

องค์ประกอบของโกธิคและผู้กระทำการผู้หญิงในละครโทรทัศน์

The Chilling Adventure of Sabrina 2018

The Elements of Gothic and Female Agency in a TV series

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บทคัดย่อ

ละครโทรทัศน์ดัดแปลงมาจากหนังสือการ์ตูนมุ่งเน้นไปที่ตัวละครหญิงหลัก **Sabrina Spellman** เด็กหญิงวัยรุ่นที่เป็นมนุษย์ครึ่งแม่มด ในการแสดงซาบรีนาต้องสำรวจโลกของแม่มดในขณะที่อยู่กับมนุษย์ บทความนี้กล่าวถึงการใช้องค์ประกอบแบบโกธิคโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งการจัดฉากและสิ่งเหนือธรรมชาติเพื่อสร้างบรรยากาศและแสดงการกดขี่ต่อผู้หญิงอย่างชัด เช่น นอกจากนี้ บทความยังกล่าวถึงการเสริมพลังของผู้หญิงและเจตจำนงในการแสดงอีกด้วย ซาบรีนาต้องเลือกว่าจะมีชีวิตอยู่อย่างมนุษย์หรือแม่มด ซึ่งเธอไม่มีทางเลือกเหล่านั้นตั้งแต่แรก

คำสำคัญ: รายการทีวีอเมริกัน นวนิยายโกธิค พลังผู้หญิง ผู้กระทำการผู้หญิง สตรีนิยม

Abstract

Chilling Adventure of Sabrina, a TV series adapted from a comic book, focus on the main female character, Sabrina Spellman, a teenage girl who is half-witch. In the show, Sabrina has to explore the world of the witches while living among the mortals. This paper discusses use of Gothic elements, especially setting and the supernaturals, to set up a tone of the show and make clear the oppressions towards female. The paper also discusses the theme of female empowerment and free will as seen in the show. As Sabrina seems to be

given a choice to live either human or witch, it is revealed that she does not have those choices in the first place.

Keywords: American TV show, Gothic fiction, Female empowerment, Female agency, Feminism

Introduction

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina is a TV series produced by Netflix in 2018. The series, adapted from a comic book series of the same name, follows the life of Sabrina Spellman, a teenage girl who was “half-human, half-witch.” On her 16th birthday, she had to make a choice that she would live either as a normal teenage girl or as a witch. Should she chose to become a witch; she would never get to be a part of human world again. Although at first, Sabrina seemed to be certain about her choice to go through a “dark baptism,” the fictional ceremony for the witches to pledge their loyalty to Satan, she became reluctant about it later as she did not want to part from her human boyfriend and friends. She was given another choice to participate in “the Academy of the Unseen Arts,” where the young witches and warlocks get their education, so that she could make her decision easier. This opportunity gave Sabrina an insight of the world of the witches where it was foreign to her since she was brought up in the human world and spent a good part of her life with humans. Instead of seeing the world of the witches as a wonder, Sabrina questioned the witches and warlocks’ devotion to the Dark Lord. She saw the witches as the followers of the Dark Lord without their own agencies, which was the quality she despise. However, at the end of Season one, Sabrina was manipulated to sign her name in the Book of the Beast, as a result, swearing her loyalty to Satan. (Aguirre–Sacasa 2018)

The show often praise for its inclusion of feminist issues, female empowerment, and representation of strong female characters. Travers (2018) praised Sabrina’s characterization in his article that she was “an unabashed hero for our times,” especially for the young women. The reason is that she was not afraid of the “untrustworthy authority figures” and “recognizes the weight of choices she makes.” In this paper, the Gothic elements, namely the setting and the supernatural, and the concepts of female empowerment and free will will be discussed in terms of how the show employs the Gothic elements to convey those concepts.

Gothic Elements in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, the word “Gothic” in literature means a style of writing that was popular in the 18th and 19th century, involving “romantic adventures in mysterious or frightening surroundings.” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries*, 2018). Although the term “Gothic” has its origin from the name of the barbarians in the Eastern Europe, it became associated with a genre of fiction originated from the uncertainty that stemmed from the changes in religious belief (Groom, 2012, p. 1). Thus, Gothic literature often focus around ghosts, revenge, torture, madness, and death. (Groom, 2012, p. 34)

One of the outstanding characteristics of Gothic literature is setting; often include dark and mysterious places, for example, ancient European castles, dark forests, graveyards, and tombs. (Canton, 2016, p. 121) These kinds of setting set the mood and tone of Gothic literature. According to Groom, these places create the “sublime effects” that show the limit of reason. These effects create through the settings that are obscure, which can be conveyed through weather, landscape, architecture, props, stories, spirits, and psychology. (Canton, 2016, p. 77)

In *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the series is set in the town of Greendale, where it looks like its Halloween all the time. (Aguirre–Sacasa 2018). The town of Greendale seems like a typical small American town. However, there are some touches of spookiness and mystery lingering in this small town. Dr. Cerberus's bookshop, which serves as the town recreational space, being both bookstore and coffee shop at the same time, decorated with Halloween–related items. The Spellman's home is the town's funeral house. The house fits the description of Gothic setting, an old Victorian–style house painted with dark grey color. Next to the house is a small graveyard. The soil in this graveyard has some magical power to resurrect whatever that is buried there. This place seems like it is isolated from the town of Greendale, not only because of distance from the heart of the town and surrounded by woods. The settings here help set up the tone of the story. It creates the feeling that, in the shadow of this small town, there must be something terrible or sinister.

