

Bachelor's thesis

# **Transgressive Women Warriors or a Post-Feminist Masquerade? The Evolution of Gender Portrayals in Female-Fronted Teen Television Series.**

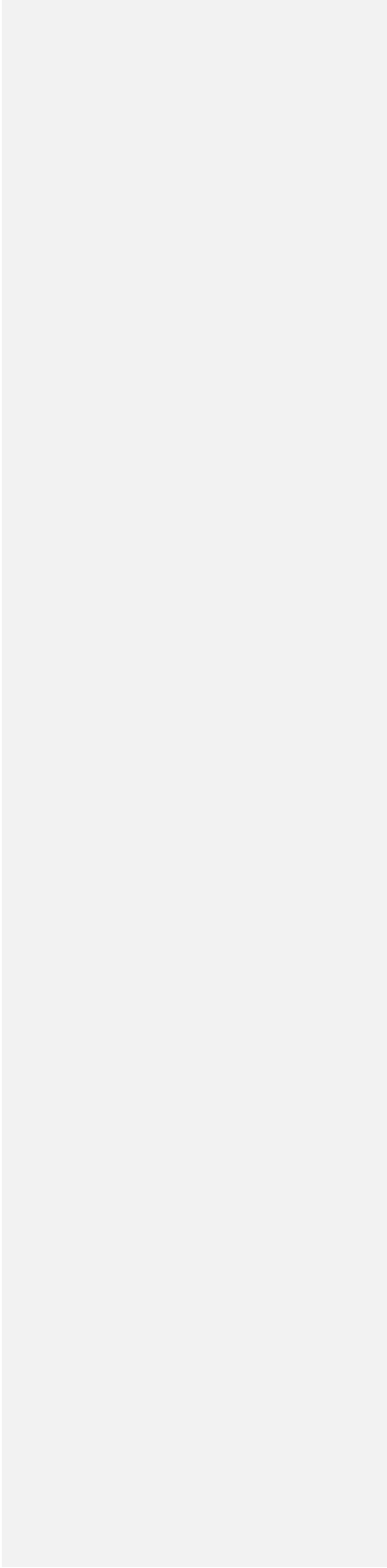


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## Acknowledgements

As a 22 year old, I would be considered an emerging adult and therefore the target audience for teen television shows. Indeed, I have binge-watched a lot of the more recent series of this genre. This is hardly a surprise, seeing as streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu allow people to watch television on demand, making it more accessible and popular than ever before. Since watching television has come to play such an important role in everyday lives, I figured that it must affect as well as reflect our thoughts and feelings to some extent. This is what inspired me to do my Bachelor's thesis on American teen television. The process of writing this thesis has been both challenging and informative. I truly feel that I have gained a better understanding of the deep-rooted issues that underlie gender dynamics. Consequently, I am convinced that I will never again be able to normally watch a television show.

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on the continuities and changes in gender portrayals in the teen television genre since it gained popularity in the 1990s. It therewith seeks to form an idea of how gender discourse has affected gender portrayals in series of this influential genre. Informed by theories on gender, stereotypes and mise-en-scène, it analyzes and compares *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) to *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), two female-fronted teen shows. The findings of this research show that while teen television creators have aspired to present progressive characters since the beginning, they were still shaped by traditional models. Although contemporary teen shows clearly build on earlier installments, increased awareness of the dangers that tend to come with conventionality has resulted in multi-faceted characters who challenge traditional norms in both subtle ways and obvious. Recent news stories about local U.S. governments' push for anti-abortion laws show that full gender equality still has not been achieved and, hence, that it remains crucial to question the portrayals that are consumed by so many everyday.

**Keywords:** *Gender, teen television, gender portrayals, femininity, masculinity, queerness, performativity, female-fronted shows, patriarchy, heteronormativity, transgressiveness.*

## Introduction

“Rapist-slaying vigilantes, teacher-pupil sex, revenge porn. The kids might be far from alright in 2017, but with the TV industry more engaged with their reality than ever, teen dramas – whether coal-black thrillers or pop culture-heavy dramedies – are only getting better at tapping into the harsh world facing Generation Z” (Davies). Hannah Davies makes this observation while discussing the appeal of teen television. She argues that these shows offer the perfect middle ground between gloom and a youthful idealism. Teen show producer Bryan Elsley agrees with her, stating: “I think that the young adult drama form is where discussions about society are going on, in the absence of far-reaching insights into contemporary life in more mainstream dramas” (qtd. in Davies). Combined with the fact that these narratives capitalize strongly on a sense of nostalgia (Meyer & Wood, 438), this appears to be what draws in adult viewers. Still, the most remarkable feature of teen series is that its target group is teenagers. Meyer and Wood define teenagers as emerging adults, generally ranging from the ages of 18 to 25 (439). This means that these shows tend to focus on contexts and themes that are relatable to people of that age group, such as school and friendship (García-Muñoz & Maddalena, 216).

Entertaining young adults on the basis of petty high school drama seems rather innocent at first glance. Nonetheless, these shows are the creations of adults with agendas. According to Glyn Davis & Kay Dickinson, these agendas might include raising crucial issues in a ‘responsible manner’ that is entirely hegemonically negotiated, and/or using this delicate time to shape people on the onset of a more prominent citizenship (3). The issues in teen shows are usually related to drug and alcohol use, family tensions, negotiating one’s place among one’s peers and sex and sexuality. Since these are all topics that teenagers encounter in their everyday lives, it would seem logical for these programs to deal with these issues in a way that is both objective as well as educational. Yet what must not be underestimated is teen show producers’ ultimate goal to negotiate the teen’s ability to buy and choose certain consumer items and reject others (3). With such commercial purposes in mind, the extent to which these programs tackle the aforementioned issues in a responsible, objective manner remains questionable.

In light of recent discussions concerning gender relations (notably with the establishment of the #MeToo movement), it is now more important than ever to evaluate these shows’ handling of something that is closely related to sex and sexuality: gender. Analyzing gender portrayals might reveal a correlation between changes in societal gender

notions and depictions in television. If these are interconnected, then it is of utmost importance that these portrayals are as progressive as possible, for otherwise, they may negatively affect the young audience's norms and values. This thesis therefore answers the following research question: "What are the continuities and changes in the representations of gender in American teen television since it gained prominence in the 1990s?" In the process of answering this question, it will consider several theories on gender and its role in society; scrutinize gender portrayals in teen television from the 1990s and the 2010s, respectively; and finally, compare and contrast the shows' depictions of masculinity, femininity and queerness. In spite of producers' commercial motives, it is expected that gender depictions in teen television have become increasingly progressive. Scholar Laura Mulvey notes that a successful film encourages spectators to identify with its characters; it allows viewers to feel as if they themselves are experiencing adventures and accomplishing great things (Benshoff & Griffin, 242). These shows, then, must reflect the audience's thoughts and feelings. Seeing as teen television is aimed at a young generation, this should ultimately result in less and less traditional and hence problematic representations of gender.

I have chosen to focus my research on teen television specifically because it is a relatively little researched genre in spite of being extremely influential. Its target audience is impressionable teenagers who are in a key moment for the construction of their identities. They can use fiction content, as well as gender representations and stereotypes, in the process of their identity building (García-Muñoz & Fedele, 215). There are several studies on teen television shows out there, for instance on the ways in which it represents motherhood (Feasey, 2012) and virginity loss narratives (Kelly, 2009), as well as the genre's appeal for the young adult audience (Feasey, 2009). García-Muñoz and Maddalena (2011) have written about gender portrayals in teen television, but they base their arguments on quantitative research rather than a qualitative textual film analysis. Perhaps van Damme's (2010) study bears most resemblance to mine, as it compares gender representations in a teen show from 2003 to that of a show that aired four years later. I will, however, be doing case analyses of two teen television shows that aired a little over two decades apart from each other, hence the similarities and differences will likely be much more drastic. Besides, teen television has lots of subgenres, such as mystery, science fiction, and fantasy. Whereas van Damme's study centers on the teen melodrama subgenre, I have opted for two shows that have strong female leads and fall into the fantasy subgenre: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB), which first aired in 1997, and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix), which first aired in 2018. Especially shows of the fantasy genre seem to celebrate otherness, rarely rooting for 'the jock' or 'the

cheerleader' (Davis & Dickinson, 7), making them stand out from other television forms. Comparing and contrasting these shows will offer a plausible insight into the continuities and changes that have occurred. I will be comparing the pilot episode of both shows, as this is usually where the majority of characters are introduced, stereotypes are most likely to be enforced, and the overall tone of the series is set. I will analyze the episodes with a theoretical framework based on relevant literature in mind, paying special attention to narrative and mise-en-scene.

I will now briefly touch upon the structure of this thesis. The first chapter functions to establish a theoretical framework. Based on Judith Butler's work on gender, I will define and complicate the term. Next, I briefly explain the concepts of media and society and how these relate to each other. After shedding light on recent gender debate, I explore traditional gender portrayals in American popular culture with help from Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin's book on American film, as well as Scott Coltrane and Michelle Adams' research on gender portrayals in television advertisements. As this thesis focuses on gender portrayals within the teen television genre specifically, I will then define what exactly characterizes this genre based on Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson's book on teen television. While treating the genre, I will also give an insight into how it typically deals with gender portrayals. Finally, I will discuss the methodology that I will adopt to conduct close readings of the case studies, using David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's texts on mise-en-scene and narrative structures. The second chapter will offer close readings. I will describe and analyze the pilot episode of the first case study, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, examining it on its representations of gender. With help of the previously established theoretical framework, I will be discussing the show's narrative and mise-en-scene. The third chapter will do the same but with *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. The fourth and final chapter offers a discussion and comparison of the case studies. The thesis will end with a final conclusion and critical outlook.

## 1. Theories and Methodology

As the main aim of this thesis is to find out whether there is a correlation between changing views on gender relations and gender portrayals in teen television, it is important to establish a theoretical framework on all respective concepts. Therefore, this chapter will provide definitions of gender, media and society, before offering a more in-depth view on traditional gender portrayals and the teen television genre as a whole. Lastly, it will explain how I will go about analyzing gender in teen television shows.

## 1.1 Defining Gender

Gender discourse tends to evoke confusion in people. The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably for it is rather unclear what differentiates one from the other. There is, however, a great difference in meaning. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines gender as follows: “The state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones”. Put simply, gender refers to the social, historical, and cultural roles that we associate with either the male or female sex. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin add to this that sex is biologically determined, while gender is a social construct. To quote Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman” (qtd. in Butler, 519). While sex may be defined by the terms “male” or “female”, gender is best defined by the terms masculinity and femininity (Benshoff & Griffin, 214). This definition of gender does not necessarily seem problematic. It is the expectations that are associated with both masculinity and femininity that raise concerns. Masculinity is typically organized around taciturnity, aggression and violence (van Damme, 79), while feminine stereotypes center on passivity, emotionality, and weakness. Accordingly, certain roles have been ascribed to gender identities, which permeate our culture, language, and media in both subtle ways and obvious (Benshoff & Griffin, 216). Feminine roles, for instance, are traditionally confined to the private sphere, meaning women are assumed to tend children and run the household. Men on the other hand, are expected to be suited for jobs and other public pursuits. The idea of separate spheres stems from English upper-middle classes during the late-nineteenth century. It spread to the United States when productive labor became separated from the home (Coltrane & Adams, 327). These roles are continuously evolving and changing. This is why gender theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is not just a social construct, but also a matter of performativity:

“Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519).

