

# “Leaving my girlhood behind”: woke witches and feminist liminality in

## *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

Sabrina the Teenage Witch is a character who has been reimagined across multiple media platforms for several decades, most recently in the horror-inspired Netflix series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. In this article I examine the way that Sabrina has evolved from a bubbly blonde comic character to a gothic representation of feminist resistance who challenges the status quo of both the magical and mortal worlds that she inhabits. I discuss how the series creates a dialogue with shows, films, political movements and events in contemporary culture to place itself within an established teen discourse relating to the liminality of the female teen experience.

Keywords: feminism; liminality; witch; gothic; horror

### **Introduction**

Netflix’s 2018 show *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is a gothic-inspired reimagining of a character that has existed in print and screen formats since the 1960s. Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the show’s creator, describes *Chilling Adventures* as a “coming of age story” that is influenced by his love of horror, particularly stories containing teenage female protagonists, such as *Carrie* and *The Exorcist* (Danielle Turchiano, 2018).

*Chilling Adventures’* protagonist, Sabrina Spellman, is a half witch, half mortal teenager who lives in Greendale with her supernatural aunts, Zelda and Hilda, and cousin Ambrose. The first episode, or “chapter”, begins three days before Sabrina’s 16th birthday, when she is expected to attend her Dark Baptism and sign her name in the “Book of the Beast”. Sabrina is aware of her magical heritage, but due to her mixed genealogy, she has attended mortal school and developed strong relationships with Ros Walker, Susie Putnam and her boyfriend Harvey Kinkle, who are regulars in the show. The chapter begins with Sabrina struggling to make an important life decision: either, to

follow “the path of night” by renouncing her mortal life and attending the Academy of Unseen Arts to begin her witch training, or to follow “the path of light” and relinquish her magical powers. As the season continues, Sabrina challenges why she cannot follow both paths, and her attempts to balance her mortal and witch lives form the main narrative of the show.

*Chilling Adventures* has been well received by audiences, with critics noting its self-referential supernatural teen drama legacy—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), *The Craft* (1996), and *Charmed* (1998) among others—as well as its clear feminist message. *The Guardian*’s Richard Andrews describes Sabrina as “the embodiment of a new type of witch: young, woke, liberated and likely to cast spells that are socially conscious rather than caustic” (2018) while *The New York Times*’ Margaret Lyons claims that *Chilling Adventures* knows what *The Craft* knew, that “teenage girl rage is a powerful force” (2018).

Aguirre-Sacassa has defined the genre of *Chilling Adventures* as psychological horror (Turchiano, 2018; Aguirre-Sacasa, 2014), but this article positions Sabrina as a gothic figure. While the term gothic is notoriously hard to define, elements of the genre noted by Fred Botting such as mysterious atmospheres which signal a “disturbing return of pasts upon presents” and figures which “shadow the progress of modernity” can be seen in *Chilling Adventures* from the outset (1995, 1). Diana Wallace argues that the Gothic has the power to “convey the female experience repressed in other modes of writing” (2013, 67), and the distinct feminist tone and presentation of female history in *Chilling Adventures* continues this trend. Sabrina also performs the role seen in the female-centred gothic films of the 1940s to 1960s, discussed by Misha Kavka, of a female protagonist who is a “subject of paranoia” and “both victim and investigator” of that paranoia (2006, 220). Sabrina is encouraged to submit to the Dark Lord by her

aunts, and yet has haunting premonitions which warn her not to, prompting her to investigate what these signs mean.

For me, it is Sabrina's liminality which primarily marks her as a gothic figure. Victor Turner uses the term liminality to describe the ambiguous state of an individual during a *rites de passage* such as death, birth or puberty rites (2017, 95). Sabrina's Dark Baptism, which she describes as a "leaving of her girlhood behind", like "Shoshanna Feldman's *bar mitzvah*, or Guadalupe Lopez's *quinceanera*", aligns with Turner's concept. For Turner these rites consist of three phases: the detachment from a "fixed point in the social structure", the "liminal" period where a person "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state", and consummation where the person once again becomes "stable" with new clearly defined expectations (2017, 94-5). Sabrina's refusal to detach from the mortal world in the first phase of her baptism, and her refusal to finish or 'consummate' the ritual, leaves her in a liminal state where she is split between the mortal and magical worlds, a "cultural realm" that she exists in alone.

