

Shadow Wardrobes: An In-Depth Analysis of Witch and Gothic Fashion

Introduction: The Resurgence of the Shadow Aesthetic

In the contemporary cultural landscape, the aesthetics of darkness have experienced a potent resurgence. Far from the fringes of subculture, styles colloquially known as "witchcore" and "goth" have become viral phenomena, flourishing on visual platforms like TikTok and Instagram where hashtags like #WitchTok and #Witchcore command billions of views.¹ This digital proliferation, however, is not merely a fleeting trend. It signifies a deeper engagement with powerful visual languages that articulate identity, spirituality, rebellion, and community in the 21st century. These "shadow wardrobes" offer more than just a collection of garments; they are curated expressions of intricate worldviews, historical consciousness, and personal power.

While often conflated in the popular imagination due to a shared affinity for dark palettes and occult symbolism, witch and gothic fashion represent two distinct, albeit overlapping, aesthetic traditions. This report posits that while these styles share a significant visual and thematic vocabulary rooted in the identity of the "outsider," they diverge fundamentally in their philosophical cores. Witch fashion, in its modern incarnation, is primarily an aesthetic of reclamation—a conscious reappropriation of a historically maligned archetype to express feminine power, spiritual autonomy, and a profound connection to the natural world. Gothic fashion, conversely, is an aesthetic of romanticism—an expression of melancholy, a celebration of the macabre, and a rebellion against societal norms rooted in the literary and musical movements of the past two centuries.

To fully comprehend these nuanced sartorial languages, this report will undertake a comprehensive analysis. It will begin by tracing the historical origins of the witch archetype and its visual codification through centuries of persecution and pop culture representation. It will then deconstruct the modern "witchcore" aesthetic, examining its core philosophies, key garments, and diverse sub-styles. Subsequently, the report will chart the genesis of gothic fashion, from its literary roots and the Victorian cult of mourning to its crystallization in the

1980s post-punk scene, followed by an anatomy of its stylistic lexicon and subcultural variations. Finally, a comparative analysis will illuminate the precise points of convergence and divergence between these two shadow aesthetics, culminating in an examination of their enduring influence on the high-fashion runway. Through this structured investigation, the complex relationship between witch and gothic fashion will be untangled, revealing two unique and powerful modes of sartorial expression.

Part I: The Archetype of the Witch — A Fashion History

Section 1. From Persecution to Power: The Historical Garb of the Witch

The modern conception of "witch fashion" is a reclamation of a visual identity that was never self-defined by its original bearers. Instead, the archetypal "look" of the witch was forged in the crucible of fear and persecution during the 16th and 17th centuries, constructed not from the wardrobes of accused women but from the anxieties of the societies that condemned them. Understanding this origin is critical, as it reveals that the witch's uniform is not a historical reality but a social construct—a visual codification of the "other" that modern practitioners now subvert and redefine as a source of power.

The Genesis of the Stereotype

Historical analysis reveals that during the European and American witch trials, there was no distinct uniform that identified a woman as a witch. Those accused of witchcraft wore what everyone else in their village community did: functional, homemade clothes, often featuring practical elements like cloaks or hoods for protection against the elements.³ Accusations were rarely based on a specific costume but rather on clothing that signaled social transgression or non-conformity. Women who wore veils, dark cloaks, or attire considered too eccentric for their station could find themselves under suspicion.⁴ For example, in the Salem witch trials, Sarah Good's lack of "suitable" church clothes was noted, yet in a spectral testimony, she was accused of cavorting with the devil while wearing a fine "black Silk hood with a White Silk hood under itt"—a garment far beyond her means that served to mark her as transgressive.⁴

The association of black with evil became particularly potent during the Renaissance, when the color was linked to the devil and "black magic," cementing the all-black ensemble in the popular imagination as the definitive color of the witch.³ This process demonstrates how the witch's "look" was not a reflection of a practitioner's identity but an imposition of societal fear, projected onto the female body to mark it as dangerous and deviant.

Deconstructing the Witch's Hat

The most instantly recognizable element of the witch costume, the pointed conical hat, is a composite symbol with a complex and contested history, its origins likely rooted in multiple, unrelated sources. One prominent theory traces the hat to the *capotain*, a tall, felted, conical hat popular with both men and women in the 17th century.⁸ This style was common among various social classes but became particularly associated with Puritans and Quakers.³ As Quaker women, who often took on public preaching roles, faced persecution and accusations of witchcraft, their distinctive headwear became visually linked to the archetype of the heretical woman.³

Another compelling theory connects the witch's hat to antisemitism. In some regions of medieval Europe, Jewish men were forced to wear pointed caps as a discriminatory marker.³ This imagery, already associated with a persecuted "other," could have been readily transferred onto women accused of witchcraft, especially in contexts where societal panic over both groups overlapped.³ A third explanation points to a more practical origin: the tall, pointed hats worn by medieval "alewives"—women who brewed and sold beer. Their distinctive headgear made them stand out in crowded marketplaces, and as independent businesswomen operating outside of traditional domestic roles, they were often viewed with suspicion and sometimes accused of witchcraft.⁶ The convergence of these disparate histories—of religious non-conformity, antisemitic persecution, and independent female enterprise—coalesced to create a single, potent symbol that is now inseparable from the image of the witch.

