

The Witching Hour Short Guide

The Witching Hour by Anne Rice

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Witching Hour Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Adaptations.....	8
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13



Characters

There are many important characters in *The Witching Hour*. The demon Lasher, a pivotal character, apparently existed even before his appearance to the witch Suzanne in the seventeenth century. When he attached himself to the Mayfair family, he saw to it that they prospered and their enemies suffered. It is difficult to reckon the nature of Lasher who has so many conflicting qualities. On the one hand, he champions the cause of the Mayfairs, but on the other his very existence compromises their lives, leading them often to excess and madness. What he is truly about is an unanswered question. He certainly has as a prime goal to find a living human body that he can take over as his own, and ultimately he does. The consequences of this accomplishment are presented in the sequel *Lasher* (1993).

Rowan Mayfair and Michael Curry are the two main human characters.

With their unusual powers, they struggle throughout the story to do what is good and honorable. Even when Rowan gives up her baby to Lasher, she does so with the miscalculated expectation of destroying the demon.

As he relentlessly takes possession of her baby's body, she screams, "I'll destroy you, with my last breath." But she fails: "Oh God, I tried to trick it [Lasher], I tried to kill it." Seeing in the rapidly developing man that had been her baby, her mothering instinct overrides everything else, she becomes protective of the creature and spirits him away clear out of the United States and out of reach of any who might do him harm.

Michael, on the other hand, having gained his powers after a near drowning early in the story, loses his powers after a near drowning — at the hands of Lasher — near the end of the novel: "It's the strangest thing," he says to one of Rowan's visiting relatives, "but after the accident in the pool, my hands went back to normal." He concludes that he may have lost his power to "see things" because he might not have "used the power right."

Aaron Lightner is an investigator of occult experiences. His interest in Michael Curry's "powers" serves to stimulate Michael's interest in the history of the Mayfair witches. Ultimately it is through Lightner and his access to the Talamasca files that 340 pages of this 965-page novel are supplied.

Most of the other characters are Mayfairs — Suzanne, Deborah, Charlotte, Angelique, Marie Claudette, Marguerite, Julien, Katherine, Mary Beth, Stella, Carlotta, Belle, and on and on. The story covers four centuries and there are many Mayfair descendants who start out in Scotland and move on to Amsterdam, Haiti, and ultimately New Orleans, with San Francisco the scene of Rowan and Michael's first meeting.

Critic Patrick McGrath considers Rice's characterization something of a problem, particularly that of Rowan and Michael. They "have both been so constructed that they hardly for a moment live or breathe except as structural elements serving specific

design functions in the grand scheme." He describes it as a "sort of caricatural sketchiness."



Social Concerns

Scientific, medical, and ethical concerns are addressed in this work. Within the first hundred pages, characters debate the pro-life/pro-choice abortion issue. Michael Curry had lived with a woman for seven years, and when she accidentally became pregnant, she decided not to have the baby. Michael "didn't contest [her] right to abort the child. He could not imagine a world in which women did not have such a right." But because of their circumstances, living "in luxury and security," he could not understand her intention to abort the child that he wanted so "desperately." The woman felt that a child at this time in her life would interfere with her own pursuits; also she felt "her body was not something to be used merely to deliver a child to another person. She also believed that should she have the child and give it up for adoption, as Michael suggested as an alternative to abortion, she "would live with that guilt forever." The bitterness resulting from the couple's continuing argument about the pregnancy created an unbridgeable chasm in their relationship. The woman moved out and ultimately sent Michael the bill for the abortion.

Scientific and medical research on live fetuses becomes an ethical concern for Rowan Mayfair. A colleague tells her that technically the fetus is "not even alive. It's dead, quite dead, because its mother aborted it ... so technically it is a nonperson, a non-human being." Rather than throw it away, he continues, it made sense to keep the "tiny body alive . . . these little gold mines of unique tissue . . . swarming with countless tiny extraneous cells" with which researchers could "make discoveries in the field of neurological transplants that make Shelley's Frankenstein read like a bedtime story."

Arguing the immense value of fetal cells in medicine, the doctor makes a compelling case for fetal tissue research, saying recipients of the tissue do not reject it and the cells continue to develop. "My God," he argues, "don't you realize this allows us to participate in the evolutionary process?" Which perhaps inadvertently counters his argument about the scientific advantages of such research with an ethical and moral consideration: Should humans tamper with nature, an age-old problem? As a neurologist, Rowan has mixed feelings about such research.

In a review, Patrick McGrath mentions a circumstance in the story where a witch judge shows a would-be witch how to bring forth the evil spirit Lasher. Because he is a judge, McGrath suggests this act is "as if the law, in its zeal, actually foments transgression, the better to serve its function." The woman Deborah, daughter of the young witch Suzanne, tells an inquirer that "it was a witch judge that taught her the black magic . . . he read [the evil book *Demonologie*] to her . . . Hour by hour he taught these things to her."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the American justice system has continually come under scrutiny because of actions by its various arms which seem less moral and ethical than the Founding Fathers envisioned. Rice's comment seems to refer to this apparent practice of lawyers and others to coerce results to help supply their *raison d'être*.



Techniques

Because of her desire to give the reader the necessary family background of the Mayfairs, Rice has a great deal of history to present. She deals with this with the device of the Talamasca Order's files that contain letters and reports written by occult investigators all the way back to the seventeenth century who have recorded the strange doings of the Mayfairs, beginning with Suzanne. With some poetic license, these reports and letters contain dialogue and description couched in an appropriate, somewhat archaic language and style telling the story in more than sufficient detail and development. McGrath calls the book "bloated" and "grown to elephantine proportions," and indeed there is much more story here than is needed to tell about Lasher, Rowan, and Michael. There is considerable repetition; as each character becomes cognizant of certain information, whether the reader has already been made aware or not, it is repeated. Nine-hundred-and-sixtyfive pages are about three hundred more than are needed to get the reader to the graphic, startling scene in chapter 51 where the climatic erotic birth/ possession takes place.