Victoria Madden notes that gothic fiction "has traditionally given voice to those "unclean" liminal entities that elude binary distinctions by falling somewhere between two opposing ideas" (2017, 10), and as a half-witch half-mortal on the cusp of her sweet-sixteenth, Sabrina is one of those entities. Madden refers to Mary Douglas' study *Purity and Danger* (1966) to explore what it is to be "unclean", noting that that all "matter out of place" is considered dirt—impure and unwelcome (2017, 9). Sabrina's impurity is referred to in similar language to that discussed by Douglas; Madam Satan calls Sabrina's mother a "mortal sow", and Prudence refers to her as a "half-breed" (Chapter One), both suggesting a "monstrous birth" formed by the joining of two species (Douglas, 2003, 40). Douglas suggests that "ambiguous or anomalous events"

such as monstrous births must be dealt by the culture in question to avoid the risk of “forfeiting confidence”, and this is what Sabrina’s coven attempts to do: absorb her to normalise her. Sabrina’s rejection of this normalising, her desire to stay in both the magical and mortals worlds, emphasizes her as “out of place”, and therefore a danger to the status quo. Sabrina’s rebellion against “classification” as witch or mortal does not stop at the bridge between realms however; Sabrina’s reluctance to sign her soul away to the Dark Lord is mirrored by feminist battles undertaken by Sabrina and her friends in the mortal world, presenting a multifaceted clash with patriarchal order.

In this article, I examine how *Chilling Adventures* represents the politics of feminism in its reimagining of bubbly blonde Sabrina the Teenage Witch as a gothic-inspired feminist icon for the millennial age. The article will begin by exploring the origins of the character of Sabrina the Teenage Witch, and will discuss how the character has evolved from a “scatterbrained” blonde, to, arguably, a “new generation feminist” (Rosalind Gill, 2016, 611). It will consider how *Chilling Adventures* uses the self-referential qualities associated with teen drama to create a dialogue with shows, films and political movements and fit itself in an established teen discourse relating to the liminality of the female teen experience. Finally, it will consider how the language of political rebellion, law, and the history of witchcraft are used to address the topical feminist issues of identity and victimhood in contemporary America.

### **The Many Lives of Sabrina the Teenage Witch**

Sabrina began as a character in *Archie*, a comic which according to the Archie website “is one of the longest running brands in the history of the comic industry”. Bart Beaty notes that despite being an American household name for over seventy years, there has

been little scholarly work done on *Archie* (2015, 5), and the same can be said of the comic's offshoot titles, including *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*.

Sabrina was created by George Gladir and Dan DeCarlo, and appeared in the comic *Archie's Madhouse* between 1962 and 1969. Described on the Archie website as "spunky, flirtatious and sometimes scatterbrained", Sabrina's role was to "hex" students at her high school, perform love spells, and carry out "malicious errands" with her feline familiar, Salem (Gladir et al., 2017, 14). She became a regular in *Archie's TV Laugh-Out* between 1969 and 1985, and was given her own eponymous series of comics from 1971 to 1983.

Sabrina has been regenerated several times across media platforms, including animated and live action TV series, and various comic reboots. The latest manifestation of Sabrina first appeared in *Afterlife with Archie* (2013), a teen+ rated horror comic which has a "more mature tone" than the "main Archie-verse" (David Betancourt, 2014). A year later, she appeared in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). Both comics were written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, who is also the series developer of the 2018 Netflix television series as well as the CW show *Riverdale* (2017), a teen drama based on the *Archie* comics. While these versions have stylistic similarities and some character cross-overs, the *Chilling Adventures* comic and TV show vary in significant ways, from narrative differences to a change in the time setting of the story.

Despite the various changes over the years, the characterisation of Sabrina as a bubbly blonde whose dark potential is regulated by a sense of morality have remained consistent until the gothic-horror graphic novel and TV instalments. The popular 1990s sitcom introduced a family-centric set-up which was not dominant in the comic, following in the steps of earlier gothic sitcoms (*The Munsters* (1964); *Bewitched* (1964)) by presenting a modern suburban family which is "shadowed by darker and

mostly unspoken ‘others’ from pre-modern” traditions (Jon Hartley, 2015, 97). Bernice Murphy has compared *Sabrina* and the 1960s show *Bewitched*, noting that both shows “tended to revolve around plotlines in which the heroine must conceal her powers from suspicious mortals or use them to get her into zany, but always solvable, situations” (2009, 65). Despite these similarities, Murphy notes that *Sabrina* is not forced to repress her abilities as Samantha of *Bewitched* is; rather, the depiction of the teen-witch in shows from the nineties such as *Sabrina*, *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* often functioned as “a powerful metaphor for the female maturation process” (2009, 66).

In *Chilling Adventures*, *Sabrina*’s story remains family-centric, but the darkness is no longer in the shadows and unspoken—it is front and centre (one would find it hard to visualise nineties *Zelda* and *Hilda* overseeing the ritualised cannibalistic frenzy in Chapter Seven). *Sabrina* still attempts to conceal her powers from friends and balance her roles in the mortal and magical realms, but the removal of an overtly comical tone makes these elements of the story feel less “zany” and more perilous, such as when *Sabrina* performs an ill-fated necromantic rite in Chapter Eight.

