

# **The Witches of Eastwick Short Guide**

## **The Witches of Eastwick by John Updike**

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# Characters

Perhaps in this novel more than any of his others, Updike uses characterization as a means of social commentary, and his portrait of the principal characters has raised significant controversy. Feminist critics have been particularly harsh in attacking what they perceive as stereotypical presentation of all three witches. In the opinion of reviewer Alice Bloom, the author's penchant to take on the premises of feminism has led him to produce a novel which is from beginning to end a "tart cliché tarted up as sniggering, smart humour." Distinguished feminists such as Margaret Atwood and Gail Godwin have leveled harsh criticism at the seemingly one-dimensional female protagonists. Hence, an examination of characterization is critical to a sound understanding of Updike's intentions and a deep appreciation for the themes which he explores in the novel.

The *Witches of Eastwick* is dominated by four strong characters: three divorced women and the man who captivates all of them. What makes each even more intriguing is that each is endowed with extraordinary, perhaps even supernatural, powers.

If there is a central female figure, it is Alexandra Sporoff. Over forty and conscious of her age, Alexandra has engaged in a series of affairs since losing her husband. She is a devoted mother (although one might question her willingness to share marijuana joints with her teen-age son) concerned about providing for her family's welfare. As the novel progresses, readers learn that she is suffering from an internal illness which is surely cancer.

Alexandra is a woman for whom physical love is important, not simply to gratify sexual passion but to meet her emotional needs. She is less concerned with her reputation among the members of the community than she is with establishing relationships which make her feel fulfilled. Having had more than one affair with the local married men, she is aware of the hypocrisy of many of the townspeople in Eastwick, and she has developed a sardonic view of life in the city.

She seems comfortable with her magical powers, but seldom wishes to use them for evil purposes. Rather, she finds her witchcraft useful in helping her get her way in small matters; only when goaded by her friends, especially Jane, does she resort to what might be called black magic. The other two principal women figures in the novel look for her to take the lead in arranging for their meetings with Darryl Van Home.

Jane Smart, a cellist, is in some ways the most headstrong among the three witches. Also divorced, she has taken up with the husbands of some of the more outwardly upstanding women in Eastwick, and like Alexandra she understands the hypocrisy which exists beneath the surface of righteousness in the community. Among the women she seems the most self-centered and possessive. For example, when she sees that Darryl is paying attention to Alexandra or to Sukie, she withdraws from their circle temporarily to express her displeasure. She, too, restricts her supernatural powers to serving minor interests, but she seems the most capable of turning her powers to evil.



She goads the others, especially Alexandra, into activity against Jenny Gabriel when the teenager displaces all three witches in Darryl Van Home's life.

Sukie Rougemont is the most docile of the witches, relying on her two sisters for advice on a number of important matters in her life. Like them, she has affairs after separating from her husband. A writer for the local newspaper, she is often privy to gossip about town which she shares with her friends. Much like Alexandra, she wants a sound relationship with a man in order to fulfill her emotional needs. She is easily led to action, both for good and for evil, by her more strongminded friends.

By far the most mysterious and enigmatic character in the novel is Darryl Van Home. Clearly intended as an incarnation of Satan, Van Home is a shady businessman who seems to be quite rich, and who lavishes his wealth on his friends while poking fun at the townspeople of Eastwick. Updike describes him as having slick-backed hair, ears that seem pointed, and pointed shoes that remind people of goats' feet. He is a collector of art, although his tastes range from the merely eccentric to the bizarre and grotesque.

His moral code is simple: Instant gratification is worthwhile for its own sake, and there is no room for the feelings of others in his life. He disdains conventional norms, both moral and social. His lifestyle is a mockery of both middle-class values and those of the wealthy who behave more conventionally in social circles. He uses the women he meets as objects, collecting them much as he does his art work, and spurning them when he no longer finds pleasure in their company. Late in the novel, he reveals his bisexual nature when he runs away from Eastwick in the company of a young man. Despite his obvious faults, however, he is able to cast a spell over the three women who seek his company; all of them find him irresistible, and each is secretly hopeful that he will choose her as a bride.

