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"Topple the White Patriarchy" : Rebranding Feminist Gothic Narratives for the 21st Century

Abstract

Recent Netflix productions centering the supernatural figures Sabrina and Wednesday take works that historically operated in the genre of gothic comedy, and shift them towards dark fantasy, with a grittier violence, and simultaneously a strong emphasis on racial and gender diversity. Netflix as a streaming platform has a special appeal among teenagers since its algorithm allows suggestion of content specifically catered to the viewers' interests; it also offers support for different devices and encourages repeated viewings, which in turn leads to renewed interest in teen series and stories that appeal to marginalised groups.

Sabrina is a character with a long history, first appearing in Archie's Madhouse comics in 1962, followed by several renditions. One of the most notable predecessors of Chilling Adventures is Sabrina the Teenage Witch, which has a different aesthetic with a likeable and clueless Sabrina in a comical setting. Chilling Adventures takes a darker approach, exploring Sabrina's relationship with her friends, family, and coven as she navigates both the mortal and magical worlds. Using interconnections between feminist theories and theories in horror studies, we examine how Chilling Adventures of Sabrina represents and challenges patriarchal structures, issues of agency, and gaslighting.

Wednesday has parallels to Chilling Adventures in how it has rebranded a popular series that began in comics, celebrated as popular viewing in the 1990s, and at their core both presented unconventional families. Focusing this latest iteration of the Addams Family universe on the eldest daughter, Wednesday, emphasises the feminist focus of this story, and the show makes explicit engagement with racial dimensions to the Addams family story that were unexplored in earlier versions of the stories. This version casts a Latina actress to play the role of Wednesday, and through time-slip narratives, explores histories of racist violence and prejudice in North America. Further, while the series director Tim Burton has been rightly criticised for anti-Black racism, the initially two-dimensional Black characters in Wednesday develop complex storylines over the first season, and grow in their appeal to audience sympathy.

These shows build an appeal to an adult audience through nostalgia for the 1990s, and target new teen audiences in making shows that are more violent and serious in tone, and that implicitly reject earlier forms of their own stories by expanding on issues of

representation and inequality. Ultimately, we put forward how these shows explore narratives that help girls and young women question oppressive systems.

Keywords: White Patriarchy, Feminism, Gothic

Introduction

Recent Netflix productions have centred on the supernatural figures Sabrina Spellman (Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, developed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, 2018-2020, hereafter Chilling Adventures) and Wednesday Addams (Wednesday, created by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, 2022). These two shows take works that historically operated in the genre of gothic comedy, and shift them towards dark fantasy, with a grittier violence, and simultaneously a strong emphasis on racial and gender diversity.

Sabrina is a character with a long history, first appearing in Archie's Madhouse comics in 1962, followed by several renditions. One of the most notable predecessors of Chilling Adventures is Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996-2003), which has a different aesthetic with a likeable and clueless Sabrina in a comical setting. Chilling Adventures takes a darker approach, exploring Sabrina's relationship with her friends, family, and coven as she navigates both the mortal and magical worlds. Using interconnections between feminist theories and theories in horror studies, we examine how Chilling Adventures represents and challenges patriarchal structures, issues of agency, and a contemporary feminist understanding of gaslighting.

Wednesday has parallels to Chilling Adventures in how it has rebranded a popular series that began in comics, was celebrated as popular viewing in the 1990s, and, like Sabrina the Teenage Witch, at its core presented an unconventional family. Focusing this latest iteration of the Addams Family universe on the eldest daughter, Wednesday, emphasises the feminist shift to this story, and the show makes explicit engagement with racial dimensions to the Addams family story that were unexplored in earlier versions. This production casts a Latina actress to play the role of Wednesday, and through time-slip narratives, explores histories of racist violence and prejudice in North America. Further, while the series director Tim Burton has been rightly criticised for anti-Black racism, the initially two-dimensional Black characters in Wednesday develop complex storylines over the first season, and grow in their appeal to audience sympathy.

These shows are targeted to an adult audience through nostalgia for the 1990s, and seek to catch new teen audiences in making shows that are more violent and serious in tone, and that implicitly reject earlier forms of their own stories by expanding on issues of representation and inequality. Ultimately, we put forward how these shows explore fantasy narratives that help girls and young women question oppressive systems today.

In her work on female heroes in fantasy fiction, Phillips (2023) argues that there is radical potential when the female hero eschews the "isolating individuality" typical of male heroes, and instead "demonstrat[e] relationality" and create community (p. xii). This

is an effective move that we see in both *Chilling Adventures* and *Wednesday*, and it is from the racially diverse, actively feminist group of *Chilling Adventures* that we take our title: their stated goal is to “Topple the white patriarchy”. Brünig argues that it is specifically sexual violence that brings about community in the recent television series *Chilling Adventures*, *Charmed* and *Riverdale*, but she critically notes that, even though they are visually diverse communities, the ways that sexism and racism intersect are left unexpressed in these shows: consequently “Despite its intersectional look, this hollowly diverse feminism is thus racialized as white” (p. 667). *Wednesday*, on the other hand, does centre race in its narrative, in ways that we will discuss below, and thus might provide a tonic to such weaker forms of community building.