The Color Black: Modesty, Wealth, and Malevolence

The symbolism of the color black during the 17th century was deeply contradictory, a fact that highlights the constructed nature of the witch stereotype. While it was increasingly associated with malevolence, the devil, and "black magic," black was simultaneously the color of wealth, modesty, and respectable mourning.⁶ Black dyes were expensive and difficult to produce,

making black clothing a status symbol accessible primarily to the affluent.⁸ This creates a significant historical irony, as the vast majority of women accused of witchcraft, particularly during the Salem trials, were from the lower classes and would not have been able to afford expensive black cloth.⁸ Their daily wear would have consisted of undyed wools and linens or garments colored with cheaper, natural dyes.⁸ The imposition of the all-black wardrobe onto the witch archetype was therefore a symbolic act, branding the accused with a color that represented both the ultimate sin and a social status they did not possess. This historical context is vital; it underscores that the modern adoption of witch fashion is not an homage to a historical reality but a powerful act of defiance. It is the reclamation of a visual language of oppression, transforming symbols of fear and persecution into emblems of empowerment, autonomy, and self-defined identity.

Section 2. The Modern Coven: Pop Culture's Enduring Spell

The 20th and 21st centuries saw the witch archetype move from folklore and trial records into the powerful realm of mass media. Film and television, in particular, have played a pivotal role in first solidifying the historical stereotype and then radically deconstructing and reinventing it. The evolution of the witch's on-screen wardrobe is not merely a matter of changing fashions; it serves as a direct visual barometer of broader cultural shifts in feminism and the perception of female power. The journey of the witch's costume from a mark of monstrosity to a uniform of empowerment reflects a profound cultural transformation.

The Villainous Archetype

For much of the 20th century, popular culture reinforced the image of the witch as a one-dimensional, malevolent villain. This visual shorthand was cemented by two iconic cinematic portrayals. The first was the Evil Queen in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), whose transformation into an old hag with a hooked nose, warts, and a black cloak established a template for sinister sorcery.³ This was followed by the even more influential Wicked Witch of the West in

The Wizard of Oz (1939). Margaret Hamilton's portrayal, with her green skin, pointy black hat, and ankle-length black dress, created an almost cartoonish yet terrifying image that would dominate the popular conception of a witch for decades.¹ These characters were costumed to be "other"—inhuman and frightening—in clothes that were deliberately unappealing and designed to signify evil.¹⁰ The physical features, particularly the prominent crooked nose,

often drew from centuries-old antisemitic and racist caricatures, further embedding the witch's image in a history of prejudice.³

The 90s Style Revolution

The 1990s marked a crucial turning point, as a wave of films and television shows began to present witches not as monstrous villains but as complex, relatable, and stylish protagonists. This decade radically transformed the witch's aesthetic, linking it to contemporary youth subcultures and aspirational fashion.

A key text in this revolution was *The Craft* (1996). The film explicitly connected witchcraft with the goth and punk aesthetics of the era. The character of Nancy Downs, memorably played by Fairuza Balk, undergoes a style evolution that mirrors her descent into dark power. She sheds her school uniform for a wardrobe of long black trench coats, dog collars, dark lipstick, and heavy eyeliner, effectively becoming a "Hot Topic spokesperson".¹⁰ For the first time on a mainstream scale, witch fashion was presented as synonymous with rebellious, alternative teen style—a conscious choice to embrace darkness and power, worn on the sleeve as a point of pride.¹⁰

In contrast, films like *Practical Magic* (1998) and the television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996) normalized the witch, presenting magical women as chic and integrated into mortal society. Sally and Gillian Owens (Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman) and Sabrina's aunts Hilda and Zelda epitomized peak '90s style. Their wardrobes—featuring ankle-length skirts, tiny sunglasses, floral prints, oversized sweatshirts, and great jeans—demonstrated that witchery could be an aspect of a modern woman's identity rather than a defining, villainous costume.¹⁰ Their fashion was aspirational, showing that being a witch could be exciting, appealing, and fashionable. This shift reflected the ideals of third-wave feminism, focusing on individual agency and the reclamation of femininity in its many forms.

The Contemporary High-Fashion Witch

In the 21st century, television has continued to elevate the witch's wardrobe, often presenting it through a high-fashion lens. Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013) was particularly influential, outfitting its coven in monochromatic black ensembles that felt like a uniform of power.¹ The series popularized a sleek, contemporary witch aesthetic—featuring wide-brimmed black hats, sharp silhouettes, and black boots—that had a direct and

immediate impact on mainstream fashion trends.¹²

More recently, Netflix's *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* offered a masterful synthesis of various witch aesthetics. Its characters move seamlessly between traditional pop culture witch garb (spooky Dark Baptism dresses), mortal casualwear reminiscent of the original *Sabrina*, and a dark, romantic style defined by rich velvets, lace collars, and capes.¹ This sartorial plurality signifies the ultimate evolution of the pop culture witch: she is no longer bound by a single style mandate. She can choose to dress traditionally, borrow from alternative subcultures, or blend in with mortals. Her fashion is her own choice, a tool for self-expression rather than a costume imposed upon her.

