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"It's Complicated … because of Tara": History, Identity Politics, and the Straight White Male Author of Buffy the Vampire Slayer

> For those just tuning in: If you really, genuinely love a character, and that character appears to be having a moment of joy, expect that the character will be beaten to death with their own spleen. – Allyson, "Bring it on Baby!: Kings of Pain"

The death of Tara, the darkening of Willow, and the rage that almost destroyed the world was difficult to watch when it aired. When Tara was shot by Warren, and Willow became a dark Fury, I was awed by the power of this story; Stephanie Zachareck rightly draws attention to Whedon's "ear for tragedy." But as I followed the huge number of passionate responses on the Internet following the Season Six finale, I was struck by a very different reaction to this story. I read the anguish of viewers who' d lost more than a familiar character on a television series; they'd lost one of the only representations of themselves, reflected in a loving, monogamous lesbian couple. It is not my intent here to dismiss any of the deeply personal responses to this story; I have neither the right nor the desire to question or deconstruct this valid emotional position. I take up instead the readings of this story in the articles of Todd R. Ramlow, Robert Black, Hillary Clay, and Jennifer Greenman. Their position argues that the Willow/Tara story of season six presented the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché" – which I will explain in a moment – and negated, or at least damaged irreparably, the positive representation of a lesbian couple on network television. By focusing on the end of Willow and Tara's journey, we fall unwittingly into the position that the Cliché perpetuates: if all that Willow and Tara are can be summed up in

"dead" and "evil" "lesbians," then we submit to the hegemony that denies lesbian characters complexity and development.

I place my reading of the Willow/Tara arc in the context established by the essays of Allyson, Stephanie Zacharek, Andrew Gilstrap, and James South. As I argue against the reading of the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché," I consciously construct my own historical narrative of Willow and Tara in the Buffyverse. As Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés[1] explore in their "Rethinking" of "Literary History": "History's explanatory …or narrative 'emplotments', to use Hayden White's term, are never innocent or without consequences" (5). I bring this understanding of historical narrative to the front because I believe that what happened in Season Six is precisely about the loss of innocence and consequences.

It is fitting, then, that from the first episode, the issue of consequences immediately takes a primary position. This is a season which had many viewers asking, as Elizabeth Rambo notes in her Yeatsian essay on Season Six, "What's wrong?" Buffy is raised from the grave and enters a violent sexual relationship with the soulless Spike, hating herself for using him ("Smashed" 6.9); Xander puts a stop to his wedding with Anya at the alter, and Anya becomes a vengeance demon (again) ("Hell' s Bells" 6.16); Willow becomes addicted to magic, and Tara breaks up with her ("Tabula Rasa" 6.8); Giles decides that the time has come for Buffy to stand on her own, and leaves ("Tabula Rasa"); Dawn, struggling with what seems perpetual abandonment, becomes a petty thief ("Older and Far Away" 6.14). Going with the concept that "Life is the Big Bad," the writers of Buffy draw out a treacherous path for each of their characters, exploring the darkest and most frightening aspects of the Scooby gang. This is Buffy at its best: exploring how people deal with loss, struggle with weakness, and attempt to fight their internal darkness. So what went wrong?

According to the members of the The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe, a website devoted to Willow and Tara, how we read the portrayal of Willow and Tara changed when two and a half years of the first positive and long-term lesbian relationship ended in death and darkness. The Kitten's FAQ argues that the Willow/Tara arc of Season Six engages the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché":

> a version of the basic "dead/evil minority cliché" in which minority characters are introduced into a storyline in order to be killed or play the villain…. [that] all lesbians and, specifically lesbian couples, can never find happiness and always meet tragic ends. One of the most repeated scenarios is that one lesbian dies horribly and her lover goes crazy, killing others or herself…. (1)

lin0 The Kitten board goes on to create a history of the films and television shows where this cliché has played out: The Children's Hour (1961), Walk on the Wild Side (1962), Young Man With a Horn (1950), The Fox (1968), Basic Instinct (1992), Heavenly Creatures (1994), Lost and Delirious (2001), High Art (1998), Mulholland Drive (2001), 24, All My Children, Babylon 5, Dark Angel, ER, Law & Order, Millennium, Northern Exposure, NYPD Blue, The Practice, Quantum Leap, Xena: Warrior Princess.[2] This list indicates not only that the cliché exists, but also that it has been repeated over the course of fifty years.

