

# WICKED BACKGROUND – WITCHCRAFT IN LITERATURE

**W**itches have been symbols of good or evil in our society since the beginnings of time. They have been a part of our folklore and literary heritage, often acting as symbols of good and bad, right and wrong. In **WICKED**, Glinda symbolises the classic ‘good’ witch; dressed in white, wielding a wand and performing good deeds. Elphaba is the classic ‘wicked’ witch, with her green skin, pointed hat, broomstick and propensity for evil deeds. That is the myth. In this modern musical the truth is far more complex, as it is in the real world.

The term *witch* traditionally meant a worker of magic and usually refers to magic derived from the earth, such as the use of herbs and the practice of divination using natural objects. The traditional term *wizard* relates more to the magic of the scholar, of literate intellectuals of whom modern scientists are direct descendants. It is a world where the arts of mathematics, astrology, alchemy and ritual magic are all intertwined.

The ancient practice of magic existed before the Greek and Roman empires and predates Christianity. Many tales of sorcery appeared in the myths of ancient Greece. Two of the most powerful sorceresses of Greek mythology are Circe and her niece Medea. Both are the daughters or priestesses of Hecate, a goddess of the waning and dark moon who came to be the patroness of witchcraft.

Women were accused of being witches throughout history, especially at times when people feared the unknown or sought to explain ‘the unexplainable’. The Salem witch hunts in Massachusetts are one of the best documented witch hunts in history and were used by Arthur Miller as the basis of his famous play, *The Crucible*. In the 20th Century, witchcraft became more sanitised in television comedies such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Witches and magic became ‘cute’. *Buffy* in turn saw the cute story inverted to express modern values. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Charmed* and the *Harry Potter* series, show that magic and witchcraft as vehicles for entertainment are as popular as ever.

## DISCUSSION: (Beginners)

What unexplainable aspects of life in the past would have been considered magical? For example, the seasons, eclipses. What aspects of life today could be considered magical? For example, modern medicine, such as X rays.

## DRAMA AND ENGLISH: (Intermediate)

Choose one of your favourite evil characters from a traditional nursery rhyme or fairy tale, such as the Big Bad Wolf, and improvise a scene involving them. Create some of their back-story so the audience learns something more about them or explains why they became evil. Use the back-story to try to explain what makes them tick and why they act as they do.

## DRAMA AND ENGLISH: (Advanced)

Choose one of your favourite evil characters from a traditional nursery rhyme or fairy tale, such as the Big Bad Wolf. Who would this character be in the modern world? Improvise a scene updating your story to a contemporary context.