The supernatural, such as ghost, vampires, or unexplainable events, is another outstanding element of Gothic literature. (Canton, 2016, p. 121) The supernatural represents things outside the realm of reason. Creatures such as vampires or the Monster from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are often as the icons of Gothic creatures.

The warlocks and witches are the main supernatural being in this TV series alongside other supernatural being. The witches in the story look mostly ordinary and indistinguishable with

naked eyes. However, they are able to do wield magic and age slower than human, the trait make Sabrina be meaningful connection with human. They are also able to come back from death several times, as seen in Episode 2 where Zelda killed Hilda out of annoyance and Hilda came back several hours later. The witches also take part in gruesome activities, such as cannibalism. In Episode 7, “Chapter Seven: Feast of Feasts,” the witches held a ritual of sacrifice and cannibalism.

Although most of the witches in the series seem to be harmless to the mortal, ones are threats to humanity. The witches can be divided into three archetypes; the hag, the seductress, and the inverted woman. The characterization of Madame Satan in the show goes along the archetype of the “hag witch.” Michelle Gomez, the actress who plays Madame Satan, has an appearance similar to the stereotypical witch, hooked nose, sharp bones, and slim. Madame Satan became not only the threat to Sabrina but also to the townspeople of Greendale when she decided to unleash “the Thirteen”. The Thirteen witches sacrificed their coven and hung by the townspeople of Greendale on the Hanging Tree.

The cult of the witches in the show is portrayed as an uncanny opposite to Christianity. There are many allusions to the Bible that are used in the discourse of the coven. For the coven, Satan is worshipped in the same way the Christians worship their God. They talk about him as the higher being who guide their lives. There are rituals, which resembles Christian rites. For example, the dark baptism is the witch counterpart of Christian baptism. In Christianity, baptism is a ceremony that welcome someone to be a part of Christian Church (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionaries, 2018). The dark baptism is a ceremony of the witches to pledge their loyalty to the Dark Lord. The ritual involves signing their names in the Book of Beasts, as a result become Satan’s absolute followers.

Although the show put Satan into the same position with the Christian God, he is much more sinister and he is the main antagonist of the series. He may not be present in the series, only showing himself only once in the entire series, he is the mastermind of the plot to bring Sabrina to “the path of the Night.” He has his right-hand woman, Madame Satan infiltrate Sabrina’s circle and gain her trust. He even confronts Sabrina once when she ran away from her dark baptism, hence failed to pledge her loyalty to him. The presence of Satan in this show becomes the epitome of male oppression towards women.

Female Empowerment and Female Agency

Sabrina, a high school student, who is determined and headstrong. She wants to protect her friends and is very willing to do anything for them. In the first episode, Sabrina finds out that one of her friends bullied by a group of football players. Her friend, Susie Putnam, is a non-binary person and bullied because the football players “cannot tell if she is a man or a woman.” Sabrina takes this matter to the principal office, where she places a complaint but nothing have done to punish the boys. She decides to deal with the problem herself, enlisting her cousin, Ambrose, to help her cast a spell on the principal so he would take a sick leave, enabling her to form an all-female club to protect women in the school. (Aguirre–Sacasa 2018)

Aside from her determination, Sabrina is a strong believer of free will. According to the definition from Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, free will is “a power to make your own decision without the control of God or fate.” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2018) Although Sabrina seems to be so sure about her choice of becoming a witch, she grows to be dubious as the date gets closer. When her aunts invites Father Fautus Blackwood to answer her questions about the dark baptism, she admits that her concern is that the Dark Lord would have control over her when she went through the dark baptism. Father Blackwood tells her that signing her name in the Book of the Beast is merely a symbolic rite and she always has the choices.

The show does not only portray the oppression toward women but it also gives audience the strong female main character who empowers women. As we can see from the show that she tries to help her friends in several ways, either magical power or just simply staying at their sides. She empowers her friends and female student by forming a club called WICCA (Women’s Intersectional Creative Cultural Association) to assist and protect female students who might need help. In “Feast of Feasts,” Sabrina managed to bond with Prudence. Although they are rivals to each other, Sabrina comes forward to Prudence to question her faith and loyalty to Satan. In addition, in the process of saving Prudence’s life from being the sacrifice in the Feast of Feasts, a ceremony where a witch become a sacrifice and be eaten, Sabrina helps Prudence learn the identity of her biological father.

