'Friends are the family we choose for ourselves' (Buchanan). Young people and families in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

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Introduction

TV shows aimed primarily at teen and young adult audiences often send strong messages about the proper roles, expectations and duties of family and friends in contemporary western societies. But there is concern among social scientists about 'television set family myths', that images portrayed in soap operas and situation comedies are no longer realistic, that they are 'cultural fantasies' (Denzin,1987). Representations of the family have also been of interest to many *Buffy* scholars, who have pointed out that contemporary nuclear families are shown to be dependent upon oppression and structural inequalities. Rhonda Wilcox notes the importance of the 'community of friends' in the series, and that 'it subverts the very pattern of patriarchal succession that it purports to highlight.' So, the friendship network of the Scoobies arguably replaces the traditional family with something better.

Reid B.Locklin notes how the show has consistently critiqued traditional notions of family and authority. Relations within the Scoobies, by contrast, are founded in unconditional acceptance, love and mutual responsibility. Further, we would agree with him that although *Buffy* challenges conventional family ideals, it does so more by

reforming these ideals than by dismissing them. However, Locklin questions whether, despite offering a counter-cultural family ideal, *Buffy* sufficiently develops this alternative.

We will argue that *Buffy* does indeed offer an in-depth vision of an 'alternative family' that compares favourably with the traditional family, one that indeed reflects the experience of growing numbers of young people. However, *Buffy* refuses to paint a simplistic picture of real life, and we will argue that this alternative family is also seen to bring its own dangers that we must acknowledge. Its model of the alternative family is based upon non-hierarchical structures and individual freedom of choice. But in this 'democratised'(Giddens, 1999) family, individuals may hurt each other by leaving or by choosing not to meet each others' needs. Nevertheless, *Buffy* endorses the alternative family and offers the positive message that individuals can cope with and survive its drawbacks.

Recent changes in family form

The conventional nuclear family, while it continues to be a cultural ideal, is now one model within an increasing diversity of living arrangements in modern western societies (Cheal, 2000). These changes indicate that people today, especially women, are less prepared to remain in unsatisfactory relationships and that they are giving their own personal needs for happiness and fulfilment a higher priority than previously.

Non-normative family forms, divorce and separation are of concern and interest for many people, particularly with respect to their impact on children's development, social adjustment school achievement (Wilkes Karraker, 1995; Forehand, Armistead and Klein, 1995; Wadsworth & Maclean, 1986). But it appears that it is disruption, loss, conflict and neglect that are are the significant factors (Cullingford, 1999) rather than family structure itself. Stable, happy, effective families can be found in various different family formations (Montgomery and Rossi, 1994), and good organisation and good communication within a democratic system are thought to be beneficial (Way and Rossman, 1994; 1996).

Dysfunction and oppression in 'traditional' families in *Buffy*

The 'traditional' family is seen in two forms in *Buffy*- the human, nuclear family and the more feudal vampire family or clan. Both are portrayed as dysfunctional, if not evil and dangerous, and as oppressive.

The feudal family: vampires and demons

Both Rhonda Wilcox and Reid B. Locklin point out that vampire groups can be seen as dysfunctional families, based on self-interest, competiton and patriarchal control. 'Family' is an important concept for vampires and demons in *Buffy*. Kristina Busse (2002) notes that in the first two seasons the word "family" appears most often in connection with vampiric relations. For example, the Master and his descendent Darla often refer to their clan as family (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1.1 and *Angel,* 1.7) and D'Hoffryn talks of being part of a 'family' of vengeance demons (*Selfless* (7.5).

The vampire family form, being associated with evil characters, is clearly seen as undesirable. Although vampires seem attached to their immediate relations and watch out for their own, this attachment is incestuous and unwholesome. The vampire family structure is feudal in its emphasis upon obedience and servitude, and punishment for failure and disobedience can be extreme. Relations are anything but democratic; individuals exist principally to benefit their parents/sires, not themselves.

The failure of the nuclear family: human relations

By contrast, the nuclear family is often subtly presented as embracing the idea of tolerance of those who think for themselves. Its apparent ideals of love, care and mutual respect are endorsed and it is not founded on an old-fashioned and unreasonable demand for obedience.

However, in *Buffy* we see that the nuclear family ultimately fails its members in practice; it is inadequate and corrupt, and never lives up to its ideals. Thus in *Ted* (2.11) we see the adolescent Buffy's fears about her mother's new partner; in *Gingerbread* (3.11) Buffy and Willow are the focus of a witch-hunt led by their own mothers and in season five, through the character of Dawn, we see that a young teenager's fear- and hope- that she does not really belong to her birth family is actually well-founded. Family life as portrayed in *Buffy* displays a range of features increasingly recognisable in real families: single parenthood, domestic violence, neglect and a general lack of communication and understanding between older and younger generations. As several other Buffy scholars have pointed out, the families of the three principal characters, Buffy, Xander and

Willow, are inadequate or dysfunctional in some way (Williams, 2002; Busse, 2002, Siemann). These young people therefore look to each other for the support, care and respect that their families of origin do not provide.