Helford's edited collection *Fantasy Girls* (2000) examines a boom in science fiction and fantasy television centred on girls and women from the 1990s, to ask: “Though we now have female warriors, ship's captains, witches, aliens, and superheroes, they remain overwhelmingly white (or at least portrayed by white actresses), heterosexual, and silent on such issues as class disenfranchisement. [...] Does it give us anything more?” (p. 5). Her collection particularly focuses on shows that Mayne and Dow called “prime-time feminism” (qtd. in Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 15) such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *The X-Files*. Collectively, many of the essays in this collection argue, as Projansky and Vande Berg note of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, that there is a “tension between feminism and containment” (p. 16), and as Ono says of *Buffy*, that there is a consistent marginalisation of people of the global majority (p. 8). Twenty years on from Helford's work, do we find a different treatment of race and gender, and a fuller intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) understanding of identities and power relations? We argue that many such tensions continue to exist, even as a greater focus on racial and gender diversity are emphasised, and as the feminist issues raised are updated to account for the challenges faced by women and girls in the 21st century.

Sabrina

Sabrina the Teenage Witch was an early introduction to feminism for many girls (Mills et al. 2019). Along with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, it was an introduction to free-thinking, independent young women (Grant & O'Meara, 2019), albeit very “Girl Power” kind of girls, feisty without being off-putting (Hay, 2021). However, *Chilling Adventures* shows young women being more than that, being “politically active, outspoken teens who are conscious of the patriarchal system around them” (Henesy, 2021 p. 1446). *Chilling Adventures* positions feminist discourse in media culture within a resurgence of activism and renewed media interest in feminist stories (Gill, 2016). We will highlight some key aspects of *Chilling Adventures* that illustrate how this series presents hierarchical and patriarchal powers, discrimination between men and women, and even fantasy versions of real life tools to maintain the status quo like

gaslighting and community pressure. *Chilling Adventures* puts the patriarchal figure of the Dark Lord, namesake of the Satan of Judeo-Christian tradition, at the top of the hierarchy with the dean of the Academy of Unseen Arts, Father Blackwood directly below the Dark Lord himself, thereby establishing an irrefutable structure of men having power over others, but particularly over women. Another instance of power imbalance can be seen in the fact that although all the members of the coven have untold powers, witches (women) are strongly pressured to take classes on the “womanly arts” like midwifery, while warlocks (men) are allowed to take classes like conjuring, that result in more powerful abilities.

In *Chilling Adventures*, the structure of the community itself, the coven, guides relationships between its members towards enforcing compliance with the status quo. The ceremony of the Dark Baptism is one of the many ways in which compliance is enforced. The Dark Baptism comes on Sabrina's sixteenth birthday, marking the moment when she has to leave the mortal world behind to become a full witch. From the outset, she questions the forced choice and seeks advice in order to "make an informed decision". It is telling that, in Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism (Aguirre-Sacasa 2018), a sister witch responds to her questions about why she cannot have both the freedom to continue being a mortal and the power of being a witch, that “the thought of you, of any of us, having both terrifies [The Dark Lord]. He is a man, isn't he?” The narrative sets the antagonist firmly as a patriarchal figure “terrified” of empowered women whomight disrupt the network of oppression. Father Blackwood, the High Priest of the Church of Night, is invited to talk to Sabrina to reassure her and answer and dispel any doubts she may have towards the ceremony. It is important to note that this conversation happens in Sabrina's living room, surrounded by her family. Both Sabrina and Father Blackwood are seated facing each other as equals, which brings a feeling of safety, comfort, and mutual understanding. They talk about the nature of the agreement Sabrina is entering into, and Father Blackwood reassures her by reminding her that “free choice is the bedrock on which [the] church is built upon” and says that any language suggesting otherwise is merely symbolic. In this situation, Father Blackwood acts as a mentor, a guide, and someone on Sabrina's side. This is later revealed to be an illusion created by Father Blackwood. On the day of her Dark Baptism, the situation is not as egalitarian as it was in their previous conversation. In the middle of the woods, in front of the entire coven, including her family, Sabrina is made to disrobe and kneel before Father Blackwood, and to sign her name in fealty and complete submission to the "Dark Lord, or from any figure he has placed in authority over you". An increasingly confused and concerned Sabrina can only answer "this is not what you said before" before running away.

The reaction to gaslighting is encompassed in the phrase “that is not what you said before”, as defined by the American Psychological Association (2023); gaslighting is “to manipulate another person into doubting his or her perceptions.” It is a tool of the

patriarchy in that by denying Sabrina's lived experience of having been reassured by Father Blackwood that she would retain her free will, she is denied the opportunity to assert her agency by making an informed decision as she wanted. It is particularly significant that her aunts were present during Sabrina and Father Blackwood's conversation and had been through the Dark Baptism themselves. By not contradicting Father Blackwood, they are as complicit in their own subjugation (Grant & O'Meara 2019) as they are of Sabrina's. Tudor (1997) has argued that creating a scenario that is fantastical enough to provide distance from the real world can open up a perspective for a reader (or viewer) to re-evaluate their pre-conceived notions. In the case of *Chilling Adventures*, notions about free will, submission, and oppression can be examined in a new light. Even if *Chilling Adventures* is primarily the story of a girl navigating two worlds – one real and one magical – its examination of patriarchal systems of oppression, and Sabrina's fight against them, offer viewers a chance to recognise these systems in their own lives.

