both feel lonely, and she says to him “We both deserve love like everybody else. Don't you wanna love me?”.

Next, regarding their social and economic status, the girls can be divided with regards to this point: the witch coming from the wealthiest background is Madison, since she is a superstar, and has been since she was young. She explains that she has always been in the spotlight, which drove her to alcoholism and drug addiction at an early age (this is a story that sounds familiar, as there are many child actors who succumb to these addictions due to the high level of pressure they are put under). Next, we could say that Nan and Zoe both have an average level of life, whereas in Queenie’s case we see a clear example of a teenage girl who lives in a poor neighbourhood, where black people are still being segregated. She has to work in a fast food restaurant to earn some money, until Cordelia Foxx finds her and admits her in the Academy. This would fit the stereotypical image of the witch, given that, even though in Salem black people were not treated in the same conditions as the white population, Queenie does have a humble background.

If we look at their personality, all the young witches have an evolution with regards to this aspect. First of all, we can see very clearly that Zoe does not follow the stereotype: throughout the entire season, Zoe is afraid of her powers, she does not really fit in with the rest of the witches, and she seems to be “weak”. In fact, in 3.2, she and Madison are questioned by some detectives, after the bus incident. Zoe breaks down and

tells them everything about the witches, and their powers. Fiona (the Supreme) fixes the problem with magic, and then she tells Zoe she is soft and weak. All this shows that Zoe does not really fit in the stereotype of the early-modern witch, despite her powers.

On the other hand, Madison has a very strong personality, she is very stubborn and arrogant. She uses swear words all the time (which was a clear sign that women were witches in colonial New England), and she is very disrespectful. She believes that she is going to be the next Supreme, because she thinks she is the most powerful witch in the coven.

Regarding Nan, at first, she is a quite shy character who does not usually get involved in fights. However, as she sees her powers growing, and especially when she is threatened by Luke's mother at one point, she becomes angrier and fiercer. This would be one of the aspects that could be considered as belonging to the stereotype of the witch.

Finally, Queenie's personality resembles that of Madison. It is also stereotypical, because she is constantly swearing, and she is disrespectful to others too, even to her Supreme. This shows a girl who does not accommodate or follow the rules of "femininity", and who would potentially be seen as a witch in New England by a patriarchal system.

The next aspect to consider is whether these witches rebel or have an element of rebellion. The witch that best accommodates to this trait in the first four witches analysed would be Madison again: she is a rebel in many cases, for example she rebels against the patriarchal system (as was mentioned above), against Cordelia Foxx's authority—even though she is not the Supreme of the coven, she is still the headmistress—when she is told to bring Zoe back to life, but in the end she decides not to do so because she felt jealous of her. Also, Queenie rebels against her own coven, by deciding to switch sides and betraying the witches in the Academy, based on what Marie Laveau told her with regards to her skin colour. Nan's rebellion is a more social one, given that she rebels against all those people who tell her that she cannot have the same opportunities as any other person only because she has Down Syndrome (this is also present in other seasons of AHS, for example in Season 4: *Freak Show*). Finally, the character who does not have a clear element of rebellion would be Zoe, since even though she decides to leave the coven with Kyle in 3.11, she comes back in the next episode, to "embrace her fate".

Finally, regarding the witches' supernatural powers, they all own them; however, Zoe and Queenie's are less stereotypical than Madison and Nan's. While the latter ones can move things and read other people's thoughts with their minds (respectively), Zoe has the power to kill any man she has relations with, and Queenie acts as a sort of "human Voodoo doll", being able to harm other people by just staring at them and "inflicting the damage" onto her body. Having said this, it is true that Zoe's power could be seen as a symbol of the impossibility of bearing any children, which would make her more dangerous in the eyes of 17<sup>th</sup> century American society.

After analysing these four characters, it is quite clear that the most stereotypical witch is Madison, as opposed to Zoe, since she fits quite well into the stereotype of the Salem witch. She exemplifies the characteristics women had to show in New England at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to be accused of practicing witchcraft. Queenie would not fit the stereotype due to the fact that her powers are connected to Voodoo, and in fact she rejects her own coven. Nan would not be considered as being stereotypical either, which is probably linked to the fact that she is not a main character, and therefore she was not so neatly defined in terms of the stereotype of the witch.

## **2.2.Cordelia Foxx and Misty Day**

Cordelia Foxx (played by one of the signature actors of AHS, Sarah Paulson), is the headmistress of the Academy and daughter of Fiona Goode, the Supreme of the coven. She is kind and understanding, but she has always lived under the shadow of her mother's power. In fact, Fiona had never been a mother to her and, when Cordelia was abandoned in the Academy when she first showed her powers, Myrtle Snow took her as a daughter and raised her. Fiona went away to live as she wanted, leaving Cordelia behind. Cordelia later became the head of the institution, teaching girls about her powers. She married Hank, who later turned out to be a witch-hunter, who infiltrated himself within the coven so as to kill all of the witches.