The Stevie Nicks Effect

No discussion of modern witch fashion is complete without acknowledging the foundational influence of musician Stevie Nicks. Long before the term "witchcore" was coined, Nicks's signature style in the 1970s and beyond established the romantic, bohemian, and mystical aesthetic that remains central to the look today.² Her uniform of flowing black shawls, delicate lace, rich velvet, bell sleeves, and top hats created an ethereal and powerful persona that was intrinsically linked to her music's mystical themes. While she has consistently denied practicing witchcraft, her visual language was so potent that she became, and remains, the ultimate witchy style icon, providing a real-world touchstone for an aesthetic that is both magical and deeply personal.² Her influence demonstrates the power of a self-created aesthetic to define a new archetype of feminine mystique and strength.

Section 3. Anatomy of an Aesthetic: Deconstructing Witch Fashion ("Witchcore")

Emerging from its historical and pop culture foundations, modern witch fashion, now widely known as "witchcore," has codified into a distinct and multifaceted aesthetic. It is more than a collection of garments; it is a practice-based and intention-driven style where the symbolic weight and energetic feel of the clothing are as crucial as the visual presentation. The choice of a particular fabric, crystal, or silhouette is often a deliberate act tied to personal belief, spiritual practice, and a desire for empowerment.

Core Philosophy: Power, Nature, and Spirituality

At its heart, witch fashion is a style that is intentionally feminine, powerful, and deeply connected to the wearer's personal spirituality and the natural world.¹⁴ It serves as a tangible expression of an individual's connection to magic, nature, and their own inner strength.¹⁶ This philosophy is a direct reclamation of the witch archetype, transforming a figure of historical persecution into a symbol of self-possession and authority. For many adherents, particularly among Gen Z, adopting this style is a form of "armor," a way to find a sense of control and spiritual grounding in an increasingly chaotic world.¹³ The aesthetic is fundamentally about wearing what makes one feel "powerful," "confident," and "in tune with yourself," making the internal experience of the wearer paramount.¹⁵

The Witchcore Wardrobe

The visual language of witchcore is built upon specific silhouettes, fabrics, and colors that collectively evoke a sense of mystery, history, and natural magic.

- **Silhouettes:** The dominant silhouette is flowing, drapery, and layered.¹⁴ This includes long skirts, maxi dresses, voluminous cloaks, capes, and outerwear like longline cardigans or ponchos.¹⁴ This preference for billowy and unrestrictive forms is not merely an aesthetic choice; for some, it is a visual representation of "going with the flow of nature or with the currents of energy," contrasting with rigid, structured garments.¹⁷ The layering of different lengths and textures adds depth and a sense of history to an outfit.
- **Fabrics:** There is a strong preference for natural, breathable, and tactile materials that ground the wearer and connect them to the earth. Linen, cotton, wool, and silk are foundational fabrics.² These are often complemented by materials that add a sense of luxury and mystique, such as velvet, delicate lace, and crochet. An eclectic mix of heavy materials (like velvet) and light, sheer fabrics (like tulle or lace) is a key characteristic of the style, creating a dynamic interplay of textures.² Many practitioners also prioritize sustainable and ethically sourced materials, aligning their wardrobe with their personal values.¹⁶
- **Color Palette:** While black remains a foundational and powerful color within the aesthetic, the witchcore palette is broad and nuanced. It heavily features dark neutrals like gray and charcoal, but also embraces deep, rich jewel tones such as burgundy, forest green, and royal purple.¹⁴ Earthy tones that evoke the natural world—moss green, rust orange, and deep brown—are also prevalent, reinforcing the connection to nature.¹³

Symbolism and Accessories

Accessories in witch fashion are rarely just decorative. They are often imbued with personal meaning, serving as tools, talismans, or symbols of the wearer's spiritual path.

- **Motifs:** The aesthetic is rich with symbolism. Celestial motifs, including moons (especially crescent moons) and stars, are ubiquitous, connecting the wearer to cosmic cycles and energies.¹⁴ Natural and "spooky" imagery is also common, featuring insects, spiders, snakes, black cats, owls, and skulls, which embrace the wilder, untamed aspects of nature.² Occult symbols, such as sigils or representations of the four elements, may also be incorporated, serving as a more direct link to magical practice.²
- **Jewelry:** Witchy jewelry often has a handcrafted, antiqued, or rough-hewn feel.¹⁴ Silver is the preferred metal over gold, as it is traditionally associated with the moon, the Goddess, and feminine energies.⁷ Pieces frequently feature crystals chosen for their specific energetic properties, such as moonstone for intuition or rose quartz for love, acting as wearable talismans.¹
- **Footwear and Details:** Footwear often grounds the ethereal, flowing silhouettes. Pointed-toe shoes, lace-up boots, and chunky combat boots are all staples of the witchy wardrobe.¹⁴ Old-timey details like buckles, an unreasonable number of buttons, and high necklines add a historical, "left-behind-in-time" quality to the look.¹⁴

The Philosophy of Empowerment through Dress

Ultimately, the power of witch fashion lies in its intentionality. The aesthetic encourages a deeply personal relationship with clothing, where each piece is chosen for its ability to evoke a feeling of strength and authenticity. This can manifest in myriad ways. For one person, it might be a flowing, drapey garment that makes them feel "powerful, sexy, feminine and witchy".¹⁷ For another, working in a male-dominated field, a tailored "power suit" can be their version of witchy attire, imbuing them with a feeling of invincibility.¹⁷ Even a pair of baggy cargo pants can be seen as witchy, valued for their freedom of movement and practicality, a modern equivalent to a pirate's functional garb.¹⁷ This focus on personal power and feeling demonstrates that witch fashion is not a rigid uniform but a flexible framework. The garments and accessories are tools used to construct an identity that feels authentic, powerful, and magically attuned to the self and the surrounding world.

