

CASTING A SPELL ON FEMINISM: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF SABRINA SPELLMAN AND THE DIALECTIC
OF FEMINIST LIBERATION AND
PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

by

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ABSTRACT

Witches have long captivated the public's imagination as symbols of both the oppression and liberation of women. This tension between control and liberation is precisely why the witch is such a powerful symbol for feminism. This thesis explores how gendered representations of witches in popular culture index the status/strength/struggles of feminism at any given time. This thesis is a feminist rhetorical analysis of one witch in particular: Sabrina Spellman. Originally a 1962 Archie comic character, then the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* starring Melissa Joan Hart, Sabrina returned again in the 2018 Netflix reboot the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* starring Kiernan Shipka. Due to Sabrina's rich history and persistence, she serves as a reflection of feminism at different points in time. This thesis explores the rhetorical strategies through which Sabrina is depicted as a symbol for feminist liberation, but also the ways patriarchal control is enforced in each of these texts to limit her power.

DEDICATION

For my sister. Thank you for insisting that I watch the new version of Sabrina, otherwise this project would have never been possible. More importantly, for being a strong independent woman that I will forever look up to.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In Disney's first animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), we see two characterizations of women which have been steadfast tropes throughout history—the princess and the witch. The first is Snow White herself, the day-dreaming princess who is banished and becomes a caretaker for seven coal-mining dwarves. She is put into an endless slumber by the Evil Queen and can only be awoken by her true love, Prince Ferdinand. Snow White embodies the damsel in distress narrative, her beauty has put her in harm's way, and she must be rescued by the male protagonist. The other characterization of a woman that arises in this story is Snow White's stepmother the Evil Queen. As the antagonist of the film, she banishes Snow White and orders her execution, all so she can become the most beautiful in the land. To accomplish that end, the Evil Queen transforms herself into a haggish old witch to poison Snow White, thus creating the second typical characterization of woman as witch. Throughout history, these two tropes have pervaded discourse about women. Popular culture has often promoted the princess as the ideal trope for which young girls are to aspire. This study aims to investigate how the other trope, the witch, has functioned as a rhetorical tool by social forces to control and to demonize women, and how women and feminists have worked to embrace the witch trope as a form of liberation from patriarchal control.

In order to understand the richness of this gendered trope, my analysis foregrounds the characterization of one witch in particular, Sabrina Spellman. Pre-dating the popular television

series *Bewitched* (1964-1972),¹ Sabrina Spellman made her first appearance in Archie's Madhouse Series #22, in 1962.² In this debut comic, Sabrina describes herself as a "modern witch,"³ in contrast to the witch wearing "grubby old rags and making some nasty old brew."⁴ A recurring and popular character in Archie's Madhouse, Sabrina was given her own comic series entitled *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, in January 1972.⁵ Sabrina has seen several iterations in popular media since her inception, including the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) featuring Melissa Joan Hart as Sabrina. In this version of Sabrina,⁶ the young witch discovers her magical powers on the night of her sixteenth birthday, and her two aunts, Hilda (Caroline Rhea) and Zelda (Beth Broderick) both witches themselves, help her learn to navigate her newfound powers. The series is a deceptively complex mix of the adventures of a young witch and that of a teenage girl navigating the troubles of high school.

In 2018, the blonde-haired half-witch cast a spell on a new generation of viewers in a Netflix reboot series titled the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (CAOS)*, featuring Kiernan Shipka as a hell-bent feminist half-witch ready to take down the long-standing patriarchal traditions of her family's coven. Her quest quickly faces a familiar feminist dilemma: she must decide whether she will claim her full powers by signing the Book of the Beast, pledging herself to

1. George Gladir, Frank Doyle, Dick Malmgren, Al Hartley, and Joe Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, Vol. 1 (Pelham, NY: Archie Comic Publications, 2017), 11.

2. "Archie's Madhouse #22 Is CGC's Featured Comic of the Month for October," Certified Guaranty Company, September 30, 2018. <https://www.cgccomics.com/news/article/6857/>.

3. Gladir, Doyle, Malmgren, Hartley, and Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.

4. Gladir, Doyle, Malmgren, Hartley, and Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 11.

5. Ibid.

6. Following Dana Cloud's work on Oprah, I use formatting choices to indicate different understandings of the word Sabrina. Cloud explains in her piece, "In referring to 'Oprah,' a first name bracketed by quotation marks, rather than Oprah Winfrey the 'real' person, I mean to aim my criticism at the way in which popular culture appropriates and uses the images and stories of Black Americans." When *Sabrina* is placed in italics, I am referring to the 1996 live-action series featuring Melissa Joan Hart. Unitalicized version of Sabrina refers contextually to the character or to the larger cultural phenomenon that is Sabrina. Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Oprah Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13, no. 2 (June 1996): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039609366967>.

serve Satan (depicted as a hyper masculine male figure), or abandon them and leave the deeply misogynistic traditions of her coven. The depiction of Sabrina has seen remarkable change with each different iteration, and yet consistent patterns remain. With the debut of *CAOS* in 2018, many have noted how the show “taps into the rising feminist passion for witches.”⁷ Not only is there a contemporary feminist passion for witches, but also specifically for Sabrina. As writer for the *Independent*, Clarisse Loughrey notes, “Sabrina herself has evolved from a figure of harmless, contained femininity to a symbolic reclamation of witchcraft and its history of persecution.”⁸ As such, Sabrina is a robust artifact for analysis as she has a rich history that intersects with different waves of feminism.

Scholars have identified witches and witchcraft as especially relevant to feminism because of the ways women have alternatively embraced and rejected the label throughout history. In the study, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature*, Justyna Sempruch argues that the witch is a reflection of feminism at any given time.⁹ Each Sabrina iteration corresponds with time periods associated with different waves of feminism: the 1962 comic book series and Second-wave feminism of the 1960s, the 1996 television sitcom and post-feminism of the 1990s, and finally the 2018 *Netflix* reboot that negotiates several forms of feminism including intersectionality during a time when the President of the United States is on record, as cited in *The New York Times*, boasting to have *previously* grabbed women “by the

7. Elle Hunt, “Hex Appeal: How Netflix's Sabrina Taps into the Rising Feminist Passion for Witches,” *The Guardian*, October 29, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2018/oct/29/hex-appeal-how-netflixs-sabrina-taps-into-the-rising-feminist-passion-for-witches>.

8. Clarisse Loughrey, “How Each Incarnation of Sabrina the Teenage Witch Has Been Symbolic of Feminism through the Years,” *The Independent*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/sabrina-teenage-witch-25-feminism-chilling-adventures-netflix-melissa-joan-hart-archie-comic-a8601336.html>.

9. Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 4.

pussy.”¹⁰ By analyzing the three iterations of Sabrina, this study uses the critical frame of Kenneth Burke to understand how these texts, reflect, select, and deflect¹¹ the cultural and historical perceptions of gender roles at the time they were created.

Four decades ago, Silvia Bovenschen, Jeannine Blackwell, Johanna Moore, and Beth Weckmueller called for an examination of symbols including the witch, stating “a further investigation of the reason for the mobilization of old and new myths and feminine symbols within the women's movement points to the unique durability and consistency of different mythological schemata throughout history.”¹² The current iteration of Sabrina compels us to answer this call yet again. Thus, the research question guiding this study is as follows: how do gendered representations of witches in popular culture index the status, strength, and struggles of feminism at any given time? Feminist rhetorical criticism of the witch trope exposes the way in which these texts communicate important messages about women’s power – both magical and material.

Précis

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature on witches, specifically as it pertains to the witch as a symbol for both the control and liberation of women throughout time. Additionally, I review foundational and contemporary literature on eras of feminist activism and the rise and

10. Mark Makela. “Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women.” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.

11. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

12. Silvia Bovenschen, Jeannine Blackwell, Johanna Moore, and Beth Weckmueller, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature,” *New German Critique*, no. 15 (1978): 82–119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487908>.

development of feminist rhetorical criticism, discussing its value as a method for this project and how it guides my analysis in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3, I offer an analysis of Sabrina as she first appears in the Archie's Mad House comic series. I look specifically at the comics from the years 1962-1969 to see how aspects of Sabrina's witch-hood develop during the first part of this long running character. Despite Sabrina's character being framed as the "modern witch,"¹³ she predominately reflects features of traditional femininity. Her magic is most notably used to improve her physical appearance, confine her to domestic spaces, and to attract boys. These themes illustrate how the witch is employed as a mechanism to control her perceived power in the Archie comics.

Chapter 4 offers an examination of feminist and post-feminist themes in the first season of the 1996 television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* starring Melissa Joan Hart. In this version, Sabrina is a young teenage girl who, on her sixteenth birthday, discovers she is a half-witch. This light-hearted series equates the challenges of being a teenage girl in high school with the discovery of becoming a half-witch. The show attempts to display views about the outdated nature of feminism, but in doing so, the show ultimately communicates the urgency of feminism to confront gender inequality. While the series tries to forego the implications of control that historically accompany the witch, they inevitably appear in the treatment of domesticity, her appearance, and her relationships.

In Chapter 5, I analyze the 2018 *Netflix* reboot of Sabrina Spellman in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (CAOS)*. Unlike her 1996 counterpart, the 2018 reboot shares the "dark coming-of-age story that traffics in horror, the occult and, of course, witchcraft"¹⁴ in which

13. Gladir et al., *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.

14. "Chilling Adventures of Sabrina." *Netflix Media Center*, n.d.
<https://media.netflix.com/en/only-on-netflix/242044>.

Sabrina faces the tough decision of whether or not to sign the Dark Lord's Book of the Beast, giving up her humanity to become a full witch. Unlike other iterations of Sabrina, this reboot positions her mystical power and her humanity as fully incompatible with one another. This chapter offers a close reading of *CAOS* to expose the way this version of Sabrina challenges the patriarchal traditions of her high school and her coven. In order to demonstrate fully the nuanced intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in *CAOS*, I employ the theory of intersectionality to show the shortcomings of the show.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes insights garnered from each chapter and suggests implications for the use of the witch as a vehicle in contemporary feminism.

CHAPTER TWO: A BREWING CAULDRON OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Witches have long captivated the public's imagination. Whether it is a woman draped in black clothing with a pointed hat flying on a broom stick in the clouds, an old haggish looking woman hunched over a boiling cauldron, or a hypersexualized enchantress armed with feminine beauty and magic, witches have remained a persistent gendered trope. While these characterizations shape stereotypical views of witches and witchcraft, especially via mediated depictions, they are merely dynamic fiction, not reality.

Over the course of history, women have been frequently targeted, defamed, even killed, because of their alleged relationship with Devil's magic, also known as witchcraft, but as Bianca Bosker writer for *The Atlantic*, so eloquently stated, "good luck tracing the history of witches."¹⁵ From the 14th-17th century, tens of thousands of women across Europe were executed because of their supposed relationship to witchcraft.¹⁶ During the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693), in colonial Massachusetts, over 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft, twenty of whom were executed.¹⁷ Over the several hundred years since the Salem Witch Trials and the execution of women across Europe, literature, poetry, film, television, and contemporary popular media have served the public a cocktail of fear, fondness, and fascination with the witch. This is part of what makes the witch such a consequential artifact for rhetorical study: she is the character, the

15. Bianca Bosker, "Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise," *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/witchcraft-juliet-diaz/605518/>

16. Jess Blumberg, "A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials," *Smithsonian.com*, October 23, 2007, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/>.

17. Blumberg, "A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials."

hypersexualized temptress, the cackling old lady, but also, she is the actual women who have had their bodies tied to a pole with their hands behind their back as they endure the torture of being engulfed in flames. The historical persecution of women as witches has been interconnected with the symbolic representation of women as witches. This thesis explores witches in a symbolic sense, but I also acknowledge that the material implications of such depictions for women historically. The next section of this literature review locates how scholars have discussed the witch as both a myth and an archetype.

A Witchy Myth

It is notable that the word “myth” pervades scholarly writing about witches because myth implies a complicated relationship between objective reality and that which has become “real” overtime because of repetitive storytelling. Myths are of particular interest to rhetorical scholars as myths are discursive artifacts that oscillate between the material and the symbolic. While some may be quick to dismiss myth as factually inaccurate, scholar Kenneth Burke suggests, “In the sense that discursive reason is dialectical, the mythic image may be treated as figuring a motive that transcends reason.”¹⁸ This view shifts the focus of the discussion from whether or not real women are able to cast spells or fly on broomsticks, to the rhetorical implications of sustaining the myth of woman as witch.

Bovenschen, Blackwell, Moore, and Weckmueller underscore this relationship in their study, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature.” They claim, “in the image of the witch, elements of the past and of myth oscillate, but along with them, elements of a

18. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1969), 203.

real and present dilemma as well. In the surviving myth, nature and fleeting history are preserved.”¹⁹ The present study investigates how the surviving myth of women as witch rhetorically constructs women’s role in society and their perceived political agency. The notion of myth present within a discussion of witchcraft blurs the line between materiality and mediation. By engaging with feminist rhetorical criticism, this study offers ways for women to navigate the witch myth productively as a site of liberation and power.

The repetition of the witch myth throughout history raises an interesting question—why are women repeatedly represented in ways that paint them as powerful but cursed, rebellious but controlled, and feared but not loved? Sharon Russell also recognizes the witch as both a myth and reality: “But beyond myth lies reality, and the concept of the witch is a negative myth derived from a false interpretation of reality. If the image of the witch in films is a product of a myth, this myth must be explored. Any filmic representation of the witch must be considered in the light of the myth and its reality.”²⁰ For this reason, herein, my aim is to acknowledge the social, material conditions which gave rise to each iteration of Sabrina, as well as to understand how reality and these depictions of Sabrina are interacting with one another.

Another understanding of the symbolic witch comes from Annis Pratt’s work *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*.²¹ In an analysis of over 300 women’s novels, Pratt identified the witch as one of three different but interrelated archetypes:

Archetypal patterns, as I understand them, represent categories of particulars, which can be described in their interrelationships within a given text or within a larger body of literature. A dogmatic insistence upon preordained, invariable sets of archetypal patterns would distort literary analysis: one must not deduce categories down into a body of material but induce them from images, symbols,

19. Bovenschen, Blackwell, Moore, and Weckmueller, “The Contemporary Witch,” 87.

20. Sharon Russell, “The Witch in Film: Myth and Reality.” In *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984), 113.

21. Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981). Pratt uses the term women's novels to refer to novels written by and/or about women.

and narrative patterns observed in a significantly various selection of literary works.²²

The three archetypal patterns include the Demeter/Kore and Ishtar/Tammuz rebirth narratives, the grail legends of the later Middle Ages, and the cluster of archetypal and ritual materials constituting the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft.²³ Pratt's work demonstrates just how pervasive the witch and witchcraft are in discourse about women, constituting an entire archetype dedicated to them. Whether witches are classified as myth or archetype, witch imagery has been a pervasive, and persuasive, trope for and against women throughout history.

As myth or archetype, the rhetorical history of the witch trope demonstrates its rich complexity as a feminist symbol. In fact, scholars have illuminated two different functions of the witch, as Sempruch explains that the witch is a divided subject:

The "witch" figure represents such a divided subject, a fantasy deployed to convey the transgressive status of the category of "woman" and gender in general. This position reinvests the concept of fantasy as un/belonging with the strategic purpose of transgressing the confining territories of culture and can therefore contesting its restrictions. It undermines the very negativity of un/belonging while bringing it into a dialogue with belonging, and therefore be seen as a theory of cultural negotiation.²⁴

Others have also acknowledged this division to which Sempruch alludes. For example, Pam Grossman, a self-identifying modern-day witch, wrote in *Time Magazine* about her understanding of the intersection between the symbolic witch and someone such as herself who identifies as a witch rooted in the Pagan tradition. Grossman wrote, "The witch is the ultimate feminist icon because she is a fully rounded symbol of female oppression *and* liberation. She shows us how to tap into our own might and magic, despite the many who try to strip us of our

22. Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 5.

23. *Ibid*, 170.

24. Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature*, 11.

power.”²⁵ Within Grossman’s notion of “a fully rounded symbol” is a dynamic tension, what I call a dialectic between control and liberation. This dialectic, I argue, is crucial to understanding why the witch is such a pertinent vehicle for feminist resistance. The remaining sections of this literature review examines this dialectic—witch as control and liberation—in order to outline the nuanced ways they work together in creating the trope of the witch.

Witch as Control

Characterizing women as witches can function rhetorically to demonize those women who seek too much power, often in the form of political participation, economic freedom, reproduction rights, and activism. Enforced through patriarchal forces, this characterization of powerful women depicts them as evil, vindictive, and literally ugly with greed and envy. In this case, the witch is painted as a monster, or as author Barbara Creed suggests, the monstrous-feminine, a term she uses as synonymous to the female monster.²⁶ Creed argues that women play a variety of roles in horror films, and each communicates important messages about women. These roles include women as vampire, monstrous womb, bleeding wound, possessed body, aged psychopath, archaic mother, possessed monster, castrating mother, and of course the witch.²⁷ Creed demonstrates the relationship between women and monsters as she argues that women become monsters when they are perceived as threatening to men’s power. Creed asserts that this vilification of women creates an understanding of witch as an abject being:

The witch... is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch

25. Pam Grossman, “Are Witches Real?” *Time*, May 30, 2019, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://time.com/5597693/real-women-witches/>, emphasis in original.

26. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1993), 3.

27. Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 1.

sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her “feminine” nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms.²⁸

While categorizing women as witches functions rhetorically to demonize, doing so also creates an interesting relationship between women and nature. According to this narrative of witches, women control the Earth in evil ways that must be tamed by chastising them as demonic.

Another manifestation of this linkage to nature is that a witch’s power is often tied to her menstruation. In her analysis of the film *Carrie*, Creed notes that it is not until Carrie menstruates for the first time that she discovers her telekinetic powers.²⁹ In a similar way, Sabrina recognizes and/or acquires her powers for the first time on her sixteenth birthday, an age often celebrated as a significant event for a girl becoming a woman. Tying women’s powers to menstruation serves as a way to control women by reminding them that their ultimate power is their reproductive capacity to mother children. As Buchanan notes in her work *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, this narrative is deeply problematic for the feminist project committed to the idea that women are autonomous beings of inherent value outside of motherhood. Buchanan explains: “Given its entrenchment within systems of gender, knowledge, and power and its familiarity to cultural insiders, the Mother is easily invoked but difficult to resist in rhetorical situations.”³⁰ This cultural reduction to biological utility perpetuates a body/mind dualism in which woman is representatively confined to the body and domesticity, whereas man is representative of the mind and equipped for intellectual and professional pursuits. Thus, when women who exhibit reason and are publicly outspoken, are characterized as a witch, they are reminded of their bond to the

28. Ibid, 76.

29. Ibid, 79.

30. Lindal Buchanan, *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), xvii.

body and their motherhood responsibilities. This vision of a witch as demonic, monstrous, and vindictive seeks to constrain and to control women. The next section explores how women have embraced and embodied the title of witch to confront these patriarchal constraints.

