

'The Lighthouse,' 'The Witch' and the Horror of Robert Eggers

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There's a light in the darkness. This is a literal and physical aspect found in the settings of both of Robert Eggers' features, *The Witch* (2015), and *The Lighthouse* (2019), but it's also a thematic and tonal truth that makes the filmmaker's horror films distinct within the genre.

The Lighthouse centers on two lighthouse keepers, Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) and Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson), whose isolation on an unnamed island off the coast of New England builds to a strange, humorous and rocky relationship, one beset by the tumultuous waves of folk legends, confessions and madness. Equal parts Lovecraftian horror story and existential chamber piece in the vein of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, *The Lighthouse* initially seems like a far cry from *The Witch*. But upon closer inspection, Eggers' films work as companion pieces, with the woods surrounding a New England homestead in the 17th century and the sea surrounding a 19th-century lighthouse both hiding a strange and supernatural light within their centers. One leads to ascension and the other to downfall: transcendence and madness found within the light.

If the dialect used in *The Witch* kept some viewers, particularly those expecting a more modern horror film, at an arm's length, then Eggers goes a step further with *The Lighthouse*, co-written by his brother Max Eggers, who shares a similar fascination with New England folklore. Not only is the heavy dialect and sailor lingo employed to keep viewers off balance, but so is the filmmaker's decision to shoot the film in black-and-white and in the aspect ratio of 1.19:1, giving *The Lighthouse* the appearance of a silent film born of German Expressionism. The result is a film that feels claustrophobic and enhances the isolation. When Ephraim enters his lodgings and hits his head on the door frame, it's a moment that makes us innately aware of the tight space in which the story is taking place, and we, the audience, feel similarly trapped by proxy. What begins as a four-week position for Ephraim loses all sense of time as editor Louise Ford, who also edited *The Witch*, creates a surreal sense of displacement that again serves the characters on the screen and the viewers in the audience. The longer the film and narrative go on, the more uncertain it is that time has any meaning and that the characters are bound by any kind of temporal reality.

The Witch is far more contemporary in its format, which employs both color and a standard aspect ratio, but the sense of isolation is just as prevalent, if less aggressive. Thomasin ([Anya Taylor-Joy](#)) and her family are exiled from their Puritan community following an unrevealed religious dispute. The land on which they make their new home is harsh, the soil a poisonous bed for their “improper farm.” What’s interesting about the two forms of isolation Eggers presents in the two films is that Ephraim’s comes in the form of a stranger, Thomas Wake, who at first could not appear more different than his reserved companion. They are two men bound by a job, but even that job entails different responsibilities that further separate them. In *The Witch*, Thomasin is bound to her family, not strangers, but she feels strange among them — isolated among her own kin, who share her blood but not her soul. And again there is the additional factor that her responsibilities are not like those of the rest of her family, highlighted by her parents’ discussion of sending her to serve another family until she is of marriageable age. Thomasin and Ephraim are castaways among castaways, making them perfect candidates to be drawn to the light.

There’s something to be said about the power of a name. Midway through *The Lighthouse*, Ephraim reveals that his name isn’t really Ephraim but Thomas “Tommy” Howard. He not only shares a namesake with Thomas Wake but a root name with Thomasin. Wake, whose last name is also a term for disturbed water, has a mysterious background that changes over the course of the film. And as Ephraim steadily sinks further into madness and alcoholic stupor, the two become increasingly similar, caught in a literal dance that sees them locking arms and dancing round and round. There is the possibility that Wake is Ephraim’s own dark reflection, the worst elements of himself, and his own self-doubts about his moral rightness given form.

Eggers plays with doppelgangers during one of the film’s more surreal sequences, in which Ephraim is strangling another version of himself while Wake stands above, his eyes shining a spotlight on the sin below him. And then there’s *The Witch*, where Thomasin’s twin siblings Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and Jonas (Lucas Dawson) seem to display their own supernatural inclinations and a closeness with the goat Black Phillip. While the rest of Thomasin’s family meet tragic ends, the twins simply disappear by the end of the film, further suggesting their uncanny nature. But perhaps the most important doppelgangers in Eggers’ films are Thomasin and Ephraim/Tommy. Their stories run parallel to each other in a search for answers and self in a world that grows increasingly unreal. But Thomasin’s narrative line continues upward, and Tommy’s continues downward.