In other words, gender is based on a repetition of acts, which can and will change over time. Different cultures have different ideas about the acts that a male or female should perform in order to fit the norm and not be punished (526). We are introduced to these ideas from an



early age, both consciously and unconsciously. It may even begin in the first minutes of our lives if we are wrapped in either a pink or a blue blanket. From that moment onwards, we are expected to conform to gender roles that tell girls to like pink and playing with dolls, and boys to like blue and playing with toy trucks (Benshoff & Griffin, 215). Chances are that girls will occasionally want to play with toy trucks, and boys with dolls, but adults are not likely to consider this as normal male or female behaviors. As Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet note, “gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity” (2). They argue that this is where gender and sex come together.

Indeed, gender builds on biological sex, but the extent to which biological difference plays a role is often exaggerated. Some even attribute gender roles completely to biological determinism. They link higher levels of testosterone to men being more aggressive than women, for instance (4). But while it is true that gender builds on biological sex, certain things simply cannot be explained by differences in physiology. For example, there is no biological reason why women should like the color pink and men should not. The point is that the influence of nature and nurture is not as clear-cut as it might seem, “and there is no obvious point at which sex leaves off and gender begins” (2).

Regardless of what definition one adopts to analyze gender, fact remains that it is near impossible to focus exclusively on either femininity or masculinity without comparing and contrasting it to each other. According to Butler: “The binary definition of gender is based on an assumed opposition in that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” (30). Simply put, the less masculine someone acts, the more they are considered feminine, and vice versa. Therefore, in this thesis I will analyze the aforementioned case studies on stereotypical depictions of both. How popular culture typically deals with the depictions of these will be dealt with in a further section.

## **1.2 Media and Society**

In introducing his book about media, culture and society, Paul Hodkinson defines media as: “the plural of the term medium, which refers essentially to the means through which content is communicated between an origin and a destination” (2). The human body is traditionally regarded as the first and most fundamental medium. Yet there are also artificial forms of mediums, collectively referred to as ‘the media’. As Hodkinson explains “they may enable a relatively small number of professional media producers to transmit large volumes of content to audiences of millions” (2). This is, arguably, a more relevant and contemporary

understanding of the term. In the context of this thesis, producers behind teen television shows transmit content to teenage audiences.

Society, then, is defined as: “The whole social world in which we exist or ‘the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live’ (Williams qtd. in Hodkinson, 3). The social world might include small everyday interactions as well as broad social groups and categories of differentiation, such as those based on class, ethnicity and gender (3). As our society is always evolving, so are our norms and values. For instance, it used to be the norm that only privileged white men had the right to vote. This changed when women sought to change voting laws in the late 1800s. People continuously challenge gender relations, seeking for more and more equality.

Looking at what has been achieved so far, it seems that the efforts are paying off. As Coltrane and Adams note: “Overall gender differences in commitment to work are [...] diminishing, as women receive more education and as job opportunities and rewards open up to them” (329). Postfeminists would even argue that equality has already been achieved and that it is no longer needed (McRobbie, 255). They point to contemporary popular films and television shows such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Sex and the City* (1998) that revolve around young women who have lots of (sexual) freedom and choice. Yet the stories that can be found under the #MeToo that came to prominence in October 2017 convey a different view. Many women claimed that they had been sexually harassed or assaulted by men in positions of power. This would lead to the establishment of the #MeToo Movement. As Carmen Perez, co-chair of the Women's March, told Vox: “It is [...] a movement of accountability on violence against women and sexism” (qtd. in North). In light of the gender debate that has ensued, one might expect that society is now more than ever aware of the extents to which there is gender (in)equality. It would make sense for the media and specifically teen television shows to reflect this sentiment.

As the purpose of this thesis is to find out if media and society do in fact influence each other, it is useful to take Hodkinson's ideas about this in consideration. He roughly divides the different approaches to regard media's role into three categories. The first is that of the media as shaper, meaning that the content that they distribute affects the future of society. The second approach on the other hand, views media as a mirror to society. This means that media's predominant role would be to reflect back to us behaviors and values that are already important. The third is a circular model that suggests that the relationship involves elements of both processes (4-5). Although the latter is arguably the most realistic approach, it is impossible to research the influence of media representations on teenagers' identities while

staying within the scope of a Bachelor's thesis. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on analyzing the assumption that media –in this case, teen television – serves as society's mirror on gender relations.

### 1.3 Gender in Popular Culture

The gender connotations of the aggressive man and passive woman are very apparent in classical Hollywood narrative. These traditional depictions can be categorized under several stereotypes. *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines the term stereotype as, “a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong”. In the context of screen studies, this translates to the roles that male and female actors are ascribed in the making of a narrative. These stereotypes functionalize to enable some sort of predictability and simplification that makes narratives more familiar for audiences. Often, subordinate and minority groups tend to be most affected by stereotypes, both in terms of their pervasiveness as well as their impact (Hodkinson, 207).

As has been established in previous subchapters, women are definitely considered a subordinate group in the patriarchal hegemony. It is, consequently, hardly a surprise that there are many different female stereotypes in Hollywood. One prominent example is that of the “good” virginal, domestic woman, which stems from the socially approved Victorian middle-class woman. She is typically white with blond hair and blue eyes. The opposite of this stereotype is that of the Vamp, an exotic woman who uses her sexuality to lure white men into their doom (Benshoff & Griffin, 219-232).

This is not to say that stereotypes about powerful groups do not exist. Men, for instance, also struggle to live up to the ideals of traditional masculinity. They are taught that “real men don't cry” and that they should take hardships “like a man” – i.e. not complain about them (258). Moreover, since men are assumed to be active rather than passive, Hollywood film has always relied on them to drive the plot forward. Male actors are supposed to be rough and tough. Male characters that display a lack of virility are usually used for comedic effect (264). If one pays close attention to contemporary film, these stereotypes can still be perceived. Take for instance the James Bond series. James Bond, the lead male character, is shown chasing and fighting the bad guys. The female characters on the other hand, are solely there to impersonate the damsel in distress. Even when men and women are given a more equal amount of screen time, gender codes regarding clothing, makeup, courtship and marriage still reinforce traditional gender roles (228).

Naturally, there is a difference between film and television studies. In the case of gender portrayals, however, television has evolved very similarly to film. According to Coltrane and Adams, nearly two decades of television content analysis shows that it has perfected the tendency to depict men and women in conventionally stereotypical ways. Again, televised male characters are generally more knowledgeable, powerful, and successful, while female characters are likely to be shown as passive, emotional, and dependent. Male characters also tend to be more complex and multidimensional than their counterparts (326). This distinction is very clear in commercials specifically.

Driven by patriarchal capitalism, beautiful women are used to entice heterosexual male costumers. This implicitly links the woman's body to the product being sold (Benshoff & Griffin, 240-241), which is problematic. Similarly, a lot of TV's advertisements thrive on the notion that men will become more masculine if they buy a certain beer, cologne or razor, for instance (258). In studying advertising, Erving Goffman also found that when heterosexual couples are depicted together, the man is usually either taller or higher up than the woman, indicating a power difference. Women were also more frequently represented in submissive positions (Hodkinson, 246). What is troublesome about this is the fact that nowadays, marketers try to create a close correspondence between program and commercial content in order to sell more. This overlap is detectable in the form of product placement for example. Extended exposure to this framing of events makes the audience feel as if what they are viewing is natural (Coltrane & Adams, 324-325). Hence television plays an integral part in how we perceive masculinity and femininity. Considering that negatively presenting particular groups in mass media can "construct or amplify [...] stigmatization and marginalization" (Hodkinson, 218), it is of great value to observe televised images of gender.

#### **1.4 Gender and the Teen Television Genre**

I have previously established a clear definition of gender, media and society, shed a light on recent gender debate, and discussed its traditional portrayals in American popular culture. Before analyzing gender representations in teen shows, it is important to have a general understanding of the teen television genre and how it has historically treated gender portrayals.

Teenagers and emerging adulthood are relatively new phenomena, coming to prominence in the Western world in the 1950s (Davis & Dickinson, 2). Due to the post-war 'baby boom', the American teen population skyrocketed from ten to fifteen million during the 1950s, hitting a peak of twenty million by 1970. More importantly, wartime labor demand

had brought a rise in youth employment and young people's earnings had grown as a consequence. Businesses obviously wanted to reap profit from this new, lucrative consumer market (Osgerby, 72-73). Television was simultaneously experiencing its growth as a widely consumed domestic medium. Watching TV became a popular leisure activity amongst teenagers, frequently motivated by peer pressure. They want to be able to understand what their peers are referencing to get the sense that they 'belong' (Davis & Dickinson, 2). What better way to reach the young market, then, than creating a television form especially aimed at them? After the popularity of teen television saw a decline as a result of a decrease in teenage population during the 1970s and 1980s, it made a comeback by the end of the 1990s and has been prominent ever since (Osgerby, 82-83).

Núria García-Muñoz and Maddalena Fedele note that according to the classification of Observatory Euromonitor, teen series cannot be considered as a specific and independent television genre (216). However, Jonathan Bignell defines genre as something that is "based on the identification of the conventions and key features which distinguish one kind of work from another" (116). As mentioned before, the key characteristic that differentiates teen television from the rest of television fiction is that it focuses on the lives of teens as they navigate the road from adolescence to adulthood. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson add to this that contemporary teen television is known for:

A use of language which is too sophisticated for the ages of the characters; frequent intertextual references; recourse to a sense of community based on generation; a blunt, somewhat melodramatic use of emotion and aphoristic psychological reasoning; and a prominent pop music soundtrack (1).

On top of that, a genre is linked to certain audience expectations. Based on the features of that genre, the audience knows what to expect of a show before having even watched it (Bignell, 116). Since this is most certainly the case when it comes to teen shows, I argue that teen television is, in fact, an independent genre.

Perhaps due to the fact that it is generally not considered an independent genre, scholars rarely take teen television narratives seriously as objects of cultural analysis (Meyer & Wood, 437). Yet considering the liability of teen TV to shape young adults' senses of freedom and limitations, studying it is crucial. It is expected that teen television shows reflect societal changes in gender notions more than any other genre, as they tend to be long-running series. As Davis and Dickinson explain, this allows for "the development of characterization,

and substantive narrative depth and complexity” (131). Storylines can also develop at a slower and thus potentially more detailed and realistic pace.

The teen genre was initially completely centered on adolescent boys. It was not until the late 1950s that American TV networks started featuring teenage girls as main characters as well, as they sought to expand their markets. The first sitcom with a female lead was *Too Young to Go Steady* (NBC, 1959), which focused on fourteen-year-old Pam Blake’s transition from “tomboyish girlhood to ladylike maturity” (Osgerby, 74). At the time, “ladylike maturity” was synonymous for passive, conformist and subordinate femininity. As in Hollywood films of the time, the main goals of female characters were finding a man and house keeping. But when American society started questioning and challenging gender relations in the 1960s, giving women more disposable income and public sector jobs, a shift in media representations ensued. Now, teenage girls were seen as the embodiment of post-war affluence, celebrating a femininity based around hedonism and friendship (76-82).

Due to a decline in teenage populations – and thus, their potential spending power – teen television was less popular during the 1970s and 1980s. However, when it made its comeback in the 1990s, young women were, again, especially prominent. A ‘girl power’ ethic was embraced, with the representation of a femininity that is intelligent, confident and powerful (83). What ensued was the increased presence of female characters that could be considered transgressive women: those who challenge, ignore, or cross over the patriarchal limits (Young, 1). Although new to television at the time, Mallory Young argues that there has always been a distinction between subordinate and insubordinate women in storytelling. To exemplify, she points out that Eve (the first woman created) already showed resistance by tasting the forbidden fruit. She argues that this contrast between the good girl and the bad girl has been enforced by works of literature, conduct manuals, sermons, ballads, and plays throughout the medieval and early western world. In other words, patriarchal culture simultaneously characterized women as either passive, voiceless and powerless, or vengeful, violent, and disruptive. The first was considered worthy of praise, the latter as something that required restraint. Taking these negative connotations of the transgressive woman into account, one might wonder why they were suddenly popular subjects in television. The answer is that by virtue of the Women’s Movement of the 1970s and the efforts of these second-wave feminists, dissenting voices were perceived differently. The adjective “bad” became ironic and women who broke the rules were now considered the heroines of the story (Young, 1-2). Contemporary popular television features lots of strong and independent female heroines who do not fit the traditional representations of female characters in prime-time

television fiction: as passive and powerless sexual objects for men (Ien Ang qtd. in Jowett, 18).