In addition to its failure to support its young people, as the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1999) points out, the contemporary nuclear family is undemocratic and based on inequality, especially for young people, women and those with non-normative sexuality. Susan Owen notes that Buffy shows up and challenges the patriatchal family.We see this most clearly drawn in the season 5 episode aptly entitled *Family* (5.6). Willow's new partner, Tara is pursued by her bullying father and brother, who have come to Sunnydale to find her as she reaches maturity. They try to manipulate and control her (as it seems they did her mother) by convincing her that she is a demon.

In this episode the nuclear family is rejected because it is exploitative, particularly for young women. Mr Maclay tells the Scoobies, 'we know how to control her ….problem.' It is easy to see this as a representation of social and religious constructions of women as needing to be restrained because they are in some respects evil. Keeping them obediently at home is presented as being in their best interest and in the best interest of society. *Buffy* unmasks this as a poor excuse for obtaining women's domestic servitude and restricting young women's sexual behaviour.

This episode also establishes one of the non-genetic family's central tenets– belonging is based on free will:

Mr.Maclay: The girl belongs with her family. Hope that's clear to the rest of you

(…)

Buffy: You wanna take Tara out of here against her will (…) You just gotta go

through me

Dawn: And me (…)

Xander: You're dealing with all of us.

Spike: 'Cept me.

(…)Shot of Giles, Dawn, Buffy, Willow, Tara , Xander and Anya all standing

together.

Mr Maclay: We're her blood kin- who the hell are you?

Buffy: We're family.

We are invited to acknowledge the Scooby group as a better, kinder form of family than

the nuclear alternative. But Spike's humorous insistence that he is not part of this and

doesn't care what happens to Tara is not just incidental. He does not choose to commit to

the new family. Spike's ambivalence about membership runs throughout season five;

however, when he is most committed, they do not necessarily welcome him. The family

is no longer the place where they *have* to take you in. It's the place you choose to be if

they choose to have you.

The Scooby family

From the outset, Buffy's friends form a support network providing vital practical and emotional support. This reflects a particular stage in adolescent development, when young people turn to their peers for support, cease to confide in the family and in more extreme cases break with it, as Buffy does, temporarily, at the end of season two.

However, during season 5, beginning with *The Body* (5.16) we see the Scoobies coded as a family with full-blown responsibilities. This family could not be more 'alternative': it's child, Dawn, is reared by two lesbian witches, a builder and his ex-demon fiancé, a disgraced English librarian, now running a magic shop, a sister returned from the dead (or, earlier, a robot pretending to be her sister) and her sister's secret vampire lover.

After Buffy's own death at the end of Season 5, Willow and Tara move into the house, sleeping in Joyce's bedroom, a symbol of their new parental role. When Joyce dies, The emergent Scooby family thus has a domestic space in which to operate and responsibilities to inherit.

1630 Revello Drive is an immaculate, suburban, middle-class representation of safety and normality. It is the place where there should always be someone for you. When Dawn is left alone in *Wrecked* (6.10) this signals that the Scooby family has become dysfunctional. Nevertheless, the voluntary nature of family support is signified by the contrast with the house as domestic prison in the traditional gothic horror story (Jarvis).

Whereas the threatening, claustrophobic atmosphere in of 'Manderley' and 'Thornfield' symbolise the oppressive nature of the home and family for women (Figes, 1982) by comparison Buffy's home is light and cheerful. It is the place that lets you go, underlining the voluntarism of the alternative family. When Dawn longs for the security of the idealised nuclear family, she casually wishes that everyone would stop leaving. But, Halfrek grants her wish and Buffy and her guests find that they literally cannot leave the house. This is clearly shown to be unacceptable and dangerous, implying that this household is not intended to be a woman's domestic prison. This doesn't mean it is always safe there, however. The house is always under threat from the demons and vampires outside. It can't be as secure against the world as a gothic mansion (or the nuclear family) – that is part of the price of freedom. But the Scooby family ensures its survival and renewal. Xander does repair work. Buffy tries to stop the cellar flooding. Anya does the accounts. Youth suddenly faces the challenges of maturity and being a 'family' becomes more than making statements about mutual support.

When Willow and Tara break up, Tara gives Dawn the stereotypical divorcing parent's supportive speech (*Smashed*, 6.9). Spike and Buffy mimic traditional parents on occasions. Xander drops in, almost like the absentee father, to escort Buffy and Dawn to school. Here, he and Buffy look like mum and dad, not the irresponsible teens we first knew. In many respects, then, the Scoobies are shown to be Dawn's family, albeit a very unconventional one.