Section 4. The Coven of Sub-Styles: Exploring the Witchy Spectrum

The witch fashion aesthetic is not monolithic. Its broad philosophical base, centered on nature, power, and individuality, has allowed for the flourishing of numerous sub-styles. These variations adapt the core tenets of witchcore to different environments, historical influences, and personal sensibilities, creating a rich and diverse sartorial spectrum. From the dark forests of Mori Kei to the sun-drenched fields of Cottagecore, these sub-genres demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of the modern witch's wardrobe.

Strega & Dark Mori

Strega fashion, taking its name from the Italian word for "witch," is a style that heavily overlaps with the Japanese aesthetic of Dark Mori ("dark forest").¹⁴ This look evokes the image of a mysterious, magical individual who dwells deep within the woods. It is defined by a predominantly dark color palette, focusing on black, charcoal gray, deep purples, and burgundy.²⁰ The silhouette is central to the Strega and Dark Mori aesthetic, characterized by heavy and often asymmetrical layering of natural fabrics.¹⁴ Garments frequently have an artfully tattered, distressed, or deconstructed appearance, as if worn and weathered by time and the elements.¹⁴ The overall effect is earthy, magical, and slightly feral, combining the comfort of natural fibers with a gothic sensibility.²¹ It is a style that feels both ancient and deeply personal, often incorporating handmade or thrifted items that contribute to its unique, layered texture.

Cottagecore Witch (or Green Witch)

At the other end of the spectrum lies the Cottagecore Witch, an aesthetic that merges the romantic, pastoral idealism of Cottagecore with the nature-centric practices of a "Green Witch".¹ This style eschews the darker palette of Strega for lighter, earthier tones, though black is still sometimes present.²³ The Cottagecore Witch aesthetic is built around natural, breathable fabrics like linen and cotton, perfect for a life imagined in a countryside cottage, tending to an herb garden.¹⁴ Key garments include long, flowing dresses (often called "prairie" or "peasant" dresses), puff-sleeved blouses, pinafores, and aprons.²⁴ A defining feature is the presence of delicate, romantic details such as lace trim, smocking, and embroidery, often

depicting floral and herbal motifs that directly reference the practice of herbalism.²³ The overall vibe is whimsical, peaceful, and deeply connected to the earth, evoking the image of a "town healer" or a gentle practitioner of home-based magic.²³ It is a celebration of a slower, more intentional way of life, where fashion is an extension of a nurturing relationship with the natural world.

Southern Gothic

A more geographically and culturally specific sub-genre is Southern Gothic. This style draws its inspiration from the unique history, atmosphere, and literary tradition of the American South. It is an aesthetic steeped in a sense of time, mystery, and often, a beautiful decay. Visually, Southern Gothic fashion frequently incorporates historical silhouettes, particularly from the Victorian era, such as high necklines and long skirts.¹⁴ The wide-brimmed hat is a key accessory, practical for the Southern sun but also adding an element of drama and concealment. The style was brought to mainstream prominence by Beyoncé in her 2016 music video for "Formation," where she and her dancers wore all-black outfits with wide-brimmed hats, powerfully reclaiming Southern imagery and blending it with a contemporary sense of Black feminine power and resilience.¹⁴ The Southern Gothic witch aesthetic is thus layered with historical weight, telling a story of survival, magic, and the haunting beauty of its cultural landscape.

Part II: The Gothic Shadow — Romance, Rebellion, and the Macabre

While witch fashion finds its roots in folklore and natural spirituality, gothic fashion emerges from a distinctly different lineage: one of literature, art history, and music. It is an aesthetic of curated historical romanticism, a style that selectively borrows from the past to articulate a modern identity grounded in melancholy, rebellion, and an appreciation for the macabre. Its evolution from the pages of 18th-century novels to the sticky floors of 1980s nightclubs charts a course through the darker corridors of Western culture, creating a rich and enduring sartorial language.

Section 5. A Symphony in Black: The Origins of Gothic Fashion

The foundations of gothic fashion were laid long before it became a recognizable subculture. Its thematic and visual DNA can be traced back to the dramatic arches of medieval architecture, the brooding anti-heroes of Romantic literature, and the somber elegance of Victorian mourning rituals. These historical touchstones provided the essential vocabulary for a style that would later be given a voice by the post-punk music scene.

Literary and Architectural Roots

The term "Gothic" itself was first applied to a style of architecture prevalent from the 12th to the 16th century, characterized by soaring heights, intricate details, and a sense of awe-inspiring drama.²⁸ In the late 18th century, the term was adopted by a literary movement that embraced themes of horror, mystery, romance, and the supernatural. Gothic literature, exemplified by authors like Edgar Allan Poe and, later, Bram Stoker with his novel

Dracula, created a world of dark, brooding atmosphere, tormented protagonists, and sublime terror.⁹ This literary tradition provided the foundational mood board for the fashion aesthetic, infusing it with a sense of dark romanticism and a fascination with death and decay.