Wednesday

The *Addams Family* (1964) parodied and undermined the conservative norms of the nuclear family unit of the 1950s (Morowitz 2007), and the sequel films of the 1990s continued to challenge mores and propriety, both in the passionate love of Gomez and Morticia, and the culturally critical voice of their daughter Wednesday. Famously, in *Addams Family Values* (1991), Wednesday hijacks a Thanksgiving play to stage the revenge of the Native Americans, and expose the slaughter and cruelty that the American holiday is based upon. This film was the breakout performance for Christina Ricci, who made Wednesday's role rise prominently in popularity. Unlike these earlier television and film versions of the character, Wednesday brings us out of the family setting, and for the most part isolates Wednesday from the Addamses as our central focus – evident both in the show's title, and in the boarding school narrative taking her out of the family home. This in itself is a feminist move to refocus the story on a heroine.

A second key change to this Netflix adaptation is that we are given a different cultural background to the Addamses. Morowitz explains that in the 1960s television series, “The Addams family may be seen as 'Euro-trash', Gomez (John Astin) and Morticia descending from Spanish and French aristocracy respectively” (pp. 43-44). Thus, race has not been a part of the stories told in television and films about this family in quite the prominent way that it is in *Wednesday*. Not only is the actor for Wednesday herself Latina in this version, unlike previous stars in the role, but the time slip narrative that plays a central part in this story brings to the fore the intersectionally racist and sexist subjugation that her Mexican ancestor Goody Addams experienced, and effectively positions Wednesday as the inheritor of that trauma. Wilson (2011) critically notes that time slip narratives for a younger audience will often minimise the effects of sexism in the past, or anachronistically present a strong-willed woman who can supposedly overcome the

sexism of her time (pp. 74, 98). In the case of Goody's story, however, we are made to bear witness to the cruel and inescapable violence of a seventeenth-century Puritanical purging of otherness, and there is no shying away from the USA's blood-soaked foundations in racism and sexism.

A final point of intersectional feminist development comes in Wednesday in the characters that surround our protagonist, and particularly the roles that Black characters play in the story. Initially, Bianca Barclay and Lucas Walker are presented as antagonists – in one case a rival in fencing and love, and in the second a leader of a group of boy bullies who are roundly defeated by Wednesday – and their representation led to a return of earlier criticisms placed against director Tim Burton for his poor record on representing racial diversity. Burton has previously called including racial diversity in films and television merely “political correctness” (qtd. in Butler & Izadi 2016, n.p.), and defended how whiteness dominates his cinematic vision. However, in later episodes of Wednesday, we are granted an insight into the complexities of both Bianca and Lucas, understanding their individual struggles better, and the nuances that build up their characters. This is particularly evident and powerful in a scene where the two characters talk over coffee, separate from all other main characters in the show, an insight into their lives that forms part of the shift of the show from centring on Wednesday herself to becoming an ensemble cast, and telling us more varied stories. Ultimately, Bianca and Wednesday reconcile, and Wednesday further finds friends and allies at the school in her roommate Enid and in the beekeeper Eugene (played by MoosaMostafa). While this grouping does not have the strong political agenda of Sabrina's circle of school friends, it does more greatly centre the racial diversity of this narrative, and individually for both Bianca and Wednesday, gives space to explore the history of racism and the ongoing effects of misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy 2018) in contemporary North America. Wednesday, through these stories, and particularly through the fantastical affordances of the time-slip narrative, raises critical questions about the forceful construction of whiteness and white Christian patriarchy as dominant features of the western world today.

Conclusion

As we've seen, thus, these two Netflix adaptations of earlier gothic comedies, push on issues pertinent to contemporary feminism. In the case of Sabrina, this retelling emphasises challenging patriarchal structures, identifying and calling out gaslighting, and in some forms celebrating and supporting intersectionality through solidarity. In the case of Wednesday, it is about unearthing the stolen narratives of marginalised communities – histories that were not merely lost, but those that were forcibly erased by dominant and oppressive social forces, such as white Christianity – and not only tokenistically including racial diversity, but allowing it to be expressed with the full roundness of personality and character. That Netflix commissioned these two shows, and that they have been so popular with teen audiences, indicates a growing appetite for such

stories of feminist and intersectional social critique. That both of these shows approach these social issues through fantasy powerfully indicates the potential that fantasy as a genre has for speaking to contemporary social issues: it can create critical distance from reality, from which to challenge real social structures, and it can bring the past and present into dialogue, to expose the roots of social injustices and inequalities.

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