*Chilling Adventures* also takes the teen-witch as a metaphor of female maturation and empowerment to a new level, explicitly exploring the role of a politically aware teenage witch in an uncanny America that is at once present day and eerily “out-of-time”. While nineties *Sabrina*, *Buffy* and the Halliwell sisters of *Charmed* could be seen as “free-thinking, independent-minded young women” (Murphy, 67), *Chilling Adventure*’s *Sabrina* and her friends are these things and more: they are politically active, outspoken teens who are conscious of the patriarchal system around them, demonstrated by their formation of WICCA (Women's Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association), a “recognized, legitimate sisterhood” to challenge the school’s culture of “puritanical masculinity”. Kristen J. Sollée notes that many millennial women

see “a reclamation of female power” in both witch and feminist identities, as these words “conjure and counter a tortuous history of misogyny” while also being “emblematic of women overcoming oppression” (2017, 13). *Chilling Adventures* certainly uses this politicised view of the figures of “witch” and “feminist” to create characters who are rediscovering the language, texts and arguments of second-wave feminism to articulate their ideological frustration in the present.

McRobbie argues that postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved” and is no longer needed (2009, 12) and the teen-witch shows of the late nineties and early millennium align with this definition. A. Susan Owen argues that *Buffy* has a postfeminist perspective constructed through Buffy’s relationship with her mother, where “little is ever said about the history of women’s struggle in American culture” (2009, 30), and the same could be said of *Sabrina* and *Charmed* which both contain strong female characters without developing overtly feminist narratives. These women carry many of the signifiers of post-feminism noted by McRobbie; they have ‘frivolous thoughts’, they are clever and witty but in a ‘feminine way’, and while their primary interest is saving the world, finding ‘the right man’ comes a close second (2009, 12).

Rachel Moseley argues that the use of glamour in teen-witch texts of the nineties aligns them with postfeminism, noting that both *The Craft* and the opening credits of *Sabrina* utilise a magical version of the makeover trope so often seen in teen films to reinforce “appropriate feminine identities” (2002, 406). *Chilling Adventures* differs from these postfeminist texts in its gender politics; Sabrina’s thoughts, and those of her friends, are rarely frivolous, and they tend to be eloquent when stating their desires for fairness and equality. In short, these young women are politically “woke”—and they know it.

*Chilling Adventures* references and repurposes feminist language and history in a way that cannot be defined as postfeminist, but could align with a term discussed by Rosalind Gill, that of “new generation feminism” (2016, 611). Gill is critical of this term because it is often attributed to examples in the media which lack political substance (625), yet in *Chilling Adventures*, there is a depth to the conversations which aligns it with a growth of genuine feminist activism seen in America over recent years. While Gill notes that a lexicon borrowed from feminism being used as feminist signifiers in magazines is often “distinctly postfeminist” in its lack of critique of gender power relations—such as the bright pink feminist fist symbol—the use of symbols and terms in *Chilling Adventures* robustly challenges patriarchal rule. For example, when Sabrina, Ros and Susie investigate the removal of controversial books from the school library, there is a poster behind them which contains the slogan “sisterhood is blooming, get ready for spring”, paraphrasing the poster created by the Chicago Women’s Graphic Collective in 1970. The book in question, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), carries its own signifiers relating to African-American female identity. By presenting Ros (a woman of colour) as the leading figure in this fight, with support from her white friends and teaching staff, the show presents an intersectional, intergenerational form of female rebellion. Their pursuit of knowledge against the principal’s orders echoes the acts of previous generations of feminists, just as the poster echoes their use of symbolism.

In *Feminist Afterlives*, Red Chidgey introduces a concept called *assemblage memory* to explain how the “images, ideas and feelings of past liberation struggles” become available in times “not of their making” (2018, 1), often through banal objects (5). *Chilling Adventures*’ repurposing of slogans and symbols of “past liberation”, and use of feminist memory as “a tool for mobilisation” (10), arguably engages with this



process of re-circulating cultural memory. However, it is important to keep in mind the ethical implications of the media's "lucrative re-purposing of historical, literary and cultural archives" as discussed by Joanne Garde-Hansen (2011, 43). As a Netflix vehicle, *Chilling Adventures*' act of remembering the past is done so for commercial gain. Despite this, the memory recorded through repurposing past activism in this show clearly has more political depth than the postfeminist signifiers concerning Gill.

Arguably, this series is part of a "new situation" mentioned by Gill. She argues that feminism "has a new luminosity in popular culture" (2016, 614), and *Chilling Adventures* is clearly part of this trend. Sollée also notes that not only is "feminism is a buzz word for the first time in decades", but that "the witch" is also having a moment in popular culture; she uses a similar term to Gill when stating that "for the newly anointed 'generation witch,' empowerment is central to her appeal" (2017, 13). Aguirre-Sacasa notes that a show dealing with witchcraft is well-placed to deal with themes of female sexuality and empowerment, but that the role of the witch here is also paradoxical, as these empowered women are still subservient to a patriarch (Turchiano, 2018). Sabrina spends most of the series questioning and disobeying these antagonistic patriarchal figures in both worlds, and it is this which arguably makes her a new generation feminist figure.

