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Libby Shortt
Cedarville University

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Libby Shortt

Dr. Deardorff

Senior Seminar

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Witches Among Us: Elizabeth George Speare's Social Commentary on McCarthyism in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*

A two-time Newbury Award winning author, Elizabeth George Speare has written four novels, one work on nonfiction, and several plays and magazine articles. Teachers, students, and parents remember Speare's works of fiction because of their ability to bring history to life. In her work *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Elizabeth George Speare writes about a young girl name Kit Tyler and her experiences with Puritans and witchcraft in Wethersfield, Connecticut. Speare describes the people and events of the novel in a memorable way that allows the reader to learn more about America in 1687 and Speare's own commentary about her culture. When Speare wrote *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in 1957, America had just endured Red Scare led by Senator Joe McCarthy. Just as the townspeople of Wethersfield feared witches, Americans feared Communists and the Soviet Union. The historical context in which Speare wrote *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and the content of the novel suggest that Speare's comments on America and McCarthyism.

Although Elizabeth George Speare is a beloved and well-known author in the elementary and middle school classrooms, few literary scholars have studied her works critically. There have been only two critical articles written about one of her best-known works *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. In one of these critical articles, Sara L. Schwebel examines *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by looking at the historical climate in which Elizabeth George Speare wrote. According to

Schwebel, Speare reworks the historical events of Connecticut in the 1680s in order to illuminate the McCarthy era of the 1950s in a way that the modern educator can apply in the classroom (Schwebel 195). Despite her argument, Schwebel builds her argument in a roundabout way that is often more confusing than understandable.

Schwebel sets out to investigate how history and myth interact in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in order to determine how the novel comments on its historical setting, historical context, and its relevance to present day America. Since writers write in different environments and with different constraints, it is important to know the historical environment in which Speare wrote in order to see the significance of the historical details she included and those she excluded. Schwebel does point out that the novelist tries to write a good story in contrast to an historian who tries to reveal truth. As she says, “Thus, writers of historical fiction condense time, add and delete historical actors, and endow incidents with more or less significance than they actually held at the time of their occurrence” (Schwebel 196). It is permissible for Speare to develop a good story at the expense of historical accuracy. By deleting or de-emphasizing certain characters or events, Speare communicates a specific message both regarding the historical setting of the novel and her present historical environment because according to Schwebel, “scholars have argued that narratives provide insight into the accepted norms of and, revealing ways in which people understand, embrace, and resist the dominant culture” (197). Schwebel claims that by writing a book about the witch trials of Connecticut, Elizabeth George Speare also writes about McCarthyism in America, but she does not move beyond this general statement to explore precisely what Speare may be saying about McCarthyism.

After establishing the plausibility of Speare’s commentary on McCarthyism, Schwebel attempts to illustrate how Speare fuses the American myth with historical research as well as

how Speare's reinterpretation of history comments on the America of her day, and offer suggestions about how contemporary teachers can use *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in their classrooms. According to this article, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* employs the Frontier Myth and thus moves past mere juvenile literature into a form of literature that speaks to the American mind. The Frontier Myth "comprises cycles of separation from settled community regression into the wilderness, and a violent but ultimately triumphant clash with Indians" (Schwebel 198). Kit's coming to Wethersfield, Connecticut as a spoiled granddaughter of a wealthy plantation owner from Barbados to live with her Puritan aunt and uncle as well as the process by which she learns to live among the Puritans allows Kit to improve her character, build her dreams, and gives stimulus to create her identity as an American. Although she said that *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* uses the Frontier Myth, Schwebel redirects that statement later in her argument to say that Speare retains the traditional Frontier Myth but changes their meanings to comment on the 1950s. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* does retain some of the elements of included in the traditional Frontier Myth, but not all of them play a vital role to the story.

After giving further textual evidence, Schwebel must say Speare has reworked the Frontier Myth because although *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* does use Kit's separation from everything familiar to her in the beginning of the story to develop a new attitude within her, the settlers do not engage in a significant and ultimately triumphant conflict with Indians as a major part of the story. Schwebel says that John Holbrook's character develops his American identity while he fights with the colonial militia and lives in captivity for a time. However, this character's development is only minor in the development of the story. The story does not center around the conflict with the Indians, but in order to say that Speare uses the Frontier Myth, Schwebel must say that Speare reworks the elements of the myth to comment on her society.

