

The Witch's Hat



Where did the most famous hat in fiction really come from?

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

1 Lead-in



10 min

Write down the first three things you think of when you hear the word *witch*. Then discuss in pairs.

1. Where did your image of a witch come from: films, books, Halloween, family stories?
2. Is the witch of Greek fairy tales (*η μάγισσα*) the same as the Hollywood witch?
3. Can a symbol that once meant something frightening become positive? Give an example.
4. Why do you think the witch's hat is pointed and black? Guess now, then check in the text.

2 Key vocabulary

10 min

Match each word (1–10) with its definition (a–l). There are **two** definitions you do not need.

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 heresy | ☐ | a seeming evil or dangerous |
| 2 siniste | ☐ | b to fill something with a quality or meaning. |
| 3 to reclaim | ☐ | c a belief against official religious teaching |
| 4 motif | ☐ | d old-fashioned and no longer popular |
| 5 conical | ☐ | e an image or idea that keeps appearing in art |
| 6 respectable | ☐ | f considered socially acceptable and proper |
| 7 superstition | ☐ | g cruel, unfair treatment of a group of people |
| 8 unbridled | ☐ | h to take back a symbol that was used against you |
| 9 to imbue | ☐ | i shaped like a cone, with a pointed top |
| 10 persecution | ☐ | j a belief in magic or luck that is not based on reason |
| | | k to make something seem less frightening |
| | | l uncontrolled, wild, without limits |



Before you read: which of these do you think are true? Tick them, then check as you read.

- ☐ Pointed hats existed thousands of years before witches wore them.
- ☐ Witches in 16th-century paintings are usually shown in tall black hats.
- ☐ The first known picture of a witch in a pointed hat is from the 1600s.
- ☐ Pointed hats were once forced on people to mark them out.
- ☐ A 20th-century film did most to fix our image of the witch.

Say these words before you read: **heresy** /'herəsi/ · **sinister** /'sɪnɪstə/ · **imbue** /ɪm'bju:/ · **superstition** /,su:pə'stɪʃn/

Hats Off to History

Why do witches wear pointed hats?



- 1 Ask anyone to picture a witch and the chances are they will see a black, conical hat. It sits on the head of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, appears in the *Harry Potter* films, and has been given a new life by Elphaba in *Wicked*. Yet few people stop to ask where this famous hat actually came from, and the answer turns out to be far more complicated than it seems.
- 2 Pointed headwear is extremely old. Some of the earliest examples are tall golden hats from the Bronze Age, decorated with symbols of the sun, moon and stars. Historians believe they were worn by priests who were thought to possess special knowledge of the heavens. Much later, mummies discovered in western China in 1978, dating from the 4th to the 2nd centuries BC, were found wearing pointed hats, which earned them the modern nickname "the Witches of Subeshi".
- 3 One popular theory links the hat to persecution. In the 13th century, the Church forced Jewish men to wear a cone-shaped cap, and during the Spanish Inquisition, which began in 1478, people accused of heresy or witchcraft had to wear tall pointed hoods called *capirotes*, so that everyone could identify them. Centuries later, the painter Francisco Goya showed floating witches in similar hats, possibly as a criticism of superstition. Whether these hats directly inspired the witch's hat, however, is still debated.

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Hats Off to History (continued)

4 Another theory points to medieval alewives, women who brewed and sold beer. They are said to have worn tall hats and used cauldrons and herbs, which made them look suspicious to their neighbours. Dr Laura Kounine, a historian at the University of Sussex, is not convinced. She argues that this connection was created in hindsight: in the 16th century, almost everyone owned a cauldron and a broom, and all women wore some kind of hat. In fact, she points out, the witches in the art of that period, for example in the work of Albrecht Dürer, usually wear no hat at all. Their loose, flowing hair was a sign of unbridled passion, since respectable women always covered their heads.

5 The first known picture of a witch in a pointed hat appeared in 1693, in a book by the American minister Cotton Mather. But even this, Kounine believes, means little, because tall hats were simply fashionable at the time, and portraits show perfectly ordinary women wearing them. The hat only became a witch motif in later paintings and fairy tales. The colour may matter more than the shape: black was linked to the devil, to the night and to secret meetings, and early printed images were woodcuts, which could only be black and white.

