

Bringing Your Own Subtext: Individual differences in viewers' responses to *Buffy*

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As a *Buffy* fan and a psychologist, I am interested in how viewers engage with the series, in what triggers our emotions and captures our imagination. Clearly, fans and regular viewers often care deeply about the stories and characters. But there is also a great deal of variety in the ways that individuals respond. We often differ in the characters and situations that we find personally exciting, absorbing and powerful.

The majority of *Buffy* scholarship to date (including my own) has focused upon textual analyses, but some more recent work has begun to explore audience reception. For example, Fitzpatrick and Fischer (2002) analyzed messages posted to a newsgroup to study the nature of viewers' affinity for their favorite character. Gwyn Symonds (2003) reminds us that the text does not determine individual readings of it and has used internet postings to study the responses of Spike fans to storylines in *Buffy*. However, further insight into viewer responses can be gained by talking to viewers specifically about their experiences.

In this paper I report on a piece of empirical research in which I investigated the responses of regular *Buffy* viewers using interviews. I wanted to go beyond the question of what viewers like about *Buffy*, what they appreciate about it, to investigate in what respect it engages them personally, emotionally, and meaningfully. I wanted to know what characters, events and storylines were powerful for them and why, the kind of questions that Laura asked in her online *Buffy* questionnaire.

This is very much a work in progress- so far I have interviewed 13 people, and have transcribed 7 of these interviews. This paper represents my initial analysis of those seven interviews. These participants all describe themselves as *Buffy* fans, or at least regular viewers, and consist of 4 women and 3 men between the ages of 28 and 51, most being in

their thirties. In the interview I asked about what had hooked them into the show, which episodes they found especially powerful, what characters they were drawn to, and any investment they felt in the romantic relationships between the characters. At the end of the interview, I also asked them if there was anything in their own lives that they felt was important for an understanding of their engagement with Buffy.

While there were some interesting commonalities between participants, there was a good deal of variation, and it is this variation that I want to focus on here. Their responses suggest that one's sense of self and life experiences are important in understanding the meanings we attach to the characters and events in *Buffy*. For many of them, their connection with Buffy was experienced, at least in part, as a resonance with some aspect of themselves or their personal biographies.

Positioning oneself in relation to the text

But one of the first things I noticed that was present in all the interviews was that people talked about their relationship with the show (and I think this is something not peculiar to watching Buffy) in two different kinds of language, which I will refer to as locating themselves either inside or outside of the text. When speaking from 'inside the text', they talked about the characters pretty much as they would talk about real people, reflecting on their behaviour and choices, trying to make sense of it, trying to understand what motivates them and so on. At other times, they stood back from the text, commenting upon its construction, often by referring to what they thought the writers were trying to achieve, or what issues they hoped they would address. (I've given each participant a pseudonym.)

For example, in talking about his response to Spike as a character, Paul says:

"Well, I think he gets treated badly... and it wasn't necessarily his fault, you know (laughs) just the way everybody expects that he's done something wrong so therefore you can't go far wrong if you blame him for it (laughter).

This is the sort of thing anyone might say about a person they know. But when asked how he feels about that, Paul says:

“Well, it wouldn’t work unless he was being blamed constantly for everything that (laughs) could possibly go wrong, and half the time you’re right anyway.”

And Audrey, commenting on the relationship between Willow and Tara says:

“I was touched by when Tara was mind-sucked, whatever it was called, by Glory. Willow was unequivocal in her continuing love, devotion and loyalty. There was no question that she was still there.”

Then, when prompted about her response to this relationship, she says;

“I suppose initially I just thought it was really courageous to have a lesbian relationship in a programme like that.”

This constant movement between these positions is of course consistent with the stance taken by writers such as David Buckingham (1996), who argues that viewers are not in any simple way carried along by the power of ideologies through their identifications with characters but that viewers typically shift between an intense involvement with characters and the fictional world of the text, and a distanced, playful recognition of its artificiality.

But my interviewees also differed in the extent to which they *wanted* to be ‘inside the characters heads’. For example, Matthew, when asked whether he particularly felt an emotional engagement with the show, says:

“No (laughs). No, I think it’s my older, cynical brain going ‘Oh, it’s only actors and it’s a script’...I’ve never really been one for watching soap operas and then discussing it at

work the day after as if they were real people living down the street. I think it's that sort of slightly detached viewpoint."