But as Willow tells us In "Life Serial," "social phenomena don't have unproblematic objective existences. They have to be interpreted and given meanings by those who encounter them" (6.5). Because I grieved when Tara died, and because I read this story as the best tragedy represented in the Buffyverse, I take up the interpretation of Willow and Tara that relies on both this cliché and a negative reading of Willow and Tara's history. Remembering what Hutcheon

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[1] "Rethinking Literary History—Comparatively."

and Valdez said about constructions of history, I'd like to unpack the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché" to reveal some of its consequences for Willow and Tara.

The word cliché comes from the French name for a stereotyped block used in printing – its connection to *texts* repeated without difference should not go unnoticed. Cliché's figurative meaning is more familiar: it is a "stereotyped expression… character, [or] style" (*OED* 2). From cliché, we arrive at the concept of a stereotype, "something continued or constantly repeated *without change*" (*OED* 3, emphasis added). The "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché," then, argues that the story of Willow and Tara in Season Six continues or repeats without change a strong tradition of negative lesbian representation in popular culture. I have to confess, I haven't seen all the films or television series that inform the Kitten board's historical narrative; I have, however, seen enough of them to know that the Willow/Tara arc *is not* a repetition without change. Sarah Warn, from *AfterEllen.Com* argues that rather than presenting one-dimensional figures in Willow and Tara, *Buffy* "humanized its lesbian characters and didn't fall into the trap of making them too perfect." Stephanie Zacharek goes further: Dark Willow, "far from being a cut-out angry lesbian, is more fleshed out, and more terrifyingly alive, than she has ever been before." The Kitten board itself acknowledges that the writers of *Buffy* created a powerful, attractive, and grounded lesbian couple over the two and a half years of Willow and Tara' s relationship. Willow has been around since the first episode of Buffy, and Tara has been her partner for two and a half seasons. So we can infer from this that Tara is not a minor character introduced into the storyline in order to be killed, nor is Willow introduced only to play the villain.

I turn now to the details of the episode "Seeing Red" – to demonstrate how rather than consciously or unwittingly falling into a repetition of the cliché, it actively works against this

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[2] The FAQ presents a fuller explanation of how each text complies with the cliche: http://pub106.ezboard.com/fthekittenthewitchesandthebadwardrobe36671frm1. showMessage?topicID 3D910.topic

reading. The episode opens with Willow and Tara in bed, naked and content. We see them in bed again, later in the episode – also naked, and between a previous session of love-making and one that is clearly about to happen. Twice, then, we see Willow and Tara in bed, exchanging kisses, caresses, and expressions of affection, and enjoying each other' s company without shame. Towards the end of the episode, Willow and Tara, now fully dressed, discuss Buffy and Xander's confrontation – and Tara is shot through the back. The confluence of events here is important, and impacts our reading of this scene: Buffy has to have defeated Warren' s plan to rob the bank, Buffy and Xander have to have argued and then begun a reconciliation, Warren has to come looking for payback in order for this scene to reach its pinnacle. Events in the Buffyverse are intricately connected, and this scene emphasizes how Tara's death is the consequences of actions beyond her control. When Elizabeth Rambo reads Season Six, she draws on Yeats's "The Second Coming: "'the centre cannot hold'" – the centre being here the powerful reunion of Willow and Tara – "through no fault of her own, 'mere anarchy,' in the form of Warren' s wild gunshot, will end Tara's life." The argument presented by Ramlow and the *Kitten* board suggests that Tara's "death is directly associated with the act of lesbian sex." I suggest that for the episode to have emotional power, it requires that viewers are invested enough in Willow and Tara to grieve when Tara dies. Focusing on the intense sexuality represented in "Seeing Red" as a punishment for Tara unwittingly works against the power and pathos of her death. Rather than mourning a dead character and worrying about the consequences of Willow's actions, the Cliché asks that we focus on her sexual identity. This move simplifies a complex character and her lover into one-dimensional figures, ignoring the character development and growth that has made *Buffy* such a powerful show. More than anything else, the representation of Willow and Tara

reinforces that viewers are meant to read the death of Tara as a tragedy unlike any other in the Buffyverse.