On the other hand, Misty Day is portrayed as a sort of naïve and foolish girl, who seems to have no education. In episode 1, she was burnt at the stake by some villagers, but she brought herself back to life with her power, that of Resurgence. After this, she hides in a swamp house, and dedicates herself to bringing creatures back to life, as well as healing others. In 3.2, Zoe takes Kyle (who has just been resurrected) to Misty's cabin,

so that she helps him recover. In 3.8, Misty has to run away from her shelter, and arrives at Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, asking for protection, since she has been found and attacked by a witch-hunter (later on, it will be revealed that it was Cordelia's husband who went to her cabin to try and kill her). The rest of the witches witness her unusual and exceptional powers, and they are convinced that she will be the next Supreme. Misty is not sure if she wants to become the Supreme, since she sees herself as unfit to do so. In the end, when Madison, Zoe, Queenie and Misty perform the Seven Wonders, Misty dies after failing to come back to life from Hell, after performing one of the trials ("Descendum"). She cannot bring herself back to the realm of the living, since she is trapped in a loop in Hell where she constantly is forced to dissect a living frog.

These two witches are very much alike, not only with regards to their age range – both seem to be in their thirties or forties, and they both try to protect and help as many people as they can. They are also similar regarding their personalities, and in fact, when Misty is in the Academy, she and Cordelia have a relationship of teacher and student, but also a friendly one. There is not an evolution in Misty Day's personality, but Cordelia's does change. At the beginning of the season, she accepts everything her mother tells her, and she feels she is not a good witch or headmistress, mostly because Fiona puts her down. Nevertheless, as the series progresses, and she learns what her mother is trying to do and sees the way she acts, she becomes more ruthless, and she rebels against her mother. In 3.4, she gets attacked with acid by her husband, Hank (who is cloaked), and is left blind. This grants her a new power, called the Vision, which allows Cordelia to know people's intentions, or to see the past and future. However, when Myrtle Snow successfully restores her eyes, Cordelia loses this power. Feeling useless again, she gouges her eyes out with a pair of shears, in order to regain her "second sight" to help the coven.

Even though they are very similar, there are some aspects that are different between these two witches. Cordelia is married, whereas Misty Day is not. This was thought to be dangerous by people in New England, since they saw unmarried women as wild and uncontrollable, as has been stated in the Literature Review section. In the series, there is a distinction clearly established, since Cordelia is under her husband's control, who has in fact only married her to control and ultimately annihilate the whole coven, which is an extreme example of the patriarchal system, where the women are subjected

to a male authority. Misty, on the other hand, is not subjected to anyone, and she in fact is portrayed as a sort of “free spirit”. There is also a clear difference in the economic status, since Cordelia has always lived in a sort of wealthy “family” (since the coven has no economic problems), whereas Misty lives a more austere life, in a wooden cabin in the middle of a swamp. She is even laughed at by Madison (who lived surrounded by fame and money), when the rest of the witches say that Misty could be the next Supreme. She is referenced as the “dirty, little, swamp witch”, and the “hippie swamp rat” throughout the series.

Another very important element in these two witches is rebellion: Cordelia is the character who rebels the most, given that she rebels against the patriarchal system by kicking her husband out, she rebels against her mother, who is also the matriarch in the coven. She even rebels against society at the end of the series, when she publicly opens the academy for all young witches to join. Misty, on the other hand, shows rebellion against the people who burnt her, since she brings herself back from death, and she also rebels against those who tell her that she will never be able to be a Supreme. For example, in 3.10, Madison, was scared that Misty might actually turn out to be the next Supreme, so she hit her in the head in a cemetery and entombs her. In 3.12, the rest of the members of the coven discover where Misty is and, after Queenie revives her (she spent several days in the tomb), Misty arrives at the Academy and gives Madison a beating.

Finally, with regards to their supernatural powers, Cordelia proves she is skilled at all of the powers involved in the Seven Wonders, but she is also extremely skilled at crafting potions and casting any type of spells. Misty, on the other hand, has the Power of Resurgence (as we mentioned above), but she is also a potion crafter. There is an ongoing debate among scholars with regards to whether women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were accused of witchcraft because of being midwives or herbalists. Rowlands, for instance, points out that people saw them as a “source of protection against misfortune, disease and harmful magic, and were therefore reluctant to accuse them” (2013, 452). This can also be related to the issue of women as threats to the patriarchal system since, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they “were more than sex objects (...), and their productive as well as reproductive roles made them potentially threatening to men” (Barstow 1995, 10). This threat is also reflected in Cordelia when she is told that she cannot bear any children: women were even less subjected to male authority if they were either too old to bear any children (which is why older women were targeted), or if they were not fertile for some

other reason. Cordelia tries to fight this, but in the end, she is not able to do anything about it. This could be interpreted as an adaptation of the stereotype, making it even more impossible to break.