Despite proposing this, Schwebel never says what Speare says about her society and McCarthyism.

Despite her claim that Elizabeth George Speare comments on McCarthyism in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Sara Schwebel's article focuses more on applying *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* in the classroom than on the specific commentary it gives on McCarthyism in America. Yet through examining the historical context surrounding the writing of the novel and the places where the novel deviates from its meticulous historical accuracy, it is possible to recognize what message Speare communicates regarding America and McCarthyism. Although Schwebel does not say what message Speare may be conveying regarding McCarthyism, Speare reflects the society in which she lived in her novel *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Speare also writes a novel that displays vivid historical details and figures that ground the work as a piece of historical fiction. Yet Elizabeth George Speare strictly adheres to the societal customs and historical facts of the time only as far as it does not interfere with the plot of her story. Specifically, as she ends the novel, Speare departs from a historically accurate portrayal of witchcraft in Puritan Connecticut by using fairy tale elements to end the story happily. By showing how historical fiction devolves into fairy tale in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Elizabeth George Speare offers her doubt about America's ability to overcome McCarthyist prejudice.

Often movies, pictures, and news coverage portray 1950s America as the picture of the ideal America where every family has a mother and a father and a pretty house with a picket fence. Yet despite the deep prosperity of the fifties, this decade also ushered in significant changes in America as the country recovered from the ravages of World War Two. Although World War Two had been a rallying point for America as she came out of the Great Depression, it was also a time of great hardship and suffering. After coming through the Great Depression

and then witnessing man's cruelty to others in the concentration camps, the blitzkriegs in Europe, and the colossal power of the atomic bomb, the American people were tired of hardships. They were ready to live in comfort and relax. They were ready to laugh instead of make the best out of their difficulties. As they pursued happiness, Americans of the 1950s repressed or ignored the negative but still present ills of society.

America emerged from World War Two as one of the most powerful nations in the world. Pressed by other countries for postwar support, America was ready for a witch-hunt (Halberstam 6). Senator Joe McCarthy's crusade to remove Communists from the country played off of the country's paranoia after World War Two, but television shows and books portrayed an idyllic society that finally brought laughter instead of hardships. The House Un-American Act Committee accused prominent officials and celebrities of being associated with Communism because they desired to push away, cover up, and leave behind the hardship of war in place of a sparkling American image (Halberstam 11). America wanted to enjoy its new prosperity, but Americans were still vulnerable to false crusades like Joe McCarthy's quest to rid the country of Communists.

Senator Joe McCarthy adopted the Anti-Communist cause as the party declined but built fear about its rise (Morgan 378). A self-made man, McCarthy, who completed high school in one year, had not distinguished himself in the Senate and needed an issue in 1950 to help him with reelection (Morgan 376). Although he could be noble, as when he worked on behalf of children of divorce, more often McCarthy operated out of frustration and lack of information. He had no problem with stretching the facts when making a case. As he began to build his Anti-Communist platform, McCarthy continued to slant the facts in order to make people believe that Communism was a greater risk than in reality. An "accidental demagogue" (Halberstam 49),

McCarthy did not know how explosive his speech in Wheeling, West Virginia would be when he spoke to the Republican Women's Club (Doherty 14). He really wanted celebrity more than he wanted to rid the country of Communists. A historian, David Halberstam said, "McCarthyism crystallized and politicized the anxieties of a nation living in a dangerous new era. He took people who were at the worst guilty of political naiveté and accused them of treason. He set out to do the unthinkable, and it turned out to be surprisingly thinkable" (52). Joe McCarthy played off of the fears of further war in America after World War Two to draw further attention to the questionable relationship between America and the Soviet Union.

Even as the United States prospered after World War Two, the evils of Communism became more evident as the Soviet Union gained power and territory. During the 1930s, the American Communist Party flourished as many Soviet spies operated in the country, but the American Communist Party did not operate openly because it was "anti-fascism" (Morgan 166). At this time, America did not fear Soviets because Communism seemed to be friendly and similar to the American Spirit. The Young Communists League sought to control mass organizations that appeared to be "socially uplifting" and "innocent sounding" non-Communist associations (Morgan 168). In an effort to address changes in immigration, Democrat senator Martin Dies wrote on May 15, 1935 that he saw one hundred thousand Communists parade in New York and that the Communist party criticized everything about American values (Morgan 186). Five days previous to that on May 10, the House Special Committee on UN-American Activities formed (Morgan 187). The Communist Party emerged as anti-American, but America gave aid to the Soviet Union, which in turn placed United States in a difficult place.

