

## BECKY NURSE OF SALEM

### What is a Witch?

#### LESSON CONTEXT

If you ask students, “What is a witch?” they’ll all be able to describe one. But they may not know about the complicated historical baggage trailing behind the broomstick. BECKY NURSE OF SALEM is a story full of witches, witchcraft, and witch hunts past and present. By centering witches, it explores the condition of women who are outside the dominant social structure. The purpose of this lesson is to give students background knowledge to recognize and join the conversation about gender that this play invites.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will develop a more nuanced understanding of what it has historically meant to be called a witch; what it means to identify as a witch in modern times; and what is meant literally and figuratively by the term “*witch hunt*.”

#### GUIDING QUESTIONS

##### Historical

- Why were women historically accused of being witches?
- Why were witches considered aberrant and by whom?
- What are some examples of witch hunts throughout history?

##### Modern

- Why might modern people identify themselves as witches?
- Why might those who identify as witches consider being aberrant not such a bad thing?
- How do modern societies conduct “witch hunts” against those who they want to demonize?

#### TOOLS

- ACTIVITY 1 - RESEARCH AND DISCUSS Thinglink about witches in history and now:

<https://www.thinglink.com/scene/1646260038722912259>

Use LCT Education’s Thinglink or clone a copy for yourself. Make sure to paste the link into the student handout.

- ACTIVITY 2: WHO IS YOUR WITCH? Padlet template:

<https://padlet.com/educationlctorg/mqywp0jcgvrrbrq5>

If doing this activity, please ‘Remake’ this Padlet for yourself and be sure to change the visitor permissions before sharing it with your students. (Go to Share [top arrow button] > Change privacy > Visitor permissions on the bottom; select ‘Can write’)

- WHAT’S A WITCH Google Doc/student handout that includes links to Activity 1: Research Thinglink and optional Activity 2: Create Padlet.

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1H3bZM6JkTvJAg-zTZhkUeNS\\_iyiLJQnEXhYIRocVfUw/copy](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1H3bZM6JkTvJAg-zTZhkUeNS_iyiLJQnEXhYIRocVfUw/copy)

Please edit/abridge/update links on the student handout as needed.

## LESSON PLAN

### DO NOW

Students brainstorm the qualities of a witch - physical characteristics, activities, attire, examples of witches, etc. on the Witch Web/table in SECTION I: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT WITCHES of the **student handout**.

Follow up by asking students to share. Add responses to a list or web on the Smartboard or chart paper.

### MINI LESSON

The term, *witch*, is complicated and loaded. Merriam-Webster's contradictory definitions exemplify this complexity. Since witches are so much a part of Sarah Ruhl's play, *BECKY NURSE OF SALEM*, it's important to have an understanding of what the term means historically and in the present. In this lesson, you'll get a chance to explore witches past and present and even think about who might be your own witch today.

Merriam-Webster	
<b>witch:</b>	
1	<i>in fiction and folk traditions</i>
	a) a person (especially a woman) who is credited with having usually malignant supernatural powers
	b) a woman who is believed to practice usually black magic often with the aid of a devil or familiar
NOTE: This meaning of witch is commonly encountered in contexts relating to historical Christian religious beliefs about witches and witchcraft.	
2	a practitioner of witchcraft especially in adherence with a neo-pagan tradition or religion (such as Wicca)
3	a mean or ugly old woman: hag, crone
4	a charming or alluring girl or woman

#### Front-loaded Vocabulary (Definitions in the WHAT'S A WITCH handout)

**Patriarchy:** (n) a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.

**Misogyny:** (n) hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women

### ACTIVITY 1 - RESEARCH AND DISCUSS

#### A) Research

Students conduct research on historical and modern witches by exploring a variety of resources on the **Thinglink** and completing notes on SECTION II: WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT WITCHES of the **student handout**.

## B) Discuss Findings

In groups, students discuss the following essential questions:

### Witches in the past

- Why were women historically accused of being witches?
- Why were witches considered monstrous and by whom?
- What are some different perspectives on why witches were hunted?

### Witches in the present

- Why might modern people identify themselves as witches?
- Why might those who identify as witches consider being monstrous not such a bad thing?
- Though, for the most part, witches aren't still burned or hanged in the public square, how do modern societies conduct "witch hunts" against those who they would like to demonize?