As stated in the introduction, both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* feature strong female leads. Buffy has received many feminist plaudits for being a ‘transgressive woman warrior’ (Osgerby, 71). *Buffy*’s contemporary counterpart supposedly conveys a similar sentiment. Kiernan Shipka, who plays the role of lead character Sabrina Spellman, describes her alter ego as a “strong independent woman [who] stands up for herself and does what she thinks is right” (qtd. in Lanigan). In addition to drawing comparisons between gender portrayals in a more general sense, it is interesting to compare these transgressive women to each other to see if the portrayal of this particular type of female character has changed in accordance with gender discourse.

### 1.5 Methodology: Television Analysis of Gender Portrayals

In order to find out to if portrayals of femininity, masculinity and queerness in teen television have altered during the past twenty years, I will need to adopt an efficient strategy. Therefore, I will conduct close readings of the aforementioned case studies by using literature on mise-en-scène and critically analyzing the pilots’ narratives. Before outlining how I will be applying these theories, I will summarize its most important points.

Mise-en-scene is a French term that translates to “putting into the scene”. Having its origin in theatre, it is used to signify the director’s control over what appears in the frame. This includes everything from setting and lighting to costumes and the behavior of the characters (Bordwell & Thompson, 212). While the study of mise-en-scene tends to be associated with film and theatre only, Jeremy Butler notes that it is also a powerful component of television productions: “It forms the basic building block of narrative in fiction programs, influencing our perceptions of characters before the first line of dialogue is spoken” (Chapter 7).

According to Bordwell and Thompson, one should always consider mise-en-scene’s function in the text. Surely, certain costumes may be used to add authenticity (228) and lighting helps guide the audience’s attention to certain objects and actions (235). But these same components might also be used to send implicit messages to the audience, whether intentionally or not. One prime example of how mise-en-scène is used in reinforcing traditional gender portrayals is the concept of the “male gaze”. This is the idea that women are usually illustrated as objects on display for the male’s enjoyment, rather than as realistic, individualistic human beings (Benshoff & Griffin, 239). In film, the male gaze is constructed

by linking objective shots to subjective shots. That is to say, the camera shifts between showing characters looking at something, to showing that something from the characters' perspectives. In Hollywood films, it is mainly the male characters that are doing the looking, and female characters that are being looked at (243). More proof that female characters are supposed to attract attention from heterosexual male spectators is that their bodies tend to be on full display. Even their costumes are designed to downplay their "problem areas" to make them look extra flattering (245). In this patriarchal narrative, male characters are subjects of audience identification and aspiration. Rather than being an erotic object, they are "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego" of the male cinema-goer (Hodkinson, 245).

Despite often taken for granted by viewers, another very important component of mise-en-scène is lighting. The look of a shot is controlled by light quality, direction, source, and color and "the filmmaker can manipulate and combine these factors to shape the viewer's experience in a great many ways" (Bordwell & Thompson, 249). The standard style for Hollywood lighting involves three separate light sources and is therefore known as three-point lighting. It is used to help separate the stars from the set, but also to make female stars look more radiant and attractive to the male gaze (Benshoff & Griffin, 245).

Although it might seem a bit more obvious than analyzing a television show's mise-en-scène, paying attention to the narrative is just as important. The term narrative is usually seen as a synonym for the story of a film or television show. A more complex definition is that it is a "chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space" (Bordwell & Thompson, 153). A narrative typically begins with a situation; a conflict is introduced; the narrative reaches a climax that marks a change; finally, the conflict is resolved and that brings about the end of the narrative (153). However, teen television shows have narratives that are similar to that of soap operas in that they are episodic and multi-linear. That is to say, instead of having a clear ending, the plot tends to be dragged out over several episodes (Parks, 101).

Since the narrative depends so heavily on cause and effect, the characters – that are the agents behind these actions – play an important role in carrying out the narrative. We can make a distinction between well-developed and flat characters. The first possess several varying traits, some at odds with one another (Bordwell & Thompson, 159), whilst the latter are relatively uncomplicated and do not develop a lot throughout the series. Seeing as male characters are traditionally given more active roles than female characters, it makes sense for the first to also be more complex than the latter.

Hence, in conducting close readings of *Buffy* and *Sabrina*, I will be focusing on the



objectification of female characters through the male gaze, clothing, and flattering lighting. If my findings are that the older case study displays one or more of these elements while the most recent one has none, then it is safe to conclude that society's increased awareness of gender inequality has affected televised depictions to some extent. Narrative-wise, I suspect that neither show will present flat female characters for they have female leads. But the interpretation of what defines a rounded character may have changed over the years. If so, comparing this could lead to interesting insights in changing perspectives of what it means to be powerful as a woman.

## 2. Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Teen television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been a popular topic of research among gender theorists for quite a while now. As mentioned before, the protagonist Buffy is frequently considered “an embodiment of strength, power and assertiveness, who often destabilizes gender structures by being ‘a supremely confident kicker of evil butt’” (Osgerby, 71). However, many of these studies have failed to compare the show to a similar, more recent series. Have gender portrayals changed since *Buffy*, one of the first popular teen series ever? And if so, how? In order to find out, this chapter will first engage with the following sub-research question: “How does *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represent masculinity, femininity and queerness?” I will watch the pilot episode of the show, titled “Welcome to the Hellmouth”, which aired in 1997. To help give the reader an idea of the context, I will first offer an introduction to the show and the episode's plot. Then I will analyze the show's narrative and use of stereotyping, before conducting close readings of the mise-en-scène in scenes that seem relevant in examining gender portrayals.

### 2.1 Introduction to “Buffy”

*Buffy* usually reached between four and six million viewers, making it a success for the relatively new and small the WB network (Ratings). This has resulted in a spin-off and as of 2018, a planned reboot. Instead of featuring a masculine hero, as is traditional Hollywood narrative, the plot centers on sixteen-year-old Buffy who leads a secret double life as a so-called Slayer. She is one in a long line of young women chosen by fate to battle evil forces. At the same time however, she desperately wants to live the normal teenaged girl life.

## 2.2 Plot Summary

The mysterious girl trying to fit in at her new high school; that is how Buffy is introduced to the audience in the show's pilot episode ("Welcome to the Hellmouth", s1e1, 1997). We witness her mother dropping her off at her first day at a new school, ensuring Buffy that she will "make friends right away" (00:04:23). The teenage audience is likely to identify with her immediately, as most of them can probably relate to being 'the new one' or dealing with a new situation. Buffy seems to make friends pretty easily. She spends her first break hanging out with fellow students Willow, Xander and Jesse. This group will later be dubbed the Scooby Gang. If the audience is to believe Cordelia, who is the self-proclaimed cool girl, they are the school's losers that Buffy should not want to befriend. But as was stated earlier, the fantasy genre does not generally sympathize with the popular people and therefore we soon come to think of Cordelia as a mean bully. She is initially nice to Buffy, though, and gives her a tour around the school. Realizing she still needs to get some schoolbooks, Buffy stops by the library and meets the librarian, Mr. Giles. He scares Buffy off when he starts talking to her about vampires. When soon after, a student is found dead in a locker with bite-marks in his neck, Buffy realizes that Mr. Giles might be able to help. Mr. Giles reveals himself as a Watcher – someone who trains and prepares Slayers like Buffy – and informs her that there have been several supernatural occurrences in the town of Sunnydale. He fears that it might be getting worse as "the signs point to a crucial mystical upheaval very soon" (00:18:55).

While on her way to a bar called the Bronze, Buffy is confronted by a man named Angel, who warns her that "the mouth of Hell" is about to open and that she should be prepared for the so-called Harvest. But Buffy remains skeptic and does not want to risk losing another friend group for being a Slayer. It is not until she sees that Willow is seduced by a Vampire in the bar that she realizes she has to do something. What follows is an action sequence between Buffy, two vampire boys and a vampire girl. Although Buffy is able to take out one of the vampire boys rather quickly, the other one manages to get a hold of her and in the final moments of the episode we see Buffy pinned to the ground with seemingly no way to escape. The text "to be continued" appears in the frame, informing the viewer that if they want to find out what happens next, they will have to watch the following episode.

### 2.3 Narrative Analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

It is hardly a surprise that many scholars consider Buffy a feminist icon. Especially from a narrative point of view, she does challenge the traditional Hollywood gender notion of the passive, domestic woman. She is hardly a “good” girl. From the perspective of social and cultural authorities, she is actually “bad” (Young, 23). During her first conversation with principal Flutie, we find out that her transcripts are “dismal” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”, 00:06:23) and, more importantly, that she has burned down her previous school’s gym. Overall, Buffy is sassy and straight to the point. She is well aware of the high school’s hierarchy but chooses to ignore it and hang out with whomever she feels like. This seems to be motivated by her philosophy that “life is short” (00:26:36). This is probably why scholars like Young argue that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about having and sharing the joy of female power (29). Indeed, creator Joss Whedon claims that his intention behind the show was to invert the conventional horror narrative in which the blonde girl “goes into a dark alley and is killed” (qtd. in Young, 15).

What is interesting is that Whedon does seem to play around with the conventional horror narrative quite a bit. In fact, the very beginning of the episode starts off on a rather traditional note. It shows a teenaged couple breaking and entering into a school building at night. When the boy wants to show her the view from the top of the building, the girl immediately expresses her doubts, scared that they will get in trouble. Soon after, she is alarmed by a noise. The boy goes on to reassure her that “it is nothing” (00:01:38). Up until this point, the narrative is conventional in the sense that: “In the horror film [...] women were primarily helpless victims waiting to be carried off by monsters or marauding madmen, so that they might be saved by patriarchal heroes” (Benshoff & Griffin, 228). Whereas the girl would be the helpless victim in this context, the boy would be the patriarchal hero. However, when the girl finally leans in to kiss him, her face suddenly transforms into that of a vampire, aggressively biting him in his neck next. Although the discarding of the passive female stereotype seems like a good development at first, it should be noted that the female character transforms into another stereotype: that of the Vamp that lures white men into their doom. Another reference to the horror narrative can be observed when Buffy is on her way to the Bronze to hang out with her friends from school. She walks down the street alone at night, when she suddenly hears footsteps behind her. She notices that the footsteps come from a dark figure that is following her. Buffy, starting to panic, runs into an alley. According to Whedon, this would usually be the point where the girl would be killed. Buffy instead decides

to attack the figure, which turns out to be Angel.

Violence is a conventional feature that serves to distinguish “masculine” and “feminine” and therefore, violent women such as Buffy upset this binary (Young, 17). Seemingly aware of this, Angel feels the need to re-affirm his masculinity by ridiculing Buffy. He says: “Truth is, I thought you would be taller. Or bigger, muscles and all that” (00:23:17-00:23:20). This is a personal attack to Buffy as she takes her role as a Slayer extremely seriously. She is so dedicated to work that her professional life often seems more important than domestic life, which is also a traditionally masculine characteristic (Jowett, 23). It is especially interesting that Buffy attacks this particular male character in the first episode as Angel is presented as hypermasculine and hyperheroic. He is introduced as the mysterious stranger, a stock male role (62).