Buffy's history of pain and torment for its primary characters provides adequate evidence to suggest that rather than positing Willow and Tara as a site of difference to be punished in ways unlike its other characters, this storyline cements their equality. Whedon's own identity group – the straight white male – is constantly and consistently under fire throughout the series: in "Innocence" (2.14), Whedon draws on the cliché of the boyfriend who turns evil after his girlfriend sleeps with him for the first time. Angel *literally* becomes a monster: as the soulless Angelus, he kills one of Buffy' s friends and Willow's goldfish, invades Buffy's room, and engages in a campaign of psychological warfare that devastates Buffy' s emotional stability. Whedon goes even further in the text to signal his awareness of his group's historical guilt towards other ethnicities; in "Becoming (1)" (3.21), Angelus kills the daughter of a Gipsy (Roma) tribe. The tribe curses him, not with death, but with a *soul*—he is cursed with a conscience, to carry the knowledge of his sins. Further, after Angelus returns to his "human" (Angel) status, the text denies forgiveness and Buffy kills him. It is only after several hundred years of torture in a hell dimension that Angel is brought back and set again on a redemptive path.

I construct this historical narrative of the straight white male identity group because Whedon evokes it again in "Seeing Red" – and because it self-reflexively deals with the loss of innocence and consequences. The details of Tara' s death are an intrinsic part of how we read this story – details, that for the most part, are left out of arguments based on the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché." Tara is is shot by Warren, who has already revealed frightening misogynistic behaviour. Warren creates a sex-bot for a girlfriend ("I Was Made to Love You"), because her

responses are easily programmed; he also uses mind control on his ex-girlfriend Katrina ("Dead Things"), turning her into a willing sex toy to be shared with his friends. When Katrina wakes up from the "cerebral dampener," and threatens Warren, Warren smashes a bottle on her head, killing her. Whedon sets the dynamics of this scene very carefully: we know, as Buffy says in "Flooded," that guns "are never useful."[3] We also know that Warren is not one of the good guys. lin0 Warren's target that day is not the 'evil' lesbian, but the Slayer— a powerful woman who thwarts his plans and emasculates him one time too many. What happens to Tara *is* cruel and perverse – and it's meant to be, but not because a lesbian is being punished: showdowns are supposed to be between the Slayer and her foe. The scene in "Seeing Red" is set in the Summers' backyard when Warren enters the Act – Tara is not even on stage for this battle, nor is she Buffy's secret weapon, as Willow has been. Tara' s death brings about a loss of innocence for all viewers: we expect that the Slayer might die in battle, but not that the consequence would be the death of a character off-scene. Whedon makes Tara's killer an unsympathetic misogynist – on that we are in no way meant to identify with or read as anything other than the very real picture of human evil. A reading based on the Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché asks that we read into Warren either the conscious or unconscious presence of *Buffy's* writers – a presence that seeks to undercut everything that has come before.

I' d like to argue that the journey Willow and Tara take in Season Six through the dark woods is so compelling a story because as characters and as a couple, they are strong and complex enough to merit this tragedy. Todd R. Ramlow argues that Willow and Tara' s representation over two and a half years lends itself to a reading of the text as lesbian 3D bad. In his first article on the Season Six finale, " 'I Killed Tara': Desire and Death on Buffy," Ramlow

[3] It's worth noting further that Razor, the head demon in "Bargaining I and II" uses a gun to set off the bikers as they quarter the Buffybot.

argues that the series' use of magic in the sixth season provides ample support for a negative reading of the arc:

> Throughout the double-episode season finale, Willow repeatedly refers to herself as a 'junkie.' But to what is she addicted? The power of witchcraft or lesbian sex? Well, both, considering how *BVS* has gone to such lengths for the past three seasons to code Willow and Tara's spell-casting as queer sexuality.