Witch as Liberation

The historical attempts to control women by labeling them as witches has in turn created a powerful symbol for feminist resistance. In their feminist dictionary, Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler offer several definitions of “witch,” one of which reads, “a woman accused by the patriarchy of being too independent, uppity, powerful, or outrageous; a woman learning techniques to overcome the patriarchy.”³¹ Throughout history, feminists have appropriated the witch as a symbol for liberation from patriarchal control. One feminist group called the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, founded in 1968, adopted the acronym W.I.T.C.H. and created a nationwide movement of covens of women “hexing” patriarchal institutions including Wall Street.³² Other feminists have adopted the slogan “we are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn,”³³ and have embraced their inner witch as a form of activism. This slogan appeared on many protest posters during the global Women’s Marches, in January 2017, after the election of Donald Trump. In a study analyzing these posters, Melanie Judge notes how the symbol of the witch has been evoked yet again to embody the violence enacted against women.³⁴

31. Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 487.

32. Gabby Bess, “How the Socialist Feminists of WITCH Use Magic to Fight Capitalism,” *Vice*, October 2, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yw3bpk/how-the-socialist-feminists-of-witch-use-magic-to-fight-capitalism.

33. Kate Guadagnino, “The Witch Continues to Enchant as a Feminist Symbol,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/31/t-magazine/witch-feminist-symbol.html>.

34. Melanie Judge, “Those (Not) Able to Be Burnt,” in *Nasty Women Talk Back: Feminist Essays on the Global Women’s Marches*, ed. Joy Watson and Amanda Gouws (Imbali Academic Publishers, 2018), 119-122.

Scholars have recognized witches as a symbol for female resistance. In her work examining the history of witches and witchcraft in the United States, Elizabeth Reis explains, “Women who challenge cultural notions of appropriate conduct, whether intentionally or unintentionally—even women who wholeheartedly embrace social norms—were (and still are) vulnerable to masculine apprehension and mistrust, and in extreme cases to accusations of witchcraft.”³⁵ Bovenschen, Blackwell, Moore, and Weckmueller acknowledge that women have been adopting witchcraft as a feminist exercise. They argue, “The fact that women are dressing up as witches for their demonstrations and festivals also points to this mimetic approach to their own personal history through the medium of mythological suggestion. They are, to a certain extent, practicing witchcraft.”³⁶

This reclaiming of the witch as a site for feminist resistance is part of what makes the witch such a rich symbol for feminism—women have taken a symbol which was traditionally used to demonize them as a form of liberation from such constraints. Thus far, this chapter has looked at literature about witches as a touchstone for this thesis; however, Sabrina Spellman is a half-witch, which becomes an important distinction that requires additional discussion here.

The Half-Witch

While scholars have paid particular attention to the witch, little scholarly research addresses the sub-genre of “half-witch,” which is especially pertinent to this study. A half-witch is the offspring of one magical parent (a witch or warlock) and a non-magical parent (i.e. human). In J.K. Rowling’s best-selling series *Harry Potter*, the half-witch is better known as a

35. Elizabeth Reis, *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), xii.

36. Bovenschen, Blackwell, Moore, and Weckmueller, 87.

“mudblood,” with the character Hermione Granger often fighting for acceptance despite her clear intellectual prowess over “pure” witches or wizards.³⁷ While this idea of “halfness” is present within other fantasy tropes, such as half-human/half-werewolf, it is especially robust within witch tropes. Similar to Creed’s argument that the female monster serves as a way of demonizing women,³⁸ I argue that the half-witch is a mechanism of additional control that seeks to paint women as less than autonomous beings.

In the case of Sabrina Spellman, she often finds herself at the crossroads between sacrificing her human life in order to embrace her supernatural powers fully. She is continually forced to decide which is more important to her, her magical power or her humanity, as the two are positioned as irreconcilable. Each different iteration of Sabrina navigates this decision in a unique way, which I explore in later chapters. This message complicates the feminist embrace of the witch as a form of liberation by suggesting women are incapable of being powerful in their own right without having to reconcile power with their humanity. In order to understand and to critique the witch trope, this thesis uses feminist rhetorical criticism as a method for engaging three different iterations of Sabrina. Thus, an examination of literature on feminist rhetorical criticism is offered next.

Double, Double Toil and Trouble: Rhetoric, Feminism, and Criticism

This study uses feminist rhetorical criticism as a method to analyze the strategies of persuasion and identification in which women have navigated their witchiness as a form of both oppression and liberation. Scholarship on feminist criticism in rhetorical studies is vast and spans a variety of different areas. In this final section, I outline my orientation to rhetoric and rhetorical

37. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 1997).

38. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.

criticism, then trace the rise and evolution of my chosen analytical method, feminist rhetorical criticism.

Fundamental to the study of rhetoric is the notion that language is meaningful and therefore can have important implications for the development of institutions, societal beliefs, and people's individual agency. This understanding of rhetoric, known as critical rhetoric, departs from the Neo-Aristotelian tradition which understood rhetoric as instrumental to persuasive discourse. My orientation of rhetoric is grounded in Burke's definition of rhetoric as, "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."³⁹ This definition of rhetoric as symbolic action makes it possible to study cultural symbols such as Sabrina through an expansion of rhetoric beyond persuasion. Utilizing this understanding of critical rhetoric allows me to analyze how the symbolic and rhetorical trope of the witch influences power relationships in society. As McKerrow argues, this notion of power is central to critical rhetoric: "in practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change."⁴⁰ McKerrow's call for demystification of the ways knowledge can be produced through rhetorical artifacts such as popular culture depictions of witches.

If critical rhetoric is *what* rhetoric is studying, then rhetorical criticism is *how* rhetorical acts are studied. As defined by Jim Kuypers, rhetorical criticism is simply, "the analysis and

39. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 43.

40. Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (June 1989): 91.

evaluation of rhetorical acts.”⁴¹ Kuypers offers three elements rhetorical criticism should include: description, analysis, and interpretation.⁴² Following Kuypers’ instructions, each chapter of this study offers an overview and description of the respective Sabrina text. The next stage Kuypers identifies is the process of conducting an analysis, or in other words, “discovering *what is in* a rhetorical artifact.”⁴³ My analysis of each Sabrina text specifically attends to elements of feminist politics within, or missing from, the artifact. I ask, for instance, how depictions of the character align with hegemonic norms of beauty, how relationships extend dominant or resistive norms, or how specific plot lines engage topics or themes relevant to gender equity activism. Finally, at the end of each chapter I offer an interpretation of the text that positions Sabrina within the dialectic of control/liberation outlined in the literature review above. In this way I utilize feminist rhetorical criticism as my main methodology, and my analysis of rhetorical acts is guided by a feminist perspective.

The main definition of feminism guiding this project is offered by bell hooks who defines feminism as, “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.”⁴⁴ Donna Marie Nudd and Kristina Schriver Whalen further expand on this understanding of feminism as a movement in their definition of feminism as “a pluralistic movement interested in altering the political and social landscape so that all people, regardless of their identity categories, can experience freedom and safety, complexity and subjectivity, and economic and political parity—experiences associated with being fully human.”⁴⁵ Fundamental to each of these definitions of feminism is the notion of gender equality. Critical rhetoric’s attention to power structures

41. Jim Kuypers, “Rhetorical Criticism as Art,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 21.

42. Kuypers, “Rhetorical Criticism as Art,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, 35.

43. Ibid, 22, emphasis in original.

44. bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 1.

45. Nudd, Donna Marie, and Kristina Schriver Whalen. “Feminist Analysis,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, ed. by Jim A. Kuypers, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 191.

complements feminism's goal to achieve equality. Each of these terms—rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, and feminism—has its own entire history, but this study is interested in how all of these terms work together through the methodology of feminist rhetorical criticism. Therefore, the remainder of this section looks specifically at the historical and methodological investments of feminist rhetorical scholarship.

Feminist criticism is not limited to the field of rhetoric; in fact, feminist criticism at its core is interdisciplinary.⁴⁶ Even within the field of communication, feminist criticism is robust.⁴⁷ Since its inception, this mode of criticism has sought to challenge who is and is not considered within rhetorical practices. A foundational work for feminist rhetorical scholarship is Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's book, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Campbell confronts the lack of rhetorical history for women orators, inspiring an area of scholarship dedicated to resolving this shortage. Campbell claims that the goal of a rhetorical critic "is enlightenment—an understanding of the ways symbols can be used by analyzing the ways they were used in a particular time and place and the ways such usage appealed or might have appealed to other human beings—then or now."⁴⁸ She embodies this goal throughout her book by studying the rhetoric of the early women's rights movements in the United States in the 1830's. Campbell's work has inspired rhetorical scholarship focused on the public discourse of women.

Following the publication of Campbell's book, feminist rhetorical scholarship began to observe the rhetorical strategies of feminist groups, particularly the use of images to question the notion that feminism is submissive to patriarchal ideologies.⁴⁹ Notable in this vein of research on

46. Bonnie J. Dow and Celeste M. Condit, "The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 3 (September 2005), 451.

47. Dow and Condit, "The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication."

48. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, vol. I-II (New York, NY: Greenwood, 1989), 2.

49. Anne Teresa Demo, "The Guerrilla Girls Comic Politics of Subversion" *Women's Studies in Communication* 23, no. 2 (2000): 146.

women in public address is the work of Bonnie Dow and Mari Boor Tonn on feminine style in which they examine the rhetoric of Texas governor Ann Richards to demonstrate the implications of the use of feminine style in public, political discourse.⁵⁰ Dow and Tonn argue that Richards' use of narrative, concrete examples, analogies, and anecdotes as primary evidence sources, as well as her personal tone and encouragement of audience participation reflects feminine ideals of care, nurturance, and family, her effectiveness in doing so critiques "traditional political reasoning that offers alternative grounds for political judgement."⁵¹ Dow and Tonn optimistically argue for the potential of this feminine style to reflect positive elements of the feminine in political discourse. In her later work *Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies*, Dow argues that scholars have misused her previous work on feminine style and discusses how such misuse has contributed to a misunderstanding of feminist rhetorical criticism as purely examining the rhetoric of women.⁵² Additionally, Dow makes an important distinction between feminist criticism in rhetorical studies and criticism of feminist rhetoric, which examines the rhetoric of women. With this brief overview of the historical literature on feminist rhetorical criticism, the remaining portion of this section examines methodological developments in feminist rhetorical criticism as it pertains to this study.

Donna Marie Nudd and Kristina Schriver Whalen suggest the goal of feminist rhetorical criticism is "to expose the fundamental ways, the often subtle, taken-for-granted ways, in which societal members undervalue and diminish women."⁵³ By illuminating the rhetorical strategies in which society belittles women, feminist rhetorical scholarship aims to understand these practices

50. Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 286-302.

51. Dow and Tonn, "Feminine Style," 289.

52. Bonnie J. Dow, "Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies," *Communication Studies* 46, no. 1-2 (1995): 106-117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510979509368442>.

53. Nudd and Whalen, "Feminist Analysis," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, 193.

and generate responses to them. Thus, herein, I am invested in understanding how women are characterized as witches in order to suggest how women can both utilize and overcome that demonization. In her chapter on Feminist Criticism in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja Foss attempts to summarize the method of feminist criticism in two steps, “(1) identifying and explicating the strategies used in the artifact to disrupt hegemonies; and (2) exploring the impact of the strategies of disruption on hegemonic ideologies and structures.”⁵⁴ These two steps guide my own analysis of each Sabrina iteration. Given that two of the Sabrina iterations were televised, I also draw from literature on feminist rhetorical criticism of television in this analysis.

Feminist rhetorical criticism of television and popular culture is rooted in the fundamental idea that film and television are representative of society and, by extension, can offer important commentary about a society’s understanding of women and feminism. Bonnie Dow’s work *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* makes a compelling argument that television is a rhetorical medium, and thus television’s treatment of feminism rhetorically constructs society’s views about women.⁵⁵ This notion that television influences society and vice versa is widely accepted by rhetorical scholars, thus showing the versatility and practicality of feminist rhetorical criticism as a method.⁵⁶ In later work, Dow conducts a feminist rhetorical analysis of the original *Stepford Wives* (1975) and the remake of *Stepford Wives* (2004), in which she situates the movie *Fatal Attraction* (1987) in historical context between the two *Stepford Wives*. Dow argues that looking at these three texts

54. Sonja K. Foss, “Feminist Criticism,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 5th ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2018), 147.

55. Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), xxii.

56. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970*.

together “provides a window onto my specific concerns: the role of men and masculinity in the emergence of postfeminist media representations, and the elision of that role in feminist media critique.”⁵⁷ In a similar way that Dow acknowledges the importance of reading those texts in conversation with one another, I acknowledge the same consideration for understanding how each iteration of Sabrina is contributing to a larger conversation about the progression of feminism.

Another notable contribution to the field that is pertinent to this study is Carrie Crenshaw’s influential essay, “Women in the Gulf War: Toward an Intersectional Rhetorical Criticism.” In this essay, Crenshaw notes that feminist rhetorical theory has traditionally been concerned with the differences between men and women rather than differences between women. She argues that this oversight results in the emergence of “heterosexual, white, U.S. women as the ideological norm.”⁵⁸ Crenshaw urges rhetorical scholars to employ an intersectional approach to understand the ways gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status all contribute to identity formation and oppressive ideologies. This concept of intersectionality is especially pertinent as it relates to my analysis of the 2018 *CAOS* reboot (see Chapter 5).

Utilizing such a dexterous method such as feminist rhetorical criticism allows for consideration of different components including visual and verbal representations of Sabrina with feminist rhetorical criticism at the forefront. Given the contested and polysemic nature of feminism itself, feminist rhetorical criticism often mobilizes specific feminist concepts and perspectives to provide a more nuanced perspective of different rhetorical phenomena. Each chapter engages other feminist literature that is pertinent to the text at hand. Specifically, Chapter

57. Bonnie J. Dow, “The Traffic in Men and the Fatal Attraction of Postfeminist Masculinity,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 29, no. 1 (2006), 116.

58. Carrie Crenshaw, “Women in the Gulf War: Toward an Intersectional Feminist Rhetorical Criticism,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 8, no. 3 (1997), 227.

4 includes a more in-depth discussion on post-feminism as it relates to the 1996 live-action series, and Chapter 5 incorporates literature on intersectionality. Ultimately, at the core of this project is feminist rhetorical criticism and the rhetorical strategies by which messages about women's power are revealed through the history and development of Sabrina Spellman.

CHAPTER THREE: PERFECTED FEMININITY IN ARCHIE'S SABRINA

The preceding chapter examined the witch dialectic, at once controlling and liberating, and its importance within feminist resistance. Throughout history we see that women have been characterized as witches when they obtain too much power—symbolically or literally. For this reason, I argue that the label of the witch is an expression of patriarchal rhetoric that demonizes women who threaten the patriarchy. Consequently, women (and feminists more broadly) often reappropriate the language of the oppressor by turning the label of witch into a source of empowerment. The tension between control and liberation is precisely why the witch serves as a powerful dialectic for understanding both the restrictions and expansion of women's power. The next three chapters examine how this dialectic of control and power appears in the rhetorical construction of Sabrina Spellman, a teenage witch who has enjoyed a long career in American popular culture. First, we examine Sabrina as she was initially created: a character in the Archie's Mad House comic book series (1962-1969).⁵⁹

From the first comic in the series, Archie's Mad House #22, there are limits placed on Sabrina's power, despite the fact that she is supposed to symbolize the "modern witch"⁶⁰ with limitless power at the tip of her fingers. In fact, in this chapter I demonstrate that while Sabrina is a woman with power in the 1960s, suggesting she is a kind of feminist icon, the uses of her

59. Sabrina was given her own series, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, in January 1972. Her first ten years as a character was through being featured in the Archie comics, which are the texts being discussed in this chapter.

60. George Gladir, Frank Doyle, Dick Malmgren, Al Hartley, and Joe Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, Vol. 1 (Pelham, NY: Archie Comic Publications, 2017).

powers are largely limited to her appearance, fulfilling domestic roles, and attracting boys. Through a close reading of the first 26 appearances of Sabrina in the Archie's Mad House series (1962-1969), I examine the limits placed on Sabrina's power in order to understand how the label of witch functions as a rhetorical strategy to subjugate women's power. This chapter begins by offering a brief overview of the comic series, as well as the debut comic Sabrina is featured in, in order to detail the early restraints placed on her power. Then, this chapter explores three themes as they relate to the limited and conventionally feminine use of Sabrina's power to: 1) improve her physical appearance, 2) confine her to domestic spaces, and 3) attract boys. This analysis reveals that her witch status is largely used as a mechanism to control her power.

Archie's Mad House Series #22: Sabrina as 'Perfected Femininity'

On October 1, 1962 Archie's Mad House Series #22 introduced audiences to Sabrina Spellman, the blonde-haired teenage witch. Pre-dating the well-known television character Samantha Stephens of *Bewitched*, writer George Gladir and artist Dan DeCarlo assert that the comic created Sabrina as a "modern witch."⁶¹ Writing for the *Independent*, Clarisse Loughrey notes, "Both of these characters [Sabrina Spellman and *Bewitched's* Samantha Stephens] reflected the 1950s and 1960s popular image of the witch as a kind of perfected femininity: mischievous, sexually attractive, but ultimately obedient to the patriarchal structure."⁶² With this understanding of Sabrina as the ultimate modern witch/woman, a closer examination of these comics reveals attitudes about women's perceived power in a "modern" setting.

61. Gladir, Doyle, Malmgren, Hartley, and Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, Vol. 1.

62. Loughrey, "How Each Incarnation of Sabrina the Teenage Witch Has Been Symbolic of Feminism through the Years," *The Independent*.