However, Dawn's home life offers an almost text-book illustration of the best and worst in child-rearing. Dawn represents the classic troubled adolescent. She constantly feels neglected and complains that her sister excludes her, does not really love her and has more important things to do. She steals, lies, truants and gets into dangerous company. She is the child of divorce, conflict and loss. But she also loses members of her alternative family. Buffy takes over as parent, but dies saving Dawn (and the world). Willow and Tara separate, and Spike, who clearly cares for her, is always being excluded from the circle as a result of his tempestuous relationship with Buffy. A transient father-figure, he is around for a while to give attention and affection, and then absent. Xander and Anya's relationship also collapses and Xander disappears, while Buffy is preoccupied with her own after-death angst and enjoying sex with Spike. In some respects, then, *Buffy* suggests that a looser family structure will almost inevitably present problems. It may lead to instability as people move in and out of the family and this is likely to be particularly painful for its younger members.

The Scooby family is inevitably distracted from Dawn's immediate care from time to time, and when we find that Dawn has been cutting classes we are led to believe that Buffy did not provide enough attention or supervision. There are parallels between Buffy's situation and that of a single mother; Buffy already has an 'evening job' (killing vampires) but to make ends meet she takes a job at the Doublemeat Palace, where she is sometimes required to work extra shifts without notice. Both emotional and financial support are precarious.

Despite sacrifices and good intentions, Buffy's care for Dawn conflicts with her own needs. Shortly after her resurrection, she rushes off to see Angel, just assuming everyone else will take care of things. Like Joyce in *Ted* she associates with an unsuitable male, entering into a clandestine relationship with Spike, and home life is disorganised. Consequently one night neither Willow nor Buffy come home to care for Dawn (*Wrecked,* 6:10). Willow is usually a strong support for Dawn, but her addiction to magic (coded as drug abuse) causes her to risk Dawn's safety and breaks the trust they had.

Buffy fails to plan meals properly, either bringing squashed burgers (because she stopped to have sex with Spike whilst carrying them) or returning late with food when everyone else has got the food ready, or forgetting that Dawn has made other arrangements. She forgets a social services visit, revealing the unorthodox nature of the Scooby home. Spike is brooding in a chair, status uncertain. Dawn is late for school; Willow appears to be Buffy's lesbian partner; magic herbs are interpreted as cannabis. The impression is given that it is unclear who will get Dawn out of bed, take her to school and get her meals.

Thus this unconventional family lacks the clear economic structure and sexual roles that characterise traditional and nuclear families. It provides love and care, but inconsistently and unpredictably, with family members at times liable to prioritise their own needs and desires. However, it does offer a more democratic environment. Dawn is often involved in serious discussions. When Buffy awkwardly takes up the reins of parental authority Willow, Tara and Xander provide an ameliorative influence and by the end of season six,

Buffy realises that she must help Dawn face and fight danger, not overprotect her. Later in Season 7, as rifts appear between Buffy and the rest of the household, in an act illustrative of Dawn's equal status in the household, she asks Buffy to leave, saying 'this is my house too' (*Empty Places,* 7.19).

The alternative family need not be autocratic. Its members are not hierarchically organised, and they do not feel obliged to follow the lead of a head of household. So they may ameliorate poor behaviour towards children rather than feeling obliged to reinforce it. In this way the alternative family exposes the child to multiple perspectives and provides supportive individuals to help when the main carer functions poorly.

Conclusion: A more mature version of the family?

The episode *Normal Again* (6.17) presents competition between the idealised version of the nuclear and her created, non-genetic family. Buffy, under the influence of a monster's poison has flashes in which she believes her birth family has been recreated and she is in an asylum; the non-genetic family is a schizophrenic fantasy. She only has to reject the non-genetic family and she can return, sane and whole to her ideal family . The episode presents this as an agonising choice., a choice related not to love but to responsibility; in the end she chooses the Scoobies. In the nuclear family she is the dependent, helpless, mad daughter. In the alternative family she is strong and the others need her to survive. She turns from her loving mother in order to rescue her alternative family, even though this means facing the fact that she has hurt them. The episode encapsulates the tension between the family forms shown in the series, particularly for

young women. The nuclear family is cosy and secure, but within it they will always be

children, their power restricted and their status limited. In the alternative family they have

freedom, but also painful choices, heavy responsibilities and a fight to survive. *Buffy*

features young people coping with the inevitable changes that emerge from the

democratisation of relationships and removal of legal and social compulsion. This may

cause pain; but no more and possibly less than its predecessor. It is also shown to be

survivable – you don't know what's coming, it may be tough but you'll get over it and

there will (probably) always be someone there for you. This unconventional family form

may well be more faithful to the experience of growing numbers of young people. The

message contained in *Buffy* is that young people can and do cope with and survive the its

inevitable deficiencies and benefit from its strengths.

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