The Victorian Cult of Mourning

The 19th century, particularly the Victorian era, was a pivotal period in the formation of the gothic aesthetic. The era's fashion, with its elaborate and restrictive silhouettes, already possessed a certain dramatic flair. However, it was the "cult of mourning" that had the most profound and lasting impact.²⁹ After the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861, Queen Victoria entered a state of perpetual mourning, famously wearing black for the rest of her life.⁹ Her example popularized complex mourning rituals and an associated all-black wardrobe, solidifying black as the color of grief, loss, and romantic melancholy.⁹ This period provided gothic fashion with some of its most iconic elements: tightly laced corsets, intricate black lace, rich velvets, and ornate, somber jewelry.²⁹ The Victorian ideal of pale skin, seen as a sign of delicacy and aristocracy, also became a key component of the gothic look, later reinterpreted as a corpse-like pallor.²⁸

The Birth of a Subculture: Post-Punk and the Batcave

While its influences are historical, modern gothic fashion as a distinct subculture was born in the fertile ground of the late 1970s and early 1980s London post-punk music scene.⁹ As punk's initial anarchic energy began to fragment, some bands moved in a darker, more introspective, and atmospheric direction, creating the genre of "gothic rock."

- **Musical Progenitors:** This new sound was championed by seminal bands like **Bauhaus**, **Siouxsie and the Banshees**, **The Cure**, and **The Sisters of Mercy**.⁵ These musicians were not just sonic pioneers; they were style icons who visually defined the nascent subculture. Robert Smith of The Cure, with his backcombed black hair and smeared red lipstick, created an image of romantic despair. Bauhaus, with their stark, theatrical look, brought an art-school sensibility to the scene. However, it was arguably **Siouxsie Sioux** who was the most influential early figure. Her dramatic, angular makeup inspired by 1920s vamps, disheveled spiky hair, and wardrobe of black leather, fishnets, and fetish-inspired gear became the blueprint for the archetypal goth look.⁵
- **The Batcave Club:** The legendary London nightclub, The Batcave (1982-1986), served as the epicenter for this emerging scene.⁹ It was the crucible where the fashion, music, and ethos of the goth subculture were forged and solidified. The club's aesthetic—cobwebbed ceilings and a real coffin at the entrance—encouraged patrons to embrace a look that blended punk's DIY ethos with glam rock's androgyny and classic horror film imagery.⁹ It was here that the style moved beyond simply imitating the bands and became a participatory, creative expression for the fans themselves.

This genesis reveals a crucial aspect of the gothic aesthetic. It is not an attempt at precise historical reenactment. Rather, it is an act of creative appropriation, abstracting key elements from the past—the silhouette of a Victorian corset, the texture of velvet, the somberness of mourning black—and fusing them with modern, rebellious signifiers from the punk movement like leather, torn fishnets, and band t-shirts.²⁸ This fusion creates a unique visual language that is simultaneously nostalgic for a romanticized, tragic past and aggressively contemporary in its anti-establishment stance. It uses historical aesthetics as a vocabulary to express modern feelings of alienation, romanticism, and defiance.

Section 6. The Gothic Style Lexicon

Gothic fashion is a highly codified aesthetic with a distinct and recognizable vocabulary of colors, materials, silhouettes, and symbols. This lexicon allows for a wide range of personal expression while maintaining a cohesive identity rooted in dark elegance, rebellion, and theatricality. It is a style where every element, from the choice of fabric to the application of

eyeliner, is a deliberate and meaningful statement.

The Primacy of Black

Black is the undisputed cornerstone of the gothic palette. It is more than a color choice; it is a philosophical statement. Black symbolizes mystery, elegance, and a connection to the macabre, while also functioning as a negation of the bright, optimistic colors often favored by mainstream fashion.²⁹ As designer Yohji Yamamoto articulated, "Black is lazy and easy – but mysterious".³⁴ Within this dominant darkness, deep accent colors add theatrical depth and emotional resonance. Rich purples, blood reds, and burgundies are frequently used to provide a touch of romantic or morbid vibrancy against the monochrome backdrop.²⁹ Stark white may also be used for dramatic contrast, evoking a ghostly or funereal quality.

Key Materials and Textures

Gothic style lives in its textures, with a preference for materials that are either luxurious, romantic, or rebellious. The interplay between these different surfaces is crucial to creating a visually complex and layered look.

- **Velvet, Silk, and Lace:** These fabrics lend a noble, haunting beauty to the silhouette, nodding to the aesthetic's Victorian and Romantic roots. Velvet, in particular, with its light-absorbing quality, adds a sense of weight and gravitas.³⁰ Lace provides a delicate, romantic counterpoint, often used in collars, cuffs, or as an overlay to soften the darkness while enhancing the mystique.³⁰
- **Leather and Fishnet:** These materials introduce an element of rebellion and subversion, drawn from the scene's punk and fetish influences. Black leather brings structure and strength, appearing in moto jackets, corsets, trousers, and harnesses.³⁰ Fishnet, whether worn as tights, sleeves, or entire tops, adds a layer of texture and attitude, often artfully torn to enhance the sense of decay and defiance.²⁹

Defining Silhouettes and Garments

The gothic wardrobe is built around a collection of iconic garments that create a dramatic and often historically-inspired silhouette. The tightly laced corset is a centerpiece, used to define

the waist and create an hourglass shape, serving as both armor and ornament.²⁹ This is often paired with long, flowing skirts or gowns that evoke a sense of historical romance. Tailored garments like frock coats and Victorian-style jackets add a formal, dandyish element. On the more rebellious side, leather jackets, band t-shirts, and slim-fit trousers or leggings are staples drawn from punk heritage.³¹ A significant influence on the style comes from BDSM and fetish wear, which contributes elements like harnesses, PVC clothing, and heavy-duty buckles and straps, adding an edge of transgressive sexuality.²⁹