All in all, it could be argued that no one performs the expected role in this show (Young, 22). Whereas the character Buffy possesses a variety of conventional masculine traits, most men in the show tend to display characteristics that are considered more feminine. For instance, Lorna Jowett argues that Xander is a new man (134): someone who is comfortable with gender equality and in touch with his emotional side (Hodkinson, 257). She assigns Xander the more conventional female role of the “heart” of the Scooby family, representing emotion, love, and friendship. He clearly struggles with putting up a masculine façade in front of Buffy. Whenever he is around her, he acts rather clumsy. He falls off his skateboard when he first sees her and he stumbles over his words trying to help Buffy pick up things she accidentally dropped on the floor. He gets very nervous around her and is even called out on it by his male friend at one point: “Is it me, or are you turning into a bibbling idiot?” (00:13:34-00:13:37). Xander’s clumsiness and physical inability to fight evil imply that he is a new man simply because “he cannot be a real man” (Jowett, 134).

The same could be said about Mr. Giles, who takes on a supportive instead of a lead role by being characterized as a ‘Watcher’. He is clearly not the violent masculine type. Mr. Giles seems more scared of the Harvest than Buffy is, and his idea of having fun is being at home and reading a book. He overtly positions himself as being submissive to Buffy when she asks him why he does not just kill vampires himself, by saying: “I am a Watcher. I have not the skill” (00:17:49-00:17:51). Instead, he claims, he is supposed to train and prepare Buffy to be a Slayer. His emotional and affectionate (“feminine”) side is revealed in his fathering of Buffy and his keen sense of responsibility for the safety of the other teens (Jowett, 127). Jowett suggests that these ambivalences and contradictions in representing gender allow viewers to recognize the difficulty of constructing and maintaining a gender

identity (2). The gender portrayals in question are therefore also conventional in some ways. It should be noted, for instance, that despite Mr. Giles' apparent passivity, he is the person that coaches Buffy. He also takes on a patriarchal role in the sense that he later provides transport and meeting places for the Scooby Gang (128). This means that after all, Buffy and the Scoobies are still under some sort of 'supervision' of a man.

In fact, looking at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* more closely, the importance of men is hinted at in a variety of ways, specifically through Willow. Personality-wise, she represents the polar opposite of Buffy. As Young writes, Buffy is bad at being a girl as she is unable to be either passive or helpless (21). Willow on the other hand, is shy, insecure, and awkward. Her and Buffy have very different mindsets in regards to male validation, as is illustrated by the following dialogue from the pilot episode:

**Willow:** "I do not actually date a whole lot... lately."

**Buffy:** "Why not?"

**Willow:** "Well, when I am with a boy I like, it is hard for me to say anything cool, or witty, or at all... I can usually make a few vowel sounds, and then I have to go away."

**Buffy:** "It is not that bad."

**Willow:** "It is. I think boys are more interested in a girl who can talk."

**Buffy:** "You really have not been dating lately."

**Willow:** "It is probably easy for you. I mean, you do not seem too shy."

**Buffy:** "Well, my philosophy is – do you want to hear my philosophy?"

**Willow:** "I do."

**Buffy:** "Life is short. Not original, I will grant you. But it is true. Why waste time being all shy? Why worry about some guy and if he is going to laugh at you? You know? Seize the moment. Because tomorrow you might be dead."

(00:26:00-00:26:48).

Buffy's comment, that Willow really has not been dating lately when she proposes that boys like girls who can talk, seems to insinuate that men would actually rather date more voiceless, passive women. Since Buffy's personality is the exact opposite, she may not have had such a thriving love life as Willow suggests. She does not seem to value it much either. Willow on the other hand, expresses the desire to be more talkative solely because she feels that it would make her more attractive to the male eye.

Interestingly, Willow's need for male approval seems to go beyond simply wanting a heterosexual relationship. She starts dabbling with magic in her senior year of high school and later joins a Wicca club in college, where she meets Tara, an actual witch ("Hush", s4e10). After foreshadowing Willow's coming out journey through a queer doppelganger of hers in a later episode ("Doppelgangland", s3e16), she finally comes out to Buffy as a lesbian when she admits that her feelings for Tara have transcended friendship ("New Moon Rising", s4e19). It does not make sense, then, for Willow's ultimate goal to be getting a boyfriend. I suggest that instead, she identifies with "masculine" rationality and status and seeks approval in this regard. This would also explain why she values academic success so much. Indeed, her "power" in early seasons is her knowledge of technology and science (which are both "masculine" fields) (Jowett, 37).

Male dominance is additionally ensured by the show's lack of meaningful female-to-female interactions. This is typical for popular film and has given rise to the Bechdel test. A series, film or advert passes the test if two or more women interact with one another about something other than a man (Hodkinson, 250). According to these guidelines, the pilot episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer would barely pass the test. In Buffy's very first interaction with another girl, Cordelia, they discuss men. Cordelia wants to know if Buffy is 'cool enough' to befriend her and judges this from Buffy's answers to a set of questions. Two out of four questions are about men. One is about how Buffy feels about actor James Spader, another about what she thinks of musician John Tesh. In other words, Buffy's 'coolness' is dependent on whether she thinks certain men are attractive or not. Another such instance in which a female character's worth is tied to men and male attention, occurs moments later when Buffy and Cordelia run into Willow at the water fountain. When Cordelia asks Willow about her dress, Willow's answer is that her mom picked it out for her. Cordelia then, sarcastically, concludes that it is "no wonder you are such a guy magnet" ("Welcome to the

Hellmouth", 00:09:33). Hence, Willow is considered a loser because she wears clothes that make her, in Cordelia's opinion, look less attractive to men.

Mendlesohn therefore offers the initially convincing description of Cordelia as someone "whose friendships with women are constructed around status seeking and competition in a game in which points are scored through the attraction of the male gaze" (qtd. in Jowett, 31). She does not seek to challenge male supremacy, but uses her sexuality to control men (28). Cordelia's shallowness does lessen when she kisses a friend of Angel's and acquires the ability to see visions of those in need ("Hero", s1e9, 1999). She decides to use her powers to help the Scooby Gang in their fight against evil. Although this development makes Cordelia a much more complex and rounded character than she was before, the fact that it is a man that grants her powers points to patriarchal tendencies.

Thus in spite of creator Joss Whedon's supposedly feminist intentions, the show was demonstrably not immune to the sexism that had prevailed popular culture for such a long time. A more sophisticated, but nonetheless important way in which this comes to light is through the objectification of its female characters. When Xander runs into a friend in the school's hallway, he is asked about how he feels about the 'new girl' [Buffy]. Xander answers that he saw her and that she is "pretty much a hottie" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth", 00:05:26-00:05:28). This same sentiment can be perceived in the mise-en-scène of the series. I will further explore this in the following section, where an analysis of the mise-en-scène in *Buffy* will be conducted.

## 2.4 Mise-en-scène Analysis of Buffy the Vampire Slayer

It is remarkable that while Buffy is not a conventional good girl, she does look like one. She has blond hair, blue eyes and an overall innocent appearance. When the audience is first introduced to her, she even wears virginal white clothes (Illustration 1.1). The first illustration depicts Buffy's first real encounter with Xander. She accidentally drops her bag and Xander helps her pick up the scatter of items on the floor. The second illustration shows the Vamp girl and her victim with which the episode begins (Illustration 1.2). She, too, looks far from exotic and much like the stereotypical "good", virginal woman. Both women are wolves in sheep's clothing, for in reality, Buffy is a Vampire Slayer and the other girl a vampire.

Floortje Schuurmans 8-6-2019 19:40

**Opmerking [1]:** Perhaps you can say a bit more about the image and the sequence in question. What about framing, camera angle, ... Please frame the sequence you are analyzing. Is this the beginning of the episode, who is the man in the screenshot?

Illustration 1.1 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*Illustration 1.2 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*

This re-affirms the idea that the show features gender inversions, with female characters assuming traditionally masculine active roles. The reversal of traditional roles is especially visible when Buffy attacks Angel. In this sequence, she takes on a dominant position by standing on Angel's body with one foot (Illustration 1.3) while he lies on the ground (Illustration 1.4), making him extremely vulnerable (00:22:52-00:22:57).

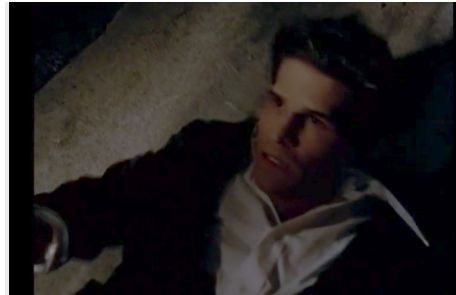




Illustration 1.3 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*Illustration 1.4 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*

In this regard, the show communicates the feminist message that women can also be super-heroes. At the same time, it can be argued that the message it truly conveys is that women can be accepted if they accept male norms. Since Mr. Giles is Buffy's watcher, she has to accept his norms. These power dynamics are especially visible in the scene below, in which Mr. Giles tries to persuade Buffy to take up slaying again. He puts up his arm against the wall so that Buffy has no way to go. Although she is technically higher up than him in the mystical hierarchy, this scene makes one question who is, in fact, more powerful (Illustration 1.5).

Illustration 1.5 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*

Male dominance is also a recurring theme in other aspects of mise-en-scene. As Hodgkinson writes, the female action hero has "an explicit emphasis on sex appeal. Such characters typically wear tight, revealing clothing and are immaculately made-up" (249). Indeed, Buffy wears such clothing throughout the episode (Illustration 1.6). As can be seen in the example below, she wears a shirt with a deep décolleté and a short skirt. Willow on the other hand, dresses very modestly (Illustration 1.7). She wears a loose dress with a high collar and her arms and legs are covered.

Illustration 1.6 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*Illustration 1.7 *Buffy s1e1 (1997)*

Buffy herself links wearing provocative clothing to being a 'slut' and modest clothing to being a Jehovah Witness when holding up two different outfits in front of the mirror (00:20:16-00:20:20). The way in which she verbalizes these outfits signals the show's and character's awareness of how appearance can construct gendered and sexualized identities (Jowett, 62). It is also noteworthy that Buffy is seen wearing eyeshadow and lipstick. According to Jenny

Bavidge, it is very common in contemporary media that the “ass-kicking girl” is also always a “lipsticked lovely” (46). Whedon’s reasoning behind making Buffy a style conscious and “feminine” character is that he wanted to change the (gender) culture and believed it could only be done through a popular medium: “If I made ‘*Buffy the Lesbian Separatist*,’ a series of lectures on PBS on why there should be more feminism, no one would be coming to the party, and it would be boring” (qtd. in Jowett, 21). But Bavidge argues that the use of make-up and its association with performative identity links exemplary female adolescence with ideals of beauty and consumption (46). That is to say, if one fails to live up to these ideals, they are punished. Willow is punished through bullying and a lack of interest from boys.

Still, the main motivation for female characters to look pretty is usually that the show must be enjoyable to watch for heterosexual male viewers. Their bodies have to be on display for the sake of the male gaze. As described earlier, camera movement can also contribute to its establishment. A glaring instance of the male gaze can be observed when Buffy first arrives at school. Xander is riding his skateboard and notices her walking up the steps. We first see an objective shot of Xander looking at Buffy, as he exclaims an admiring “woah” (Illustration 1.8). Next, the camera shifts to a subjective shot of Buffy (Image 1.9). Xander is so distracted by her appearance that he falls off his skateboard (00:04:50-00:04:54).



Illustration 1.8 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)



Illustration 1.9 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)

Of course, lighting also plays an integral part in enhancing attractiveness to the male eye. As Hollywood director Federico Fellini has stated: “Light is everything [...] With the right lighting, the ugliest face, the most idiotic expression can radiate with beauty or intelligence” (qtd. in Bordwell & Thompson, 237). Buffy is, quite literally, introduced to the audience by talking to principal Flutie about her transcript, her past and her future at Sunnydale High School. In spite of getting to know Buffy’s troublesome past, the viewer is likely to

sympathize with her through the use of three-point lighting that makes her look glamorous and innocent (Illustration 1.10).