## *Options for Grouping*

**Individual:** *Each student can do all the research and take their own notes.*

**Groups:** *Offers scaffolding for ENL and SPED students if groups mixed heterogeneously. The historic links have several video sources, offering a reduced reading load and graphic contextualization.*

### Small groups

Create heterogeneously mixed groups of 7 or 8 depending on which research they're doing. Give each group member a number to identify which link they'll read, take notes on and summarize for the others based on interest and ability.

### Two groups:

Assign half the students to research and take notes on historical and half on modern. Each half discusses their findings amongst themselves to clarify and add to their notes. They then report their findings to the other half who take notes. The advantage to this model is that the teacher can jump in to clarify or deepen as groups report.

Base and home groups: Assign base groups of three where half the base groups research and take notes on historical and half on modern. Each half discusses their findings amongst themselves to clarify and add to their notes. Then create home groups of six where half the group explores historical inputs and the other half looks at modern inputs. Each group sums up their findings and shares with each other and adds to their group notes.

## ACTIVITY 2 - WHO IS YOUR WITCH?

*Classes that aren't drawn to creative activities can skip Activity 2 and go straight to the Extension Discussion.*

In SECTION III: WHO IS YOUR WITCH, students brainstorm the qualities of a modern witch and consider who might be their 21st Century witch.

Student responses including an image of the person, an explanation of why they qualify as a witch, and who might want to “hunt” them and why” are then entered on the class **Padlet**.

### EXTENSION DISCUSSION

1. Based on what you’ve read about modern notions of witches, to what extent do Becky’s and Gail’s positions on the fringes of society, and the way they respond to those rules, make them like witches?
2. In the play, Becky is often angry. She reveals to her friend Bob the bartender, “I get so mad. Sometimes I walk around thinking: “I’d like to take my shoe off and just throw it at a person.” Later the witch, speaking as Amy, tells Becky, “I know you have great anger.” In her essay, *Who Gets to be Angry*, Roxane Gay says, “The challenge is knowing the difference between useful anger, the kind that can stir revolutions, and the useless kind that can tear us down.” How would you characterize Becky’s anger?

## THINGLINK DETAILS

<b>START</b>	<p><b>Exploring Witches</b></p> <p>BECKY NURSE OF SALEM is a story full of witches, witchcraft, and witch hunts past and present. The word, witch, however, can mean different things depending upon the time and context in which it's used. To get a better understanding of witches and the feminist themes explored in the play, interact with the links in each section and take notes on the What's a Witch? handout. Follow the numbers.</p>
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### Historical Witch links

1	<p><b>Paganism: Ancient Roots, Historical Challenges - Article</b></p> <p>Although ancient Pagan religious practices, including deity worship and seasonal rituals, have been syncretized for millennia with Christian and other religious traditions, witchcraft was outlawed and persecuted in early modern Europe and America. A series of accusations of witchcraft and investigations involving torture led to the killing of thousands, if not millions.</p> <p><a href="https://pluralism.org/ancient-roots-historical-challenges">https://pluralism.org/ancient-roots-historical-challenges</a></p>
2	<p><b>Silvia Federici on Witch Hunts, Body Politics, and Rituals of Resistance - Article/Interview</b></p> <p>Witchcraft has become a buzzword of late. In fashion, movies, TV, and on social media, women have begun to reexamine its meanings, and how it can be adopted as an archetype against patriarchy. But long before #witchesofinstagram was a hashtag, feminist and leftist writer Silvia Federici examined the hardly superficial ties between the witch trials, patriarchy, and the creation of capitalism.</p> <p><a href="https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/09/15/silvia-federici-on-witch-hunts-body-politics-rituals-of-resistance/">https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/09/15/silvia-federici-on-witch-hunts-body-politics-rituals-of-resistance/</a></p>
3	<p><b>TED-Ed Ugly History: Witch Hunts - 5:25 minute animated video</b></p> <p>Uncover the history of the witch hunts that swept through Europe and the American colonies from the 15th century until the 18th century.</p> <p><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7x5KesH3dzM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7x5KesH3dzM</a></p>
4	<p><b>Library of Congress Video on the Malleus Maleficarum - 3:00 min video</b></p> <p>Nathan Dorn discusses the Malleus Maleficarum, a treatise used to try persons accused of witchcraft. This item is part of the Law Library of Congress rare book collection.</p> <p><a href="https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-8694/">https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-8694/</a></p>
5	<p><b>Why Did Women Stop Dominating the Beer Industry? - Article</b></p> <p>Strict gender norms pushed them out of a centuries-long tradition</p> <p><a href="https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/women-used-dominate-beer-industry-until-witch-accusations-started-pouring-180977171/">https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/women-used-dominate-beer-industry-until-witch-accusations-started-pouring-180977171/</a></p>
6	<p><b>A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials - Article</b></p> <p>One town's strange journey from paranoia to pardon</p> <p><a href="https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/">https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/</a></p>
7	<p><b>TED-Ed What really happened during the Salem Witch Trials - 5:30 minute animated video</b></p> <p>Dig into how the infamous Salem Witch Trials began and why they remain a cautionary tale of the dangers of groupthink and scapegoating.</p> <p><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVd8kuufBhM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVd8kuufBhM</a></p>

