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Rebecca Williams

"It's About Power": Spoilers and Fan Hierarchy in On-Line *Buffy* Fandom

Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power.
Henry Jenkins, 1995:59

"It's not about right, not about wrong ... it's about power"
The First Evil, "Lessons," 7001

[1] One of the most prevalent issues within the narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) is the idea of what it means to be a Slayer and, inextricably linked to this, is the notion of power. This theme is present throughout as the characters jostle for power with their parents, other authority figures, and the various 'Big Bads' that pass through Sunnydale. Moreover, there is an under-lying theme of how power needs to be managed and controlled, and how abuse of power can lead to negative consequences, such as jail in the case of rogue slayer Faith or for Principal Snyder, a gruesome demise within the jaws of a giant snake. Tensions between those with power and those without it are constantly negotiated throughout the narrative. In 'Checkpoint' (5012) Buffy argues "I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them". Indeed, if season seven could be encapsulated in a single phrase it would be the line, "It's about power", uttered by the First Evil in 'Lessons' (7001) and referred to throughout the season.

[2] In a series so pre-occupied with ideas of power and hierarchy, it is interesting to observe how this theme may have carried over into the fandom that surrounds the show. Zweerink and Gatson (2002) have noted how fans were initially drawn to the on-line fan community of the BtVS message board The Bronze. However, "with that community [...] came the very class structure [of High School] Whedon sought to satirise" (2002: 242), and a similar hierarchy of power and prestige then manifested itself within that on-line community. It is worth considering if, and how, the themes of power and hierarchy so prevalent within the text have enmeshed themselves within the accompanying on-line spoiler community of BtVS fandom.

"I've got a theory!" Theoretical Background

[3] Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work 'Distinction' (1984) critics such as Thornton (1995) have used cultural and social capital to examine fandoms such as cult media, or in Thornton's study, dance music. Thornton uses the term 'subcultural capital' and concludes that 'subcultural capital' "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (1995:11). Similarly, it has been noted that "'subcultural capital' [...] is also useful in the discussion of fan cultures generally, since it implies an assertion of difference and status which would not be recognized by the wider society, given the generally low cultural prestige of fan cultures" (Thomas, 2002:10). The links between cultural and social capital, identified by Bourdieu as "the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...] which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital" (1986:51),

are made clear in much research, and it is uncontroversial to suggest that, within fandoms, subcultural capital can foster fan social capital. Nancy Baym notes "that knowledge of the events that happened on the soaps are a form of cultural capital because it enables participation in the social groups that form around soap" (1998:118). Subcultural capital enables fans to participate in fan discussion, and accrue fan social capital but despite this, the notion of social capital has been sidelined in much academic work such as that of John Fiske (1992) and Sarah Thornton (1995). Bourdieu himself emphasizes cultural and economic capital, and although he "repeatedly places social capital close to the heart of his analysis as one of the three fundamental species of capital [...] it remains curiously under-developed" (Schuller, 2000:5). It is my intention in this research to redress this balance, by studying fan subcultural and fan social capital in equal depth through examination of a specific on-line BtVS fan community; the community of spoiler sources and spoiler whores.

[4] It has been argued that "communities emerge in cyberspace when a number of users create avatars that return again and again to the same informational space" (Jordan, 1999:100), and "an on-line community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community" (Bell, 2001:102). It is this definition that I am using in my research. The on-line groups of BtVS fans I am investigating form communities by virtue of their shared laws, rules, and codes of practice and interpretation. Community members may not be geographically close, but they are in the same virtual 'place' when they are posting and engaging in, what is often, real-time discussion. Critics have argued that the term 'community' suggests an overly positive view of on-line groups. However, I would counter that 'real-life' communities are not homogenous either, and are stratified by class and other factors and, although the Internet does not simply reflect off-line activities or act as "a perfectly transparent form of mediation" (Hills, 2002:175), such stratification is visible in the hierarchies created in many on-line communities. Furthermore, fans have been a typically marginalised group, perceived as a "scandalous category" (Jenkins, 1992:16). However, fans can also marginalise and 'other' within a particular fan culture. Therefore, fandoms can no longer be seen as utopian, as was the trend with early academic work, such as Camille Bacon-Smith's assertion that "the media fan community has no established hierarchy" (1992:41), but rather should be viewed as "a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status" (Hills, 2002:46). Hierarchies can be observed on-line through fan activity on websites, message boards and news groups. Kirsten Pullen has argued that the Internet has not eradicated fan conflicts over differing interpretations of their chosen fan texts as "despite the aggressive, sustained fan activity visible on the Web, the Internet should not be assumed to have created utopian fan communities [...] [the Internet] has not necessarily created a single, unified fan position or practice" (2000:60).

[5] MacDonald's 1998 study of on-line Quantum Leap fans does not rigorously critique fan hierarchies but provides clear definitions of five different types of hierarchy, which are hierarchy of knowledge, fandom level or quality, access, leaders and venue. She notes that "hierarchies exist along multiple dimensions" (1998:136) and argues that fans who are at the top of all five of these hierarchies are 'executive fans'. It is my intention to examine where the fan practice of 'spoiling' places fans within these hierarchies, and whether they contribute to fans' subcultural and fan social capital, and to the discursive power that they possess.

[6] Discussions of power within this research refer to the notion of 'discursive power', as considered by Tulloch (1995) who notes that most senior and powerful fans "have discursive power in establishing the 'informed' exegesis for their subculture of fans. Thus they establish and control an important reading formation" (1995: 150). Fan cultural and discursive power comes from having intimate and detailed knowledge of a show's history and being able to control the ways in which fellow fans read and interpret the text. Fans are generally unable to exercise institutional power over producers and have instead been perceived as "a powerless elite [...] experts who have little control over either the conditions of production or reception of 'their' show [...] their power is the power to gloss, and to write the aesthetic history of the show [...] thus they establish an officially constituted reading formation which supervises reading of the show" (1995: 145). The way in which fans can enforce a specific 'reading formation' around the text has become more apparent with the proliferation of Internet fandom. Fan on-line postings comprise a fan "shadow- text" (Hills, 2002: 176) which has been described as a "serialisation of the fan audience itself" (Hills, 2002: 177). By examining these postings, one is able to discern key topics and areas of fan discussion and examine the ways in which executive fans (such as those who run their own websites) are able to control topics of discussion and maintain their own high level of discursive power. Accordingly, spoilers enable fans to accrue discursive fan power, as this practice is linked to knowledge and to enforcing fan discussions and ways of reading the text. Spoilers allow fans to sustain a reading formation based on narrative speculation and trusted sources and enforce this via exclusion of the unspoiled from discussions and through the amount of knowledge that spoiler sources permit fans to have.

Methodology

[7] To solicit respondents to complete questionnaires via email I posted on the Buffy Cross and Stake (<http://www.voy.com/13746>), the Tabula Rasa (<http://www.btvS-tabularasa.net>) and Bloody Awful Poet Society (<http://bloodyawfulpoet.com>) Yahoo e-mail lists, the Ducks Babble Board (<http://clik.to/buffyrant>), and the Shippers United (<http://shippersunited.com/archive/main.html>) board. I was contacted by twenty people, and e-mailed them the appropriate questionnaires. Of these, I received back eighteen questionnaires from spoiled fans and two from unspoiled fans.

[8] My decision to solicit answers to questions rather than analysing on-line postings means that respondents may not always be entirely truthful in their responses as on the Internet "people can and do, present and explore multiple personae. This clearly limits the explanatory value both of the basic information provided and of any inferences about the respondents" (Bruhn Jensen, 2000: 183). In responses to questionnaires, fans can be explicitly untruthful about their identities, particularly in relation to more generic demographic data such as age, location, occupation, sexuality and gender and can also covertly present a version of themselves that is not entirely truthful, and one must always be wary of this. Fans cannot fail to be aware of the ethnographic interest in them and, in a study of on-line X-Philes Matt Hills (2002) notes that "over the period of study, academic surveillance of the newsgroup itself constituted an insistent newsgroup presence, soliciting fan testimony as ethnographic data. As such, those posting to the newsgroup could not fail to be aware of their status as an 'object of study', or as a resource in the production of academic work" (Hills, 200: 173). Accordingly, fans attempt to create an impression of both themselves and their particular interpretive communities through the responses they give to solicited research and "what people say or write about their experiences, preferences, habits etc cannot be taken entirely at face value...[reactions] must be regarded as texts, as discourses people produce when they want to express, or have to account for their own preference" (Ang, 1982: 11). It is safe to assume that, aware that their words are being analyzed, fans may attempt to write seemingly informed intelligent and 'academic' responses to research questions. However, my status as both a researcher and a fan may have encouraged fans to give more honest responses to my questions and it is worth questioning "What happens when the research is also part of the audience being researched, and when the power differential and the dynamic between researcher and researched are transformed by this shared belonging? How are the research context and the data generated changed by the researchers' dual, or split, role – partly objective observer, partly member of the group, sharing anecdotes and experiences?" (Thomas, 2002: 11).

[9] Furthermore, Nancy Baym has critiqued the way that "it is easy to select only cases that confirm

researcher beliefs, creating a reflection of researcher assumptions rather than a valid (if necessarily incomplete) story of an [on-line] community" (Baym, 2000:25). However, my research is by no means exhaustive and I am not claiming that my small sample is representative of all on-line fans as it is limited, due to constraints of time and space, to just five on-line message boards or groups, and due to the nature of the research these are from a very narrow faction of the BtVS fandom.

[10] To solicit 'executive fans' as respondents I e-mailed seven of the most prominent spoiler sources who were named by the respondents to my research on spoiled fans. These were Tensai at Spoiler Slayer (<http://www.spoilerslayer.com>); Hercules at Ain't-It-Cool-News (<http://www.aintitcool.com>), AngelX at Buffy Cross and Stake (<http://www.angelicslayer.com>), Wendy at Tabula Rasa Spoiler Zone (<http://www.btvS-tabularasa.net/spoilerzone>) and independent spoiler sources The Partyman, William the Poet and DrLloyd11. Although this method of recruiting respondents is not representative, there are actually very few spoiler sources within the on-line community, and these seven sources were the ones most often cited by my respondents, and the ones I was aware of due to my own experiences within the BtVS spoiler community. Of these only The Partyman and another anonymous source completed the questions I e-mailed to them. Perhaps the reluctance of spoiler sources to comment on their fan practices is due the very nature of that activity. Many such sources work within the industry that produces and promotes BtVS and to be 'outed' as such a source would invariably compromise their position. Indeed, paranoia regarding detection of one's identity is not uncommon among spoiler sources, as one commented to me, "there may be things you may want to know that I might be uncomfortable discussing through traceable email. (As you can imagine, there's sometimes an awful lot that goes on in the spoiler community that people generally don't know about). Not that I'm paranoid or untrusting, but a certain amount of cloak and dagger goes with the territory".

Studying Spoilers

[11] Spoilers are pieces of information regarding an upcoming plot or character development on a television show that is revealed to fans before the relevant episode airs. It is worth noting the derogatory connotations of the term itself which, according to its dictionary definition, means to "make or become useless or unsatisfactory; ruin character of by indulgence; decay, go bad" (The Little Oxford Dictionary Sixth Edition, page 536). This devaluing suggests that spoilers are 'bad' and insinuates that fans that choose to be spoiled are indulgent, greedy and should feel guilty about this fan practice.

[12] For the purposes of this research the term 'spoiler' applies only to information which is made available before an episode airs in the United States. Once an event occurs on-screen, it ceases to be a spoiler, although "the UK [BtVS] scheduling situation [...] is highly complex. The freshest news undoubtedly will be a spoiler to all UK viewers" (Hill and Calcutt, 2001). This US/UK divide goes some way to explaining the allure of spoilers for fans who reside outside the US, contributing to the development of what has been called "'just-in-time' fandom" (Hills, 2002: 178).

[13] The different types of spoiler that have been identified through my research are episode titles, information on writers and directors, basic plot outlines, information on guest stars (and possible returning characters), information on character deaths, information on romantic developments, information on locations used, extracts from shooting scripts and wildfeeds (special transmissions of a show that networks use to transmit to local television stations). These spoiler types can be gleaned from a variety of resources, including industry sources (where the majority of spoilers originate), convention reports, location shoot reports and interviews with cast and production staff. These spoiler types and sources vary in their reliability and also in their 'intensity'. For instance, a fan knowing the title of an upcoming episode is less 'intense' a spoiler than having read the wildfeed and knowing exactly what, and how, something will happen before the episode airs. Spoilers are not a new phenomenon, but it is only with the advent of the Internet that they have become so widely and easily available. However, despite the recent deluge of research into on-line fandom, studies have tended to disavow or simply ignore the importance of this phenomenon.

[14] Henry Jenkins' 1995 work on the alt.tv.twinpeaks group acknowledges the metaphorical currency that spoilers have, as "within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power" (1995:59). He also discusses the netiquette of posting spoiler warnings, thus "allowing viewers to make a rational choice between their desire for mastery over the program universe and the immediacy of a first viewing" (1995:59). However, he does not elaborate on the possible fan divide and conflict that could occur between spoiled and unspoiled fans. Arguably, this omission is due to Jenkins' study of the Twin Peaks group as a particular interpretative community and his focus on the groups' "reading practices and strategies" (1995:53). Jenkins' primary concern is the ways in which this community makes the same interpretations based on the same available information. To address the possibility that some fans may not be spoiled would indicate that they were not in possession of the same amount of knowledge as spoiled fans, and Jenkins would have to concede that the alt.tv.twinpeaks community was, in some way, split. This would undermine his otherwise consistent and convincing narrative of this particular interpretative community.

[15] Nancy Baym (2000) devotes just two pages to spoilers in her study of the conduct "interpersonal relationships" (2000:32) in an online community of soap fans. Her focus on the affective ties of the community means that she is rarely critical of online relationships and interactions. Baym emphasises the more utopian view of this particular fan community, and according to her portrayal of the r.a.t.s newsgroup as a community, spoilers act only as a means for igniting discussion, prompting responses that are "highly evaluative, voicing opinions on whether or not the events described are desirable, and how they are likely to unfold" (2000:87). Although Baym concedes that many fans prefer to remain unspoiled, her description of how fans use spoiler warnings is again part of her attempt to accentuate the positive aspects of on-line community. For Baym this spoiled-unspoiled divide is just another way in which the r.a.t.s community works to avoid conflict and maintain its harmoniousness, and the possibility of discontent between the two groups, and issues of fan hierarchy and power struggles are therefore ignored.

[16] It can be argued that spoiled and unspoiled fans occupy a hierarchy of power; with spoiler sources positioned as dominant, followed by spoiled on-line fans and then unspoiled on-line fans. Also, these fans will be in possession of the greatest levels of fan 'discursive power', as they are able to control the flow of spoilers to fans and to set the agenda of fan discussion through the revelation or concealment of specific spoilers. It is also my supposition that the majority of spoiler sources, or executive fans will be male, for the following reason.

[17] In a study of on-line soap fans, Harrington and Bielby refer to spoilers as 'fan gossip'. Gossip is widely regarded as being "predominantly a female genre of talk" (Guendouzi, 2001:32), concerned with the silly and the trivial. For example, John Fiske notes that "the word gossip is clearly from a phallogocentric discourse; its connotations are of triviality and femininity, and it is opposed, by implication, to serious male talk" (1987:77). The proposition that spoilers are gossip can explain why they have been devalued and seen as unworthy of serious academic scrutiny. "Specifically feminine cultural tastes [can be placed] alongside other culturally disparaged forms" (Thomas, 2002:175) as the feminine has long been seen as inferior to those cultural phenomenon which are coded as masculine. However, I wish to suggest that the phenomenon of the on-line spoiler is more complex than the traditional 'masculine = valued' and 'feminine = devalued' binary opposition would suggest. It is my argument that we can separate the notion of a spoiler into two separate parts; the initial spoiler itself, and the fan speculation that follows. The spoiler itself (if it comes from a reliable spoiler source) can usually be regarded as fact, (as Baym notes, "in contrast to updates, credibility is an important issue underlying spoilers" (2000:87)) whereas the speculation is, if not entirely fictitious, certainly more imaginative. The spoiler signifies knowledge (a spoiler has to be verified by a number of sources before it can be regarded as reliable), whereas the speculation implies assumption. Furthermore, the spoiler can be seen as being objective (it is taken as fact, as being an accurate statement about what is going to happen on a show) whereas, according to the binary opposition I have set up, speculation is subjective (as it is merely a fan's opinion about what will, or should, happen). [See Figure 1].

Figure 1

SPOILER	SPOILER RELATED SPECULATION
Masculine	Feminine
Fact	Fiction/imagination
Knowledge	Assumption
Reliable	Unreliable
Serious	Silly/fantastical
Substantiated	Unsubstantiated
Objective	Subjective
Talk	Gossip

[18] From these oppositions I am suggesting that the spoiler may be coded as masculine, and that it is the speculation (hence, the 'gossip') that can be coded as feminine. Therefore, I would argue that spoiler sources occupy a dominant and culturally masculinised position. This is potentially indicative of a gender-related power divide within this fan community, according male fans occupying masculinised roles the power to grant knowledge to the primarily female on-line speculators.

[19] In MacDonald's (1998) work on hierarchies of fandom although she gives an in-depth analysis of the five types of hierarchy and fan on-line activities, at no point does MacDonald use the term 'spoiler'. This omission is striking because spoilers can be seen as evidence of all five of the hierarchy types that MacDonald identifies. Furthermore, she describes how fans post location shoot reports and up-coming episode titles, and these are two of the most common types of spoiler that I have identified. Perhaps MacDonald disavows the term 'spoiler' to try to avoid the negative associations that it could connote through its association with fan gossip? MacDonald focuses on how a small group of female Quantum Leap fans formed their own newsgroups to avoid on-line harassment from male fans "for being what one fan called 'too silly'" (1998: 146) and for indulging in gossip about "Scott Bakula's cute butt or [...] character relationships" (1998: 148). If spoilers do signify gossip and therefore connote the trivial, any reference to them by MacDonald could confirm the assumption about the female fans' concern with the 'silly'. This would therefore undermine her constructed narrative of the female fans' topics of conversation as equally valid as those of the male Quantum Leap fans.

Pleasures of Spoilers: Rationality and Irrationality

[20] It is worth considering the pleasures of being spoiled and how this relates to the ways in which fans defend and justify this fan practice and attempt to negotiate their bids for forms of capital and power. One of the greatest pleasures of being spoiled is the thrill of trying to solve the mystery of what will happen in the series' narrative, and this is usually coded as a 'rational' fan activity. Spoilers usually give only the basic outline of future events, and the fun for fans is to be found in collectively examining evidence and

discussing narrative possibilities. For example, Jenkins (1995) emphasised the pleasures that Twin Peaks fans got from sifting through textual and extra-textual information, 'cracking the code' and figuring out how the narrative would unfold. Indeed many of my respondents defined the pleasures of spoilers in these terms, commenting "I like the opportunity to speculate [...] It's fun to piece an episode together from a few bits of information that you can get from sources. It's exciting" (Foggi). Another rational explanation for reading spoilers is impatience. Spoilers have been perceived as characteristic of the "'I want it now' generation [who say] to hell with trailers and PR releases. They want to sample the goods" (Sutherland, 2002). In this view fans are making a rational, logical decision to read spoilers and are motivated by impatience rather than by an emotional need to know what happens. However, problems arise when one queries how rational the concept of impatience actually is, or considers the implications when a fan's 'rational' impatience is motivated by their 'irrational' emotional desire to find out what happens as soon as possible. For instance, one respondent commented that "I love, care and worry about these characters. Yes, I intellectually understand that they are fictional, but that does not stop me from being emotionally attached to them. So, I have to know what is going to happen to them ASAP" (Gwynevere1).

[21] Another rational reason is the conscious desire for knowledge to enable fans' greater participation, and often status, with fan peers. The prevalence of the previously mentioned phenomenon of 'just-in-time fandom' has certainly contributed to the increase in spoilers. If fans discuss and communicate immediately after (or even during) the airing of a show, then "falling out of step with this spatio-temporal rhythm means falling out of the newsgroups' mutually reinforcing sphere of anticipation and speculation, or indeed revealing a geographical difference which marks the poster as inevitable and informationally 'alien' to the group's US-based composition" (Hills, 2002:176). The fan is therefore "subordinated within the hierarchy of the group" (Hills, 2002:177) and has less subcultural and fan social capital than other fans. This problem is one that must be continually negotiated by fans torn between wanting to sustain an element of suspense when watching the shows, and being involved in the most up-to-date gossip with other fans. Indeed, "living in the UK it is pretty hard not to be spoiled to some extent, because the shows are shown in the US months ahead of their UK showing" (Anon.). Fans who are spoiled are privileged, as "people who read the wildfeeds and stuff discuss the eppie [episode] generally earlier [...] than the unspoiled ones so the latter are a bit 'late' then and a lot of discussion has already taken place" (Frances).

[22] In contrast are the more personal, emotional and 'irrational' reasons why fans read spoilers. In their study of soap fans, Harrington and Bielby (1995) noted that "narrative speculation provides so much pleasure that viewers wrestle with whether or not" (1995:129) to be spoiled. This characterises the fan as self-absent, fighting the uncontrollable urge to be spoiled. This irrationality contributes to the common analogy of spoilers as a drug, with fans consuming them obsessively, almost against their will. Indeed, this addiction metaphor can be seen in much of the writing on the spoiler phenomenon. One article laments the fact that "it's a shame that no support group exists for this addiction" (Erenburg, 2003) and Emily Nussbaum confesses her 'spoiler whore' status, saying, "I know too much. Each Tuesday night [...] I carry more information that could possibly be good for me. I know the title of the episode to come, the name of the writer, often the basic plot. Occasionally if I really can't resist, I've already read the 'wildfeed' [...] And while I try to avoid the spoilers - plot revelations that ruin surprise twists -its hard!" (2002).

[23] Many fans acknowledge the seeming irrationality of their practices, often through the use of "defensive qualifiers ...[such as] 'it's sad but...'" (Barker and Brooks, 1998:273). Fans can avoid the stigma of 'sadness' "by self-ironising [...] by acknowledging the obsessiveness, [one can] save [oneself] from the charge" (Barker and Brooks, 1998:273), and this is a route of self-deprecation fans utilise, alluding to themselves as 'sad' or 'geeky'. Respondents comment that "This will sound really lame. The show is my life...[I'm] in need of serious help" (Sharon C.) and "What's wrong with me?" (Rachel), using humour to avoid any derogatory assumptions that could be made about them. Similarly many evoke the drug metaphor that I have discussed above, commenting that "it's a shameless, shameless addiction." (Rachel). They also use their emotional investments in the characters to explain their need to be spoiled. They comment that "its crazy, but lots of things happen when you are so attached to characters. You need to know beforehand to be able to handle it" (Foggi). The examples most often cited in this context were the controversial Spike-Buffy 'attempted rape' scene and Tara's death in 'Seeing Red' (6019).

[24] However, not all fans find it easy to distinguish between logical and illogical reasons for their desire to be spoiled. The two became blurred together in some responses, such as "[I read spoilers because] Australia is so far behind [...] but now it is something akin to an addiction" (Debbi), or that "at first it was just because I knew there would be a year and a half gap between seasons for me, being in England and having no access to Sky [...] Now I'm just addicted to speculation and posting on the boards"(Adam). This illustrates the ways that rationally motivated fans can, over time, become 'addicted' to spoilers. Arguably, this could be due to fans' desire to obtain high levels of subcultural and fan social capital as a result of their spoiled status. However, as discussed below, fans are uncomfortable with those who overtly express this desire and could prefer to code themselves as 'addicted' and therefore helpless and passive, thus avoiding the potential fan stigma which could occur if one explicitly declared their longing for greater levels of capital and subcultural power.

Spoilers, Fan Knowledge and Subcultural Capital

[25] It is uncontroversial to suggest that fan subcultural capital is dependent on the amount of knowledge of the fan object that the fan possesses. In his examination of websites devoted to *The Exorcist*, Julian Hoxter concluded that "the acquisition of fan knowledge is about learning, certainly, but [also] signifies an overwhelming need for security" (2000: 179). For Hoxter the collection of knowledge is a way for fans to form affective links to one another through shared information and viewing experiences. He does not, however, consider the ways in which this eagerness to collect and display this knowledge acts as a way for the fan to display their subcultural capital and to accrue power over less educated fans. Obtaining information about the object of fandom is crucial in gaining status and prestige within the fan community as to have little basic knowledge would immediately mark a fan as inferior and would lead to them being dismissed as a "know-nothing dilettante" (Kermode, 1997: 58). Indeed, John Fiske has noted how fan knowledge "serves to distinguish within the fan community. The experts – those who have accumulated the most knowledge – gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power" (1992: 43).

[26] My results show that it is widely perceived by fans that the spoiled are more knowledgeable than the unspoiled. Fans commented that spoiled fans are "More genuine? No. More knowledgeable? Yes" (Jenny) and "I guess they are more genuine fans because they are so involved with the show that actually seeing it is less important than knowing what is about to happen" (Kate). However, again this is a complex issue with fans often making value judgements about spoiled or unspoiled fans. For example, one respondent stated that "I know we're equal but I think I was a better fan when spoiled" (Anon), whilst another argued that "I tend to think that it's the more obsessive fan that is spoiled, because they need to know everything about the show, past and future" (Adam). However, whilst most spoiled respondents were keen to assert that they did not consider themselves to be 'better' or more 'genuine' fans than the unspoiled, the fact that they persist with this fan practice despite it often reducing their enjoyment of the show is telling. They commented that; "I didn't enjoy the show as much if I knew everything that was going to happen" (Ayleen) and "I do believe it detracts from the viewing experience because you're not surprised" (Sharon C.). Fans also explained their need for spoilers through their love of the fan debate that accompanies them, with one male respondent admitting that "While I think the show would be more satisfying to me without spoilers, I can't do without the discussion" (Adam), and another stating "the pleasure I get from the spoilers more than balances out the loss of pleasure from watching the show" (Anon).

[27] So why, then, do fans read spoilers even when such a practice detracts from the enjoyment of the *BtVS* text itself? I posit that it is their need to be 'in the know', to have information before other fans and thus covertly cement their subcultural capital through the acquisition of knowledge or to increase fan social capital through discussion of spoilers.

Spoilers and Fan Social Capital

[28] It has long been argued that talk can be used to gain power and to assume authority over others, and

it has been "seen as both a means of reinforcing group membership, and as a means of social control" (Guendouzi, 2001:33). Indeed, it has been suggested that "gossip has a transactional function and may be used as a form of social exchange, items of gossip being exchanged in order to gain [...] symbolic capital"(Guendouzi, 2001:33). If spoilers are gossip, they can be used by fans to exercise control over others, and the exchange of fan gossip in the form of 'spoilers' can increase fan social capital. Many fans felt that their status as 'spoiler-whores' had allowed them to participate in a unique on-line community and befriend fellow fans. Fans "talk with the people at BC&S almost every day and I feel like I know them as friends" (Gwynevere1) and "there's a distinct community on the boards, especially the Cross and Stake [...] a real camaraderie between posters, and friendships made. And quite a lot of posts are not about the show" (Adam). These on-line friendships tended to be based on affective ties, as "[On Tabula Rasa] they chat on-line, and support each other as friends etc during any trying times in their real life, and I believe they feel part of a select community" (Debbi). Friendships are also based on the shared norms of a particular interpretative community because "the spoiled have so much creative room to spout theories or speculations (based on the spoilers) that the community is immensely entertaining" (Rachel). These friendships are a way for fans to cultivate fan social capital by getting to know other fans. This automatically privileges the spoiled fans as they have a common ground on which to base their relationships whereas the unspoiled are deprived of activities centred on the decoding of spoilers and predicting story lines. Spoiled fans have greater social capital as "it's more difficult to make friends if you're unspoiled because you can't get involved in half the discussion. So you're left out a bit [...] I haven't really come across any specifically unspoiled boards or communities" (Kate). However, spoiled fans can attempt to gain further fan social capital through their on-line participation with the ultimate goal being to attain discursive power and achieve the position of being able to control fan discussion to enforce their own interpretations through their subcultural capital. As one respondent commented, "when you befriend certain 'sources' you get more involved in the initial breaking of spoilers where not many people are involved [...] so yes it's a little clique-y" (Foggi). Those fans that are spoiler sources have greater knowledge of upcoming narrative events and therefore greater subcultural capital. As these fans tend to be the most dominant, it seems that the more privileged fans become, the fewer of them there are.

The Spoiler Hierarchy - Executive Fans, Spoiler Whores and the 'Innocent' Unspoiled

[29] The fans who are positioned as dominant within the BtVS spoiler subculture are 'executive fans', a phenomenon into which there has been little prior research. MacDonald observes that "hierarchy is important on many levels [...] outsiders to fan discourse (such as journalists and academics) will usually be directed either by fans or production people to fans who have achieved a certain level of recognition or authority. The community's determination of who is an authority coincides with the authority's position within various fan hierarchies" (1998:139). However although she critiques executive fans' "ability to determine who is and is not worthy of participation" (1998:139), MacDonald does not scrutinize the ways they can exercise power over other fans through control of knowledge (subcultural capital) and social constraints (social capital). I am narrowing this concept of the executive fan to spoiler sources, those fans that post spoiler information on-line and often act as the conduit between fans and the industry that produces BtVS.

[30] There are many examples of the executive fan within the BtVS online fan communities I examined. As noted by MacDonald (1998) control over venue is important to establishing oneself at the top of the fan hierarchy, and it is the case within BtVS fandom that those spoiler sources who run Websites and/or message boards can exercise control over those fans who frequent them. As well as rules on flaming and netiquette, one prolific BtVS spoiler board, The Buffy Cross and Stake has a stringent list of banned topics, including discussion of character sexuality, the issue of Spike's redemption and the Buffy/Spike relationship (<http://www.angelicsunset.com/faq.html>). Although space prohibits a comprehensive citation of the various rules and regulations, this is a practise undertaken by the majority of fan sites I researched. Through such rules, the executive fans who run these sites can strictly govern topics of conversation and control debate through these "benign dictatorships" (Smith and Kollock, 1999:5) which allow the owners to exercise control but with the informed consent of other fans. This ultimately leads me to question the ways the executive fans can stifle some aspects of fan discussion and this works to contradict views of fandom as interpretative communities "where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are

proposed, debated and negotiated" (Jenkins, 1992:86). The presence of executive fans leads one to ask how this can be true if fans cannot debate issues such as Spike's soul, and other diegetic events that are crucial to the unfolding BtVS narrative?

[31] Spoiler sources themselves are keen to perpetuate the typical notion of fandom as egalitarian and non-hierarchical, commenting that spoiled and unspoiled fans are equal because "its all a matter of personal choice. Some people cannot enjoy a show if they are spoiled. I just want them to enjoy the show" (Kelly). This performed altruism however, seems at odds with the levels of power and control that this source possesses through her ability to stifle and control fan discussions through the suppression of particular spoilers. In addition to withholding spoilers "at the request of my sources", Kelly also attests that "during season seven I have deliberately withheld spoilers by my own choice [...] I have been doing this either when there is a major plot point that will be a huge surprise or narrative twist". However, this begs the question, who gives her, and other spoiler sources, the legitimacy to control fan knowledge, interpretation and discussion in this way?