Although Communism was largely not compatible with American democracy, when Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, America started giving aid, up to one billion dollars in aid

and supplies, to the Soviet Union. Throughout World War Two, “America sent the Soviets eleven billions dollars in lend-lease, including three thousand planes, three hundred and eighty-one ships, and more tanks that they could use” (Morgan 224). As the Soviets struggled to survive World War Two, Communism began to take hold in other countries such as China in 1949. As the country saw what Communism was really like, the American Communist Party began to decline, and by 1950, the change in attitude toward Communism and decline in Soviet spies in America crippled the American Communist Party (Morgan 374). America allowed the Soviets to retain power in East Europe after the war because they had lost so much (Halberstam 9). In this time of declining Communist support, Senator Joe McCarthy latched onto Communism in order to catapult his own career in the Senate. Due in part to the change in perception of the Communist party and also in part to the Soviet Union emerging as a powerful force contrary to America, Americans feared the Soviet Union and Communism and tried to put forth pro-American optimistic attitudes that allowed the country to enjoy its new prosperity and happiness.

Yet even as the country feared the rise of a dying Communist party, people turned to laughter as a way to deal with problems. As America began to move beyond World War Two, television became more and more a part of the American culture. During World War Two, the movies had been a means of dispensing cultural ideologies. After World War Two, the television became the new medium for communicating the ideals of America (Doherty 21). Americans enjoyed television because it allowed them to move beyond the struggles of the Great Depression and World War Two to enjoy the good days that had been promised for so long. Yet as America prospered materially, the fears and concerns about Communism remained.

One of the best examples of the contradictions between the ideologies presented by television and the problems in America is the CBS show *I Love Lucy*. In the hit television show *I*

Love Lucy, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez portrayed a zany couple that fought but always managed to end the day with a kiss and a smile. In this more puritanical, genteel time, *I Love Lucy* portrayed the challenges of marriage in hyperbolic fashion so that they were funny instead of completely serious as they would be in real life. When Ricky would not let Lucy be in his show, the audience sees Lucy's stubborn resolve that inevitably unites the couple instead of making Ricky angry. The show also challenged society's view of the expectant mother by having Lucy declare her pregnancy on the screen (Halberstam 200). This great show was the top-rated television show in the country from 1952-1955 with as many as 50 million viewers every week (Doherty 51). Desi and Lucy's success story seemed to be a model of Cold War American virtues that included ethnic pluralism, upward mobility, and entrepreneurial intelligence. However, in real life the couple shared a cold relationship. As opposed to their television personalities, they basically only tolerated one another. Ricky and Lucy were nothing like Desi and Lucille (Halberstam 201). The most popular television show in the country portrayed a happy family that remained united despite arguments and challenges, but in reality the couple divorced.

The dream portrayed by Lucy and Ricky was only a veneer to cover up the incompatibilities of Desi and Lucy. America loved the fake family, but they did not want to see the real struggles the couple faced. America wanted to laugh, but her citizens still feared the risk of Communism and indeed feared further hardships in general. In much the same way, the Puritans in Speare's novel *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* fear the spread of witchcraft. In her award-winning work of historical fiction, Elizabeth George Speare expresses her skepticism in America's ability to overcome their fear of McCarthyism by mixing the historical narrative with the fairytale.

Although *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is a work of historical fiction, it is more than a story set in an historical place or time. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is a book grounded in the historical events that Elizabeth George Speare devoted much time in studying before begin the writing process of her novels. When writing her books, Elizabeth George Speare paid careful attention to the historical events surrounding her story's plot. She would usually spend approximately one year to one and a half years researching and immersing herself in the information about the place and real historical characters that would contribute to the development of her stories (Apseloff 24). In her earliest novel, *Calico Captive*, Speare used *The Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson* as the foundation for the novel's protagonist Miriam Willard. Miriam Willard was Susannah Johnson's daughter-in-law and received limited exposure, but her character intrigued Speare who then wrote *Calico Captive* about the Indian captivity from Miriam's perspective (Apseloff 24). As a writer, Speare wanted to write fiction for children that was not only substantive but also reliable historically. She started her novels by intensely researching her topics so it should come as no surprise that her novels contain so many historical details, and that her plots, though fully developed apart from historical facts, are also closely intertwined with history.