lin0Ramlow contends that the conflation of magic and sexuality in "Who Are You?" (4.16) reflects insidiously on Willow' s addiction to magic in season six. If spells are used to signal the subtext of a lesbian relationship, then an addiction to spells must somehow connect to this earlier signification. It is impossible not to remember the beginning of Willow and Tara's relationship: they work magic, complete with heavy breathing and heaving chests that culminate when Willow falls onto a pillow and arches with orgasmic delight. Ramlow sees in this code "BVS' s reluctance to show much intimacy between the two lovers" (1), suggests that "Whedon's skittishness about being too explicit around Willow and Tara's love life" (2) is its cause. Whedon deals with accusations of this kind, arguing that network censorship necessitates a code for the early stages of Willow and Tara's love story, but that it allows him to portray something more powerful than anything we've seen before:

> Are we forced to cut things between Willow and Tara? Well, there are things the network will not allow us to show. As for example kissing. Does this bother me? Actually, no, and I'll tell you why. Restrictions are often a writer's best friend – they force him to be CREATIVE. The spell scene in 16 was on one level a sex scene, on another level not. It was (barely) subtle compared to smoochin' and rompin' .. The blowing out of the candle was lovely and poetical, as opposed to the more pedestrian smoochies. Look at Buffy and

Riley. All their sheeted shenanegins leave most people cold compared to the tension between Willow and Tara…

lin0We don't see Angel and Buffy explicitly having sex until a flashback much later, and Xander and Anya's first time is also played offscreen. The "skittishness" Ramlow accuses Whedon of having towards his lesbian couple is not without precedent – sometimes we don' t need to see the actual act for it to have impact, and sometimes the explicit act (as he suggests, Buffy and Riley in "Where the Wild Things Are") is far less intriguing and enticing than what we don' t see. But back to the magic and its problematic associations for Willow.

I think the source of some of these problems lies in following the writers' discussion of magic as metaphor. Ramlow is not the only critic to associate magic with lesbian sex as a stable metaphor; E.A. Week, the prolific Robert Black, and Edwina Bartlem also read the use of magic in Willow's arc as an extension of the "code" of magic used in the early stages of Willow and Tara' s relationship. This reading neatly lines up magic, lesbianism, addiction, death, and darkness all in a row. I would suggest, however, that magic is not a stable metaphor for lesbian sexuality, but rather a fluid symbol. A symbol, as "something that is itself and also stands for something else," includes a "permanent objective value, independent of the meanings that it may suggest" (Harmon and Holman, 507). Reading magic as a symbol rather than a metaphor allows it to retain the dangers of the power it literally and inherently possesses, extrinsic to the "lesbian sexuality" it is evoked to represent in the early stages of Willow and Tara' s relationship. Magic is always magic in Buffy; its connection to Willow and Tara's relationship is only one aspect of its presence in the series.

The Sixth Season, however, distances itself from magic's former association: as Willow and Tara lie naked in bed together in "Seeing Red" (6.19), Willow says, "I forgot how could

good this could feel. Us, together, without the magic." Andrew Gilstrap also reminds us that much of the magic we see Willow doing is devoid of sexual symbolism: he points to "her reliance on magic to manage daily life – to wash dishes, turn on lights." The first explicit representation of lesbian sex on the show is consciously depicted without the "coyness" of the earlier symbolism: this is Willow and Tara, two women in love and finally back together after a season of strife, lounging naked in bed. Consider too, that when the writers give Willow another "magically inclined friend" ("Smashed" 6.9), she (Amy) is written as a straight character, reinforcing the distinction between magic as addiction and magic as lesbian sexuality.[4] And, as Tanya Krzywinska argues in her essay on magic and witchcraft in *Buffy*,

> When Angelus kills Jenny, it is Willow who steps into the role of witch…. This development allows witchcraft and its powers to be explored through a central, familiar character. As both Willow and Jenny are set up as benevolent and more 'ordinary' than the preternaturally strong Buffy, witchcraft gets freed from many of the traditional trappings of transgression and salaciousness. (187-88)

lin0Reading magic as a symbol, associated with a "benevolent and … ordinary" character like Willow, permits us to read it fluidly, against the more fixed metaphoric association Ramlow wants us to see in both lesbian sexuality and addiction.

