

Good essay about
semiotic analysis of
race in american
horror story: coven -
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The horror anthology series *American Horror Story* has derived much of its tensions and drama from the past. Some of the more unsavory elements of American history have been mined for horror, from serial killers to Holocaust survivors to the horrors of early mental institutions. In the case of the third season, *Coven*, the major theme is witchcraft. Set in contemporary New Orleans, the season revolves around a cold war between a white coven of witches descended from the Salem witches, and a black voodoo coven, dating back hundreds of years to the antebellum South. According to Gibson, “America’s popular cultural witches continue to inhabit the same contested ground between modernity and conservatism that they inhabited in the middle years of the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*, and even the 1590s” – this provides the show with a campy, yet powerful platform on which to explore the prejudices of both the past and present (103). In the penultimate episode of this season, “Go to Hell,” many of the racial tensions found in the American culture of the past and present are very much alive. “Go to Hell” depicts a vibrant and diverse New Orleans battle of witches, with conflict often falling on racial lines, but transcending them enough to become a progressive piece of television media.

The racial makeup of the show is surprisingly multiracial and diverse. New Orleans has a somewhat higher population of African-Americans than in many other areas of the country, and so the black coven is represented just as often as the white coven. No other races are found in the episode besides white and black; Leveau is patently Creole, while Queenie is portrayed as an inner-city black teenager. In terms of their characters, they are portrayed as vengeful, spiteful and confident, but this is not in contrast to the rest of the

show's women. Queenie in particular fits the black stereotype of being more full-figured, as she is obese, and is depicted as working in a job serving fried chicken to other black customers. The mystical voodoo character of Papa Legba is the other prominent black character in the episode. He is portrayed as a stereotypically Creole voodoo demon, with an addiction to cocaine, white makeup, a tall hat, and a demonic appearance. Leveau and Queenie both see their versions of 'hell' in this episode, which (for the former) means torturing Delphine for killing her black slaves, and (for the latter) having her mind-numbing job as a chicken shack. In short, the show gets mileage out of showing the more odd aspects of black and New Orleans culture than it does with white culture, making it more diverse.

In this episode, and the show in general, race is seen as a major dividing line of conflict. The war between Fiona Goode's and Marie Leveau's covens is ostensibly a war between white and black. The white coven's token black character, Queenie, is shown to have divided loyalties between the two covens. According to Gibson, witches like Leveau are a "problematically empowered heroine," who looks for righteous revenge (91). The historical figure Delphine LaLaurie, a white slave owner who is given immortality and unearthed from her grave, is forced to live in a more racially tolerant America, which she despises. Despite the racial conflict in the show's present, the existence of Delphine (and her rivalry with Leveau) is meant to show the audience the futility of racism as a thing of the past. In short, by linking the oppression of women witches to the oppression blacks faced against whites, the show deals in allowing persecuted minorities to have bloody, gory justice.

Because of these things and more, “ Go to Hell” is an example of American Horror Story’s commitment to allowing both women and blacks to get revenge against the majority for historical oppression. According to Gibson, “ Salem’s accusers werelinked with the conservative forces of ‘ fanaticism’ and ‘ superstition’ whilst the defenders and accused were associated with ‘ real and thorough reformation’ and ‘ justice’” (87). Because of this, the treatment of witches in this show falls in with the typical idea of witches being an oppressed minority. The witch hunters, and the Axeman, are shown to be the conservative ones, while the ‘ accused’ witches seek their own justice. According to Gibson, shows like these explore a patriarchal “ tension between radically empowering women and conservatively affirming the need to control them” (Gibson 97). The use of witches as a stand in for general oppression, as well as showing the specific struggles of blacks in America without sensationalizing it. This allows the racial politics of the episode to be relatively progressive. Racial tensions are used to explore the greater importance of gender revolution – the end of the episode sees the covens unite in order to take on the real enemy: male murderers and witch hunters. To that end, American Horror Story: Coven’s episode “ Go to Hell,” despite mining New Orleans and Creole witch culture for over the top camp, is racially progressive in terms of having black characters with agency and nuance in the story. These characters are not defined by their cultural quirks or laughed at, and are able to transcend their stereotypes in order to gain solidarity with the rest of the female cast of characters in the episode.

Works Cited

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