The cover of the debut comic, Archie's Mad House #22, features Sabrina provocatively posed on her living room floor watching the well-known Archie comic characters, Archie Andrews and Betty Cooper, on television. The title of the comic declares her to be Sabrina, the Teenage Witch, and a speech bubble above her head reads "Hi! My name is Sabrina! I hope I haven't



Figure 1: Archie's Mad House #22, Courtesy of CGC Comics

disappointed you!”⁶³ From the first moment of her existence as a character, she is apologizing for not meeting expectations that people may have of her as both a witch and a woman. This depiction conveys her desire to please others, a common expectation placed on women. Yet the comment is delivered in irony as it presumes that the reader expects an ugly, old, hag-like witch character and that Sabrina's pre teeny-bopper form is somehow “disappointing.” This introductory image portrays Sabrina as an average teenage girl sitting in her living room, only she also happens to be a witch with a Barbie doll like appearance. Outside of the title of the comic, her appearance does not immediately give away that she is a witch. The second and third frames of the comic juxtapose the modern version of Sabrina to a stereotypical image of the witch as an old woman “Wearing some grubby old rags, and making some nasty old brew.”⁶⁴ Sabrina identifies herself as being exactly the opposite of what people expected her to be, “I mean... I hope you didn't expect to find me living on some dreary mountaintop”⁶⁵ Instead, she says that “We modern witches believe life should be a ball!”⁶⁶ In the next frame, Sabrina demonstrates the use of her

63. Gladir, Doyle, Malmgren, Hartley, and Edwards, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 11.

64. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 11.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

powers for the first time by winking her eye resulting in a vase cracking as she says, “Besides soft, gracious living doesn’t reduce our powers one iota!”⁶⁷ This idea that lavish living is compatible with being a witch suggests that her modernity is compatible with capitalist incentives for luxury and comfort and, further, that witches/women should or do desire this lifestyle. The remainder of the comic proceeds to outline the characteristics of what it means to be a modern witch.

The first characteristic that we learn about Sabrina is that modern witches are still allowed to have familiars, “an impish animal that helps perform small malicious errands!”⁶⁸ In addition to having familiars, the audience learns that one way to spot a witch is that witches cannot cry. While she may not be able to cry, she is still capable of showing emotions. The next unique characteristic of Sabrina as a teen witch is that she cannot sink in water. Sabrina recalls when “some fun loving boys”⁶⁹ pick her up over their heads to throw her in the ocean as one boy exclaims “this hip pip is going to take a dip!”⁷⁰ and the other boy retorts “whether she likes it or not!”⁷¹ The second display of Sabrina’s magical power is when she uses her powers to levitate above the water. The boys are left quite puzzled and ask Sabrina how she managed to float, to which she replies, “that’s because I’m 99 ⁹/₁₀₀% pure!”⁷² This notion of purity is interesting for several reasons. First, purity suggests her virginal status which the audience learns about later in the comic and serves to emphasize her sexuality. Secondly, it alludes that her witch status does not compromise her purity as a woman or vice versa. After surviving the water incident, the reader learns that another characteristic of Sabrina’s life as a modern witch is that she can make

67. Ibid, 11.

68. Ibid, 12.

69. Ibid, 13.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

other people fall in love, with one stipulation, “we’re not permitted to fall in love ourselves...that would make the head witches very angry!”⁷³ This clause introduces the reader to Sabrina’s head witch Della, who gives Sabrina tasks that she must perform.

Sabrina’s current assignment, for no stated reason, is to hex students at her high school. She uses her role as a cheerleader to hex the athletes on the basketball and football teams. She states that she sometimes works for her team, and other times she works against them, echoing traditional assumptions that witches are deviant and use their powers for malevolency. She also uses her powers in the classroom causing people to forget test answers. She has a part-time job at the soda shop which gives her “even more opportunity to carry out my wickedness,”⁷⁴ such as spiking milkshakes with love potions. In the concluding frames of the comic, boys are chasing after Sabrina with her retorting, “everywhere I go the boys are simply wild over me!”⁷⁵ It is in the final three frames of the comic that Sabrina reveals the last characteristic about her life as a witch, “you’ll never catch me falling in love... that would mean I would lose my powers and become human”⁷⁶ The two frames following this reveal her mixed feelings with that rule, with the second to last frame reading “and that would be bad!”⁷⁷ Finally, the comic concludes with a conflicted Sabrina saying, “I think!”⁷⁸ This debut comic introduced six important characteristics about Sabrina’s life as a modern witch, she: 1) has a familiar (a cat named Salem) to assist her, 2) cannot cry, 3) cannot sink in water, 4) can make other people fall in love, 5) cannot fall in love herself, otherwise she sacrifices her own powers and 6) is sent orders from her head witch Della that she must perform.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid, 15.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

While Sabrina has these magical powers that make her a witch, this first comic places overt restrictions upon her mystical abilities. Additionally, her powers usually manifest as traditional roles for women: fall in love, perform household chores, and uphold the patriarchal structure. One might argue that these limitations are a result of the fact that she is a teenage witch, therefore she is still learning to navigate her powers. From the perspective of feminist rhetorical criticism, these limitations suggest something important about women's power: while she is allowed to have power, she is continuously reminded that her power must conform to the rules placed upon her, inevitably restricting her autonomy. Over the next seven years from this initial comic, Sabrina is featured again in twenty-five different Archie Mad House series comics. Of these twenty-five comics, only two of them, one of which is an ad feature, depict Sabrina using her powers for something other than seducing a boy. Comic after comic, the plot follows a variation of Sabrina using her powers to bait a boy into dating her or to take her to a dance. Each of these attempts results in predictable mishap, evoking a kind of comical response. This calculated plot results in her magic being used for three main purposes: 1) to improve her physical appearance, 2) perform domestic roles, and 3) to attract boys. In the next section of chapter, I explore how Sabrina's power relates to her physical appearance.

Enchanting Looks: Magic and Her Appearance

Traditionally, when the label of witch is used as a mechanism to control women, they are painted as literally being ugly with greed and envy; however, Sabrina maintains her beauty and femininity, and the controlling aspect of her witchiness is rhetorically constructed through what Sabrina is, and is not, allowed to do with her magic. In several instances throughout the comics, Sabrina uses her magic for what most would assume a teenage girl would use her magic for—to

create a never-ending closet with the latest fashion trends quite literally at the tip of her fingers. In Archie's Mad House Series #45 (February 1966) "Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch in "Lulu of a Boo-Boo,"" Sabrina explains "One advantage of being a teen witch is that you don't have to keep a big wardrobe! All you have to do is find a picture of an outfit you like"⁷⁹ Notably, as Angela Record argues, the teenage market in the postwar United States, "wed consumer-based activities with dominant ideological norms regarding teenage women and domesticity; teen women were encouraged to spend, marry, and mother."⁸⁰ In this example, Sabrina's desire to have a bigger closet exemplifies these ideological norms about domesticity.

Furthermore, this example demonstrates how traditional notions of femininity are present within the comic. Despite how easy she makes it sound; Sabrina messes up the incantations for the "perfect outfit" spell multiple times until she finally produces the combination she desires. She then performs the same incantation for a new hairdo with similar mishaps, all so she can use her new looks to steal a boy named Donald away from "that finky Rosalind!"⁸¹ While this example demonstrates the trivial and material ways in which Sabrina's power is linked to her appearance, her magic is continuously tied to appearance as it relates to what can be described as her sex appeal or, as the comic playfully presents it, her "hex-appeal". This series of moves contrasts Sabrina to the older generations of witches. The next section delineates these as separate sub-categories in order to show the complexities of this trope.

79. Ibid, 67.

80. Angela R. Record, "Born to Shop: Teenage Women and the Marketplace in the Postwar United States," in *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, ed. Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 181.

81. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 69.

Hex-Appeal

Sabrina frequently refers to her own sex appeal. For example, Archie's Mad House Series #31 (February 1964) is a one-page feature of Sabrina introducing the Teen Section in which she is provocatively posed with a speech bubble reading: "This is **Sabrina** your *hexpert* teen sorceress, introducing the fabulously *hexciting*... Teen Section."⁸² Several of the comics, including this one, discuss her magic as a form of "hex-appeal," undoubtedly a play on "sex appeal" and the act of hexing by witches. Part of Sabrina's sex/hex-appeal is her ability to enchant boys with her good looks thus, reinforcing hegemonic ideals about beauty that a woman should be beautiful for the enjoyment of male onlookers. This comic in particular explicitly names her as a hexpert, suggesting that with her powers comes an inherent sex appeal. Her status as a witch allows her to tap into sex-appeal as a persuasive resource not available to other women or even other witches of older generations. Part of Sabrina's "magic" is her ability to enchant men with her looks. Throughout the comics, she states that she does not need magic charms to get boys to chase after her because she has personal charm. Her hex/sex appeal becomes a defining feature of her youth, suggesting that the modern woman must also embrace her own sex appeal. Sabrina was imagined as an embodiment of the modern witch, and her hex/sex appeal is part of this performance especially as it is contrasted to the older generation of witches, which is explored in the following section.

Generational Differences

Another way in which Sabrina's appearance links to her magic prowess is by contrasting her beauty with the older witches, such as her Aunt Hilda. This rhetorically positions her as a

82. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 46, (emphasis in original).

modern witch as opposed to those older witches “Wearing some grubby old rags, and making some nasty old brew.”⁸³ The first appearance Sabrina makes after the initial Archie’s Mad House #22 (October 1962) demonstrates this tension. In Archie’s Mad House #24 (February 1963), entitled “‘Monster Section’: Featuring Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch,” the three older witches are hunched over a boiling cauldron saying to one another “Look how Sabrina turns **boys** into toys!”⁸⁴ The second witch adds “our **magic charms** never had **that** effect!,”⁸⁵ and the final witch says to Sabrina, “What kind of **special** charm are you using?”⁸⁶ Posed with six boys fixated on her with hearts above their heads, Sabrina replies “Just a little **personal** charm, Hilda.”⁸⁷ By stating that the older witches’ charms never had that effect suggests that there is a notable difference in potency between their charms and Sabrina’s. The most notable difference between the older witches and Sabrina is their physical appearance. The three older witches are hunched over a boiling cauldron wearing black rags and witch hats. Each of the older witches have overly pronounced noses and chins complete with warts and chin hairs creating a stark contrast between them and the youth and beauty of Sabrina. Through contrasting images such as this, we see that a modern witch is characterized by conventional beauty, and therefore uses her witchy powers for conventional romantic ends.

This theme reappears throughout the series. In Archie’s Mad House #30 (December 1963) “Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch Presents: Teen-Age section” Sabrina yet again positions herself in opposition to the older witches. She is sitting in a room full of potions with a painting behind her of an older more stereotypical looking witch as she says, “The girls sure were

83. Ibid, 11, (emphasis in original).

84. Ibid, 17, (emphasis in original).

85. Ibid, (emphasis in original).

86. Ibid, (emphasis in original).

87. Ibid, (emphasis in original).

backward 500 years ago! ...Imagine using all those silly potions and charms to attract boys!”⁸⁸

While Sabrina is sitting in a room full of every love potion she could possibly need, she asserts she does not need to rely on them to attract boys as the witches from 500 years ago did. One of the major reasons she does not need the love potions is because of her hex/sex appeal.

Another way this tension between the older and younger generation manifests is when Sabrina’s Aunt Hilda suggests that Sabrina is less of a witch because of her good looks. In Archie’s Mad House #37 (December 1964) “Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch in ‘Double Trouble’” her Aunt Hilda is telling her she needs to get out of bed because she has the lowest efficiency rating for witches in the district. Sabrina responds that it is not her fault that “people don’t have any confidence in her as a witch.”⁸⁹ Hilda asserts that others’ lack of confidence in Sabrina as a witch is because she is “downright ugly for a witch” because she “doesn’t have any of the attractive features witches are famous for... like straggly hair, warts on the chin, blood shot eyes!”⁹⁰ Hilda takes her to the home of Professor Transistor the World’s Greatest Mad Scientist and asks him to make Sabrina “beautiful” like her. Hilda and Sabrina step into the Professor’s

beautifying machine which is supposed to replicate Hilda’s looks on Sabrina.

However, when Sabrina exits the machine, she still looks the same and instead Hilda has lost her warts, scraggly hairs and resembles Sabrina.



Figure 2: Hilda's Makeover, Courtesy of Archie Comics

88. Ibid, 44.

89. Ibid, 60.

90. Ibid.

When Hilda sees her new looks, she begins sobbing, stating this is going to ruin her witching career because she is so ugly. This exchange between Sabrina and her Aunt Hilda reflects a generational motivated mindset about feminism. Edel, Brown, and Tolman note that views about the sexualization of women differ between different generations of feminists.⁹¹ As a part of the younger generation of witches, Sabrina embraces her hex/sex appeal as a form of empowerment, whereas her Aunt Hilda equates beauty with the downfall of her career. This inversion is problematic because it suggests that beauty and career success are incompatible for witches and, by extension, women. This comic positions Sabrina and Hilda as the opposites of one another, the epitomes of beauty and hideousness. The intergenerational attitudes of Sabrina and her aunt, specifically attitudes about appearance, reflect an important contention within feminism. By pitting these different views against each other, the generational divide weakens feminism as a political movement and complicates what it means to be feminist. Furthermore, the comic suggests that Sabrina is the ultimate picture of beauty given that it is quite literally impossible for her to be made ugly, even by magic. Given the fact that Sabrina is continuously messing up her magic throughout the series and Aunt Hilda is supposed to help her navigate her powers, the comic suggests that there is a connection between these women's appearance and their power. This complicates the beauty theme by placing beauty and witch skill into opposition; or, more accurately, a "modern" witch such as Sabrina faces the dilemma of acceptance and popularity through human beauty norms versus professional success among her witch family.

91. Dana Edell, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Deborah Tolman, "Embodying Sexualisation: When Theory Meets Practice in Intergenerational Feminist Activism," *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 3 (2013): 275-284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499844>)

Magic in Domestic Spaces: Making Sand-witches

One of the appeals of Sabrina's character is that she brings magic into ordinary spaces, whereas witches have traditionally been thought of only existing in fantasy worlds. Additionally, even though she is a witch, she is equal parts a teenager, and therefore, the comics occur in quotidian spaces including school, her house, and other hangouts around town. However, there are several comics in which her powers are connected to domestic spaces, usually within the context that her powers prevent her from being able to conform to her "proper duties" as a woman in those spaces. Instead, her power complicates her ability to be domestic and therefore complicates her relationship with being a woman.

Archie's Mad House #50 (October 1966) includes two different Sabrina features: "Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch in Rival Reversal" and "Sabrina Teen Witch in Tragic Magic." Both of these comics complicate Sabrina's multifaceted relationship to domestic spaces. At the beginning of "Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch in Rival Reversal," Sabrina is boasting about how she can use her powers to change magically the music on a record player and how she can make hamburgers into hotdogs, but she laments that she cannot get her phone to ring with a dance invitation from "Hot-Rod" Rudy. After trying an instant phone potion and several other spells, she gives up on trying to make the phone ring. Shortly after, the phone rings with a call from Rudy who says he has something he wanted to ask her, but he cannot remember what. An excited Sabrina invites him over for steak and french fries to help him remember what he wanted to ask her. When Rudy arrives, Sabrina remembers she does not know how to cook, so she turns to a book of "100 Instant Bewitching Recipes."⁹² She uses her magic and attempts to turn a french press coffee maker into french fries which goes terribly wrong. She apologetically tells

92. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 89.

Rudy there is no steak or french fries, so instead he asks her to make him his favorite dessert, custard. She promises to have him “swimming in custard,”⁹³ but instead Rudy quite literally begins to drown in a large vat of custard which sends Rudy running from her house. This particular comic reinforces the dialectic between Sabrina’s supernatural powers and her ability to perform tasks that are traditionally expected of women. While housework, including cooking and cleaning, has historically been associated with women’s work in the United States,⁹⁴ Sabrina’s identity as a witch causes her to fail this conservative standard. Her witchiness is both directed at limited goals, such as traditional normative domestic success, and portrayed as insufficient; she cannot even cook or make the phone ring. Her inability to conjure up steak and fries magically or actually to cook custard for Rudy suggest a kind of failure as both a witch and a woman. The dialectic of control is two-fold: not only are her powers limited to domestic tasks, but also, they fail her in completing those tasks.

In the same issue of Archie’s Mad House #50 (October 1966), Sabrina is seen again in a one-page feature, “Sabrina Teen Witch in Tragic Magic.” Sabrina is frantically searching for her tickets to a concert in her very messy room. She uses her powers to clean her room; however, she is still unable to find the tickets, and her room instantly returns to a state of disaster. Underlying this comic is her inability to keep her room straight, another role that has been traditionally perceived to be a woman’s job: keeping a clean house. Both of these comics in the same issue place Sabrina and her magic in relation to domestic spaces. While Sabrina is supposed to be the image of an ideal modern witch, she fails miserably at duties that have been prescribed to women throughout history. If Sabrina is supposed to be the image of the liberated modern witch/woman,

93. Gladir, 89.

94. Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 5.

these examples have all shown how witch as a label is being employed to constrain and to control her perceived power. This tension creates an interesting dialectic between what it means to be a witch with magical powers and an ideal woman. Her modern magic is limited to domestic realm, but she also keeps failing at smaller, sillier tasks such as tidying becomes a comedic resource for the comic but also limits the overall power and impact of women/witches. Next, this section examines how Sabrina's magic is used to attract boys.

Love Potions Galore: Attracting Boys with Magic

Themes of constraint and complexity figure strongly in Sabrina's relationship with teenage boys. In Sabrina's very first appearance in Archie's Mad House #22, we learn that Sabrina cannot fall in love, otherwise she risks losing her powers. At the very end of the comic she asks herself if losing her powers would truly be that bad if it meant she could fall in love. This sense of doubt suggests that for Sabrina, the ability to love and be loved is worth losing her supernatural powers. This constraint, however, does not keep her from chasing after boys; instead, it seems to make the appeal of them that much more of a chase for her. Interestingly, the writers of the comic seem to drop the notion that she cannot fall in love after the first comic, and instead it becomes the focal point of an overwhelming majority of the comics.

Sabrina's desire to attract boys often prevents her from performing her duties as a witch. In the third comic featuring Sabrina, Archie's Madhouse #24 (February 1963), "Sabrina the Teen-age Witch in 'Witch Pitch'" Sabrina's head witch Della orders her to make the Baxter High hockey team lose. Instead of using her powers to complete the task, Sabrina is overcome by her attraction for one of the players on the team, a blonde-haired boy named Donald. She loses all control and begins to use her magic to help make Donald an even better player. It appears she

has little control over her sexual desires and her magical powers. Baxter High wins the game, and Sabrina must report to Della. When asked what happened, Sabrina says “Er...Ah... I guess I goofed!” Della responds “You’ve done something **worse** than goof! You’ve fallen in **love!**”⁹⁵ This example again stresses the importance that Sabrina cannot get caught up in her feelings for boys, or it will make her less effective as a witch. After Sabrina begs for forgiveness, Della gives her one more chance to redeem herself: she must make the Baxter High team lose the state championship. Mistrusting Sabrina, Della decides to accompany her to the game. Della becomes fixated on Baxter High’s coach and instead decides that she has changed her mind and will let Baxter High win. After the victory of Baxter High at the state championship, Donald asks Sabrina out, but reluctantly she declines the offer reminding herself she is not allowed to date. Sabrina turns to her cat Salem and says that she wished she were more like Della, “a real witches’ witch.”⁹⁶ In other words, her emotional and physical desires prevent her from being the witch she wants to be, juxtaposing sexual desire with power.