Whereas Carl positively values the way that he can get emotionally caught up in the drama:

"...the fact that it could get an emotional reaction out of me like that, I thought was great. The show could provoke reactions in me, not just on a thinking level 'Oh, that's an interesting plot twist', it could actually get more of a gut emotional reaction from me, make me irritated, make me laugh out loud, make me feel sad, bring a tear to my eye quite literally, as daft as that sounds."

It seems likely that the extent to which viewers want this kind of experience will affect the degree to which they feel a sense of personal connection with events and characters in the show and find personal meaning in it. In any case my participants, to the extent that they, in varying degrees, showed evidence of engaging personally with the events portrayed in *Buffy*, they struggled to understand them, to make sense of them, and they cast judgment on the actions of the characters in much the same way as they would those of real people. And just as we find that in real life no two people will see the same events in quite the same way, my interviewees came from quite different perspectives, bringing with them different personal 'baggage', to their experience of *Buffy*'s storylines.

I'm going to illustrate now two different aspects of this that I have noticed. One is that people connect with certain events or characters because of some similarity with their own life experience. But, just as in real life, they also interpret events and characters and respond to them according to their sympathies, their basic attitudes and values in life. We all try to make different sense of what people do, we defend it or we cannot condone it, and we make sense of and judge the conduct of fictional in the same way. So the second kind of response I want to talk about is a response which does not rely on some perceived similarity but which nevertheless resonates with something fundamentally important to the person..

Connection to life experience

Sometimes we connect with an event because of personal experience. We see events through the eyes or from the perspective of a character who has been through what we have been through. For some of my interviewees, the focus in their sense of connection to *Buffy* lay in some perceived similarity in life events and situation. For example, Catherine repeatedly returned to the theme of the friendship network in Buffy. She talked about this as the aspect of the show that originally attracted her:

“I don’t know why, but I’m drawn to what I call corny American things where they’re often based on groups of young people, like I also watch things like Smallville, Superman and Dawson’s Creek.”

When asked about why she thought this was, she readily made a connection with her own life, where friendship groups had been very important source of support to her from schooldays to the present:

“Possibly because I like being in that situation myself, sort of surrounded by friends...I’ve got quite a sort of close group of friends, particularly from University. That’s probably when I started watching things like this, when I was at Uni, sort of sat around with my own friends, watching about other young people.

Viv: Buffy’s friends are obviously very important to her. In your own life now would you say that your friendship group is still very important?

Catherine: Yeah, definitely...I mean, it’s almost equal to my family, I’d say. Specifically a couple of relationships, I’d feel, are as strong as my relationships with my brothers and my parents.

Catherine was particularly drawn to the development of Spike as a character and his relationship with Buffy. Like many, she seemed to want a resolution to this relationship by Spike finally being accepted by Buffy, but her engagement with this issue was flavoured by her concern with friendship groups:

“I want it to be resolved. I want him to be in the gang properly (laughs). I feel sorry for him (laughs). I probably feel sorry for him because he’s...he used to have his vampire friend as well, didn’t he? I can’t remember what she was called- the one with the really annoying voice- and he had his sort of separate life. Now it seems like he’s living in this tomb all by himself and he’s sort of got these friends but not quite and he, I think he wants to be one of them. I suppose I feel sorry for him actually.”

Carl readily made a connection between those events in Buffy that had had the most powerful effect upon him and his own life experience. When asked about particular scenes or episodes that had affected him, he said:

“Angel finishing with Buffy...always got me, and that scene, erm, just touched me. The one afterwards where Buffy’s explaining it to Willow...and Buffy just breaks down and cries, saying ‘I feel like I can’t breathe’. That brought...every time I watch it it brings a tear to my eye”

He goes on .”.that particularly got me, because a girlfriend I had at the time who I was very much in love with finished with me, and some of the things Buffy said and some of the general reaction, I just thought ‘Good grief, that’s very similar to what happened to me”

Later, Carl found he was drawn into the relationship between Buffy and Riley, and felt particularly for Riley, who he saw as being, like him, in the position of loving someone more than they love you.

Although they did not necessarily explicitly talk of *Buffy* as a feminist show, it is interesting that nearly all of my female interviewees (but none of the males) found the Buffy's strength personally attractive or significant:

Audrey: I just liked the fact that the Slayer was a girl. I suppose watching it with my daughter, and as a woman, I liked the fact that she was independent, that she stood up for herself, that it was almost counterintuitive to the image she presented...I particularly like the idea that the young woman can be the strong one, on whom people rely for her strength.