Although she thoroughly researched the time period about which she wanted to write, Elizabeth George Speare did not always find a character in history to be the protagonist for her story. While conducting research for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Speare did not find a character in history she could use for the protagonist like she had for *Calico Captive*. Yet as she pored over the historical documents regarding her hometown Wethersfield, Connecticut's early colonial history, the pieces began to come together for her novel. She used the conflict surrounding Connecticut's charter in 1687 and the witch trials in Hartford, Connecticut to frame

the story (Newbery Acceptance Speech 74). *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is incredibly historically accurate, particularly in its portrayal of the intense fear Puritans had of witches in late 1600s, and how Puritans treated those accused of witchcraft.

Contemporary readers and scholars cannot always fully understand the Puritan fear of witches because the meaning of the term has changed dramatically from when the Puritans accused someone of witchcraft. Although contemporarily a witch is someone who plays with magic but does no harm to others, historically a witch is a person, usually a woman but sometimes a man, who has devoted her life to serving the devil and did whatever he wanted (Cohn 50). In order to understand the Puritanical fear of witchcraft, one must first understand how ingrained the witch had been into numerous societies to the point that believing in witches and fearing their power was not just a Puritanical belief.

Although each culture has a slightly different view of precisely what witches are and what they do, there are several general characteristics that remain universal to all cultures. In general, a witch is a human, most commonly female, who had met with the devil and had occult powers to hurt members of her community. Witches could afflict the people around them with sudden illnesses, mental disorders, maiming accidents, infertility, miscarriages as well as control the weather and livestock although their specialty was killing babies and little children (Cohn 50). Witches preyed on the weak using their powers to accomplish the devil's work. Their powers came from the devil who demanded their allegiance for his aid. Regardless of the culture, involving oneself in witchcraft went hand in hand with worshipping the devil.

Throughout history whenever a culture describes a witch, or one who uses occult forces, they almost always do so as part of worshipping a Deity or Spirit. In addition to bringing harm and suffering on others, generally witches participated in ceremonies with the Devil, called

sabbats that were perversions of traditional religious rites and services. In these sacrilegious gatherings, the Devil would usually appear to oversee the proceedings in the form of half man and half goat. Those gathered would then pledge allegiance to him by kissing his foot, genitals, or anus. After pledging allegiance to the devil, the witches would dance around the fire or fly into the night in the form of an animal to fulfill the devil's purpose (Cohn 51). Puritans are the most well known believers in witchcraft, but other cultures also believed in witches. Puritans inherited and enhanced their beliefs about witches from other cultures that had come before them. While these characteristics of witches are most commonly credited to European cultures, Roman, African, and American Indian cultures also believed in these people with supernatural powers.

Witches go back as far as Roman times when supposedly witches worshiped the pre-Christian Dianus. At that time, people believed these followers of Dianus took the form of spirits who would come to a family and demand to be welcomed as an honored guest. If the family satisfied the spirit, she would bring them blessings, but if they failed to give her the treatment and attention she wanted she would bring curses on them (Cohn 54). No other culture believes that a witch is a neutral spirit or person who could perform either good or evil.

Most cultures, including African, American Indian, and European believed that witches could only perform evil deeds. In African cultures, witches used voodoo rituals such as taking a piece of hair, a nail clipping, or a sample of bodily fluid to use in cursing or bringing harm to an individual. Similarities between African and European beliefs about witchcraft include that in both cultures the majority of witches were female, that witches had the power to separate from their bodies and usually does so at night in order to take the form of an animal, and that witches preyed on people even going so far as to suck human beings for their blood and eat their flesh (Breslaw 49). Although American Indian culture was naturally more mystical than European, or

even Puritan, culture, they too believed in women who had wicked preternatural powers that could devastate, maim, and bring calamity on humans (Cave 198). African and Amerindian beliefs intersected with English and Puritan beliefs because of the slave population in the English colonies. Tituba, the slave credited with beginning the Salem witch trials hysteria, came from Barbados, and was most likely of African or American Indian descent. The majority of slave in the colonies at the time were African, and so their beliefs about witchcraft circulated in Puritan and other colonial communities (Breslaw 49).