6 Our modern image of the witch as a green-skinned crone owes most to L. Frank Baum's novel of 1900 and, above all, the 1939 film. Today, however, many people have reclaimed the witch as a symbol of female independence and resistance, and stories like *Wicked* invite us to feel sympathy for the outsider. The hat itself is not sinister, Kounine suggests. It is simply an object that we imbue with meaning through art and stories, and those meanings keep changing.

Adapted for classroom use from an article by Scarlett Harris, BBC Culture, November 2025 · approx. 560 words

Who's who in the text

Laura Kounine – historian of witchcraft, University of Sussex

Albrecht Dürer – German painter and printmaker (1471–1528)

L. Frank Baum – author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)

Cotton Mather – American minister and writer (1663–1728)

Francisco Goya – Spanish painter (1746–1828)

Elphaba – the misunderstood "Wicked Witch" of *Wicked*

4 Check your understanding

20 min

TASK A - GIST

Match the headings (1-7) to paragraphs A-F. There is one heading you do not need.

1 A hat for the hunted

2 A sign of ancient wisdom

3 The devil's favourite colour

4 Fashion, not magic

5 A familiar image with an unfamiliar story

6 From villain to heroine

7 Did brewers start the trend?

A

B

C

D

E

F

TASK B - TRUE, FALSE OR NOT GIVEN

Circle **T** if the text says this, **F** if it says the opposite, or **NG** if it does not say.

1 Bronze Age priests were believed to understand the sky.

T

F

NG

2 The Subeshi mummies were found in the 13th century.

T

F

NG

3 People accused by the Inquisition wore pointed hoods so that they could be recognised.

T

F

NG

4 The Church criticised Goya's painting of witches.

T

F

NG

5 Laura Kounine agrees that alewives were the origin of the witch's hat.

T

F

NG

6 In 16th-century art, witches are often shown with uncovered hair.

T

F

NG

7 Most historians share Kounine's view of the 1693 picture.

T

F

NG

8 Early printed images were black and white for technical reasons.

T

F

NG



TASK C · ANSWER IN YOUR OWN WORDS

In class or homework

1 According to Kounine, what made a witch look different from other women in the 1500s?

2 Why does Kounine think the 1693 picture is not strong evidence?

3 What does paragraph F suggest about the relationship between objects and meaning?

TASK D · CRITICAL READING C1

How convincing do the writer and Kounine find each theory? Write **strongly supported**, **possible** or **doubtful**, then copy the words from the text that show this.

Theory	Verdict	Evidence from the text
Ancient priests' hats		
Persecution of heretics		
Medieval alewives		
17th-century fashion		
The colour black		

C1 EXTENSION · GOYA'S *Witches' Flight*

Goya painted *Witches' Flight* in 1798, during the Enlightenment, and it is usually read as a satire on superstition. Three grotesque witches float through the night, holding a man aloft. Their tall hats could suggest a bishop's mitre or the *coroza* of condemned heretics, while a donkey, an old emblem of ignorance, stands nearby.

Why might Goya have left the type of hat unclear? Use a hedging expression.

TASK E • VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Find words or phrases in the text that mean:

- 1 a way of saying something is likely (A)
- 2 to own or have (B)
- 3 people still argue about it (C)
- 4 not persuaded (D)
- 5 exists mainly because of (F)

TASK F • HEDGING: WHEN WE ARE NOT SURE

Historians often cannot prove things, so they use cautious language. Underline examples in the text.

Structure	Example
It is thought / believed / said that + clause	It is believed that the golden hats had a religious use.
Subject + be said / thought + to-infinitive	Goya is thought to have disliked superstition.
may / might / could (+ have + V3)	The alewife theory might be partly true.
be likely / unlikely + to-infinitive	The debate is unlikely to end soon.
possibly · probably · arguably · apparently	It is arguably the most famous witch symbol.
There is little / some evidence that...	There is little evidence that brewers started it.

Complete the second sentence so that it means the same. Use the word given and **two to five words**.

- 1 People say that the Witches of Subeshi were powerful women.

SAID

The Witches of Subeshi _____ powerful women.

- 2 Perhaps Mather simply drew the fashion of his time.

HAVE

Mather _____ the fashion of his time.

- 3 Experts believe that black stands for evil in many cultures.