The lore of *The Witch* is concentrated, largely based on historical superstitions that boil down to the battle between the ironically unforgiving doctrines of the era's Christianity and the fear of Satanic works. The situation in *The Witch* is easier to navigate for viewers, and for Thomasin, who willingly signs away her soul with a clear-minded resolve and is given the gift of community, a coven, as a result. As with many folktales and fables, animals are central to both of Eggers' films. In *The Witch*, it's the family's goat Black Phillip, a disguised Satan, who draws Thomasin in and leads her to the light, a bonfire in the woods. In *The Lighthouse*, it's a one-eyed seagull that taunts Ephraim, eventually causing him to disobey Wake's warning to never kill a seabird, leading to a series of increasingly unfortunate events that pave their own way to the mysterious light housed at the top of the lighthouse. The lore in *The Lighthouse* is less specific, and though equally traceable to historical documents and journals cited in the film's credits, it is a collection of stories and tall tales picked up by sailors throughout history and across continents.

The lighthouse serves as a waypoint for sea lore, gods and devils of all sorts, each of whom become represented by Wake. The one-eyed seagull, never seen on screen with Wake, could be viewed as a manifestation of Odin, the one-eyed Norse god associated with wisdom, death and frenzy. Ephraim also sees Wake, whether real or imagined, take the form of a Siren (Valeriia Karaman) and Neptune, god of the sea. Both of these figures stem from Greek and Roman myths. And there are Wake's Christian equivalencies as God and Satan, testing Ephraim with the forbidden fruit that is the light at the top of the lighthouse. Last, there's the possibility that Wake is something much more ancient, an eldritch horror befitting the stories of H.P. Lovecraft's tentacled Elder Things. Perhaps Wake is simultaneously all of these beings, the ultimate form of judgment in the purgatory Ephraim finds himself in. While Thomasin feels herself torn between Puritanical equivalencies of God and the devil, with the former seeming like a far harsher figure, Ephraim is at the mercy of an entire pantheon of gods and demons.

Thomasin's signing away of her soul, a personal confession revealing the identity of her secret self, allows her to literally ascend at the ending of *The Witch* and float among her fellow witches. But Ephraim's confession, in the form of "spilling the beans" about an accident he failed to stop, an accident that sounds suspiciously like murder, cements his eventual descent. Despite Wake's warning's not to "spill his beans," Ephraim does and becomes aware of his own moral failings and corruption. He murders Wake and makes his way to the top of the lighthouse to finally stare at the light.

All we can see is an increasing brightness on his bloodstained face as he first looks in on the light in awe and then eventual mind-melting horror. He screams and flings himself away from the light, only to fall down the spiral staircase to the bottom of the lighthouse. The film ends with Ephraim's sprawled and naked body on the rocks, being eaten by seagulls. The imagery recalls the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and was punished for it by Zeus (another possible identity for Wake) chaining him to a rock and letting an eagle eat out his liver, which would grow back every day so the process would be repeated. It's also worth noting that the setting where Ephraim finds himself in the end seems different from where the lighthouse was. The lodgings and lighthouse are no longer visible, and while Ephraim was clothed when he fell, he is now naked. The film seems to suggest that the purgatory of the island is gone, and Ephraim has landed in hell.

The stories of Thomasin and Ephraim turn traditional notions of damnation and forgiveness on their heads. They represent a specific kind of New England horror, one born of the merging stories of immigrants, each clinging to different sacred texts with different ideas about light and darkness and who is deserving of which. *The Witch* and *The Lighthouse* form a steaming stew of myth, folklore and religion, bubbling over with our own moral insecurities.