While Sabrina idolizes Della as a witch role model, even Della succumbs to her physical desires, suggesting that no matter how good of a witch one is, ultimately the desire for love is greater than the desire for power. The concluding frame of the comic is Della at dinner with the coach as Sabrina unknowingly walks by remarking that Della “never let’s [*sic*] anything tempt her.”⁹⁷ This branding of Della as a real witches’ witch communicates that falling in love makes these women less powerful. Additionally, it shows that no matter the age of the witch, whether it a teenager such as Sabrina or a head witch as Della, these powerful women must battle the temptation of men. This sentiment that Sabrina cannot fall in love is very strong throughout the

95. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 21, (emphasis in original).

96. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 23.

97. *Ibid.*

first couple comics; however, as previously mentioned twenty-four of the twenty-six features of Sabrina in Archie's Mad House Series involve her using her magic to seduce boys. As her character develops, there is less of an emphasis on the fact that she cannot fall in love because she is a witch. Rather, the focus seems to shift to how hard it is to get a boy to like her even with her magical powers.

Pitting Her Against Other Women

Often in Sabrina's quest to attract boys, other women are positioned as being an obstacle to her success. In Archie's Mad House #25 "Sister Sorceress" (April 1963), Sabrina is summoned to the Witches Tribunal under the supervision of Della to be tried for kissing a boy and for the "said kiss not being in the line of duty but purely for her own pleasure!"⁹⁸ Della gives an apologetic Sabrina one more chance and orders her to hex her fellow teenage witch, Wanda Demoola, by breaking Wanda up from her boyfriend Hal Flipp. Sabrina is excited about the assignment because, of course, she has feelings for Hal herself. After Sabrina leaves the Witches Tribunal, she asks Della why she ordered Sabrina to hex another teenager. Della replies "It's the best way to train young witches! It gives them a chance to test their powers against stiff competition!"⁹⁹ In this comic, Sabrina is pitted against Wanda by Della and the Witches Tribunal. This early pitting of Sabrina against Wanda is important because it becomes a theme throughout the series that every time Sabrina is eyeing a boy for herself, she is positioned as being against other women.

Throughout the rest of Archie's Mad House #25, Sabrina and the other teenage witch Wanda try to cast love charms on Hal. After many failed attempts and mishaps, Sabrina and

98. Ibid, 24.

99. Ibid, 25.

Wanda come to an agreement that Hal can date Sabrina on Mondays and Fridays, and Wanda can date him on Wednesdays and Saturdays. This is the most agreeable Sabrina is with another woman throughout the rest of the series, partly because Wanda is also a witch. However, throughout the series, Sabrina is repeatedly feuding with another woman to gain the attention of a boy.

At the opening of Archie's Mad House #28, "Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch in Tennis Menace" (September 1963), Sabrina is invited to the estate of Bruce Van Klood III, the richest, most handsome boy in town. As Sabrina is walking to his house, she is surprised by her Fairy Witch Mother, Greta who informs her that Rosalind, who Sabrina refers to as "nothing but a teen wolverine,"¹⁰⁰ will also be coming to Bruce's estate. Greta tries to offer Sabrina a magic charm against Rosalind, but Sabrina declines the offer because she says she has personal charm and therefore does not need any magic. Sabrina and Bruce begin a game of tennis before Rosalind arrives, and Sabrina pretends to be unskilled at the game in order to get closer to Bruce; she earns physical closeness but also states that letting him teach her will advance her cause because "boys get such a kick out of feeling superior!"¹⁰¹ When Rosalind arrives, she is equally bad at tennis, and Sabrina becomes envious when Bruce tries to help her as well. Sabrina decides to use her magic and hexes Rosalind's racket to make her magically good at tennis, that way Sabrina will get all of Bruce's attention instead of Rosalind. This spell backfires on Sabrina because Bruce invites Rosalind to be his partner at a double's tennis tournament.

This pitting of Sabrina against other women in a contest over heterosexual love is problematic for several reasons. First, it reinforces the notion that women are a threat to other women and should be treated as such. Secondly, by suggesting that women should be in

100. Ibid, 37.

101. Ibid, 39.

competition with one another the comic proposes the idea that the ultimate prize is to obtain the affection of a man. Each of these work rhetorically to dismantle solidarity within feminist resistance against the patriarchy. It is through taking down the competition (other women) that she will obtain what is deemed rightfully hers (a male partner). While there are a few times in the comic that Sabrina is surrounded by groups of people, supposedly her friends, her only interpersonal relationships are between her aunts, Della, her cat Salem, and the boys she desires.

Conclusion

The separate themes that arise in the early Archie comics often work together; indeed, several of them are deeply interconnected. This is especially evident as it relates to her using magic to enhance her appearance and using magic to attract boys. The fact that her magic is centered around her appearance, domestic spaces, and attracting boys is notable as it communicates an important message about where women's power lies and where it should be deployed. Sabrina never uses her beauty to become a leader in school, or her power over boys to help cure social injustices – her abilities and aims are circumscribed to traditional feminine spheres. As a whole, these comics give “magic” powers to a teenage girl, but remain a reminder of the human, material rules about women and power.

Even though the terminology of half-witch does not come about until later in Sabrina's history, there are still clear attempts to place restrictions on her power in the same way that calling her a half-witch functions in later iterations of Sabrina. For example, in the very first comic Archie's Mad House #22, the threat of becoming human is introduced as a repercussion for her falling in love. From the beginning, her human desires are a direct threat to her magical powers, and she is continuously stuck between these human desires and her duties as a witch.

While the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and the 2018 *Netflix* reboot play into this notion of Sabrina as a half-witch, the earlier Archie comics exploit the idea that she will always have a dual nature because she is a woman. This is evident in the fact that she seems to botch every single spell she ever tries, and she is only concerned about using her powers to improve her appearance or stop another girl from vying after the same boy as her. In other words, she may be a witch, but readers are reminded time and time again she is still a teenage girl with very little control over her own power. Many of these features that appear in these early comics manifest themselves in their own unique way as her character develops over the next six decades. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how these themes develop as Sabrina becomes a live-action series.

CHAPTER FOUR: FAILURE OF POST-FEMININISM IN SABRINA THE SITCOM

The previous chapter demonstrated the variety of rhetorical strategies by which the witch trope functions to control Sabrina's power in the Archie comic series. As a whole, the 1960s comic book *Sabrina* displayed traditional conventions of femininity amenable to patriarchal power. In contrast, the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (*Sabrina*) starring Melissa Joan Hart problematizes social gender norms by incorporating rhetorical characteristics of post-feminism. Post-feminism is understood in this chapter as a discourse undermining the political aims of feminism by suggesting that women have actually achieved equality, therefore the feminist project is no longer needed and actually counterproductive. The ideology of post-feminism took shape in the 1980s challenging Second Wave feminism and is often associated with the popularity of shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Murphy Brown* featuring strong, independent women as the lead without substantive commentary on the obstacles women must overcome to achieve such status. In the case of *Sabrina*, the sitcom portrays her as a strong-willed teenaged girl with magical powers; however, the fact that *Sabrina* is a teenage *witch* inevitably brings in a control/power dialectic that cannot be divorced from feminist roots. There is little explicit discussion of feminist goals or issues within the series, and it is precisely this conspicuous absence that warrants critical attention. Given the historical and rhetorical interconnection between witches and feminism, *Sabrina's* identity as a trouble-free witch and the show's general deflection of complications surrounding gender equality speaks volumes. Of course, such sanguine representations are difficult to maintain, especially when adolescent femininity and witchcraft are involved, and when topics of gender equality do arise the sitcom

demonstrates similar tensions of control and liberation discussed in the previous chapter. When we are talking about women with power—magical or otherwise—the presence, or in this case, the subversion of feminism cannot be ignored.

This chapter offers an overview of the major developments in the series and key characters, then explores relevant literature on post-feminism in order to critically engage with the ways post-feminism arises in the first season of *Sabrina*. Finally, this chapter investigates pertinent themes of domesticity, appearance, and relationships with others that arise in the televised version in order to demonstrate the show’s complex relationship with feminism and post-feminism.

Sabrina on Screen: Melissa Joan Hart in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*

Breaking from an animated format, Sabrina enchanted a new generation in 1996 with the live-action series, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, airing on ABC and featuring Melissa Joan Hart as Sabrina.¹⁰² The pilot episode aired on September 27, 1996 with over 17 million viewers and received the highest ratings among ABC’s formidable T.G.I.F. lineup until 2000.¹⁰³ The show ran for a total of 7 seasons, chronicling the life of a young teen witch learning to navigate her supernatural powers and the troubles of high school. At the time, the show was praised for its nearly all-female cast, female-dominated writers’ room, and of course, its’ female lead.¹⁰⁴ As a whole the sitcom has a light, bubbly, teeny-bopper tone consistent with situation comedy, and

102. Devin Fuller, “Excited for the ‘Sabrina’ Reboot? Here’s How the Teenage Witch (and Her Cat) Have Evolved” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/arts/television/chilling-adventures-sabrina-teenage-witch-history.html>). Prior to this network series, Sabrina appeared in the 1969 television animated specials *Archie and His New Pals* and *The Archie Comedy Hour*. In 1970 she starred in her own spin-off series, *Sabrina and the Groovie Goolies* which was later retitled *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and ran until 1974. In 1977, she joined the Archie gang again in a series entitled *The New Archie and Sabrina Hour* that ran for a year.

103. Fuller, “Excited for the ‘Sabrina’ Reboot?”

104. Kelsey McKinney, “Sabrina the Teenage Witch’s Feminism Is Still Magical, 20 Years Later,” *Splinter*, September 27, 2016, <https://splinternews.com/sabrina-the-teenage-witch-s-feminism-is-still-magical-1793862231>)

little attention is given to serious social topics or controversies or the threatening nature of witches that composes so much of the trope's history. The series portrays magic as light-hearted and fun: she has a talking cat; she uses her magic to make a giant flan in the school cafeteria and turns her nemesis into a pineapple.

At the same time, the controlling nature of the witch trope cannot be completely erased or overlooked by even the most perky of sitcom formats. It is as if the disruptive potential of the witch trope compromises the sitcom creators' best efforts to sanitize Sabrina. One major area where we see the controlling nature of the witch appear is in details about Sabrina's origins. While some of the earlier comic book features began to develop Sabrina's origin story, the live-action series greatly expanded upon this aspect of Sabrina's story. Sabrina is the offspring of one magical parent (her father, a warlock who lives in the other realm which is also a book for the majority of the series), and one mortal parent (her mother an archaeologist in Peru who cannot lay eyes on Sabrina in the next two years without turning into a ball of wax), making her half-witch/half-mortal. The original 1962 Archie comic never explicitly states that Sabrina is not a full witch, but in this 1996 series Sabrina's nature as a half-witch becomes a defining characteristic about her in the first two minutes of the pilot episode. We meet Sabrina in the show before she herself has realized her supernatural identity, rather than how the comic begins with an already-capable teen witch. The shock and confusion of this revelation shifts the way we come to know Sabrina as a young woman and as a young witch. The series begins on the eve of Sabrina's 16th birthday, as Sabrina's aunts, Hilda and Zelda, enter her room to witness her first levitation as a witch. "Oh, look, Hilda! She's levitating. Right on schedule,"¹⁰⁵ a very excited

105. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot." Directed by Robby Benson, written by Jonathan Schmock and Nell Scovell, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired September 27, 1996.

Zelda says to her sister Hilda as they both stand beside Sabrina who is asleep levitating above her bed. Sabrina's witch identity literally forces itself into the sitcom's narrative; while in many ways the sitcom works to avoid this aspect of Sabrina, we cannot avoid the reality that this "regular" teenage girl also happens to be a witch.

While this television version of Sabrina is more surprised by her identity as a witch, as opposed to the comic version who knew she was a witch from the very beginning, the main objective of her witch power remains teen romance and peer rivalry. In this iteration, Sabrina is a teenage girl first, and a witch second. In many ways *Sabrina* is a series about a girl trying to navigate the trials and tribulations of high school. She is concerned with school, friends, and notably, her main love interest, a tall, dark-haired, charming boy named Harvey Kinkle. Sabrina survives the troubles of high school and the relentless bullying by the popular cheerleader Libby with the help of Harvey and her best friend Jenny – and occasionally her supernatural powers.

In contrast to many of the other lighthearted, post-feminist, independent female sitcom series of the 1990s,¹⁰⁶ Sabrina is unique because she is not just a teenage girl, she is a witch, an identity that inevitably harkens to mechanisms of patriarchal control. The unescapable connotations of witch as powerful and feminine smuggles in important feminist implications to her character no matter how bubbly her personality, or how trivial the obstacles she faces. As previous chapters have discussed, the witch is always accompanied by the liberation/control dialectic, greatly complicating *Sabrina's* rhetoric as a post-feminist text. Rather than fully

106. In her work *Prime-Time Feminism*, Bonnie Dow analyzes *Murphy Brown* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* as post-feminist texts. Angela McRobbie demonstrates the way the film *Bridget Jones Diary* embodies post-feminist ideologies. Jennifer Nash conducts a comparative analysis of *Sex and the City* and the HBO sitcom *Girls* to show how post-feminism is displayed across both shows. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970*; Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255-264, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>; Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant, "Twenty-Something Girls v. Thirty-Something Sex And The City Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (2015): 76-991).

disappearing, the threat of the powerful female, manifested here in the form of a witch, recurrently disrupts the simple narratives of teenage life and reveals the inherent flaws with resigning feminism to the dust bins of history. In other words, while *Sabrina* attempts to demonstrate the obsolescence of feminism, in doing so the show ultimately communicates the necessity of feminism to confront gender inequality. Next, I offer an overview of the developments within post-feminist scholarship in order to understand how it helps unpack the rhetorical dynamics in *Sabrina*.

Post-Feminism

Since its inception in the late twentieth-century, post-feminism has adopted a variety of meanings. Each of these various understandings of post-feminism offer the feminist rhetorical critic a framework for understanding this unique development in feminist theory and gender relations. Broadly speaking, post-feminism was, and continues to be, a conservative reaction to liberal feminists' advances of the 1960s and 70s that attempts to suspend feminism by prematurely declaring "victory" from the patriarchy. The post-feminist worldview contends that women no longer need to be angry bra-burning man-haters (all conservative stereotypes) because women have already achieved collective legal, social, economic, and political equality. Because post-feminism often uses the logics and symbols of feminism to put an end to feminism, some scholars argue post-feminism is synonymous with antifeminist, while others suggest post-feminism is tantamount to Third Wave feminism, and others state that post-feminism is the absence of feminism altogether. However, this is not to say that there are no boundaries to what post-feminism is entirely. Gill and Scharff identify four general meanings of post-feminism: 1) an epistemological break within feminism, 2) an historical shift after the height of Second Wave

feminism, 3) backlash against feminism, and 4) postfeminism as a sensibility.¹⁰⁷ According to Gill and Scharff, post-feminism as an epistemological break refers to the prefix “post” as an analytical perspective in the same way postcolonialism and poststructuralism constitute an epistemological break from the concepts that preceded them, i.e. colonialism and structuralism, and in post-feminism’s case—feminism. Second, Gill and Scharff identify post-feminism as a historical shift after the height of Second Wave, which refers to the use of post-feminism as synonymous with Third Wave feminism. Third, Gill and Scharff categorize the usage of post-feminism as a backlash against feminism in which feminism is the cause of negativity. This usage of post-feminism blames women’s unhappiness on alienation caused by feminism. The final meaning of post-feminism that Gill and Scharff identify, post-feminism as a sensibility, is largely based in Angela McRobbie’s work that argues all three previously mentioned definitions miss the essence of post-feminism because feminist and anti-feminist views are entangled with one another.¹⁰⁸ Gill and Scharff argue that the fourth definition of post-feminism articulated by McRobbie allows scholars to use post-feminism as an analytical frame because it locates the push and pull of feminism within post-feminism.

Not only does McRobbie’s work offer an important conceptualization of post-feminism, but it also demonstrates the prominence of post-feminism within popular culture. McRobbie argues that many elements of popular culture have worked to undo feminism, ultimately defining post-feminism as,

An active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined. It proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing

107. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3-4. There are several spellings of post-feminism utilized by different scholars including: postfeminism, post-feminism, and post feminism. For consistency I use post-feminism throughout this chapter, but when citing other texts keep the term as is in its original text.

108. Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*.

of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism.¹⁰⁹

Thus, post-feminism suggests that equality has been attained, and therefore feminism is no longer needed, or worse, may actually jeopardize previous gains. This conceptualization of post-feminism is helpful for understanding how feminism appears to operate within post-feminist texts such as the 90s sitcom iteration of *Sabrina*.

Indeed, the 1990s marked a significant time period for post-feminist discourse, notably the same time period *Sabrina* aired on television.¹¹⁰ In fact, the development of post-feminism corresponds with an increased attention given to television by feminist scholars as a persuasive medium for feminist representations. Specifically, scholars have identified the teenage girl as a pertinent site for post-feminist discourse because they provide the narrative means to break with feminism of the past. These post-feminist teenage girl texts evoked a nod to girl power that Jackson and Westrupp describe in their work, “Popular culture of the 1990s captured ‘grrlpower’, [sic] marketing it as a blend of ‘girliness’, sexuality and assertiveness that simultaneously stripped away its political, feminist roots.”¹¹¹ This observation becomes especially relevant as it relates to the emphasis placed on *Sabrina*’s appearance in the series. Several scholars have utilized post-feminism as a framework for analyzing television series during this time period, including Bonnie Dow’s analysis of *Murphy Brown* in her book *Prime-Time Feminism*.¹¹² In her analysis, Dow argues that the sitcom is popular, “because it taps into the postfeminist anxieties of both those who think feminism went too far and those who think it

109. McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*.

110. *Ibid*, 256.

111. Sue Jackson and Elizabeth Westrupp, “Sex, Postfeminist Popular Culture and the Pre-Teen Girl,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 3 (2010), 359.

112. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970*.

did not go far enough.”¹¹³ Dow’s observation is especially helpful for understanding *Sabrina’s* relationship to post-feminism because Sabrina’s identity as a witch inevitably evokes a concern that feminism has not gone far enough.