Despite similarities between other cultures' beliefs about witchcraft and England's, England and her colonies held specific views about these servants of the Devil. Like most other cultures, the English believed that witches had power to bring evil on others. Beliefs about witches in England even went so far as blaming witches "for inexplicable diseases and deaths" (Breslaw 49). As one historian says, "In European folklore, as among Amerindian and African cultures, witchcraft, or the evil actions of cunning people, helped to explain otherwise inexplicable strange happening; but to the educated part of the Christian community, the ultimate sources of evil power was beyond human control and had to be traced to a diabolical force" (Breslaw 103). The English believed in the devil and credited him for personal and community problems such as crop failures, sudden death, and epidemics. In contrast to previously discussed cultural beliefs about the way witches harmed others, according to English beliefs about witchcraft, most spells were performed by touching, pronouncing a curse on an individual, or making eye contact with an individual, but sometimes hexes could be performed by taking a nail, piece of hair, or a sample of bodily fluid from the person one wishes to curse (Breslaw 96). The English people also believed in the flying witch discussed earlier. The flying witch would go out at night to perform evil, cannibalistic, and even erotic ceremonies with the devil (Breslaw 91).

Since Puritans originated from England, Puritans living in the colonies took their beliefs about witchcraft directly from those in England. Puritan beliefs about witchcraft were even more integral to their community because of their theological beliefs. As one historian said, “the magical techniques of the cunning folk may have belonged to the realm of folklore, but the beliefs regarding the presence of the spirit world were endemic throughout the community” (Breslaw 100). During the seventeenth century, New Englanders lived in an enchanted world where ghosts visited people in their dreams, Satan actively prowled the earth through his servants, and every day something wonderful occurred. God or Satan could conduct a wonder, but regardless a wonder always confirmed God’s will (Hall 90). Puritans also believed that “magic and the affairs of the Devil were part of that will and to deny the existence of the Devil was tantamount to admitting to atheism” (Breslaw 101). Wonders verified the importance of the Protestant community and demonstrated order. Puritans viewed this order as a constant reminder of the imminent end of the world. When something happened that violated the normal order of nature such as an earthquake or accident, they thought it meant that Christ would return and judge the world (Hall 91).

Puritan theology forms the foundation for Puritans intense fear of witches. Although Puritan ministers hardly wrote or discussed witchcraft, witchcraft cannot be understood apart from Puritan theology (Weisman 24). Those who practiced magic wanted to rebel against the standards of life endorsed by the clergy, and prophecy gave the common man knowledge and position that was independent of the local pastor’s teaching (Hall 90). Any kind of deviation from the Puritan faith as put forth by the clergy was considered dangerous. Challenging the establishment meant rebelling, and rebelling often translated into practicing witchcraft. As

mentioned earlier, a puritanical definition of witchcraft involves aligning one's self with the devil.

According to Puritan culture, one could not merely dabble in witchcraft. Puritan ministers and theologians did not believe that regular people, meaning people who had not given allegiance to the Devil, were able to use the occult without the Devil's help (Breslaw 102). Because of Puritan theological beliefs, "fear of witches and belief in their magical powers was not an isolated episode in the colonial experience; it was deeply woven into early New England's culture" (Woodward 16). Puritans did not invent the witch. Rather it was a belief held by many previous cultures that the Puritans enhanced because of their religious beliefs. In conjunction with the combined social development of the witch, Puritans greatly feared witches as part of their theological beliefs. Elizabeth George Speare portrays this deep fear of witches in the townspeople of Wethersfield in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*.

In keeping with her historically active novel, Speare includes this intense Puritanical fear of witches in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. From the moment the main character of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Kit Tyler, meets the Connecticut colonists, she experiences their fear of the unusual. On a brief trip ashore at a town before Wethersfield, Kit dives into the river to save a toy for a young girl. New Englanders disapprove of Kit swimming because in the Puritan culture, "no respectable woman could keep afloat like that" (*The Witch of Blackbird Pond* 13).

According to Puritan culture, a woman who could swim was a witch. Magistrates would often use the water trial to convict a witch using the argument that using the argument that the water rejected the witch just as the witch had rejected her baptism in the church (Woodward 17). The Puritan community learns of Kit's action through Goodwife Cruft who indoctrinates others against Kit (*WOBP* 55). Speare communicates fear Puritans harbored for witches not only in the

way they reacted to Kit's actions but also in the way the town treated Hannah Tupper, a Quaker woman.