[32] As previously discussed fan power is "discursive rather than institutional" (Tulloch, 1995:149) and is dependent on the ways in which fans can control textual interpretation and perform "an important agenda-setting function" (Tulloch, 1995:150) by deciding what is and is not a valid topic for discussion. Executive fans are responsible for enforcing and controlling appropriate fan interpretations, what Jenkins (1992) refers to as 'the right way' of reading a text. He notes the importance of "a certain common ground, a set of shared assumptions, interpretations and rhetorical strategies, inferential moves, semantic fields and metaphors [...] as preconditions for meaningful debate over specific interpretations" (1992:89). My research seems to have substantiated my earlier postulation that spoiler sources would possess the greatest levels of power, due to their ability to control the flow of spoiler information to other fans and to stimulate or stifle fan discussion regarding particular upcoming narrative developments.

[33] As "control of knowledge is a major form of social power" (Brown, 1994:132), the possession and distribution of spoilers imbue the spoiler source with knowledge and therefore subcultural capital. Not only did they obtain the information but also they got it first, giving them a distinct advantage over the majority of BtVS fans. Accordingly they achieve prestige and status and are usually respected and admired by other fans. Jenkins (1995) has acknowledged that "knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it" (1995:59). However, the two spoiler sources that responded to my questionnaires were keen to emphasise their passivity and stress that they didn't actively seek out the spoilers or intentionally aim to increase their power and capital. The Partyman says that he started posting spoilers "when I started getting hold of them! [...] I'm just a fan who got so addicted that spoilers started finding their way to me!". Another source, Kelly, also frames her involvement with spoilers in a passive way, stating that she was "taken in by so many foilers, I thought if I could just track who said what, I could figure out who had a reputation for accuracy. Later, people started sending me information, so I posted it".

[34] These responses and attitudes negate the possibility of executive fan power. The Partyman responded to the question of whether he sees himself as being in a powerful position saying "No. But I am aware that some folk do see me that way. Spoilers are addictive. It's maybe like being a drug dealer. Spoiler addicts need their fix, I supply". Evoking this common drug analogy is rather negative, and again alludes to the fact that the spoiler source merely serves the needs of the spoiler whores, and does not seek status or prestige, but rather, performs a necessary service. As previously discussed, this analogy also devalues the spoiled fans by positioning them as uncontrollable addicts, who demand fresh spoilers. Similarly, the discourse of professionalism that spoiled fans alluded to in their discussion of spoiler sources seems to be taken quite seriously by the executive fans themselves. They comment on themselves as having "quite a responsibility" (The Partyman) and also adhere to self-enforced professional codes of conduct. They retain some spoilers at the request of the original source, frowning upon those sources that flout this unspoken rule. The Partyman comments that "if one doesn't post, its because a promise has been made not to, and we take things like that very seriously. (Well, most of us do)". Situated within this discourse of professionalism, are values such as "the responsibility to be as accurate as possible so people are not

misled" (Kelly) and accuracy and credibility, as "folk look to people like myself to confirm or debunk the alleged spoilage" (The Partyman).

[35] However, despite his protestations that he does not actively seek power and capital, he admitted that "Sometimes I've chosen to be cryptic [...] often it's just a case of wanting to spread things out a bit. Why post a whole script summary when you can drip the information out over a week or two?" Kelly, whilst dismissing the notion of herself as 'powerful' because "my power is only that which others give me. On a realistic level, I have no power. The writers are the ones who tell the stories", concedes that "there is [...] ego involved".

[36] Spoiler sources are likely to have the highest levels of fan social capital, through their contact with other fans and industry sources. By the very virtue of what they do, they are popular with other fans as they provide information which fans want, or need to know, and can provide links between fans and producers. Therefore, it is crucial for online fans to try to 'know' the spoiler sources (although it is open to debate how much one can really 'know' another on-line persona) and to win their favour. This is attempted through a mix of friendliness, gratitude, flattery (often bordering on obsequiousness), regular posting and sometimes personal E-mail communication. Indeed, Reid (1999) has commented that executive fans such as Gods and Wizards in MUD's "may often be the subject of respect and even fawning as users attempt to curry favour and gain privileges, but the atmosphere of respect which often surrounds them can lead to favour users who are prepared to offer adulation, and to pass over those who are not" (1999: 120). Fans attempt to avoid disagreement or dispute with these executive fans as they control knowledge and the fans' future social capital. A fan banned from a message board quickly loses his social standing within the fan community and may find himself ostracised from numerous other sites. However, being a well-know spoiler source is not always a positive experience. Some other fans can be dismissive and resentful, and seek to undermine the spoiler sources' legitimacy and authority, particularly when those sources have news concerning fans' favourite characters and storylines. The Partyman mentions how "Spuffy (Spike/Buffy) fans wanted to hunt me down and kill me after my infamous 'Fish and Ships' post (claiming there would be less emphasis on relationships) pre Season 7". Kelly also states that she "reported that a character would die on a board devoted to that character, and the board members took it badly and attacked me [...] it can hurt when you pass on news and people either refuse to take you seriously or ignore you". However, it is likely that such incidents are disliked by sources, not for their personal impact upon the individual, but for the aspersions they cast over the credibility and respect of that source. Indeed, this is often the case in a variety of fandoms when certain fans become executive fans or 'net celebrities'. In a study of online Xena fans, Debbie Casetta has noted how jealousy and bitterness can cause rifts in fandoms as "conflict and criticism all too often will result when someone makes a name for her or himself within fandom. Often she or he found themselves as a target from other fans with an axe to grind [...] these fans tend to be judged quite harshly by other fans [...] resentment is very much a part of what goes on" (Casetta, 2000). Tensions also run high between the various spoiler sources and The Partyman notes how "A certain spoiler queen wanted to hunt me down and kill me due to her frustration and jealousy that I seemingly had information she did not". Therefore, although spoiler sources seem to have the most power in a spoiler hierarchy, they continually jostle between themselves for higher levels of legitimacy, power and subcultural and fan social capital.

[37] Bourdieu has noted that those with high social capital "are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known [...] they do not need to 'make the acquaintance' of all their 'acquaintances'; they are known to more people than they know" (Bourdieu, 1986: 52). More fans know of spoiler sources than that source knows of fans and this cements the fan social capital of the source. Their name is bandied around countless websites, boards and lists, and they are quickly conferred status and prestige by other fans and spoiler sources. Thus a network of executive fans exists within the on-line BtVS community, working to privilege some fans over others, and ensuring that these fans are accorded the appropriate levels of power and continue to occupy dominant positions in the fan hierarchy. Along with subcultural and fan social capital, this prestige imbues the executive fan with symbolic capital, a form of capital which is "both a form of recognition (fame, accumulated prestige) and the specific legitimation of other conjunctions of capitals" (Hills, 2002: 57). This form of capital allows spoiler sources to continue to use their discursive power by controlling fan knowledge, and relying on their high fan social

capital leading to recognition and respect.

[38] Spoiler sources, then, are positioned as dominant due to their greater subcultural and fan social capital and their discursive power. In my research, a number of spoiler sources were named most frequently. Take for instance the example of Tensai (<http://www.spoilerslayer.com>), about whom the following are just a fraction of the comments made: "If Tensai [...] has mentioned whoever it is, they usually become a known source" (Nina), "Usually if Tensai has confirmed them. Once he does I know they can be reliable" (Gwynevere1) and "Tensai says this person is reliable. I trust Tensai" (Rachel). These comments seem to back up my supposition that there is a network of executive fans on-line working to consolidate the position of other fans.

[39] Unsurprisingly, most respondents praised spoiler sources, according them respect and admiration and situating them within a discourse of professionalism. One respondent specifically described them as "very professional" (Rachel) and others were equally effusive. However, a few respondents expressed concern for sources, making comments such as "I sometimes worry that they might get into trouble with Mutant Enemy, especially if they work for them" (Anon). Interestingly, fans are less enthusiastic about sources they deem to be too cryptic and therefore too ostentatious. One source was criticised for this a number of times, with respondents deriding them for "trying too hard to be mysterious" (Paula) and thus giving "the impression...[of] questionable information" (Ariana). Others bemoaned this source as "the only one I can't stand...he never tells us anything directly and is so impressed with himself that he has info and you don't. Get over yourself" (Gwynevere1). Others lamented anonymous sources who are "too obsessed over getting credit for their spoilers" (Bailey) or commented that it's "nice that they share their knowledge. But I hate it if they say 'sorry, cannot say more blabla' [...] boasting much? ;-)" (Susanne). Many fans are uncomfortable with spoiler sources explicitly flaunting their knowledge and subcultural capital, preferring them to act 'professionally' (as discussed above). Arguably, this can be linked to fans' discomfort with declaring their own interest in the acquisition of capital, evidenced in the respondents who declared equality among spoiled and unspoiled fans and then made covert value judgements about the quality and dedication of the unspoiled.

[40] Although the unspoiled possess less subcultural and fan social capital, have less discursive power, and therefore are less able to occupy dominant positions within the fan culture, they were praised and described by spoiler whores as more "restrained" (Beth), with greater "fortitude" (Debbi) and "will power" (Anon). In contrast the spoiled self-identify as 'sad' and "decadent. And in need of serious help" (Sharon C.). Many spoiled fans express positive opinions of the unspoiled, conceding "I greatly admire unspoiled fans ability to remain strong, and enjoy the show as it plays out with no prior knowledge" (Isabelle). They praise (even envy?) their decision to be spoiler-free, conceding that "They're strong. I'm not" (Jenny), lamenting "I wish I had the strength to stay unspoiled!" (Abby) and expressing bewilderment at their choice; "I don't know how they do it though" (Foggi). One of the most incongruous comments made regarding the unspoiled was that "they are innocent and they need to be protected" (Sharon C.). This is intriguing as it suggests that being spoiled is a guilty pleasure, which can harm and damage those fans that participate in such activity. This statement connotes that the spoiled are in some way reprehensible and that the unspoiled are innocent of such 'sinful' indulgence and decadence. It therefore assumes a negative stance towards spoilers, devaluing the spoiled fans and simultaneously privileging the unspoiled as stronger and more restrained, whilst also patronisingly labelling them as naïve and helpless. This statement directly contradicts the view of another fan who lamented the fact that "[people] feel they should feel guilty about reading spoilers" (Gwynevere1). Indeed, only one respondent explicitly said they thought the spoiled were 'better', commenting "Yes, I'd say so. Just because that section of fandom is so huge for Buffy, it's hard to be part of the community without it" (Foggi), again consolidating the link between subcultural capital gained by spoilers and fan social capital garnered from discussing them.

Conclusions

[41] It is worth noting that the majority of my respondents were female (only two were male) and this

could be because BtVS has a large female fanbase, and a large female on-line presence. Also the sites I posted at requesting respondents consisted of two general boards, two Spike oriented lists and one Angel oriented list. Arguably, these characters, acting as the main attraction for the female spectator are going to have large female fan bases and possibly, posting at a Buffy or Faith specific board would have yielded a greater number of male respondents. However, BtVS on-line fandom is highly fragmented and general boards are uncommon. The fan practise of 'shipping' (of supporting particular on-screen romantic relationships) has caused the fandom to split into smaller communities, and it is difficult to find 'neutral' boards which tolerate all shipper groups. I had also hypothesised that the majority of spoiler sources and therefore executive fans would be male and that this would show a power imbalance in favour of the male fans. However, of the seven most commonly named sources, four were female and three were male. This contradicts my earlier supposition that male sources can exert power over female fans, and continue their dominance at the top of the spoiler hierarchy. Instead, it appears that female fans assume the mantle of spoiler sources and are able to exert their own authority and dominance in the typically male-oriented space of the Internet.

[42] In conclusion, whilst this study is only a snapshot of a small corner of on-line BtVS fandom, some conclusions can be drawn and questions raised for possible future research. It seems clear that whilst the majority of fans openly express the egalitarianism and equality of spoiled and unspoiled fan factions, there are differences in the forms of capital that each group possesses. The spoiled have greater subcultural and, in particular, fan social capital and therefore occupy the more dominant position in the fandom, dominating the fandom with their fan knowledge, textual interpretations and discursive power. The discursive power of being able to "call up series history in their quest for meaning" (Tulloch, 1995:149) also ensures that the spoiled possess the greatest levels of power, as they are able to use previous plot twists and character developments to decode spoilers and predict narrative occurrences. However, this is done in a surprisingly restrained manner with little explicit criticism of the unspoiled from these fans. Rather, their praise of the unspoiled is indicative of both their own desires to retain an untarnished enjoyment of the show, their discomfort with overt declarations of their own capital and a general desire to perpetuate the idea that fandom remains egalitarian and non-hierarchical. Although this research is not representative of BtVS fandom as a whole and it cannot be used to make sweeping generalisations about the BtVS fan community as a whole, further enquiry could consider the responses of a greater number of male fans by soliciting responses from different fan factions. Furthermore, this research is obviously restricted by the employment of only one empirical method, and a parallel discourse analysis of on-line postings would either substantiate or contradict the findings from the respondents. This would highlight whether the comments that fans post on-line belies their performance as egalitarian and non-hierarchical and undermines the answers they give when presenting themselves and their fandoms to a researcher. Finally, now that BtVS itself has come to an end, critical analysis of the ways in which fan hierarchy and power have been affected by fans' move into Angel fandom could provide further insights into issues of fan community, power and hierarchy.

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Elizabeth Rambo

“Lessons” for Season Seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Will you tell me this riddle: who is the father of lies?
Who is the master of half-truth? What is Madison Avenue?
T-Bone Burnett, *Truth Decay*

“Buffy—duck”

Spike, “Lessons”

[1] Two themes stated for season seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by series creator and executive producer Joss Whedon were “Back to the beginning” (“Watch”) and “coming to terms with power and sharing it and enjoying it” (Whedon, “Ending”). It is worth noting that these themes were announced in Spring and Summer of 2002, before or just as filming for season seven began: The “back to the beginning” quote comes from an April news story, and at Mutant Enemy’s “*Buffy Behind the Scenes*” event in June 2002, which was intended to show off the musical episode “Once More with Feeling” (6007) to potential Emmy voters, a fan who attended the event reported that Whedon announced “it was time to get back to what he said was the real theme of the series: *the joy of female empowerment and the sharing of that power*” (Tague). In an interview with the *New York Times* just before the final episode of season seven aired, Whedon stated:

After seven years your mission statement may have changed. Ours remained pretty much the same, or rather came full circle. We looked at the idea of power; the girl who had power that nobody understood, living in high school and how hard that was. We came back to that girl and that concept very strongly in the seventh season on purpose because we knew it was our last. (“10 Questions”)

All these comments seem to indicate, first, that season seven’s major themes were clearly conceptualized by the writers well-ahead of any definite statements that season seven would be the last season or that Sarah Michelle Gellar would be leaving the series, and secondly, that the themes of season seven were highly compatible with a final season, and may have been deliberately chosen with that possibility in mind. What follows is a fairly straightforward (some might say old fashioned) “close reading” of “Lessons,” considering some ways in which this first episode may be viewed as a kind of template for the entire final season of *Buffy*.

[2] It was always very likely that the seventh season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would be the show’s last. *Buffy* had moved from the WB network to UPN in 2001 with a two year contract, and Joss Whedon told *TV Guide* in October 2002, “I’m beginning to suspect that it may be [*Buffy’s*] last season [. . .]. Nothing’s official, but it’s starting to feel possible. The way people are talking, there’s a finality to it” (“Buh-Bye”). In addition, rumors arose that Sarah Michelle Gellar might not renew her contract at the end of that second year, and who could seriously imagine *Buffy* without Buffy?¹ The stakes for season seven, therefore, were as high if not higher than the stakes for season five, the show’s last season on the WB network, which

ended with Buffy's spectacular second death ("The Gift," 5022), and fan expectations were thus somewhat overwrought, perhaps unreasonably so. Many were already displeased or distressed by directions the show had taken in season six, particularly Buffy's lengthy depression following her reluctant resurrection, Buffy's dysfunctional relationship with Spike, the "Three Stooges" of villainy (Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew), and especially the death of Tara, which provoked enormous controversy as soon as it was "spoiled," long before "Seeing Red" (6019) actually aired.²

[3] Whedon, though famous for having said, "Don't give people what they want, give them what they need" (Interview, Tasha Robinson), seems to have felt that fans both needed and wanted assurance that season seven would be "lighter" than season six ("Watch"), although he had previously defended his and Marti Noxon's season six story arc, which he acknowledged had been fairly grim: "I told Marti, 'You know, I've been thinking, and I think next year we should go back to, like...that very positive message that we had at the very beginning of the show, and really see Buffy empowered again, instead of seeing her at the mercy of her life'" (Lee). The first episode of season seven, "Lessons," seems to epitomize these promises, but Whedon also jokingly credited himself with "a thing I have personally devised called a 'plot twist'" (Wright). Those who geared up happily for a season of Dawn, Kit, and Carlos as bouncy junior Scoobies dealing with various metaphorical teen monsters-of-the-week, aided by counselor/Slayer Buffy at newly rebuilt Hellmouth High may have been disappointed again when season seven rapidly turned nearly as grim as season six. Much like Buffy startled by newly ensouled Spike in the high school basement, after six years with Joss Whedon's team of writers, viewers should know to be ready to duck when he says things will be fine. The lessons of "Lessons" turn out to be stated quite plainly—virtually hitting us on the head—but it would take the entire season to learn them.

[4] Two important elements of season seven which "Lessons" illustrates are the vital necessity of listening carefully to words, which will often have more than one meaning, and the need to watch carefully for visual clues and references. In the course of the episode, several points are made regarding listening and watching, each of which is echoed or reflected in various ways as the season continues, culminating in the series finale, "Chosen" (7022), an objective that influenced the intervening episodes, according to Whedon (Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator"). In addition, "Lessons" signals that season seven may be about new beginnings, but it will also be very much about the past, the history of the entire series and its invented back-story. *Buffy* is a show that from at least its second season has increasingly rewarded the attentive viewer with intertextual and metatextual references, and often baffled the casual channel-surfer, and perhaps never more than in season seven, which continually alluded to past seasons and episodes and gave false clues about where it was going. In "Get It Done" (7015), the importance of watching carefully will be spelled out as "You can't just watch, you have to see." A corollary key to "Lessons" might be phrased as, "You can't just listen, you have to hear." Though some details along the way may have been altered by circumstances or other considerations,³ the essential elements of the final episode seem never to have been in question, and "Lessons" provides a remarkable number of clues as to what signposts to watch for and when the viewer, perhaps, should have ducked.

Back to the beginning

[5] As most *Buffy* fans and scholars know, the show began with Whedon's vision of the stereotypical horror movie's frail blonde girl going into a dark alley with a menacing assailant, and then—"she's not only ready for him, she trounces him" ("Joss Whedon"). "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1001) starts with a twist on that scenario: the seemingly helpless blonde turns out to be a vampire, Darla. "Lessons" opens on a variation of the cliché itself: a terrified girl fleeing through dark alleys, pursued by hooded figures. After six years of triumphant Buffy, perhaps the viewer expects the girl to escape, or to turn and defeat her enemies; instead, the attackers surround and kill her, reminding viewers of Whedon's elementary principle from "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1001): "The idea is always to try and surprise them, to subvert the obvious" ("Commentary"). "Lessons" concludes with the First Evil (though the audience is not meant to guess what it is yet) manifesting itself as the past seasons' villains in reverse order, taking viewers "right back to the beginning," according to The Master vampire of season one. It's appropriate for The Master, one of the oldest vampires, to speak about "the beginning," as the first and final opponents the First will call up against the Slayer are "Turok-Han" (familarly known as the "über-vamps"), primordial vampires that are much harder to kill than modern vampires.

[6] The opening and closing scenes of "Lessons" contain only two of the "back to the beginning" allusions that almost every episode in season seven will refer to in various ways. We'll get scenes from the complete biography of Anyanka the vengeance demon in "Selfless" (7005) that also allude to seasons five ("Triangle," 5009) and six ("Once More," 6007), and a vital missing piece of Spike's vampire history in "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017); reformed rogue vampire slayer Faith⁴ will return to Sunnydale, as will Angel;⁵ Buffy and Dawn's mother, Joyce, will reappear (either as a ghost or as an apparition of the First Evil,⁶ or in Buffy's dreams⁷), and the apparitions of several of the past seasons' villains will turn up again as well. All these returning characters and references to the past continually remind viewers how the show and the characters have changed through its seven year run. As Mutant Enemy writer Jane Espenson describes it:

Our agenda at the very beginning of this year overall was [. . .] to return to high school, and [the first few episodes] had that first-season feel to them, but our characters have been through so much and have suffered such losses that we couldn't maintain that lighthearted, it's-all-a-big-fun-metaphor for much of the year, but we came into it with that agenda of getting off on a lighter foot [. . .] because the high-school-as-hell metaphor is the strongest the series ever had. (*Succubus Club*)

Thus, the "back to the beginning" theme seems more and more ironic as the season progresses, or as viewers come to realize how impossible that nostalgic dream always is.

"It's about power. [. . .] Who's got it. Who knows how to use it."

[7] The opening and closing scenes of "Lessons" end with the phrase "It's about power." In both cases, the speaker is Buffy—Buffy herself, teaching Dawn how to fight vampires, and at the end, the First Evil appearing as Buffy. Buffy has always been the girl with the power—"one girl in all the world, a Chosen One, one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires..." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001). Nevertheless, the message has been delivered again and again that although Buffy is unique (despite the secondary callings of Kendra ["What's My Line" 1-2, 2009-10] and Faith ["Faith, Hope and Trick," 3003]), she is not, in fact, alone (Clark and Miller). She has friends and family, and these characters have developed their own powers, or at least their own talents and skills. "Who's got [power?] Who knows how to use it[?]" are questions for almost every character in the course of season seven.

[8] Since "Lessons" opens with her, let's first focus on Dawn, who was introduced as an interdimensional key disguised as a fourteen-year-old girl in season five; in season seven she's a high-school girl (the same age as Buffy in "Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001), trying to find her place in the strangest household in Sunnydale, maybe the world. Could she be a vampire slayer like her sister? The opening scene of "Lessons" hints that she might be, with Buffy teaching her how to fight vampires, but since "Potential" (7012) reveals that Dawn is not a future Slayer, it makes more sense to read Dawn in this episode as pre-figuring the Potential Slayers whom Buffy will teach in later episodes ("Showtime," 7011; "Potential"). Rather, Dawn must discover her own path. At the end of season six, Buffy, recovering her sense of self, her calling, and her *joie de vivre*, promised Dawn:

Things have really sucked lately, but that's all gonna change—and I want to be there when it does. [. . .] I want to see you grow up. The woman you're gonna become... Because she's gonna be beautiful. And she's gonna be powerful. I got it so wrong. I don't want to protect you from the world—I wanna show it to you. There's so much that I want to show you. ("Grave," 6022)

Buffy's vampire-slaying tutorial is undoubtedly an effort to carry out this promise, but her overwhelming instinct, especially as Dawn returns to Sunnydale High on the Hellmouth, is to "make sure it's safe for my sister" ("Lessons," 7001).⁸ Although Dawn still needs her sister's help in "Lessons," in succeeding episodes she continues to resist Buffy's "protection" in subtle, but increasingly effective ways, mostly off-screen. At

intervals, we see that she has discovered a talent for the kind of research and linguistic skills that enable her to taken on Giles's role in emergency spell-casting ("Conversations," 7007) and explaining ancient texts and rituals ("Get It Done," 7015), so that she is calling herself "Watcher Junior" by the end of the season ("Chosen," 7022). Dawn steps up most decisively as a leader, not just a follower or observer, in "Empty Places," and perhaps hers is the only voice Buffy will hear at this point:

DAWN: Buffy, I love you, but you were right. We have to be together on this. You can't be a part of it. So I need you to leave. I'm sorry, but this is my house, too.

[Buffy looks around, then walks out the front door.]

RONA: Ding dong, the witch is dead.

DAWN: [sharply] Shut your mouth. (7019)

[10] "Lessons" subtly foreshadows this scene in reverse, as "Plin" points out, with Dawn's breezy farewell to Buffy at the entry to Sunnydale High: "DAWN: I know! You never know what's coming, the stake is not the power, *To Serve Man* is a cookbook. **I love you. Go away!**" (7001; emphasis added). When Buffy tries to save Dawn from the final apocalyptic showdown with the forces of the First Evil, we learn that Dawn has wasted little time worrying about what Joyce's cryptic prophecy meant ("When it's bad, Buffy won't choose you. She'll be against you" ["Conversations," 7007]), or whether it was true or false, but has simply prepared herself by acquiring a taser, which she uses to stop Xander from taking her away from Sunnydale ("End of Days," 7021).⁹ After spending most of seasons five and six whining or screeching, and lying and shoplifting in desperate attempts to get some attention, Dawn claims her own identity in season seven, much as Buffy did in season one. After a few false starts, in which she, like any other Sunnydale student, is at the mercy of the Hellmouth—transformed to a life-size, pose-able "Skipper" doll by Gnarl's paralyzing venom in "Same Time, Same Place" (7003), falling under the spell of R.J.'s letter-jacket of love in "Him" (7006)—Dawn never looks back.

[11] Before leaving the scene of Buffy and Dawn in the cemetery, another significant element must be noted. The vampire rising from his grave may foreshadow the dire "über-vamps" to come or The First itself, but he is ironically "stuck—could use some help" ("Lessons," 7001). Dawn thinks "he's got the power" (7001), but repeatedly throughout season seven we'll be shown that as a "big bad," a villain to end all villains, the insubstantial First Evil only has as much power as it is given by its corporeal "Bringers"—notes Andrew, "[T]hey're very mobile for blind people [. . .]" ("Storyteller," 7016)—and, more significantly, by those who allow themselves to be swayed by its line of flattery and appeals to greed, lust, jealousy, anger, hatred, and fear. Nevertheless, these emotions and desires are "real—that's the only lesson, it's always real" ("Lessons," 7001), which has always been the "lesson" of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Buffy kindly helps the apparently ineffectual vampire, and he almost kills Dawn when she stakes him but misses the heart; the First Evil seems like a lame "big bad," but the emotions it raises and the actions they can motivate are fatal, or nearly fatal, to more than one of the "good guys." "Lessons" has more to say about the nature of the season's villain, however, as will become clear.

It's all connected

[12] The second theme announced for season seven was, "coming to terms with power and sharing it and enjoying it" ("Ending"). "Lessons" refers repeatedly to "connection," beginning with Willow's conjured Peruvian flower: "It's all connected. The root systems, the molecules...the energy. Everything's connected." These references will continue throughout season seven, sometimes through puns and other hints. Giles's and Willow's scenes are full of these freighted lines: "WILLOW: Is there anything you don't know everything about? GILES: Synchronized swimming. Complete mystery to me" (7001). As a watcher, Giles has been trained to guide one girl; working with the "unusual" Buffy has made him an outcast even among Watchers. Season seven will develop the value of team work—"synchronized swimming"—something Giles knows nothing about, but which he—and indeed, all the characters—will have to learn in order to help the remaining Slayers-in-Training and to survive "what's to come" ("Restless," 4022).

[13] The next Giles and Willow scene finds Willow on the ground, apparently staggered by a sudden dreadful mystical experience, as Giles supports her:

WILLOW: I felt the Earth. It's all connected. It is, but it's not all good and pure and rootsy. There's deep, deep black. There's...I saw, I saw the Earth, Giles. I saw its teeth.

GILES: The hell mouth.

WILLOW: It's gonna open. It's gonna swallow us all.

Notice that Willow's terrified position in this scene:



("Lessons," 7001 [*Just Imagine*])

is very similar to her happily exhausted "That was nifty!" position in the principal's office above the Hellmouth after she successfully "connects" via the Slayer's Scythe to empower all the Potentials in "Chosen" (7022):



("Chosen," 7022 [*Just Imagine*])

and the earth does *not* swallow them all, though there are certainly great losses.

[14] Another symbol of connection in "Lessons" is the cell-phone Buffy gives to Dawn. "DAWN: It's a weapon, isn't it? BUFFY: Yes, it is" (7001).¹⁰ Communication as a weapon? Certainly many of the issues of season six involved lack of communication, most of which were encapsulated in "Once More with Feeling," in which people found themselves compelled to sing about things they were afraid or unwilling to talk about (6007). "Plin" notes that although the cell-phone is indeed effective in "Lessons" ("DAWN: Buffy? Isn't this reception amazing?" [7001]), "as the season progresses the cell is used to show Buffy increasingly cut off from her circle." In "Conversations with Dead People," Buffy loses it in the graveyard, and it rings uselessly as she insistently tells vampire psychologist Holden Webster, "I'm connected. I'm connected to a lot of people, OK.[. . .] I really am." (7007); in "Potential," Willow wants to call Buffy with the news that Dawn is a future Slayer, but "we can't," Xander remembers. "She didn't bring a cell phone" (7012). In "First Date," there are two cell-phone snafus: when the Scoobies attempt to contact Buffy after foiling the First Evil's attempt to subvert Andrew, they find she has left her phone behind and is once again, "[n]ot so much connected" ("Conversations," 7007), while simultaneously Xander's encoded text-message appears on Willow's cell, but she can't remember what it means:

WILLOW: Uh, this one's either "I just got lucky, don't call me for a while" or "my date's a demon who's trying to kill me."

KENNEDY: You don't remember which?

WILLOW: It was a long time ago.

DAWN: Well, if we play the percentages...

GILES: Something's eating Xander's head. (7014)

At least they remember that much. In "End of Days" (7021), Buffy will finally admit, "The good guys are not traditionally known for their communication skills," but her very acknowledgment demonstrates that she has reached the point where she is willing and able to connect in new ways. She will stop lecturing and start talking (except to Dawn, who has one more journey of her own to make).

[15] Perhaps the most significant representation of connection in “Lessons” is one that is easy to miss, but can be followed through succeeding episodes until it comes full circle to return to its origin. Buffy, having fought her way through the “manifest spirits” to get to a room in the high school basement where she believes she’ll find Dawn, prepares to kick open the door only to be confronted by a disheveled Spike, clearly the last person she expected. “Buffy,” he says blankly, reaching out to touch her cheek, “duck —” (7001). James Marsters, as Spike, keeps the intonation perfectly neutral, so that the viewer and the startled Buffy are momentarily suspended among three possible interpretations—the British endearment, a warning to “duck!” or Buffy’s stunned “What? Duck? There’s a duck?”—before she is bashed by a the spirit-janitor. It’s a beautiful moment of verbal play, but the real key is the ever-so-brief gesture of physical connection:



(“Lessons,” 7001 [*Just Imagine*])

[16] Cassie reaches out to Buffy with this same gesture in “Help,” assuring her, “you will [make a difference]” (7004); when Joyce touches the dreaming Buffy in “Bring on the Night,” Buffy wakes up cupping her own face—



(7010 [*Just Imagine*])

Joyce's appearance in Buffy's dreams representing both the memory of her mother's love and Buffy's own "mother wit," telling her what she knows instinctively, although she's not ready to accept it yet (7010). In "Get It Done," the shaman gives Buffy the knowledge she asks for with the same simple touch after she rejects his attempt to fill her with additional demonic "slayer power" (7015); in "Touched" (7020), Spike, now in full possession of his faculties, touches Buffy's face again, saying "Hey, look at me"—a variation on "You can't just watch, you have to see" ("Get It Done," 7015). In the same episode, Faith connects with Robin Wood with a variation on the same gesture, taking his hand and bringing it to her face: "FAITH: Been awhile. Am I out of line? PRINCIPAL WOOD: Hey, you're the leader" (7020). And finally in "Chosen," Buffy brings the circle of connection back around to Spike, as she reaches out to him after giving him the champion's amulet, not going up the stairs as she did in "The Gift," when she was still, indeed, "unattainable" and he was a "monster" she "treat[ed...] like a man" (5022).



("Chosen," 7022 [*Just Imagine*])

The significant element in all but one of these scenes is that the connections are emotional and/or intellectual; even Faith and Wood's encounter, which may appear to be purely physical, indicates the beginning of a deeper bond between them, although Faith is reluctant to admit it initially ("Chosen," 7022).