The townspeople of Eastwick are less well developed, and most seem to be stereotypes of characters expected to be found among the citizens of a small town. The preacher Clyde Gabriel and his wife Felicia are drawn with some distinction, and the complexity of their marital relationship lends depth to one's understanding of their behavior when Clyde has an affair with one of the witches. The portrayal of the Gabriels' children is less well defined, even though both become deeply involved with Darryl Van Home.

As one finds in most modern novels, the interest of readers lies principally in a few characters whose interactions reveal much about both the social concerns and themes with which the author is dealing.



## Social Concerns

The *Witches of Eastwick*, John Updike focuses on one of the subjects which most interests him as a chronicler of modern American life: the changing status of men and women in society. His three female protagonists struggle to establish themselves within a small-town community which is at best begrudgingly tolerant, and at its worst openly hostile, to their unconventional lifestyles. However, Updike gives these women a decided advantage over their opponents; all three have supernatural powers, enabling them to manipulate nature and other people. All once-married but now on their own, they suffer the opprobrium of their fellow townspeople because they try to make their way as mothers and breadwinners without the support of a husband. Their struggle indicates that, despite the movement in America toward acceptance of alternative lifestyles, the majority of Americans in small towns are not particularly accepting of women who flaunt traditional conventions, especially with regard to love and marriage.

The larger social issue underlying the stories of the three women whom Updike casts as witches in the small Rhode Island town of Eastwick is the effect of the feminist movement on American society.

Never a strong supporter of women's liberation, Updike seems at best ambivalent about the rectitude of his heroines' behavior. At times their romantic adventures seem comic, at other times truly tragic and worthy of readers' sympathy.

All three women are presented as victims of spite and even open prejudice; their weekly gatherings (which Updike ominously refers to as covens), at which they bemoan their fate as social outcasts, are presented with great compassion by the author. Nevertheless, while their valiant attempts to achieve dignity within the community are certainly laudatory, their willingness to flaunt conventions of morality and custom seem somehow misguided. Readers are made to see the ill effects of their actions—especially the death and destruction of other families as a result of their affairs with various men of the town, and especially with the mysterious stranger Darryl Van Home. It is not surprising that the three women who have been ostracized by the Eastwick community should turn to Van Home when he extends his friendship to them; the consequences of their doing so lead to personal trauma and social tragedy, however, and Updike is suggesting that this may be the cost for a society which refuses to grant understanding to people whose lifestyles do not conform to those of the majority.

Another concern for Updike is the role of religion and morality in modern America. As he does in many of his other works, the author takes pains to point out the many failures of conventional religious practices. The characters in *The Witches of Eastwick* who are associated with the various churches in the town are hardly models of good behavior; while they may observe the rules of their religion on the surface, their pharisaical behavior is evident in their private lives and in the un-Christian treatment they show toward Alexandra, Sukie, and Jane.

Their initial willingness to embrace the stranger Darryl Van Home because he has money also suggests that they are more concerned with outward appearances than inner strength of character.



## Techniques

The *Witches of Eastwick* may be Updike's most daring novel with regard to technique. Usually given to writing realistic fiction with only a hint of the surreal occasionally showing up through the dreams or fantasies of individual characters, Updike diverges significantly from his habitual patterns in this novel. The assumption on which the novel is built is that the three women about whom he writes are actually witches, with superhuman powers enabling them to affect the elements, change the course of natural events, and direct the actions of humans with whom they come in contact. He takes great pains to suggest physical similarities between Darryl Van Home, the principal male figure in the work, and the Devil; like the three women he seduces, Van Home is given the ability to affect both the forces of nature and the behavior of humans with whom he comes in contact.

Updike presents his fantastic tale with great understatement, however, treating the activities of his three witches as if they were merely extensions of their everyday activities. Through careful use of metaphor and allusion, Updike inconspicuously creates the illusion that supernatural acts are possible, thereby heightening the suspense created by the conflict between the forces of good and evil which vie within the novel.



# Themes

As it is in most of Updike's other longer works, the importance of the individual person's struggle to understand his or her place in the universe and comprehend the meaning of life are major themes in *The Witches of Eastwick*. Bereft of the comforts that conventional living provides to so many individuals, the three heroines are forced to look within themselves, and to each other, to discover some purpose for living. While he avoids being overly philosophical, Updike manages to place his heroines in situations where they must question their role as women and as mothers. Each confronts in some way a personal tragedy, causing all three to reflect on the transitory nature of life. Even their fecundity and their almost rapacious desire to engage in sexual activity have metaphysical implications: As they enjoy the fruits of behavior which leads to procreation and continuance of the species, they are forced to see that their own offspring are visible signs that a new generation is arising to replace them as they grow older. The presence of physical illness within the community— one of the witches suffers from what appears to be cancer—causes them to reflect on their own mortality.