Not only have scholars noted the significant role teenage girls play in post-feminist texts, but Rachel Moseley identifies the teenage witch in particular as a post-feminist space, “the unconventional wild female space of feminist witchcraft has been transformed. It has become a powerful, girly, sexualized space—a post-feminist space.”¹¹⁴ Sabrina is in many ways the embodiment of post-feminism as she is purportedly able to enjoy life without needing to trouble herself with liberation from the patriarchy. For example, when Sabrina first comes to terms with her identity as a witch, she exclaims, “I don’t want to be special. I want to be normal!”¹¹⁵ This sentiment, Sabrina’s desire to be “normal,” is precisely her attitude towards feminism. In other words, she might have well said, “I don’t want to be a feminist. I just want to be a normal teenage witch!” Sabrina’s desire to adhere to the status quo, or in this case her desire to be normal, aligns with post-feminist claims that the status quo now offers everything a woman could want or need. By rejecting her potential to be a powerful teen witch, she is suggesting that she does not need power, because she is already capable and inherently equal. When Sabrina does end up embracing her witch identity, she does so in a way that indicates her powers are more than she knows what to do with it; as my analysis shows, she redirects her witch power into conventional means, rather than a feminist revolution as we see in the 2018 *Netflix* reboot.

By the end of the first episode, Sabrina has accepted her witch identity and quickly decides that she likes being a teen witch when the supernatural perks go her way. The show

113. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 161.

114. Moseley, “Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television,” 418.

115. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot.”

embraces a post-feminist mentality through its light-hearted tone and focus on high school drama in which the biggest problems facing Sabrina and other girls/women lie in romantic relationships and fashion *faux pas*. In this way, the show tries to dissolve the controlling aspect of the witch dialectic by solely focusing on the aftermath of liberation. Mechanisms of patriarchal control inevitably become apparent when domesticity, appearance, and personal relationships are discussed, revealing the other half of the witch dialectic, and undermining the post-feminist aims of the sitcom. I argue that even though *Sabrina* presents itself as a post-feminist text, the rhetorical features of the witch trope result in feminist interruptions that reveal the limitations and failures of post-feminism. Despite the show's best efforts, gender inequity becomes undeniable, and patriarchal control is exposed as a force acting to subdue her feminist potential. The remainder of this chapter explores themes of post-feminist liberation within the show, and its ultimate failure to demonstrate feminism's demise. Specifically, I discuss three notable themes of feminism that arise in the first season of *Sabrina* to illustrate the tension between feminism and post-feminism occurring in the show. These themes include, 1) the prevalence of domesticity, 2) fixation on appearance and, 3) her relationships with other people.

Witchcraft in the Suburbs: Domestication in *Sabrina*

Depictions of Sabrina's magic throughout the show are generally contained to domestic spaces and items. Sabrina and her aunts live in a quaint Victorian house in the fictional town of Westbridge, Massachusetts and a majority of the show takes place either in their home, or at school. Part of the humor of the series is that Sabrina is a witch trying to live a completely "normal" suburban life, marked by domestic chores and consumer goods. For instance, historically witches fly on broomsticks, but not this version of Sabrina; she flies on a vacuum

cleaner. The setting of the show evokes an interesting relationship between magic and domesticity. In the previous chapter, I discussed how a prevalent theme in the 1960s Archie comic was how Sabrina's magic was largely linked to performing domestic tasks. In this iteration of Sabrina, domesticity is linked less to the tasks she is asked to perform, but rather more about how magic appears in the material world. In many ways, the show is a post-feminist performance insofar that her magic does not need to be tied solely to the completion of domestic tasks because women have supposedly achieved equality beyond caring for the home. However, domesticity is still extremely prevalent within the series, specifically as it relates to how magic manifests in her everyday world, bringing feminist undertones to the show.

The instability of post-feminism is evident in the gender hierarchy dynamics of the Spellman home. As a nod toward the show's feminist roots, creator and executive producer Nell Scovell deliberately placed Sabrina in a home with her two aunts, rather than a mom and dad, to support the advancement of Sabrina as a feminist, liberated character.¹¹⁶ Scovell received pushback from ABC executives at the time as they could not understand why Sabrina's mother would not be part of the home, "When she [Scovell] suggested that maybe Sabrina's mother was an archeologist, they [ABC executives] still couldn't imagine a world where a mother would leave her child for work."¹¹⁷ This outdated and misogynistic response from network executives demonstrates why *Sabrina* was considered progressive at the time.

Despite this post-feminist attempt to demonstrate an equal household, patriarchal control appears in important ways, especially as it relates to domestic spaces. The Witch's Council is a hierarchal and patriarchal organization that resides in what is known as the "Other Realm" and dictates the actions of witches. Notably, when Sabrina goes to the Witch's Council to request a

116. McKinney, "Sabrina the Teenage Witch's Feminism Is Still Magical, 20 Years Later."

117. Ibid.

time reversal in the pilot episode, she accesses the Other Realm via her linen closet. An all supernatural, female household must report to a patriarchal organization that quite literally lives in their linen closet. The fact that the Witch's Council is accessed through the linen closet is part of the palatability of the show, how fun it is that a whole other world can be accessed in the same space as bath linens! The hierarchal nature of the Witch's Council is consistent with the Archie comic in which Sabrina had to report to her head witch Della. However, in this iteration of Sabrina, the head of the Witch's Council is a man named Drell. In the pilot episode, the audience learns that Sabrina's aunt Hilda has a long romantic history with Drell, who describes him as "mean, pig-headed, power-mad despot."¹¹⁸ Drell is clearly misogynistic, he repeatedly stands Hilda up sending her a pot roast to express his condolences, and he takes great pride in denying witch's requests to the council. Despite the supposed absence of patriarchal structures within the home, the Witch's Council is just one of the ways that invisible patriarchal structures are made visible and enforced in *Sabrina*.

Another interesting demonstration of tensions between domesticity and feminism in *Sabrina* is through the manifestation of magic in ordinary objects. For example, in the pilot episode, Sabrina, Hilda, and Zelda all gather around their toaster waiting for something to appear, but it is not toast they are so eagerly waiting for. They are waiting for a letter to arrive from the Witch's council with the decision about Sabrina's time reversal request. In many ways, it is humorous that three women with supernatural powers eagerly await communication via their toaster, part of the light-heartedness of the show. A letter appears in the toaster with Drell's booming voice yelling "DENIED!"¹¹⁹ This seemingly harmless plot point is significant because it interrupts this otherwise independent female household with hegemonic mechanisms of

118. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot."

119. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 1.

control. These powerful women are literally reminded of the limits to their power via their toaster.

Later in the season, this space is interrupted again, but this time by Sabrina's father. The audience meets Sabrina's dad formally for the first time in season one, episode twenty, "Meeting Dad's Girlfriend."¹²⁰ The episode begins with Sabrina in the kitchen struggling to get a jar of pasta sauce open. Hilda comes in the kitchen, offers to help Sabrina, but she cannot open it either. Hearing all of the commotion, Zelda offers her help, "don't you know the trick. Here. You whack is lightly to break the seal and there."¹²¹ The sauce jar still won't open, so Zelda tells Sabrina to use magic to open it. Hilda replies, "Good idea. The finger is mightier than the wrist."¹²² In the show, all of the spells performed are through a wave of one's index finger. Here, Hilda suggests that because the women have supernatural powers and independence from marital bonds they are liberated and can make up for what they might lack in brute strength. Even after using her magic, Sabrina is still unable to open the jar, frustrated she asks, "what is wrong with the jar? I give up" and storms out.¹²³ Zelda turns to Hilda and says, "You know it is great having supernatural powers, but for some things we could really use a man around the house."¹²⁴ Hilda makes a disapproving face and grabs the jar to prove a point. A house full of women, nonetheless, a house full of witches with supernatural powers that are completely self-sustainable, are now stymied by a domestic chore, and need a man to help them.

120. Sabrina communicates with her dad in earlier episodes through a magic book, but this is the first time he is physically seen in the series.

121. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 20, "Meeting Dad's Girlfriend." Directed by David Grossman, written by Nell Scovell, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired April 4, 1997.

122. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 20, "Meeting Dad's Girlfriend."

123. *Ibid.*

124. *Ibid.*

This, however, was not the end of the pasta jar incident. Later in the episode, Hilda is still trying to open the jar of sauce, and Zelda tells her “Ted [Sabrina’s dad/their brother] will be here soon and he will open it.”¹²⁵ An angry Hilda asks “Why? Because he’s a man?”¹²⁶ Zelda replies, “Well, yes,”¹²⁷ to which Hilda fires back, “That is so sexist!”¹²⁸ Here Zelda channels the post-feminist perspective when she says, “Men happen to have more upper body strength.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, she sees no threat to her inherent power because, as post-feminism argues, she is equal regardless of her physical strength. As the sisters bicker, down the stairs comes Sabrina’s father, Edward, saying in a demonic voice, “that’s enough out of the both of you. Don’t make me use the voice.”¹³⁰ Even though Edward is mocking a voice that their father used to use when they were kids, he asserts his authority as the man of the house through his tone of voice, ultimately reinforcing gender norms. Sabrina’s dad tries to open the jar, and after two hours have passed Hilda snidely remarks, “See? Men aren’t stronger. They just try longer than any sane woman would.”¹³¹ He finally gets the jar open. Through humor, the show flirts with post-feminist ideologies in that women main characters are relatively independent and capable, but ultimately Hilda’s character cannot ignore the blatant sexism occurring. Even though Hilda’s character pokes at Zelda’s post-feminist logic, it is ultimately the man who gets the jar open, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Another important demonstration of magic through domestic objects is how spells are cast. This version of *Sabrina* ditches the love potions of her 1960s predecessor, or the black cauldrons traditional to the witch trope, and instead is equipped with Jiffy Truth Sprinkles, Man

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid.

131. Ibid.

Dough, and more. In the second episode of the series, the head cheerleader Libby mocks Sabrina and Jenny for being freaks. Sabrina knows that Libby is spreading gossip about them at school, so she decides to use her magic to her advantage. Her Aunt Zelda teaches her about Jiffy Truth Sprinkles, sprinkles that when consumed force someone to tell the truth. Zelda warns Sabrina that the truth can have harmful side effects. Sabrina brings the truth sprinkles to their home economics class and puts them on a piece of bundt cake that she offers to Libby. Libby reveals that she had been telling people that Sabrina had a nose job, and that Jenny's father is in jail, and she cheats on tests. Since the Jiffy Truth Sprinkles appear to be an ordinary object, Jenny unknowingly disperses bundt cake with the sprinkles on it to other members of the class, and the teacher even brings some to the teacher's lounge. Sabrina must then confront the harmful side effects that Zelda warned her about when the whole school begins to speak their mind, including the school principal. This again is evident of the ways the show appears palatable and light-hearted: a teenage girl shares bundt cake with sprinkles on it with her peers. Yet, this example demonstrates the lack of control Sabrina has over her magic, and the role of trivial objects like sprinkles in this historic source of women's power.

In another episode, Sabrina decides she wants to utilize her magic to put a love spell on Harvey so he will take her to the dance. Sabrina employs the help of her aunts but learns that there is no love spell, because according to Zelda, "love is far too precious to tamper with."¹³² Sabrina then concludes, "being a witch doesn't help at all."¹³³ When her supernatural powers fail, "Man Dough" comes to her rescue. Her aunts literally bake her a date out of dough to take her to the dance. A hesitant Sabrina sees how attractive he is and decides she will go to the dance

132. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 6, "Dream Date," Directed by Gail Mancuso, written by Rachel Lipman, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired November 1, 1996.

133. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 6, "Dream Date."

with him. From a post-feminist perspective, this example suggests the disposability of men. She is able to create the perfect man out of dough when she needs him, but ultimately, he returns to being nothing but a pile of pastry when she no longer needs him. On the other hand, this example demonstrates how the show quite literally communicates the message that when supernatural powers fail, a woman should turn to her kitchen cupboard instead. This is problematic for the depiction of women's power. While her power has extended beyond the performance of domestic tasks, as was seen in the Archie comics, her power is still associated with and often usurped by domestic objects.

Witches Still Get Zits: Appearance in the Sitcom

The sitcom *Sabrina* conveys a complex relationship with post-feminist and feminist ideals as it relates to women's appearance. The live-action format allowed the show to capitalize on Sabrina's connection to her appearance and wardrobe: she can magically conjure up any outfit she wants with the wave of her finger. The title sequence at the beginning of every episode features Sabrina standing in front of a vertical mirror using her powers to magically change outfits. Each title sequence features the same three outfits, a gold dress, a casual outfit, a formal outfit, but the last outfit in the sequence changes each episode with Sabrina making some kind of remark about it. In episode 4, she is dressed as a construction worker and remarks, "I am ready to clean my closet."¹³⁴ In the next episode, she is dressed in a Renaissance outfit, turns to the mirror and asks, "does this make my butt look big?"¹³⁵ In a later episode she is dressed as a cowgirl and

134. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 4, "Terrible Things." Directed by Gary Halvorson, written by Jon Sherman, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired October 18, 1996.

135. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 5, "A Halloween Story." Directed by Gary Halvorson, written by Nell Scovell, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired October 25, 1996.

says, “smile when you say that partner.”¹³⁶ Each of these statements flirt with post-feminism. They push the line that she can say whatever she wants because women have achieved equality, yet the statements clearly tap into feminist concerns that women are reducible to physical appearances. At the beginning of each episode, the audience is reminded through the title sequence of the relationship between her appearance and her power.

In these short title sequence clips of Sabrina changing outfits, she is, as Mosely suggests, negotiating her feminine identity through an absence of consideration for feminism. In other words, appearance from her viewpoint has nothing to do with the status of women and is instead just another fun part about being a teen witch. This infatuation with appearance and sexuality is important in a post-feminist context in which women supposedly no longer need to be concerned with appearance, yet it is a central focus in the show. Projansky and Berg argue that the series is actually offering a version of feminism “that seeks to value women and disempower gender categories, while simultaneously using narrative and costume to locate this version of feminism within a traditionally feminine world.”¹³⁷ Even though the show is presenting a version of feminism as Projansky and Berg suggest, the narrative and costumes of the show are actually reinforcing traditional beauty standards that demonstrate the dire need for feminism.

Sabrina is not the only woman in the show who is consumed with her appearance. Sabrina’s aunts’ concern for their own appearance reinforces beliefs about beauty across generations, demonstrating the theme’s pervasiveness. Notwithstanding the fact that her aunts are both over 600 years old, they retain their vibrancy, youthfulness, and infatuation with their

136. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 11, “A Girl and Her Cat.” Directed by Brian Roberts, written by Frank Conniff, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired December 13, 1996.

137. Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg, “Sabrina the Teenage...? Girls, Witches, Mortals, and the Limitations of Prime-Time Feminism,” in *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. Elyce Rae Helford (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 13-40

own physical appearances. In the show, Hilda and Zelda are in many ways the embodiment of women who have achieved success. They both have careers, one as a scientist the other as a violinist. They are seen as successful on the merits of their accomplishments and routinely receive praise in their respective fields for their success. They are proof of the achievements of women in a post-feminist context. They are not bothered by any critique of their unmarried status; they embrace it as sisters who are co-parenting their niece. While Hilda and Zelda presumably exemplify the notion of female success, as they have aged with the progression of feminism, their obsession with their appearance undermines the progress of their characters. The depiction of their success is important because as McRobbie argues, the depiction of female success is an important component of post-feminist texts in which feminism is taken into account.¹³⁸

Hilda and Zelda frequently discuss the limitations of their magic in preventing common side effects of aging. This could not be more different than the Archie comic version of her aunts who equated beauty with the demise of their witching careers. Within the first few minutes of the pilot episode as Hilda and Zelda witness Sabrina's first levitation as a witch, Hilda remarks, "Wait 'til she finds out that you still get zits when you are 600 years old."¹³⁹ Despite comments like this, the sitcom depicts Hilda and Zelda as youthful, attractive, and engrossed with maintaining their appearance. Later in the same episode, Hilda and Zelda inform Sabrina about an important witch law, they cannot turn back time. In the same breath, they also inform her that a witch cannot get rid of cellulite, as if manipulating time would be used solely for recapturing youthful beauty. They remain fixated throughout the season with their own appearance and frequently remind Sabrina not to take her youth for granted. The contradictory nature of her

138. McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 257.

139. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 1.

aunts' liberated status with the fact that they are consumed by beauty is precisely a manifestation of the post-feminist tensions within the text. If feminism has truly been achieved like post-feminism suggests, then their fixation on beauty undercuts that success, demonstrating the need for feminism. Finally, I explore how her relationships with other people exudes tensions between post-feminism and feminism.

Never Cross a Witch: Sabrina's Relationships with Others

Outside of her familial relation to her aunts, Sabrina's main relationships include her best friend Jenny, her boyfriend Harvey, and her rivalry with Libby. Season one of *Sabrina* echoes post-feminism beliefs in her treatment of other women, specifically the head cheerleader Libby. Through Sabrina's treatment of other women, the show perpetuates the idea that because women have achieved equality, they do not need other women in order to succeed. Therefore, most if not all of Sabrina and Libby's interactions are based on competition and antagonism, not solidarity. In fact, in many ways each of them are a hinderance to one another's goals. While Sabrina does have a close female friend, Jenny, in the first season, more of Sabrina's attention is placed on degrading Libby. Of twenty-four instances of her using her magic in the first season, eight of them are to demean the head cheerleader in some way.

These tricks on Libby range in severity but become a notable theme throughout the season. At the beginning of the third episode, Sabrina uses her magic to make Libby drop her lunch tray three days in a row, humiliating Libby. In another episode, Sabrina quite literally turns Libby into a goat. This is important because it positions these two girls who are powerful in their own unique ways, Sabrina has supernatural powers and Libby has the power of popularity, as pitted against one another. Not only does this play on the mean girl stereotype, but by having

Sabrina and Libby constantly at odds with one another supports the anti-feminist misconception that only one powerful woman can succeed at a time. Inevitably, one of the girls' power is a threat to the other, rather than advancing common goals for all women. Through these displays of post-feminist attitudes, these episodes actually reveal the need for feminism: when Libby and Sabrina try to hurt one another, they actually end up hurting themselves.