Despite the series' presentation of feminist debate, it still has some elements which are arguably postfeminist. It utilises the trope of glamour in Chapter Two when Sabrina creates a sexualised doppelgänger to seduce and punish the jocks who bully Susie. Here, Sabrina conforms to a traditional construct of feminine beauty and sexuality as her glamoured-self strips for the jocks; yet throughout the rest of the series, any nakedness or discussion of Sabrina's body is used to make a point on bodily autonomy and choice. In Chapter One, for instance, Sabrina asks why she must remain a

virgin for her “dark baptism,” questioning why the Dark Lord gets to decide what she does with her body. Moseley argues that the teen-witch texts of the nineties present feminine power and glamour as “emphatically superficial, ephemeral and cosmetic” (2002, 409), but while *Chilling Adventures* does, like any teen show, occasionally present a superficial and idealised sense of feminine beauty and sexuality, it also strives for depth in its challenge of many of these ideals.

One element which makes the witch/feminist dichotomy complex in *Chilling Adventures* is the inclusion of the Church of Night as a dark mirror to Christian patriarchy, both legitimising Sabrina’s family as “real” witches, while removing much of the power of independence attributed to the image of the witch in feminist discourse. Diane Purkiss argues that the witch has been “cast and recast as the late twentieth century’s idea of a profeminist, a sister from the past”, and has been “central to the revival of women’s history” (1996, 9), but these witches are both powerful and subservient, ever eager for the Dark Lord’s attention. Purkiss describes the mythical profeminist witch as a liberated “healer and midwife” living alone on the edge of a village, who derived mystical knowledge from a “half-submerged pagan religion”, and was tortured to death because her “freedom and independence threatened men” (1996, 7). Sabrina’s aunts fit this description: they live on the edge of the town, they are midwives and herbalists, neither is married and they are both sexually active. Yet it is not the Christian church that threatens their freedom, rather it is the head of their own coven, Faustus Blackwood, who threatens and subjugates them.

While Sabrina’s fight against patriarchal suppression drives the narrative, the older witches in the coven are presented initially as complicit in their own subjugation. Even Madam Satan, played with carnal gusto by Michelle Gomez as the archetypal “feral femme fatale [...] witch-as-villain” (Sollée, 2017, 111) spends much of the time

acting as a slave to the Dark Lord. Prudence explains to Sabrina that the Dark Lord expects her to give up her freedom for power because the thought of them having both terrifies him, stating: “He’s a man, isn’t he?” (Chapter Two). As the seasons develop, however, Sabrina’s rebellious attitude appears to infect those around her, encouraging her aunts, the Weird Sisters, and even Madam Satan, to break rules set by their unforgiving patriarchs.

This version of Sabrina is, unlike its predecessors, a dystopian exploration of teenage witchcraft. Sabrina’s fight against the system draws out the same limitations experienced by the rebellious girl protagonists of dystopian teen fiction, such as contradictions “of strength and weakness, of resistance and acquiescence” (Sara Day, Miranda Green and Amy Montz, 2014, 4). Part of Sabrina’s journey is about learning when to fight, and when to comply, which can be seen in her move from initially refusing to sign the Book of the Beast, to doing so at the end of the first season in order to gain the power needed to save her friends. Her overall agenda appears to remain the same throughout the series, however, as she states in Chapter Four: “I am going to the academy to learn how to defeat the Dark Lord. I’m going to learn how to conjure him, bind him, banish him”. This determination at least does provide a sense of hope, although we are left to wonder how successful she will be.

**‘The whole thing functions as a metaphor’: intertextuality, liminality and time in *Chilling Adventures***

While *Chilling Adventures* distinguishes itself from the sitcom and animated series that precedes it through a darker, more socially aware narrative, it has also used intertextual referencing to films, shows and historic events to place itself in a wider discourse of

witchcraft, gothic-horror and feminist texts. In her discussion of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva notes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1986, 37), but in *Chilling Adventures* this act is conscious and deliberate.

Several magazine articles have noted the intertextual referencing of horror dramas and the Salem witch trials within *Chilling Adventures*. *Indiewire* published a “list of pop culture Easter eggs” found in the series episode-by-episode, ranging from the names of fictional and historical people; to the use of “feminist imagery” in the home décor (Hanh Ngyuen and Jamie Righetti, 2018). This approach builds upon a characteristic found in “quality” teen and cult television since the nineties; frequent intertextual references are made through the series’ visual and narrative conventions to “introduce young audiences to older media texts, facilitating their continued circulation to a new generation of consumers” (Catherine Johnson, 2005, 108). The fact that fans have actively engaged in tracking down these Easter eggs means that this approach has been effective, pointing the series’ viewers towards merchandise and other franchised elements, such as the original comic and the sister show *Riverdale*, as well as older films, several of which are also available to stream from the show’s production company, Netflix.

