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More Than Their Oppression: Transgender Representation in *Sabrina*

As LGBTQ+ representation in the media becomes increasingly inclusionary, diversity on the basis of sexual orientation is now becoming accompanied by the inclusion of gender non-conformity. Gender non-conforming people, such as transgender individuals, have historically been discluded from queer social movements, but on shows such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* transgender characters such as Theo Putnam (he/him) are taking their place in the spotlight. As the understanding of gender orientation gains a seat at the table of social discourse, there are clearly evident disparities between how genderqueer individuals are treated comparatively to sexually-queer individuals. The Human Rights Watch has estimated that currently, only 62 percent of Americans have a positive opinion of transgender people, while they have a 72 percent positive opinion of gay individuals (Roth). The evident dichotomy between transgender and gay/lesbian acceptance can perhaps be seen in how the many pansexual characters in *Sabrina*, such as many of the young witches and warlocks, are treated differently than Theo. In *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the writers struggle in their portrayal of the genderqueer people on the basis of their illustrating real-life experiences, as well as how their characters have no more depth than their oppression. However, while *Sabrina* struggles with genderqueer representation, it excels in its portrayal of sexually-queer individuals.

It is imperative to first consider the widespread lack of understanding surrounding the transgender community in order to best understand the root causes of their inaccurate portrayals

in popular culture. In chapter six of *Signs of Life in the USA*, “My Selfie, My Self: Identity and Ideology in the New Millennium” by Sonia Maasik and John Solomon, the readings explore how popular culture both allows and hinders one to explore their own individuality. The authors, in a discussion about the emergence of one’s own self-identity in a global age, state that “the second decade of the new millennium could itself be identified as the time when the trans community came out of the shadows,” illustrating how the understanding of transgender individuals is a new concept for contemporary popular culture to address (Maasik & Solomon 453). As a fresh topic of conversation, the foundational knowledge of what it means to be genderqueer has not yet cemented itself into the collective knowledge of contemporary society. For example, many non-queer individuals would still conflate most of the drag queens found on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as equivalent to transgender actors such as Laverne Cox on *Orange Is the New Black*, simply because they have not been socialized to understand their differences or were directly acquainted with a genderqueer individual. Transgender issues, historical figures, and accurate representations in media are largely non-existent, leading those of all ages to be unaware of the realities and obstacles trans individuals, such as Theo Putnam on *Sabrina* may face. Moreover, without the inclusion of Lachlan Watson (they/them), who is a non-binary actor, Theo’s storyline may have never even existed at the subpar level it currently presides at. In an interview in 2018 with *Bustle*, Watson reveals that they “may have influenced the writers to hold off,” of publishing Theo’s original storyline of where Theo was already fully transitioned, robbing the audience of the show to some level of the difficulties of transitioning (Carlin). The writers, consisting largely of cisgender individuals, may have lacked the knowledge of the trans experiences, which was why they initially wanted to skip the transition phase of Theo’s storyline.

However, this initial planning by the writers could be revealing to the fact that they were inherently uneducated on the trans experience, and initially lacked genderqueer people like Watson to guide them in realistically writing Theo's character.

Perhaps as a result of the foundational lack of understanding of the transgender experience, the writers wrote Theo to have bland and unrealistic experiences with his transition. Throughout the run of the show, Theo has been bullied for his lack of conformity by jocks, teachers, and even his own family. The social outcast status cast upon Theo is sadly common for transgender youth globally, however, the way that the show resolves Theo's conflicts surrounding his identity interacting with those around him is problematic. His best friend Sabrina, a powerful witch with largely unlimited supernatural abilities, routinely is able to use magic to come to Theo's rescue. In one instance, Sabrina casts a spell to trick a group of jocks that harass Theo into kissing one another, which Sabrina subsequently uses as blackmail to cease their efforts at making Theo's life miserable. While based on fictional magic and fantasy, beyond the few times Theo has problems after his transition, without the use of magic even, the large majority of Theo's problems surrounding his identity are nonexistent. This is a cause of concern for many, including writer David Clover when in 2018 he wrote a review of *Sabrina* in the publication *Romper*. Clover, both a fan of the show and a transgender man himself, wrote that "this show, which is all about nuance and complexity, gave us the most bland and acceptable trans narrative possible," exemplifying how the writers missed the mark in portraying the constant struggles that transgender people have to endure from society even after they transition (Clover). For transgender people like Theo and Clover, their issues surrounding their identity do not suddenly vanish after fully transitioning as conflict may emerge daily: constant

misgendering, inability to pass as a cisgender individual (if they are seeking to pass), hormone therapy, gender-affirming surgeries, intra-community conflict. The use of magic by his best friend Sabrina is clearly rooted in romanized fantasies of what allies would do to help genderqueer people given the ability, yet the aftermath of Sabrina's antics that do not involve magic carry equal parts of that same fantasy. *Sabrina* curates the narrative that once someone transitions all of their problems go away when that could be further from the truth. The transition storyline of Theo is shallow for the reason that it is too easy for Theo to exist. Transgender people in many cases have to fight for their existence every day, and *Sabrina* does not write Theo to reflect that, especially after his transition.

