

oppressive gender roles, and paganism should allow men to explore stereotypically “feminine” qualities and women to explore stereotypically “masculine” qualities: “Finally we have the ability to play. Men who are stuck in the role model of the stern, mature adult never truly engage in creative play.”²⁶ Particularly at pagan festivals today—such as Starwood and others—one sees quite a lot of this fluid play with gender roles. Cross-dressing, gender bending, and experimentation with alternative sexual identities are all common phenomena within the space of the festival, which allows for a kind of “serious play with the self.”²⁷

A similar debate has emerged around the links between neopaganism and environmentalism. By identifying femininity with nature and the earth, witches such as Starhawk may be seeking to undo the history of exploitation of both women and nature; but, ironically, they risk reinforcing the very old gender binaries and stereotypes of women versus men, earth versus heaven, nature versus culture, and so on. As critics such as Anne Archambault argue, this actually undermines their own larger feminist agenda: while they want to celebrate the sanctity of both women and nature, by identifying the two they repeat and reinforce the traditional stereotype that women are closer to nature, closer to biology, and closer to reproduction: “The claim that women are biologically closer to nature reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and limits ecofeminism’s effectiveness.”²⁸ More recent feminist environmentalists have therefore rejected the essentialist view of earlier 1970s-era ecofeminists. As the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues, women may have historically been identified with “nature,” and both nature and women may have been exploited for similar reasons, but this is a social construct, not an essential quality of their being. Today, she writes, “most ecofeminists . . . reject an essentializing of women as more in tune with nature by virtue of their female body. They see this concept of affinity between women and nature as a social construct that both naturalizes women and feminizes nonhuman nature. . . . Women may also suffer more due to the abuse of the natural world . . . but this is a matter of their experience in their particular social location, not due to a ‘different nature.’”²⁹ In any case, despite these internal debates over women, nature, and essentialism, many neopagans such as Starhawk continue to work toward a new vision of a human relationship with the environment that weaves together spirituality, ecology, and political activism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

1. Why do you think neopaganism emerged when and where it did—in the middle of the twentieth century in England, Europe, and the United States? What did it offer that many well-educated people found so appealing as an alternative to mainstream religions?
2. Does it seem strange that a tradition based on *magic* should have not only emerged but become hugely popular in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even as our society has become increasingly technological and scientific? And how do we account for the popularity of magic in more popular media such as

the Harry Potter novels or films such as *The Craft*, *Hocus Pocus*, and countless others?

3. Gardner claimed that Wicca was an ancient pre-Christian tradition of Goddess worship that had survived underground for millennia and had finally resurfaced in the modern world. Do you find this narrative plausible? Or does it even matter? Does a religious movement *need* to have an ancient history to be persuasive, or is all that really matters the fact that it exists and is meaningful to practitioners today?
4. What do you make of the debates over neopaganism, feminism, and environmentalism? Do you agree with authors such as Starhawk that the women's movement and environmentalism need the Goddess and pagan spirituality today? Or do you agree with more critical feminists who argue that this appeal to the Goddess is a form of essentialism and more of a hindrance than a help to these other social movements? Does an environmentalist movement need spirituality at all—or is the appeal to something outside science more of a distraction from than an aid to the effort to protect the environment and address ecological crises?

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Critically examine the question of Wiccan rituals being performed at the Fort Hood military base, which was a key issue in the 2000 US presidential debates (the candidates' responses can all be viewed online, for example on the Religious Tolerance.org website: www.religious-tolerance.org/wic_pres.htm). Why did this particular question involving a small new religious group in Texas become such a polarizing and divisive political issue at the national level? And why did the various candidates address it in the ways they did (for example, why did Bush firmly reject it, while Gore dodged the question)? And what larger interests were at stake in the possibility of granting or not granting Wiccans the right to perform ceremonies on a US military base?

SUGGESTED FILM

Read, Donna, director. *Women and Spirituality: The Goddess Trilogy*. Alive Mind, 2008.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Adler, Margot. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. New York: Penguin, 2006.