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Society in Bell, Book, and Candle, and Practical Magic

The question of whether certain groups of people need to act a certain way in society has been relevant for centuries. Women's roles in society were never more questioned than in the 1950's, and when films were made about women, it was usually with a political agenda in mind. Art forms like movies are always influenced by some type of basic belief about how the world works, and the two films examined in this essay are no exception. Practical Magic is a modern film that commentates on the more dated piece, Bell, Book, and Candle.

The 1950's film Bell, Book, and Candle presents a world where witches exist and some women have extraordinary powers. In the film however, the most influential act they perform with these powers is seduce men. The film is a metaphor for women's realization of how much power and ability they really had. 1950's men still had the power in American society, but women had been suppressed for too long to stay that way. The culture change occurred as women began using their sexuality and feminine ways to pursue their own happiness. As opposed to trying to follow the same path as men, they began gaining power in society and breaking free of stereotypes.

Gil Holroyd is the beautiful witch that Bell Book and Candle focuses on. She uses her beauty, captivating gaze, and spells to get what she wants; the attention of her neighbor, Shep Henderson. Shep, however, is already engaged to Merle Kettridge, whom Gil despises for reasons having to do with their college days together. Gil knows of Shep's relationship and chooses to act upon it using her magical powers, something she would normally not do. Problems ensue once Shep discovers what Gil has done, but he ends up getting over it and they have a relationship. It is Gil's belief that her powers should be used as little as possible that is exemplary of a liberal society having their complex analysis of the world repressed by the conservative side, which strives for simplicity and does not require

intense analysis of the world.

The 1998 motion picture Practical Magic is an obvious modern day commentary on Bell, Book, and Candle. Sally Owens is a witch trying to figure out how to hide her powers from a town that rejects her magical family. This fear of magic also stems from seeing how magic has caused death in her family before, due to a curse placed on the Owens family long ago. Sally doesn't want to practice magic because it reminds her that her life is far from normal. She continually expresses her desire for a normal life throughout the film. She is not satisfied with living alone as a witch, or even with other witches in her family. Tragically, when Sally gets her wish, and finds a husband to start a family with, he dies. Sally is left as a widow with two young children. Practical Magic doesn't reward her for wanting a more typical lifestyle, instead Sally must experience the death of her husband. Sally is not permanently punished though; she finally finds the man of her dreams, Officer Gary Hallet, near the end of the film. Hallet is actually under a spell cast by Sally long ago, but they both learn to accept that, and the film finally grants Sally her wish for a normal life with Hallet as her husband.

Noticeable similarities arose between both films after repeated viewings. Rejection was a strong theme throughout Practical Magic and Bell, Book, and Candle. Gil and Sally are attractive women seek out men because of the companionship they offer more than any other reason. Family was the other theme that stuck out in the two films. Gil and Sally don't live in witch-friendly cultures, so their magical families play huge roles in their lives. I will discuss these two themes in the following paper along with the role independence plays in the two films. The films both end with women giving up their independence in order to marry men. The liberal ideas reflected in these endings provide a lens through which I assessed the movies. In post-war America, most people's beliefs fell into two basic categories ; liberal and conservative. The basic ideology of both conservatives and liberals included rejection of extremists; people who challenged the status quo. The idea of witchcraft featured in both films is as extremist as they come, and far removed from the values of liberals or conservatives.

In his book, Seeing is Believing, Peter Biskind explains how 1950s liberals wanted more

thought and process put into decisions, while conservatives argued that quick, ideological decisions were the way to go. Conservatives believed situations could be observed and acted upon without too much second-guessing. From a liberal point of view, the magical powers Gil and her friends possess is indicative of a more complicated reality where things are not always as they seem. In the early scenes of Bell, Book, and Candle, Shep appears to have no romantic interest in Gil, yet Gil manages to seduce Shep rather quickly as the film progresses. She accomplishes this feat with witchcraft, not her good looks and charm. The fact of the matter is, women actually do possess the ability to seduce men, and it would normally not be any trouble at all for a woman as attractive as Gil to do so.

Gil fears the use of magic and she expresses this throughout the film. In one Christmas Eve scene, she speaks of her powers as though she is scared of them, saying, "I don't know what this kind of thing can do to you if you go too far." Gil's powers are stronger than most witches yet she chooses not to use them if she can avoid it. During the same scene, Gil's brother Nicky raises the question of why witches haven't been more successful throughout history, considering their boundless powers. The reason, as explained by Gil's Aunt Queenie, is that witches have never known how to properly use their powers. Gil has considerably more control over her powers than most witches though, as evidenced by her brother Nicky's claim that she could "hex the entire stock market if she wanted to, but she's scared." America's post-war female culture of the time had the same reservations about their own powers. Gil, like many women of the 1950's, recognizes that she is not worthless as an individual, but is not sure how to apply this knowledge to her life and career, or if she even should. These women began to think about these issues after men returned from World War II and took their jobs back. Gil is unsure where she fits into society, and society doesn't necessarily have a spot for a woman like her. She knows she is talented, but is wary of a culture that will reject her special abilities and label them as dangerous and frightening. Women who tried to assert themselves in 1950's America received the brunt of their culture's apprehension towards that sort of behavior. Biskind claims, "many films punished ambitious women for their independence," and Gil does, in fact find herself in a difficult situation after using her

powers to bewitch Shep, therefore giving herself the power in their relationship. Gil is discouraged by both herself and the society around her from using her skills due to a fear of rejection.