"We all are who we are..."

[17] Willow's and Giles's first scene ends with another seemingly significant line from Giles: "In the end, we all are who we are, no matter how much we may appear to have changed" ("Lessons, 7001), and an immediate cut to Xander in a business suit, looking "unconscionably spiffy," says Buffy, even suavely "double-O-Xander," according to Dawn (7001). And indeed, Xander will remain "The man who is the heart of the Slayer machine," in the slightly heightened rhetoric of Andrew's "Monsterpiece Theatre" documentary ("Storyteller," 7016). Fans warily speculated that successful Xander in a suit must be about to turn evil, but his "I'm good" seemed to have a double meaning this time—Xander remains good in season seven, though he is also, as usual, naive in assessing the newly rebuilt Sunnydale high school to be "safe as houses" (7001). When have houses in Sunnydale ever been safe?

[18] Who else has not really changed? Anyanka the off-and-on-again vengeance demon tries to defend her job performance when her colleague Halfrek point out, "No deaths. No eviscerations. You're not goading women into anything inventive, and you're not delivering when it is" ("Lessons," 7001). Anyanka's emotional links to ex-fiancé Xander and his friends are stronger than she thought they were; she will rescind one of her wishes for Xander's sake, and admit to Willow,

ANYA: [. . .] the vengeance itself, i-it's not as fulfilling as I remember.

WILLOW: Really? 'Cause I got the impression that you enjoyed—you know, inflicting.

ANYA: Well, causing pain sounds really cool, I know, but turns out it's really upsetting. Didn't use to be, but now it is. ("Same Time, Same Place," 7003)

And she finally asks to be released from "the vengeance fold," even if the price must be her own life ("Selfless," 7005). The fact that the price turns out to be her demon friend Halfrek's life does not negate Anyanka's self-sacrificial intent. Nevertheless, Anya maintains her screen of sarcasm almost to the bitter end: "Spike's got some sort of "Get Out of Jail Free" card that doesn't apply to the rest of us. I mean, he could slaughter a hundred frat boys, and— [everyone looks at Anya, who actually did slaughter a large number of fraternity boys in "Selfless"; Anya laughs it off] Forgiveness makes us human—blah-dee-blah-blah-blah" ("Lies," 7017). At last, Andrew finds a common thread with her as they raid the abandoned hospital for medical supplies:

ANDREW: So how come you're here? I mean, you could just go, right? [...W]hat's different?
ANYA: Well, I guess I was kinda new to being around humans before. But now I've seen a lot more, gotten to know people, seen what they're capable of and...I guess I just realized how amazingly screwed up they all are. I mean, really, really screwed up in a monumental fashion. [. . .]

And they have no purpose that unites them so they just drift around blundering through life until they die...which they know is coming yet every single one of them is surprised when it happens to them. They're incapable of thinking about what they want beyond the moment.

They kill each other, which is clearly insane...and yet here's the thing. When it's something that really matters, they fight. I mean, they're lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never...they never quit. So I guess I will keep fighting, too.

ANDREW: That was kind of beautiful. You love humans.

ANYA: I do not!

ANDREW: Yes, you do. [sing-song] You love them...

ANYA: Stop it! I don't love them and I'll kill you if you tell anybody.

ANDREW: I won't tell anybody. I won't get a chance to, anyway.

ANYA: I don't know, you might survive.

ANDREW: No, you might survive. You know how to handle a weapon and you've been in this world for like a thousand years. I'm not so... [sighs] I don't think I'll be okay. I'm cool with it. I think I'd like to finish out as one of those lame humans trying to do what's right.

ANYA: [smiles] Yeah.

ANDREW: So...wheelchair fight? ("End of Days," 7021)

Andrew perceives that despite her protests, Anya has come to love humans, but that he won't get her to admit it by arguing. Anya's seasonal arc is yet another example of "you can't just listen, you have to hear" and "you can't just watch, you have to see." In almost every episode after "Selfless," her actions speak louder than her words: she remains in the Summers house and helps care for and train the Potential Slayers. She may call the Potentials "cannon fodder," but "Not to their faces. What am I—insensitive?" ("Chosen," 7022); and she can't stop caring about Xander; ultimately, they reconcile ("Storyteller," 7016, "Touched," 7020).

[19] "We all are who we are" is a kind of promise, as well, to viewers who were exhausted by the despairing Buffy of season six that the Slayer's second emergence from her grave is permanent. She really is "alive," no longer "going through the motions" ("Once," 6007). Nevertheless, to have written season seven's "back to the beginning" Buffy as regaining the kind of sophomoric, frothy girlishness she had in seasons one and two would not have been consistent with the way Mutant Enemy writers have shown characters to be changed by experience. As Joss Whedon explained in an interview with IGN.com:

In season seven, it wasn't like we weren't going to put her through her paces. Buffy in pain is a staple of the show from season one. As [David] Greenwalt and I told each other very early on—"Buffy in pain, story more interesting. Buffy not in pain, story not interesting." So we couldn't just have her be like, "La-di-da, do-di-do, all is well," for a season, because—hey, show not about that. The dark place we took her to was about, "I'm accepting my power, my responsibility, and my leadership, and those are hard things to deal with." So, inevitably, she got kind of bummed out, because that's how you tell the story. The hero goes through something and then they resolve it. (Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator")

Part of the "going through something" included the "bummed out" responses of Buffy's friends and family, who also found her "I'm the law" leadership style jarring, and her speeches boring and less-than-helpful: in the beautifully constructed and hilarious metafiction-within-the-fiction, "Storyteller," Andrew ducks out as Buffy begins pontificating: "ANDREW: Honestly, gentle viewers, these motivating speeches of hers tend to get a little long. I'll take you back in there in—in a little while.[. . .] She's not done. Even Willow looks bored, and she usually can take a lot of that stuff" (7016).

[20] Buffy herself hates what she has become—the role of commandant is clearly not natural to her, and she keeps trying to find more effective ways to deal with a threat that she cannot touch, to protect girls who remind her so much of Dawn that she is afraid to get close to them—"You can't protect her," the dead girl's spirit tells Buffy in "Lessons," "You couldn't protect me" (7001). Even if these "manifest spirits" are not direct apparitions of the First Evil, they talk like it—reminding people of past failures, feeding their fears, and sapping their hopes. Buffy's lessons will be to learn that Dawn can protect herself, and to let herself love even those she may lose—the lesson of the First Slayer—

GUIDE: You are full of love. You love with all your soul. It's brighter than the fire, blinding. That's why you pull away from it.

BUFFY: I'm full of love? I'm not losing it?

GUIDE: Only if you reject it. Love is pain and the slayer forges strength from pain. Love. Give. Forgive. Risk the pain. It is your nature. For it will bring you to your gift. ("Intervention," 5018)

Among several ways this prophecy may be read as borne out in season seven is Buffy's evasion of Caleb and discovery of the Slayer's Scythe, after she finally *hears* Spike assure her:

When I say I love you, it's not because I want you, or because I can't have you. It has nothing to do with me. I love what you are, what you do, how you try. I've seen your kindness and your strength. I've seen the best and the worst of you and I understand with perfect clarity exactly what you are. You are a hell of a woman. You're the one, Buffy. ("Touched," 7020)

Even though she protests automatically, "I don't want to be the one," she is able to ask Spike to "just hold me"—something she would never have done before—and to sleep at last, as Joyce told her she must in "Bring on the Night" (7010). The following day, she finally finds "the strength and skill" to evade Caleb instead of attacking him directly, attacks which previously allowed him to smash her with his superior strength ("Buffy, duck!"), and to take the Scythe from its Excalibur-like hiding-place under the vineyard: love leads her to her gift.

"There's always a talisman."

[21] The "manifest spirits" Buffy battles in "Lessons" have been raised by a mysterious talisman: "DAWN: How'd you know it was a talisman? BUFFY: *There's always a talisman*. The real question is who put it there" (7001, emphasis added). Much grumbling among fans because the origin of this talisman was never revealed,¹¹ but if we consider "Lessons" primarily as a thematic template for the season, the talisman itself is the important thing, foreshadowing several other objects that channel supernatural power or call up supernatural entities which feature significantly in later episodes: R.J.'s letter jacket is a kind of talisman of high school popularity and success, handed down from father to son ("Him," 7004); Willow uses D'Hoffryn's talisman, given to her in "Something Blue" (4009), to summon him and bargain for the return of Anyanka to humanity in "Selfless" (7005); the knife Andrew uses to murder Jonathan, and the "Seal of Danzalthar" on the Hellmouth may be interpreted as talismans ("Conversations," 7007; "Bring on the Night," 7010); in "Get It Done," Buffy breaks the power of the primeval "Shadow Men" by breaking the leader's staff in a gesture parallel to Xander's in breaking the "Lessons" talisman, saying, "I knew it. It's always the staff" (7015); the Slayer's Scythe becomes a talisman when Willow uses it to channel Slayer power to all potential Slayers ("Chosen," 7022); and finally, Angel brings the "champion's" amulet to Buffy, which will enable Spike to "do the cleanup" of the Hellmouth by channeling "purifying power...cleansing power...possibly scrubbing bubbles" ("Chosen," 7022). The real question is who put *this* talisman into Angel's hands—evil law firm Wolfram and Hart, or someone else using W&H as go-between—and whether that agent originally meant it to be worn by Angel, or by Spike, who—thanks to the amulet and a mysterious delivery service—is revived on *Angel* and continuing to work out his own salvation (with minimal evidence of fear and trembling) ("Conviction," A5001).

Of dogs and mothers

[22] The final scene of the "teaser" introduces a new character, the new principal of the rebuilt Sunnydale High School, Robin Wood, who will become a key figure of the season. His meetings with Buffy in "Lessons" yield two more lines that direct viewers attention both forward and backward. I deal with these

in reverse order of occurrence and importance:

[23] As Buffy and Principal Wood discuss Buffy's high school record and Dawn's future, they are interrupted by Buffy's cell-phone ringing—Dawn calling from the high school basement. The scene is played for humor as Buffy tries to invent a cover story:

BUFFY: Excuse me. Yeah. [to Principal] Oh, sorry. My dog. Uh, dog walker. [Quietly, into phone] Three dead?

PRINCIPAL: Oh, my God!

BUFFY: Uh, no, I'll be right there.

PRINCIPAL: Your dogs are dead?

DAWN: And, Buffy? Isn't this reception amazing? I'm in the freakin' basement!

BUFFY: OK. Sorry about that. I—I have to...

PRINCIPAL: Yeah. No, of course. And good luck with that...dog tragedy.

It seems like just a funny scene, until episode two, "Beneath You," in which a literal "dog tragedy" occurs—a Yorkshire terrier is eaten by a giant worm (one of Anyanka's vengeance victims).

[24] References to dogs turn up again in episode three, "Same Time, Same Place," as Spike continues proving his ensouled reformation by acting as "bloodhound" to find Willow:

XANDER: Should've put a leash on him.

BUFFY: Yes, let's tie ourselves to the crazy vampire.

XANDER: You really think it's gonna work?

BUFFY: It's pretty easy. Spike follows the exciting smell of blood, and we follow the fairly ripe smell of Spike.

At this point, the alert viewer might want to review the history of vampires as "dogs" on *Buffy*; it is quite considerable, and goes "right back to the beginning" with the Master's sarcastic dismissal of Jesse as an "offering" in "The Harvest": "You've tasted it. I'm your. . .faithful dog. You bring me scraps" (1002). Angel calls a pack of vampires "dogs" ("Angel," 1007); Drusilla calls Angel "bad dog" ("What's My Line" 2, 2010); Spike is famously, or infamously, "love's bitch, but [. . .] man enough to admit it" ("Lover's Walk," 3008); Angel is "the puppy" Vampire Willow tortures in "The Wish" (3009); Buffy tells Parker that the scar on her neck from Angel's bite came from an "angry puppy" and Oz uses the same term as a code to alert her that Harmony has been turned into a vampire ("Harsh Light," 4003); Dru tells Spike that his "[chip] tells you you're not a bad dog, but you are" ("Crush," 5014). Principal Wood, when given a chance to avenge the death of his mother by staking Spike, incites him with "That's right, dog. Fight back" ("Lies," 7017). In addition to the vampire "dogs," the name of the fallen preacher, Caleb, means "dog" in Hebrew—if the choice of names is coincidental, it is nevertheless remarkable. The role of Robin Wood as villain or hero may have been undecided when "Lessons" was written, and perhaps whether Spike would survive the end of the season was also undetermined at that time; nevertheless, by the time "Chosen" was written, "Good luck with that dog tragedy" certainly seems to have become another significant line.

[25] When Wood first meets Buffy, he assumes she is Dawn's mother: "You seem a bit young to have such a gown-up daughter" ("Lessons," 7001). Although he soon admits that he has "heard of" Buffy—and will eventually confess that he knew all along that she was the Slayer—here is the foreshadowing of Wood as the son of Nikki, the "subway Slayer" of "Fool for Love" (5007).¹² His error sends Buffy to check her appearance in the mirror: "It's not 'mom hair'"—but like so many statements made in "Lessons," in some

senses, the opposite is true—Dawn was made from Buffy, according to the monks who made the “key” human (“No Place Like Home,” 5005); Buffy will soon find herself in the uncomfortable position of “mother” to a houseful of slayerettes; and finally in “Chosen,” the First-as-Buffy addresses her as “Mommy”—which brings us back to the question of the nature of the season’s villain (7022).

[26] What is the First Evil? Begin with its original textual description in season three’s “Amends”:
 “Absolute evil, older than man, than demons [. . .] Beyond sin, beyond death. I am the thing the darkness fears. You’ll never see me, but I am everywhere. Every being, every thought, every drop of hate” (3010). Well, that seems simple enough. Nothing seriously contradicts this in season seven, though the First does change its operating methods somewhat, adding the vicious fallen preacher Caleb to its roster of physical servants. What remains constant, however, is the First’s devotion to sowing discord amongst the “faithful,” its insistence that each of them, particularly Buffy is “alone,” and its desire to absorb everything into itself. Thomas Hibbs commented on the consistent portrayal of evil on *Buffy* as season six ended: “By contrast to goodness and in parasitic dependence on it, evil involves isolation from the rest of humanity, a closing off of the possibility of love, friendship, and communication; it is a will to raw, unconstrained power, a nihilistic drive to destroy all that is, including oneself.” The First Evil, naturally, intensifies all these qualities, and “Lessons” appropriately concludes with the reappearance of this force morphing through the past seasons’ villains, from Warren, to Glory, to Adam, to the Mayor, to Drusilla (representing season two), to the Master. Interestingly, this is the last time the First Evil will appear as most of these “Bads,” with the exception of Warren (twice more, once in a flashback), Drusilla (twice), and the Mayor (once); it appears as Caleb once. The First instead prefers to manifest as deceased “good guys”: Buffy, Jonathan, Potential Slayers Eve and Chloe, Joyce, Cassie, Nikki, and even Spike, who, if not exactly good, is at least working towards it now that he has a soul. One might simply dismiss this as mere casting availability coincidence; but it actually makes sense both in terms of the plot—evil disguising itself as good people confuses the protagonists, obviously—and in terms of the Augustinian definition of evil Hibbs draws on, evil as dependent on goodness for its very existence-- it “has no positive nature” (Augustine, *City of God* xi.9). Thus, Buffy, the guiding light of the Buffyverse, more than any other “good” character, is the First Evil’s “mommy” (“Chosen,” 7022), not because Buffy is evil—though she certainly is not perfect—but because evil cannot be self-existent, though it likes to think it is.

[27] The First, manifesting as each preceding season’s villain, concludes season seven’s “Lessons” with a speech that is both typical of the character and foreboding of something greater, and reveals more about the nature of evil:

MORPHING EVIL THING [as WARREN]: Of course she won't understand, Sparky. I'm beyond her understanding. She's a girl. Sugar and spice and everything...useless unless you're baking. I'm more than that. More than flesh...

MORPHING EVIL THING [as GLORY]: ...more than blood. I'm...you know, I honestly don't think there's a human word fabulous enough for me. Oh, my name will be on everyone's lips, assuming their lips haven't been torn off. But not just yet. That's all right, though...

[28] There are elements of truth in all the Big Bad personae’s statements, and some of them are truths that it may not be aware of itself: Buffy herself hasn’t yet figured out that she’s “baking,” however unfortunate the analogy may be (“Chosen,” 7022); everyone does seem to be saying “From beneath you, it devours” over the next several episodes, in English, Spanish, and German,¹³ but—so what? The significance of First-as-Dru’s “little songs” will become apparent in “Sleeper” and “Lies My Parents Told Me” (7008, 7017), and the Master is correct in saying that “we’re all going to learn something about ourselves in the process,” but the fact that Spike (and most of the Scoobies, in fact) are “pathetic schmuck [s]” is just one step in the process, not the whole story. When various characters encounter the First Evil in various guises, they often ask something like, “did The First tell the truth?” (“Touched,” 7020), and the

answer often seems to be “Yes,” at least in terms of immediate information. But careful analysis from a larger perspective reveals that usually the statements are only partially true, or that some vital information has been omitted. For example, when the First-as-Cassie tells Willow, “You’re not gonna be okay. You’re gonna kill everybody.” This is a complete lie, but it is a true statement of Willow’s fears and probably contributes to the painful side-effects of her insecure spell-casting efforts in the early part of the season. When the First tells Principal Wood that Spike killed his mother, Nikki, that is quite true; it omits the information that Spike has since acquired a soul, since the only purpose is to inflame Wood’s lifelong quest for revenge on “the monster who took my mother away from me” (“Lies,” 7017). The First-as-Warren entices the vulnerable, lovelorn Andrew to murder Jonathan with visions of godhood, and appeals to his heroic fantasies with *Star Wars* allusions:

ANDREW: Do you have any idea how hard it’s been to act this cool?

WARREN: Calm down, you’re doing great. All specs are within parameters.

ANDREW: You keep leaving me. I hate it when you leave me. One time you died, and I ended up a Mexican.

WARREN: We’ve been over this. Now, that death thing was all part of the master plan. Come on, “If you strike me down...”

ANDREW: [Alec Guinness impression] “I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine.” [laughs] Of course. Do you think, maybe, Willow could kill me, too?

WARREN: Hey, don’t worry. If short round pulls off his end of the bargain, we’ll both become gods. (“Conversations,” 7007)

[29] Although the First Evil goes to great lengths to portray itself as all-powerful, telling Willow, for example, “This last year’s gonna seem like cake after what I put you and your friends through, and I am not a fan of easy death” (“Conversations,” 7007), or promising Caleb to make him a god, just as it had evidently earlier promised Andrew and Jonathan, in the persona of Warren (“Storyteller,” 7016; “End of Days,” 7021)—it cannot carry out these promises, or only partially—certainly, suffering, torture, and deaths are inflicted, but not on the scale implied by the First’s portents. As Buffy comments when finally confronted by an apparition of First-as-(deceased)-Caleb in season seven (she dismissed it with greater insouciance in season three’s “Amends,” but she was a different girl then): “Have you ever considered a cool name? I mean, since you’re incorporeal and basically powerless. . .how about the Taunter?” (“Chosen,” 7022). Its army of Turok-han “über-vamps” and its preference (or limitation) for appearing only in the insubstantial forms of those who have died is reminiscent of Simone Weil’s comment on the

[m]onotony of evil: never anything new, everything about it is equivalent. Never anything real, everything about it is imaginary.

It is because of this monotony that quantity plays so great a part.[. . .] One is condemned to false infinity. That is hell itself. (119)

It is this Augustinian quality of the First Evil, that is at least one element of its failure. When it taunts Buffy with the one essential truth of her nature, wearing the face and body of an “equivalent” Slayer, repeating the formula she’s heard so many times since her calling that it long ago became mere “blah, blah, blah” (“Welcome,” 1001), Buffy’s response is not the expected helplessness:

THE FIRST/BUFFY: "Into every generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world. She alone will have the strength and skill to..." There's that word again. What you are. How you'll die. Alone. [silence] Where's your snappy comeback?

BUFFY: You're right.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: Hmm...not your best.

[. . .]

BUFFY: No. [beat] Yeah. I just realized something. Something that really never occurred to me before. We're going to win. ("Chosen," 7022)

There's an important shift in Buffy's thinking: whereas in almost every scene before she's talked in terms of "I"—"I" can't protect these girls, "I" can't defeat the First—here for almost the first time she says, "we're gonna win." What was meant to instill despair sparks the inspiration for the empowerment of all the world's potential slayers, snapping into place the final mental and emotional connections Buffy and the others need. The First never sees that coming, just as its devotee Caleb, though his first traps work well enough, can never imagine that "just a girl" can possibly defeat him; as W.H. Auden noted (in his 1956 review of Tolkien's *The Return of the King*), "Evil [. . .] has every advantage but one—it is inferior in imagination. Good can imagine the possibility of becoming evil [. . .] but Evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself."

[30] Another interesting feature of the First's "Lessons" speech is its praise of incorporeality: "more than flesh...more than blood." Andrew, too, initially sees the ghostly First-as-Warren as "cool": "THE FIRST/WARREN: Pretty bitchin', right? I'm like Obi Wan? ANDREW: Or Patrick Swayze" ("Never," 7008). But it will eventually come to be seen as something of a liability, and even the First Evil itself shocks Caleb by longing for incarnation:

THE FIRST/BUFFY: I envy them. Isn't that the strangest thing?

CALEB: Well, it does throw me a tad. I mean, they're just... well, they're barely more than animals, feedin' off each other's flesh. It's nauseatin'. But you...you're everywhere. You're in the hearts of little children, you're in the souls of the rich, you're the fire that makes people kill and hate. The fire that will cure the world of weakness. They're just sinners. You are sin.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: I do enjoy your sermons.

CALEB: And you're in me. Gave me strength no man can have.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: You're the only man strong enough to be my vessel. And I know you feel me but... I know why they grab at each other. To feel. I want to feel. I want to wrap my hands around an innocent neck and feel it crack.

CALEB: Amen. ("Touched")

Though it would be going too far to identify the First Evil with traditional portrayals of Satan, it is interesting that its contempt for flesh and blood—or at least, Caleb's contempt—parallels that of Milton's Satan:

O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold,
Into our room of bliss thus high advanc't
Creatures of other mould, earth-born perhaps,
Not Spirits, yet to heav'nly Spirits bright
Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue
With wonder, and could love, so lively shines
In them Divine resemblance, and such grace
The hand that form'd them on their shape hath pour'd. (IV.357-65)

[31] It is possible to speculate that some negative reactions to the First as seasonal villain may be akin to those who termed the Evil Troika of geeks in season six as "lame" (kdS)—the First Evil is just too close to home for most viewers. Who wants to be reminded every week, as Joyce tells the dreaming Buffy, "[E]vil is a part of us. All of us" ("Bring," 7010)? Most would rather see Buffy heroically kick-boxing monsters than struggling with the real doubts and fears the monsters metaphorically represent. Similarly, Spike, previously one of the most magnetic of villains, is not at his most fascinating during the early episodes of the season, perhaps because the writers are attempting to deal with the ramifications of his soul in more or less "real" time, whereas Angel's 100 years of agony could be touched on in brief flashbacks. Again, Simone Weil's comment on "literature and morality": "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring." To the extent that the "First Evil" approached "reality," it was a boring villain. That does not mean, however, that it wasn't evil; nor was it eliminated—though perhaps it was "scrunched" ("Chosen," 7022), but there is no closure on Evil, if I may disagree with David Lavery's assessment of "Chosen" as "closure (at the level of expectations) of the war with The First." Xander's seemingly facetious comment Sunnydale's buried mall metaphorically connects us for the last time to the recurring feature of the First's operating system—lies and half-truth. All the stores—"the Gap, Starbucks, Toys 'R' Us" ("Chosen," 7022)—are chains, branches of which can be found in malls in nearly every major city in America, and in some countries around the world; like the First Evil, "Madison Avenue"—a faceless force trying to sell things with exaggerations and half-truths—is everywhere. The First's biggest lie, of course, is its version of itself as told by the Master at the end of "Lessons," a version of its self-description in "Amends"—"...right back to the beginning. Not the Bang...not the Word...the true beginning" (7001)—because the beginning, of course, is not the First, as it seems to imply, but the creator of the First—in this case, the writer. Say what we like about "reader response" and "deconstruction of the text," without Joss Whedon (and the other Mutant Enemy writers), there is no Buffyverse.

[32] So, it is all connected, but especially "Lessons" is connected to "Chosen," both written and directed by Joss Whedon. David Lavery, in his essay on *Buffy's* endings, citing Frank Kermode, argues that "those fictions which continue to interest us, which through their very subject matter and form give to us a 'sense of an ending' and facilitate our imaginative deconstruction and construction of our world, include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a fiction which will 'continue to interest us' because it 'move[d] through time to an end, an end which we must sense even if we cannot know it.'" "Lessons" is clearly the beginning of that ending, though the details of the entire season could not have all been in place when "Lessons" was written, and some elements of casting or plotting certainly seem to have changed or developed as the season's filming progressed. However, season seven maintains remarkable coherence in its major elements—if one is watching and listening for these. "Lessons" tells the viewer what to watch and listen for, and even hints at

when to “duck.” Season seven as a whole, with its constant referrals “back to the beginning”—which includes any pivotal episodes from previous seasons—keeps reminding viewers where the characters have come from, while at the same time the developing plot pushes the characters toward the final steps they must take to move out of Sunnydale into the world beyond.

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[1] UPN executives and Whedon apparently entertained the possibility of a "Vampire Slayer" series "without Gellar and Buffy at its center" as early as July of 2002 (Bianculli), and perhaps for some time afterward, but this concept seems to have evaporated, at least in the near-term, for a variety of reasons.

[2] For one defense of season six, see my "Yeats's Entropic Gyre and Season 6 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," forthcoming in Thomson, et al., *Blood, Text and Fears: Reading Around Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[3] E.g., the rumored appearance of the First Evil as Tara in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007) (Whedon, Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator").

[4] Last seen in "Who Are You?" (4016).

[5] Last seen in "Pangs" (4008).

[6] In post-season interviews, Mutant Enemy writers stated flatly that Joyce's appearance to Dawn in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007) was, like Cassie's appearance to Willow, a manifestation of the First (e.g., Jane Espenson). It's difficult to argue with clearly announced authorial intent, although I believe a case can be made that Joyce who appears to Dawn is really Joyce, despite the cryptic and possibly divisive nature of her statements: "Things are coming, Dawn. Listen, things are on their way. I love you, and I love Buffy, but she won't be there for you.[. . .] When it's bad, Buffy won't choose you. She'll be against you" (7007). However, this is not the essay for that case.

[7] Joyce as she appears in Buffy's dreams is almost certainly *not* the First Evil. For one thing, she actually touches Buffy in "Bring on the Night" (7010), though perhaps that could be explained as a property of the dream. More significantly, Joyce in Buffy's dreams behaves differently from apparitions of the First, whose ultimate weapons are self-doubt, fear, anger, pride, envy, and emotional pain. Buffy, who has been forcing herself into a commandant role that is not really her style and stretches the limits of her strength, needs to hear the mother-wisdom within tell her

JOYCE: [. . .] there's some things you can't control. The sun always goes down, the sun always comes up. Are you worried about the sun going down? Because there's some things you can't control. The sun always goes down, the sun always comes up

BUFFY: Everyone's counting on me.

JOYCE: Well, they do that, and I'm sorry, Buffy, but these—these friends of yours put too much pressure on you. They always have.

BUFFY: Something evil is coming.

JOYCE: Buffy, evil isn't coming, it's already here. Evil is always here. Don't you know? It's everywhere.

BUFFY: And I have to stop it.

JOYCE: How are you gonna do that?

BUFFY: I-I don't know yet, but—

JOYCE: Buffy, no matter what your friends expect of you, evil is a part of us. All of us. It's natural. And no one can stop nature, not even— ("Bring on the Night," 7010)

Buffy does need rest—a good night's sleep will give her the clarity to finally confront Caleb successfully and find and retrieve the mystical Scythe ("Touched," 7020). The sun, a part of the natural order, is the only thing that instantly destroys the über-vampires; and of course, evil is indeed part of all humans, including Buffy, Spike, and Willow, who must all learn to deal with that fact. No one can stop nature, but there are always some things nature can't explain or predict.

[8] Buffy's compulsion to keep Dawn safe may be a lingering effect of the spell which created Dawn:

"MONK: For centuries [the Key] had no form at all. My brethren, its only keepers. Then the abomination found us. We had to hide the Key, gave it form, molded it flesh. . .made it human and sent it to you.[...] We knew the Slayer would protect.[...] You cannot abandon" ("No Place Like Home," 5005). Buffy seems less aware than the others of the effects of magic spells on her—see "Something Blue" (4009) and "Him" (7006).

[9] These scenes also reveal that Dawn has learned to drive—how, we don't know, but it's another skill that she has acquired off-scene, possibly without seeking Buffy's help or approval, and which gives her independence.

[10] This is the first cell-phone ever to appear on *Buffy*, though they have been used on *Angel* since at least season two (2000-2001) and have been increasingly common in the real world for much longer. Why no mobile phones in Sunnydale? No explanation is ever given. It is a small town, though—most places are within walking distance—so maybe cell-phones are just not needed. Also, Buffy herself has never been much of a techie. And finally, one might speculate that mystical influences related to the hellmouth interfered with reception; but that doesn't appear to be a problem in season seven.

[11] Possible candidates for placing the “Lessons” talisman: Principal Wood, Spike, the Bringers, or Xander (highly unlikely); only the Bringers have any believable motive, and are specifically described by Giles in “Amends” as able to “conjure spirit manifestations and set them on people” (3010), though Spike might do it under FE influence. He at least knows the origin of the “manifest spirits”—but he has always known a lot about occult things, so that doesn’t necessarily prove anything.

[12] Interviews suggest that this connection may have been developed later in the season; nevertheless, it works perfectly (Espenson, Succubus Club).

[13] Check out the lyrics of the techno soundtrack playing as the German Proto-Slayer is pursued by Harbingers in “Beneath You” (7002).



Dawn Heinecken

Fan Readings of Sex and Violence on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

"Part of me believes real love and passion have to go hand and hand with pain and fighting."
Buffy, *Something Blue* (4009)

(1) In her article, "I'm Buffy and You're . . . History," Patricia Pender discusses the postmodern politics of *Buffy*. Pender argues that the question of whether *Buffy* is "feminist" or not is less useful than viewing the series as "a site of intense cultural negotiation in which competing definitions of the central terms in the debate . . . can be tested and refined." Among one of the central issues in feminist debate is female sexuality and the depiction of female desire. *Buffy's* representation of female sexuality and desire is complex and often contradictory, and serves as a strong example of the way the series invites negotiation over meaning (Heinecken, *Warrior*).

(2) Created by Joss Whedon as an antidote to the defenseless, sexualized female victim of countless horror films, *Buffy* nonetheless has a long history of situating its heroine in a world full of monstrous men and in which sex is consistently linked to death and violence (Reid-Walsh, Braun). While the dangerous nature of female sexual desire has always played a part in *Buffy*, in the series' sixth season, this theme was foregrounded in the story of Buffy's sexual relationship with Spike. The depiction of their explosive, violent and graphically sexual affair generated a great deal of press. Clips of Buffy/ Spike sex scenes were featured in a Fox News Special titled "The Corruption of American Youth" and the relationship was discussed in such stories as "*Buffy* Relationship Tips into Domestic Violence" (O'Hare).