From the outset, the series toys with self-reflexivity, a trait well documented in teen television (Moseley, 2008, 41). Sabrina and her friends head to Cerberus’s Books (an old-fashioned book shop-come-diner) to “dissect” George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) after a Halloween screening. Susie and Ros explain to Harvey that the film is a “monster movie” but also “functions as a metaphor”: “on one level, yes, it is about zombies, but it’s also about Cold War, civil rights, the collapse of the nuclear family”. This show is aware of its place in the canon of horror, and is also aware of

academic analysis that has been performed on these films, such as the way in which *Night of the Living Dead* echoes “the radical politics of the period” and the anger of the times (Paul Wells, 2000, 80). This paratextual discussion acknowledges the show’s place in this genre, and in doing so, presents a narrative that works on multiple levels. To use Susie’s words, yes *Chilling Adventures* is about witches, but it is also about prejudice, female empowerment and the queering of social norms.

*Chilling Adventures* has been compared to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in several reviews due to shared generic codes and conventions, such as characterisation, setting, and narrative. Both protagonists are supernatural, blonde teenage girls who fight monsters to protect the underdog. Like Buffy’s Sunnydale, which sits on the “hellmouth”, Sabrina’s Greendale references the underworld (Cerberus Books, Persephone’s Pizza), in particular the mine which is referred to as “the Devil’s Doorway”, said to run so deep that “one shaft takes you all the way to hell”. At times, the parallels are too similar to be mere coincidence. “Dreams in a Witch House” (Chapter Five) has an almost identical plot to the *Buffy* episode “Restless”, where a being is haunting the characters in their dreams, forcing them to face their greatest fear—in *Buffy* it is the first slayer, in *Chilling Adventures* it is a mythical demon from Ilicano folklore called Batibat. They even share an actor: Alexis Denisof, who played Wesley in *Buffy*, appears in four episodes of season two as Madam Satan’s love interest. Like the highly revered horror movies referenced in *Chilling Adventures*, there has been a “wealth of critical literature” produced on *Buffy* (Helen Wheatley, 2006, 18), referred to as “buffyology”. By associating itself with this iconic show, *Chilling Adventures* is again aligning itself with quality examples of the horror teen genre.

The regular references made by the show through paratext (films, books, comics and posters used within the show) and intertext (subtle homages to films and shows)

place it in a broader discursive universe relating to gothic and horror media. However, there is also a playful intertextual relationship with another genre; that is, the coming-of-age drama. An early scene in Chapter One depicts Sabrina dancing up the stairs of her aunts' house to "Be My Baby" by The Shirelles, echoing the soundtrack and Baby's moves in *Dirty Dancing* (1987); and in Chapter Two, she dances with Harvey to the Stray Cats' version of "Sixteen Candles", recorded for the 1984 John Hughes movie of the same name. By referencing coming-of-age films as well as horror, *Chilling Adventures* places itself within a wider narrative discourse on the liminal female teen experience that covers well known tropes such as young love and awakening sexuality from both perspectives: like *Buffy* and other teen witch shows, this story is part romance drama, part gothic nightmare.

Liminal states relating to female experience are also common tropes in horror cinema: as A. Robin Hoffman observes, *Rosemary's Baby* plays with fears associated with pregnancy (2011, 246), while Aviva Briefel notes that both *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps* use menstruation to draw viewers into "painful identification" with the monstrous teenage protagonists (2005, 24). *Chilling Adventures'* reference of iconic horror movies as paratexts within the series aligns Sabrina with the liminal protagonists of such films: for example, Sabrina wears a replica of Rosemary's red dress to join forces with the Weird Sisters, and echoes Carrie's prom dress in her outfit for the Dark Baptism. There is even a water conservation poster in the girls' bathroom at school which uses the phrase "plug it up", a reference to the chant directed at Carrie by the girls who bully her at school. By aligning Sabrina with these protagonists, the series allows for her own liminality to be explored on multiple levels; she is virginal and naïve but powerful like Carrie, she is manipulated by those she trusts in the name of the Devil as Rosemary is, and yet she also arguably shows more strength than these characters by gaining control

of her powers rather than be controlled by them, and by resisting the Dark Lord's demands for servitude.

The intertextual references in *Chilling Adventures* are not limited to female teenage characters: during Sabrina's Dark Baptism we see a man with a rabbit's head, conjuring memories of Frank, the cunicular spectre in *Donnie Darko* (2001), another gothic exploration of teen angst. Like *Donnie*, *Chilling Adventures* evokes the past through its nostalgic use of pop iconography and music, and yet, makes the era in question "strange and unstable for the viewer" (James Walters, 2008, 196) by combining the soundtrack with distorted visual effects. For *Donnie*, it is an admixture of "real time" and slow-motion filming; for *Chilling Adventures*, a recurring use of out-of-focus framing blurs the edges of the shot, resulting in scenes that come across as dream-like.