In contrast to her tumultuous relationship with Libby, her relationship with Harvey stands out as consistent with many feminists aims. Harvey is unlike the stereotypical football boy from Sabrina's comic book antics; he is sensitive, thoughtful, and supports Sabrina through all of her endeavors. Harvey is in Sabrina's home economics class, and when Sabrina is surprised to see him in class, he first tries to present a more masculine front that he is only taking the class so he could eat during class in order to carbo-load for football.¹⁴⁰ He later reveals that he actually took the class because he likes to cook. He is not afraid to reveal his liking for what have been traditionally ascribed as feminine roles. In another episode, when Sabrina is on Mars with her aunts for a family ski trip, Harvey is the one waiting by his phone waiting for Sabrina to call. When Sabrina forgets to call because she is distracted by her affections for her ski instructor, Harvey plays it off cool like he was never waiting up for her.¹⁴¹ This interaction between Harvey and Sabrina flips a common trope of romance in sitcoms: girl waits by her phone for boy to call, boy gets distracted and forgets to call. In episode ten, "Sweet N' Sour Victory," Sabrina uses magic during gym class to take down her opponent in a kung fu match. When Sabrina does so well, her teacher suggests she compete in a formal competition, Harvey is not threatened by her

140. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 16, "Mars Attracts!" Directed by Gary Halvorson, written by Nell Scovell, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired February 7, 1997.

141. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 1, episode 2, "Bundt Friday." Directed by Gary Halvorson, written by Nell Scovell and Norma Safford Vella, featuring Melissa Joan Hart, Caroline Rhea, and Beth Broderick. Aired October 4, 1996.

physical prowess, rather he is supportive and encouraging. In this version of Sabrina, Harvey's character demonstrates the fluidity of gender roles, suggesting the feminist agenda has been achieved, but through several plot points, Sabrina herself expresses discomfort with the total dissolution of gender roles.

Sabrina's discomfort with a gender-blind relationship affirms anti- or post-feminist concerns that feminism has "gone too far" in erasing gender as a meaningful category. In episode six when Sabrina asks her aunts about casting a love spell on Harvey, her aunts suggest that she ask Harvey to the dance rather than waiting for him to ask her. Sabrina vehemently rejects such an idea as preposterous, and instead is insistent that he be the one to ask her because he is the male. We are returned to the paradox of a teenage witch with supernatural powers being at the mercy of a teenage boy in order to pursue her love interests. Sabrina's relationship with others, predominately Libby and sometimes Harvey, reflect attitudes and beliefs Sabrina has about her own autonomy in relation to other people.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the multifaceted relationship between post-feminism and feminism within the first season of the 1996 live-action *Sabrina* series. This sitcom appears to be a fun, bubbly, light-hearted series about the trials and tribulations of a teenage girl who is also a witch; however, as this analysis shows, whenever the witch trope is present, there are mechanisms of hegemonic control at play. First, this chapter discussed how magic was confined to domestic objects that reinforced patriarchal hierarchies. Even though, Sabrina's home modeled a kind of feminist utopia where gender hierarchies do not exist, domestic objects became a reminder that patriarchal forces are still intact. Then, I explored the ways appearance is still a

predominant focus through discussions of beauty by both Sabrina and her aunts. Regardless of her perceived liberated post-feminist status, Sabrina was still plagued by discussions of beauty and what it means to be a woman. Finally, this chapter discussed the tensions of feminism and post-feminist attitudes in her relationships with others. Her rivalry with Libby emanated post-feminist beliefs that women no longer need other women in order to succeed, but in fact ultimately their relationship demonstrated the need for solidarity among women. Her relationship with Harvey ultimately expressed discomfort with the dissolution of gender roles given Harvey's gender fluidity. This post-feminist analysis of *Sabrina* enhances our understanding of the witch dialectic: despite the show's every attempt to portray a feminist utopia, whenever the witch is present, patriarchal forces are inevitably present. The next chapter explores Sabrina's explicit return to feminism in the 2018 *Netflix* reboot.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERSECTIONALITY AND HALF-WITCH FEMINISM IN
THE *CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA*

In large contrast to the post-feminist themes present within the 1996 live-action series, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the 2018 *Netflix* reboot the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (CAOS)* evokes feminism as a central plot in the series. From the very beginning, Sabrina’s dual nature as a half-witch/half-human raises an important feminist tension between the choice of power or humanity. In this reboot, Sabrina presents the radical notion that she should not have to decide between power and humanity—she is a liberated woman with the freedom to have both. Sabrina positions herself as a feminist icon when she battles the patriarchal traditions of her coven and her high school, earning her the name “woke witch.”¹⁴² In *CAOS*, Sabrina embraces her identity as a witch to liberate herself and others from patriarchal constraints; however, her dual identity as a human is used as a mechanism to control her feminist desires. Her half-witch status reveals something important about women’s power, namely that women are only seen as truly powerful once they denounce their humanity. While the discussion of Sabrina’s identity is a feminist issue at its core, the show also includes important commentary about the contemporary need for intersectionality. Despite the feminist aims of this reboot, an intersectional analysis reveals the way *CAOS* furthers a white, cis-gendered, heteronormative vision of feminism through the show’s treatment of race and sexuality.

142. Rachel Yang, “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina’ Stars on the Netflix Show’s Feminist Themes,” *Variety*, October 21, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/chilling-adventures-of-sabrina-woke-witc-premiere-1202987527/>

This chapter begins with a brief description of *CAOS*. Following a short synopsis of the show, I offer an overview of intersectionality as a form of critical analysis. Next, I discuss why intersectionality is especially relevant to critiques of television broadly and *COAS* in particular. I then identify three overt feminist themes in the reboot: the ways in which she challenges her 1) coven's traditions, 2) high school's norms, and 3) identity as a half-witch. Finally, I employ intersectionality as an analytical framework to show the shortcomings of the show as it relates to race, class, and sexuality.

Woke Witch: Sabrina Spellman

Sabrina's dual nature as half-witch/half-human becomes a distinguishing characteristic and an important point of contention throughout the series from the very opening lines, "In the town of Greendale, where it always feels like Halloween, there lived a girl who is half-witch, half-mortal, who, on her 16th birthday, would have to choose between two worlds: the witch world of her family, and the human world of her friends."¹⁴³ In *CAOS*, Sabrina is the daughter of the prominent warlock Edward Spellman and her human mother Diana Spellman, both of whom died shortly after Sabrina's birth.¹⁴⁴ She was raised by her father's sisters, Zelda (Miranda Otto) and Hilda (Lucy Davis) along with her cousin Ambrose (Chance Perdomo) who are tasked with preparing her to follow her family's coven down the "Path of Night."¹⁴⁵

143. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: October Country." Directed by Lee Toland Krieger, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, featuring Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch and Lucy Davis. Aired October 26, 2018.

144. Later seasons reveal that Sabrina's parents made a deal with the Dark Lord for them to have a child and Sabrina is actually the biological child of the Dark Lord himself.

145. The Path of Night is understood as Sabrina's journey to becoming a full member of the Church of Night. The Church of Night worships the Dark Lord and is overseen by Father Faustus Blackwood. The Church of Night is Satan's church.

The series begins the week prior to Sabrina's 16th birthday which falls on Friday, October 31st. According to the traditions of her coven, her Dark Baptism is to be performed on the night of her 16th birthday in which she will sign the Dark Lord's (a.k.a. Satan's) Book of the Beast. Her signature in the Book of the Beast grants her full access to all her magical powers, but she must sacrifice her freedom, her humanity, and agree to become a servant of the Dark Lord. In the days prior to her Dark Baptism, Sabrina battles with the reality of having to let go of her mortal life in addition to preparing for her new life as a witch. In Sabrina's mortal life she attends Baxter High School with her closest group of friends Theo/Susie,¹⁴⁶ Roz, and her boyfriend Harvey. As opposed to the previous iteration of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* that featured a nearly entire white, cisgender, heterosexual cast, in *CAOS* her best friend Susie later referred to by the name Theo is gender non-conforming (as well as the actor Lachlan Wilson who plays Susie) and her other best friend Roz (Jaz Sinclair) is black.

Intersectional Criticism

Intersectionality was an overt effort to include dimensions of identity that had previously been excluded in feminist scholarship. Just as two streets cross paths and create an intersection, the basic premise underlying intersectionality is that different aspects of people's identities (including race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.) connect and overlap to create a more complex lived experience. Likewise, analysis of lived experience, or anything that impacts it, must account for these complex inter-dynamics. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge argue intersectionality offers an alternative way of understanding people, "rather than seeing people as a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, intersectionality provides a framework for explaining

146. In season 2, Theo shares their transgender identity with Sabrina and her friends and asks to be called Theo. In the first season of the show which is the focus of this chapter, Theo is solely referred to by the name Susie.

how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world, especially in relation to global social inequality.”¹⁴⁷ Intersectionality challenges traditional notions of feminism that focus on one aspect of a person’s identity, their gender, and promotes a more nuanced understanding of women within feminism.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s development of the term intersectionality sparked an important conversation amongst feminist theorists at the time, a spark still very much present within discussions of feminism today. Crenshaw’s influential essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” is traditionally credited for the development of intersectionality.¹⁴⁸ Scholars have noted that while intersectionality owes its naming to Crenshaw, the sentiments expressed in the essay have long been a part of Black feminist thought.¹⁴⁹ Intersectionality was born in legal studies, but is not isolated to one academic discipline, rather it is an interdisciplinary endeavor that challenges public assumptions of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Furthermore, each disciplinary approach asks unique methodological questions about intersectionality.¹⁵⁰ Carrie Crenshaw’s essay, “Women in the Gulf War: Toward an Intersectional Rhetorical Criticism,” extends the principles of intersectionality to the field of feminist rhetorical theory. In this essay, Crenshaw notes that feminist rhetorical theory has traditionally been concerned with the differences between men and women rather than differences between women. She argues that this oversight results in the emergence of

147. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 15.

148. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989],” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139-168, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>

149. Jennifer C Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (2008): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4>

150. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785-810).

“heterosexual, white, U.S. women as the ideological norm.”¹⁵¹ Crenshaw urges rhetorical scholars to employ an intersectional approach to understand the ways gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status all contribute to identity formation and oppressive ideologies.

Despite intersectionality’s inclusive aims, it has received legitimate critique as a form of critical analysis. Many scholars have argued that while intersectionality is theoretically promising, it lacks a clear methodology.¹⁵² Due to the lack of a clear methodology, Nash argues that intersectionality fetishizes Black women as “prototypical intersectional subjects,”¹⁵³ therefore committing the same privileging of identities intersectionality seeks to combat. Other critiques of intersectionality include, “the ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and the coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities.”¹⁵⁴ While these critiques offer important methodological considerations, the value intersectionality offers rhetorical scholars should not be dismissed. In fact, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall argue that these methodological concerns about intersectionality reveal something important about the whiteness undergirding dominant epistemologies, and by placing such an emphasis on methodological concerns, the goal of intersectional work is undermined.¹⁵⁵

Due to these perceived methodological challenges, scholars invested in intersectional analysis have identified useful steps for conducting this work. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall state that at its most basic form, an intersectional analysis is simply an, “adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.”¹⁵⁶ In an attempt to outline intersectionality as a critical methodology, Kathy Davis identifies three

151. Crenshaw, “Women in the Gulf War,” 227.

152. Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” 1-15; McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771-1800.

153. Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” 4.

154. *Ibid.*

155. Cho et al., “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies” 785-810.

156. Cho et al., “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies,” 795.

strategies for doing intersectional research, 1) situating yourself, 2) complicate gender, and 3) identify blind-spots, near-sightedness and other myopias.¹⁵⁷ Within the first strategy of situating yourself, feminist theorists and critical race scholars have long suggested scholars identify their own identities as a form of self-reflexive transparency. Rather than listing the different identity categories that I, as an author, belong to (white, middle-class, queer, cis-gendered woman), Davis suggests that a more inclusive intersectional strategy includes “developing a narrative about how your specific location shapes or influences you (your thinking, theoretical preferences, intellectual biography) in specific ways – ways which will be relevant with respect to the research you are doing.”¹⁵⁸ This study gives theoretical preference to feminist rhetorical criticism, but this chapter in particular is informed by the theories and controversies of intersectionality given the way race, sexuality, and gender identity appear in the reboot. The second strategy Davis suggests, to complicate gender, is at the core of intersectionality. Gender is not one isolated category for analysis, but rather is influenced by other aspects of identity. The following excerpt from Mari Matsuda offers an example for how one might complicate gender as Davis suggests:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?”
When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?”
When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone.¹⁵⁹

157. Kathy Davis, “Intersectionality as Critical Methodology,” in *Writing Academic Texts Differently: Intersectional Feminist Methodologies and the Playful Art of Writing*, 1st ed. (Routledge, n.d.), 17-29).

158. Kathy Davis, “Intersectionality as Critical Methodology,” 22.

159. Mari J. Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1183-1192, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229035>)

While intersectionality may not have a linear methodology, the perspective intersectionality offers is of great value to feminist rhetorical criticism for understanding the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality within feminist texts.

Thus far this study has focused predominately on sexism prevalent in two different iterations of Sabrina, the Archie comic series and the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. The lack of diversity in previous iterations of Sabrina is in and of itself an issue, and as a result my analysis of these two texts focused on gender as a predominant category for analysis. The diverse cast in *CAOS* means that complicating gender becomes a vital method for analysis, further evidence for why an intersectional analysis is important here. Additionally, the show is implicated in a larger feminist conversation regarding the opportunities and challenges posed by a multi-facet of identities within feminist movements such as the Women's March,¹⁶⁰ #MeToo,¹⁶¹ and #TimesUp.¹⁶² The final strategy Davis offers is to identify blind-spots, near-sightedness, and other myopias. Within this final strategy, Davis cautions that “despite the best intentions, many feminist scholars in North America or Western Europe tend to position themselves as being able to speak for women in other parts of the world.”¹⁶³ The analysis offered

160. C Mandler, “Please Stop Wearing Those Pussy Hats To Women's Marches,” *Seventeen*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.seventeen.com/life/a15854506/stop-wearing-pussy-hats-womens-marches/>. The Women's March is an international protest that was first held on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated. The March has been held every subsequent year. During the 2017 Women's March a mass of women wore pink knitted hats, known as pussy hats, as a response to Trump's *Access Hollywood* comments about grabbing women by the pussies. The hats, and the March, received widespread critique for the exclusion of trans women and non-binary individuals within the movement. These hats are an example of how mainstream feminism often neglects diverse gender identities.

161. According to the #MeToo movement website, the #MeToo movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke in order to, “to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing.” Despite the movement's inclusive aims, many women of color have expressed the lack of representation they feel in the movement. “About,” *Me Too Movement*, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>; Jessica Prois and Carolina Moreno, “The #MeToo Movement Looks Different For Women Of Color. Here Are 10 Stories,” *HuffPost*, January 2, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/women-of-color-me-too_n_5a442d73e4b0b0e5a7a4992c).

162. “Our Story,” *TIME'S UP Now*, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://timesupnow.org/about/our-story/>. Founded in 2018 by over 300 women in the entertainment industry, the Time's Up was inspired by the #MeToo movement but focuses specifically on issues of inequality in the workplace.

163. Davis, “Intersectionality as Critical Methodology,” 25.

in this chapter is a result of my own understanding as a student whose rhetorical education has been largely influenced by Western thinking; therefore, the findings of my analysis do not claim to represent experiences of people across nations, but rather reflect what is occurring within this 2018 reboot largely targeted towards Western audiences. With these methodological considerations in mind, this chapter utilizes intersectionality as a method of analysis in order to demonstrate failures of *CAOS* in the show's treatment of race, gender diversity/sexuality, and white saviorism.

Intersectionality on TV

Television is an especially fruitful medium for reinforcing white, heterosexual identities as the ideological norm. Although there has been an increased awareness about the lack of diversity in Hollywood, both in production and casting, the bar has yet to move. According to a 2018 *Guardian* article, “creators of new shows in the 2017-18 season were 91% white and 84% male.”¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, “women also claimed only 28% of leads for new shows, a significant drop from the previous season. There was, however, improvement in casting of people of color, who made up 28% of leads for new shows, an increase from the prior year.”¹⁶⁵ This is important because according to the *Population Reference Bureau*, data from the 2020 census will show a more racially and ethnically diverse country.¹⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the demographics of the U.S. are becoming more diverse, representations in popular media are still not an accurate

164. Sam Levin, “Despite Reckoning on Hollywood Diversity, TV Industry Has Gotten Worse,” *The Guardian*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/feb/27/tv-industry-diversity-women-people-of-color-decline>)

165. Levin, “Despite Reckoning on Hollywood Diversity, TV Industry Has Gotten Worse.”

166. Leslie Aun, “What the 2020 U.S. Census Will Tell Us About a Changing America,” *Population Reference Bureau*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.prb.org/what-the-2020-u-s-census-will-tell-us-about-a-changing-america/>)

reflection of the population. Furthermore, even when diversity is represented, it is often in a way that continues to further a white, classist, heteronormative agenda.

Rhetoric scholar Bonnie Dow argues that representations on television matter, especially for how feminism is understood, since “television’s representations of feminism are almost exclusively filtered through white, middle-class, heterosexual, female characters.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, Colpean and Tully argue that women such as Amy Schumer and Tina Fey who are generally praised for their feminist aims, frequently employ racist stereotypes and tropes.¹⁶⁸ Furthering the notion that feminism is often filtered through a white, middle-class, heterosexual perspective. In today’s media environment, the evolution of Sabrina Spellman’s character in *Netflix’s* 2018 reboot, *CAOS* is quite remarkable in some respects as it features a surprisingly diverse cast including both racial and gender diversity. However, as I discuss later in this chapter, the representation of diversity in *CAOS* falls short from an intersectional perspective. In this iteration of Sabrina, she is positioned as the hell-bent feminist half-witch determined to change the patriarchal traditions of her coven, not to mention her high school, and take down Satan himself. Kiernan Shipka who plays Sabrina in *CAOS*, describes her character as being a “woke witch,”¹⁶⁹ and many have praised the show’s overtly feminist themes.¹⁷⁰ The next section of this chapter will examine the feminist moves made by *CAOS*.

167. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism*, xxiii.

168. Michelle Colpean and Meg Tully, “Not Just a Joke: Tina Fey, Amy Schumer, and the Weak Reflexivity of White Feminist Comedy,” *Womens Studies in Communication* 42, no. 2 (2019): 161-180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1610924>

169. Yang, “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina’ Stars on the Netflix Show’s Feminist Themes.”

170. Angie Martoccio, “Sabrina’ Star Kiernan Shipka on Season Three, Witchcraft, and the Future of Sally Draper,” *Rolling Stone*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/sabrina-netflix-kiernan-shipka-interview-943152/?fbclid=IwAR0sIKiF1v18eSq6-xo3cGrKgNsIomPTyyQ0yeFK4Eay3efYt0XVAO8RezY>; Pilot Viruet, “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina’ Uses Horror to Show Women’s Anger as Righteous and Necessary” *NBCUniversal News Group*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/chilling-adventures-sabrina-uses-horror-show-women-s-anger-righteous-nca924606>; Yang, “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina’ Stars on the Netflix Show’s Feminist Themes.”