Illustration 1.10 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)

While it could be argued that *Buffy* offers female bodies as spectacle, Jowett rightly points out “their primacy and activity means that they are not simply passive objects” (23). What complicates this is the fact that *Buffy* primarily uses her powers to protect others, especially the ones she feels emotionally connected to (such as Willow in the context of this particular episode). This is seen as “natural” feminine behavior (27).

## 2.5 Conclusion

Whedon openly rejects the traditional horror narrative and the “weak” femininity that permeates it. He ridicules it by alluding to typical horror situations and then doing the exact opposite from what the audience would expect from a series that is categorized as a horror. As a result, *Buffy*’s eponymous lead character strikes one as strong and independent. Buffy and later Cordelia and Willow, too, are all able to protect themselves and others from evil. They do not have to rely on a male hero. Most of the show’s male characters are actually a lot more non-confrontational than their counterparts. If, as Butler discerns, gender is a matter of performativity (519), then *Buffy*’s women are more masculine than its men. Turning all female characters into transgressive women undeniably overthrows patriarchal culture that praises voiceless and powerless women (Young, 1). But it could simultaneously be considered problematic that it relies on traditionally masculine traits to do so.

Two other problematic elements that remain are Buffy and the other female characters’ need to look good and the need for male validation. Cordelia’s desire for male approval expresses itself in her fascination with the male gaze, whereas Willow’s is apparent in her strive for academic success. Although Buffy claims that she does not worry about guys liking

her or not; she is clearly aware of how clothing and makeup can influence the construction of gendered identity. Despite her explicit claims of autonomy, by being a “lipsticked lovely” she adheres to traditional ideals about feminine beauty.

The men in *Buffy* struggle with gender binaries as well. New men like Xander and Giles are not always successful in repressing the “natural” masculine tendencies in themselves. By giving up their masculinity, they risk being classed as allies and becoming feminized. Jowett argues that this is why almost all of the show’s new men display a kind of split personality: macho, violent and strong on the one hand, passive, emotional and weak on the other (142). The gender portrayals in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, then, are best understood by Angela McRobbie’s notion of the post-feminist masquerade: the show emphasizes particular versions of female independence, while reinforcing patriarchy at the same time (Hodkinson, 247).

### 3. Chilling Adventures of Sabrina

This chapter critically looks at the representations of masculinity, femininity and queerness in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. This will later help me determine what has and has not changed in the representations of gender within the teen television genre in the past two decades. The analysis will primarily focus on the show’s pilot episode, but will occasionally reference future episodes in order to explain important plot points and character development. Once again, I will introduce both the show as well as the pilot episode’s plot, before looking at the case study more thoroughly.

#### 3.1 Introduction to Sabrina

As *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* first aired a little over half a year ago, there is no academic literature on it as of yet. Still, its roots can be traced back all the way to 1962. This is when Sabrina Spellman, a sixteen-year-old half-witch, first appeared in a popular comic book series called *Archie Comics*. There have been multiple adaptations since, but by far the most popular one is the 1996 live-action series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, which ran for seven seasons until 2003. It was a light-hearted comedy that revolved around Sabrina ending up in awkward situations because of her spells going awry. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is far darker. As the synopsis on IMDB states, the show is “tonally in the vein of *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist*”. It is expected to be an interesting case study as it is often celebrated for its depictions of diversity, featuring heterosexual and homosexual relationships, as well as gender neutrality.

### 3.2 Plot Summary

We are first introduced to Sabrina when she is about to turn sixteen years old (“October Country”, s1e1, 2018). She is at the movies with her friends, Susie and Roz, and her boyfriend, Harvey, when they run into one of their teachers: Ms. Wardwell. After politely declining Sabrina’s offer to join her and her friends at the diner to discuss the movie, Ms. Wardwell drives home. She then sees a teenaged girl’s figure creeping into view, causing her to bring the car to a screeching halt. Ms. Wardwell decides to bring the girl home and help her clean up. At home, the girl asks Ms. Wardwell if she teaches Sabrina Spellman. When Ms. Wardwell questions her about knowing Sabrina, the girl’s voice suddenly turns distorted and raspy, answering that she knows “her bastard-of-a-father who broke sacred witch law when he married a mortal sow” (00:08:48-00:08:55). The girl stabs Ms. Wardwell to death with a pair of scissors and takes on her appearance next. She goes on to declare that she will deliver Sabrina to the Dark Lord.

The next morning, Sabrina is having breakfast with her aunts, Zelda and Hilda, and her cousin, Ambrose. They are talking about the so-called “Dark Baptism” that Sabrina will perform on her birthday. During the Baptism, she is supposed to sign her name in the Book of the Beast, essentially giving herself away to Satan in exchange for magical power and immortality. Sabrina later admits to Ambrose that she has some doubts about the baptism, for it means that she will have to forsake her mortal half, which includes her friends and boyfriend, Harvey. While Sabrina is not “the new girl,” the fact that she will never entirely fit in with either her mortal friends or her mystical family is arguably what allows the teenaged audience to sympathize with her.

Meanwhile at school, Sabrina’s friend Susie is upset because some jocks have pulled up her shirt to see if she had breasts. Sabrina immediately goes to Principal Hawthorne to ask for help. He instead defends the jocks, saying that Susie should go and find another school. This inspires Sabrina to form a feminist club with Roz and Susie to help protect each other. By suggestion of the dark entity that took over Ms. Wardwell, Sabrina decides to curse Principal Hawthorne to teach him a lesson and to scare him into allowing the club. With help from Ambrose, she plants thousands of spiders at Hawthorne’s house.

With everything going on at school, Sabrina is even more doubtful about the Baptism and is considering postponing it. Ambrose encourages Sabrina to search for a “malum malus,” an apple that will show her what path to follow. Yet Ms. Wardwell fears that it will make Sabrina see something that will dissuade her from her baptism. She tries to attack Sabrina

while she is looking for the apple by performing voodoo on a scarecrow. However, the efforts are futile, and Sabrina manages to pluck the apple and take a bite from it. She is confronted by frightening images of hung witches and the Beast. Terrified, Sabrina goes home to inform her family of her decision. She finds them sitting by the fireplace with a traditional looking man who is introduced as Faustus Blackwood: the High Priest of the Church of Night. He explains that Sabrina's aunts have told him about her doubts regarding the baptism and in a hauntingly tone says: "Let us see what I can do to convince you" (00:59:54-00:59:57). Then the theme music starts playing and the end credits start rolling.

### 3.3 Narrative Analysis of Chilling Adventures of Sabrina

Sabrina is in many ways a stereotypical "good" girl. She is described as "uncommonly kind, thoughtful, caring" and "an unwaveringly loyal friend and a loving girlfriend" (Sabrina). More importantly, it is revealed that she is still a virgin ("October Country", s1e1). What makes her character complex, however, is that she is evil by birth. She is the Devil's child and her life's purpose is to allow the Dark Lord to return to Earth ("The Mandrake", s2e8). Although Sabrina and therewith the audience does not find out about this until the finale episode of the second season, her dual nature is frequently hinted at in preceding episodes. The dilemma she faces throughout the pilot episode about doing the Dark Baptism first shows her feeling torn between "good" and "bad". She eventually decides to sign the Book because she needs the power to save the townsfolk from the Red Angel of Death ("The Witching Hour", s1e10). Even if signing the Book to protect others makes her "good", from that moment onwards, she is obliged to heed Satan's bidding. Consequently, she almost burns down her school to prove her dark devotion to him ("The Passion of Sabrina Spellman", s2e2). This makes her "bad" from the perspective of social and cultural authorities (Young, 23). The audience's very first encounter with Sabrina mirrors the ambiguity of her nature. We see Sabrina and Harvey at the movie theatre, a seemingly ordinary sight ("October Country"). When we notice their facial expressions, we are struck by a sense of discomfort. While Harvey looks terrified by the images of cannibalistic zombies on the screen, Sabrina's slightly wicked smile indicates that she is amused by it (00:02:11-00:02:18).

This does not only make one question Sabrina's moral compass but also the gender

dynamics at play. Harvey is far from the ideal patriarchal hero. Sabrina even makes fun of his cowardice after seeing the movie together, joking that he “may have had his eyes closed” at one part (00:05:13-00:05:17). Indeed, Harvey is presented as “feminine” for he is sensitive, romantic and compassionate (Harvey). That he is comfortable with showing his emotions is, for instance, demonstrated in a scene from the pilot episode where Sabrina informs Harvey that she will leave Baxter High School. He is visibly upset that she had not told him about it before, asking her: “So what? You were just going to leave? Without saying goodbye?” (00:27:05-00:27:08). It is also telling that it is Harvey’s ambition to become an artist rather than a mineworker like his father and brother (Harvey). The latter is a working-class job, which tend to be associated with tough-guy masculinity (Jowett, 136). What further points to Harvey’s dismissal of traditional masculinity is that he does not take pleasure in being violent, in spite of being a descendant from a long line of witch hunters (Harvey). The first time he goes hunting with his family, Harvey is not aware of this yet and thinks they are hunting deer. Much to his family’s disappointment, he fails to shoot a deer and his grandfather does it for him. This leads him to confess to Sabrina that he does not think he fits in with his family (“Feast of Feasts”, s1e7).

Hence in accordance with what one may expect from the new man persona, Harvey is rather non-confrontational. It is worth noting, though, that Harvey can be brave if necessary. When his brother resurrects after dying in a mine collapse, he is a senseless, violent zombie. Harvey decides that it is better to put his brother out of his misery and decides to shoot him (“The Returned Man”, s1e9). The fact that Harvey possesses both conventionally feminine as well as masculine personality traits makes him a complex, balanced and therefore realistic character.

Sabrina’s cousin, Ambrose, is similar to Harvey in this regard. Being a witch automatically places him in a feminine line. He advises Sabrina and empathizes with her anxieties of leaving behind her friends, telling her that: “he is continuously missing everything” since he was placed under house arrest 75 years ago (00:15:29-00:15:41). This signifies his “feminine”, new man side. At the same time, his readiness to assist Sabrina in cursing Principal Hawthorne and the very reason he was placed under house arrest (attempting to burn down the Vatican) reveals that he also has tough guy tendencies (Ambrose). His sexuality makes him even more complex as a character. He is shown looking at erotic pictures of men and eventually falls in love and has sex with a male witch (Prance). But later, he engages in an orgy with other witches and warlocks (“Witch Thanksgiving”, s1e7). He does not sexually label himself. Consequently, he is presented as a very

multifaceted individual.

In comparison, the jocks that bully Susie are much more flat characters, representing the extreme end of the masculine spectrum. Jowett suggests that athletes are “traditional models of masculinity in the high school/college context” and that they are generally violent and predatory, therefore posing a threat to civilization (117). It seems significant then that Principal Hawthorne turns a blind eye to their behavior. When Sabrina tells him that Susie “does not feel safe here, in your school” and that she is “living in a constant state of fear” (“October Country”, 00:19:50-00:19:53), his response is: “If that is true, then you, as her friend, might suggest to Miss Putnam that she find another school” (00:19:59-00:20:12).

As was touched upon in a previous chapter, people who do not conform to gendered expectations are commonly punished for it (Butler, 526). The character Susie cannot easily be identified as either a girl or a boy. Appearance-wise, Susie’s short hair and loose fitting clothing are traditionally deemed more masculine. On the other hand, the name Susie is a “feminine” one, and throughout this episode, Susie is referred to by feminine pronouns such as “she” and “her.” She falls outside of gender binary and is bullied as a consequence. Regardless, in a subsequent episode she is accepted to the school’s male basketball team. Susie calls herself Theo and self-identifies as a boy from that point onwards (“The Ephiphany”, s2e1). Although his friends are immediately supportive of his new gender identity, his teammates still make fun of his body in the locker room (“The Passion of Sabrina Spellman”, s2e2).