The townsfolk in Wethersfield fear Kit because she behaved differently than they were accustomed. They also fear Hannah Tupper because she holds different theological beliefs. Puritans in Massachusetts exiled Hannah and her husband because they were Quakers or as Puritans called them "queer people" (*WOBP* 99). Supposedly, "Quakers cause trouble wherever they go. They speak out against [Puritan] faith" (*WOBP* 99). Because Hannah was not a Puritan, she had to leave her home with a brand on her forehead to live on the edge of a swamp near Blackbird Pond in Wethersfield. The townspeople did not interact with her because they fear she can cause sicknesses or other trouble on them (*WOBP* 182). Regardless of the fact that the townspeople cannot prove any occult dealings by Hannah, they still call her a witch (*WOBP* 137). The people of Wethersfield fear Hannah because she deviates from their theological beliefs, which then translates into cavorting with the devil. Speare depicts the Puritanical fear of witches through the Wethersfield inhabitants' reaction to Kit and Hannah.

The Witch of Blackbird Pond is also historical accurate in the way it treats those accused of witchcraft. Historically, a woman accused of witchcraft endured a trial, and then if convicted she suffered great punishments that ranged from spending time in the stocks, being branded on the forehead, or more extremely having an ear cut off or being hanged (Karlsen 53). The accused usually never escaped the stigma of being accused of witchcraft. Townspeople still feared the accused, and the accused often moved or in some cases fled before they even were tried. Accusing someone of practicing witchcraft essentially ended that person's life as a member of her community. Quite often, a woman accused, convicted, and punished of witchcraft in a nonfatal manner lived a life of isolation. The stigma of witchcraft, even if acquitted, was often

too much for the Puritan community to overcome. In addition to harsh punishment, witches and even those simply accused of witchcraft were not able to interact in the community (Karlsen 29-30). *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* refers to several witches that were punished in this manner.

When awaiting her trial, she learns that of the two women accused and convicted of witchcraft, one was banished from the colony and the other hanged (*WOBP* 203). Although it has been twenty years since the town had dealt with any witches, the town remembers them because they were convicted of witchcraft. Goody Harrison, the woman banished lived the rest of her life without a home because she had been labeled a witch, and Good Johnson's life literally ended when a court found her guilty of practicing witchcraft. The way Speare describes the treatment of these women and the townspeople's' responses to these women corresponds to historical facts.

When studying witchcraft in the American colonies, most people only study the Salem witch trials in 1692. Witches did not appear at one isolated point in time, and one of the periods where New England accused, tried, and executed supposed witches was between 1647 and 1663 in Hartford, Connecticut. From 1663 to 1688, magistrates and authorities drastically changed their prosecution methods. After this time until roughly 1688, approximately the same time in which Speare set *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, New England enjoyed a calm time with little tension as far as witchcraft. When witch-hunt and trials began to occur again, prosecutors and judges had changed in their approaches to trying witches (Woodward 16). Instead of listening primarily to those accusing the supposed witches, magistrates gathered evidence and interviewed witnesses about their accusations (Woodward 17). Authorities still believed that witches were real, but they demanded more evidence before convicting. Even when they did convict someone of witchcraft, authorities often released witches or kept them in jail instead of sentencing them to

be hanged (Woodward 18). Despite intense fear of witches, Puritan judges and theologians wanted to avoid wrongful execution.

Like the magistrate presiding over Kit's case in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, judges at this time were more skeptical of those accusing other individuals of practicing witchcraft (Woodward 18). When hearing the case against Kit, the magistrate listens to the various witnesses and allows all relevant evidence to be heard instead of believing the allegations brought against her (*WOBP* 209-15). Not only were judges more hesitant to quickly convict someone as a witch, they also appealed to a panel of ministers led by Gershom Bulkeley, the minister that shepherds the Wethersfield community in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Historically, Gershom Bulkeley shared an interest with other officials of the time in natural magic as well as a deep skepticism toward charges of witchcraft (Woodward 19). Speare's depiction of Bulkeley matches this historical information. When asked for his thoughts during Kit's hearing, Reverend Bulkeley says, "it is necessary to use the greatest caution in the matter of testimony" (*WOBP* 213). Other than Kit's treatment, Speare accurately portrays both the punishment for accused witches and the judicial mindset of the time.