Like Sabrina and Carrie, Donnie's liminality manifests itself through a growing awareness of paranormal abilities, which alienates him from those around him. Madden argues that the failure of liminal figures "to conform to their class is a transgression that confounds the entire system, threatening to bring it all down" (2017, 11), and this is why they are often ostracized and come to tragic ends.

Liminality can be used in a powerful way, however. Day et al. note that adolescent women protagonists in contemporary dystopian novels, such as Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, "recognize their liminal situations and, over time, use their in-between positions as a means for resistance and rebellion against the social orders that seek to control them" (2014, 3-4). Sabrina of *Chilling Adventures* does the same, recognizing and using her liminality as a means for resistance. She questions why she must be virginal for her baptism by asking to speak to someone about the ritual in order to "make an educated choice". Zelda responds that it is not a choice, *it is a duty*, a term

which indicates that Sabrina, and by extension all female witches, are expected to obey the rituals that are emphatically patriarchal. Despite her aunts' attempts at persuasion, Sabrina repeatedly resists these expectations by questioning the status quo of their coven, the Church of Night. As a half mortal, she can challenge the magical world, knowing that she can remain in the mortal world if she is rejected by the coven, while her role as someone who has grown up in a magical community, but who has not yet signed her name in *The Book of the Beast*, awards her agency in order to question what the coven requires from her. Here, we can see that liminality can be manipulated to fight for choice if the person in question is strong enough, and unlike Carrie and other liminal protagonists of horror films, Sabrina possesses that strength.

While the sense of liminality in the series is integrally linked to Sabrina's maturation, it also extends beyond her individual experiences to the liminal spatiotemporal locations within the show. Sabrina moves between alternate timescapes and realities, physically moving between the magic and mortal world by attending the Academy of Unseen Arts which is on a different plane of existence to Greendale. She is also pulled back in time through biting into a "malum malus", an apple of knowledge, in order to witness first-hand the results of the historic lynching of witches in the woods outside Greendale.

More broadly, the temporal setting of *Chilling Adventures* bridges several eras at once. While the series is set in the present day, indicated by a subtitle in Chapter One stating that it is "Tuesday October 28th of this year", it is strongly influenced by 1960s style in terms of fashion, music and vintage technology. Certain incongruous choices make the show feel deliberately dated: Sabrina and her friends do not have mobile phones; they drive vintage cars; watch black and white films; and the diegetic soundtrack is made up of tracks from the 1960s, or covers of songs from that era. Other



elements post-date this decade, however: the pop culture references to *The Bluest Eye* (referred to by Sabrina as a “classic”) and Neil Gaiman’s 1989 graphic novel *The Sandman*; her cousin Ambrose is regularly seen with a laptop, and the non-diegetic soundtrack includes songs which span from the seventies to the present day. The comic that the show is adapted from is a “period piece” set in the early 1960s, aligning it with the publication dates of the original Sabrina stories (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2018), which explains some of the show’s retro-aesthetic choices. That said, these references to both the past and the present have confused fans, prompting online discussions which speculate the era in which the series is situated (see for example Corey Plante, 2018).

The way that *Chilling Adventures* uses history draws heavily upon gothic tropes. As Misha Kavka (2002, 210) notes, the Gothic uses the blurring of boundaries to create a feeling of the “uncanny”, whether that is boundaries between the self and other, life and death, or the historic past and the present. While the Greendale witches’ immortality and ability to raise the dead certainly plays with the boundaries of life and death, the presentation of the past and present as a blurred timescape is particularly uncanny. Kavka argues that the Gothic “represents the incursions and invasions of a semi-imaginary past into the present” (211), and this certainly happens in Greendale.

The archaic past which haunts Sabrina and her friends is, to use Ms Wardwell’s phrasing, one of “puritanical masculinity”: the blur of 1960s and the present makes it seem that the show is merging the birth of second wave feminism with feminist battles seen in the present, allowing for a conversation to develop between these two political waves.

Political language, arguments and references to gender and identity politics used by Sabrina and her friends draw upon both the movements of the mid twentieth century and current political debates. For example, Ros’s anger at Principal Hawthorn’s

decision to reject a “Daughters of the Black Panthers” club (Chapter One) works on multiple levels: it harks back to the 1960s civil rights movement, mimics the “Daughters of the American Revolution”, an organization historically clouded in racism (Sarah Maslin Nir, 2012), and echoes the concept of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, a network started by three black women in 2013 to challenge state-sanctioned violence against black people in the US. A substitute for “Daughters”, the WICCA group founded by Ros and Sabrina, is designed to “topple the white patriarchy”, activating a feminist, race-aware agenda. WICCA itself may even be a reference to the WITCH action groups formed under the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s (Sollée, 2017, 52).