## Modern Witch links

8	<p><b>From Circe to Clinton: why powerful women are cast as witches - Article</b></p> <p>A misogynist insult in Washington and Westminster, a force for good in Hollywood ... for centuries, witches have personified fear of assertive women. But why does the stereotype persist?</p> <p><a href="https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/07/cursed-from-circe-to-clinton-why-women-are-cast-as-witches">https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/07/cursed-from-circe-to-clinton-why-women-are-cast-as-witches</a></p>
9	<p><b>Vulnerable women used to be suspected of witchcraft. Now witchiness is a sign of strength. - Article</b></p> <p>Hundreds of years ago, being called a witch could get you burned alive. Now women voluntarily call themselves witches as a way of asserting their power and independence.</p> <p><a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2017/10/27/vulnerable-women-used-to-be-suspected-of-witchcraft-now-witchiness-is-a-sign-of-strength/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2017/10/27/vulnerable-women-used-to-be-suspected-of-witchcraft-now-witchiness-is-a-sign-of-strength/</a></p>
10	<p><b>Witches are Having Their Hour - Article</b></p> <p>Pam Grossman, author and host of the popular “The Witch Wave” podcast, said witches are having a resurgence among feminists who want authority over their lives.</p> <p><a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/style/pam-grossman-witch-feminism.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/style/pam-grossman-witch-feminism.html</a></p>
11	<p><b>The Many Faces of Women Who Identify as Witches - Article and photo series</b></p> <p>In her portrait series “Major Arcana: Witches in America,” the photographer Frances F. Denny seeks to explore the figure of the contemporary witch beyond the cultural chestnuts that have shrouded and obscured it.</p> <p><a href="https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-many-faces-of-women-who-identify-as-witches">https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-many-faces-of-women-who-identify-as-witches</a></p>
12	<p><b>Beyonce Brings Wonderful Witchcraft, Healing Powers in ‘Lemonade’- Article</b></p> <p>With her sixth album, Lemonade, she has modeled herself into a witch — of the healing variety — during a time when black women are in need of positive reinforcement, deep healing and transformation.</p> <p><a href="https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/beyonce-lemonade-witchcraft-healing-powers-7348491/">https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/beyonce-lemonade-witchcraft-healing-powers-7348491/</a></p>
13	<p><b>How Witchcraft Is Empowering Queer and Trans Young People - Article</b></p> <p>"There is no one way to be a witch," says Mey Rude, who left the Catholic church after coming out as trans. "It's a really freeing identity."</p> <p><a href="https://www.vice.com/en/article/zngyv9/queer-trans-people-take-aim-at-the-patriarchy-through-witchcraft">https://www.vice.com/en/article/zngyv9/queer-trans-people-take-aim-at-the-patriarchy-through-witchcraft</a></p>
14	<p><b>Witch hunts never stopped - now they're online - Article</b></p> <p>The lurid accusations and arbitrary punishments meted out in centuries long gone are all too reminiscent of the way young women are harassed and blamed today</p> <p><a href="https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/28/laura-bates-witch-hunts-never-stopped-now-theyre-online">https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/28/laura-bates-witch-hunts-never-stopped-now-theyre-online</a></p>
15	<p><b>Who Gets to be Angry? - Opinion by Roxane Gay</b></p> <p><a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/opinion/sunday/who-gets-to-be-angry.html?">https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/opinion/sunday/who-gets-to-be-angry.html?</a></p>

### PADLET screenshot

(including sample entry on ALOK. Teachers can keep this as a model and/or include their own.)