Elizabeth George Speare pays meticulous attention to the historical accuracy in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* for most of the novel. Yet as she develops the interpersonal relationships between the characters, Speare resolves conflicts in a way that reflects the fairy tale rather than a strict historical perspective. Speare's novel devolves into a fairy tale in order to allow Kit to overcome the stigma of being accused of witchcraft and to allow the characters to live happy lives. As opposed to pure historical fiction that allows children to experience history in a new way, "The fairy tale confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments" (Bettelheim 8). Fairy tales allow children to interact with general problems that all people face

and learn how to deal with the problems they will face in life. These tales teach children that through perseverance they can overcome the inevitable obstacles that come with life. Child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim says that, “In all these and many other respects of the entire ‘children’s literature’ – with rare exceptions – nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tales” (Bettelheim 5). Different cultures have kept these takes, such as Cinderella, Rapunzel, St. George and the Dragon alive in order to convey morals and virtues for men and women to follow. By reading these cultural tales, people find hope for the future and encouragement through the present (Luthi 24). *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* uses elements of the fairy tale in order to comment on the American culture of Speare’s time.

One element of the fairy take that Speare uses in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is the Cinderella story. The traditional folk tale version of Cinderella, the scullery maid that marries a prince, speaks to man’s ability to overcome adversity by persevering with humility and trust in others (Luthi 61). Although there are several different cultural versions of the Cinderella story, each version involves the heroine’s initial downfall only to enjoy a more exalted position by the story’s end (Bettelheim 247). One critic connects *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* with Cinderella saying, “like Cinderella and other folktale heroines, Kit is temporarily ‘debased.’ Her wealthy grandfather had been knighted by the king so the household drudgery she must now perform is new to her” (Thuente 51). However, Kit Tyler’s rags to riches story is slightly different than the traditional Cinderella tale.

Before Wethersfield, Kit lived in luxury at her grandfather’s estate Barbados. She had wealth enough to bring seven trunks filled with silk dresses, shawls, and embroidered gloves (*WOBP* 38). Yet she, like Cinderella, experienced a change of fortune when her grandfather dies forcing her to come to live with her Puritan aunt and uncle in Wethersfield, Connecticut. When

she comes to Connecticut, Kit must learn to do the menial household chores and eat simple food with her new family (*WOBP* 34). Used to having a personal slave to attend her, Kit now has to work in the onion fields, help the family make candles, and card wool for spinning (*WOBP* 45, 75). However by the end of the story, Kit becomes engaged to Nat Eaton, a ship's captain who promises her a life of adventure (*WOBP* 248). Although Kit does not return to her previous material wealth, she amasses great emotional and relational wealth through her experience in Wethersfield.

Another Cinderella element in Kit's story are two the prince figures: William Ashby and Nat Eaton. By marrying William, Kit will return to her former material wealth. William can offer Kit status and freedom in the community. She can bid farewell to menial labor and never bother to worry about what other people say about her (*WOBP* 135). William offers Kit an escape from her uncle's strict hand to live a life of leisure without learning how to respect others. Yet Kit rejects William Ashby for her real prince Nat Eaton. As a ship captain, Nat cannot offer Kit the luxury and stability that William could with his land and house, but Nat allows Kit the freedom to behave freely. Whereas William wanted Kit to behave a certain way, Nat allows Kit the freedom to express her thoughts and opinions (*WOBP* 132). Rather than return to material comfort, Kit chooses the man who loves her and allows her to be herself. She follows the character Hannah Tupper's advice: "thee has never escaped at all if love is not there" (*WOBP* 170). Elizabeth George Speare's Cinderella figure, Kit, chooses to wait for love and therefore risk having to live alone and work instead of marrying the man who could bring her back from rags to riches. In this Cinderella story, the Cinderella figure, Kit, rises out of her emotional poverty through her love for Nat.

Another point where the story devolves from historical fiction into fairy tale is in the emphasis the story gives to romance. Historically, young girls like Judith and Kit would have been trying to find a husband because their parents and community would have expected them to get married, have children, tend the house, and work alongside their husbands. They would have been looking for a man who would be able to provide for them rather than a man that they loved. However, Speare creates female characters, who marry men that they love that can also provide for them. Speare uses romance as a way to resolve the conflicts of the story both in the Wood family and in Wethersfield village.