The temporal anachronisms of *Chilling Adventures* remove social media as a way for the characters to articulate their political views, and so they utilise the same formats used by previous generations of political activists – leaflets, posters, and public speaking. The social issues that Ros, Sabrina and Susie contest appear at once dated and current, problems that previous generations of activists fought and that many believed were “fixed”. Post-feminism works on the understanding that feminism has “already passed away” (McRobbie 2009, 12) but the politics represented in *Chilling Adventures* works by acknowledging that the language of second-wave feminism is needed now more than ever.

Sarah Banet-Wiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue that we are living in a “remarkable moment” where “popular feminism” is becoming accessible and admired, but they also note that this sense of popular feminism combines multiple interacting and competing feminisms, raising questions on how it can be defined or understood in the present (2017, 884-5). *Chilling Adventures* presents a form of feminism that is inclusive of these separate “threads” of feminist discourse: the acronym WICCA refers

to the term “intersectional”, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her discussion of how black women’s subordination is an intersection of both racial and sexual discrimination (1989), and the club itself is founded by Sabrina and Ros to support their friend Susie who is bullied because of her queer identity (Susie is played by Lachlan Watson, a non-binary actor, drawing parallels between the activism of the character and the actor themselves). *Chilling Adventures* echoes the language of political activism histories, but in an inclusive, forward-thinking way. One could argue therefore that the sense of liminality articulated through skewed temporality, space and the female teen experience in *Chilling Adventures* resonates with the transitional space that feminism currently finds itself in as a whole. As Gill argues, we are in a moment of a cultural change where multiple and contradictory ideas co-exist: post-feminist criticism is still required to discuss the contradictions in media culture (2016, 622), but a new more serious feminist voice is also developing, and it is multigenerational, multicultural, and like the voice of second wave feminism, it is angry.

### **‘You broke your promise’: consent and choice in *The Trial of Sabrina***

This final section will consider the trial in Chapter Three of *Chilling Adventures* as a case study of how the series explores contemporary issues of consent and choice, while also drawing on the history of female victimhood seen in the witch trials of the past. Just as Arthur Miller’s depiction of the 1692 Salem trials in *The Crucible* (1953) responded to the contemporary McCarthy “Red hunt” in the US (Miller, 1996), this episode responds to the #MeToo movement by combining the language of contemporary rape trials and the historic American “witch hunts” to draw a parallel with feminist issues of the past and present.

In this episode Sabrina appears in Witch Court, charged with Breach of Promise for refusing to sign her name in the Book of the Beast. Father Blackwood, the High Priest of the Church of Night and antagonist throughout the series, acts as prosecutor and representative of the Dark Lord, while Sabrina is defended by a lawyer called Daniel Webster, who found success through making a deal with the Devil.

The prosecution uses language drawn from cases that have been documented in the media over many years, language which suggests that women consent to acts of abuse through choices they make, such as the clothing they wear. During his examination of Sabrina, in a court where defendants are considered guilty until proven innocent, Blackwood asks:

Did you not willingly go into the woods that night, wearing of all things a wedding dress? The fact is you gave every indication that it was your intention to fulfil a promise made. You showed up for a ceremony you committed to, then at the moment of consummation, you fled. You broke your promise.

He argues that Sabrina was “courting” the Dark Lord before the Baptism, and following Blackwood’s examination, the crowd are heard shouting the words “guilty” and “tramp”. The framing of the prosecution’s argument here is reflective of those regularly seen in rape trials which apportion blame to the victim: Sabrina was initially willing, she dressed provocatively, and she changed her mind at “the moment of consummation”.

Several trials that have been discussed in the media follow similar patterns, from a 2011 case in Canada where the judge felt that the victim gave confusing signals by wearing a tube top, high heels and make up, and by kissing the perpetrator earlier in the evening (Christine Balderas, 2011), to a more recent case in Ireland which saw a

teenager's thong being shown to the jurors as evidence that the girl could have been "attracted to the defendant" (Harriet Hall, 2018). In 2016, Brock Turner was given a reduced sentence for sexual assault because the judge believed he had already suffered through the loss of his swimming scholarship at Stanford University, drawing a statement from the victim which noted that "the trial, the sentencing and the legal system's approach to sexual assault — from the defense lawyer's questions about what she wore that night to her attacker's sentence — were irrevocably marred by male and class privilege" (Liam Stack, 2016).

By borrowing the language of these trials to punish and limit the freedom of Sabrina, this show is making a point that the target audience of the show may already be painfully aware of: young women may well be blamed for their own victimhood if they dress or behave in a way that is deemed provocative, or that conveys a sense of freedom of choice. As Sollée notes, the word "witch" was used to punish women and "police female sexuality" for centuries, but "now 'slut' has become the damning epithet that is *de rigueur*" (2017, 13).