A second important theme in the novel involves the universal conflict between good and evil. Set against the background of a New England community, allowing Updike to rely upon the traditions of a region that has been closely associated with witch trials in the past, the novel offers insight into the struggle of traditional religion and the occult. While the hypocrisy of conventional religion comes under fire from Updike, there is nevertheless a strong indication that the work of Darryl Van Home, a thinly disguised representation of the Devil, is inherently and fundamentally destructive. Updike is concerned with ways the forces of evil are able to penetrate a community such as Eastwick, whose citizens are more concerned with upholding the outward conventions of morality than with practicing Christian virtues.

A third theme, closely tied to the social conventions of Eastwick and modern America, is the exploration of the role of women in a patriarchal society. Like many novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, Updike is interested in the struggle of women to attain a sense of personhood and self-worth in a community where men have traditionally established both the rules of behavior and the values on which individuals are judged. Although not a feminist, he is clearly sympathetic to the plight of his three heroines who attempt to be accepted as respected citizens of their communities.

While the circumstances of the latter half of the twentieth century have brought this perennial problem to the forefront of the modern consciousness, Updike recognizes that the problems women have had in achieving equal place with men both socially and morally extends throughout Western civilization. His heroines' refusal to accept social conventions is not simply a failure of moral willpower; rather, it is a conscious act of rebellion against standards which have kept women from achieving their full potential in a culture where they are often seen merely as objects created for the pleasures of men.

More muted, perhaps, than other themes is Updike's exploration of the power of art. All three of his witches possess some artistic talent. Among the three of them they cover





the principal forms of artistic expression: visual, musical, and literary. Initially they use their talents for harmless purposes (two even try to earn a living in this way), but by the end of the novel they all employ their artistic skill in practicing their magic. The linking of art and magic is an age-old practice, and the notion that the artist is somehow possessed of special powers has been popularized in literary circles since the emergence of the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth century.

Figures such as Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest* (1611) and the poet described in the closing lines of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1816) are literary precursors to Updike's three women. Although he is never direct in saying so, Updike may be trying to show readers that the power of the artist to create a spell with his art is a form of magic which may be used for good or for evil.



# Adaptations

In 1987, Warner Brothers released what could be described as a "blockbuster" movie based on Updike's novel.

The screen version of *The Witches of Eastwick* had an all-star cast: The three witches were played by Cher (Alexandra), Susan Sarandon (Jane), and Michelle Pfeiffer (Sukie), and Jack Nicholson was cast in the role of Darryl Van Home.

Directed by veteran George Miller, who had achieved notoriety through his work on the *Mad Max* movies, the motion picture follows loosely the story Updike relates in his novel. There are a number of significant differences, however, most notably the shift of focus from the three witches to the figure of the devil. Not surprisingly, Nicholson steals the show with his caricature of Satan; many reviewers noted how closely the character of Darryl Van Home resembles the principal character in the movie version of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980), a motion picture which established Nicholson as the premier portrayer of demented evil for his generation of screen stars.

The women in the film are deprived of the complexity of character which Updike gives them; their attraction to Van Home, and their behavior in his presence, is merely stereotypical. Further, they do not even realize they have supernatural powers. Perhaps because the stars selected for the roles are themselves known for their ability to portray seductresses, the female characters on screen have a sameness about them which makes them decidedly less interesting than they appear in the novel. Screenwriter Michael Christofer chose to rewrite the ending of the novel so that the three witches are able to achieve mastery over the devil, driving him back into hell and joining together to take over Van Home's riches.

Although a modest success at the box office, the screen adaptation of *The Witches of Eastwick* falls short of the critical success achieved by Updike in his novel.

Updike himself made fun of the film in a *New Yorker* article wherein he pointed out the superiority of the novel over the movie adaptation.

An audio version of the novel, with the text read by Donada Peters, has been produced by Books on Tape.