This leads us right back to the beginning. While in the first season, the delineation between good and evil – human and demon – seemed well-founded, it took only seven episodes for the first grey area (the ensouled vampire Angel) to appear in an otherwise black and white landscape. Since that point, the only clear examples of black and white are the costumes often

[4] ***BRIEF SPOILERS— We also we find out in Season Seven that Amy went through her own addiction and downward spiral. She may not try to destroy the world, but she does seek revenge on Willow in the form of a "penance malediction." Willow' s girlfriend in Season Seven is not at all magically inclined, seeing the whole magic thing more as a "fairy tale."

worn to complicate the characters' actions (I'm thinking of the great use of colour in Buffy' s wardrobe for Season Seven). The narrative arc of Season Six presents another colour for contemplation – Red. The episode that depicts Tara's death and the start of Willow's dark journey is aptly named – "Seeing Red." This title alludes to the splatter of blood on Willow's shirt after Tara is shot. It also refers to Willow's eyes, flashing red as she roars at Osiris, who has refused to bring Tara back. I'd like to take this further: "Seeing Red" is about *seeing Willow* – this episode looks both forwards and back on Willow's arc, Janus-headed.

The narrative arc at work here draws together not only the writers' penchant for being, as Allyson aptly describes it, "Kings of Pain," it also relies on the strength of Willow and Tara as characters in the Buffyverse. For Willow, this story is about power: in the season opener, "Becoming I" we see Willow atop a crypt, directing the Scooby gang' s vamp slaying telepathically. Willow truly is "boss of us" ("Bargaining I") before Buffy is brought back, but this is a progression rather than a new development. In "The Gift," the finale of Season Five, Buffy tells Willow: "You're the strongest person here. You know that right? … You're the only person that's ever hurt Glory. At all" (5.22). Part of why Willow was able to hurt Glory lies in her magical ability, doubtless, but I believe there is also an aspect of involvement here: like Buffy, Willow's "emotions give [her] power" ("What's My Line II" 2.10). The "power" of Willow's love for Tara, and what she will to do someone who has hurt Tara is demonstrated -- we' ve seen "Red" is capable of when she's using magic. In season six, we see Willow act against the forces of nature in her spell to bring Buffy back; we also see her act against what we understand as her nature when, sitting in a pastoral landscape and wearing a white blouse, she kills a young deer to acquire its blood for the spell. As James South notes in his essay on Willow and irrationality, the reaction about Willow's darkness

> took the following form: 'We don't recognize Willow in these episodes.' I think that response is only half right. It is half right, because our ordinary notion of Willow is one in which Willow would never do the sorts of things she did. It is incomplete as a response, though, because it assumes that we could ever fully understand Willow, that there are no dark currents in her, that we could ever construct a coherent and consistent narrative for Willow. There have always been dark currents in Willow, but she has always managed to swerve when they emerged, to cover them over. (145)

lin0Willow cannot "swerve" or "cover over" her grief when Tara dies, nor should she. There are "dark currents" in Willow, and in the tradition of Giles after Jenny's death, Willow reacts instinctively, drawing on the power she had abandoned. We see both Willow's power and capacity for darkness at the end of season five and the beginning of season six, even though we are still able to hold to our "ordinary notion of Willow." But as Dark Willow will say in "Two to Go": "Willow doesn't live here any more."