Theatricality in Makeup and Hair

Makeup and hair are not afterthoughts in gothic fashion; they are integral components of the overall look, used to create a theatrical and otherworldly appearance. The signature makeup style begins with a pale foundation, creating a stark, high-contrast canvas that recalls Victorian ideals of beauty and evokes a corpse-like or vampiric pallor.²⁸ Eyes are heavily emphasized with dramatic black eyeliner (often in a cat-eye or graphic shape), smoky eyeshadow, and dark, defined brows.²⁹ Lips are painted in bold, dark shades, most commonly black, deep blood-red, or plum.²⁹ Hair is almost universally dyed black and is often styled for maximum volume and texture, with backcombing, teasing, and styles like the "deathhawk" (a wider, fanned-out mohawk) being classic choices.²⁹

Symbolic Accessories

Accessories are essential for completing the gothic look and are often heavy with symbolism. Jewelry is typically made of silver or other white metals, as yellow gold is generally avoided.³⁰ Motifs are drawn from religious, occult, and macabre sources, with crosses, ankhs, pentagrams, skulls, bats, and spiders being common themes.²⁹ Chokers are a near-universal accessory, ranging from simple velvet ribbons to elaborate, spiked leather collars.²⁹ Other key accessories include fingerless gloves (in lace or fishnet), dramatic wide-brimmed hats, and protective masks.³⁰ Footwear is bold and substantial, with platform boots, combat boots (such as Doc Martens), and pointed "winklepickers" being the most iconic choices.²⁹

Section 7. The Many Faces of Goth: A Taxonomy of Darkness

The gothic subculture is not a monolith; over the decades, it has branched into numerous sub-genres, each with its own distinct stylistic nuances. These variations reflect the diverse influences that have shaped the scene, from music and history to technology and global fashion trends. While all are united by a core appreciation for dark aesthetics, their specific expressions can vary dramatically, showcasing the creativity and adaptability of the subculture.

Traditional Goth (Trad Goth)

Traditional Goth, or "Trad Goth," refers to the original aesthetic that emerged from the 1980s post-punk and gothic rock scene.²⁹ This style is a direct reflection of the looks pioneered by the subculture's founding musicians and the patrons of clubs like The Batcave.²⁹ The key elements of Trad Goth are raw and heavily influenced by punk's DIY ethos. The look is characterized by large, backcombed and teased black hair, often styled into a "deathhawk".²⁸ Clothing staples include torn fishnets (worn as hosiery or tops), leather jackets often adorned with band patches, band t-shirts, and slim-fit black trousers or skirts.²⁸ Footwear typically consists of combat boots, creepers, or pointed winklepickers.²⁹ The makeup is dramatic, with heavy black eyeliner and pale foundation, capturing the raw, rebellious energy of the early scene.²⁹

Victorian Goth

This sub-genre leans deeply into the historical and romantic influences that underpin the broader gothic identity. Victorian Goth fashion is a modern interpretation and romanticization of 19th-century styles, particularly those of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.²⁹ It emphasizes elegance, opulence, and drama. The aesthetic is defined by garments like long, flowing gowns made of velvet or lace, tightly laced corsets worn as outerwear, tailored frock coats, and blouses with high necklines, ruffles, and jabots.²⁹ While still predominantly black, this style often incorporates deep jewel tones like burgundy and purple to enhance its luxurious feel.³⁰ The overall look is more formal and theatrical than Trad Goth, evoking the image of a character from a gothic romance novel.

Cybergoth

Emerging in the late 1990s, Cybergoth represents a fusion of classic gothic fashion with the aesthetics of industrial music and rave culture.²⁹ It is a futuristic and dystopian take on the goth look, characterized by a stark contrast between black and bright, synthetic neon colors. A signature element is the hair, which often consists of synthetic dreadlocks ("dread falls") in vibrant shades of green, pink, or blue, sometimes incorporating materials like plastic tubing or foam strips.²⁹ Clothing combines traditional goth elements like tight black pants (often made of PVC or leather) and platform boots with futuristic accessories such as goggles, respirators, and circuit board motifs.²⁹ Cybergoth is a high-energy, technologically-infused offshoot that imagines a dark, post-apocalyptic future.

Nu-Goth

Nu-Goth is a 21st-century evolution of the aesthetic, representing a more modern, accessible, and often minimalist take on the style.³⁵ It combines elements of traditional goth with contemporary influences from streetwear, grunge, and witchy fashion.³⁶ The Nu-Goth look maintains the dark color palette but often features cleaner lines and simpler silhouettes than its predecessors.³⁵ While accessories are still important, they are used more sparingly, with a focus on key pieces like chokers, harnesses, and round sunglasses.³⁵ Occult and witchy motifs, such as moons, pentagrams, and alchemical symbols, are particularly prevalent in Nu-Goth jewelry and graphic prints.³⁵ Footwear remains chunky, with platform boots being a staple.³⁵ Nu-Goth is often seen as a more everyday, wearable version of the aesthetic, blending spooky and macabre elements with current fashion trends, making it highly popular on social media platforms.³⁷

Part III: A Confluence of Darkness — Analysis and High Fashion

While witch and gothic fashion have evolved from distinct historical and cultural wellsprings, their paths frequently intersect. They share a visual language of darkness and a philosophical stance as "outsiders," leading to a rich cross-pollination of styles. However, a closer analysis reveals fundamental divergences in their core philosophies, creating a fascinating dynamic of

shared aesthetics and separate identities. This dynamic has not gone unnoticed by the world of high fashion, where designers have repeatedly drawn upon the potent symbolism of both the witch and the goth to create some of the most memorable and culturally resonant collections of recent decades.