## Key Questions

The *Witches of Eastwick* provides opportunities for serious discussion of a number of topics central to the American experience, especially those of everyday social life. Despite the fantastic premise on which the novel is based—that witchcraft exists and is practiced in modern times—both the characterization and story line offer fertile grounds for exploring issues about the quality and value of twentieth-century American living. Updike's graphic representations of the power of the Devil, coupled with his hostile portrayal of the townspeople in their treatment of the three women, provide opportunities to discuss the ways a novelist can use negative portrayals of character and action to suggest a positive alternative regarding both behavior and belief.

1. Although Updike has lived in New England for most of his adult life, many of his novels and stories are set in other locales. Why is New England a particularly appropriate setting for *The Witches of Eastwick*? In what ways does the setting itself lend depth to the presentation of character and theme? In what ways does the history of the region contribute to readers' appreciation of the story?

2. Feminist critics have been particularly harsh on Updike for his portrayal of the three principal women in this novel.

In what ways is Updike exploiting stereotypes of women? Is he fair in representing each of his female protagonists as a well-rounded character with individual strengths and faults?

3. Felicia Gabriel, whose husband becomes the lover of one of the protagonists, is one character who is not taken in by the charms of the three witches. However, when she begins speaking out against the three women in the novel, she finds herself spitting forth objects such as buttons, feathers, and dust balls. Why does this happen? How has Updike used this episode symbolically in the novel?

4. In many of his works, Updike uses names to suggest something about characters or something about themes within the novel. What names seem to have special significance? How has the author used these to give some insight into character or theme?

5. At the end of the novel, each of the three witches leaves Eastwick to take up a new life. What is the significance of their departures? Do the choices they make after their disastrous affair with Darryl Van Home indicate that they have grown and learned from their experience?

6. Each of the women in the novel is an artist, and Darryl Van Home claims to be a collector. What is Updike saying about the practice of art?



7. Shortly before he leaves Eastwick, Darryl Van Home preaches a sermon to a congregation in town. What is the significance of that sermon? What do we learn about modern religion? Can we trust Van Home's perspective?

## Literary Precedents

The most obvious precedent for Updike's story is the historical record in New England. Living in Massachusetts for most of his adult life, Updike has frequently turned to the lore of the region for subject matter in stories and novels. He has also indicated on more than one occasion the significance he finds in the Puritan legacy of modern America, especially with respect to attitudes about religion and sexuality, two themes which predominate *The Witches of Eastwick*. Unquestionably, there are thematic parallels between this novel and one considered among the greatest American classics, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; see separate entry). Parallels with other works in this tradition may also be found, such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), but it would be unwise to speculate that Updike was directly influenced by such writings.

On the other hand, *The Witches of Eastwick* is a part of a tradition in popular fiction which explores the seamy underside of ostensibly respectable society. In American literature, the best examples of that tradition are the novels of Henry James; however, a more recent exemplar, also set in New England and long a best seller, is Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (1956; see separate entry).

Updike's devil is particularly modern.

Unlike his predecessors in works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1307-1320) or Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), he lacks grandeur and inspires no fear. Rather, he is at times comic, at times merely pathetic. His pandering to the townspeople and especially the three witches, his intense egotism and his pursuit of selfgratification make him merely repulsive.

The portrait is in keeping with Updike's general view of religion in contemporary America. In earlier times, the awesome dimensions of the religious experience had a powerful effect on human behavior. In contemporary society, however, the religious aspects of human experience have been reduced to a series of psychological and sociological complexes which cause people to feel good or, in the case of their encounter with evil, merely uncomfortable.

## Related Titles

Since Updike has always been preoccupied with religion and sexuality, it is not surprising that a number of his novels share affinities with *The Witches of Eastwick*. *Couples* (1968) tells the story of men and women living in a small new England community similar to Eastwick; there, too, a veneer of respectability covers lives of desperation, longing, and sexual promiscuity. The three novels which Updike has written as a modern retelling of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* also focus on themes of sexuality and religion: *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986), and *S.* (1988; see separate entry). The men and women in these novels, modeled on those in Hawthorne's tale of adultery and reprisal, bear some similarities to ones in *The Witches of Eastwick*, although none of these novels includes the practice of witchcraft as a premise for the behavior of its characters.



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