The theme of consent is continued when Sabrina is told that she must be "stripped and examined" by the coven for a witch's mark to test if her "true, dominant nature" is mortal or witch, and so asks Harvey to check her body to see if there is a mark that she is unaware of. While the filming of this scene verges on romantic (he strips also so that she does not feel so exposed, there is a chaste kiss, and there are lingering shots on her body) the main sense is one of awkward trust. Sabrina is Harvey's girlfriend, and she is naked, but he does not attempt to pressure her into sexual activity. This trust is starkly contrasted with the predatory nature of Blackwood and the coven, reinforcing the idea that a decent man can be trusted to know when consent is being given, and when it is not.

This episode was released in the same year that both the President of the United States and his nominee for Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh, resisted accusations of historic sexual assaults, and by playing with the concept of a flawed and often misogynistic legal system, it continues the themes of “puritanical masculinity” seen on both sides of Greendale’s magical divide, as well as challenging what is currently happening in America. The uncanny use of language and approaches seen in trials against women from Salem to the present day by the court of The Church of Night shows that it is not being positioned purely as a hellish antithesis of the mortal court, rather it is presented as a dark reflection of America’s own broken legal system.

As with the show’s reference to horror texts, this episode borrows from two versions of the Faust myth, providing the fictional trial with a cultural backdrop which challenge the concepts of justice and fairness woven into the cultural and literary fabric of what it is to be an American. Faustus Blackwood’s name references Christopher Marlow’s version of the Faust myth, while the defence lawyer’s name is a reference to the eponymous protagonist of Stephen Vincent Benét’s short story *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (2015), in which a man faces eternity in hell after making a deal with the Devil, but is given the chance to fight the Devil’s contract in court.

Elements of *The Devil* and Sabrina’s trial in *Chilling Adventures* overlap: both take place in a supernatural court, and both follow defendants who are trying to exit their contract with the Devil. The judge in *The Devil* is John Hathorne, one of the magistrates from the Salem witch trials, whose name is also referenced by *Chilling Adventures’* Principal Hawthorne. There are also areas of contrast between these narratives, however: the man on trial in *The Devil* willingly sold his soul to the devil in a moment of greed, but Sabrina’s was bargained without her consent before she was born; where Webster in *The Devil* is a moralistic, “mythicized figure” (Robert Singer,

1996, 270), the character who shares his name in the show is flawed, having sold his own soul to become a great lawyer and defend known rapists and child killers.

The contrast between these two narratives raises an interesting discussion pertaining to contemporary issues of justice in America. Benét, a “willing propagandist for [American] democracy” during the Second World War, produced his story as a treatise on patriotism; as Singer argues, Benét’s message was that “law and the government work in concert to protect the individual’s rights against oppression” (1996, 270). *Chilling Adventures* appears to do the opposite: it presents a case which is saturated with injustice, in which the protagonist is deemed guilty until proven innocent, and where the law and governing body of the coven seem determined to oppress the individual. This show is criticising the legal system rather than championing it.

It is Sabrina’s liminality which allows her to win the court case and withstand the Devil; her name was written in the Book of the Beast by her father, but her mother had her christened before this happened, and so the acts cancel each other out. Perhaps it is telling that she has no control over the verdict, but her decision to fight the accusations against her rather than submitting to the church, as her aunt Zelda wanted, still frames her as a figure of political agency in a time when women’s voices are often ignored by the legal system.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, I would argue that *Chilling Adventures* presents a well-known character in a way that challenges preconceptions. What makes this new Sabrina interesting is both her gothic sensibility and her political “wokeness”, which are presented as aspirational qualities. Sabrina is flawed and idealistic, she makes mistakes, but she is also an

advocate of choice, of free will, and she is not afraid to state her opinion or fight for what she believes is right. *Chilling Adventures* has reimagined the magical heroine as a gothic teenage feminist icon, and considering the current state of American social politics, this is a welcome adaptation.

*Chilling Adventures* establishes itself as a worthy addition to the gothic horror canon, and uses self-referential qualities of teen drama to chart the liminality of the female teen experience through the journeys of Sabrina, Ros and Susie. While all three of these characters feel like outsiders at some point in the series due to their liminality (Sabrina as a half witch, Ros as a woman of colour in a primarily white town, and Susie as a non-binary person), they all show strength in embracing that which makes them different, and develop support structures which promote individuality and independence. The liminal spatiotemporal locations of the series create a sense that the issues faced by these young women are at once contemporary and timeless: puberty will always be a battleground, but other fights that we assumed had been won have raised their ugly heads again in recent years. For some, they may never have gone away. *Chilling Adventures* reminds young women that they do not have to lie down and accept injustices, but perhaps instead should consider starting their own WICCA group to, as Ros so articulately puts it, “topple the white patriarchy”.

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