Section 8. Shared Threads and Divergent Paths: A Comparative Analysis

At a surface level, the confusion between witch and gothic fashion is understandable. Both aesthetics embrace a dark color palette, utilize occult or esoteric symbolism, and are rooted in a rejection of mainstream societal norms.⁵ They represent a conscious choice to align with the mysterious, the misunderstood, and the powerful forces that exist in the cultural shadows. Both can be potent forms of rebellion and empowerment, providing a visual identity for those who feel alienated from or critical of the status quo.⁵ The overlap is particularly evident in modern sub-styles like Nu-Goth, which explicitly incorporates "witchy vibes" into its aesthetic framework.³⁶

Philosophical Divergence

Despite these shared threads, the foundational philosophies of the two styles are fundamentally different. Witch fashion is primarily rooted in spirituality, a connection to nature, and the reclamation of feminine power. Its ethos is often proactive and life-affirming, focused on personal growth, healing, and the cyclical energies of the earth.¹⁴ The clothing and accessories are often chosen for their perceived energetic properties or their connection to natural materials, serving as tools for a spiritual practice.⁷ The empowerment it offers is one of self-creation and alignment with natural or cosmic forces.

Gothic fashion, in contrast, is rooted in romanticism, melancholy, and an appreciation for the beauty found in darkness, decay, and sorrow.⁹ Its philosophy is more introspective, poetic, and often focused on the macabre and existential themes of life, death, and tragic love. The rebellion of goth fashion is often a passive one—a withdrawal into a world of dark beauty as a statement against the perceived banality or cruelty of the outside world. Its power comes from the embrace of the shadow self and the finding of aesthetic pleasure in what mainstream culture deems morbid or depressing.

Visual Distinctions

These philosophical differences manifest in distinct visual cues. While both styles use black as a foundation, witch fashion's palette is broader, often incorporating the earthy tones of a forest floor or the deep jewel tones of a twilight sky.¹³ Its silhouettes are typically looser, flowing, and layered, prioritizing comfort and a connection to natural forms.¹⁴ The materials reflect this, with a preference for linen, cotton, and other natural fibers.¹⁴

Gothic fashion, conversely, tends toward more structured, theatrical, and historically evocative silhouettes. The lines are often sharper and more dramatic, as seen in the tailoring of a frock coat or the rigid structure of a corset.³⁰ The material palette favors luxury and rebellion—the rich sheen of velvet, the cool touch of leather, the delicate intricacy of lace, and the subversive texture of fishnet.²⁹ While a "hippie goth" might embrace flowing dresses, the core gothic aesthetic is more defined by its dramatic and often restrictive elegance.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Witch and Gothic Fashion

Feature	Witch Fashion (Witchcore)	Gothic Fashion
Core Philosophy	Empowerment, Connection to Nature, Spirituality, Reclamation of Feminine Power.	Romanticism, Melancholy, Rebellion, Appreciation for the Macabre.
Primary Origins	Folklore, 16th-17th Century Persecution, 1970s Stevie Nicks, Modern Paganism.	Gothic Literature, Victorian Mourning Culture, 1980s Post-Punk Music Scene.
Key Materials	Linen, Cotton, Wool, Crochet, Silk, Raw Crystals, Natural Fibers.	Velvet, Leather, Lace, Fishnet, PVC, Silk, Silver, Brocade.
Dominant Silhouettes	Flowing, Layered, Asymmetrical, Loose, Natural, Comfortable.	Structured, Theatrical, Corseted, Tailored, Dramatic, Often Restrictive.
Iconic Motifs	Celestial (Moons, Stars), Herbal, Faunal (Snakes,	Crosses, Bats, Skulls, Ankhs, Religious and

	Spiders, Cats), Occult Symbols, Sigils.	Macabre Imagery.
Color Palette	Black, Gray, Jewel Tones (Purple, Green), Earthy Tones (Brown, Orange).	Predominantly Black, with accents of Red, Purple, Burgundy, and White.
Emotional Tone	Powerful, Ethereal, Grounded, Mystical, Empowering.	Melancholic, Dramatic, Morbid, Romantic, Introspective.

Section 9. The Haute Occult: Witch and Goth on the Runway

The potent visual and symbolic language of both witch and gothic fashion has made them a perennial source of inspiration for high-fashion designers. The runway has served as a space where these subcultural aesthetics are amplified, reinterpreted, and infused with avant-garde creativity, in turn influencing their evolution back in the mainstream. Designers have consistently drawn on the themes of darkness, rebellion, and mysticism to craft collections that challenge conventions and explore the deeper, more complex aspects of beauty.

Designers of the Dark

Several key designers have built their entire brand identity around an aesthetic that is deeply rooted in or adjacent to gothic fashion.