The jocks’ behavior towards Theo and Principal Hawthorne tolerating it is what prompts “Ms. Wardwell” to say that there is a culture of “puritanical masculinity” in the school. She describes Principal Hawthorne as: “The most intolerant, the most buffoonish, the most misogynist of all.” “Ms. Wardwell” finally draws the extremely feminist conclusion that “women should be in charge of everything” (“October Country”, 00:21:07-00:21:22). It is through the curse on Principal Hawthorne and Ms. Wardwell’s statements that the show openly renounces the hypermasculinity that is depicted by the jocks and tolerated by Principal Hawthorne.

With the male leads being nuanced new men and the overt criticism towards hypermasculinity, *Sabrina* does not only appear extremely progressive; it also allows the female characters to take on a more active stance, albeit it not through violence. Sabrina refuses to kill Hawthorne, although she easily could have as a powerful witch. Moreover, when the bewitched scarecrow chases her, she tries to run away instead of attacking it. As a true feminist, she instead uses diplomacy to achieve her goal: preventing violence against



girls at school. By forming the WICCA (Women's Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association) club with Roz and Theo, she indirectly conjoins her witch and her mortal side. Wicca is a form of modern paganism and it is stated that the purpose of the club is for women to protect each other, "you know, sort of like a coven" (00:41:39-00:41:47). Yet neither Roz nor Theo is a witch. They are both mortals, meaning they are not endowed with great (physical) powers. In fact, Roz is visually impaired (Rosalind) which makes it even more complicated for her to participate in bodily activities. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* thus does not rely on "masculine" physical prowess to construct female heroines; it is their bravery and unity that empowers them.

Whereas the show's youth challenges gender roles, the older, more traditional characters adhere to them. Sabrina's aunts, Hilda and Zilda, do not leave the house at all during the first one-hour episode. Besides, most of their scenes take place in the kitchen (a domestic space). Whilst Hilda does not do anything aside from tanning and reading the newspaper, Zelda is always cooking. It is, accordingly, hardly a surprise that Sabrina and her aunts' interests tend to clash. One excerpt from the pilot episode illustrates this in particular. Sabrina shares her doubts about doing the Dark Baptism because she and Harvey very recently "took things to the next level" and the subsequent discussion ensues:

**Zelda:** "He has not defiled you, has he? Witch law forbids novitiates from being anything less than virginal."

**Sabrina:** "Not that it is anyone's business, but no. However, now that you bring it up, I admit, I have reservations about saving myself for the Dark Lord. Why does he get to decide what I do with my body?"

**Zelda:** "Because it is witch law. Covenant."

**Sabrina:** "Okay. But why? And if you do not know, maybe I can talk to someone before my baptism, someone who can help me understand these things so I can make an educated choice."

**Zelda:** "Choice? It is our sacred duty and honor to serve the Dark Lord. The extraordinary, delicious gifts he bestows upon us in return for signing his book. And you, you would deny him that?"

(00:42:14-00:43:01).

Afterwards, Zelda claims that it is Sabrina's mortal mother's influence that makes her disobedient. This is a telling remark since mothers are the generational connection to 1970s feminism (Moseley, 416). Zelda's disapproval of her can be interpreted as a disapproval of second-wave feminism. Sabrina's aunts do come across as being conservative by supporting the idea of a woman saving herself. By asking them why the Dark Lord gets to decide over her body, Sabrina directly questions the hegemonic masculinity that appears to dominate witches' faith.

The Dark Lord Satan is at the top of this hierarchy, followed by Fauster Blackwood, the High Priest of the Church of Night. Blackwood too portrays hypermasculinity, although in a less obvious manner than Principal Hawthorne and the jocks. He is both an individualist and part of hierarchical evil, which Jowett notes, are characteristics of "tough guys" (116). His sleek comb-over hairstyle, puritanical black clothing and walking stick all contribute to the manifestation of classic masculinity. Furthermore, he condemns women that occupy powerful positions. When Sabrina expresses her desire to reform the Church of Night, Blackwood tells her that the position of High Priest has always been held by a warlock and that there will never be a High Priestess ("The Epiphany", s2e1).

All things considered, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* can be regarded a feminist text, depicting the patriarchy as inherently evil through association with Satanism. In the midst of all this is Sabrina, a transgressive woman warrior that tries to reform the Church of Night and therewith topple the patriarchal hegemony. What seems to conflict with Sabrina's supposedly feminist identity, however, is the way she looks. She is not a witch in the traditional sense; she is far from abject in appearance, nor untamed or wild. Moseley suggests that characters like Sabrina are "glamorous" witches. Although glamour can be central to the production of a confident self, it is also "superficial, ephemeral and cosmetic" (410). This does not correspond with second-wave feminist ideals, which argued that beauty ideals objectified and held women back (Hall). The following section will focus on the mise-en-scène in *Sabrina* and will therefore, among other things, deal with the series' use of glamour more thoroughly.

### 3.4 Mise-en-scène Analysis of Chilling Adventures of Sabrina

Although "glamour" may be associated with extravagant outfits or makeup, the term is best defined as "charmingly or fascinatingly attractive" (Glamorous, *Dictionary.com*). Sabrina mostly forgoes wearing make-up except for the occasional red lip and she dresses in

conservative and comfortable knitted clothing items. But her wavy blond hair, sparkling green eyes, clear skin and delicate figure make her attractive by conventional standards (Illustration 2.1). She frequently sports a distinct red trenchcoat that is reminiscent of Little Red Riding Hood's, which might symbolize her innocence (Illustration 2.2).



Illustration 2.1 *Sabrina (2018)*



Illustration 2.2 *Sabrina (2018)*

What also contributes to the interpretation of Sabrina as a glamorous witch is the show's use of a recurrent audiovisual effect in television programs about witches called "the sparkle" or "the twinkle." It is a magical sparkle on the soundtrack that indicates that a spell is cast. It first occurs when Sabrina wants to turn on the radio. While she points her finger at it (Illustration 2.3), a brief sparkle sound effect can be heard, after which the radio turns on and the music starts playing (00:07:03-00:07:06).



Illustration 2.3 *Sabrina (2018)*

The sparkle is not only a conventional sign of femininity, but also signals the teen witch's power. While it is spectacular and therefore captures the viewer's attention, it is also ephemeral and draws the eye away from the teen witch (Moseley, 408-409).

This mirrors the overall contradiction in teen witch texts such as *Sabrina*: they express the postfeminist concern to hold together conventional femininity and power (409). In order to do so, they draw upon discourses of natural, domesticated femininity (418) and insistently inscribe nature in setting and costuming (416). As was stated earlier, Sabrina's conservative aunts best conform to gendered expectations. Especially her aunt Zelda is a glamorous woman whose makeup and costumes "give off the air of old money, of elegant times past" (416) (Illustration 2.4).



Illustration 2.4 *Sabrina* (2018)

Even the Spellman home itself is adorned with allusions to nature. The exterior is a gothic-style villa, partly covered in creepers (Illustration 2.5). The interior is dark with lots of old wood, wallpapers and paintings with flowers on them, and filled with plants and bottles (Illustration 2.6).



Illustration 2.5 Spellman Home (*Davison*)



Illustration 2.6 *Sabrina* (2018)

Simultaneously, it contains feminist imagery. The most prominent example is the wallpaper in the living room that has the Gibson Girl's head on it (Illustration 2.7). The Gibson Girl was considered the ideal of feminine beauty in the late 1800s, and has been used to send mixed messages that either undermine or support women's sociopolitical change (Nguyen). As was discussed in the previous section, Sabrina herself is concerned with healing social inequities, while her aunts are skeptical of it. The wallpaper and the house in general could thus be understood as reflective of this dissension.



Illustration 2.7 *Sabrina* (2018)

Hence Sabrina, although glamorous, is also powerful and liberated. Her transgressiveness is especially highlighted in the scene that she plucks the “malum malus” from the tree (Illustration 2.8).



Illustration 2.8 *Sabrina* (2018)

Not only is the imagery remindful of Eve plucking the Forbidden Fruit in the Judeo-Christian story; the definition that Ambrose offers of the *malum malus* has very similar connotations. He says that it depends on who is translating: “If it is a man, it is the apple of evil. If it is a woman, it is the fruit of knowledge” (00:44:42-00:44:50). The apple is considered evil from the male perspective because it grants knowledge to women, allowing them to make their own choices (such as not doing the Dark Baptism in Sabrina’s case) and thereby complicating their subordination.

While the show’s intentions seem essentially feminist, Moseley argues that the flipside of the coin is that texts like *Sabrina* that empower glamorous witches, seem to privilege magic, nature and conventionally ‘proper’ femininity over ‘difference’ (219). The “hags” that offer a contrast to the glamorous witches are the villains. These types of witches signify female power out of control, nature out of balance and a destructive force (415). It could be argued that in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, fellow witch Prudence best embodies this stereotype. Her costuming and makeup is ‘hard’, gothic looking; consisting of mostly dark colors. Together with her short, gray blonde hair, she has a very unconventional appearance (Illustration 2.9).



Illustration 2.9 *Sabrina* (2018)

But once Sabrina signs the Book of the Beast in a later episode, her appearance reflects the more provocative look of Prudence (Sabrina). Her hair becomes grey blonde and her makeup bold (Illustration 2.8). If anything, Sabrina becomes even more powerful after signing the book. Hence the theory that glamorous witches are favored over hags is not true in the case of *Sabrina*. Rather, the lead character fits Brunsdon's description of the postfeminist girl that is "neither trapped in femininity (prefeminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist). She can use it" (qtd. in Moseley, 404).



Illustration 2.10 *Sabrina* (2019)

### 3.5 Conclusion

*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and its multifaceted, complex characters are best understood as a medley of ambiguities. It is about being "good" and "bad", feminine and masculine, and glamorous and transgressive at the same time. Especially through its depiction of Susie/Theo's gender fluidity, the show challenges the binary definition of gender that is based on the assumption that "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender" (Butler, 30). The conservative-minded characters that disagree with the social

construction of gender are portrayed as puppets of the patriarchal evil and punished accordingly.

It therefore initially seems illogical to make the female lead a glamorous witch, connoted with the superficial, ephemeral and cosmetic. But Sabrina's demonstrable bravery and determination to challenge gender roles regardless of her glamorousness indicates that conventional models of femininity are not necessarily in conflict with female power (Moseley, 419). While neither Sabrina, Roz or Susie/Theo tends to engage in physical fights; they are empowered through their outspoken personalities and their joined effort to bring about social change. At the same time, Sabrina's ability to switch from 'proper' femininity to a more unconventional one proves that these characters are not "trapped" by their femininity and that the series does not prefer one to the other. Hence the message that is conveyed is that "gendered performances are available to everyone" and that there *should not* be constraints on "who can perform which personae with impunity" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2).

## 4. Comparison and Discussion

Whereas the previous chapters have focused on gender portrayals in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* respectively, this fourth and final chapter will compare and contrast the above findings to each other. I will first deal with these shows on a surface-level, comparing them in regards to narrative and mise-en-scène. Then I will consider them more in-depth, studying the ways in which they portray masculinity and femininity, respectively. Since Jowett argues that queer characters tend to fall outside of gender binary structures (68), I have devoted the last subchapter to specifically discussing and comparing their representations in the case studies.