(3) In the series, the Buffy/Spike relationship is presented in an ambiguous fashion. In many ways it replicates stereotypical notions of passive female and aggressive male sexuality. Spike is the verbal aggressor, who is able to speak his desire for Buffy. An evil vampire, he pursues her unrelentingly. Buffy repeatedly denies her desire for Spike, but is repeatedly shown giving in to it. At the same time, *Buffy* demonstrates female sexual aggression and male vulnerability. Buffy takes the superior position in their sexual scenes and even beats Spike into unconsciousness in one episode, while Spike takes the "feminine" role in his emotional openness to Buffy. In addition, the relationship draws upon the idea of natural antagonism between men and women. The two first come together in the midst of a fist fight. Throughout the season, they alternate between taunting or punching one another and having sex. The relationship culminates with Spike's attempt to rape Buffy.

(4) The contradictory storyline launched a hot debate among fans, who generally reacted to the relationship either with ecstatic delight or horror. Fan readings of the representation of sexuality and desire within *Buffy's* sixth season are interesting because they tie to how fans understand and discuss the show as promoting messages of female empowerment. For example, many fans are critical of the episodes "Smashed," "Wrecked" and "Gone," in which Buffy first denies, then gives in to, her desire for Spike. They see the episodes as reflecting traditional notions of female passivity and male sexual aggression which do not jibe with viewers' understanding of the series as a "feminist" text. Mrs. Poet, for example, writes that "As a feminist I have a big problem with the way Buffy's sexuality has been portrayed in series six . . . [that] has Buffy saying 'no'. 'stop it' etc (to sex) over and over again when she clearly means the opposite."¹ Chris L is dismayed how when Buffy says no, Spike is portrayed as "intentionally disregarding Buffy's expressed wishes."² Other fans find the violence in the relationship distasteful.

(5) However, the Buffy/Spike storyline was very popular among a particular group of on-line fans, known as the B/S "shippers" (Buffy/Spike relationshipippers). These fans are devoted to the relationship and discuss it on numerous websites and list serves. In a *TV Guide* on-line poll Buffy and Spike won "favorite TV

couple," with 35% of the votes, ahead of *Friends*' Chandler and Monica (19%).³ Spike also won 83% of the votes in Zap2it's ranking of Buffy's boyfriends.⁴ The unofficial fan website for the actor who plays Spike, www.jamesmarsters.com, crashed because of too much traffic after the airing of "Smashed" and "Wrecked," the episodes which depict Buffy and Spike's first sexual encounter and the morning after. If some fans were critical of the depiction of the relationship because it reinforced ideas of female sexual passivity and antagonism between the sexes, does this mean that the B/S shippers subscribe to these stereotypes?

(6) This paper examines the various interpretive strategies employed by shippers in their readings of the episodes "Smashed" through "Dead Things," based on their online-comments, discussions and fan fiction. Two major developments in the series have since occurred: Spike's attempt to rape Buffy and his winning of a soul. While readings of Buffy/Spike relationship will undoubtedly change based on these developments, fan readings from this particular period are nonetheless of interest. They not only reveal the way fans respond to specific textual cues but highlight fan desires and expectations based on these cues and textual information available at the time.

(7) Although "feminism" is a term rarely used, shipper comments demonstrate a sensibility that may easily be as feminist in that their readings reflect a concern with female agency and aggression, a desire for egalitarian relationships, and a desire to see expressions of an unchained female sexuality. Shipper readings are consistent with ways that fans have read other texts such as contemporary romances. Understanding *Buffy* as a popular romance helps explain readers' pleasure in dangerous men as a sign of female power and aggression. B/S Shippers also show an understanding that the dangerous sexuality presented is a method of developing the identity of the heroine. Finally, shipper readings see the relationship as potentially representing a shift in the series' epistemology and political message.

(8) In the world of *Buffy* sex is dangerous and to be a real man is to be a monster. Buffy sleeps with her first vampire lover Angel and causes him to lose his soul. He then goes on a murderous rampage. Spike is likewise monstrous. A vampire without a soul, he is sexually and morally deviant. For example, in the fifth season, Spike stalked Buffy. He stole her panties, built an altar for her, chained her up and even had a robot built in her image to use as a sex toy.

(9) Spike has been described as "impotent" for the last three years after he was captured by a government agency that implanted a chip in his brain that prevents him from harming humans. However, as he says, he gets his "rocks" back in season six when he discovers that he is able to hit Buffy. Not coincidentally, it is that moment that he and Buffy begin their sexual relationship. The dangerous nature of their union is underscored by Spike, who tells Buffy, "I knew the only thing better than killing a Slayer would be fuc-....," before being silenced by her.

(10) Shippers are quite cognizant and critical of the link the series makes between sex and violence. They acknowledge the fact that the aggression in the B/S dynamic is not a "good" thing, but still find themselves aroused or emotionally sucked into the text. Indeed, in some cases, the sexual scenes between Buffy and Spike seem to have functioned as a marital aide for some couples: Midnightdancer writes, "My husband caught me watching the end scene of "Smashed" for the tenth time and kinda got jealous of Spike. Since then, the passion has returned to our relationship and things have never been better (I even had to find a turtleneck to wear to hide the bite marks!)"

(11) The effectiveness of these episodes and their ability to suck viewers in despite themselves is perhaps due to the fact that sexual violence is inherent to our cultural mythologies about love and male/female relations. Spike is presented as the "bad boy" who may be bad but who is ultimately desirable. The text makes it clear that his appeal to Buffy is at least partly based on his darkness. As Spike tells Buffy, "I may be dirt, but you're the one who likes to role in it, Slayer." A number of fans likewise view danger (if only in fantasy) as part of Spike's sexual appeal. One poster, for example, describes Spike as a "wonderful, sensitive, sweet guy and a dangerous impulsive killer all at once. . . . A guy you'd love to fall in love with and mary (sic) but wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

(12) Given this interpretation of Spike's character, why do shippers see him as a valid love interest for Buffy? It is important to note that readers tend to read texts based on a horizon of expectations formed by familiarity with other texts (Jauss). The Buffy/Spike storyline replicates imagery and codes drawn from other stories about female maturation, such as contemporary romance novels. Two of the most obvious codes are the combative relationship between lovers and a mysterious, dangerous man as a love interest. Shippers use interpretative strategies similar to those of romance fans in the way they read the violent hero.

(13) As Tania Modleski explains, the plot of contemporary gothic romances is basically this: a young girl, isolated from friends and family, comes to a strange, threatening space full of ambiguous characters. Her

survival is dependent upon her ability to interpret and define the emotions of a mysterious and dangerous male. Does he want to kill her or kiss her? The ambiguous nature of men is at the heart of these stories; their violence is ever present, but the heroine saves herself by learning to reinterpret his apparently violent actions as a sign of his love (168). The hero is effectively tamed by novel's end.

(14) *Buffy* describes a similar journey for its heroine. Although Buffy has friends, in the sixth season, she is isolated from them and is even an orphan. Throughout the series she has had to navigate dangerous spaces while dealing with the question of the "truth" about identity—particularly men. Men in *Buffy* are unpredictable, depicted as dangerous at heart and their surface appearances are often misleading (see Heinecken, *Warrior*). The "truth" of Spike's character and his love for Buffy (is he evil or good; is his love really lust?) was a hot debate between shippers and other fans during Season Six.

(15) Textual analyses of romances would suggest that romance readers' pleasure in the domineering and dangerous hero is masochistic. However, in her groundbreaking study of romance fans, Janice Radway found readers were often selective in terms of the character traits on which they chose to focus. Radway, for example, found that the hero's appeal to readers was not based on his domineering or violent qualities. Instead, readers interpreted the hero as someone who is strong and masculine but "equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness and concern for her pleasure" (81).

(16) Shippers seem to be performing the same kind of selective reading of Spike. Although Spike is clearly a violent character who tries to bite a girl in the very same episode he consummates his relationship with Buffy, shippers tend to focus their discussions around his nurturing qualities. Even though many shippers acknowledge Spike's dark side, they repeatedly stress all the things that he has done to care for Buffy. These include taking care of her sister Dawn even after Buffy's death, serving as Buffy's confidant when she first returns from the dead, and saving her from dancing herself to death under the influence of a dancing demon. They interpret Spike's interaction with the Buffybot, his robot sex toy, as evidence of his concern for Buffy's pleasure, since his first act with it is to perform cunnilingus.

(17) While some on-line fans are insistent that the soulless Spike is irredeemably evil and cannot change (this is based on the mythology of the *Buffyverse* in which a soul distinguishes good characters from evil characters), almost all shippers agree that Spike's love for Buffy has changed him—his behavior if not his inner self. Mace writes, "Spike will always be bad, but he can control himself for love of Buffy."⁵ One group of shippers, called the "redemptionists" believe that Spike will make a complete transition to the side of good.

(18) The focus on the change in Spike's character replicates one of the central themes of many romances: the dangerous man tamed by the love of a woman. His appeal lies in his power, but a power that is harnessed. As "PWAC" says, "Spike is smoldering and sexy . . . and that is the fantasy that we all want. We want the mysterious, bad guy with the heart of gold to fall in love with the girl and save the day." Modleski sees the popularity of romances as based on the fact that they speak to the fears of women who have literally had to depend upon their ability to "read" the true nature of men in order to survive (34). The idea of a violent hero tamed by the heroine is seductive because it is a way of conquering fears about the real-world potential of men to harm women (Radway 169).

(19) This kind of reframing of male violence certainly has the effect of masking and maintaining unequal power relations between the sexes. However, it also expresses women's desire for power. Many romances feature heroes who are emotionally wounded and suffer for love of the heroine. Modleski sees such texts, in which the hero is reduced to "internally groveling" as a female revenge fantasy (45). Even if revenge is not the motive, wielding such excessive emotional control over a man is a potential form of power for women. In addition, Radway concludes that the individual qualities of the hero are less important to romance readers than the role he performs vis-à-vis the heroine. The romance is finally about readers' desire to be cared for, loved and validated in particular ways (83).

(20) The episodes "Intervention" and "Dead Things" highlight Spike's willingness to suffer for Buffy. In one he allows himself to be tortured by an evil god to save Buffy's sister, because "I'd couldn't live, her [Buffy] being in that much pain." In "Dead Things" Buffy believes she has killed an innocent girl and attempts to turn herself into the police. Spike tries to stop her. When she explodes in rage at him he tells her to "put it all on him," and allows her to beat him almost to unconsciousness, absorbing her emotional pain into his body. Spike's willingness to love Buffy unconditionally appeals to the shippers. After "Dead Things" Reia wrote: "Spike still loves her so strongly, is able to forgive her and understand, still want to be with her . . . sigh!!"⁶

(21) In addition, shipper comments make clear that at least part of the attraction of Buffy/Spike relationship is that his strength and aggression serves as a way of expressing Buffy's power and desire. Most shippers assert that Buffy is physically stronger than Spike and the violence between them is

consensual. Shippers react negatively to other fans' suggestion that the "Smashed" sex scene, in which the two punch and pummel each other as a form of foreplay, implied that Buffy was being forced. One fan writes, "Forced? I will keep that in mind the next time I watch that scene and watch how Buffy mounts Spike like a steed, and then ends up on top of him in the final scene. Oh my, the submission."⁷ Fans of the relationship clearly see this kind of representation of female sexuality and desire as empowering. After watching "Smashed" one fan wrote: "I don't know about you guys but that sex was great and wow it is even better when both are in powered (sic) buy (sic) it. It shows that not only guys want true hot and passion filled sex but us women too."⁸

(22) The fact that Buffy and Spike come together only after he learns he can hit her implies that, in order to be sexually viable, men need to be violent and able to dominate their women. However, B/S shippers see this as a necessary move to imply equality between the two. Aurelio writes that "As long as he couldn't physically hurt her, he was for all intents and purposes, "impotent." And now he's not anymore. . . . Buffy can enter into a relationship of equals with him."⁹ Shade says that "There really is only one person equal to Buffy . . . (how crucial was that getting back of the rocks deal? Very. Buffy can't have love for a doormat).¹⁰

(23) One reason that these fans feel the need for Spike to be seen as Buffy's equal is because it supports the notion of Buffy as a powerful woman. Tora says, "I'd like to see them develop things between Spike and Buffy as a relationship of equals . . . I really don't want them to play into the "strong woman emasculates the men around her" cliché. . . . they're putting her in a position where she can't look down on Spike,"¹¹ A.Zael writes, "ever since "Smashed," it seems like they want both him and Buffy to be equals. . . . In too many shows, writers think the only way to make a strong female protagonist is to surround her with weaker males or only females. I believe the fact that they allow a strong male lead, shows the faith the creators have in the power of their female character."¹²

(24) Shippers want to see a powerful woman who is loved, not in spite of, but because of her power. As Cumbayaya says, "to have her find someone she is compatible with only to lose him to the complications that comes with the slayer package is getting old. I would love it if she could find a relationship with Spike who accepts (sic) and in a warped way loves who she is and stick with it."¹³ Latestake says that "Buffy is all about the feminist paradigm shift so that would be an interesting play on that theme. . . . A man reveling in the power of a woman without losing his own power. Spike and Buffy are quite evenly matched, and as they are worthy opponents for each other, so should they be worthy of each other as lovers."¹⁴

(25) Shippers also seem to enjoy the way the Buffy/ Spike dynamic foregrounds what reviewer Stephanie Zacharek calls the "messiness and potential danger" of sex. In her *Salon.com* review of "Smashed" and "Wrecked," Zacharek wrote that "I can't think of a recent movie that dealt with the emotional risks and dangers of sex in such a startling and affecting way. . . . they've so straightforwardly defined the usually blurry meridian between aggression and sex." On-line fan Haunt similarly writes: "Well I LOVE sensuality, more than the wild animal abandon that we saw in Smashed, but to limit one's view of sex that way is well, limiting. . . . it's unhealthy to assume that anger and passion are never a part of sex."¹⁵ Slyvie agrees, saying that "the genius of Joss is not writing sex for sex."¹⁶

(26) These readings suggest that fans enjoy the break from the traditional media representation of sex as a sort of liminal space, set outside of time, in which all tensions and conflicts between partners are resolved. As I have written elsewhere, the depiction of such "messy" sex displays a kind of feminist consciousness because it "problematizes the conceptions of sex as a context-free, natural act," politicizing sex by revealing the way power relations are constructed and contested within a relationship (Heinecken, "Changing," 169).

(27) It must also be noted that in addition to presenting Buffy as the sexual aggressor, the sixth season sex scenes provided another role reversal in their presentation of the male body as visual object. While Buffy is covered or clothed in each scene in "Wrecked" for example, Spike is nude. Whatever artistic decisions influence this, by the vast number of delighted posts about "nekkid Spike," and discussions about the body sock worn by the actor, it is clear that many fans are taking extreme pleasure in the opportunity to gaze at the male body.

(28) Furthermore, while it is possible to assume that viewers identify primarily with the character of Buffy, processes of identification are mobile.¹⁷ It is useful to consider what female viewer's identification with *Spike* means. Importantly, at the same time Spike is depicted as excessively hard and masculine and an object of erotic desire, he is also feminized, possessing feminine traits like emotional openness, a willingness to love unconditionally, and a desire to talk about the relationship. He is "love's bitch," endlessly suffering for love. Despite his physical strength, Spike is revealed to have little power in the relationship. As

he tearfully tells Buffy "All you've ever done is play me. And keep playing with rules you make up as you like." Spike's emotional powerlessness and internal pain are emphasized to the point of excess within fan fiction, indicating that Spike embodies what Ian Ang calls "a tragic structure of feeling" for fans. He functions similarly to *Dallas*' Sue Ellen, allowing fans to take pleasure in his excessive emotions and melodramatic suffering (78-79).

(29) Viewers' pleasure in the way Spike suffers for love is particularly interesting considering the maternal function of romance heroes noted by Radway (139-40). In much shipper fiction, Spike is depicted as a long-suffering mother. His love holds Buffy and her Scooby family together, but his efforts are never appreciated. As Gwyneth writes, "Everyone else except her mother had conditions for their love. . . . Spike had never asked for conditions. He wanted all of her, but took whatever she would give."¹⁸ Spike's unconditional love simultaneously allows female viewers to identify with the experience of being loved intensely and expresses many women's experience of under-appreciation.

(30) However, Spike is not read only as a "whipping boy." As Kinsale argues, "the oft-derided happy ending" of romances in which the violent hero and heroine are joined, "is a dramatization of the integration of the inner self" (39). The acceptance of the hero is thus a way for women to acknowledge impulses such as aggression, anger, and sexuality that are unacceptable for women even in today's world (Botts 69). Similarly, in her article "Every Night I Save You," Rhonda Wilcox has demonstrated that Spike functions as Buffy's shadow within the text. Shippers also see Spike as Buffy's shadow. Shade writes "Spike . . . seems to be almost the other half of Buffy."¹⁹ While Scarlettfish writes that "Maybe we will discover that slayers and vampires are two halves of a whole—that could tie into her and Spike's relationship rather nicely."²⁰

(31) The episode "Dead Things" is at pains to point out that Spike is Buffy's shadow. The episode has several sequences which show this, particularly one scene in which a guilt-ridden Buffy beats Spike, telling him "There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside." She is clearly talking to herself and sees herself in him. Reia writes of the scene "suddenly Buffy is the monster, beating up on someone innocent."²¹ While "Dead Things" does not resolve whether Buffy's feelings for Spike are "good" or not, it is clear that, at this point in the series, she feels bad for having them. A possible reading is that Buffy is confronting the depths of her sexual desire. Can she be a good girl if she likes sex? What does it say about her that she desires an evil creature? The series is thus presenting a heroine who is actively grappling with the ramifications of acknowledging her own sexuality, aggression and anger.

(32) The appeal to shippers may be due to how the B/S relationship dramatizes feelings and impulses which women are still supposed to keep hidden. For example, Slayer Chica writes, "[Buffy's] had a taste of what it feels like to . . . well not be miss perfect. And she loves it!"²² Annalore writes, "I think Buffy's really acknowledging that she's drawn to the darkness, that she wants it. Thinking that she came back wrong, and that these desires weren't really hers has allowed her to explore them in depth. But they've always been there. It's always been her . . . Now that she knows that she's herself, she again feels the need to adhere to her moral code, and she doesn't know if she can. Because now she doesn't only want it, she's had it. She knows what it's like. And it's obvious she was loving it."²³

(33) B/S shipper fan fiction likewise articulates fans' desire to see a hero who accepts her anger and sexuality. Fan fiction make it clear that many fans believe soulless Spike is already worthy of Buffy's love, not despite, but because of his aggressive and dangerous qualities. For example, in Annie Sewell-Jennings' *Waking the Dead*, Buffy yearns for Spike and "the fierce fury of him, the maelstrom made of muscle and malignance."²⁴ Dangerous Spike is necessary, because he makes room for dangerous Buffy. Many fan writers depict anger and aggression as essential components of Buffy's character and linked to her desire for Spike. Gwyneth writes, "Buffy wants him so bad her chest aches. . . . Wants to know the thrill of darkness as it overtakes her, when it's all right to feel full only of hate and bleakness and ugliness. He lets her be whatever she wants to be."²⁵

(34) As shipper comments highlight, the representation of sex in *Buffy* expresses what is going on inside characters as well as the series' world view. Seeing Spike as the "other half of Buffy" implicates Buffy in darkness and Spike in light. This move actually makes a dramatic change in the series' overall philosophy in which the separation between good and evil has been clearly marked, at least between vampires and humans. While the show has shown a great deal of moral complexity in terms of human relations, Buffy's right to kill demons and vampires without guilt has never been questioned. Whedon has said that he made his vampires explode into dust when staked because "it shows they're monsters. I didn't really want to have a high school girl killing people."²⁶ This Othering of the vampires means that there has been little relativism, no blurring between right and wrong in the series' overall world view. As Kent A. Ono has pointed out, among the results of such Othering is to convey "debilitating images of and about people of color" (163).

(35) Fans are quite aware of the political implications of such binary thinking as a way of justifying relations of dominance. Haunt says, "If the show had stayed as straight forward and simplistic as it tried to make us think it was in Season One I wouldn't be here right now."²⁷ RomanceLady writes, "In the beginning it was no soul=evil, and now . . . maybe we are all meant to re-evaluate our racism. . . . Maybe all 'soulless' creatures aren't bad and need to be killed."²⁸ Many shippers are quite critical of what they see as the series' simplistic worldview. Scarlettfish sees the B/S relationship as part of the "'oh grow up' lesson that is going to be taught this year—things aren't as simple as black and white"²⁹

(36) Buffy's acceptance of Spike as a lover is linked to a complex morality in which the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, human and nonhuman, is unclear. Newly risen writes, "I think it's pretty convenient for humans to think of demons and vamps as not having souls. . . . As long as they are thought of as not having souls, the Slayer can go stake them (or the Initiative can experiment on them) without compunction. . . . If vamps have souls, then Buffy is no different from Faith when she staked the mayor's aid. She's not a Slayer. She's a murderer."³⁰ SockPuppet argues that "being able to see her former mortal enemy as a human being . . . adds so many shades of grey to slaying. What if Spike isn't unique? What if others are capable of change?"³¹ Ultimately, shippers see the Buffy/Spike romance as calling into question the morality of the function of the Slayer.

(37) While part of the appeal of the B/S relationship is undoubtedly based on the erotic appeal of the actors, shipper readings demonstrate fans' ability to read metaphorically. They do not read the sexualized violence of season six as simply representative of or promoting abusive relationships and/or female passivity. Instead, Spike's "badness" is read in ways that are consistent with the way romance fans read the hero: he is appealing because of his nurturing, "feminine" qualities and because his strength reflects Buffy's power. These fans want to see a female hero who both integrates and accepts her aggressive tendencies as well as acknowledges her desires in all their messy complexity. They read Buffy as a powerful figure and want her to find love with an equal. B/S shipper readings suggest that the series' rejection of a worldview based on binary opposites and Buffy's acceptance of her own sexuality and capacity for anger are reflected in her acceptance of Spike as a lover.

(38) Shipper comments during this period demonstrate how textual producers and textual receivers may diverge in their reading of a text. In contrast to fans, *Buffy's* producers repeatedly described the relationship as "unhealthy" and as a sign that Buffy was straying from her true self.³² Co-executive producer Marti Noxon has stated that Spike's attempted rape of Buffy in "Seeing Red" was constructed as a corrective to fans who read Spike as worthy of Buffy's love (Gottlieb). The rape was intended to demonstrate that Spike was, in essence, evil. Buffy's rejection of Spike is ultimately framed by the show's creators as a positive move because her attraction to an evil being was "killing her." Spike seeks a soul to become "what Buffy deserves." Fan fiction written during the series' summer hiatus indicates that there continues to be a discrepancy, however, between what fans want to see and what producers wish to show.

(39) Jenkins has observed that when texts "fail to satisfy," fans try to recover them for their own interests (23). Fan fiction often serves as a way for fans to repair the text. It is therefore significant that a large percentage of recent fiction dealing with Spike's return to Sunnydale features Buffy acknowledging her love for Spike prior to learning he has a soul, a seeming dismissal of his crime.

(40) Fan reaction to the attempted rape and Spike's winning of a soul deserves far more attention than it can be given here, but several points are notable. Some fans are disappointed by Spike obtaining a soul because they read it as reaffirming notions of essential identity.³³ In addition, some fans criticize the ways that the rape was used to retroactively justify Buffy's emotional abuse of Spike.³⁴ Despite these critiques, it is important to observe that shippers do not condone the attempted rape or suggest that Buffy deserved it. In fact, most recent B/S shipper fiction accepts the text's presentation of the soul as necessary for Spike to change for the better. This acceptance reveals that whoever the perpetrator, they find uncontrolled masculine sexual aggression intolerable.

(41) While Spike's behavior is condemned, fans' repeated depictions of Buffy loving what she thinks is a soulless being reiterate their desire to see Buffy acknowledge her own aggression. In many of these fictions, Buffy realizes she is not morally superior to Spike and accepts responsibility for her behavior. She finds love and happiness through loving her shadow and recognizing her own capacity for anger and aggression as well as from the intensity and depth of her sexual desire. In this way, many fan representations of female aggression and sexuality stand in contrast to the text.

(42) Elyce Rae Helford has observed that *Buffy* works to contain female anger in various ways. Unless properly channeled through wit and indirection, female anger is often depicted as destructive and tied to insanity and perverse sexuality. Female power and sexuality are likewise linked and depicted as dangerous (Heinecken, *Warrior*). This trend continues into the series' seventh season, in which Buffy and Spike's

relationship is discussed as a sign of Buffy's self-loathing, from which she has now recovered. This "healthy" Buffy is distanced from the violent impulses which drove her to sleep with Spike, saying "I don't hate like that. . . . Not anymore." The aggressive sexuality of the sixth season (which we are told in "Wrecked" is the best sex she has ever had) is thus framed by the current text as pathological, an outcome of Buffy's urge to self-destruction. In addition, Buffy continues to deny her own sexual agency, referring to the sexual aspect of their relationship as something Spike did to her and as Spike "tak[ing] me over completely." Midway through the series' seventh season, Buffy's sexuality continues to be framed by the series' creators as overwhelming and out of her control. It remains to be seen whether *Buffy* will eventually satisfy shippers' desire for the text to acknowledge the reality of women's anger and sexual aggression.

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Gwyn Symonds

"Solving Problems with Sharp Objects": Female Empowerment, Sex and Violence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

D'Hoffryn : "Isn't that just like a slayer. Solving all her problems by sticking things with sharp objects." ("Selfless," 7005)

[1] It has become *de rigeur* in research on the Buffyverse to cite Joss Whedon's premise that he "designed Buffy to be an icon, not just a TV show" (Whedon, 2003a). Based on its portrayal of a strong female protagonist, the nature of that icon has been firmly linked with contemporary phrases like 'girl power', 'female empowerment' and 'feminism'. This iconic status has been the theme of laudatory articles appearing as the show has ended its seven year run (Dauber 2003; Green 2003; Hockensmith 2003a; Mason 2003; Miller 2003; McDaniel 2003; Ostrow 2003; Richards 2003; Tsai 2003). Joss Whedon, in a panel discussion for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences where he repeated his icon claim, also described the "very first mission statement of the show" as "the joy of female power, having it, using it, sharing it" (Whedon, 2003a). As the show has ended, we can now assess what is the sum of the show's achievement as a dramatic statement about gender, whether or not Buffy as hero truly "represents her gender, herself, and more" (Daugherty, 2002, 153) and in what way?

[2] Given Whedon's premise, it is not surprising that Pender asserts: "If one of the principle motivations of popular cultural studies is to decode the political subtext of any given work, then the central concern for students of the Buffy phenomenon is the question, is *Buffy* feminist?" (Pender 2002, 36). Academic analysis has circled around the "transgression/containment" model which "dictates that Buffy is "good" if she transgresses dominant stereotypes, "bad" if she is contained in cultural cliché" (38). Some assessments like Wisker's, "*Buffy The Vampire Slayer* treads an entertaining, if uneasy, course between conservatism and contemporary feminist girl power?" (Wisker, 2001), posit an ideological divide. Others, limited by being written early in the show's run, prematurely adopt Whedon's desire to subvert the horror genre 'female-as-victim' role, as a basis for subverting gender roles in *Buffy*, as the beginning and end of the story. Thompson, for example, asserts that the show is in a 'males-cannot-measure-up' scenario, fitting the criteria of a radical feminist superiority discourse: "Even Cordelia, the archetypal high-school cheerleader "bitch" has a strength of character which males in the series cannot match" (Thompson, 2003). However, one does not have to go further than Xander saving the world at the end of season six, or Spike doing the same at the end of season seven, to realise that "strength of character" is not exclusively the province of females in the Buffyverse. In both Spike and Xander's case, the message seems to be that whoever is best placed at the time to save the world is the one who should do it, gender being irrelevant.

[3] There is no question that the show's exploration of female empowerment is linked to the concept of power in male/female relationships. Season seven is essentially an exploration of what Buffy's power might mean in a leadership context as she takes her role to the level of commanding an Army in a war against the First Evil. The storyline has Buffy battle a sexism-spouting misogynist villain, the preacher Caleb. She successfully fights off the first Watchers' attempt to force demon power into her, a form of mystical rape, to strengthen her in the fight against the First Evil (as they had done to the very first Slayer). Finally, Buffy's discovery of the Scythe in the stone, forged by ancient female Guardians who through history monitored the patriarchal Watchers to help protect the Slayers, enables Buffy to reject patriarchal precedent and to change Slayer lore. In the final battle, she gives up her chosen status and shares her powers with potential Slayers all over the world, rejecting the idea that her life has to be predestined. For all the didacticism of that triumph, as one writer succinctly puts it, "girl power" alone is not enough

to propel a narrative, otherwise...Charmed might not seem so inane" (Menon, 2003).

[4] While gender subversion is the intent of Whedon's premise, we were given a narrative that was prepared to take risks in exploring that premise. There are moments of ambiguity and flux where, thankfully if one values complex drama or comedy, the premise is stretched and played with to give the audience resonant dramatic, emotional, and ideological possibilities beyond its stereotypical empowerment boundaries and icons. Vint is right when she says *Buffy* "opens productive space for getting young women (and others) to see how meanings are constructed" (Vint, 2002, 24). I would take Vint's perception of ideological tension a step further and argue that tension is creatively cultivated in the show's dramatic negotiation with its own premise. Whedon encourages us to specificity in ideological terms: "We think very carefully about what we're trying to say emotionally, politically, and even philosophically while we're writing it", but he qualifies this:

"The process of breaking a story involves the writers and myself, so a lot of different influences, prejudices, and ideas get rolled up into it. So it really is, apart from being a big pop culture phenomenon, something that is deeply layered textually episode by episode. I do believe that there is plenty to study and there are plenty of things going on in it, as there are in me that I am completely unaware of." (Whedon, 2003b)

In juggling discourses about male and female power, the show works to embed them in a dramatic context that encourages a range of gender possibilities that make for a far less static 'girl power' thesis. "The basic idea, the empowerment of girls and the toughness of this life, was always there, but it grew beyond my best intentions" (Murray & Kloer, 2003). Just as "generalisations about gender can all too easily erase the multiplicity of experiences of gender" (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 2003, 47), a too easy acceptance of what 'empowerment or 'girl power' might mean in the Buffyverse may lead us to miss the true value of the show's exploration of such labels for the female experience. The simple reversal of culturally demarcated gender differences so that "women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defined as masculine, as long as the man then steps into her position), so as to keep the whole structure intact" (Kaplan, 2000, 129) is not exactly what we get in *Buffy* because the reversal of gender roles is never a simple dramatic flip.

[5] Sharing gender roles, rather than reversal, is closer to what we are given in Buffy and Spike's relationship. There is a partial gender role reversal in Spike's damsel in distress role leading up to Buffy's rescue of him from the Ubervamp's torture and the First Evil's imprisonment of him in season seven. Buffy is "not much for the damselling" ("Chosen," 7022) but Spike often is. Nor is he always in control of the sexual action between them. One of the "main indictments of Hollywood film has been its passive positioning of the woman as sexual spectacle...and the active protagonist as bearer of the look", a product of "masculine desire" (Stacey, 2000, 450). Spike is objectified for the female audience in scenes where he is shirtless or naked while little is seen of Buffy's body by comparison, even to the point where Buffy is, ironically, totally invisible in 'Gone' (6011) and Spike is, despite strategic placement behind props, barely covered. Spike's beauty, his desirability, "becomes a function of certain practices of imaging – framing, lighting, camera movement, angle (Doane, 2000, 421) so that the male is an object of spectorial sexual voyeurism. Buffy also loses "some traditionally feminine characteristics" (129) to Spike in the relationship. He wants to analyse their relationship, "So, we gonna chat this out, or what?" ('Gone', 6011) and talk about what is happening between them in an effort to get her to acknowledge, or at least name it: "What is this thing we have?" ('Dead Things', 6013), a process she rejects.