South argues that "At the end of the sixth season, Willow is the one core character from the series who has not yet found her place in the world. She is still struggling to define who she is" (134). The fear Willow carries with her, and one part of the force that drives her to rely so heavily on magic, is the "fear that, deep down, she hasn' t changed at all; that beneath all the layers of social roles she has assumed, she is still the nerdy schoolgirl that she was when the show first started" (134). The first time Willow loses herself in magic is "Becoming II," where in doing the Restoration spell that will re-ensoul Angel, she stops being Willow – frail, quivering voice speaking an unfamiliar language – and becomes the spirit of the gypsy woman who first cursed the vampire. She snaps her head, up and then down, and firmly gripping the sides of a lap tray, speaks powerfully and fluently in Latin. The visual and oral cues here signal that the

Willow who has her “resolve face” on several minutes earlier has been overtaken by something powerful and magical. We see a similar take-over in “Afterlife,” when Willow and Tara do a spell – Willow stops chanting, drops Tara’ s hand, and head straight up, is lost in the magic. There is little here that can be read as lesbian subtext. This is magic as magic, connecting to its inherent power and danger.

If Willow’s path figured power and danger as early as the second season, then Tara’s path is presented as the antithesis to this, going back to Season Five, when she tells Dawn in “Forever” that “witches can’ t be allowed to alter the fabric of life for selfish reasons.” I follow Elizabeth Rambo’s reading of Tara as the “falconer” in her Yeatsian reading of Season Six: Tara becomes “the voice of wisdom and strength… [who] could be trusted to take care of Dawn, make pancakes, use magic responsibly, make the hard decisions – no matter how painful to herself and her loved ones – and show compassion to the lost.” We should also remember that on more than one occasion, Tara is Willow’s “anchor” – from “Hush” to the argument with Anya about Willow’s decision not to use magic in “Older and Far Away,” Tara supports, helps, and defends Willow and her use of magic. Tara is also the one person Buffy turns to about her involvement with Spike, and when confronted with the seemingly impossible idea – Buffy and Spike sleeping together – Tara neither judges, nor intervenes, simply and gently stroking Buffy’s hair as she breaks down. Willow and Tara are greater than the sum of their parts – these are the hybrid characters that defy any attempt to place them in a single reading. Their place in the Buffyverse is earned, and the pain they encounter in Season Six means that they have become powerful enough to suffer as heroes.

Hillary Clay, however, argues that “Anything that happens to Willow and Tara is necessarily excluded from equal treatment because they are the only lesbian couple of its kind on

television." [5] But as Buffy says to Wesley when he reminds her that she is the Slayer, "I' m also a person. You can't just define me by my Slayerness. That's somethingism" ("Choices" 3.19). Their lesbian identity is absolutely a part of *who* Willow and Tara are, but it is not *what* they are. Denying them "equal treatment" means saying that they are different from the straight characters on the show – and this undoes the huge amount of work Whedon and his writers have undertaken to make Willow and Tara fully fleshed-out characters. Whedon himself says,

> I knew some people would be angry with me for destroying the only gay couple on the show, but the idea that I COULDN' T kill Tara because she was gay is as offensive to me as the idea that I DID kill her because she was gay. Willow's story was not about being gay. It was about weakness, addiction, loss... the way life hits you in the gut right when you think you're back on your feet. (The Bronze May 22 02)

lin0Nancy Holder spoke last night, at the banquet, about writers being cut off; that how they view the world as creators necessarily means that they see the world from a distance. I know critics have taken Buffy' s writers to task for being too far from the world in their representation of numerous minority groups, and in some ways, these critics are right. Jennifer Greenman wrote perhaps the most balanced critique of the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché," acknowledging the conflict between external and internal histories:

> I respect Whedon for staying true to his vision even if I don't agree with it. I respect him for pushing the envelope with the networks to open the way for better portrayals of gay love. I even applaud aspects of this story for its sheer audacity and ability to make my jaw drop at every turn. Part of me is sad that I can' t see this story the way Whedon must have intended it, where all the characters really are treated the same in death and in life. Because I don't live in Joss Whedon's world. (3)

[5] "I Know Why Willow Weeps." The Other Side. 31 July 02.

lin0We *don't* live in Joss Whedon's world. And that's why it' s complicated. The consequences of the historical narrative presented by critics who apply the "Evil/Dead Lesbian Cliché" are dire for Willow and Tara because it focuses on one reading of the end of Season Six to the exclusion of much that came before. Tara's death is deeply saddening, and Willow's fury is powerful beyond words. *Buffy* is not just about destinations; as Shepherd Book from *Firefly* says, "how you get there is the worthier part."

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