### 4.1 Differences and Similarities in Narrative and Mise-en-scène

The most noticeable aspect of a television show is its mise-en-scène, which is why this is a productive starting point to base a comparison between two series on. What is unmistakable is that both involve supernatural elements. Buffy is a mystical Slayer, while Sabrina is half-mortal, half-witch. The realistic, everyday settings and costumes mean that these shows are neither confined to the horror nor the drama genre, instead offering a sort of hybrid between both. This is not to say that Buffy and Sabrina are in the exact same spot on this spectrum. I argue that the lighting, settings and editing in Sabrina make it lean more towards the horror



genre than Buffy. Buffy is set in Southern California, while Sabrina was filmed in Vancouver. Most scenes in Buffy are rather casual, using bright lighting and background noises like chirping birds or talking people. Sabrina on the other hand, is far darker and gloomier, with grey-toned camera filters that indicate cloudy skies. As the contrast between neutral and “scary” scenes in Buffy is bigger, it is easier to tell when something is about to happen. Since there is a constant sense of discomfort when watching Sabrina, the viewer is constantly kept on their toes because they may be surprised by an abrupt change.

Of course, the shows were filmed over two decades apart and it is therefore expected that there will be some differences in costuming and set design. Yet *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* looks more vintage than *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does. It is assumed that Buffy is set in 1997, which is when it was filmed. It is difficult to tell exactly when Sabrina takes place. The movie that Sabrina and her friends watch at the theatre is in black and white and so is the television show that is on at Mr. Hawthorne’s home when it is invaded by spiders. When Sabrina and Harvey go apple plucking, Harvey is seen driving a red old-timer truck (Illustration 3.1) and an overhead shot of the farm shows several more old-timers in the parking lot (Illustration 3.2). Between that and the characters dressing in ‘60s attire, it seems that the show’s style loosely emulates that of the comic it was based on. What might explain the vintage trend in teen shows like *Sabrina* is that these narratives tend to capitalize on a sense of nostalgia in order to draw in adult viewers as well. It allows them to revisit their history of their own past identity struggles (Meyer & Wood, 438).



Illustration 3.1 *Sabrina* (2018)



Illustration 3.2 *Sabrina* (2018)

Still there are some scenes in the pilot episodes that are eerily similar to each other. For instance, in Illustration 3.3 we see Buffy waking up scared after having a nightmare about evil taking over. Illustration 3.4 shows Sabrina, gasping for air after waking up from what looks

like a nightmare as well. Similarly, in Illustration 3.5 Buffy is discussing the mundane in the Principal's office, and Illustration 3.6 displays Sabrina doing the same. Finally, we see Buffy running away from Angel in Illustration 3.7, and Sabrina being chased by the possessed scarecrow in Illustration 3.8.



Illustration 3.3 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)



Illustration 3.4 *Sabrina* (2018)



Illustration 3.5 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)



Illustration 3.6 *Sabrina* (2018)



Illustration 3.7 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)



Illustration 3.8 *Sabrina* (2018)

Seeing as this observation is based solely on the pilot episodes, I realize that these similarities do not necessarily indicate congruence in its entirety. Yet these scenes do reveal the

comparable themes that are dealt with. Both shows revolve around “good” girls, trying to live normal high school lives in spite of being “the Other”, and dealing with both the mundane such as friendships and relationships as well as supernatural, life-threatening situations.

It is hardly a surprise, then, that the narrative forms are alike as well. Albeit in different ways, both shows attempt to convey a message about gender equality. Issues like race and class, however, remain little discussed. Jowett suggests that this is because Buffy could be considered “quality television.” Jancovich and Lyons explain that quality television, generally targeted at “affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programs,” is less preoccupied with race and class because it is not as relatable to the consumers of these shows (qtd. in Jowett, 9). Some formal identifiers of quality television include an ensemble cast that allows for characters to develop over time, a mixture of genres, and self-conscious references to culture and popular culture (8). Taking the close readings I have conducted of *Sabrina* into account, it seems to meet all of the requirements as well.

For that same reason, both stories have a strong focus on friendships and relationships. It is simply what the teenaged audience is mostly concerned with. Jowett argues that Buffy and Angel’s relationship is ultimately doomed. With Buffy being a Slayer and Angel a Vampire, it is clear that they are not “meant” to be together, yet against the odds they fall in love. Sabrina and Harvey’s relationship, with Harvey being a Witch Hunter and Sabrina a witch, is no different. One important reason that television auteurs opt for this trope is because it fits with the demands of serial narrative (68). Indeed, Buffy and Sabrina both have linear narratives. Each episode resolves one or more problems and thereby offers weekly closure. At the same time, Buffy and Angel’s as well as Sabrina and Harvey’s ongoing relationship troubles allow for longer-running narratives that may last throughout multiple seasons (10-11). According to Robyn Warhol, serial form series such as *Buffy* and *Sabrina* enable narratives to resist the closure of heterosexual romance (traditionally leading to marriage) as the relationship arcs may be left open-ended (qtd. in Jowett, 11). This reads as feminist, for it allows the female leads to get their “happily ever afters”, whether this includes a male partner or not.

To conclude, comparing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* will lead to interesting insights into the evolution of gender portrayals in teen television series, as their most important characteristics are similar. They tackle the same themes; have feminist agendas and their narrative structures allow for progressive, feminist conclusions. In the next sections, I will explore in what ways their representations of gender are different or the same.

#### 4.2 The evolution in portrayals of masculinity

Hodkinson writes that male characters that use their prowess to fight evil or to win the love of the female lead have been dominating popular culture (256). Even if they are not depicted in physically tough roles, they tend to be active, goal-oriented, competitive and “occupying positions of power, authority and responsibility” (257). *Buffy* and *Sabrina* present their own interpretations of this conformist masculinity. Buffy’s is more obvious, depicting certain men with physical prowess. The hypermasculine men in *Sabrina* are not necessarily tough, but rather execute great power in more sophisticated ways. As is expected from series that revolve around female lead characters, though, most male characters in both *Buffy* as well as *Sabrina* are considered new men who are in touch with their emotions and take on passive roles. The bright side of this new representation of masculinity is that it complements the show’s strong female protagonists and allows them to fulfill the positions of power, authority and responsibility. This is the case in *Sabrina* more so than in *Buffy*. Giles and Xander, being integral parts of the Scooby Gang, are still somewhat involved in Buffy’s occupation as a Slayer. Harvey is initially not even aware of Sabrina’s double life, and Sabrina rejects the Church of Night’s attempts to have her subordinate to its patriarchic hierarchy. Sabrina therefore appears to have greater independency.

Nonetheless, what Giles, Xander and Harvey all have in common is that they are primarily heterosocial, meaning that they seem to prefer the company of girls to that of other males. Giles and Xander are usually with Willow and Buffy, and Harvey spends most of his time with Susie, Roz and Sabrina. One explanation for this, as suggested by Jowett, is that girls accept them for being unthreatening and equal companions (135). While this is a positive development in regards to the normalization of heterosociality, it could simultaneously be thought of as problematic that Buffy chooses the hypermasculine Angel over the new men, with whom she has purely platonic relationships. Even if Xander tries to impress her by displaying “uncharacteristic” traditional masculine behavior, it is often deflected by comedy. Him glaring at Buffy, only to fall off his skateboard afterwards, exemplifies this. This implies that men must be tough and unattainable in order to be desirable. In this regard, new men demonstrate the difficulty in trying to construct a masculinity that fits the postfeminist age (143). In this form, they are not the ideal solution to the stereotypical tough guys. But since then, *Sabrina* has taken a step in the right direction by successfully hinting at normative masculinity as detrimental to society.

*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* also proves that while new men are presently still used, they have gone through somewhat of an evolution since they were first initiated. Giving

Sabrina a boyfriend that is rather short and slightly built, for instance, helps to challenge the assumption that new men cannot escape friend zone territory. Harvey, unlike Xander, also seems comfortable with his nonconformist masculinity. He is critical of the high school's athletes and refuses to become a mineworker or a Witch Hunter in spite of disappointing his family. Harvey is a new man because he wants to be one, not because he has no choice but to be one.

Yet what complicates these new male characters is that even in *Sabrina*, most of them are white heterosexual males. While they may not exactly conform to hegemonic masculinity, this position inherently allows them to benefit from a patriarchal dividend (Johnson qtd. in Jowett, 140). The one male character that seems to offer the perfect middle ground, then, is *Sabrina's* Ambrose. He is clearly content with taking on a passive and supportive role, whilst demonstrably able to be confrontational if needed. Most importantly, he is an ethnic minority and therefore completely excluded from the unearned social capital that white men accrue.

#### 4.3 The evolution in portrayals of femininity

Buffy, Willow and Sabrina are what Bavidge describes as Anglo-American Girls: they are useful, charming and fun, but at the same time artificial, potentially dangerous, and possibly doomed. The latter is underlined by the very metaphysics of these women; if they are not guided or the wrong forces manipulate their gifts, they can wield enormously destructive power. Accordingly, Bavidge raises the question if the dependent positions of these characters function as a correlative to the position of girls in society more generally (43). From this viewpoint, these shows would convey the sexist message that women in powerful roles cannot properly function without some form of (male) supervision. Although there is undoubtedly some truth to this interpretation, it can quickly be debunked for all three women eventually dismiss guidance and become autonomous.

Still, I have previously described *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a post-feminist masquerade: an attempt at progressive gender depictions whilst simultaneously adhering to the patriarchal hegemony. Buffy is extremely confident and does not try to put on a "good girl" act for potential love interests. In this regard, Buffy has a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude. Even if this dominant stance is probably why none of her relationships with men last, her ability to look after herself and to negotiate the perils of postfeminist romance (Jowett, 66), is what positively distinguishes her from all other aforementioned women. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, her incapability to be passive is also why Young asserts that Buffy is "bad

at being a girl,” despite her efforts to adhere to traditional beauty standards. She furthermore obviously takes pleasure in being violent (although for a good cause). If, as Butler discerns, gender is a matter of performativity, then Buffy could ultimately be perceived as traditionally more masculine than feminine. This appears to be in line with what creator Josh Whedon’s intended to suggest with Buffy’s character; that women do not have to rely on men to be saved. In effect, Buffy could be regarded as a strong female lead simply because she acts like a male lead character normally would. Her character thereby constructs a femininity that renders passivity and emotion as incompatible with powerfulness.

Cordelia and Willow, who are both emotional heroines, further illustrate that fragility and empowerment are not supposed to go well together. To begin with, it is not until they acquire their powers and actively start fighting evil that they are depicted as strong women. Before discovering her supernatural side, Cordelia is vain and shallow. During this period she often falls into life-threatening situations, making her seem like the stereotypical damsel in distress. When she gains the power of visions, she is suddenly forged into a “dedicated and powerful warrior in the fight against evil” (Cordelia). She does so quite literally, for she learns a series of combat moves. Although Willow has played a vital role in the Scooby Gang since the beginning, it was largely a masculine one for it was based on having knowledge in traditionally masculine fields. By developing her talents, she turns from a “shy computer nerd” into a “powerful and assertive witch” (Willow). But even after turning into female warriors, their powers remain presented as uncontrollable and chaotic (Jowett, 39) due to their sensitive natures. Hence while *Buffy* clearly tries to renounce the patriarchal idea that vengeful, violent, disruptive women require restraint, basing female character development solely on the obtainment of “masculine” traits evokes the idea that female empowerment is based on the willingness to forsake sensitivity.