[6] However, there are fissures in this reversal. While the female audience is encouraged to gaze, as Mulvey defines that term (Mulvey, 1975) at Spike's body with pleasure, we do not get Buffy gazing lustfully and directly at Spike. She is not literally "the bearer of the look" despite the fact that Spike's body is there to be looked at. She desires him but, because it is in spite of herself, we see little of her indulging the pleasure of contemplating the object of her desire. Though he has no inhibition in raking her body with his eyes, as he kneels in front of her and sings of his love in the Musical, she turns away. While pining after Buffy with unrequited love, Spike still embodies the traditional male as seducer role. His physical touch or caresses arousing her despite herself in the Bronze balcony scene in *Dead Things* (6013), for example, where he draws her into a public sexual encounter she initially wants to avoid. What we have here are shifting gender roles, shared between the male and female characters. The sharing, rather than simple reversal, of traditional male and female roles by Buffy and Spike, such as their partnership in saving the world in *Chosen* (7022), are tentative attempts in *Buffy* to change the discourse of gender reversal through circling imaginary or symbolic boundaries to represent an option of "empowerment" that is more than a 'pattern of oppositions':

What rather has to happen is that we move beyond long-held cultural and linguistic patterns of oppositions: male/female (as these terms currently signify); dominant/submissive; active/passive;

nature/civilization; order/chaos; matriarchal/patriarchal. If rigidly defined sex differences have been constructed around fear of the other, we need to think about ways of transcending a polarity that has only brought us all pain. (Kaplan, 2000, 135)

I would like to argue, that *Buffy* is **tentatively** attempting to transcend polarity, in particular, through its exploration of the aspects of Buffy's empowerment that relate to her engagement with violence and sex.

[7] Female empowerment in *Buffy* is typically described as linked to her ability in the masculine role to 'kick butt' as the positive stereotype of the female aggressor (Hopkins, 2002). Buffy appears empowered as a Slayer because the violence she uses works in the fight against evil and saving the world. Until Xander saves the world with love in 'Grave' (6022) it is the main tool in an apocalypse. Xander, petulantly when he feels under appreciated for his use of it, calls it "quality violence" ('The Zeppo', 3013). Given that the evil guys seem to be good at it too, with "all those fancy martial arts skills they inevitably seem to pick up" ('Lessons', 701), it is a "solid call" to use it:

Xander: You don't know how to kill this thing.

Buffy: I thought I might try violence.

Xander: Solid call. (Killed by Death, 2018)

Buffy's violence is in response to attack from the other side and she does not get to choose another method in those circumstances. Buffy knows that there is an art to her violence and she is proud of that. It takes training and it is about survival. She is not paid to kill but she has a calling to do it and, like any good employee, she is workmanlike in her execution. This dedication is comically highlighted when she is politely apologetic at having to stake an elderly woman who has been sired by Spike, "Sorry, ma'am, but it's my job" (Sleeper, 708).

[8] It has also been frequently noted that Buffy fights with words as well as blows, that language for her is a weapon (Wilson, 2002, Overby & Preston-Matto, 2002). The "banter portion of the fight" (Prophecy Girl, 1012) is acknowledged by both villains and the Scooby heroes as a ritualistic and essential part of the fight scenario. Lame repartee can signal inevitable defeat as much as a poorly placed kick or punch. Repartee, whether Buffy's or from the core Scooby group, is a vehicle for the female empowerment message. "If I was at full Slayer power, I'd be punning right about now" (Helpless 3012). As Overby and Preston-Matto point out, in placing Buffy in the traditionally male stance of the sardonic hero, the show participates through language in gender reversal, as it does when it gives male characters like Xander the more feminine "self-directed" mocking and self-deprecating lines. Allusively self-referential as always, the show uses a nonsense pun to signal that having robot Buffy, the Buffybot, as a stand in Slayer when Buffy is dead, is not nearly as effective as having the real Slayer. "That'll put marzipan in your pie plate, bingo!" (Bargaining Part 1, 601) As Spike says, the Buffybot will never be Buffy "exactly" because Buffy is more than a fighting machine. Her language is not just the sarcastic word trappings of battle but, essentially, a signifier for the hero she is. This joy in language is, for Buffy herself, a part of the thrill of the fight. When the punning is bad, the fun goes out of the fight. "That's it? That's all I get? One lame-ass vamp, with no appreciation for my painstakingly thought out puns? I don't think the forces of darkness are even trying" ('Wild at Heart', 406). Language is Buffy's power, not simply because it is a part of her arsenal, but because it is the way she announces who she is. Concomitantly, her enemies are never more threatening than when they have the truth-telling zinger to contribute to the encounter: "I think we already know what Lady HacksAway wants" (Selfless, 705). The leader of the Vengeance demons, D'Hoffryn, devastatingly pinpoints the lack of subtlety in Buffy's violent approach to some of the problems she wants to solve. Manipulation of language for Buffy, as it is within the text of the show overall, is liberating. If Buffy were less articulate, she would appear more brutal. The effect of this word play in the context of Buffy's use of violence is one of putting the audience "fray-adjacent" (The Zeppo, 3012). We, and the show, have perspective on the violence, as we do on every other aspect of the shows construction, cliché or not. We are given the distance to consider what the violence is being used to do or reveal or tell, what the blow is **for**, and how violence as metaphor is constructed is never forgotten.

[9] However, the show makes very specific use of violence beyond its role in action sequences and in word play to define Buffy's strength and weaknesses. Violence is recognized as a part of Buffy's power but, in Xander's embarrassment that Buffy has brought her slaying into the real world of his job, we are reminded that while violence works in saving the world it is messy and annoying in other contexts, "No. No, not here. Not at my job. That's your job" (Life Serial, 605). Buffy does not like to think that violence is her main resource:

Buffy: I wasn't gonna use violence. I don't always use violence. Do I?

Xander: The important thing is *you* believe that.

("Inca Mummy Girl," 2004)

She often knows that what works on the killing fields of Sunnydale in the fight against demonic evil may in fact hinder her in building relationships and a life. The Slayer Faith killing a human and Buffy's mistaken belief that she was herself responsible for Katrina's death, due to the manipulation of the Nerd Trio, are just two instances where the show supports Buffy's moral compass. The misuse of violence in the context of the loss of human life, in those two instances, is something that Buffy does not feel she can explain to someone like Spike, who is a demon without a soul:

SPIKE: And how many people are alive because of you? How many have you saved? One dead girl doesn't tip the scale.

BUFFY: That's all it is to you, isn't it? Just another body!

SPIKE: Buffy-

BUFFY: You can't understand why this is killing me, can you?

SPIKE: Why don't you explain it? (Dead Things, 6013)

It is ironic that Buffy beats an unresisting Spike, who loves her, within an inch of his undead life after she asserts the sanctity of human existence. In this scene, she is losing control of her anger and unleashing the full fury of her Slayer violence, leaving us with the sense that "the best theme song for the relationship would probably be "Sympathy for the Devil"" (O'Hare, 2002). Buffy is brutal in her beating of Spike and, as his vamp face changes to his bloodied human one, the show condemns the misuse of her 'girl power'.

[10] In that beating, violence is a vehicle for exploring Buffy's attempts to transfer a quick fix, provided by the Slaying skills required to fight evil, to solving problems in her personal relationships. However, when the kill is not clean in Buffy it is a signifier of emotional meltdown:

Buffy: What? I kill vampires, that's my job.

Giles: Well, true, true, although you don't usually beat them into quite such a bloody pulp beforehand.

Everything alright? ('Ted', 2011)

Violence is emotion in *Buffy*, it reveals inner life, and the characters fight their own demons when they fight the monster of the week. "How do you make each unstoppable monster unique and threatening?" Whedon was asked:

"We got into a problem with that. We kept saying, "This monster can't be killed." It's like, "Well, have you used violence?" It was never about the unstoppableness. It was never about the monster. It was about the emotion. The monster came from that. We didn't always make them unique. We tried as much as possible, but what was important was how they related to the characters and that's what made them unique." (Topol, 2003)

As Buffy takes out her self-loathing on Spike we are at the nadir of her use of violence. We are about as far as we get in the show from that sense of her resilience in the struggle to cope with life that is the heart of Buffy's empowerment: "Strong is fighting! It's hard, and it's painful, and it's every day. It's what we have to do" ('Amends', 3010). As she speaks those words to a suicidal Angel, Buffy is not talking about her action hero Slaying role, which seems straightforward by comparison. In the struggle to find the will to live and deal with life as it is, for Angel to find the will to go on, you need more than fancy fight moves and repartee.

[11] Her sexual relationship with Spike, embodying the sexuality of violence and the violence of sexuality, supports and questions our sense of Buffy's empowerment. Xander, when he finds out Anya slept with Spike, echoes what Buffy has been feeling about the fact that she is sleeping with everything she hates: "You let that evil, soulless thing touch you. You wanted me to feel something? Congratulations, it worked. I look at you - and I feel sick - 'cause you had sex with that" ('Entropy', 6018). Xander's words confirm Buffy's worst fears about what her friends would think of her if her sexual liaison had been known to them. Her self-loathing puts her "at the mercy of her life":

Buffy . . . goes through horrible pain every year. But last year, she really lost herself. And I think the audience felt that lack. They felt the lack of the strength . . . of, you know, grabbing that sword when Angel's about to stab her and saying, "I've still got me." ...And I understand why they need that.. because I need it, too...that very positive message that we had at the very beginning of the show...

Buffy empowered again, instead of seeing her at the mercy of her life. . . (Lee, 2002)

I'm not entirely in agreement with Whedon's assessment of season six, particularly given the prefiguring of Buffy's future depression in her often cynical view of life as a Slayer doomed to die young:

Buffy: (interrupts) World is what it is. We fight. We die. Wishing doesn't change that.

Giles: I have to believe in a better world.

Buffy: Go ahead. I have to live in this one. ('The Wish', 309)

Such cynicism has always held the seeds for a descent into the depression-like state she develops after coming back from the dead. While dying and being resurrected will do that sort of thing to you, so will being the Slayer.

[12] She has come close to losing part of herself in other seasons. Her break-up with Riley was about that fluidity of her heroic self when she is confronted, as she is in her relationship with Spike, with moral ambiguity. In the underbelly of the vampire world, where the weak vampire dregs ply a centuries old trade of feeding for money on those who find the "hazards of the underworld" addictive" in 'Into the Woods' (5010), Buffy confronts what Giles tells her is not "less ambiguous evil" like Glory. Buffy, angry at Riley for paying for the rush of being fed on by vampire "trulls", wants the Buffyverse to stay black and white, and she asserts she knows what to use violence for: "Vampires are vampires. And my job description is pretty clear". Hurt by Riley's betrayal, she is in no mood to hear Giles's uncertainty about killing the purveyors of this addiction. For Giles, the willing complicity of the humans in their victimhood, muddies the moral clarity of her role as defender of "people out there who deserve your help", who are not colluding with the vampires in their fate. For Giles the distinction is about "focus", about where her efforts in the fight against evil can be best spent. Fighting unambiguous evil makes decisions and actions, heroism, simpler. When Buffy finally goes with Xander, Giles, and Willow to clean out the nest and finds the building abandoned, the palpable disgust she has towards "these creeps" feels personal. Her attitude and language is that of someone who has found that the fight here is not about her destiny but about the intrusion of some of the worst aspects of the vampire culture into her personal life. Riley, the epitome of normal and safe to her, the man she trusted, has sought out the very thing she is trying to stamp out. Buffy is turning her anger at Riley on the vampires, much as she turns her self-loathing on Spike in the alley beating.

[13] Riley later tries to explain to Buffy why he allowed himself to be bitten. The most interesting contrast of terms in this conversation is when Riley calls the vamps who bit him "girls" and Buffy quickly counters with the correction "Vampires. Killers". She cannot understand what Riley is trying to tell her because the moral terms in which she judges the human/vampire dichotomy do not allow her to understand Riley's attraction to it. They fail to communicate but the real source of the distance between them is the limitation of Buffy's moral compass. There is no place, at this point in her journey, for moral ambiguity or shades of grey. It shocks her that Riley can claim to understand what the vampires are feeling: "You aren't a passion to them, you are a snack! A willing, idiotic snack." But Riley says what they feel is analogous to the passion he feels for her: "I know exactly what they feel when they bite me, because I feel it every time we're together. It's like the whole world falls away. And all there is... is you." For Buffy, the possibility that analogies can be made between human passion and vampire bloodlust, that there may be felt experiences the two species share, echoes her ignorance of the existence of the nests where human and vampires meet in an exchange of needs. Sunnydale, small town though it may be, still contains within its borders both experiences and knowledge of the world that both Buffy the young adult, and Buffy the superhero, do not have the ability to understand. So when she stakes the pathetic, skeletal female vampire running away from her, essentially because she was the one that drank from Riley, it is brought home to us that there are times when "Yikes! The quality of mercy is not Buffy" ('I Only Have Eyes For You', 2019). While Buffy is proved right when she asserts that "my emotions give me power", that anger can give the Slayer the "fire" she needs to win, she is missing their paradoxical impact when she continues on to say that "They're total assets" ('What's My Line', Part 2, 2010). Emotions can be violent and you can lose yourself in them and the pain they embody. Spike's assessment of what loving Buffy feels like: " I have come to redefine the words pain and suffering since I fell in love with you" ('Never Leave Me', 709) devastatingly pinpoints that fact. As Whedon says, emotional pain **is** Buffy's story: "Buffy in pain, story more interesting. Buffy not in pain, story not interesting " (IGN, 2003, 8).

[14] However, that pain is often multi-faceted, signaling life passionately lived even when it is debilitating. The violent, lustful and desire-driven sexual encounter in 'Smashed' (609) brilliantly portrays what drives Buffy and Spike's attraction to one another and how both violence and their sexuality define the way they both cope with life. As they trade blow for blow and insult for insult, we get two superheroes evenly matched in the fight and in a personal relationship where submission or dominance is sidelined as an issue, for all they will go on to play dominance sexual games. This scene is not about the reversal of gender roles as traditional gender roles are almost

completely irrelevant to this violent coupling. Looking for a fight in that scene, Spike feels renewed power in the knowledge he now has that his chip does not prevent him from physically attacking her, that he is not "toothless". Everything that is predatory, dangerous, sneeringly derisive, and gleefully violent about Spike is conveyed in the way he warns her: "you oughta be careful" and goads her into punching him:

BUFFY: (small puzzled smile) Get out of my way.
SPIKE: Or what?

Unafraid, Buffy erupts into attack and, staggering from a flurry of punches and kicks that drive him backwards down the alley, Spike laughs. He punctuates his verbal counter attack with blows to Buffy's face and body that do not hurt her and immediately bounces back from blows, grinning. He is enjoying his newfound equality with her, as much as the fight itself, as the verbal barbs they both fling become as pointed as the accompanying blows.

[15] There is aggression in the fight music and it underscores their verbal barbs even when they stop trading blows to talk. The verbal, as well as the physical, sparring is as much about how they can emotionally hurt each other as it is about their superhero enmity:

BUFFY: You haven't even come close to hurting me.
SPIKE: Afraid to give me the chance?

When Buffy grabs Spike and pushes him up against the wall, cutting off another taunt by launching herself at him in a passionate kiss, we have the unification of sex and violence in their coupling. The ethereal, female choral voice underscoring as Buffy moves rhythmically against Spike, with its elegiac minor chords against low registers in the strings, creates a sense of melancholy. This could just as easily be a theme for a parting as a joining. As they stare at each other, prone on the floor, the music resolves on an A minor chord that signals inevitability. The music is telling us, along with the metaphor of the house falling down, that this sexual union is not going to bring them fulfillment. However, there is another resonance to the fact that what falls down is an abandoned and decrepit building. The black and white moral framework that has separated these two former enemies in the past is being brought down as well. It signifies a moral shift, a further greying of both their moral views and the destruction of the male-female power dichotomy they started out as representing.

[16] We do need to ponder whether *Buffy is* empowered in her relationships with men given that, every time she has sex, emotional pain and relationship failure results. We need to consider whether the show is in danger of promoting the disempowering message that indulging in sexual pleasure inevitably leads to some form of penalty and that the expression of desire always threatens life, self-esteem, and one's sense of self. All of Buffy's relationships seem to fall into the conventional 'love hurts' discourse, which is about the disappointment and mistreatment women may experience, and the compromise required by women "to compensate for men's apathy, neediness, or misconduct" (Phillips, 2000, 69). Angel turns evil, Riley leaves her and Spike's lack of a soul rocks her moral universe too much for her to find joy in her abandonment to the sexual excitement he arouses in her. DeKelb-Rittenhouse describes vampire allure as the "eroticisation of death and the possibility of an eternity spent in sensual abandon" (DeKelb-Rittenhouse, 2002, 146). Written prior to season six, she too easily includes Spike in the same category as Angel when speaking of this myth as a "counterfeit" for love. If the show is aware and plays with the myth, "A vampire in love with a Slayer! It's rather poetic! In a maudlin sort of way" ('Invisible Girl', 1011), it does so differently for both characters. However, Buffy succumbs to both lovers because of something in herself, as much as she does to something in the very different natures of her lovers. *Buffy is* predicated on the paraphernalia of Dracula and vampire mythology, even though it toys with it in postmodern ways and plays with it from a 'girl power' viewpoint. Vampirism as evil is as firmly the canon in the Buffyverse as it is in Stoker's Dracula: "Dracula is the product of Victorian sexual repressiveness" and "we are still trying to exorcise him" (Wood, 1996, 365). The potency of the vampire figure is the allure of irresistible, non-procreative, abnormal sexuality and sexual freedom, to use Wood's paradigm. Dracula's darkness is "familiar" to us: "For all the emphasis on "unknown" places, "it all comes home": "the sense of terrible familiarity... the familiarity of a disowned self that insists upon recognition" (369). The difference with Spike is that the supposedly evil is given a "voice, a discourse, a point of view" (368), which Stoker did not really give Dracula. As well, Buffy is not in supernatural thrall to Spike, she chooses to come to him, to a previously denied part of who she is, creating in the show the possibilities of a shared sexual freedom.

[17] In Buffy's identity implosion after she initiates a sexual liaison with Spike we have the eroticism of shame and a fascinating illustration of the show's complex engagement with its own empowerment premise. Her lust for Spike propels her indulgence in sexual practices with him involving dominance games and rough sex: "You wanna see the

bite marks love" ('Dead Things', 613). She perceives those practices as deviant behaviour: "That's the power of your charms. Last night . . . was the most perverse . . . degrading experience of my life" ('Wrecked', 6010). Spike is full of admiration for the passion unleashed by their building-destroying sex, telling her that getting off on "the little nasties we whispered" is more than her "style", it's her "calling". To her that night is a "freak show", to him "a bloody revelation". Spike's enthusiastic but inappropriate compliment, "I knew the only thing better than killing a slayer would be f...", shows that the 'rush' of violence and sex are linked for him, an insight that Buffy is fighting within herself. In that sense, he does know her intimately, better than she knows herself, "You can act as high and mighty as you like . . . but I know where you live now, Slayer. I've tasted it".

[18] Buffy talks very little about her feelings for Spike and when she does she either denies feeling anything meaningful or wants to keep it undefined so that she does not have to face the reality of what she may feel. She cannot even bring herself to call what they have a "thing": "We don't have a . . . thing, we have . . . this. That's all" ('Dead Things', 6013). During their one relaxed and conversationally intimate, post-coital moment she reluctantly admits to liking him "sometimes". The rarity of this verbal intimacy leads Spike to drily ask her "Are we having a conversation?" The most Buffy will admit is "Maybe" but she opens up to express a wry awareness of her own inconsistent moral stance in the relationship. She accepts Spike's pointed description of her post-coital fleeing "virtue fluttering", even jokes about doing it, "as soon as my legs start working", and grudgingly compliments him on his lovemaking skills "You got the job done yourself". The moment of communion between them is lost when Spike, meaning to compliment what he sees as her abandonment to passion, lust and skill in their S & M games, "you make it hurt in all the wrong places", calls her an "animal". As he says to Anya elsewhere, when they commiserate over their mutual rejection by those they love, "She was so raw/ Never felt anything like it. . . ." ('Entropy', 6018). Buffy, understandably, rejects Spike's "animal" description but he is right about her being "raw" in her sexuality and in the emotional needs she tries to use sex to satisfy.

[19] From an ideological point of view, the interesting question is whether the show is as confused as Buffy about what is oppressive or liberating in her sexual relationship with Spike. As When Buffy asks Tara later, after the conversation with Spike: "Why can't I stop? Why do I keep letting him in?", female victim-hood and male oppression are implied by her question. However, Buffy is portrayed as succumbing out of desire when having sex with Spike in a public place in the Bronze balcony scene, in the same episode as both the conversations above with Spike and Tara. Initially rejecting Spike, Buffy asks him to stop his advances but is sexually aroused by him. "You see . . . you try to be with them . . . but you always end up in the dark . . . with me. What would they think of you . . . if they found out . . . all the things you've done? If they knew . . . who you really were?" Spike is right in much of what he says to her. Buffy voluntarily leaves the lighthearted company of her friends, clearly not sharing their mood. She does not deny his claims that she takes pleasure in what is forbidden, dark, dangerous and hidden in their public coupling. She does not take him up on his challenge to stop him and she is enticed by what brings her shame. This is not coercion on Spike's part, her desire simply wins out over her shame and is stimulated by the circumstances that produce it. However, Spike is only partly right. While her desire tells us that Buffy does feel emotional affinity with "the dark" which Spike embodies, it is also her discomfort with what she is doing that tells us she 'belongs' downstairs with her friends. As Wilcox points out, there are limits to Buffy and Spike's knowledge of each other: "Spike tells Buffy that he knows her, that she is like him—and he is right; he knows her dark side in both its strengths and weaknesses. But he does not know all of her; and even more significantly, he does not know all of himself, any more than she knows all of him or of herself" (Wilcox, 2002, 18). Buffy has links to both the dark and the light and cannot, at this point in her life, find a way of uniting them in her sense of who she is.

[20] Ideologically, the show is hovering around a very particular sexual discourse in Buffy's sexual interaction with men where the show wants to acknowledge women's

entitlement to express their full sexualities and makes clear that they are entitled to do so without losing social respect, being victimized, or being held accountable for their own exploitation. (Phillips, 2000, 78)

Burr has pointed out the ideological subversion inherent in the ambiguity created by the sadomasochistic eroticism in vampire/human relationships in the storyline (Burr, 2003). However, the show's interest in the emotional pain relationships bring to Buffy, and in the consequences of Buffy's choices in relationships with men, portrays her lack of self-knowledge, rather than her sexuality, as the problem. In her relationship with Spike, it is not simply the dominance games, or sexual violence, that frightens Buffy. I think we can rely on Spike's mention of their five hour sexual marathons, when Buffy breaks up with him in 'As You Were' (6015), as saying something about her confident enthusiasm for what they do! What terrifies Buffy when she realises she did not 'come back wrong', is that she **is** the girl who wants sex with Spike. "I may be dirt . . . but you're the one who likes to roll in it, Slayer" ('Wrecked', 6010).

Her identity crisis about her Slayer role is played out in her emotional crisis about her sexuality, but they are not the same issue. In the former, she does not know why she is back, given that she achieved a sense of completeness in Heaven, or why she feels cut off from the world around her. In her relationship with Spike, her identity is shaken by discovering that her deepest sexual feelings are more powerful, and less socially mainstream or conventional, than she knew. Sleeping with a vampire whose appetites matched her own unleashes that knowledge. When her identity crisis about her Slayer role plays into her emotional crisis about sleeping with Spike Buffy confuses the two issues. She links her sense of degradation from her sexual practices to her disgust at Spike's moral identity as a vampire but they, too, are not the same thing. Her issue with their sexual practices is one thing, the morality of enjoying them with Spike is another.

[21] In their sexual liaison we are given "the variability and murkiness of the boundaries, or "edges" and "fine lines"- between seduction and domination, pleasure and danger, responsibility and exploitation, agency and objectification, consent and coercion" (Phillips, 2000, 3). Buffy wants Spike to be the gatekeeper for her behaviours. As Clem tells Spike in 'Seeing Red' (6019), Buffy is a nice girl but she has issues, and one of them is about giving herself permission to enjoy the sexual practices she wants to indulge in with Spike. Tara tries to give her that permission when she tells Buffy the results of her investigation of the spell that brought her back- that Buffy did not come back wrong. She tells Buffy that it is morally acceptable to be with Spike whether she loves him or not. Buffy weeps and begs Tara not to forgive her: "This just can't be me, it isn't me. Why do I feel like this? Why do I let Spike do those things to me?" ('Dead Things', 6013). With the "let" she admits some participation, with the "do" she assigns him blame. What she does not take responsibility for is the initiation of their sexual interaction on occasions like their first coupling or her commanding him to "Tell me you love me...Tell me you want me" ('As You Were', 6015). This lack of responsibility is even more patent in her excuse to Xander when he finds out about the liaison, "It just happened" ('Seeing Red', 6019). A vampire without a soul being the source of her feeling unbelievably alive terrifies her: "He's everything I hate. He's everything that . . . I'm supposed to be against. But the only time that I ever feel anything is when . . . Don't tell anyone, please." In her confession to Tara fear and shame battle with sexual self-realisation. The one bit of self-knowledge Buffy does have in that conversation is that, whatever the rights and wrongs of allowing herself to enjoy what she has with Spike, the one thing she cannot do is continue to exploit his love for her by using him sexually to feel better about her life. Since she cannot give herself permission to enjoy sex with him guilt free, giving the relationship a degree of exploitation-free mutuality, then she is right to break up with him.

[22] Buffy is a victim of wanting to be a 'good' girl sexually. She thinks it is appropriate to express her sexuality but only if she expresses it within certain parameters. The fact that her socially acceptable relationship with Riley did not fulfill her needs has not taught her much about the futility of denying what she feels. In Buffy Vs Dracula (501) we have seen her leave her post-coital bed with Riley to go and find the 'rush' from slaying that was not satisfied by sex with him. It is not surprising that Buffy seeks out the same sense of danger in her love life that she finds empowering in her role as Slayer. Buffy finds aggression erotic but she is not, here, the sexually sophisticated young woman at ease with her sexuality that is ideologically stereotyped in today's magazines for young women. She is trying to reconcile a range of social expectations about the kind of young woman she should be sexually. She is struggling to be empowered when she declares her ambivalence and fears to Tara and it does lead her to insight about herself and her use of Spike. However, in that conversation with Tara, she abrogates some of the responsibility for her choices, denies her role as a participant in the pleasure Spike gives her, then succumbs to the sense of herself as a victim. Thankfully, it is the permission that Tara gives Buffy to just enjoy herself, or to love Spike, that saves the show from succumbing to it too. We do not see if Buffy integrates that aggressive aspect of her sexuality into a relationship with a man. Spike goes off to get a soul, they build a relationship of intimate trust and have a metaphorical sexual union before Spike's death, but they never have actual sex again. Maybe metaphorical sex, with their joined hands bursting into flame, when Buffy tells Spike she loves him in 'Chosen' (7022), is meant to give us that integration. The show to some extent neuters Spike sexually in season seven when he has a soul. It is probably due to James Marster's ongoing portrayal of latent sexuality that we do not end up with him as a character shot down by "the evil that Victorian society projected onto sexuality and by which our contemporary notions of sexuality are still contaminated" (Wood, 1996, 378).

[23] It is not possible to consider the issue of Buffy's role as an empowered woman without consideration of the pivotal scene where she is portrayed as the victim of an attempted rape. Given the controversy this scene in "Seeing Red" (6019) has generated between fans and the writers (Symonds 2003), and the sensitive place rape narratives have in feminist and post-feminist discourse, research and activism, it is not possible to read this scene as a straightforward narrative of male sexual violence. James Marsters has said: "That scene, more than any other, was very carefully choreographed (Bernstein, 2003, 20). That care seems to me to be present in more than one aspect of the scene. Considered as a media event, inclusive of dialogue, acting, cinematography and editing, the scene is technically and emotionally intricate and it encourages a complex audience engagement with both characters, the

perpetrator and the victim, that is not typical of all representations of attempted rape. From the beginning, we are asked to view the scene from more than one perspective through the dialogue. On Spike's entry, our attention and his is drawn to the fact that Buffy is hurt, after an earlier fight with a vampire where she has fallen and hurt her back. It is clear Spike enters the bathroom on the basis of an established intimacy because she objects to him being there, not because he has invaded her privacy, but because she feels they have nothing to talk about given the fact that he has slept with Anya. Spike says "we have to talk", to apologise is an imperative, but she curtly rejects this and orders him to leave. He asserts that it is not all about her "as much as you'd like it to be". This remark reminds us of Buffy's ongoing refusal to talk about their relationship with him and we feel the truth of his comment. Spike is aware that his apology will make no difference to the way she feels but he needs her to know that he was not trying to hurt her. There is deep despair and pain in his protest against Buffy's accusation that he initially went to Anya to get a magic spell to use on her: "It wasn't for you! *I* wanted something -- anything to make this feeling stop. I just wanted it to stop! You should have let him kill me."

[24] There is a shift from his despair when Buffy says she could not have let Xander kill him. He clutches at the hope that she prevented it because she loves him and he moves with more confidence towards her, accusing her of lying to herself. When she expresses her exasperation at his failure to accept what she says: "How many times. . .!? I have feelings for you. I do. But it's not love. I could never *trust* you enough for it to be love", the scene shifts again to Buffy's point of view. Spike is not hearing the resolve in Buffy's voice, nor does he understand her need to trust if she is to love. His scoffing dismissal of the word and the need, "Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy! Great love is wild and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes", alluringly passionate as the image is, returns us to the dynamic of the relationship we have been watching since they first coupled, of two people on different wavelengths. For Buffy that passion is something that burns "Until there's nothing left. Love like that doesn't last". He believes that her love for him is there and, now that all her friends know about their sexual liaison, she can allow herself to freely express it. What he does not understand is that her inability to say what she feels stems as much from her uncertainty about what those feelings are. What she does feel is that she cannot trust him, at least not enough to love. This assertion rings true in the context of Buffy's history with men who have left her: her father, Parker, Riley, and Angel. Her trust issues are not just about Spike. What is not clear is exactly the degree of trust that Buffy is talking about, given we have seen her trust Spike on countless occasions to watch her back in battle, to support her emotionally and receive confidences she cannot tell her friends, to protect her sister Dawn, and in dominance sex games that have even required her to let him handcuff her. The perspective shifts again as Spike moves towards her, trying to hold her and begging her to let herself "feel it" and "Let it go. . . Let yourself love me. . . Buffy, Buffy. . .". He is so desperate that he is not listening to what she is saying. He does not even notice her hitting herself on the bath when she falls as they struggle, even though she calls out in pain as her body jarringly strikes the bath. He repeats "you love me" and is oblivious to everything but his need. His eyes close as he tries to kiss her on the side of the head, not aggressively on the mouth, an action that disturbingly keeps us focused on his love for her and on his pain, even as we recognise with growing horror that he is losing himself. He closes his eyes, lost in his yearning: "Let yourself go. Let yourself love me".