Erotic scenes pepper the book: Lasher is quite a sensual being and takes great pleasure in giving pleasure to the various Mayfair witches. His sinister motive — to steal the body of a newborn baby for his own — does not affect the soft-porn quality of some of the writing. Strong compelling imagery abounds.



Themes

Rice writes about the supernatural world that she feels co-exists with the so-called natural world. In *The Witching Hour*, witches and demons with powers beyond those of humans use those powers for good and evil. Unlike the vampires in her *Vampire Chronicles*, the witches in this novel are not especially harmful to the health of mortals, and they in fact are mortal themselves, burning to death or crashing to earth from great heights from which they have flung themselves or been flung.

Most often their powers are used to increase their wealth and power and to wreak havoc on their enemies. The point is that when one sees a family that seems always to prosper even when illness or adversity strikes, Rice's explanation seems to be that there are supernatural creatures out there who have the power to overcome things that mere mortals cannot.

The main theme of *The Witching Hour* has to do with good and evil. Rice suggests that in everyone there is the potential to do good or do evil. In the case of Rowan, it seems that through heredity, she has the ability to kill merely by "wishing" her opponents dead. On two occasions, once when she was a child and once when she was a young adult, the persons interfering with her in a threatening manner died almost immediately. That their deaths appeared to be the result of brain hemorrhage made it seem that their deaths were natural. But Rowan, although unaware at the time of her "witch" powers, knew somehow that she had caused the deaths. Yet knowing her power, she struggled against using it against anyone else. As Rice has said, she has no doubt "that people manipulate unseen forces" and that goes double for people with supernatural abilities.

Michael Curry's new-found ability to read people's minds, their pasts and futures just by placing his hands on them or their possessions was certainly a tool for good or evil. It is to his credit that he chose to restrain its use, not exploit it or commercialize it to his advantage.

Both Rowan and Michael, with their unusual powers, personify the circumstance that everyone has the potential to be good or bad. Their story shows that it is a constant struggle that often ends unhappily. But Rice has Michael say that "Life itself must be founded upon the infinite possibility for choice and accident . . . We must believe that we can change, that we can control, that we can direct our own destinies...

I believe in Free Will."

Adaptations

The Witching Hour has been recorded on audio tape, read by actress Lindsey Crouse.



Key Questions

Witches by their very historical nature are humans with spiritual connections. Generally (disregarding Glenda, the Good Witch of The Wizard of Oz) they are thought to be malevolent or at least mischievous. When Rice switched from the once-were-humans, the undead vampires, to humans with extrasensory powers, witches, it might be supposed she wished to bring a verisimilitude to her stories that is not possible with her vampire or mummy characters. After all, witches are living people, albeit with unnatural powers, and are therefore obviously more believable than vampires. Reports of ESP and other psychic phenomena that appear in the news from time to time make The Witching Hour seem less fantastical. To be pondered is why Rice saw fit to switch from vampires to witches: Had the well run dry? Did her move from California to her childhood home of New Orleans trigger a new creative interest? Whatever the reason for her shift to a more "realistic" aberration, her witches and their attendant spirit Lasher begin a new chronicle.

1. Considering the length of the history of the Mayfairs, discuss how important you find it to the story of Rowan and Michael and Lasher.
2. The title is mentioned by Lasher on page 930 when he tells Rowan "you know what I want. It is Christmas Eve . . . The witching hour is at hand, Rowan, when Christ was born into this world, when the Word was finally made flesh . . ." Explain what Lasher means. Explain the significance to the other characters.
3. Are Michael's near-death experiences like any real-life experiences that have been reported in recent years?

How believable is Rice's depiction of Michael's experiences?

4. Why do you think Rice develops only one male witch out of four centuries of witches? Is this a kind of bias or does this have some relationship to the sexuality of the Lasher character?
5. Explore the circumstances of Rowan's removal as a child from the influence of the Mayfairs in New Orleans to San Francisco? How valid is the reasoning behind this? How acceptable is the plotting to return her to New Orleans?
6. Plot the basic story of The Witching Hour. What is it really about?
7. What is the position on religion shown in the characters of Michael and Rowan? To what extent do you think their positions represent that of the author?
8. What real purpose is served the story by Michael's ability to look into others' minds after his near-death experience? Could the story have proceeded in a similar vein without his becoming clairvoyant?



9. Which single character is the most interesting, realistic, and vital to the story's enjoyment? Why? Which character's story could easily be removed without any damage to the novel?

Why?

Literary Precedents

Stories of witches can be found in the Bible (the Witch of Endor), Shakespeare (in *Macbeth*, c.1600), Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," and even Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953). Supernatural occurrences have served fiction in such works as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and Goethe's *Faust* (1790) develops the theme of the devil's ambition to bring down a human, much as Lasher attempts occasionally. Considering *The Witching Hour* from the point of view of its detailed creation of the atmosphere of New Orleans, George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) is an earlier book that makes a similar attempt.

Related Titles

The Witching Hour is the first in what might be called Rice's Witch Chronicles. Published in 1993, the novel *Lasher*, and in 1994, the novel *Taltos: Tales of the Mayfair Witches* continue the story.

Aaron Lightner, a significant secondary character, was introduced in *The Queen of the Damned* (1988). *Lasher*, a demon, has no counterpart in previous Rice novels, although he resembles the vampire Lestat in his charismatic irresistibility.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994