Speare uses romantic relationships both to create and solve conflict. Initially romantic interest creates conflicts when Kit attends Meeting for the first time, and William Ashby, who everyone had expected Judith to marry, asks for permission to call on Kit. Judith and Kit never really bond from that point on because Kit had essentially taken William away from Judith. Judith then sets her cap for John Holbrook who really loves Mercy but agrees to marry Judith to avoid hurting her. Meanwhile, Nat cares for Kit and become jealous when he finds out that Kit will marry William. In Speare's story, everyone wants to be in love, but no one finds the right person initially.

When Kit refuses, the romantic tensions disappear. William because she does not love him, then each relationship rights itself. William and Judith will marry. John returns from Indian captivity bold enough to declare his feelings for Mercy, and at the end of the story Nat tells Kit that he loves her and offers to take her with him. The troubles and disagreements of the story disintegrate as each couple begins their new lives together, and situations return to their right states (*WOBP* 237). Finding romance is part of each person's development. In *The Witch of*

Blackbird Pond, finding one's mate brings happiness and security, and by all indications each couple will live happily ever after.

Speare moves beyond the historical facts in which she bases the novel to fairytale elements that resolve the conflicts and allow Kit to live happily ever after despite her experience with witchcraft. While Speare's uses of the Cinderella motif and romance in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* shows how the story devolves into fairytale, the place where Speare sacrifices historical accuracy most clearly is at the end of the novel. Unlike the historical accounts of woman accused of practicing witchcraft, Kit Tyler goes on to live a normal life where her uncle finally accepts and appreciates her work and where she finds love with a man who loves her despite her past (*WOBP* 195, 248). The situation with Kit in the courtroom really has no solution historically. If Kit had been one of the people accused of witchcraft in Hartford in the 1680s, she would not have been able to go back to a normal life. Even being acquitted would not have made the townsfolk change. Kit has fraternized with a woman who had been accused of witchcraft, and therefore, historically, the townsfolk would have continued to suspect her of sordid conduct.

At the novel's ending, Kit overcomes the stigma of being accused of witchcraft and unjust situations are made right. Not only does Kit find acceptance and love, but Prudence, a small girl abused in the story, finds love and peace at home at the end of the story. During Kit's trial, Prudence comes forward as a witness to prove Kit's innocence. Instead of performing witchcraft, Kit had been teaching Prudence to read (*WOBP* 219). Prudence had not been allowed to attend the village dame school because her mother said that she was too stupid to learn simple reading and writing (*WOBP* 113). Prudence's mother, Goodwife Cruff, hit and abused Prudence as well as controlled her husband. When Goodman Cruff learns that his daughter can read, he suddenly finds the courage to stand up to his wife and take control over his house. Prudence does

not have to worry about not having enough food or clothing because he would be there to make sure she was cared for (*WOBP* 224). The trial not only sets Kit's life to right, but it rescues an innocent child from further harm as well.

In a real witch trial, an acquittal like Kit's would not have given the accused back her life. The trial also would have reaffirmed the community's fear of witches. It, most likely, would have caused greater fear and disunity because people would have been watching their neighbors in order to spot others who practiced witchcraft. Eventually, the town would have recovered, but initially there would have been most likely only greater fear and division. Speare ends the novel in a happy way where all the wrongs have been made right and the rational truth triumphs over the people's superstitions, yet that is not historically accurate to the Puritan culture. Because of Speare's attention to detail in using history to develop the plot, one can also assume that Speare intentionally chose to end the novel the way she did.

Elizabeth George Speare is a gifted children's author who plans out her novels in order to clearly communicate the message she wants the reader to discover. In *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Elizabeth George Speare adheres to historical facts as she develops the novel's setting, but she deviates from the historical into the fairytale when she builds relationships between the characters and resolves the conflicts of the story. Realistically, the story could not have ended in the way it did because of the intense ingrained fear the Puritan community harbored for the occult. The story could only end happily by using the elements of the fairy tale. By using the fairy tale to resolve the conflicts of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Elizabeth George Speare expresses her doubt in America's ability to leave behind the fear and suspicion of McCarthyism. Just as the Puritans feared witches, America too seemed to fear anything that could threaten their newfound happiness and prosperity.

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