[25] The discontinuities of emotion in this scene, as we move back and forth from the interaction between Spike and Buffy's point of view in the dialogue, are reinforced by the camera moving back and forth between upper body shots of Buffy and Spike separately, to close-ups of the struggle itself, and to wide shots of the assault. These changing angles, as much as the dialogue and the action itself, shape the nature of the discourse as an attempted rape narrative. The camera angles are used to follow the flow of emotion in their separate points of view and to create our response to them. Spike moves in on her in a predatory manner as the struggle starts and the camera cuts from close ups of individual body parts, such as his invasive hand inside her robe, to wide angle shots. The close ups give you the sense of the struggle, and its invasive, hectic movement. She fights him off, he alternately pleads with, and assaults her. When the camera switches to a wide angle, such as when he is lying on top of her, trying to pin her to the floor and holding her hands at her side, the audience is encouraged to adopt a detached way of seeing the action, not from Buffy's or Spike's point of view but the act for what it is, attempted rape. When they fall next to the bath, and she is sitting on the floor, with him kneeling in front of her, we shift to him pleading with her and for that moment his emotion is foregrounded, even as she struggles. When she falls back and he is lying on top of her, the scene shifts emotionally again and the brutality of what he is doing, in that overwhelmingly white and sterile bathroom, is paramount. The camera angles up, from Buffy's point of view, and Spike's face shifts to naked aggression, teeth clenched, before it fades to black. When the scene resumes, it is as if Spike is talking to himself: "I know you felt it... when I was inside you". He clings to the empty hope that sex will reconnect them and at that point, more than any other, we know the futility of that belief as Buffy pleads with him to stop: "Don't. . . please, please Spike, please don't do this, please don't do this. . ." When he finally abandons himself completely to the assault, ripping her robe from her breast, we lose all sympathy for him as his intention to coerce her takes over: "You'll feel it again, Buffy. . . I'm gonna make you feel it. . ."

[26] In addition to the camera manipulation, the fact that the whole scene is played with no musical underscore emphasises, along with the stark sterility of the bathroom setting, the graphic violence in Spike's behaviour. The man who, while he never denied his own history of violence, was convinced that he would never hurt the woman he loves, does what was unthinkable to him, he attempts to rape her. Buffy alternates between expressions of physical pain and pleading and when Spike says he is going to make her feel it, and rips her robe open at the point where our sympathy for him has dissolved, she kicks him off. "Ask me again why I can never love you", indeed. Buffy asserts that it is only because she stopped him that it went no further. However, Spike makes no attempt to continue the attack. When Spike struggles to stand prior to this, using the bathroom sink to raise himself up, the transition to his realisation of what he has just done is signaled by the return of the musical underscore. By the time he stands, opposite Buffy clutching her robe shut, Spike knows, and is horrified at, what he has done and almost done.

The difficulties one might have with placing the emotional impact of the above scene in the category of traditional rape narratives stems primarily from the use of it to tell a story about a character other than the woman facing the attempted rape, and that, from a feminist point of view, is disconcerting. More than one writer has acknowledged that the decision was made to have Spike attempt to rape Buffy, to give him powerful motivation to do what no vampire or demon has done in the Buffyverse, to defy canon and do the unprecedented, to voluntarily go and get a soul. As Marsters says on the use of the scene to motivate the soul quest: "how do you motivate him – how do you make him make a mistake that's so heart-rending that he'd be willing to do that?" (Bernstein, 2003, 20). His use of the phrase "heart-rending" is apt and the scene as a rape narrative is deeply disconcerting because of our empathy, albeit discontinuously in the scene, with the perpetrator. While some clumsiness in execution with the soul quest cliffhanger at the end of season six confused the clarity of that motivation with the mislead about him going to get his chip out, writer declarations (Espenson, 2002) and the soul revelation scene in 'Beneath You'(602), make that motivation clear:

[27] Given audience empathy for the character, and his popularity, there were writer concerns about allowing Spike to attempt to rape Buffy if they had any intention of continuing the love story:

I love Spike. I was very worried about the attempted rape. . . because that's not something you play around with. That's not something. . . it's very hard to come back from. And you know, you can say Luke and Laura came back from it, but that was a different time. I think we have to be very careful that we are not saying anything about humans. When we say that Spike looked into his soul, at that moment, and saw the demon in him and that's what made him want to go get a soul. (Jane Espenson, 2002)

Spike fan response in the online discourse about this scene often described this plot development as a form of 'character rape', in the belief that a morally developing Spike would never do such a thing (Rhys, 2002) . This belief was not untouched by James Marsters expressed distress at having to play the scene: "It still haunts me. I am artistically proud to have done it, but it was the hardest day of my career":

It was written very carefully. But I was more freaked out about the scene than I should have been, and I think that freaked Sarah out, and then I, as the character, reacted to her freaking out and that dynamic kind of fed on itself. I think it ended up being much more aggressive and violent than intended. I think there was an attempt to keep it from being painful, but it played that way and so we have to deal with it. (Bernstein, 2003, 20)

It is clear, however, that fan felt empathy for the character in the scene is encouraged within the narrative itself.

How we view the attempted rape scene also depends very much on the degree to which it is outside the horror genre and the Hellmouth metaphor. Spike is not in vamp face so it appears that it is not the demon but the man attempting to rape her, despite Espenson's assertion above that it is the demon. Buffy being victimized because she is injured works if you can suspend your sense of her as the Slayer and a superhero, it feels odd if you cannot suspend that disbelief. The superhero kick that sends him flying back into the wall does not merely stop him, it serves to bring him back to himself. It is the man who decides not to renew the attack. However, the scene straddles its exit from the metaphor uneasily. The mention of the spell Spike went to get reminds us that we are in the Buffyverse, as do the careful references to Buffy's injury which call up the fact that slayer super healing powers should be at work as much as it does that she is hurt. Since we have never seen Spike even come close to physically overwhelming her she seems to take a long time to kick him off. The shift from Buffy as Slayer to Buffy as victim seems odd when she finally does send him flying into the wall. As often as the camera angles at Spike from Buffy's point of view to show

his aggression, and as much as she struggles and protests, the effect is to leave us puzzling as to why it takes her so long to kick him off, particularly as all it takes is one kick. Perhaps, there is something in Buffy's pleading with Spike, "Don't do this" that implies she is holding to her belief that he will stop of his own accord, echoing the trust she has had of him in the past. Perhaps, she is attempting to give him the space to make that decision. Perhaps, her own stunned disbelief that he is doing this prevents her immediately reacting with the strength she ultimately uses. A clearer sense of these emotional possibilities would have allayed my own quizzicality about the delay in Buffy stopping the assault.

[28] How we view the assault in the context of female empowerment also depends on what is typical, or atypical, about that scene in the context of the history of representation of rape, "the pervasive and persuasive power of the cultural narratives about rape and the cultural imperatives to represent it in particular ways" (Projansky, 2001, 230). This assault of Spike's is central to his decision to go off and get a soul and if we hold to Spike's point of view, in that context, the attempted rape makes sense in the Buffyverse. If we hold to Buffy's story, to her strength as a Slayer who can be run through with a sword in the finale and get up again and throw herself into the battle, her victim-hood here feels odd. There is some question whether the scene works as a discourse on rape being about power, in the sense that feminism might use it. The lack of pre-meditated hostility on Spike's part also prevents the easy categorisation of it as making a statement about violent male response to female strength and independence. Nor does it fit the image of rape-revenge genre (Read, 2000) when we have subsequent scenes showing Spike's anguished soul-searching in the scene in the crypt with Clem, where he makes the decision to go and get the soul, or Buffy seeking Spike at his crypt to leave Dawn in his care. She even inquires with concern of Clem as to when Spike will return when she finds out he has left Sunnydale. We are left with a representation of attempted coercion, unquestionably, but also of the deep emotional pain that allowed Spike to slide into it. As another writer on the show, Rebecca Rand-Kirshner has said:

It's so desperate emotionally and so horrific physically. We could feel how his very innards were twisted into this perversion of what he wanted. But it was disturbing to think of it from his perspective as well. (Rand-Kirshner, 2003)

Since the scene is being used to tell Spike's story as well as Buffy's, the scene straddles across the narrative divide of trying to make a feminist statement about rape, through Buffy's momentary disempowerment, and furthering Spike's character development. We are given Buffy's experience of the trauma of attempted rape while we get Spike's experience of emotional trauma and moral implosion. In the end, we do not have to choose one perspective over the other, or between a male or female perspective, the drama is complex enough to leave us with both.

[29] What Buffy has discovered in trying to make sense of her relationships with men and her sexuality is that her slayer powers have been of little use in making life choices or in protecting her from emotional pain. Xander's description of Parker's sexual attraction to Buffy, "That's because he got hit by the Buffinator. Now he's powerless" points that out in its word play with the action hero, Terminator image ('Living Conditions', 402). The irony is that Parker uses her, dumping Buffy after a one night stand despite her 'buffinator' power. It is comic that when Harmony dumps Spike, she takes a shorter time than Buffy to get the basic fact of empowerment: "I'm powerful, and I'm beautiful, and I don't need you to complete me" ('Pangs', 408). Her relationships with Angel, Parker, Riley and Spike finally bring her to that point in her cookie dough analogy, in the conversation with Angel, prior to the final battle that destroys Sunnydale. Despite the didacticism of that analogy, Joss Whedon's vision of female empowerment, in the context of Buffy's use of violence, her sexual identity and search for a life and love, has been encapsulated in an exploration of primal human urges that seem to me to take dramatic risks that do not support a simplified, gendered reading of the text as about 'girl power'. In that context, Harmony's traditional empowerment statement seems too simple. As Buffy faces her new life at the end of Chosen, no longer bearing the burden of being the only Slayer, a smile of anticipation on her face, I do not think we can assume that all will now be plain sailing for her. "What we want to show is an independent heroine who is not defined by her relationships." (Noxon, 2002) Noxon's assertion is, ultimately, contradicted by aspects of the dramatic context of the show. We do know Buffy through her relationships with everyone around her and she herself recognises they say a great deal about who she is, especially her relationship choices in men. She is very much defined by her relationships and by her choices within them, as are we all. I would argue that the show does celebrate the "joy" of female empowerment but that its final resting place in feminist ideology can afford to incorporate into that definition the show's exploration of what it means to be human, and male, as well as female, "the more" that Daugherty has said she represents. After all, Buffy is not up on that screen alone and it is not necessary to see that fact as an ideological problem.

[30] Many of us can agree with Whedon's belief in his "legacy":

Honestly, I hope that the legacy of the show would be that there is a generation of girls who have the kind of hero a lot of them didn't get to have in their mythos and a lot of guys who are a lot more comfortable with the idea of a girl who has that much power. (Hockensmith, 2003b)

However, Whedon's notion of "guys who are comfortable" might have as much to do with what is happening to the male characters on the show as it does with the heroine. The finale is as much about the culmination of Spike's journey as it is about the beginning of the rest of Buffy's life, and the show ends with them saving the world in partnership. We are left to read what we will into her enigmatic final smile but, when Giles asks in bewilderment who is responsible for the crater that is now the destroyed Hellmouth, the last word Buffy says is "Spike". We need to remember that the Buffyverse does not, though it sometimes is tempted to, offer us a closed definition of Buffy as a feminist symbol. The celebration of female empowerment is tintured with a range of emotional colours that site the Buffyverse at the center of a resilient struggle to know what that empowerment might consist of as a girl growing up lives it in a complex and fragile world. Buffy's heroic journey is one of authentic self-discovery, she fashions herself as she goes, and that resonates for some of her contemporaries in the audience precisely because she is a work in progress and the signs of the struggle to simply 'become' are there for contemplation. While we might cringe a little, as Angel does, when Buffy uses the analogy of unbaked cookie dough to describe where she stands at series end, we are cautioned by it to remember that Buffy is only 22 at that point, and she is at the end of the series, not the end of her life's journey: "The show is still about life and life is not a thing that says 'The End' at the end" (Menon, 2003). In that context, we need to look beyond current simple definitions of 'girl power' and female empowerment if we want to fully appreciate the show's brilliant exploration of Joss Whedon's premise.

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Stevie Simkin

“You Hold Your Gun Like A Sissy Girl”: Firearms And Anxious Masculinity In *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*

Overview—“Do We Really Need Weapons For This?”

[1] Buffy’s regular use of mediaeval weaponry in nod-and-wink fashion to hint at female subversion of the male is familiar; indeed, the phallic/penetrative “dusting” of vampires is so commonplace in the series that it requires little commentary. There are, however, some more varied and playful instances where the phallic significance of such objects is highlighted. The creative team of *Mutant Enemy*, responsible for both *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel*, are clearly aware of this subtext; perhaps the most obvious instance of self-referentiality comes in the *Angel* episode “Billy” (3006) when Cordelia squares up to the eponymous demon with a crossbow and remarks, “the irony of using a phallic-shaped weapon? Not lost on me.” When Principal Snyder expels Buffy from Sunnydale High, she draws a sword from a bag, holds it out, erect and threatening, and metaphorically emasculates him: “You never got a single date in high school, did you?” (“Becoming,” Part 1, 2021). Spike’s reply to Buffy when she asks, “Do we really need weapons for this?”—“I just like them. They make me feel all manly” (“School Hard,” 2003)—is another representative exchange.

[2] In a TV programme that relies heavily on action as part of its genre mix, it is intriguing that, the Initiative-dominated Season 4 aside (which Doug Petrie refers to as their James Bond season), handguns such as pistols, rifles, etc., appear only rarely. There are many reasons why modern weaponry may appear relatively infrequently in *Buffy*; the audience demographic is probably a significant factor.^[1] It is also the case, as several commentators have remarked, that technology tends to be gendered male in *Buffy*, while Buffy and the Scooby Gang routinely rely either on non-violent strategies, or on arcane weaponry and magic (Early 18; Buttsworth 187). This essay will look in depth at a number of instances where modern weapons *do* appear. My contention is that, when modern firearms are featured, it is almost always in situations where the assertion, performance, or destabilising of masculine identity is key. The use of firearms—and especially pistols—can be seen as an important signifier of the wider issue of anxious masculinity. The examples I will look at all revolve around the use of modern firearms and feature a number of different configurations of gender conflict. Note that I do not intend to look at these moments in strictly chronological order: I will begin with a familiar male vs. male conflict from Season 4, return to Season 2 for a more complex male/female interplay, before concluding with a close look at the climax of Season 6.

[3] If the use of handguns almost always comes loaded with subtext about gender and power, it most frequently involves Buffy subverting the standard “male is strong, female is weak” paradigm, and brief examples will serve to illustrate the point: in “Band Candy” [3006], Giles’s *alter ego* Ripper—an overtly, aggressively more masculinized figure than the Giles the audience is used to—takes a cop’s pistol, only to have it confiscated by Buffy, his macho posturing for Joyce’s benefit cut off in its prime.^[2] In “Phases” (2015), the werewolf hunter Cain has the barrel of his rifle bent out of shape by Buffy in a fairly obvious castration gesture. “A big, strong man versus a girl like me?” she mocks, “Wouldn’t be a fair fight.” There are scattered references to guns elsewhere, with Buffy almost always dismissive: twice in Season 6,

she uses the same phrase "these things—never useful"—once to a security guard in a battle with a demon at the bank in "Flooded," 6004], and again in "As You Were" (6015) after she is given an automatic rifle to destroy the Suvolte Demon eggs, spectacularly failing to hit a single one. Considering the tragedy at the heart of Season 6, and the writers' tendency to set up long-range story arcs, it is not unreasonable to assume that these lines were planted in earlier episodes with the climactic death of Tara and wounding of Buffy in mind (discussed in greater depth towards the end of this essay).

[4] Other, Buffy-less examples work in a similar fashion, underlining the anxious masculinity that the series explores so frequently: when Spike trains a pistol on Xander in "The Yoko Factor" (4020), setting off the chip, Anya taunts him: "Wow. That chip in your head means you can't even point a gun. How humiliating." Spike's humiliation is doubled when we find out that the gun is a fake: "Can't even point a decorative gun?" remarks Anya. "Give it up for American chipmanship," smirks Xander. The chipping of Spike has, of course, been established early on as a kind of castration. Immediately after he has been fixed by The Initiative, we see him attempt an attack on Willow ("The Initiative," 4007). Prevented from doing her any harm, what follows is a dialogue parodically patterned on male impotence: Spike, embarrassed and apologetic, puzzles, "I don't understand. This sort of thing's never happened to me before"; Willow replies reassuringly, "Maybe you were nervous," and so the conversation continues.³ Incidentally, the "Yoko Factor" episode also explores further Xander's own anxieties, as he is led to question his role in the Scooby front line on the one hand, while being reassured by Anya on the other ("he's a viking in the sack," she tells Spike).

Riley vs. Angel—"The Yoko Factor"

[5] In an overview of anxious masculinity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, if we leave aside for now the members of the "Trio" (Jonathan, Warren and Andrew), Riley stands out as perhaps the most anxious male of them all, and this is often displayed by his interaction with his stridently masculine comrades. The commandos of The Initiative are to a large extent defined by their aggressive masculinist image, stubbornly retro in their sexual politics. In his commentary for the episode "Hush" (4010), Joss Whedon notes the Initiative's reaction to the latest Sunnydale crisis—"Here we have the classic male response `guns, guns, guns'"—thereby making a particular kind of association between firearms and masculinity. Doug Petrie, meanwhile, makes similar remarks on the soldiers in his commentary for "The Initiative," drawing attention to their, quote, "big machine guns," adding "it's all wonderfully phallic."⁴ As Sarah Buttsworth notes, "Soldier identities are 'embodied' by, and embody, *heterosexual* masculinity" (186). It is clear, moreover, that Riley has a huge psychological investment in his military identity. As he remarks (rhetorically) in the episode "This Year's Girl" (4015): "I'm a soldier. Take that away, what's left?"

[6] The conversation between Forrest and Riley in the refectory in the opening scene of 'The Initiative' clearly positions Forrest as a male sexual predator, objectifying the female students—and then specifically Buffy—as sex items—

Forrest: Women. Young, nubile, exciting. Each one a mystery, waiting to be unlocked.

The sequence alternates shots of Forrest talking with Riley with shots of his point of view as he watches Buffy. One particular Forrest PoV shot zooms in on the breasts of another female student as she walks towards him carrying her tray. This scene is undoubtedly problematic in terms of racial politics—the image of the African American Forrest as sexual predator panders, no doubt unintentionally but nevertheless unhappily, to familiar myths about black sexuality. However, the intended meaning in terms of sexual politics is well taken. Riley, significantly, is clearly uncomfortable with Forrest's discourse, and this is soon reinforced when Parker, the student who has slept with Buffy, egged on by Forrest and Graham, cracks a joke about the difference between freshmen girls and toilet seats ("a toilet seat doesn't follow you around after you've used it"). Riley, in Jimmy Stewart mode, promptly knocks him down

[7] Nevertheless, Riley shows himself to be distinctly old-fashioned in his sexual politics. Petrie describes him bluntly, as "a sexist doof" in his commentary on the scene in this same episode, when Riley attempts to chaperone Buffy to safety (behaviour which prompts Buffy's neat line "Who died and made you John Wayne?").⁵ Lorna Jowett accurately describes him as 'macho, violent, and strong, but . . . also romantic,

heroic and human" (65). There are other complicating factors, too, including a traceable subtext of homoeroticism between Riley and Forrest, and the provocative figure of Maggie Walsh: Walsh is herself both mother and stern patriarch, and has a particularly close bond with Riley and, of course, Adam. The commandos also contrast nicely with the more feminized male figure Xander, who continues to occupy (willingly or not) that borderland between the aggressively masculinist on the one side and the less gender-defined new man on the other.⁶ Xander's battles with vampires are exemplified by his tussle with Harmony: Petrie notes that, with its "tough guy dialogue" and slow motion effects, the scene plays "as if it's going to be the fight of the century," but quickly descends into a comic, slapping, hair-pulling fight. Harmony reminds Xander of the fight when trading insults with him in "The Real Me" (5002): "You're the hair-puller, you big girl."⁷ Xander's generally inept attempts at combat contrast markedly with Riley, who, though lacking the slayer's superhuman strength, nevertheless fights side by side with Buffy.

[8] Riley's relationship to modern, technological weaponry is an integral part of his role as soldier.⁸ The credit sequence, which always uses carefully selected clips to introduce each actor/character, includes two images of him with a taser gun (once shouldered, once firing). By the time we get into Season 5's credit sequence, one taser shot has been replaced by an intriguing clip of him from the dream episode "Restless" (4022): filmed from a low angle, Riley is seen suited and seated at a table, whilst a pistol perches on a glass tabletop in front of him, foregrounded and in focus. Throughout Season 4, Riley most often uses the science fiction toned taser gun. However, there are two key sequences in which Riley uses a pistol, and these are both particularly useful in an exploration of Riley's anxious masculinity.

[9] In "Goodbye Iowa" (4014) we find Riley, psychologically coming apart at every nail, confronting Buffy in Willie's Bar. Disoriented, paranoid, and physically shaking, he pulls his gun on a female bystander. The bystander may be a vampire (as the unstable Riley suspects), but, judging by her terrified response to the threat, she is more likely to be an innocent citizen. The camera angle emphasizes both the muzzle of the pistol and Riley's lack of control over his sidearm. After he lets the pistol drop (allowing the woman to run panic-stricken from the building), Riley turns around to the bar and smashes the drink glasses. Immediately afterwards, Buffy is depicted ministering to him in his hideout; the relationship portrayed is something like mother and sick child. The sequence displays the extent to which Riley has lost self-control, and establishes his profound reliance upon Buffy.

[10] The second instance is even more interesting in terms of anxious masculinity. In "The Yoko Factor" (4020), Riley encounters Angel first of all in the alleyway, beating up an Initiative team. Riley suspects Angel and Buffy have recently slept together, since Buffy has just returned from a trip to visit her former lover in L.A., hot on the heels of rogue slayer Faith. Riley is determined to prevent Angel from seeing Buffy again, but is fairly comprehensively taken apart by Angel, his only momentary advantage courtesy of his stun gun. By the time he catches up with his rival, Angel is already in Buffy's dorm room. Riley enters pistol first, and the camera angle exaggerates the muzzle of the gun comic book style (the effect is even more marked than in the barroom scene in "Goodbye Iowa"). The conversation that follows is a macho locking of horns: Angel suggests Riley put down the gun and Riley, revealingly, responds, "It's pretty much all I got left, so I'm thinking not." Buffy insists Angel "won't hurt anybody," but Angel instead raises his metaphorical hackles—"might hurt you," he tells Riley). When Angel mocks his opponent's physical weakness ("Some threat. You can barely stand"), Riley defers to (or, rather, clings to) the potency of the phallic symbol again: "Trigger finger feels okay." Angel continues the challenge along more explicit lines, as the subtext of sexual competitiveness erupts to the surface in his next line, spoken to Buffy—"You actually sleep with this guy?" The direct challenge to Riley as Buffy's sexual partner prompts physical violence, and Buffy has to literally pull them apart, while her one-liner forces both of them to stand down—"I see one more display of testosterone poisoning and I will personally put you both in the hospital." In a neat touch, Angel is reduced to childish protests—"He started it—," swiftly cut short by Buffy's glare. Finally, Riley's last attempt to assert his will ("I'm not leaving this room," crossing his arms, and taking up a defiant position), is quietly defeated by Buffy's tiny gesture to Angel, who accompanies her out into the corridor.

[11] The audience is aware that Angel poses no threat to Riley's relationship with Buffy, but for Riley the threat is very real and profoundly unsettling: he has only just discovered the truth of Buffy and Angel's

romantic history (including the consequences of their lovemaking). Angel's fight with the Initiative soldiers has convinced Riley that Angel is "up to his old tricks again." The confrontation, then, is inevitable: Riley, humiliated by Angel in hand to hand combat, also suspects Angel and Buffy have slept together again, and the pistol—all that Riley's "got left"—is a desperate attempt to regain control and "possession" of Buffy. Incidentally, there is a strikingly similar scene in "The Replacement" (5003). The plot of the episode is constructed around the magical division of Xander into two bodies—a confident *persona* and an anxious *persona*—and the showdown, with pistol, takes place in a similar battle over Anya. The camera angles, dialogue and Buffy's intervention are all reminiscent of the Riley and Angel showdown in "The Yoko Factor."

Cock Fighting—"Innocence"

[12] Perhaps the most striking use of a firearm by Buffy herself (striking both literally and figuratively) comes from an earlier season: the acquisition and deployment of the rocket-launcher in "Innocence" (2014).⁹ This episode, together with its predecessor "Surprise" (2013), charts an unusual approach to the power struggle between male and female. The confrontation between Riley and Angel in "The Yoko Factor" is a clear example of struggle between two men for power and sexual dominance—who "owns" Buffy?—and the answer both crushes Riley and, more importantly, shows that neither man can own her and that she is quite capable of asserting her will over both of them. The "Innocence" example plays out a male vs. female conflict, but in a very different way to the more straightforward examples given in the introduction to this essay. The rich complexity of the rocket-launcher incident derives, as we shall see, from its context—in particular, the crucial narrative arc of Buffy's psychosexual journey.

[13] The two-parter "Surprise" and "Innocence" is pivotal in the sexual maturation of a number of characters—Willow and Oz, Xander and Cordelia, Giles and Jenny. Whedon remarks how the conversation between Willow and Oz as they wait in the truck, and Oz refuses to kiss Willow, marks the moment when Willow falls in love with him.¹⁰ There is development of a kind, too, between Xander and Cordelia (their kiss is witnessed by a horrified Willow), while the Jenny/Giles relationship is abruptly derailed by the discovery of Jenny's knowledge of and involvement in Angel's reversion to his evil former self. However, all this pales beside the crucial development in the Buffy/Angel romance—what Whedon describes as "a horror movie version of the idea of 'I sleep with my boyfriend and now he doesn't call me and also he's killing hookers'."¹¹

[14] As is often the case in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Surprise" and "Innocence" play out a surface narrative of rampaging demons and the threat of Armageddon while proceeding with major developments in the characters' story arc. When Keith Topping writes, "what holds the episode down is the unnecessary plot about the rocket-launcher that pushes the viewer away from the important relationship stuff," he is missing the point (Topping 2002: 112). The Judge is the key antagonist in the "Buffy saves the world" narrative, but he also fits into the psychosexual story arc, and in this context can be understood to represent a kind of phallic totem for Angelus, Spike and Drusilla. Over the course of the two episodes, the boxes containing the parts of The Judge are collected and the surprises contained within the various boxes all have readily detectable phallic significance. In "Innocence," Dru opens one box and is turned on by what she sees, her view of the box's contents spliced with an erotically charged interaction with Spike, kneeling in front of him and sighing suggestively. There is also a classic Freudianism when Dru almost kills Dalton for losing the box containing the Judge's arm. Stopping short of gouging out his eyes, she instead removes his glasses and stomps them into the concrete before putting them back on his nose—the Freudian idea of blinding as a substitute for castration fits the phallic subtext very neatly. When the re-assembled Judge burns and annihilates Dalton, Dru is clearly turned on—"Do it again, do it again," she coos.

[15] When Buffy opens the box confiscated from Dalton, however, the result is very different: she is promptly attacked and nearly throttled by the Judge's arm that has been shut inside. It is easy to interpret this as a sign of anxiety over her burgeoning sexuality, with the arm as a phallic symbol threatening to suffocate her—the Buffy/Angel consummation is close, and has been hinted at already by the Buffy dream sequence that opens the episode, and which climaxes with her marrying Angel. The song played by the band during the dream is suggestive—it includes such lines as "Take me over, I'm lying down / I'm giving in to you"¹²—as are Joyce's words in the dream ("Do you really think you're ready, Buffy?"—a line she

speaks later in the episode when Buffy talks about learning to drive). The subsequent shattering of the saucer in the dream (again prefiguring reality, *déjà vu* style) is a clear signifier of loss of virginity. It is often noted that the encounter with the re-assembled Judge in the episode "Surprise," when Buffy and Angel narrowly escape with their lives, is the catalyst for their first sexual encounter.

[16] For Spike, the Judge is "Big Blue" (a variation on his familiar, macho catchphrase "The Big Bad," most often applied to himself); conversely, Buffy refers to him, belittlingly, as "the smurf." Buffy chooses to combat the Judge in a particular way—a way that will, tellingly, deeply impress Faith, who is less ambivalent about her violent vocation than Buffy (see "Faith, Hope and Trick," 3003). Her choice of weapon is a technologized phallic symbol, which Joss Whedon himself acknowledges in the same terms during his commentary for the episode. After describing how original plans to use a tank proved impractical, Whedon talks at some length about the rocket-launcher, referring to it as "my man-toy"—going on to clarify, in endearingly Xander-like fashion, that he's talking about "the rocket-launcher, not my other man toy."¹³ The acquisition of the rocket-launcher in the first place occurs under cover of a particularly macho game, reinforcing the sexual/phallic subtext. I have already noted how the Scoobies more often use quick wits, research, and magic in their battles with demonic forces. Here, it is Xander's ability to draw on the soldier in him (as Whedon refers to it)¹⁴ that germinates the counter-attack. It is important that Xander chooses Cordelia (for him, the sexualized female), and not Willow to accompany him on this mission. And although Xander's proficiency with weaponry seems to come and go—he can't figure out how to fix the taser gun, for example, in "This Year's Girl" (4015)—in "Innocence" his confidence is strong and well founded. As he tells Cordelia, "I am pretty sure I can put together an M-16 in 57 seconds," and his military skills are put to simple, effective use.

[17] Xander and Cordelia approach the armoury, and Xander attempts to gain entry by pretending to be an off duty soldier who wants to give his girl, quote, "The Tour." The dialogue that follows plays out the familiar connections between guns, phallic symbols, sexual arousal and virility—"Well, you know the ladies. They like to see the big guns. Gets 'em all hot and bothered," Xander says when challenged by the guard. He asks the soldier to cut him some slack, and when the soldier asks why he should, Xander takes him apart:

Xander: Well, if you do, I won't tell Colonel Newsome that your boots ain't regulation, your post wasn't covered, [*grabs his M-16 and gives it back to him properly*] and you hold your gun like a sissy girl.

Soldier: You got 20 minutes, nimrod.

Xander: [*smiles*] I just need 5. [*heads for the door, stops and looks back*] Uh, forget I said that last part.

Xander's scornful mocking of the soldier ("you hold your gun like a sissy girl") takes on a particular resonance within the scenario that has been set up, where display of weaponry—the "big guns"—has already been established as a phallic signifier.¹⁵ The exchange ends with a typical instance of Xander inadvertently cutting himself down to size—the reference to "20 minutes" and "I just need five" is, of course, another index of virility, or lack of it.

[18] Now the Scoobies have their own phallic box to play with. Just as Spike has presented his boxes to Drusilla as gifts, so Xander presents the boxed rocket-launcher to Buffy with a "happy birthday" greeting, underlining the parallel between the two. But here the talk is straight-faced and business-like, with none of the fawning, self-consciously erotic overtones that characterize the conversations between the vampires. The exchange between Buffy and Xander ("Do you want me to show you how to use it?"—"Yes I do") is terse and business-like, refusing any suggestion of *double entendre*, and the same goes for their brief exchange after the rocket has blasted the Judge into tiny pieces—"Thanks"—"Knew you'd like it."¹⁶ In the confrontation with the Judge, "Big Blue's aggressive over-confidence—"You are a fool; no weapon forged can stop me"—is countered by Buffy's smooth riposte, "That was then—this is now," and the Judge responds with a flummoxed "What does *that* do?" before the rocket blows him into tiny pieces. This sequence is beautifully put together—the emphasis is on smooth, fast cutting, and Gellar's portrayal of cool, unflustered determination as she raises the rocket-launcher, arms, and fires it adds to the impact of

this climactic scene.¹⁷ It is telling that Buffy looks far more confident and at ease with the rocket-launcher than she does with taser guns on the rare occasions she uses them in Season 4: her interaction with firearms in that season is more consistent, and more in keeping with her identity as the Slayer, and in retrospect serves to emphasize her proficiency on this particular occasion.

