

Mike Pavlik
Magic & Witchcraft Lecture Notes

Why are we concerned with magic & witchcraft today, October 31st?

Halloween- All Hallows Eve.
(N.B. – hallows.)

The Eve of All Saints Day, November 1. November 2 is All Souls Day, which gives us a 3 day period, which is preoccupied with the dead (Dia de los Muertos).

Celtic Feast – Samhain – the Winter Feast - a period at the end of the year. The year was divided into 2 halves- winter, the time when crops died, and summer, the time of the rebirth of crops, of life and activity.

Because Samhain came at the end of the life part of the year, it was associated with the the dead ; the beginning of the dark part of the year, and the otherworld. Because the festival occurred at the junction of the “life” and “death” part of the year, this is when otherworldly things are most likely to be present in the land of the living.

Both recent and long dead ancestors were commemorated at this festival, and tales of supernatural and otherworldly occurrences abound at this time. Late fall has long shadows and chilly nights; it is harvest time and magic is in the air.

An Anthropological View:

Magic- the direct manipulation of cause and effect between phenomena, whose connection is not demonstrable through independent means – i.e., between things or events that appear to an outside, scientifically inclined observer to be unrelated. (Vivelo, 1978).

Anthropology is the study of humanity; through time and space, and so the definitions of large topics must be broad enough to cover related spheres of activities as they occur through many different cultures and time periods. It is a natural science, a social science, a historical discipline and one of the humanities. Comparing many societies and traditions helps to produce general statements about human activities.

There are many traditions of magic and witchcraft; wizardry and sorcery – so how do we begin to sort them out?

Well, in a general frame, - who is involved? Who is a witch?

Witch- a person with an inborn ability to cause harm or misfortune through magical, often purely psychic means.

(This includes, for example, the witchcraft traditions of Africa, which did not specify a sex or gender requirement.)

Witchcraft – the exercise of the innate ability to produce harmful effects, either purposely or accidentally, through magical means.

(Evans Pritchard – Witchcraft among the Zande)

(Bohannan & Bohannan The Tiv)

This is separate from Sorcery- a form of Black magic- a learned form of magic, which intends to bring harm or misfortune to its target.

Learned magic uses charms and incantations, as well as materials (potions, herbs, talismans and amulets).

White Magic – a benevolent form of magic, the aim of which is to effect some socially desirable form of action- such as protection from sorcerers, or curing of illness.

Sir James George Frazer- The Golden Bough.

Imitative Magic- (homeopathic magic) – based on the law of similarity. “Like produces like”. Sticking pins into a doll to injure or kill an enemy “in the belief that as the image suffers, so does the man, and that when it perishes he must die.”

Sympathetic Magic (contagious magic) - based on the law of contagion. ‘Things which have once been in contact will continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.’

Frazer uses the example of hair or finger nails- cut from an individual, but still retaining a bond.

B. Malinowski – Magic in the Pacific

G. Gmelch – Baseball Magic.

Witchcraft & Magic in the Medieval European Tradition: Magic as an alternative mode of rationality.

Traditional healers and herbalists.

The term magic- Magus- Latin through Old Persian – learned man.

Mage – Magi- learned and foreign.

Malleus Maleficarum – 1487 – (Hammer of the Witches) the Witchhunting manual of the German inquisitor Heinrich Kramer.

(Publications ran through 1521, and did not start again until 1560.)

The Reformation

Magic was labeled as deviant behavior by Religious and Political authorities.

The Inquisition was endorsed by both protestant and Catholic leaders- for the elimination of witches.

(Both equated heretics with witches, witchcraft with alliances with demons and worship of the devil.)

3 Recurring Elements:

1. Political or Civil Turmoil
2. Unexplained occurrences (outside cultural knowledge or terms).
3. Sympathetic Magic

‘A Fever in Salem’ L.W. Carlson- New England Witch Trials

(Encephalitis lethargica)

(previously posited suggestion- ergotism).

Both European & North American witch hunts followed cycles; were mainly rural rather than urban, and had approximately 75% female targets.

Witchcraft and Magic- a long history in Literature, Theatre and Film.

Pliny (Natural History)

Arthurian Legends

Shakespeare (Macbeth (the Weird Sisters)

Jacques Lacan – Psychoanalytic Film Theory (gaze/construction/desire)

Joe Queenan – Cinema as reflection of societies neuroses.

Mid 20th Century Incarnations of Magic & Witchcraft

I Married a Witch

Bell, Book and Candle.

(The Crucible) (Television – Bewitched)

1950's – Domestic activity during the Cold War (could the “other” (The enemy?) be so close, so hidden?).

The Current Incarnations of Magic & Witchcraft

Harry Potter (J.K. Rowling)

Wicked (Gregory Maguire/Frank Baum)

Lord of the Rings

(Terror as a weapon; public oblivious to threats on a grand scale).

Some References (and suggested Reading!)

“Magic, Science and Religion” by Bronislaw Malinowski

“Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events” by E.E. Evans-Pritchard

“Medieval Folklore” by Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow

‘Eros and Magic in the Renaissance’ by Ioan P. Couliano

‘Witchcraft: The History and Mythology’ by Richard Marshall

“A Fever in Salem” by Laurie Winn Carlson

‘Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe’ by Gary Waite

“Cultural Anthropology Handbook” by Frank Vivello

“Return to Laughter” by Elenore Smith Bowen

“The Tiv” by Paul & Laura Bohannan