- **The Japanese Masters:** Designers like **Yohji Yamamoto** and **Rei Kawakubo** of Comme des Garçons are renowned for their intellectual, deconstructed, and predominantly black designs. Yamamoto's voluminous, all-black tailoring creates a silhouette that is both protective and mysterious, while Kawakubo's early adopters were famously nicknamed the "black crows" for their adherence to her dark, avant-garde aesthetic.³⁴
- **The Avant-Garde Goths:** **Rick Owens** is perhaps the most famous contemporary designer associated with a dark aesthetic, though his work has evolved beyond the "Goth Ninja" tag of the late 2000s.³⁴ His designs often feature dramatic draping, a muted palette, and a sense of primal, futuristic elegance. **Gareth Pugh** is known for his sculptural, wearable art, crafting extraordinary dark fashion

that plays with form and volume, blending historical references with a futuristic vision.³⁴ **Ann Demeulemeester** offers a more romantic and poetic vision, creating a dark, glamorous aesthetic that blends strength with sensuality through elegant tailoring and a deeply personal approach.³⁴

Witchcraft in High Fashion

The figure of the witch has been a particularly powerful muse for designers, allowing them to explore themes of female power, mysticism, and historical persecution.

- **Alexander McQueen's "In Memory of Elizabeth How, Salem 1692" (AW07):** This is arguably the most significant witch-inspired collection in modern fashion history. After discovering that his ancestor was executed during the Salem witch trials, Lee Alexander McQueen dedicated his Autumn/Winter 2007 show to her memory. The collection was a breathtaking exploration of paganism and religious persecution, staged on a giant red pentagram drawn in black sand. Models wore powerful, dark designs featuring occult symbols, astrological headpieces, and a sense of fierce, defiant femininity.⁴⁰
- **Dior's Powerful Women:** Under the creative direction of Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior has repeatedly explored feminist themes. For her Spring/Summer 2024 collection, Chiuri explicitly dedicated the show to witchcraft, re-contextualizing the witch not as a demonic figure but as a symbol of strong, unconventional womanhood. The collection drew on historical figures like Joan of Arc, creating a subtle yet undeniably witchy atmosphere that celebrated female resilience.⁴⁰
- **Iconic Moments:** The connection between high fashion and witchcraft has a long history. **Vivienne Westwood's** seminal Autumn/Winter 1983 collection, titled "Witches," was one of the first to bring the theme to the runway, inspired by the esoteric art of Keith Haring.⁴⁰ Perhaps the most enduring single image is that of a young **Kate Moss** walking for **Martine Sitbon's Spring/Summer 1993** show. Her look—a simple floating dress, a classic pointed witch's hat, and an elegant cigarette holder—has become a perennial reference point, an image of effortless, chic sorcery that is shared across social media every autumn.⁴⁰

Influencers and Modern Icons

In the digital age, the dissemination of these styles has accelerated. Social media influencers on platforms like Instagram have become key figures in interpreting and popularizing witch and gothic fashion for a global audience. Influencers in the goth sphere, such as **Goddess**

Sylvanas (@goddess.sylvanas) and **Astrid** (@bluexastrid), showcase a range of gothic sub-styles, from Appalachian goth to dark fantasy.⁴³ In the witch community, figures like

Lindsay Squire (@thewitchoftheforest) and **Bri Luna** (@thehoodwitch) blend fashion with spiritual guidance, demonstrating how the aesthetic is a lived practice.⁴⁴ These digital creators act as modern-day style icons, translating the high-concept drama of the runway and the deep-rooted traditions of subculture into accessible, personal, and ever-evolving forms of expression.

Conclusion: The Enduring Allure of the Shadow Wardrobe

The exploration of witch and gothic fashion reveals two rich, complex, and deeply symbolic sartorial traditions. While they share a common ground in the shadows of mainstream culture—a shared palette of darkness, a vocabulary of occult symbolism, and a spirit of non-conformity—their core identities remain distinct. Witch fashion emerges as a vibrant, living practice of empowerment, a tangible connection to nature and spirituality, and a powerful reclamation of a once-demonized female archetype. Gothic fashion stands as a testament to the enduring power of romanticism, a poetic embrace of melancholy and the macabre, and a rebellion rooted in the rich soil of literature and music. Their frequent intersection speaks to a shared "outsider" status, yet their divergent paths highlight fundamentally different ways of engaging with the world: one through the active cultivation of personal power, the other through the introspective celebration of dark beauty.

The enduring allure of these "shadow wardrobes" lies in their capacity to offer more than just a fleeting trend. In an era of rapid cultural and social change, they provide robust and highly articulated visual languages for expressing complex identities. They are not merely clothes but are imbued with history, philosophy, and community. To dress as a witch is to potentially align oneself with a lineage of resilient women, to connect with the cycles of the earth, and to make a statement about self-possessed feminine power. To dress as a goth is to find beauty in sorrow, to signal an appreciation for a rich artistic heritage, and to create a space of romantic defiance against a mundane world.

As these styles continue to evolve in the digital age, the lines between authentic subculture, curated online aesthetic, and mainstream trend become increasingly blurred. The accessibility offered by platforms like TikTok and Instagram allows for unprecedented creativity and participation, yet also raises questions of performativity versus lived identity. Nonetheless, the fundamental power of these fashions remains. They persist because they speak to timeless aspects of the human experience that often exist outside the bright lights of the mainstream:

mystery, power, melancholy, and magic. The shadow wardrobe, in all its forms, will continue to be a potent resource for those seeking to articulate who they are, not in spite of the darkness, but because of it.

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