[19] In the showdown with the Judge, Buffy is dealing on one level with the threat of Armageddon—nothing new for the slayer. However, on a psychosexual level, Buffy is dealing with her humiliation at the hands of Angelus. In this context, the showdown between the totemic Big Blue and Buffy and her “man toy” takes on a particular resonance. Buffy defeats the phallic enemy by unsheathing the emphatically male, technological, overpowering weapon.¹⁸ The thread follows through directly to Buffy’s fight with Angelus. Although she is unable to stake him, she does deliver a well-aimed kick to his groin that leaves him thoroughly incapacitated. Buffy exchanges the “mine’s bigger than yours” tactic for a more familiar, and equally powerful method of castration. Moreover, this moment is likely to get an even more enthusiastic response from the audience than the destruction of the Judge does—another indication of the primacy of the sexual story arc. Indeed, the significance of the moment is underlined by Whedon’s commentary. He evidently saw it as providing a kind of closure for the narrative of Buffy’s sexual initiation and humiliation: the defeat of Angel in this fight, and the way in which Buffy does it, is a reminder that *Buffy* was designed to be, as Whedon says, “a feminist show—not a polemic, but a very straight on feminist show.” The kick to the groin, he says, is “very primal, it’s very important, it’s kinda empowering and I kinda love it.”¹⁹

Bite the Bullet—“Seeing Red” and “Villains”

[20] Undoubtedly the most devastating use of a handgun comes at the climax of Season 6, when Warren shoots and critically wounds Buffy, and inadvertently kills Tara. This moment, the events leading up to it, and the aftermath—specifically, Willow’s torture and killing of Warren—can all be interpreted from a similar perspective, tracing gender conflict, anxious masculinity, and Freudian subtext. Note also that the build-up to this shooting incident is protracted, but that the phallic subtext remains intact—indeed, as we shall see, it becomes so blatant at times that it is hard not to feel that it is very knowingly playing Whedon’s “bring your own subtext” game.

[21] In “Seeing Red” (2019), the Trio (Warren, Jonathan and Andrew) acquire the Orbs of Nezzla'khan, which Warren quickly appropriates for himself (having used Jonathan to retrieve them). The orbs give him superhuman strength and apparent invulnerability. It is difficult not to interpret the orbs as phallic—or, more precisely, testicular: Warren even has a pouch, slung on his belt, designed to hold them. As he absorbs their power, Warren’s expression is orgasmic (“Oh, they work,” he gasps). Jonathan pokes him curiously immediately afterwards, remarking that “I thought they were supposed to make us all huge and veiny” (the phallic subtext once again unmistakable). Warren settles any doubts by promptly trouncing a Nezzla demon. When Jonathan and Andrew attempt to reach the orbs, desperate to try them out for themselves, they are rebuffed by the onanistic Warren—“You’ll each get a whirl . . . as soon as I’m done playing with ‘em.” Here and elsewhere, the homoerotic subtext is also in play: “Man, I can’t wait to get my hands on his orbs,” Andrew remarks as he watches Warren turn over the security van later in the same episode. Later, abandoned by Warren and, with Jonathan, under arrest, Andrew’s despair has an overt romantic theme: “How could he do that to me? He promised we’d be together. He was just using me. He never really loved—(*catching himself*)—hanging out with us.”²⁰

[22] It is not entirely surprising, given his history, that Warren’s first port of call when he has acquired his new powers is a bar, where he deliberately provokes a fight over a woman. Although there is not space here to explore in detail Warren’s particular brand of anxious masculinity, it is enough to recall his lack of success in romantic relationships leading him to create a robot designed to be the perfect, submissive, sex slave girlfriend (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5015). In Season 6, he hypnotises his former girlfriend Katrina and turns her, too, into a sex slave (“Dead Things,” 6013). Katrina is dressed in a French maid’s outfit and is clearly about to perform oral sex on Warren when she recovers from the spell. When she tries to escape, Warren accidentally kills her. Here in “Seeing Red,” armed with the orbs, he confronts Frank, a bully who victimized him at high school, and beats and humiliates him in a confrontation over Frank’s girlfriend. Xander is in the bar, too; while Warren’s attempt to chat up a woman is aggressive and clichéd, Xander, by contrast, has just politely declined the advance of a woman at the bar. When Xander faces off against

Warren, Warren taunts him sexually: "You think maybe you could put a word in for me with that Anya chick?" he mocks. "'Cause if she's taking it from a vamp, I think I might have a chance."

[23] The episode builds towards a showdown between Buffy and Warren. Willow will later accuse Warren of killing Katrina because he "got off on it"—it was his way of asserting his power over her. Willow sees his desire to kill Buffy as similarly motivated by a desire to establish his superiority over a woman—"That's why you had such a mad-on for the slayer. She was the big O—wasn't she, Warren?" (note the toning down of the more overtly sexual "hard-on" to "mad-on"). Warren revels in his supposed superiority, his language shot through with gendered discourse: "you hit like a girl," he tells Xander in their fight in the bar. In his fight with Buffy, he calls her "Superbitch" and "kitten," and tells her (prematurely) he will be remembered as the guy who beat her. "You really got a problem with strong women," retorts Buffy. Warren, unharmed by her blows, continues the overt references to gender conflict: "What's the matter baby? Never fight a real man before?" He is defeated only when Jonathan tells Buffy to, quote, "smash his orbs." In the shooting script, the phallic/testicular subtext is given another twist: Buffy misinterprets Jonathan's message, and kicks Warren in the groin, to no effect, and Jonathan comments, to himself, "Not those orbs . . ." 21 When Buffy sees the pouch, snatches it and destroys the real orbs of power, Warren is left helpless. The term "bitch" has many meanings in Buffyspeak: Spike admits that "I may be love's bitch, but at least I am man enough to admit it" ("Lover's Walk" 3008), but it can also be used as a way of admitting the strength of a woman (usually in a pejorative way, as in Warren's use of "Superbitch," noted above), as well as in the more familiar, purely belittling fashion. Here, Warren's "Say good night, bitch" is reclaimed by Buffy and turned back on him: "Good night, bitch, " she quips, sending him crashing down with one powerful kick. Stripped of his orbs, Warren is nothing but a "sad little boy." 22

[24] In "Innocence," Buffy faced down the Judge with her own massive, technologized phallic weapon—the rocket-launcher. In "Seeing Red," Buffy is first defeated by what we might call a phallically enhanced Warren, before a close-to-literal act of castration allows her to turn the tables. At the end of that episode, Warren critically wounds Buffy and inadvertently kills Tara with a handgun. "You think you can just do that to me? That I'd let you get away with it?" he rants. His desperate and cowardly act recalls not only Riley's desperate "it's pretty much all I got left" in "The Yoko Factor," but also Spike's reversion to the desperate measure of a rifle after being humiliated by Buffy in "Fool for Love" (5007). 23 Time and again, men use firearms, often as a last resort, and almost always in attempts to reassert their masculinity.

[25] A vengeful Willow proceeds to redress the power imbalance in the following episode, tracking down, torturing, flaying and burning the misogynist woman-killer Warren ("Villains," 6020). The bullet she took from Buffy's body in the operating theatre is a key element in the process: if Buffy's defeat of Warren in "Seeing Red" recalls her kick to Angelus's groin at the end of "Innocence," Willow's attack on Warren is modelled on the rocket-launcher paradigm: "It's so small," Willow marvels, as the bullet withdraws from Buffy's chest and hovers in the air. The extent of her mastery over the bullet—both in saving her female friend and destroying her male enemy—is crucial; it also acts as a poignant comment on her failure to save her lover, Tara. The audience has watched Warren put his faith explicitly in brute technology. When he believes he has killed Buffy, he swaggers into Willy's bar, Western style, and boasts of his supposed victory: "Don't underestimate science," he says to the vampire he is regaling with his braggart story of slaying the Slayer; "good old-fashioned metal meets propulsion." Willow, by contrast, traps him using magic and nature. However, having brought the vines and branches of the trees to life to catch and bind his arms and legs, she proceeds to torture him with the phallic bullet, stripping away his shirt and allowing the bullet to hover just in front of his chest. 24

[26] The extent to which Willow transgresses the strict slayer code that Buffy follows ignites a familiar controversy over women wresting power by appropriating male behaviour patterns (particularly violent ones). In part, her acts are mitigated by Warren's impenitence: he continues to spew his aggressive misogyny, even in defeat. "You're really asking for it," he spits at Willow, and when the ghost of Katrina is raised, he tells her he killed her "because you deserved it, bitch" (that word again). Willow's punishment recycles male violence and is deliberately phallic and penetrative, with disturbing overtones of rape: "Want to know what a bullet feels like? . . . I think you need to feel it . . . Can you feel it now?" 25 In this respect, the dynamic is very different from Buffy's confrontations with Warren (where reasonable, non-lethal force is

used), with Angelus in 'Innocence' (the justifiable and empowering kick to the groin), or the Judge (averting apocalypse). Buffy, Anya, and Xander are all visibly appalled by Warren's execution, and shortly after this act, Willow, clearly out of control, faces off against Buffy, Anya and Giles as she hunts down the implicated (though comparatively blameless) Andrew and Jonathan.

[27] However, it is the way in which Willow is prevented from unleashing Armageddon that brings us full circle in terms of gender and violence. The climax of Season 6 is notable for its sidelining of the series' eponymous heroine. Although, as we would expect, Buffy has been the chief protagonist in each season's climactic battle (against the Master in Season 1, Angelus in Season 2, the Mayor in Season 3, Adam in Season 4 and Glory in Season 5), in 6022 she is left in a holding pattern, trapped underground, fighting for her life and her sister's. It is left up to the two males we have already noted as both more feminized and, to differing degrees, less anxious about their masculinity, to save the world from destruction. Both Giles and Xander use methods which are strongly coded as feminine: Willow is first weakened by Giles (who is drawing on the magic of a presumably female coven) but finally defeated only by the Watcher's near fatal act of self-sacrifice and the intervention of the feminized male Xander. Xander's words "I love you" (compare this with Warren's vitriol), repeated over and over again as Willow blasts and wounds him with her magic, gradually deplete her all-consuming destructive energy, until she finally gives in and breaks down in his arms.²⁶ If the male is usually subverted by the female in the Buffyverse, and if one of the standard issue symbols of aggressive masculinity (the gun) is often used to symbolise anxious or destabilized masculine identity, it is also worth remembering that the Mutant Enemy creative team is seldom predictable. The complexities of gender and power that are mapped out in individual episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as the longer and broader story arcs, pay eloquent tribute to the creator's (and the writers') serious intent.

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[1] In this respect, it is worth noting the WB network's decision to delay the broadcast of the third season's final episode, "Graduation Day, Part 2", in the wake of the Columbine high school massacre. Sarah Michelle Gellar's statement, presumably voicing the opinions of the Mutant Enemy creative team, makes it clear that they are acutely aware of such sensitivities: "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has always been extremely responsible in its depiction of action sequences, fantasy and mythological situations. . . . There is probably no greater societal question we face than how to stop violence among our youth. By canceling intelligent programming like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, corporate entertainment is not addressing the problem." (Quoted in Topping 2002: 229). Joss Whedon also notes that Warren's use of a gun at the end of Season 6 was in part "mak[ing] a statement about guns" ("Buffy Past, Present and Future" 2002: 13).

[2] Lorna Jowett argues that, in the series as a whole, Giles is desexualized by his age and his nurturing/fatherly role – see Jowett 2002: 61-3. Anne Millard Daugherty describes Giles as 'ambiguously gendered', and also notes he is 'resistant to most late-twentieth-century technology' (Daugherty 2002: 151).

[3] The demon in "Villains" (6020) makes the metaphor quite explicit: "You were a legendary dark warrior and you let yourself be castrated," he tells Spike.

[4] Petrie backs it up with references to the films *The Spy Who Loved Me* (*Loves Me* [sic] in Petrie's words) and *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (commentary on Region 2 Season 4 DVD set, disc 2).

[5] Doug Petrie, commentary on Region 2 Season 4 DVD set, disc 2.

[6] Xander's monologue in "The Initiative" ("Every man faces this moment," etc.) is taken from that macho masterpiece *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and is quite clearly used in a parodic way.

[7] For a more detailed study of Xander's masculinity, see Jowett 2002, Simkin 2004.

[8] When Buffy is stabbed by vampires in "Fool for Love" (5007), Riley's response is to throw a grenade into the crypt as a form of retaliation. (Thanks to Renee Dechert for this point).

[9] The Season 7 episode "Him" (7006) features a humorous reprise of the use of a rocket-launcher when Buffy, magically infatuated with a Sunnydale High quarterback, and competing with Willow and Anya to prove her love for him, attempts to assassinate Principal Wood with a similar weapon.

[10] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[11] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[12] "Anything", by Shawn Clement and Sean Murray.

[13] The fact that, as Whedon indicates in his commentary, they initially intended to use a tank brings to mind a moment in the movie *Tank Girl* when Rebecca straddles a cannon and challenges the men, "Hello, now don't you feel inadequate?" The image of Buffy with the rocket-launcher may also recall the figure of Vasques, the butch female marine in *Aliens*. In all these cases, the iconic images that are set up act as direct challenges to male phallic power.

[14] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[15] The soldier's use of "nimrod" may be significant, since although its surface meaning is "fool", the word also implies virility in its etymological roots (Nimrod the biblical hunter).

[16] The two showdowns, Buffy vs. The Judge and Buffy vs. Angel (as well as another earlier showdown, set in the school corridor, between Jenny, Xander, Willow and Angel, interrupted by Buffy), are seen in terms of the Western movie by Whedon—perhaps the most macho-oriented of all genres of US cinema.

[17] Again, Whedon's particular emotional investment in the episode is revealed by his remark in the commentary at this precise moment: "When she picks up that rocket-launcher, I have never loved her more".

[18] The significance of technology is underlined by the fact that the apparently invulnerable Judge, it would seem, is defeated by a weapon that is manufactured rather than "forged", which implies hand-tooling.

[19] Joss Whedon, commentary on Region 2 Season 2 DVD set, disc 4.

[20] Meanwhile, Jonathan is more unnerved by his stereotype of prison life: sitting in their cell, he eyes a neighbouring inmate and remarks: "That guy's been looking at me. I think he wants to make me his butt monkey."

[21] The kick to the groin is missing from the finished programme, which cuts straight to Warren revealing the pouch as he draws his fist back to strike the killing blow. Buffy snatches the pouch from his belt and smashes the orbs.

[22] The term "bitch" is also crucial in the episode "I Only Have Eyes for You" (2019), when Buffy, possessed by the spirit of a male student from the 1950s, re-enacts the original tragedy and shoots Angel, who has been possessed by the female teacher's spirit. For a detailed discussion of the episode, see Stevie Simkin, "Who died and made you John Wayne?".

[23] Spike's determination that he will shoot Buffy is shattered when he finds her outside her house, devastated by the news of her mother's illness, and the episode ends with his moving, faltering attempt to offer her comfort.

[24] The use of the trees in this way may recall the infamous rape of a woman by a tree in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1983).

[25] In this respect, there is another possible parallel between Willow's attack on Warren and Spike's attempted rape of Buffy earlier in the same episode.

[26] Note that Willow's rehabilitation at the beginning of Season 7 is seen in terms of reforging connections with magic through nature ("energy and Gaia and root systems", as Willow herself says). The coven where she is being looked after is clearly gendered female: Willow refers to her teacher Miss Hartness and "the coven" and its members ("they're the most amazing women I've ever met") ("Lessons," 7001).



Stevie Simkin

"Who died and made you John Wayne?": Anxious Masculinity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Masculinity, Femininity, and Stereotypes

[1] In recent years, the figure of Buffy the Vampire Slayer has been subject to a good deal of critical analysis as scholars have debated her status as a feminist icon (see, for example, Owen, Daugherty, Early, Harts, Karras, Vint). However, less attention has been paid to the key male characters in the series. Lorna Jowett's essay considers masculinity in the show in binary terms, setting new masculinity ("feminised", passive, romantic, heroic, weak and human") against old masculinity ("macho, violent, sexual, villainous, strong and monstrous"), noting how Angel is "the primary example of the crisis of masculinity," being either "very good (Angel) or very bad (Angelus)" (59, 63). My own exploration will take a different approach. I begin with the familiar proposition that feminism has brought about a crisis in masculine identity in the west at the end of the twentieth century. Although the precise nature of Buffy as a feminist icon remains hotly contested, it is clear that in the so-called Buffyverse the men are obliged to reconsider and redefine their masculine identities in relation to her. To varying degrees, I will argue, the men in *BtVS* define their masculinity using two key indices – the first being Buffy herself, both as an empowered female and as a site for erotic desire, competition and control, and the second being each other. Often explicitly, always in the subtext, complex, shifting hierarchies of masculinity are in constant states of evolution.

[2] As has been noted many times before, Joss Whedon's explicitly feminist agenda in creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* establishes certain parameters for the representation of male and female character types, and the exploration of the relations between them. With a female at the center of the show set to invert the standard "girl in peril" scenario of the horror genre, the representation of male characters is clearly going to have to reflect that reversal. But as Whedon himself is aware, there is much more at issue than simply the inversion of genre conventions. Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (1999) identifies feminism as a key element in the "undermining of patriarchy and the male paradigm of control" (quoted in Whitehead, 2002: 48), and in the larger cultural context, the representations in *BtVS* can be seen as part of a much wider phenomenon we could term "anxious masculinity." However, if the representations of men and women in *BtVS*, and the relations between them, can be taken to signify more than simply a clever parody of the horror genre, we must also understand the limitations of the Buffyverse. It is, after all, a world almost exclusively made up of middle and upper middle class North American youth of the late 1990s and early 2000s – and, what is more, predominantly white. What is more, its representations of ethnic "others," as other writers have noticed, are often problematic (Edwards, Ono). It follows, therefore, that the discussion of masculinity and female empowerment that follows will remain specific to that narrow cultural context, despite the hegemonic potential of a popular US show that has also found wide popularity on a global scale.

[3] Anya's naïve assumption that "[all] men like sports" prompts a typically wisecracking response from Xander: "Yes. Men like sports. Men watch the action movie, they eat of the beef, and enjoy to look at the bosoms" ("Graduation Day Part 1," 3021). A seemingly endless supply of jocks and frat boys are useful representatives of traditional models of masculinity in the high school/college context, from the hyper-

masculine types that make life hell for the likes of Xander, to the geeks Andrew, Warren and Jonathan, with whom Xander shares more common ground than he might like to admit. While the key male characters in the show give the lie to the "sports, action movie, beef and bosoms" stereotype, *BtVS* also uses these stereotypes to make particular points about the genre under deconstruction, as well as wider-ranging cultural commentary.¹

"Where the Wild Things Are": Men and Beasts

[4] Stephen M. Whitehead suggests that "a key factor in men needing to control is a lack of confidence and inner security about their masculinity, maleness, sexuality," and implies that this lies at the heart of sexual violence and rape (165). Some of *BtVS*'s more ambitious experiments with monstrous metaphors explore aspects of masculinity that are cruel, aggressive and primitive, and while these episodes are not always the most successful, they do illuminate one way in which some men have met, and continue to engage with, what they perceive as the threat of feminism.

[5] The association between masculinity and animals, or more primitive human states, is made in a number of episodes. Predictably, the cynical slayer Faith believes that "every guy from . . . Manimal down to Mr. I-Love-The-English-Patient has beast in him. And I don't care how sensitive they act. They're all still just in it for the chase" ("Beauty and the Beasts," 3004). This episode offers a protracted metaphor of man as beast: high school kid Pete, experimenting with a formula to make him more macho, has succeeded in transforming himself into a literal monster, the change being triggered by anger at his girlfriend Debbie. The episode sets up some nicely tuned parallels between Pete the abuser, Angel (who has just returned from a hell dimension and is in a feral state), and Oz. While Oz has no control over his werewolf state, he is a young man very much at ease with his masculinity and in a healthy and positive relationship with Willow. Pete, by contrast, is the monstrous, jealous, possessive, and violent male.²

[6] Although the episode does little more than harangue its audience, trading in subtlety and complexity for a rather too obvious message about sexual politics, it does raise some questions about Oz's identity. Oz, for the most part, conforms to the 'new man' archetype that is under constant negotiation in *BtVS*. When he forgives Willow for kissing Xander in "Amends" (3010), he is unafraid to admit his own vulnerability and need: "I miss you. Like, every second. Almost like I lost an arm, or worse, a torso. So, I think I'd be willing to . . . give it a shot." Oz and Willow have to come to terms with his werewolf identity at the end of this episode, and Willow brings some amusing sexual equality into the debate: Oz may have to lock himself up at night every full moon, but, as Willow reasons, "three days out of the month, I'm not much fun to be around either." It is interesting that both here and in "Innocence" (2014), it is Willow and not Oz who takes the initiative in sexual terms, with Oz more concerned to allow the relationship to proceed at a "wiser" pace.

[7] Unfortunately, the coherence of story and character arcs suffered when the Mutant Enemy team was faced with the sudden and unexpected departure of Seth Green (Oz) from the cast. The episode "Wild at Heart" (4006) replays the "all men are beasts" line, and although Oz's literal animal attraction to fellow musician and female werewolf Veruca is well played, it clumsily contradicts many aspects of the well-developed character that the writers (and Green) had established. Oz is insistent that he is only a wolf three nights a month, but Veruca retorts, "You're a wolf all the time and this human face is just your disguise." By the end of the episode, Oz has surrendered to the notion that "the wolf is inside me all the time" and he leaves Sunnydale. He returns for just one more episode, "New Moon Rising" (4019), where his reversion to his feral state (having apparently been cured) is triggered by the revelation that Willow is in love with Tara. Although the episode was rightly seen as groundbreaking for its depiction of the consummation of the Tara/Willow relationship, in terms of Oz's character it offers only a puzzlingly abrupt, incongruous and unsatisfactory resolution.

[8] The episode "Beer Bad" (4005) again chooses to use a sledgehammer rather than a scalpel to make its point about sexual politics. The barman Jack, sick of the patronizing attitude of many of the students who frequent his bar, has succeeded in brewing a beer that turns the students into Neanderthals. "That's the great thing about beer," he tells new barman Xander. "It makes all men the same." In part, the episode continues the narrative of Buffy's relationship with Parker Abrams, who has recently slept with and dumped

her ("The Harsh Light of Day," 4003). In case the audience has failed to decode the caveman metaphor in "Beer Bad," Willow's speech to Parker draws it out for them: "I mean, you men. It's all about the sex! You find a woman, drag her to your den, do whatever's necessary just as long as you get the sex. I tell you, men haven't changed since the dawn of time." As she finishes, the Neanderthal students break down the door with girls in tow. Again, the message is broadly comic – many of the laughs are raised by the transformation of Buffy into a Neanderthal state – but it is unsubtle in the way it explores masculinity. The potential complicating factor – Buffy is also affected, suggesting that there is more to this than a straightforward "all men are beasts" message – is not fully exploited, and is used only for an easy (but admittedly satisfying) laugh when Buffy inverts the familiar caveman caricature and knocks Parker over the head with a club.

[9] More successful is the early episode "The Pack" (1006), in which Xander and some of his classmates (including a girl) are possessed by the spirits of hyenas. The gruesome death of Principal Flutie aside, the episode is most striking for the personality change Xander undergoes, joining in the mockery of "Michelin boy" at the Bronze, and being aggressive, dismissive, and later openly hostile to Willow, humiliating her in public. Giles' remark that Xander has simply "turned into a sixteen year old boy," and that testosterone "turns all men into morons" brings the subtexts about adolescence and the cruelty of high school society very close to the surface.³ When Xander, in his wild state, confronts Buffy, his language is coarse and his attitude aggressive and possessive (anticipating the kind of language Spike will use when his relationship with Buffy develops): "I've been waiting for you to jump my bones," he tells her, as their fight begins; "We both know what you want."

[10] If men are, in essence, all beasts, then the episode "Some Assembly Required" (2002) puts another, anti-feminist paradigm under scrutiny. Once again metaphor becomes literal, with the male's desire to possess, control and anatomize the female given concrete form. Chris and Eric have taken to robbing graves and, eventually, are even prepared to kill Cordelia to create the perfect woman for Chris' brother Daryl, whom Chris has brought back from the dead. The idea of the objectification of the female body is expressed through a narrative in which women are reduced to spare parts that can be collected and fitted together to create a mate for the re-animated Daryl. Similar is the male cult in "Reptile Boy" (2005): Buffy, Cordelia and Callie are chained up by the Zeta Kappa fraternity, although they are to be used not for the pleasure of the fraternity but "for the one we serve," a reptilian creature Machida which is notably phallic-shaped and is destroyed by Buffy, armed with a correspondingly phallic sword.⁴

"A dateless nerd": Xander as anxious male

[11] Of all the key male characters, Xander Harris is perhaps given most reason to question his status within his peer groups, which time and again is associated explicitly with his masculinity. Xander's role as class geek in the early seasons is represented not only by his regular mockery courtesy of Cordelia, Harmony, and their gang, but also by his lowly and precarious position in the male hierarchy. Nowhere is this more obvious than in "Reptile Boy" (2005). Identified as a crasher at the frat party, he is discovered and put in women's clothing, a figure of fun, while he gamely attempts to please his frat audience. It is not long before he is thrown out, and as he stumbles past their line of cars, he mutters, "One day I'll have money. Prestige. Power. And on that day," he concludes bitterly, "they'll still have more." In Season 4, the fact that Xander is not a student means that he automatically occupies a lower position. When he takes a job as a barman, he is humiliated intellectually by a student who, associating virility with intellect, informs him that "we are the future of this country and you keep our bowl of peanuts full. We are what these girls want" ("Beer Bad," 4005). Although the actor Nicholas Brendon has looks and charm that belie the stereotype, his character in the early seasons is clearly intended to have geek-like tendencies, and while he does not fall into the same category as Jonathan, Andrew and Warren, it is clear that they share some common ground.

[12] The self-styled "Trio" is a group of anxious males who have retreated into, or never emerged from, a state of perpetual adolescence and fantasy. An early appearance by Jonathan, bullied by the swim team at the beginning of "Go Fish" (2020), sees him getting his revenge not, as Willow suggests, by "conjur[ing] up a hellbeast from the ocean's depths to wreak your vengeance" but by "pee[ing] in the pool." The paltry

nature of their ambitions, in comparison with the considerable powers they have developed magically and technologically by Season 6, is very telling. "But we had so many plans. Naked women, and all . . . well, all--all the naked women!" whines Andrew ("Gone," 6011). For them, masculinity is associated with their degree of evil (interestingly, Spike uses the same "Big Bad" equation), and Warren's greater aspirations are repeatedly reined in by the other two - "We're villains!" he declares; "Not killers," Jonathan retorts ("Gone," 6011). The evil to be defeated in Season 6 is not, however, one of the monstrous, demonic villains of previous seasons, but "Just ordinary students you went to high school with," as the doctor in "Normal Again" (6017) tells Buffy. "Just three pathetic little men . . . who like playing with toys."⁵

[13] Xander struggles not only within his male peer group but also in his attempt to carve out a role for himself in the Scooby Gang.⁶ In "The Harvest" (1002), while Willow immediately finds her place ("I want you to go on the 'Net," Giles says; "Oh, sure, I can do that," she replies), Xander is useless both as combatant and researcher ("And I, in the meantime, will help by standing around like an idiot"). In the same episode, as they prepare to go into action, he draws tellingly on a Western metaphor (the Western being "a masculine genre par excellence" [Horrocks 56]): "So, what's the plan? We saddle up, right?" He is swiftly put back in his place by Buffy ("There's no 'we', okay? I'm the Slayer, and you're not"). Xander shrugs, "I'm inadequate. That's fine. I'm less than a man."⁷ "Teacher's Pet" (1004) opens with a dream sequence in which Xander lives out his fantasy as a hero fighting shoulder to shoulder with Buffy.⁸ Not only that, he also imagines himself as a rock god who will immediately after the fight, he tells Buffy, "finish my solo and kiss you like you've never been kissed before."

[14] The theme is reprised more comprehensively in "The Zeppo" (3013). After a particularly tough battle in the teaser, Buffy suggests that in future skirmishes Xander should stay "fray-adjacent," and Giles concurs. Faith quips, "That was real manly how you shrieked and all." Xander subsequently tries to find his own reason for being on the team, the "thing" that will prove his worth as a member of the gang. His decision to acquire a car as an opening gambit is ripe for a popular psychoanalytical reading: when Xander announces that the car is his "thing," a bemused Buffy shoots back, "Is this a penis metaphor?" Although the Chevy does attract the attentions of the blonde beauty Lysette, it turns out that she is turned on specifically by the phallic symbol itself (the car), and not by the man behind the wheel.⁹ The episode unfolds with Xander reluctantly joining a posse of brought-back-from-the-dead stereotypical jocks on a male bonding night of high jinks - "Let's go pick up some girls, man. We'll hang out at Taco Bell, get some girls, go cruise around."

[15] As time goes by Xander learns to defer to Buffy more comfortably. However, this does not apply to everyday life situations; there is a clear demarcation between Xander's self-esteem in supernatural combat and in the school corridor. Leverenz suggests that men's real fear "is not of women but of being ashamed or humiliated in front of other men, or being dominated by stronger men."¹⁰ At the beginning of the episode "Halloween" (2006), Xander attempts to defend Buffy's honour in the face of Larry's slurs, squaring up to him and threatening to do something "damn manly." Buffy intervenes before Larry can do any damage to Xander, slamming him into the soda machine. Xander, however, is less than grateful for her help in earning him a reputation as "a sissy man." As Buffy notes, "I think I just violated the guy code big time." ("Poor Xander," sighs Willow. "Boys are so fragile.")

[16] This incident works as a set up for the way the episode unfolds, and which shows a more conventionally masculine aspect of Xander's character with his assumption of a soldier *persona*. As Ethan Rayne's spell transforms everyone into the characters represented by their Halloween costumes, Xander adopts his military identity while Buffy becomes a stereotypical eighteenth century woman, dropping into a dead faint at the first sign of danger, inverting the strong, self-possessed Buffy with which we are so familiar. Xander not only rescues the helpless Buffy from a marauding pirate version of Larry, but proceeds to beat Larry up ("It's strange," Xander tells Angel, "but beating up that pirate gave me a weird sense of closure"). Something of the military *persona* remains long after the spell has worn off. The military knowledge he retains is vital in the battle to defeat The Judge ("Innocence," 2014), and Xander again adopts a crucial role in "Graduation Day," Part 2 (3022), marshalling the troops in the showdown with the Mayor and his army. The skills do seem to fade over time, however.¹¹ Getting ready to face the Initiative

soldiers towards the end of Season 4, Xander has an array of assorted handguns ("If some commando squads are out there, fully loaded, these babies might give us the edge we'll need"), but while he struggles in vain with the chamber of a pistol, Giles opens it easily. Similarly, "This Year's Girl" (4015) finds Xander puzzling endlessly over the malfunctioning blaster the gang have requisitioned, while Riley powers it up with the flick of a single switch.