In addition to Theo's storyline being shallow and unrealistic of the transgender experience, the writers reduce Theo to be no more than his identity. *Sabrina* for the most part does an excellent job at developing their characters to be nuanced, multi-faceted, and to be more than just a supporting role. Roz, one of Sabrina's best friends, has a disability where over time she loses her eyesight and eventually becomes blind. She is depicted as someone who is courageous, in a healthy relationship, and is generally referred to as a bookworm. Harvey, Sabrina's former boyfriend, comes from a mining family, loves to draw, and feels stifled in his small town. These non-magical (for the most part) characters all fulfill similar roles as best friends to the main character yet are both dynamically written to have substance behind the problems that they may face (such as Roz developing a disability or Harvey coping with the death of a family member). Theo, on the other hand, does not have nearly the same dynamism when compared to Sabrina's other two best friends. Theo is simply a transgender individual who experiences bullying, is constantly oppressed by discrimination, and is reliant on Sabrina to fix

his problems. Theo is largely not written to have hobbies, interests, or character traits that lay outside of interacting with his gender identity. Queer people are more than their identities and are not one-dimensional; queer people are more than the oppression they face. In a 2020 article by *NBC*, writer Gwen Aviles discussed Theo and how producers could have better written his character to be more productive in efforts to promote positive representation of genderqueer people. Aviles writes that there must be “‘casual inclusion,’ which entails ‘featuring LGBTQ characters in all sorts of worlds and in all sorts of stories’ and having their LGBTQ identity be overt, but not necessarily their defining character trait,” as queer people are far more than the labels placed on them or the problems they may face from a heterosexist popular culture (Aviles). An individual’s sexual or gender orientation may be a pillar that holds up the superstructure of their existence, yet it is not their entirety. Theo is a courageous, brave, and caring person in *Sabrina*, but the writers need to give him more to his existence than his gender identity and the struggles related to it.

While *Sabrina* struggled writing Theo in many instances, the show should not be discounted for the immense amount of positive queer representation they promote. As *NBC*’s Gwen Aviles critiques the character of Theo to not be “casually queer,” this cannot be said for other characters in the show. Under the Satanic cult that Sabrina, her family, and her local magical population follow, pansexuality is widely common and gender is a non-factor in sexual attraction. During party scenes even throughout the non-magic world, same-sex relationships can be witnessed in the background of scenes featuring minor characters insignificant to the plot. For those who are significant to the plot, Sabrina’s boyfriend, her magical frenemies (known as the Weird Sisters), and her cousin all have been featured in their pansexuality. Beyond simply

surface level demonstrative queer sexuality, Sabrina's cousin Ambrose is one such example where the show excels in pansexual representation. Jordan Platt wrote in a 2018 MTV review that "*Sabrina* ha[s] given us varied, nuanced characters who live within their truths but for who their LGBTQ+ identities don't always have to be the focus of the story playing out on screen," illustrating how for cisgendered characters, the show's writers weaved queer sexual orientations seamlessly into the world of *Sabrina* (Platt). Ambrose is perhaps the most successful example, as he is an intelligent, accomplished individual who has a tragic back story tied to his failed bombing of the Vatican years prior to the show taking place. Additionally, Ambrose engages in a same-sex partnership with another warlock, while still remaining a dynamic and nuanced character beyond his attachment to his partner. The success of Ambrose should have been demonstrated in Theo as well, and the contrast between the depth of the two characters is sadly staggering.

In *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the writers struggle in their portrayal of the genderqueer people on the basis of their illustrating real-life experiences, as well as how their character has no more depth than their oppression. However, while *Sabrina* struggles with genderqueer representation, it excels in its portrayal of sexually-queer individuals. For shows that are actively making an effort to portray transgender people, we the audience must not only applaud companies like Netflix for writing in queer characters but continue the conversation to encourage further progress. The fact that a popular show could write in a genderqueer character, that is actually played by a genderqueer actor, is astounding progress when compared to just a decade ago when two partners of the same sex could not even get married in the United States federally. In order to further encourage representation, however, we need more people playing

genderqueer roles, as well as more genderqueer people behind the scenes producing and writing characters that appear on our screens. *Sabrina* overall is a highly diverse show with wonderful story building and character development, and I hope that in future seasons they give genderqueer characters like Theo more thought.

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