Like Cordelia and Willow, Sabrina is largely guided by emotion as well. It is her loyalty to her friends and family that makes her question her future “path” in the first place. Her personality is described as “uncommonly kind, thoughtful, caring, compassionate and spirited” while possessing “incredibly strong willpower and sense of self” at the same time (Sabrina). She is glamorous and feminine but simultaneously modest and powerful. Yet the show also sheds light on a different kind of femininity: one that is not glamorous nor conventional but strong and liberated nonetheless. Different from all of the aforementioned female characters, Roz does not even possess any powers that could physically benefit her and she is still “brash, empowered and outspoken” (Rosalind). *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, then, redefines what it means to be powerful. It does not prefer one kind of

femininity to the other and it shows that through activism, each woman can be empowered to challenge conventions. The WICCA Club that is formed after Theo's encounter with the jocks epitomizes this sentiment; it consists of different gendered identities, sharing the same feminist goal: to protect women.

#### 4.4 The evolution in portrayals of queerness

Whereas other television genres struggle to integrate depictions of homosexuality (Davis, 129), teen television depicts queer characters in notable numbers. It thereby brings to the screen issues that are often ignored by other media. As mentioned before, the key element is the multi-linear narrative of these series that allow for substantive depth and complexity (131). Unsurprisingly then, both case studies offer LGBTQ+ characters. But what seems significant is the fact that *Buffy* presents only one main character as queer, while *Sabrina* has multiple. According to Meyer and Wood, in traditional teen television formats it is typical for non-heterosexual identities to be contained to one token character (435). They tend to be teen shows' symbolic effort to be inclusive. Teen shows are particularly suitable for superficial gay plots because it allows writers to show the teenagers' coming out process instead of actual sexual relationships, which are more common among gay adults (Ferrier). At the same time, it makes sense for teen television to focus on the discovery of one's sexuality because it obviously plays a crucial part in the identity formation narratives that dominate this genre (Meyer & Wood, 438).

Willow's coming out process is indeed explored elaborately. The audience witnesses everything from Willow first questioning her sexuality to her finally coming out. However unlike other (teen) television series at the time, *Buffy*'s writers do not shy away from showing Willow having intimate contact with someone of the same sex. In fact, the sex scene between Willow and one of her girlfriends was the first ever lesbian sex scene on network television (Damshenas). Willow's relationship with Tara in particular is also largely healthy and supportive. This is best illustrated through Tara's willingness to end things when Willow's ex-boyfriend Oz came back into her life, so that Willow could return to him if she wanted to (Tara).

*Buffy*'s representation of homosexuality thus undeniably functioned progressively, but that does not mean it was flawless. By initially focusing on the coming out process in so much detail, it simultaneously converted queer identity into an issue. Willow having to publicly acknowledge her same-sex desires consolidates heteronormativity as it reconfirms

heterosexuality as hierarchically superior. What further complicates the show's representation of adolescent queerness is the fact that Willow and Tara's sexuality is connected to their status as witches. As Benshoff notes, "the linkage of homosexuals and witchcraft within popular understanding has a long and tangled history" (qtd. in Davis, 135). Finally, Willow and her girlfriends are all Caucasians. If teen series' representations of LGBTQ+ adolescents are worthy, it seems feasible to offer more variability in characterization (Gross qtd. in Davis, 135-136).

With Ambrose, *Sabrina* offers both a non-white and a more nuanced character whose queer identity does not always have to be the focus of the story. He never expresses the need to conceptualize his sexuality. Ambrose's introduction to the audience as pansexual is extremely subtle; the series never even explicitly labels his sexuality. His non-heterosexual identity is seen as a part of life instead of an alternative. Still, Ambrose cannot be regarded as the most liberal representation of queerness simply because he too is a warlock.

I would suggest that Susie/Theo's sexual identity journey is the most realistic and praiseworthy out of all. His coming out as non-binary and later a transgender boy is not a huge focus of the show, but very matter of fact. Theo's friends immediately accept and support his new gender identity ("The Euphany", s2e1). But as was explained in an earlier chapter, not everyone is as supportive. With the jocks harassing Theo both physically and verbally, the show tackles the very real issue of homophobia within high school environments. This has educational potential for audiences who are unable to learn about homosexuality from more traditional sources (Davis, 135). What is problematic is that it also presents gay as a condition that coincides with victimhood and the feeling of being under a constant threat of verbal or physical violence (Dhaenens, 10). Yet Theo unsettles the hegemonic position of victimization in gay identity formatting through assuming a male identity regardless of the bullying.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

That the *mise-en-scène* in *Buffy* is contemporary while that of *Sabrina* is meant to evoke nostalgic feelings speaks volumes about the teen television genre as a whole, for it shows that the target audience has shifted. *Buffy* first aired when the prime focus was, indeed, on the teenage market. But with the genre gaining prominence and drawing in more and more adult 'guilty pleasure' viewers over the years, it has clearly been adjusted to satisfy the needs of both emerging adults as well as actual adults. The different tones of these series also point to this shift. While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are both



hybrids between the horror and the teen melodrama genre, the dark and gloomy tone of the latter makes it feel a lot less “teen friendly” than the first.

Being essentially more of a melodrama than a horror, *Buffy* seems to rely more on traditional stereotypes such as the mean cheerleader (Cordelia), the mysterious stranger (Angel) and the shy nerd (Willow). But taking the character development that each of these characters undergo into consideration, they are far from shallow and flat. This is in line with creator Joss Whedon’s ambition to invert the conventional horror narrative. Although the show has proven successful in this regard, it is still clearly informed by conventional gender ideals. One is either a rough and tough hypermasculine male or a passive, clumsy new man. Similarly, the show’s female characters are either vain and weak or strong and powerful. What is especially problematic is that in the end, conventional masculinity appears to be the default. Even if the new men play significant roles, they are all white and presented as the awkward alternatives to the seductive tough guys. In addition, it is implied that female characters are unable to fight evil until they obtain “masculine” powers, essentially replacing the role of the patriarchal hero.

Nowadays, perhaps in part due to women’s confessions about harassment in the workplace, there is a lot more awareness about toxic masculinity than twenty years ago. As it has been established that these shows attract an affluent and highly educated audience, the creators appear to try and stick to progressive portrayals that fit today’s liberal standards. Their motives to do so remain questionable. Is the main reason high-minded principles or commercial success (Summerskill qtd. in Ferrier)? Regardless, in accordance with Hodgkinson’s theory about media mirroring society, the enhanced gender awareness becomes apparent when one compares older gender portrayals to more recent ones.

The message that *Sabrina* appears to convey, then, is that hypermasculinity is dangerous. The High Priest of the Church of Night (an “evil” institution) represents puritanical masculinity and the “tough guy” jocks are presented as the bullies. New men appear to be preferred. Unlike before, they are not necessarily white; they are comfortable with taking on the supportive role; and they are still capable to successfully come to action. More importantly, in featuring a female lead that conforms to ‘proper’ femininity and yet fights the patriarchal hegemony, femininity is no longer established as a non-default category. Yet *Sabrina*’s transition to a more unconventional appearance and the inclusive nature of the Wicca club shows that it is also accepting of ‘different’ femininities.

Finally, the changing representations of queer further mark the increasing inclusivity in the teen television genre. Just as masculinity appeared to be the norm in earlier shows, so too

was being heterosexual. In attempting to be liberal, the emphasis was put on the coming out narrative, which proved to be counterproductive. Contemporary portrayals solve this by avoiding labels as much as possible, presenting queerness as matter of fact as heterosexuality. Homophobia is touched upon (arguably for educational purposes) but it no longer forces queer characters to “stay in the closet” and therewith unsettles the hegemonic positions of gay people as ‘the victims’.

## Conclusion

Ambitious marketers called the teen television genre into existence in hopes of attracting a young, lucrative market. Seeing as these shows have become so popular that they even draw in adult viewers nowadays, their attempts were clearly successful. Like other genres, the teen television genre can be divided into lots of subcategories. But the one thing that all teen shows have in common is that the issues that are dealt with are relatable to the (mostly) teenage audience. One such recurrent topic is sex and sexuality. Since it has been established that emerging adults can use fiction content in identity formation, it is of great value to critically scrutinize the ways in which gender is represented in the shows that they consume so much.

The very few studies that have touched upon gender representations in teen television tend to be based on quantitative research. Moreover, they have failed to compare two similar shows from different eras. It is therefore unclear if and how gender portrayals have changed and, hence, to what extent they can be considered progressive or not. Consequently, the aim of this thesis was to find out what has and has not changed in gender representations in teen television since it became popular over twenty years ago. The method that was used to conduct this research was textual analysis of two case studies that are akin, yet aired over twenty years apart from each other. Theories by Benshoff and Griffin on gender

representations in American film, as well as Bordwell and Thompson's literature on mise-en-scène, have helped me recognize stereotypical depictions of gender. On top of that, Butler's work on gender performativity has allowed me to offer a complex definition of gender that shed a light on ongoing discourse regarding social constructivism and biological determinism; something that continues to be relevant in shaping fictional gender identities up until today.

I have found that, in keeping with Hodgkinson's theory about media mirroring society, teen television portrayals of gender have mostly altered in accordance with societal gender discourse. In trying to subvert the conventional horror narrative, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was very obvious in its attempt to challenge the patriarchal ideal of voiceless, passive women. Its approach was built around a switch in performativity between male and female characters. What made this solution problematic was that it was still informed by conventional masculinity. Men were passive simply because they were too weak to be tough, and female empowerment was based on their readiness to adapt to "masculine" standards. Male dominance was additionally established through the female characters' blatant need for male validation, the lack of meaningful female-to-female interactions, and the objectification of women through the male gaze. Similarly, the attempts to be inclusive were also counterproductive. Even if it successfully tackled taboos surrounding same-sex relationships that dominated television at the time; focusing on the queer character's struggle with self-acceptance gave the impression that being heterosexual, like being masculine, was the preferred option.

Now that there is more societal awareness about the dangers of hypermasculinity, it is no longer the norm. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* proves that female-fronted teen shows still resort to new men in order to accommodate the assertive woman warrior, but they do not try to fill the "tough guy" void. If anything, they are comfortable within their nonconformist identities. The lack of labeling sexuality and the denunciation of patriarchal institutions further signal the belief in gender fluidity instead of biological determinism. This also means that, in accordance with post-feminist ideology, women can choose to be conventionally feminine or not. Sabrina's sudden transformation from typical to atypical femininity denotes this liberty.

In conclusion, perhaps in part due to women's confessions about harassment in the workplace, there is presently a lot more awareness about the harms of toxic masculinity and other forms of conventionality that were once considered the norm than twenty years ago. This is reflected in teen show's increasingly progressive portrayals of gender. Although it remains unclear whether this is driven by producers' high-minded principles or commercial

success, this trend is expected to continue regardless. Unfortunately, this does not mean that full gender equality has already been achieved. Recent news stories about local governments in the United States that push to overturn *Roe v Wade* (McLaughlin) prove that Sabrina's concern about the patriarchy policing female's bodies is grounded in reality. Likewise, the in 2017 issued Nashville Statement, which states that only heterosexuality is permissible and that people born with intersex conditions are "disordered" (Cruz), is proof that queer people are still considered deviant. This demonstrates the continued relevance of gender studies.

Of course, the scope of this research is far too limited to tackle each and every aspect of a topic as comprehensive as gender. For instance, as was briefly touched upon in discussing portrayals of masculinity and queerness, race and class are inextricably linked to depictions of gender. Future research might draw a comparison between characters of different socioeconomic backgrounds to illustrate the similarities and differences in the ways that they embody gender identities. Another suggestion is to compare and contrast earlier gender portrayals of minority groups to more recent ones to see if and how gender discourse have affected these characters. Lastly, it was previously explained that the relationship between media and society is a circular one. This research was limited to analyze society's influence on media alone. One might want to test the theory that teen television plays a significant role in identity formation, perhaps by conducting interviews with the target group.

Overall, it is of foremost importance that scholars remain critical of gender portrayals, in every way, shape or form. Only by continuing to question and challenge the conventional norms, we can shape new ones that are inclusive of all gendered identities: no matter what socioeconomic position, ethnical background or sexual preference.

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