Sally and Gil have both acquired financial independence as business owners. Sally doesn't want to be independent, but she runs a small bath and body shop, while Gil runs her foreign art boutique. Sally and Gil are both strong women, but their lives get turned upside down in their respective films after seeking love in inadvisable ways. Sally knows there is a curse on Owens women that causes their lovers to die, but she falls in love anyway. Gil does not have the same problem with love, but she does force Shep to fall in love with her through the use of magic. The women make decisions based on passion, not logic, and their lives take a turn for the worst after their initial contact with men. The similarities do not end there though; at the end of their respective films, both witches are happy with the men upon whom they have cast spells. The women are the ones who must learn to love the men, the men have no choice in the matter. These once independent women have now settled down with men to take care of them, and they give up their unique skill set to do so. This speaks to Peter Biskin's idea of a liberal society that wants women in the home, for there is no better way to keep a woman at home than stripping away her independence and giving her a man who will work for her. Both women are successful as independent people, but the liberal society drives them towards men and the family life.

Sally Owens is after a more serious relationship than Gil. While Gil's advances on Shep are originally motivated by revenge, Sally wants someone to love. For most of Sally Owen's life, she seeks a man who will fulfill her wish for a family, and when she meets her first husband early in the film she instantly thinks of marriage and a family. This insistence on becoming a wife and conforming to gender roles is conservative in nature, driven by a desire to keep the status quo. Sally knows her husband will one day die, but her girlhood dream of finding a man to love ends up clouding her judgement. Sally is in a reversed position from Gil; Sally is supposed to be the more modern woman. Practical Magic is set in modern times, and Sally should be more empowered and free of the male-controlled society. Men are all Sally's life focuses on though, which contrasts the nonchalant approach Gil takes with Shep. Gil is

actually the woman with more modern characteristics. Independence is one of these, but Gil is not comfortable being completely alone. Both women fear the rejection their ancestors have dealt with for centuries.

Going with the theme of rejection, there are anti-pluralistic ideas contained in Bell, Book and Candle, as well as Practical Magic. Pluralists believe everyone can come to agree with one another when all opinions are heard. This does not hold true in either film. The general consensus in Bell, Book, and Candle as well as Practical Magic is that witches need to remain in hiding because society will reject them whenever possible, no matter how reasonable the witches might be once they are understood. The films also oppose the pluralist idea that general questions of morality are important. Biskin points out how pluralists thought these questions were, “irrelevant and even obstacles to the smooth operation of democracy”(38). Sally displays a lack of morality when she repeatedly lies to Officer Hallet and performs inadvisable spells throughout Practical Magic. These films do follow the pluralist view in other aspects however. In his book, Biskin asserts that, “if reality was as complex as pluralists said it was, straightforward explanation of events were useless,”(17), and the witchcraft featured in these two films is surely indicative of a world in which reality is complex. Shep and Officer Hallet experience this phenomena more than anyone, as they do not know what is really happening to or around themselves until the end of their respective films.

There is an ideology surrounding Bell, Book, and Candle that Gil's Aunt Queenie reinforces: Gil should settle down eventually because domesticity, not capitalistic success, is the key to happiness. Biskin points out that mid-century films presented single women as, “Hysterical, emotional, irrational, [and] political extremists.” This is certainly true of Gil, but also true in Practical Magic. Sally's sister Gillian Owens is a wild woman who, unlike her sister, embraces her magical powers. Gillian ends up alone after broken relationships end and cannot find the same happiness as her more conservative sister. Sally sees her sister as a poor role model and shies away from the use of magic for personal enjoyment. Gillian Owens jumps from relationship to relationship, but Sally doesn't want that.

The need for a lasting relationship is part of the reason Gil seduces Shep. Gil is trying to find a companion in her lonely life, a life in which she sometimes finds herself speaking to her cat. Biskin observes the loneliness of women in his book by claiming, “Women did not have to fall in step with the lonely crowd; they were already at the head of the parade”(256). When Gil sees other women around her, there can be almost no comparisons drawn between them and her, and this causes her to question her own life. The sense of rejection comes into play, and the women strive for comfort in the form of an accepting male. Acceptance in a romantic form is crucial for Gil and Sally's happiness because they can't find it elsewhere in society.

Extremism was frowned upon in peace-time America, especially where women were concerned. Throughout most of their respective films Gil and Sally are extremist women whom society wants controlled because of their special powers. Their extremism can be attributed to their magic powers, but also the fact that they're single and own their own businesses. This is a masculine lifestyle that the conservative side of Bell, Book, and Candle aims to change, and does so successfully with Gil's marriage to Shep. Women were not completely powerless in the liberal society that wanted them kept home. As Biskin points out, “The managerial mother was a career women after all; its just that her career was the home and the family”(268). Gil and Sally both end up this way at the end of their films, abandoning their independent lives for those of housewives. By the end of each film, gender roles are back to their traditional ways. The women give up their magical powers in order to be with the men they love.

By examining a specific subject like women's role in post-war America, I was able to notice smaller and smaller details in each film to discern hidden meaning. Themes like rejection, family, and independence jumped out at me, and the connection between witches and post-war women of America was revealed. Sally and Gil did not seek out men to find financial stability; they already had that. These women had simply never experienced acceptance outside their family, and they craved it. The witches are strong women outside the home, and successful by any measure. Women could have power in the

1950's, they could vote and sexism was slowly headed out the door. Liberals and conservatives preferred women hold power in their home, where their social influence was contained. Conservatives were less inclined to give women any type of social power, and Gil gives up most of hers when she agrees, at the end of the film, to be with Shep. The same holds true for Sally and Officer Hallet, but both women accept this type of life without hesitation, and understandably so. Acceptance is the key to happiness for Sally and Gil, and a life without magic promises more acceptance than the alternative.

Works Cited

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