THOUGHT

Black _____ evil in many cultures.

- 4 There is a good chance that the hat will remain a Halloween favourite.

LIKELY

The hat _____ a Halloween favourite.

6 Let's talk

15 min

Discuss in pairs. Use at least **three** hedging expressions from Task F.

Which theory about the hat do you find most convincing, and why?

Kounine says some links only *seem* old because we look back in hindsight. Which other traditions might be newer than people believe?

The *copirote* began as a mark of shame, yet today it is worn with pride in Spain's Holy Week processions. How can a symbol's meaning turn around like this?

Is it right to "reclaim" a symbol that was once used against a group of people? Give examples.

USEFUL LANGUAGE

I'd go along with that.
That's a fair point.

Disagreeing politely

I'm not entirely convinced
that...
I see what you mean, but...

Conceding

Admittedly, ... Even so, ...
That may be true, but...

Group task: design a symbol

In groups of three, choose a modern figure: a hacker, an influencer or a climate activist. Invent one object that could become its symbol in 300 years. Tell the class:

- what the object is and where it comes from;
- how its meaning might change over time;
- what future historians might wrongly believe about it.

7 Write

Homework

Choose **one** task.

OPTION 1 • ESSAY • B2

140-190 words

"Popular culture, not history, decides what symbols mean." Do you agree? Use examples from the text and your own knowledge.

OPTION 2 • ARTICLE • C1

220-260 words

A magazine wants articles called *A symbol with a surprising past*. Choose a Greek symbol (the evil eye, the olive wreath...) and explain how its meaning has changed.

Answer key & teacher notes

FOR THE TEACHER

2 • VOCABULARY

- | | |
|-----|------|
| 1 c | 6 f |
| 2 a | 7 j |
| 3 h | 8 l |
| 4 e | 9 b |
| 5 i | 10 g |
- Not needed: d, k

3 • BEFORE YOU READ

- True: 1, 3, 4, 5
False: 2 (witches in 16th-century art usually wear no hat at all)

TASK A • HEADINGS

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| A 5 | D 7 |
| B 2 | E 4 |
| C 1 | F 6 |
- Heading 3 is the distractor: black is only part of paragraph E.

TASK B • T / F / NG

- 1 **T** – special knowledge of the heavens (B)
2 **F** – discovered in 1978 (B)
3 **T** – so that everyone could identify them (C)
4 **NG** – the Church's reaction is not mentioned (C)
5 **F** – she is not convinced (D)
6 **T** – loose, flowing hair (D)
7 **NG** – only Kounine's view is given (E)
8 **T** – woodcuts were black and white only (E)

TASK E • VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

- 1 the chances are · 2 possess · 3 is still debated · 4 not convinced · 5 owes most to

TASK F • KEY WORD TRANSFORMATIONS

- 1 are said to have been
2 may / might / could (simply) have drawn
3 is thought to stand for
4 is (very) likely to remain

TASK C AND C1 EXTENSION • MODEL ANSWERS

- C1** Witches were shown with no hat and loose hair, while respectable women covered their heads.
C2 Tall hats were ordinary fashion in 1693, so the hat did not mark the woman out as a witch.
C3 Objects have no fixed meaning: people give them meaning through stories, and it changes over time.
C1 ext. He may have wanted to criticise the Church indirectly: the hats recall both bishops and the Inquisition's punishments, so he could mock religious power without saying so openly. Accept any hedged, reasoned answer.

TASK D • SUGGESTED VERDICTS

- Priests' hats** – possible: "Historians believe"
Persecution – possible: "is still debated"
Alewives – doubtful: "is not convinced", "in hindsight"
17th-century fashion – strongly supported: portraits of ordinary women
The colour black – possible to likely: "may matter more than the shape"

TEACHER NOTES

Timing: two 45-min periods (pp. 1–4, then 5–7). In class: Tasks A, B, D; set Task C and the C1 extension as homework or for fast finishers.

Sensitive content: paragraph C mentions caps forced on Jewish men. Name it as antisemitic persecution and keep the focus on how symbols are imposed, not on stereotypes.

Return to the lead-in guesses after reading. Task F follows the B2 First / C1 Advanced key word transformation format; the writing word counts match those exams.

Text adapted from Scarlett Harris, BBC Culture, 20 Nov 2025.