Feminist Themes in *CAOS*

The 2018 reboot is a complex multi-layered text, and the first season sets up numerous plot twists and story lines for future seasons to explore. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on themes within the first season of the show that illuminate tensions of feminist theory and practice, as well as how the show instantiates intersectional feminism. Beginning with the tensions, we see Sabrina challenging the patriarchal control of her witch life, as well as the patriarchal and heteronormative authorities in her human life. In addition, the compressed timeline and plot structure of the show limit how much change Sabrina can affect overall, ultimately forcing her to absorb the role of the white savior.

Challenging the Coven

During the days before her Dark Baptism, Sabrina boldly calls into question several practices of her coven. These range from small scale rituals to the critical decision of whether or not to sign the Book of the Beast. On the simpler end of things, Sabrina challenges the witch practice of having a “familiar,” that is, a goblin who has taken on the form of an animal to serve their witch masters. When Zelda hands Sabrina a book to select her familiar, Sabrina suggests the practice “dehumanizes”¹⁷¹ the familiar. She questions the traditional way of selecting a familiar suggested by her Aunt Zelda and instead decides she will use a spell *inviting* a familiar who wants to serve her. She finds herself a familiar through this method, a black cat named Salem. Upon introducing Salem to her aunts, she states, “Salem doesn’t serve me, we are in a partnership.”¹⁷² In this seemingly small move, Sabrina seeks to bring a more egalitarian dynamic

171. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

172. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

bordering on the post-human to a traditional witch practice, something never considered by any of the previous iterations of Sabrina.

The selection of her familiar is not the only outdated practice of the Church of Night she questions. Later Sabrina finds out that witches are supposed to remain virgins until they are baptized into the Church of Night.¹⁷³ Zelda asks Sabrina if she has indeed saved herself for the Dark Lord, and Sabrina reveals that while she is still a virgin in the traditional sense, she has reservations about saving herself for the Dark Lord because, “Why does he get to decide what I do or don’t do with my body?”¹⁷⁴ Zelda is baffled Sabrina would ever challenge the practice, and tells Sabrina there is no explanation or justification needed simply because it is witch law. This fixation on purity has historically been a concern within Christian traditions, but *CAOS* mimics and undermines this fixation through associations with Satanism. Sabrina is left unsatisfied with Zelda’s reasoning and states that he (the Dark Lord) should not get to decide what she does or does not do with her body. Zelda invokes duty and honor as justification enough, “CHOICE? It is our sacred duty and honor to serve the Dark Lord. The extraordinary, delicious gifts he bestows on us in return for signing his book. And you, you would deny him that?”¹⁷⁵ Zelda fears that Sabrina’s critiques of the Church of Night will derail her from assuming her role within the Church as a witch. While Zelda has been groomed to view her power as a gift from the Dark Lord, Sabrina sees her power as something that belongs to her and only her.

Another major point of contention Sabrina has with her coven is that in order to obtain full access to her powers she must sign her name in the Book of the Beast, giving up her freewill. In a critical dialogue between Sabrina and Prudence, Sabrina shares that she is hesitant to sign

173. The Church of Night is the Church of Satan.

174. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

175. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

the Book of the Beast because she believes it is unfair that she has to choose between power and free will. This exchange suggests that freewill is accessible only if she is human, and in turn, her power is only accessible if she sacrifices her humanity. Not only does this suggest that for her to obtain power she must make a sacrifice, but it also insinuates that for a woman to be powerful, her humanity is incompatible. When Sabrina states that she believes she should have both, the girls laugh and Prudence replies, “the thought of you, of any of us, having both terrifies him [Satan].”¹⁷⁶ When Sabrina asks why that is, Prudence replies “because he is a man, isn’t he?”¹⁷⁷ In this comment the Dark Lord becomes the embodiment of the patriarchy, the enforcer of a misogynistic reign. By drawing this comparison between Satan and the patriarchy, the show metaphorically demonstrates the dangers of patriarchal control as being equivalent to fiery depths of Hell. In other words, a world where the patriarchy reigns is Hell itself. At her Dark Baptism, Sabrina makes the ultimate departure from these norms when she decides not to sign the Dark Lord’s Book of the Beast. This monumental decision results in Sabrina choosing both aspects of her identity, or as she puts it, “And so, the girl who had to decide between being a witch and being mortal chose neither path. Or, if you look at it another way, chose both. She was half-witch, but with two covens.”¹⁷⁸ Her decision not to sign the Book of the Beast was the greatest act of defiance against the patriarchal traditions of her coven—she decided, as an autonomous being, that she should be allowed to have both power and free will. As a half-witch/half-mortal, Sabrina is the ultimate threat to the Dark Lord’s power because she has power

176. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 2, “Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism.” Directed by Lee Toland Krieger, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, featuring Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch and Lucy Davis. Aired October 26, 2018.

177. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 2.

178. *Ibid.*

and humanity/free will. Furthermore, Sabrina's freewill is the ultimate threat to the patriarchy, and the Dark Lord will stop at nothing to subvert her power.

After Sabrina's refusal to sign the Book of the Beast, she continues to publicly critique the conventional practices of her coven. Sabrina learns about a sacred tradition in her coven called, the "Feast of Feasts." The tradition dates back to the fourteen Greendale witches who were chased out of Greendale and into the forest. The men of Greendale had hunted all the animals, so one of the witches, a woman named Freya, sacrificed herself to be eaten by the rest of the coven in order to ensure the coven's survival. Sabrina's coven celebrates Freya's sacrifice every year during a holiday called the Feast of Feasts. During the Feast of Feasts, fourteen girls are offered by their families and one is selected to be Queen. The Queen offers herself to be eaten by the coven just as Freya had done. When Sabrina learns about the practice, she is baffled that such an outdated practice still exists, "wait are we seriously talking about cannibalism?"¹⁷⁹ Sabrina openly critiques the ritual and assumes that if she was brave enough to outwardly critique the practice other witches in her coven would follow her. She is surprised that the other witches in the coven were so willing to participate in such a heinous act. Sabrina blackmails Father Blackwood into stopping the Feast of Feasts, but ultimately a witch in her coven slits their own throat in the name of Freya. Sabrina is forced to confront the fact that while her feminist aims seek to help those who have been oppressed by the patriarchal traditions of the coven, she must also confront those who have been active participants in the same traditions she is trying to put an end to.

179. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 7, "Chapter Seven: Feast of Feasts." Directed by Viet Nguyen, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and Oanh Ly, featuring Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch and Lucy Davis. Aired October 26, 2018.

Ultimately, Sabrina ends up signing her name in the Book of the Beast because she believes it will allow her to unlock a level of power, she does not have access to on her own. Still hesitant to give up her freewill, Ms. Wardwell, who is actually Lilith¹⁸⁰ and a servant of Satan, persuades Sabrina to sign her name by appealing to her desire to be independent and powerful in her own right. Ms. Wardwell crafts a hypothetical scenario in which Sabrina's loss of freewill is compatible with her desire to be independent, "I know you are scared Sabrina. Because all women are taught to fear power...own your power. Don't accept it from the Dark Lord. Take it. Wield it. Save your friends."¹⁸¹ After hearing Ms. Wardwell's plea, she signs her name and then uses her newfound power to save her friends and the town of Greendale from an imminent threat.

These actions are only the beginning of her drive to take down the patriarchy within her witch world: the selection of a familiar, her refusal to sign the Book of the Beast, the ending of the Feast of Feasts. However, Sabrina's work within her human life suggests that she sees strength/value in the witch half of her life, primarily in the form of messages about women's power and potential. The ambivalent status of her witch identity—is it outdated and controlling or is it empowering and radical—speaks to the ongoing tension and intrigue of the *Sabrina* franchise.

Challenging High School Norms

In case Sabrina's taking on of centuries old patriarchal traditions within her coven was not enough, she finds herself doing the same with the outdated practices of her high school. In the case of her coven, she is predominately battling misogyny, but at her high school she

180. According to the Talmud, a sacred Jewish text, Lilith is the first woman and Adam's first wife. She refused to be inferior to Adam and was punished for doing so. Arsène Darmesteter, *Talmud*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1897).

181. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 10, "Chapter Ten: The Witching Hour." Directed by Rob Seidenglanz, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and Ross Maxwell, featuring Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch and Lucy Davis. Aired October 26, 2018.

becomes enraged with sexist and heteronormative behaviors. One major advantage Sabrina has for challenging the norms of her high school is that she is a witch. In several instances throughout the series, Sabrina uses her magical powers to bring about change and equality within her school life. This is a distinct change from the comic and sitcom where Sabrina only uses witch power for domestic, romantic, and personal appearance goals. In her mortal life, more so than in her witch life, her supernatural identity becomes empowering. Her capabilities are not unbounded, structures are in place at the school to reinforce a white, masculine, heteronormative ideology, but Sabrina tackles them head-on with the help of her magic.

Sabrina's interest in challenging high school norms begins from the very first moments of the series' launch, when in episode one she learns that a group of boys on the football team pulled up Susie's shirt to "try and see what's under there."¹⁸² Outraged, Sabrina goes directly to the principal, a blatant misogynist, to demand he take action against the football players and bring each of them in for questioning. Since Sabrina does not know which of the football players it was, Principal Hawthorne replies "you're suggesting a witch hunt?"¹⁸³ When Sabrina states how important it is that Susie feel safe in their own school, Principal Hawthorne suggests Susie find a different school. Infuriated by Principal Hawthorne's lack of action, Sabrina takes matters into her own hands and decides that she will not undergo her Dark Baptism until she can ensure the safety of her friend Susie. This is in stark contrast to the 1960's comic where Sabrina was trying to hex athletes or the 1996 sitcom in which Sabrina routinely turned against female/allied peers and used her magic to undercut their position.

Sabrina seeks to protect her friends by creating a club for women empowerment to discuss issues on campus and come up with proactive solutions, or in the words of her friend Roz

182. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

183. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 1.

“a club to fight the white patriarchy.”¹⁸⁴ Through this action, she demonstrates the power of organization and coalition building for resisting patriarchal establishments. Sabrina knows that Principal Hawthorne would never agree to such a club, so she employs her cousin Ambrose to help her use a spell on Principal Hawthorne preventing him from being able to come to school and stop the creation of her club. She successfully creates the club WICCA: The Women’s Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association before her Dark Baptism. By creating this club, Sabrina is demonstrating the importance of an inclusive feminism and the duty of those like herself—a white, cis-gendered, feminist—being an ally to the transgender community. When Sabrina and Roz first tell Susie about the club, Sabrina states that “the more girls who join, the harder we’ll be to silence,”¹⁸⁵ evoking a nod to feminism that there is strength in numbers. Sabrina recognizes that Principal Hawthorne, a raging misogynist himself, fosters an environment where such harassment and bullying is allowed, but he himself is a symptom of longer patriarchal hierarchies. Further, she draws upon aspects of her witch life to achieve her goals. When Sabrina tells her aunts about the club, she compares it to the idea of a coven “Women protecting women. You know sort of like a coven.”¹⁸⁶ Here Sabrina acknowledges the power she has felt amongst a group of predominately women (her coven) as a force to be reckoned with that she tries to recreate in her mortal life. In this case, being a witch helps her accomplish her feminist aims.

Sabrina’s challenging of high school norms extends to the second episode of the first season, when the football players who had been relentlessly mocking Susie for their gender identity rip up a WICCA poster that the club had hung in the school hallway. Susie sees it and

184. Ibid.

185. Ibid.

186. Ibid.

stands up for themselves, but they are instead beaten up by the boys. Sabrina goes to what can be best described as three of her frenemies from the Academy of Unseen Arts (the witch school Sabrina would attend once she completed her Dark Baptism): Prudence, Agatha, and Dorcas (also known as the Weird Sisters) to help her teach the football players a lesson. Together, the four teen witches entice the boys to come with them to the coal mines for a party. The girls use a spell, so the boys think they are kissing each one of the girls; however, the four boys are actually kissing one another. Sabrina takes a picture of the boys kissing one another and threatens to expose the pictures if the boys ever lay a hand on Susie or any other girl again. Sabrina uses the magic she has as a witch, to fight the boys' transphobic beliefs by threatening to expose them as being gay themselves. While this act protects Susie and other people like them, this action uses widespread homophobia to achieve transgender inclusion; this is one of the ways the show fails in its feminist aims, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Challenging Half-ness

The 2018 reboot brings Sabrina's half-witch identity into much stronger focus than the two previous texts. In the Archie comic, Sabrina is never explicitly labeled as a half-witch, but as Chapter 3 explored, there are other rhetorical strategies enacted to create limits to her power. In the 1996 live-action series, Sabrina's identity as a half-witch is present but her dominant identity is that she is a teenager who also happens to be a witch rather than vice versa. Sabrina's half-ness becomes a key point of struggle for Sabrina in *CAOS* and offers a lens through which to explore the larger themes of power, control, limits, and opportunities. Initially, Sabrina decides not to sign the Book of the Beast at her Dark Baptism, making a commitment to her human female form and the battles she faces there. As the show progresses, we see Sabrina struggle to hold

onto this choice—she is lured by the power of the magic and eventually decides to become a full witch to better achieve her feminist goals. This section discusses how each aspect of her identity, witch and human, function rhetorically as a mechanism of control and liberation.

Sabrina’s humanity liberates her from the deeply misogynistic traditions of her coven because she is not a full witch and therefore, she is not fully bound to their laws and practices. For example, after Sabrina refuses to sign her name in the Book of the Beast, the coven holds a trial against Sabrina for breaking her promise to the Dark Lord. If she is found guilty, she must fully abandon her mortal life. During Sabrina’s trial, her lawyer claims that witch law does not fully apply to her because she is half-mortal. Her humanity gives her free will that her witch life does not give her access to. In this way, her human status liberates her from these patriarchal controls; however, her humanity is also operationalized as a mechanism of control. “Half-breed” is frequently used as a slur to insult Sabrina by Prudence, Dorcas, and Agatha to suggest that she is less of a witch because she is half-human. The main way Sabrina’s humanity controls her is that it supposedly¹⁸⁷ limits her from being able to access her full potential as a witch. In many ways, Sabrina’s attachment to the mortal world, including her friends and her school, distracts her from unlocking her full potential. Next, I discuss how her identity as a witch both liberates and constrains her.

Sabrina’s witch identity gives her to access a different kind of power for stopping misogyny in her mortal life. The magical powers she has because she is a witch allow her to fight the patriarchal traditions within her school with a new kind of fire, Hell fire. When she wants to create the WICCA club at her school to provide a safe space for women, she uses her magic to prevent Mr. Hawthorne from being able to come to school and deny the creation of her club.

187. I use supposedly intentionally here because members within her coven view it as a limitation whereas Sabrina embraces it as another source of power.

Similarly, in order to seek justice for the football boy's bullying of Susie she uses magic to scare the football boys with their own homophobic beliefs. In each of these scenarios, her magic liberates her from patriarchal controls that would normally prevent women from seeking justice. The ways in which Sabrina uses her power for equality and liberation makes her a compelling feminist character. On the other hand, her witch identity comes with a largely controlling factor that she must give up her free will and her humanity to fully wield its powers. Even if Sabrina wanted to become a full witch to use her magical powers to end all misogyny, injustice, racism, homophobia, etc., she is ultimately at the mercy of Satan because witches do not have free will.

At this point is it vital that we shift to an intersectional analysis since the girl who chooses free will, the girl who then signs her name but saves the town, is a *white* girl. Interrogating the "white savior" aspects of CAOS complicates many of the feminist aims that show claims to accomplish.

Intersectional Analysis of *CAOS*

While feminist themes feature strongly in the 2018 reboot of Sabrina, in as early as the second episode of the series one can start to identify some of the ways the show fails its feminist aims by not accounting for intersectionality. While it may be refreshing to watch a show directly and explicitly question patriarchal norms, the show ultimately offers continued expressions of white, heteronormative feminism, ultimately failing at promoting intersectionality. By utilizing intersectionality as a form of critical analysis, this portion of the chapter explores three pertinent themes that emerge, each exposing ways that certain expressions of feminism can be counterproductive to lasting social change. These themes include 1) race in CAOS, 2) gender diversity and sexuality in *CAOS*, and 3) Sabrina as a white savior.

Race in *CAOS*

While *CAOS* offers strong commentary on the status of feminism, intersectionality critique demands that we look closer at the show's treatment of its Black characters since racial bias can be present within feminist texts. There are three predominant characters of color Ambrose, Roz, and Prudence, all of whom are biracial and have some sort of disability preventing them from being the real hero of the show.

Ambrose is Sabrina's cousin and a pansexual warlock. During the first season of *CAOS*, viewers learn that he has been placed on magical house arrest for the past 75 years because he plotted to blow up the Vatican. One could argue that this is a development from the 1996 live-action series, when Sabrina's cat Salem was sentenced to 100 years as a cat by the Witch's Council for his attempt for world domination, but instead of Salem being sentenced to house arrest in *CAOS*, it is her cousin Ambrose. While this plot point comes from the Sabrina canon, it is hard to ignore the fact that one of the three main characters of color in the show is incarcerated when according to the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*, African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites.¹⁸⁸ Ambrose is relieved of his life-long house arrest sentence, only by promising to become a servant of the High Priest.

Roz, is one of Sabrina's best friends, and during the first season of the show she gradually becomes blind. Roz's grandma also went blind but shares with Roz that her blindness is actually called a "cunning" that allows her to have magical visions. Roz's grandma shares that the women in their family have been going blind for generations because of a curse put on them

188. "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet," *NAACP*, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>)

by witches. This is notable for a couple reasons. First, Roz's ability to have magical visions comes from a disability: her complete loss of vision. This suggests that Roz's cunning is not a power, but rather a curse. Secondly, this evokes a common trope that Black women have seeing powers, commonly referred to by scholars as the "magical Negro."¹⁸⁹ Glenn and Cunningham identify characteristics of the magical Negro: "(a) using magical and spiritual gifts for the White character, (b) assuming primarily service roles, (c) exhibiting folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition, (d) possessing limited role outside magical/spiritual guide, and (e) displaying an inability to use his or her powers to help himself or herself."¹⁹⁰ Each of these characteristics of the magical Negro are present in Roz's character. This is important because as Glenn and Cunningham argue, the magical Negro is not only a set of characteristics but is a set of racist stereotypes.¹⁹¹ Additionally, Roz had attempted to create a Daughter's of the Black Panther Party club but was denied by Principal Hawthorne. It wasn't until Sabrina created WICCA that there was a club for inclusion on campus. Third, her alliance with witches, presumably white witches like Sabrina, is actually a cause of the blindness. This puts a literal, physical barrier between full solidarity across racial lines; if Black and white women can unite only if one entity becomes cursed or disabled, what type of solidarity is that?