Catherine: I think I like her [Buffy] character because she's sort of seen as a strong- physically and mentally- person, and a strong woman as well. I suppose I relate to that. I like women with a bit of strength (laughs). I like to think, I'm not a feminist but I like to think that women have got equal rights and I suppose that sort of comes out in her physical abilities.

Jane: I think, it sounds really dreadful (laughs)...in a way it's partly thinking 'Wouldn't it be great to be like her? You know... someone being that pretty blond girl and yet having this amazing strength. And I think it's rare to see a female character as well that's so... powerful really...it shows that women can be just as powerful, can do things men wouldn't think they could do. I like the fact that it bucks those stereotypes...she's only a little girl and yet she has all this power and strength, and I think that's good, it's very satisfying (laughs).

Sympathies and values

Often it is not possible to say exactly why we have a particular emotional reaction to certain events- it's the sedimentation of years of experience and there is no simple answer to the question of why different people do or do not come to feel, say, sympathy for the underdog, outrage at injustice or protectiveness toward those they see as vulnerable.

So our capacity to empathise with a character may not rest on some perceived similarity in circumstances. Asked about whether he felt a connection with the characters, Paul replied:

No, I don't think there's a connection particularly with *any* character. I mean they don't have lives anything like mine so there's not, it's not like, I don't know, people might find a connection in Coronation Street [UK soap] or something because, you know, they live just like that, ...I mean you can still feel something for people when something goes wrong for them.

Jane particularly felt protective toward Buffy:

I've always felt for her really more than all the characters...because I think they portray how hard it is for her and sometimes people don't understand, and sometimes she makes mistakes as well, which is good because, you know, it makes her human but ...there's something about her which you do want to protect because she's had to go through all this, and you just think, you know, she's been through everything anybody can ever go through really, so there is this urge to want to protect her from any more nasty things (laughs).

Spike proved to be a rich source of variation in responses:

Like Catherine, Audrey focused on Spike's marginal status. But her feelings were slightly different in that she couldn't help feeling sorry for Spike as an 'underdog': "I like Spike...I have an instinctive, identification with underdogs, people who are rejected, all that sort of thing, and he's, yes, he is the outsider in the gang...who would like to be part of it...I quite like the idea of creating your own family with friends and loved ones, but he's always been marginalised, even when he tries to do things positively and tries to think of others."

But for Carl, even though he felt some sympathy for Spike (predictably, when he was ditched by Drusilla), this could not cancel out his strong feelings about Spike's past:

“When Buffy came back from being dead...I understand she was messed up, but the fact that she slept with Spike, Spike being a mass murderer.”

Spike’s later struggles to win Buffy’s love could not win Carl’s sympathy: “I particularly like the character of Spike, but with him being, always at the back of my mind with him, no matter what he does, or did since the chip was put in, no matter how much he helped the Scooby gang out, no matter..his self-sacrifice at the end of the show, I always have to think, with that character, of all the misery he caused and all the husbands who haven’t got wives coming home, or boyfriends without girlfriends...

Viv: You could never quite forgive him?

Carl: No, I never could. No matter how much good he'd ever do, saving Sunnydale, saving the world at the end of season seven, (laughter) I still always think that person at some point was there ripping the throats out of babies, so I can never quite embrace him one hundred percent in my head.”

V: So you just keep him at a distance?

C: Yeah (laughter), yeah so I could never really go 'Oh I completely feel for him there'. There was always that slight emotional distance for me with that character.

Conclusions

Our connection with characters and events in Buffy, what moves us, activates our desires, gains our sympathy, admiration, or antipathy, is complicated and varied. Our sense of connection is clearly not a simple matter of ‘feeling for’ the character who seems to be most like us:

Carl ‘identified’ with Xander “ Xander being a bit of the odd guy out and a bit of a geek, especially with the kind of comics references and stuff, er, reminds me of me... but I’ve

never really thought ‘That’s just like me- I must see what happens to that character’.” His most intense reaction was to Buffy’s break-ups with Angel and Riley.

Audrey reported that she saw herself as probably most like Willow. But her strongest empathic feelings were for Spike as the underdog.

Not are we in any simple way sucked in by the text, compelled to adopt the sympathies and perspectives encouraged by the construction of the narrative or by the P.O.V suggested by clever camera work, as seems to be implied by the concept of identification as it is often used by film theorists. People do indeed ‘bring their own subtext’ to Buffy, as to other fictional spaces they invest in, both in terms of attitudes and values that are deeply held, and in terms of specific life experiences that have affected them

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