If we put all this information together, we get a clear picture which establishes Misty Day as a representation of the stereotypical witch in New England, who symbolically dies, giving way to a sort of “new generation” of witches, where Cordelia Foxx is the Supreme. She represents a clear threat against the patriarchal system who executed witches, and, in fact, she exposes the coven to the whole world, giving the message that being a witch is not something bad or that should be kept secret, but something to take pride in. The message conveyed is a criticism to the exclusion of a minority, which in *AHS: Coven* is clearly represented from a racial perspective, but also from a feminist one, through the image of the witch.

### **2.3.Fiona Goode and Myrtle Snow**

The two characters remaining are those who would represent the past of the coven. Fiona (played by Jessica Lange) is the Supreme throughout the whole series, however her position is threatened all the time, as she feels her time coming to an end, with the rising of a new Supreme, who eventually will be revealed to be her own daughter, Cordelia. In an article titled *And the Most Despicable Jessica Lange Character Is...*, Robinson-Greene (2018) makes an analysis on the four characters played by Lange in the four seasons she appears (Constance Langdon, Sister Jude, Fiona Goode, and Elsa Mars), and concludes that the worst one is Fiona Goode. Her reasoning for this is that even though this actress's roles all portray the failure of matriarchies, “Fiona doesn't seem to have a moral bone in her body” (2018, 78-80).

On the other hand, Myrtle Snow (role played by Frances Conroy) represents Fiona's opposite: they have been rivals since they coincided in Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, and Myrtle has always suspected Fiona of having murdered the previous Supreme, Anna-Leigh, to be more powerful. In the end, Myrtle became a member of the Council, an organisation destined to protect covens and to impose justice when problems arose. Actually, this can also be seen in the fact that she only cares about the truth. As Ethridge points out, “Myrtle's death is actually a success if she aims to produce a strong and thriving Coven” (2017), given that she has Cordelia burn

her at the stake (for the second time) because she murdered the two other members of the Council.

If we analyse these two characters, we can see that even though they both are opposed in the series, they have several aspects in common. First, they are the same age. However, this means different things for the two women. Fiona sees aging as a curse, she is obsessed with her appearances and with looking younger, getting to the extreme of murdering Madison Montgomery to steal her vitality, when she believes the girl could be the next Supreme (3.2). In the case of Myrtle Snow, she does not seem to be bothered by the fact that she is getting older, she just seems to embrace it as a natural process.

Next, regarding their marital status, we can see a similarity in the two women at the beginning of the series, since neither of them have a partner – Fiona is a widow, Myrtle is single; and they do not seem to be interested in getting involved in any kind of relationship. However, when Fiona meets the Axeman of New Orleans (who has been brought from the spirit realm by Zoe, in an attempt to know where her friend Madison was), she decides she wants to be in a relationship with him. She does not “fall in love” with him, because in the end, she just wants to feel loved and appreciated, but she also wants to have someone to puppet around who can help her fulfil her wishes. Myrtle’s only love seems to be with high couture (which is used with a comic effect), but she claims that she did not have any children because she wanted to devote her life to the coven (3.5). This would make Myrtle more stereotypical than Fiona in this sense, taking into account the fact that she decided purposefully not to have any children, thus breaking the established role of mother that the patriarchy imposes. Nevertheless, when Cordelia is abandoned at the Academy by Fiona, she becomes a motherly figure for the girl. Opposed to this is Fiona’s case, who rejected her daughter in order to be free to do as she wanted. This constitutes another breaking of the established roles, given that Fiona becomes a mother, but later decides to abandon this occupation and her daughter.

An analysis of their social and economic status shows that both women live surrounded by luxuries. In Fiona’s case, this happens because with her powers as a Supreme, she can have anything she desires. We can appreciate this in Myrtle Snow whenever she makes references to her clothes, or to exclusive designer lines. In Salem, it was not only women coming from the poorer backgrounds that were prone to be accused of practicing witchcraft, there were also others who were accused by their neighbours

because they felt jealous or they wanted to get a part of their inheritance. It is in this latter group that these two women would fit best.

The trait which sets these two characters apart is their personality. Fiona Goode is a cruel and selfish witch who only cares about herself. She will do anything to achieve what she proposes, and she does not really seem to care about the coven: the only reason why she returns is because she feels her powers dwindling, and she wants to get rid of the new Supreme who is rising to take her position. On the other side, we have Myrtle Snow, whose only wish is to protect the coven. She acts as a sort of mother to all the girls, not only Cordelia Foxx, and she faces the consequences of her acts and dies at the stake, as we explained above. She does this to avoid Cordelia from facing criticism and judgement when she herself becomes the Supreme, given that she has infringed the law. We can establish a duality between these two characters – Fiona represents the stereotypical Salem witch in that she does what she pleases, she is cruel, and is constantly cursing; whereas Myrtle Snow's main objective is to protect the coven and ensure its safety, becoming thus a dangerous character by opposing the patriarchy. Fiona, nevertheless, is more stereotypical than Myrtle with regards to this trait.