The main conflict of the show is between Sabrina and Satan, and it is a battle to maintain Sabrina’s free will. Sabrina is a girl who sees her freedom as the most important, but the world seems determined to take away her freedom. Despite Father Blackwood’s claim that the core of the Church of the Night is free will, it turns out that the Dark Lord demands the absolute devotion

from his followers. The oath that the witches take in their dark baptism states that they would give up their free will to follow the Dark Lord's command, as shown in Sabrina's dark baptism:

"Father Blackwood: In exchange of this belief, you shall be granted powers that will enable you to be of service to the Dark Lord. Sabrina Edwina Diana Spellman, are you willing to forsake the Path of Light and follow the Path of Night wherever it may lead you?

Sabrina: I am.

Father Blackwood: And are you willing to place our Dark Lord above all others in your life, be it your loved ones, your family, your friends, and your neighbors?

Sabrina: I ... am.

Father Blackwood: Then it's time to sign his book. *[Father Blackwood takes Sabrina's hand and leads her to the Book of Beast. He cut her left palm with a knife and uses her blood as the ink.]* In signing his book, the Book of the Beast, you swear to obey without question any order you may receive from the Dark Lord, or from any figure he has placed in authority over you.

Sabrina: That's not what you said before.

Father Blackwood: In signing his book, the Book of the Beast, you swear to give your mind, body, and soul unreservedly to the furtherance of the designs of our Lord Satan.

Sabrina: You said I would have free will."

(Aguirre-Sacasa, 2018)

The pledge of loyalty to the Dark Lord indicates that his follower must be stripped of their free will and follow his orders without any question. This contradicts what Father Blackwood told Sabrina when he visited her before. This leads to Sabrina running away from her dark baptism.

Satan as the epitome of patriarchy and oppression towards women becomes clearer in the conversation between Prudence Night and Sabrina in episode two. Sabrina talks about her doubts in taking a dark baptism, especially that part that she has to give up her agency. Prudence, however, sees this rite as a normal thing to do in exchange of power, the one that allows them to be superior to human. Sabrina replies that she wants both the freedom and power, making Prudence laugh and reply that women cannot have both. She says that the thought that any woman would have both power and freedom "terrifies him," referring to the Dark Lord. When asked why, Prudence's answer is "he's a man, isn't he?" (Aguirre-Sacasa 2018) This expresses how women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. They are either granted freedom to do things that they want or power, but never both.

The oppression towards women does not belong only among the witch. The local high school, Braxter high, has relatively ordinary outlook with its red brick walls and crowded hallway. However, the school serves as the center of the oppression towards women. Instead of being a safe space for all students, the female students of Baxter High face oppression in different levels. For example, Susie Putnam is bullied and physically assaulted; she is a non-binary person, dressed up like a boy. The oppression does not stop at the personal level but expands to the institutional level as well. Principal Hawthorne is painted as the mortal counterpart of Satan. He neglects his female students' problems and concerns.

In the finale episode of the season one, Sabrina's determination to help her friends become her flaw, resulting Madame Satan manipulated her to sign her name in the Book of the Beast. In that episode, Madame Satan unleashes the Thirteen, the witches who were hung by the Hanging Tree. As their revenge, the Thirteen call forth the Red Angel of Death to take lives of every first-born sons in town. In order to protect the townspeople, Sabrina turned to Madame Satan, whom she believes is her ally. Although Sabrina believes that it was her own free will that lead her to sign the Book of the Beast to save her friends, the whole thing is purely manipulation by Satan. Sabrina embraces her choice of becoming a full witch and says good-bye to her boyfriend.

The first season ends with an open question on Sabrina's free will. In her point of view, it is what she chose to help her friends, but the irony is that she did in under a manipulation. In the end, this show can be a kind of social commentary. It may seem that even though a woman has her own agency and empowerment, her potential is limited due to outer circumstance. The ending of season one here echos Sabrina and Prudence's conversation in episode four. Satan wants to have control over Sabrina, and that is probably because she is too powerful when she has her free will.

Conclusion

The TV series tackles the issues of feminism, female empowerment, and female agency throughout its first season by using Sabrina's status as both a human and a witch and the elements of Gothic to explore these issues. The elements of Gothic help enhance the oppression towards female, both human and supernatural. In the world of human, Sabrina acted as the leader of her small group of friends. The group shows being progressive and politically engaged since the very first scene of the first episode. The small group of friend evolved to an all-female club with the mission of "women protect women." (Aguirre-Sacasa 2018) The series also deals with different

feminist issues, such as bullying against sexuality or banning feminist-themed books. (Aguirre–Sacasa 2018) Sabrina is the major solution to the problems, using her magic as her aids. However, as a witch, Sabrina became an outsider to other witches, aside from her family, because she was born from a human mother. This status allows her to explore the world of witches and warlocks and question their beliefs. Sabrina saw the devotion that the witches held towards Satan as a deprivation of free will. She strongly challenged the belief and went some great length to prove it. By the end of the show, it leaves us with the questions if such thing is real and if women could really escape the world under patriarchy.

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