Prudence is Father Blackwood's illegitimate child and has been an orphan her whole life along with her two foster sisters Agatha and Dorcas, both of whom are white. Even after it is revealed that Father Blackwood is Prudence's father, she is still not allowed to adopt the Blackwood name. From the very first episode, Prudence is positioned as Sabrina's enemy.

189. Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 2 (August 2007): 135-152, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934707307831>; Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

190. Glenn and Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," 142.

191. Glenn and Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic," 138.

Prudence is actively trying to persuade Sabrina not to attend the Academy of Unseen Arts so Prudence and her sisters can retain their rule at the Academy. Prudence and her sisters relish in the traditions of their coven, again positioning them as the opposite of Sabrina. Additionally, Prudence is selected as the Queen during the Feast of Feasts to be offered to her coven as a sacrifice and it is Sabrina who must convince her that she should not willingly sacrifice herself to be eaten by the coven.

Each of these representations of racially diverse characters taken together, paint a rather grim view for the inclusion of all races within feminism. The Black characters are cast as criminals, disabled, and bastards – the distinction from Sabrina’s savior role could not be clearer. An intersectional analysis reveals how much is left to achieve in regard to race within feminist movements. Intersectionality cannot only be achieved through adding more diverse secondary characters to the show, how these characters are represented in popular has important implications for their agency.

Gender Diversity and Sexuality in *CAOS*

CAOS received a lot of praise for the casting of a non-binary actor, Lachlan Watson, to play Susie/Theo.¹⁹² Reportedly, the writers of the show incorporated Watson’s feedback and experience as a non-binary individual into Susie’s character, making the character more believable and authentic.¹⁹³ The first season of the show does not put a label on Susie’s identity, whether they are non-binary or transgender but rather what is established is they are gender non-

192. Adryan Corcione, “Susie Doesn't Need a Label in ‘CAOS’ - Lachlan Watson Explains Why That's So Important,” *Teen Vogue*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/lachlan-watson-susie-putnam-chilling-adventures-of-sabrina>)

193. Shannon Carlin, “What Lachlan Watson Helped Change About Susie's Non-Binary Journey On 'Sabrina',” *Bustle*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/susies-journey-on-the-chilling-adventures-of-sabrina-is-honest-look-at-being-non-binary-thats-exactly-what-lachlan-watson-wanted-12965144>)

conforming. Despite this inclusion of a very underrepresented population in television, *CAOS* undermines these attempts through a couple of key plot points.

One of the first notable mistreatments of queer identities is when Sabrina, Prudence, Agatha, and Dorcas seek to put the football boys in their place by luring them to the mines and taking a photo of the boys kissing each other. Their action suggests that the worst possible punishment for these boys is to be put in the position of the women they lust after—feminized and objectified. Using femininity as a threat is dangerous for transgender inclusive feminism. As Serano argues, “the idea that femininity is subordinate to masculinity dismisses women as a whole and shapes virtually all popular myths and stereotypes about trans women.”¹⁹⁴ While Sabrina seeks justice for her gender-nonconforming friend, she furthers this idea that being gay or the appearance of being gay is a punishment, ultimately undermining the feminist project. Comparing the bullies of queer individuals to being queer, is by no means empowering for queer individuals. Through this plot point, *CAOS* positions Sabrina’s feminist action of putting the boys in their place, as furthering notions of homophobia. There is also an underlying assumption that all of the football players are straight so therefore the thought of homophobia terrifies them; however, if they are not all straight which the show does not reveal, Sabrina’s feminist act could be potentially outing one of them. Furthermore, the spell she uses completely neglects any conversation about consent in sexual encounters.

Another important shortcoming of queer representation in *CAOS* is through the story of Susie’s Uncle Jesse. Jesse lives with Susie and their father, but when their father goes out of town, Susie is left home alone with Jesse which frightens Susie because Jesse has a demon named Maerceci living in him. The first night they are alone, Maerceci disguised in Jesse’s body

194. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016), 5-6.

emerges behind Susie in the bathroom as they are brushing their teeth and says to Susie, “you’re an abomination, boy-girl... and he [the Dark Lord] will smite you”¹⁹⁵ When Sabrina confronts the demon in Jesse’s body, the demon reveals that he selected Jesse’s body because “he’s a Sodomite. An abomination.”¹⁹⁶ When Susie’s father returns to see Jesse’s condition has worsened, he invites a doctor to the house to see about putting Jesse in a facility. During the conversation with the doctor, Susie’s father reveals that his brother has always had demons. He recalls, “Jesse liked to put on our mother’s dresses”¹⁹⁷ and he “always struggled with his, uh... you know, sexuality. His proclivities.”¹⁹⁸ Susie overhears their father’s remarks and comes to Jesse’s defense that putting on a dress as a child does not explain why he appears to be possessed by a demon. The show literally portrays the only other queer character besides Susie as literally being possessed by a demon. Sabrina performs an exorcism, but ultimately it was not enough and the only other queer character besides Susie is killed off.

White Saviorism

Despite all of Sabrina’s intentions and hard work to challenge the patriarchal norms of her school and her coven, in episode ten she ends up signing her name in the Book of the Beast. The same Sabrina who has been an activist, feminist, and outspoken critic of the patriarchal structures imposing themselves on her has now, in a single signature, given up her free will and decided to become a servant of Satan. Sabrina did not wake up one morning and decide that she would sign her name in the Book of the Beast for no reason. Rather, she felt as though the only

195. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 6, “Chapter Six: An Exorcism in Greendale” Directed by Rachel Talalay, written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, Joshua Conkel, and Mj Kaufman, featuring Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch and Lucy Davis. Aired October 26, 2018.

196. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, season 1, episode 6.

197. *Ibid.*

198. *Ibid.*

way she could save her friends and family from a curse about to destroy the town was to sign her name so she would be powerful enough to stop the curse. At the same time Sabrina is signing her name in the Book of the Beast, other characters in the show like Susie, Roz, and her Aunt Hilda are all performing courageous actions to try and stop the curse as well; however, the show overlooks their efforts and instead it was only through her courageous action that she was able to save the town. This plot trapped Sabrina into becoming the “white savior” of the show; a concern many feminist scholars argue furthers notions of imperial feminism that privileges the experiences of white, middle-class women.¹⁹⁹ As Valerie Amos and Pratibha write, “true feminist theory and practice entails an understanding of imperialism and a critical engagement with challenging racism—elements which the current women’s movement significantly lacks, but which are intrinsic to Black feminism.”²⁰⁰ While this iteration of Sabrina paints a far more hopeful future for feminism than her predecessors in the 1962 Archie comic and the 1996 live-action series, this analysis of Sabrina reveals the need for a more inclusive version of feminism.

Conclusion

In *CAOS*, Sabrina embraces the title of the feminist witch and uses her status as a half-witch to affect change in both her human and witch worlds. This chapter has demonstrated the ways that this feminist-appearing text suffers many shortcomings: yes, Sabrina is outwardly feminist, but she is still constrained and falls into dominant patriarchal norms despite her best efforts. If, as scholars have noted, the witch is a site for feminist resistance, this reading of *CAOS*

199. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” *Feminist Review*, no. 17 (1984): 3-19.

200. Amos and Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” *Feminist Review*, 17.

reveals problematic notions of feminism in society.²⁰¹ Reiss argues that our understanding of women's roles in society changes as we (re)consider the figure of the witch.²⁰² Thus, the 2018 dark version of Sabrina Spellman suggests that women's roles in society are changing, posing the question: does feminism need to go dark to create change?

The darkness of the show can be considered an attempt to illuminate the reality that many people felt after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Pilot Viruet argues, "In many ways, 'Chilling Adventures of Sabrina' is the perfect 2018 update for ABC's (and later The WB's) brightly-lit, family-friendly 'Sabrina The Teenage Witch,' and a clever way to tackle the necessity and benefits of feminism: Through a horror lens."²⁰³ Thus, the show is not trying to hide the fact that the world *feels* dark but rather to portray that darkness. With Sabrina's aunts and other members of her coven frequently interjecting "Hail Satan!" into everyday dialogue—it causes viewers to pause and to reflect "did they really just say that?" – this version of a classic character such as Sabrina reflects a society that is dark. To a certain extent, the show's embrace of this mentality allows viewers to start developing a response to darkness, rather than spending the time to convince them the world is dark in the first place. Another possible answer for why dark and why now, is that the ludicrous nature of characters walking around saying "Hail Satan!" allows a sense of escapism from contemporary society. While contemporary politics may be bad, at least Satan is not trying to talk away our free will. Additionally, to grasp the dark status of our contemporary society, *CAOS* allows us to see how the dramatized and Satanized version plays out on screen first. The final chapter of this thesis will grapple with the results of each of these analyses of Sabrina and what these findings mean for feminism today.

201. Reiss, *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, xii; Bovenschen et al., "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth," 82–119.

202. Reiss, *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*.

203. Viruet, "Chilling Adventures of Sabrina."

CHAPTER SIX: CLOSING THE SPELL BOOK: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Through an examination of three different iterations of Sabrina in popular media, the 1960's Archie comic, the 1996 live-action series, and finally the 2018 Netflix reboot, this study has provided an examination of the tensions of liberation and control present within teenage witch depictions. Each iteration indexes the status, strength, and struggles of feminism at different points in time, and, taken together, I have sought to demonstrate the lasting power and flexibility of the witch trope across time. I argue that the witch trope will never be fully divorced from the mechanisms of patriarchal control, but that each iteration of Sabrina offers valuable lessons for confronting those controlling features. In this conclusion, I offer ways the witch can be embraced as a site for feminist resistance.

This study examined Sabrina's character as she developed across time, medias, and changes in the political concept of feminism. In chapter 3, I discussed how Sabrina's character was created to symbolize the "modern woman."²⁰⁴ In this case "modernity" was presented as a break from the confining traditions of witchcraft and womanhood that held back Sabrina's aunts. However, the first issue, Archie's Mad House #22 placed constraints on Sabrina's power. My analysis showed that despite her perceived status as a liberated, modern woman, she is too consumed by using her magic to improve her physical appearance, complete domestic tasks, and attract boys to tap into the feminist potential that being a "modern" witch could afford.

204. Gladir, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.

Through an analysis of the first season of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, chapter 4 demonstrated the complexity of introducing post-feminist ideologies into the witch trope. Regardless of the show's light-hearted and fun portrayal of Sabrina as the liberated post-feminist witch, ultimately elements of patriarchal control manifested in the series. This analysis revealed that despite every effort to frame Sabrina as the post-feminist witch who is fully liberated and does not need feminism, her magic was frequently contained to domestic objects and fixation with appearance. Her relationships with others, specifically her boyfriend Harvey and her rivalry with the head cheerleader Libby, revealed the shortcomings of post-feminist ideologies and further demonstrated the need for feminism.

Finally, chapter 5 investigated the feminist aims of the 2018 *Netflix* reboot the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. In this version of Sabrina, she does not assume her liberated status in the same manner as her 1960 and 1990 counterpart. Instead she believes that because she is both human and witch, she has the right to both freedom *and* power. She understands that as long as the patriarchal traditions of her high school and coven reinforce gender inequality, her status as a witch will not grant her full liberation. While this version of Sabrina is undoubtedly the most progressive of the three, the show's treatment of race and sexuality further notions of white, classist, heteronormative feminism. The driving force behind this project was to understand how women might productively navigate the witch label as a site of feminist liberation and power. In order to do so, let me now locate how the witch trope is being mobilized in contemporary politics.

In a February 2020 *Atlantic* article, Bianca Bosker notes, "In the U.S., mainstream interest in witches has occasionally waned but mostly waxed, usually in tandem with the rise of

feminism and the plummeting of trust in establishment ideas.”²⁰⁵ The election of Donald Trump, in 2016, indicated the dire need for feminism, so many women turned to the witch. Women evoked the witch at the Women’s March in protest posters that read, “we are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn.”²⁰⁶ Melanie Judge discussed the power of evoking the witch as a form of protest:

Present-day witches include women who transgress sexual codes, who assert non-conforming gender identities, who survive violence and hold perpetrators to account, who call out racism against them and others, who refuse to assimilate into dominant cultures that seek to deny their own, who claim the right to health, education and land, who strike out against capitalist exploitation, and who refuse to separate demands for sexual freedom from that of racial and economic justice.²⁰⁷

This vision of a witch is much more intersectional than the version of the Sabrina seen in *CAOS*. Women have used the label of the witch beyond just Women’s March protest posters, but for other protests as well calling out white supremacy. So far, I have discussed how the witch is being mobilized in protest movements, but as each of the analysis chapters demonstrated, the witch is not free from patriarchal control.



Figure 3: Witch Protestors at 2017 Boston Free Speech Rally, courtesy of Wired

205. Bosker, “Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise,” *The Atlantic*.

206. Melanie Judge, “Those (Not) Able to Be Burnt,” in *Nasty Women Talk Back: Feminist Essays on the Global Women's Marches*, ed. Joy Watson and Amanda Gouws (Cape Town, South Africa: Imbali Academic Publishers, 2018), 121.

207. Judge, “Those (Not) Able to Be Burnt,” 121.

With an increasing number of women elected to political office,²⁰⁸ the witch has been evoked as a mechanism to demean women who seek too much political power. For example, in January 2019 Dave Kubal, a member of the conservative organization Intercessor for America whose mission is to pray for American leaders and the nation as a whole, stated in a live video “there is, a coven of witches that cast spells on President Trump 24 hours a day 7 days a week. This particular coven is found in the Southern portion of New York City.”²⁰⁹ Kubal goes on to discuss a string of events that strikes him as “coincidental,” he states that these events are all occurring “where the witches are doing their 24-hour spell casting” and is also the district which the progressive congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez oversees.²¹⁰ The snowball of coincidences Kubal refers to are precisely the kind of events and suspicious activities that have been blamed on the work



Figure 4: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the Wicked Witch, courtesy of A Science Enthusiast

of witches throughout history. Here, the witch trope is being mobilized as a mechanism for patriarchal control over powerful women through statements such as Kubal’s, but also through images. Ocasio-Cortez is not the only target of these attacks; other women including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, California Senator Kamala

208. Danielle Kurtzleben, Sean McMinn, and Renee Klahr, “What It Looks Like To Have A Record Number Of Women In The House Of Representatives,” NPR, January 4, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/04/678227272/what-it-looks-like-to-have-a-record-number-of-women-in-the-house-of-representati>)

209. Kyle Mantyla, “Dave Kubal Prays Against the Witches and 'Diabolical Power' Operating in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's District,” Right Wing Watch, January 14, 2019, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/dave-kubal-prays-against-the-witches-and-diabolical-power-operating-in-alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-district/>)

210. Mantyla, “Dave Kubal Prays Against the Witches and 'Diabolical Power' Operating in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's District,” Right Wing Watch.

Harris, and many others have been equated visually with the Wicked Witch of the West.²¹¹ These representations of women as witches have important implications for women's political agency. As these examples have shown, patriarchal forces continue to paint women as witches when they obtain too much power. This makes now a more important time than ever to understand the witch as a site of feminist resistance.

Not only are more women embracing the witch as a symbol for resistance, but also as a religious practice. This study has focused on the symbolic witch, but it would be remiss to ignore that there has also been a recent rise in the practice of witchcraft. According to a 2014 Pew Research poll, over 700,000 Americans identify as Wiccan/Pagans, which is just one categorization of people who identify as witches.²¹² With a rise in the number of people who identify as practicing witches, future research should explore how the cultural and religious practices of witchcraft influence our understanding of the symbolic witch. Unlike the 1962 or 1996 *Sabrina*, the 2018 *Sabrina* features significant commentary on witchcraft as a religion, positioning Sabrina and her coven's practices and beliefs in Satanism. *CAOS* quite literally positions Satan as the leading powerful patriarchal figure over humans and witches. By doing so, the show raises important questions about the relationship between patriarchal mechanisms of control and organized religion. Religion is a powerful rhetorical tool that has inherently influenced contemporary understandings of the witch. Rhetorical scholars should carefully consider how the witch trope in a Burkean sense, reflects, select, and deflect aspects of witchcraft as a religion.²¹³

211. The Wicked Witch of the West is the antagonist in the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. She can be easily identified by her green face and black clothing.

212. Bosker, "Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise."

213. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 45.

The cultural symbols we produce, such as the half-witch, have important implications for the status of women. With the progression of each iteration of Sabrina, her half-witch identity becomes an even more defining aspect of her identity. Through my analysis of Sabrina, this study explored the ways in which the witch label operates as a dialectic of liberation and control. I argue that the half-witch label is an intensification of the double-bind that has been placed on women throughout history.²¹⁴ More precisely, the half-witch can be understood as a manifestation of Creed's argument for the monstrous-feminine: Sabrina has to choose between her personal (human) life and her witch (monstrous) life. If the demonization of women as witches was not enough, the half-witch functions as a further means to suppress women's power. When women are viewed as only half-powerful, or asked to forfeit their humanity in order to achieve equivalent power to men, then the need for feminism remains as pertinent as ever. Future research should explore how this notion of halfness is utilized in other discourses about women as a way of further binding them to a dialectic of liberation and control.

Rhetorical scholars have long argued that film, television, literature, and other forms of popular media convey important messages about how society views different groups of people.²¹⁵ For this reason, it is important to critically engage with popular media around us, even those about a teen witch, as they offer important commentary about our society, especially feminist artifacts during a time when the president of the United States actively degrades and demeans women. Throughout the years, Sabrina has introduced many young women to feminism. She is a young witch coming to terms with her sexuality and power in a male-

214. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

215. Kristen Hoerl, "Criticism of Popular Culture and Social Media," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, ed. Jim A Kuypers, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 269-288; Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

dominated world. For better and for worse, she offers a model of feminism that is intertwined in a dialectic of liberation and control inherent to the witch trope. Scholars should continue to monitor the evolution of and variations within witch depictions, especially in recurring characters like Sabrina in order to understand the ways this rich trope responds to evolving versions of feminism.

For all her love potions and spaghetti jar struggles, Sabrina Spellman remains a compelling figure for American culture to grapple with questions of feminism and feminist liberation. Self-identified witch Pam Grossman writes that, “witches reflect our fears and our fantasies about women with power.”²¹⁶ The persistence of Sabrina’s character over the past 58 years demonstrates our infatuation with this particular witch, and it remains to be seen if more updates of this familiar character will ensue. Sabrina is far more than a blonde-haired teenage girl; she is the character, the phenomenon, but most importantly: a witch. Through tensions of both feminist liberation and patriarchal control, Sabrina Spellman has truly cast a spell on feminism.

216. Bennett, “When Did Everybody Become a Witch?”

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