Their personality is very much related with the next trait: rebellion. Fiona stands out here as well, as she does not follow any of the conventions imposed upon women at the time the trials took place. Myrtle Snow also has some instances where she defies the patriarchal system, especially by refusing to bear any children, as was pointed out above; however, it is Fiona that holds up the biggest fight against the patriarchy. This is reflected also in 3.11, titled *Protect the Coven*, where Fiona and Marie Laveau meet Delphi Trust (the witch-hunting organisation) to “pact a truce”, but they eventually murder all the high executives who join them in the meeting. This is very symbolic, because the organisation was the clear representation of the male dominance and authority, as well as resembling the court which judged women accused of witchcraft in New England in 1692.

Finally, with regards to their powers, this trait is not as relevant for the analysis of these characters as it is with the other ones, since Fiona Goode, as a Supreme, can master any power a witch has, and Myrtle Snow does not really have many segments using them. Moreover, even though they both are very powerful witches, they are not shown using more stereotypical powers, such as potion craft (which in the case of Cordelia, for example, this is more relevant).

### 3. CONCLUSION

After having carried out the analysis of these eight witches appearing in *AHS: Coven*, we can extract some conclusions regarding the way these characters adapted or followed the stereotype prevalent during the witch-hunts. In general, we can see how all these characters have different traits, which sometimes belong to the one present in the early-modern period, but they sometimes are part of the more-modern stereotype of the witch. It makes sense, however, that the series would maintain the “older stereotype”, taking into account that the witches appearing in the series, as we said at the beginning, are the descendants from the ones who were able to escape from the Salem witch trials. The traits that were most relevant when analysing these characters were those of the marital status, the social and economic status, and the personality they had. Other ones, e.g. the presence of supernatural powers, were not as telling, given that all of them show that they own powers. Also, the sex was not very relevant, as all of the witches analysed (and portrayed in the series) are women.

If we were to group these characters into stereotypical or non-stereotypical, making a clear distinction between them, we could say that the less stereotypical characters are probably Zoe, Queenie, Nan, and Myrtle Snow; whereas the most stereotypical ones are Madison, Cordelia Foxx, Fiona Goode and, above all, Misty Day. The first ones do not show the different traits that would characterise witches in the early-modern period, even though they do have some aspects in common with this stereotype. On the other hand, the latter characters follow these traits, especially the ones related to personality, rebellion and their marital status (this is also related to the issue of motherhood and the possibility of bearing children).

Taking into account the outcome of each character, we can see that most of the stereotypical witches die in the end (i.e. Madison, Fiona and Misty), but the same happens in the case of the less-stereotypical witches (Nan and Myrtle Snow both die as well). This, at first, would not be indicative, since characters from both groups die, and one of the groups does not prevail over the other one. In fact, what we can see is that the directors mix both groups, making Zoe and Queenie part of the Council, with Cordelia Foxx as the Supreme. This way, there is a convergence between those witches who are not stereotypical, and those who clearly portray the traits that were seen as belonging to a practitioner of witchcraft in 1692 and the modern-day period.

Also, we can see how AHS, *Coven* manages to speak up and raises awareness about many different social problems, amongst which racism and discrimination are included; but also about the importance of living in an equalitarian society, eliminating the presence of a dominant patriarchal society. This is done through an extreme example, since in the series, it can even be argued that almost all of the men who appear are a threat to the Coven. These are all issues that are very present in the culture of our time, but which were also relevant in New England during the Salem witch trials.

Regarding the results obtained in this investigation, we can see an example of how television series (and also movies), as a very important part of our nowadays culture, are aiming at portraying key issues and trying to spread a set of values for a society. The whole AHS franchise tries to address the fact that minorities have been excluded throughout the years. This exclusion seems to be coming to an end, but it is not fully completed. Some of the examples of this that we can see in *Coven* are women (which is the main focus of this project), but there are also issues of racism addressed, as well as people with Down Syndrome – Nan is played by Jamie Brewer, an actress who is also an advocate for the rights of people with Down Syndrome).

Nevertheless, there are many other elements that can be analysed not only in *Coven*, but in the whole AHS franchise. The issue of racism (as we pinpointed above) could be a research topic further on, especially with the opposition between the “white” witches and the “black” ones (especially Marie Laveau); as well as the portrayal of a patriarchal society that turns out to be a failure (as it happens with Fiona Goode). There would be much more to be analysed as well if we selected other seasons of the series, including ostracism, money as a representation of power, or even politics.

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