[17] Xander's lack of confidence in himself as a member of the team lingers, however, and is betrayed by his dream sequence in "Restless" (4022): when Giles declares that Spike is "like a son to me," Xander replies, uncertainly, "That's good. I was into that for a while, but . . . (*nodding towards his ice cream van*) I got other stuff goin' on." In the same sequence, Giles and Anya speak to him in French and Xander is flummoxed, indicating that his anxieties center on his skills in research, as well as combat mode. Although Xander often fights bravely, he rarely does more than act as a diversionary punch-bag, although his resilience is worth noting.¹² More characteristic is his fight with Harmony in "The Initiative" (4007), filmed in slow motion to heighten its comic, ironic effect, as the two slap, bite, and pull each other's hair. Nevertheless, the fact that Xander (and not Angel) saves Buffy in "Prophecy Girl" (1012) by administering CPR--something Angel cannot do, since, as a vampire, he has no breath--is important, and comparable with his part in saving the world from the apocalyptic rage of dark Willow at the end of Season 6.¹³

[18] In terms of his relationships with women, Xander is a very good example of the anxious, progressively destabilized "new man." Patricia Pender describes him as "an archetype of a new 1990s embattled masculinity, . . . struggl[ing] with the machismo stereotypes of classic narrative film" (Pender 2002: 39). As Buffy tells him, "You're not like other boys at all . . . You are totally, and completely one of the girls!" ("The Witch," 1003). For the duration of the first two seasons at least, Xander plays out the typical virgin/nerd role, preoccupied with sex, but almost always harmless in erotic terms. In "Beneath You" (7002), he sums his younger self up as "a dateless nerd." He drools over the cheerleading team; borrows books from the library about witchcraft in order to pour over the semi-nude engravings (both from "The Witch," 1003); and he angles the mirror in Buffy's room to catch a glimpse of her changing ("Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," 1005). When Ampata remarks, "You're strange," he replies, "Girls always tell me that. Right before they run away" ("Inca Mummy Girl," 2004).¹⁴ The remark is typical of Xander, and speaks volumes about his lack of success in romance, as well as his endearingly self-deprecating nature. His unrequited love for Buffy runs as a constant undercurrent in the series; his early attempts to woo her (often associated with manliness) are timorous and doomed to fail: "I gotta be a man and ask her out," he says in "The Witch" (1003), before failing miserably once more. His declaration of love in "Prophecy Girl" (1012) is typically open and vulnerable in "new man" fashion, and he is crushed when Buffy rejects him, gently but emphatically. His essential decency, however, and his distance from the stereotypical adolescent male that is evoked elsewhere in the series, is confirmed in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (2016), when he chooses not to take advantage of Buffy who, under a spell, has fallen hopelessly in love with him.

[19] Before he forms more (or less) stable relationships with Cordelia and, later, the ex-vengeance demon Anya, Xander's sexual encounters place him firmly in the passive, victim role despite his best efforts to assert himself. In the early episode "Teacher's Pet" (1004), the teacher he falls for, Natalie French, turns out to be a giant praying mantis, and in "Inca Mummy Girl" (2004), he forms a relationship with Ampata, the deadly Incan princess released from her tomb. In this episode, he tries to take on a traditional protector role, reassuring Ampata that "Nobody's gonna hurt you. I won't let them." For the costume dance, he turns up in appropriately manly attire, dressing as the Clint Eastwood character The Man with No Name. Unfortunately, Ampata turns out to be as deadly as Natalie French, sucking the life out of Buffy's hapless exchange student, and then the bodyguard who is pursuing her, before, reluctantly, attempting the same on Xander. Ampata and Natalie French in "Teacher's Pet" represent particularly striking images of Barbara Creed's monstrous feminine, and of the female as sexual predator (Creed 1993). Even more vividly than the vampire's erotic bite, the image of the male being literally sucked dry by the female embodies male fantasy and nightmare in a particularly evocative way.

[20] Xander's fortunes in love take a wholly unexpected turn in the episode "Bewitched, Bothered & Bewildered" (2016) when a love spell goes awry: the target, Cordelia, remains unaffected, but every other

woman around Xander falls for him, instantly and passionately. His response is to recognize that it is "time for me to act like a man – and hide." Once again, fantasy is inverted as nightmare. When Xander takes his long walk down the high school corridor, attracting adoring looks from the women and aggressive envy from the men, the effect is heightened by slow motion photography and the raunchy non-diegetic soundtrack. As the camera pans up to Xander's face, however, his expression is one of shock and fear. In "The Zeppo" (3013) Xander loses his virginity to Faith in an encounter that finds him playing the passive role familiar from his encounters with Natalie French and Ampata. Xander believes the fact that he has slept with Faith means he has a connection with her (although in "Consequences," 3015], Buffy informs him that the guys Faith has a "connection" of this kind with "are kind of a big joke to her"). When he goes to visit Faith to talk to her, the situation quickly gets out of hand and turns into a sexual assault upon Xander ("I could make you scream . . . I could make you die"), and Xander is saved from strangling only by Angel's intervention.

[21] Xander's sexual maturation does not occur until Season 4, when his relationship with Anya blossoms. Even here, it is Anya who has taken the active role, having invited (or, rather, ordered) him to the prom (3020). Early in Season 4, Anya assumes that this means a relationship has been established: "So, I can assume a standing Friday night date and a mutual recognition as prom night as our dating anniversary?" When she 'seduces' him with the line "You're funny, and you're nicely shaped. And frankly, it's ludicrous to have these interlocking bodies and not . . . interlock. Please remove your clothing now," Xander is reminded of his previous encounter: "And the amazing thing . . . still more romantic than Faith." Nevertheless, Xander's sexual anxieties are not fully allayed, despite the outward appearance of happiness with Anya. His dream sequence in "Restless" (4022) includes Willow and Tara dressed as lipstick lesbians, inviting him to join them for a threesome while he leaves Anya at the wheel; Joyce attempting to seduce him; and going to the bathroom to find himself standing at the toilet surrounded by Initiative-style scientists observing him intently. More significantly, Xander becomes more and more nervous as he and Anya move towards marriage, and this culminates in the painful, bride abandoned at the altar episode "Hell's Bells" (6016). Perhaps the most interesting episode in this respect, however, is "The Replacement" (5003). Its plot is constructed around the magical division of Xander into two bodies - a confident *persona* and a weak *persona*. Written and directed to make the audience believe that the weak Xander is the 'real' one, we see his confident *alter ego* take over his life, "living it better than I do." The kind of behavior that we associate with Xander – prat-falling his way through his ordeals – is greatly exaggerated, and anxious Xander clings to Buffy as his salvation: when Willow tells him he has to help her figure things out, he replies: "But I never help. I get in trouble and Buffy saves me." The real crisis, however, is centred on Anya: as the weak Xander loses his grip on his own existence, he is provoked into action by the threat to his lover: "He can take anything but he can't have her. I need her." Confident Xander, meanwhile, does not hesitate in planning proactively: "It stole my face," he tells the others, as weak Xander looks on helplessly from his hiding place; "We have to find it and we have to kill it." Confident Xander takes on the role of protector and provider: the episode begins with Xander failing to arrange for Anya to have the apartment she wants, but reaches its climax when confident Xander, having secured his employment, signs a contract for the apartment and invites Anya over for a romantic house-warming celebration. It is at this point that the weak Xander breaks in, armed with a pistol, and attempts to assert his ownership over his life and, in particular Anya – a symbol of his virility.¹⁵ A scuffle results in confident Xander left holding both symbols - the girl and the pistol – until Buffy intervenes.

"Who died and made you John Wayne?" - Buffy and Riley

[22] It is interesting that the feminist icon at the heart of the show is particularly attracted to sensitive males. Although they vary considerably in physical type (from the tall, powerfully built figures of Angel, Riley and Ben to the slighter figures Scott Hope, Owen Thurman and Parker Abrams), they all tend to be less aggressively masculinised, and this includes Angel in his ensouled state and the wholesome, personable, sexually naive Riley (who describes himself, tongue in cheek, as "a studly yet sensitive boyfriend" in "The Real Me," 5002). The obvious exception, of course, is Spike, who will be discussed in more detail presently. Owen, who catches Buffy's eye in "Never Kill a Boy . . ." (1005), is typical, noted by Willow as a reader of Emily Dickinson, "solitary, mysterious . . . sensitive, yet manly." However, appearances are more often than not deceptive. Cameron in "Go Fish" (2020) impresses Buffy with a poetic speech about the ocean at the beach party, although he soon turns out to be a swim bore with nothing else

to talk about. When, abruptly, he tries to come on to Buffy, she responds by slamming his head into the steering wheel and breaking his nose. Parker Abrams, meanwhile, who uses the sad story of his father's death as a chat up line, has a one night stand with Buffy, leaving her bewildered and humiliated when he doesn't call her again, prompting Willow's indignation at "you men and your manness."¹⁶

[23] Riley is physically much more like Angel ("Have you seen his arms?" Buffy marvels to Willow in "Something Blue," 4009); "Those are good arms to have"). Like David Boreanaz, Marc Blucas is tall and powerfully built - both of them dwarf Buffy. This clever casting panders to and at the same time subverts the standard paradigm of the vulnerable female and protective male. However, in terms of the nature and stability of his masculine identity, Riley is much more complex than Angel. Mary Alice Money notes that he has "a bit of the aw-shucks charm of a young Jimmy Stewart or of his own namesake, Huck Finn" and describes him as "the sunny antithesis of Buffy's first great love, the always shadowed Angel" (Money 2002: 106). Iowa-born and bred, he retains much of the naivety and conservatism that is associated with the mid-West stereotype (his appearance in Willow's "Restless" dream as "cowboy guy," all wide-eyed innocence and smiles, is a witty and accurate summary of a significant aspect of his personality).¹⁷ Despite this, his political attitudes, however well meaning, are still, in Buffy's words, rather "Teutonic." When Buffy and Riley fall out over the issue of "demon bigotry," raised by Oz's return in "New Moon Rising" (4019), Riley retreats to where he feels secure, joining Forrest to hunt down the demon that attacked one of his teams. For Riley, there are no gray areas, only white and black, good and evil.

[24] Riley is very aware of his shortcomings and his inexperience in matters of the heart. In "The Initiative" (4007), he recruits Willow to help him woo Buffy, his awkwardness emphasised by the contrast with the smooth-talking Parker. He is also simultaneously more aggressively masculine than Xander (writer Douglas Petrie refers to him as a "sexist doof")¹⁸, and equally anxious. As his relationship with Buffy develops, he is willing to let Buffy lead in terms of their romance: at the end of "Something Blue" (4009), when Buffy tells him, "You really have a lot to learn about women, Riley," he replies, "You're gonna teach me." On the other hand, once their true identities are revealed to each other at the end of "Hush" (4010), anxieties and conflicts of a different kind begin to emerge. Buffy's superiority over the Initiative soldiers is established early on when she is tested by Maggie Walsh in the teaser scene of "The 'I' in Team" (4013), and she takes them apart with ease. From the episode "A New Man" onwards (4012), Riley is keen to test himself against Buffy; when they do spar in 4012, Buffy defeats Riley with ease. "Give me another . . . oh . . . week to get ready and I'll take you down," Riley tells her, but neither Buffy nor the audience are convinced. There is one unusual incident (in the "Fool for Love" teaser [5007]) when Buffy is impaled on her own stake by a rocker vamp, and is saved by Riley's intervention. "Do you think I'm a total wuss now?" she asks Riley, as he helps her home. Still, when Riley volunteers to patrol in her place, her reaction is protective, insisting that he should not patrol alone, but only with the rest of the group.

[25] From the time that they embark on a sexual relationship, there is an overt connection established between vampire-hunting violence and erotic excitement. This is most striking in "The 'I' in Team" (4013), where, in a scene perhaps indebted to Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), Buffy and Riley's fight with the Polgara demon is intercut with them undressing and making love. In "Where the Wild Things Are" (4018), Buffy and Riley take on and defeat a "vampire-demon tag team," and the adrenaline rush initiates another bout of passionate love-making. It is worth noting that Riley is unnerved by his partner's unusual "bad girl" sexual advances when Buffy's body is being inhabited by Faith in "Who Are You?" (4016): he is clearly thrown by being cast into a passive role in their love-making. As Buffy and Riley's relationship deepens, Riley has to come to terms with Buffy's superior strength. Once he is weaned off the Initiative's drug regimen, reverting to "normal" human strength, this crisis becomes even more acute, and when the relationship begins to fall apart early in Season 5, Riley turns to vampire prostitutes for satisfaction, while there are hints that Buffy has to leave Riley's bed to seek satisfaction with some covert middle of the night slayage (as in the teaser scene of "Buffy vs. Dracula," 5001). The appearance of Dracula acts as a kind of watershed. From his first appearance, Dracula triggers insecurities about masculine identity: Xander is hypnotised and reduced to a state of enslavement ("I will serve you, your excellent spookiness"), becoming, as he says himself, Dracula's "spider-eating man-bitch" and "butt monkey." Meanwhile, the discussion of the first encounter with Dracula is characterised by the women's starry-eyed recollection of a brush with greatness, Hollywood movie star style. Riley is particularly

unnerved, asking Buffy about Dracula's "dark penetrating eyes," and Buffy's reply is hardly reassuring: "There was no penetration," she tells him, immediately embarrassed by her own inadvertent *double entendre*.

[26] Riley's masculinity, then, is threatened by Buffy's superior strength and resilience. As Irene Karras notes, chiefly because Buffy "could not play into the needy female role and allow him to be her caretaker or protector," the relationship collapses (Karras 2002). Riley opts to return to the emotionally safer, masculine world of his fellow soldiers - although, ironically, it is here that he meets his future wife, Sam ("As You Were," 6015).¹⁹ Sam only calls Riley by his surname, military style; we hear they met during a firefight, and married in a military chapel; and when Buffy remarks, "he's your boss, too?" Sam laughs: "Oh, he *wishes*." If it is true, as Spike suggests, that Buffy "needs a little monster in her man" (as he tells Riley during their heart to heart in "Into the Woods," 5010), and again when he discovers the two of them in bed together ["As You Were" (6015)], then her failure to hold on to Riley is lent a sense of inevitability (unlike Oz's departure), and not to be dismissed merely as the fate of a character who never managed to find a place in the hearts of his TV audience.²⁰

[27] Buffy is not the only female against whom Riley defines his masculinity. He is also dominated by the powerful matriarch Maggie Walsh, commander-in-chief of The Initiative. Riley's comrade Forrest refers to him joshingly as "Mama's boy" in "Pangs" (4008), and it is clear that Walsh has deep, maternal feelings for Riley, with disturbing, incestuous overtones. There is an inevitable conflict between her and Buffy over Riley, anticipated by the dream sequence at the beginning of "Hush" (4010), and reaching its climax when Walsh observes Riley and Buffy making love via a hidden camera, and subsequently tries to arrange her death ("The 'I' in Team," 4013). However, the complexities of the relationships in The Initiative run even deeper than this, as we shall see.

.....
Can I have sex with Riley too?" – homosocialism in *BtVS*

[28] The homoerotic subtext that frequently and playfully shadows Xander makes for amusing, trainspotting viewing. As Roz Kaveney remarks, he "has, at one time or another, homosexual panic about every male in [the show]" (Kaveney 2001:10). There is a recurrent thread in the character of Larry, whom Xander inadvertently tips out of the closet.²¹ Xander is also deeply impressed by The Initiative in a "boys and their toys" fashion; when Buffy uses the voice print entry to the base, he coos: "I totally get it now. Can I have sex with Riley too?" The scattered references probably owe something to the close relationship between the show's fanbase and the Mutant Enemy production team (see, for example, Larbalastier, Zweerink & Gatson). The writers are well aware of the fan fiction that proliferates on the Internet and will at times indulge in some amusing games in the "fanfic" and "shipping" line. The most obvious example of this kind of camp self-aware referentiality comes in "Beneath You" (7002): when a gathering of Buffy, Spike, Xander and Anya is asked "Are there any of you who haven't slept with each other?" Xander and Spike exchange an intriguing, unreadable, but conspicuous look.²² Elsewhere, in "Beauty and the Beasts" (3004), Xander assures Willow he can handle "the Oz full monty" when left to guard Oz, who will return from his werewolf state naked: "I mean, not 'handle' handle, like 'hands to flesh' handle," he explains. In "Superstar" (4017), it is clear that both Anya and Xander are turned on by the magically enhanced Jonathan's performance with the band at the Bronze, and make a quick exit to go and have sex.

[29] However, more significant is the friendship between Riley and Forrest, where the homosocialism of the army environment shades into unarticulated homoerotic subtext.²³ Riley will often retreat to The Initiative when his masculinity is threatened by Buffy. For his part, Forrest fits neatly into the paradigm bell hooks defines of the black man "eager to 'do it for daddy' . . . individuals tortured by . . . 'unrequited longing for [white] male love'" (hooks 1995:99).²⁴ It is to Forrest that Riley first confesses he "has feelings for" Buffy ("The Initiative," 4007). Forrest attempts to head off Riley's affections: as they watch Buffy and Xander go off together, he suggests that "they're probably on their way to make crazy naked sex," adding, "I'm protecting you, buddy. I don't want to see you mooning over some freshman for the next three months." Shortly afterwards, Riley is bemused when Forrest suggests using this girl he (Riley) has "got a crush on"

as bait to recapture Hostile 17 (Spike). Throughout the next few episodes, Forrest is repeatedly dismissive of Buffy, and after the test run against the Initiative team, the camera lingers on his expression of deep discontent as Riley assures her, "See? You're a hit. Everybody loves you" ("The 'I' in Team," 4013). "I've always been Riley's second in command. Instead he picks a girl," he grumbles, when out on a demon hunt (4013). As The Initiative begins to come apart ("Goodbye Iowa," 4014), envy turns into outright hostility, with Forrest convinced that Buffy is Walsh's killer. When Riley is wounded by Adam, Forrest will not let Buffy near him ("We take care of our own around here, understand?"), and when Riley attempts to leave the Initiative facility in "This Year's Girl" (4015), Forrest tries to stop him, with a direct reference to Buffy and Riley's sexual relationship: "One good conjugal visit and you're back in intensive care to stay." The same preoccupation is evident in his confrontation with Buffy in "Who are You?" (4016): "Hope you left him alive . . . Boy's supposed to be on the mend. I don't see you letting him get much rest."

[30] The disturbing, twisted family connections at the heart of The Initiative are central to the climax of Season 4. Walsh's creation Adam is "our baby" in her conversation with Angleman. "I know you're gonna make me proud" she says to Adam before he comes to life, and moments later she says almost exactly the same to Riley ("The 'I' in Team," 4013). Adam in turn calls Walsh "Mommy" as he stabs her in a rather too obvious moment of Oedipal symbolism. Meanwhile, to the hypermasculine Adam, Riley is his brother: in an unconvincing plot device, we discover that Riley too has had a chip implanted and that he is wired up to obey Adam's commands ("Primeval," 4021).²⁵ When Forrest is reanimated, he also insists on calling Riley "brother" (and Walsh is "mommy"). Granted greater strength and resilience in his undead state, he tells Riley he is looking forward to trying out "your girl" again. The triangle of love and jealousy is shattered when Buffy leaves Riley and Forrest to fight to the death, and finally only Riley is left standing.

"Not as toothless as you thought": Buffy, Spike and Drusilla

[31] The relationship between Spike and Drusilla is a very neat representation of the idea that gender status in *BtVS* is determined by who is in control, rather than by biological, "material" sex. Spike's oft-quoted remark that "I may be love's bitch, but at least I'm man enough to admit it" ("Lover's Walk," 3008), is usefully indicative of that gender/power equation. I do not intend to discuss Angel in depth here – although a fascinating figure in many ways, his significance as an "anxious male" is limited. Owen identifies him as "a site of perfected masculine appeal" (27) and Arwen Spicer declares that "the extreme masculinity of his gendering is also evident in his relationships with his fellow vampires" (9). However, Angel is important in this discussion for the role he plays in determining Spike's masculine identity. Spicer argues that "If we read this relationship [Spike/Angelus] as homosexual, it fits a dominance-submission paradigm in which Spike is coded as submissive female" (Spicer 2002: 16). This is just one part of Spike's ambiguous gender position. Spicer develops an interesting argument that sees Spike "crossing the boundaries of conventional gender identifications": I will argue instead that he is another example of the anxious male, shaped in large part by his interaction with Buffy, Angel, and, to a lesser extent, Drusilla.

[32] Spike's ambiguous representation contrasts the violent and extremely dangerous vampire punk with his image as a dandy (often well groomed, snappily dressed, and with distinct echoes of his human form, the mother's boy William). His status from "The Initiative" (4007) onwards as "chipped" is also key: the implant placed in his head by The Initiative prevents him from attacking humans, and there are repeated associations between this incapacity and sexual impotence; as he says of himself, "Spike had a little trip to the vet and now he doesn't chase the other puppies anymore" ("Pangs," 4008). When he realizes in "Doomed" (4011) that he can attack demons, he goes wild (and note his use of beast imagery when describing the re-discovery of his potency): "That's right. I'm back. And I'm a bloody animal! Yeah!"

[33] In his romantic relationships, women often behave towards him in a patronising fashion: to Harmony, he is "my sweet Boo-Boo" ("Crush," 5014). To Drusilla, whom he calls "the face of [his] salvation" ("Crush"), he is "my sweet . . . my little Spike" ("School Hard," 2003). When he fails in that episode to kill the slayer, he returns to be comforted by Dru, and after he is temporarily crippled at the end of "What's My Line? Part 2" (2010), Angelus mocks him, remarking how Drusilla "bathes you, carries you around and changes you like a child" ("Passion," 2017). Angelus takes full advantage of his injured state to move in on Drusilla. He one-ups Spike's gift of a necklace with a still warm heart he found "in a quaint little

shopgirl" ("Bewitched . . . ," 2016), and scornfully offers to help out: "if there's anything I can do for you . . . Any . . . responsibility I can assume while you're spinning your wheels . . . (*looks over at Drusilla*) Anything I'm not already doing, that is" ("Passion," 2017). Like The Initiative's skew(er)ed family, there is something twisted and incestuous about the Freudian triangle made by these three. On their reunion in "Innocence" (2010), Drusilla remarks, "We're family again. We'll feed. And we'll play." Angelus threatens Spike with a growl when Spike talks of him having been Buffy's "lap dog" (a slur on his masculinity), and then kisses him on the forehead. The "harder than thou" competition continues to the end of the season: in "Becoming Part 1" (2021), Angel fails to perform, unable to remove the sword from the statue of Acatla and Spike gloats with a sing-song refrain of "someone wasn't worthy" while Dru moans "This is so – disappointing." Revealingly, Spike finally forms an uneasy alliance with Buffy to stop Angel destroying the world, chiefly because, as he admits, "I want Dru back."

[34] Spike is repeatedly cast in the role of scorned lover; the back-story of his human incarnation as William the "bloody awful poet" in 1880s London ("Fool for Love," 5007) is a stroke of genius: effete, a momma's boy ("Mother's expecting me, " he tells Drusilla shortly before she bites him), ridiculed by men and women alike, he is treated like dirt by the object of his unrequited passion, Cecily: "You're nothing to me, William," she tells him; "you're beneath me."²⁶ It is this rejection that sends him out into the streets for his fateful encounter with Drusilla, who sires him. Dru later spurns him, abandoning him for a chaos demon as we learn in "Lover's Walk" (3008): "You stupid, worthless bitch," he despairs, "Look what you've done to me." However, the role is much more intricately and painfully played out when he is rejected by Buffy in Season 5 ("Crush," 5014) and again, even more painfully, in Season 6. Victoria Spah argues that Spike can be seen as a version of the courtly lover: "the knight/lover finds himself desperately and piteously enamored of a divinely beautiful but unobtainable woman . . . and goes forth to perform brave deeds in her honour." However, it is also important to bear in mind Spike's more conventionally masculine and aggressive forms of behavior in response to his lovers. He is convinced that the way to get Drusilla back is to "be the man I was, the man she loved. . . . I'll find her, wherever she is, tie her up, torture her until she likes me again" ("Lover's Walk," 3008). The triangle he set up in "Crush"(5014) between himself, Dru and Buffy, drives him to distraction, and a despairing, misogynistic howl: "Why do you bitches torture me?"²⁷

[35] The fact that Spike resorts to the robot replica the "Buffybot" for satisfaction of his unrequited love for the slayer puts him closer to the Warren of "I Was Made to Love You" (5015) than any of Buffy's other partners. The robot is clearly programmed to reaffirm his masculinity ("Oh Spike. You're the big bad . . . You're the *big* bad!"). The relationship with Buffy in Season 6, however, is deeply complex, and has much to do with games of power, submission and manipulation. When Buffy discovers that Spike has a crush on her (5014) and is asked by Joyce whether she may have inadvertently led him on, she admits that "I do beat him up a lot; for Spike, that's like third base." With hindsight, the irony is startling. The beginning of their sexual relationship is provoked by combat, the first fight they are able to have on equal terms since Spike was emasculated by The Initiative's chip – "Looks like I'm not as toothless as you thought, sweetheart," he smirks, having discovered that, since her resurrection, he can attack her without the chip kicking in ("Wrecked," 6010). After they have slept together, he talks of having "got [his] rocks back," and it is unclear whether he is talking about sex, his ability to challenge the slayer in combat, or both. For Buffy, the relationship provides only momentary satisfaction, and deep shame ("You're a thing – an evil, disgusting thing," she spits at him ["Smashed" (6009)]. She relentlessly denigrates their relationship ("Last night was the most perverse, degrading experience of my life . . . You're just convenient" [6010]), but her most brutal beating down of Spike comes in "Dead Things" (6012), an episode which begins with Spike proffering handcuffs to use in their sexual games, and ends with Buffy's fierce rejection of his claims of ownership - her furious, anguished insistence that "I could never be your girl," as she pounds him into the pavement.

[36] Spike's attempted rape of Buffy in "Seeing Red" (6019) has been the subject of much debate, although the fact that it comes in the same episode as the hugely controversial death of Tara seems to have reduced its significance (an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable clash of storylines). In terms of the show's mythology, the incident is evidently meant to communicate something about Spike's monster/man duality, a reminder to the audience of Spike's true, demonic self, and a clear explanation of why Buffy

cannot love Spike. Just as when he held up the handcuffs in 6012, she said she could "never" trust him, here she hisses, "Ask me again why I could never love you," after she has regained the balance of power. In terms of the current debate about masculinity, it leads us back towards the territory of conceptual episodes such as "Beauty and the Beasts" (3004) and "Wild at Heart" (4006). But whereas these episodes often feel contrived, the attempted rape scene's power to disturb is indicative of the courage and sophisticated thinking that characterises the work of the writers, directors and performers on the show. Spike returns for Season 7 newly ensouled: it seems that his intention is not as aggressive as his parting shot to Sunnydale suggested ("I'll be back. And when I do, it's all gonna change"), and when he returns Buffy finds him mentally and spiritually destroyed. Spike's quest ended (6022) with the return of his soul, for the single purpose of giving Buffy what he thinks she wants. Ironically, this is also a return to the male's need in *BtVS* to define masculinity against other males, too: Spike desires a soul not only to be the kind of "man" he believes Buffy would want him to be, but also to match his arch-rival Angel. As *BtVS* began its final season, it continued to explore ever more sophisticated and intriguing models of masculinity.

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[1] Whitehead notes that sociological research time and again reveals the school setting to be "a conduit for dominant ideologies/discourses of gender and a vehicle for the validation of a particular form of masculinity" [Whitehead, 2002: 52].

[2] Also relevant to this debate is the figure of Ted (2011). Ted is obsessed with having complete control over an ideal nuclear family; as he short-circuits, revealing phrases spark out of him: "I don't take orders from women ... Husband and wife is forever ... " His outmoded attitudes even extend as far as knocking Joyce unconscious to carry her out of the house, caveman style.

[3] Compare this remark to Jack the barman's note in "Beer Bad" (4005) that beer "makes all men the same." Compare also this from "Phases" (2015): when Giles describes the werewolf as "act[ing] on pure instinct. No conscience, predatory and aggressive," Buffy replies, "In other words, your typical male." According to Cain, werewolves "are suckers for that whole sexual heat thing." Significantly, neither of these remarks fit well with what we know of the real werewolf, Oz - at least, not in his human form.

[4] The students are offering up the women in exchange for power and prosperity. ("If he is pleased with our offerings, then our fortune shall increase"). In the coda, we learn that this is a long-established cult, with its graduates in big business, and when the story hits the papers, there are "falling profits, IRS

raids . . . Ooo, and suicides in the boardroom," notes Xander, with some degree of satisfaction. Consider also the sacrifice of Nurse Greenleigh: Coach Marin shoves her into the water to be eaten by the former-swimteam-creatures ("Go Fish" [2020]). He then tosses them Buffy - they may have already fed, he notes, but "boys have other needs." Marin is eventually eaten himself. It is also worth noting that the use of a woman by men in demon-summoning rituals was reprised in Season 7, "Helpless" (7004).

[5] An homoerotic subtext is clearly traceable in their relationships; see Simkin 2004 for further discussion.

[6] There are some parallels between Xander and Wesley in this respect, whom I do not discuss in this essay: Wesley works in part as a version of Giles without the older man's complexities and shady past. Englishness is associated with effeminacy ("Princess Margaret here had a little trouble keeping up," Faith remarks in "Doppelgangland" [3016]), but he also has difficulty finding a role in the Scooby Gang; Buffy tells him that "If I need someone to scream like a woman I'll give you a call" ("Graduation Day," Part 2, 3022).

[7] The Western references recur elsewhere, in similar circumstances: "So we charge in, much in the style of John Wayne?" ("Doppelgangland" [3016])

[8] In the same episode, Xander throws his arms around Buffy and Willow as they enter The Bronze in order to convince a couple of his friends of his ability to score - "Blayne had the nerve to question my manliness. I'm just gonna give him a visual," he tells them.

[9] The symbolism continues when Xander is involved in a fender bender with Jack O'Toole and his big hunting knife.

[10] Whitehead is discussing Michael Kimmel's study of male sexuality (Kimmel 1994), and cites Kimmel's quotation of Leverenz (1986).

[11] But note how in "Checkpoint" (5012), when the Watchers question the worth of Xander to the team, Buffy uses a military metaphor in her response, pointing out that he has "clocked more field time than all of you combined. He's part of the unit."

[12] He bravely endures a broken wrist, and the prospect of more torture, when he refuses to choose whether Anya or Willow should die by the troll Olaf in "Triangle" (5011).

[13] For further discussion of this, and of Giles' role at the end of Season 6, see Simkin 2004.

[14] In a similar vein, he tells Buffy that "my valentines are usually met with heartfelt restraining orders," shortly before he offers Cordelia a Valentine's gift, and is promptly dumped ("Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" [2016]).

[15] In an amusing, and characteristic twist, Anya has her own ideas about what should be done with the two Xanders: "See, I can take the boys home, and . . . we can all have sex together."

[16] Spike merely mocks Buffy and her gullibility: "Did he play the sensitive lad and get you to seduce him?" ("The Harsh Light of Day," 4003).

[17] Joss Whedon notes in his DVD commentary for the episode that Cowboy Guy is "let's face it, how many of us see Riley."

[18] Douglas Petrie, DVD commentary for "The Initiative" (4007)

[19] It is probably not reading too much into the text to note Sam's gender-ambiguous name. Keith Topping refers to her as "a female clone of himself [Riley]" (Topping 2003: 130).

[20] As Joss Whedon himself acknowledged, "I wanted to see Buffy have a nice relationship with a nice guy. America doesn't want to see that. So it became instead a scenario where people thought, 'She has a nice guy. She's going to walk all over him.' ... He [Blucas] has a Gary Cooper quality. But Gary Cooper can't live in the Buffyverse..." (cited in Topping 2001, p.370).

[21] See "Phases" (2015) and "Earshot" (3018)

[22] Attentive viewers will recall "Intervention" (5018): when the gang believes Buffy is sleeping with Spike, Xander attempts to reassure her: "No one is judging you. It's understandable. Spike is strong and mysterious and sort of compact but well-muscled," and Buffy replies, "I am not having sex with Spike. But I'm starting to think that *you* might be."

[23] I refer here to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction: see Sedgwick 1985.

[24] He also, unfortunately, has overtones of the stereotype of black male as sexual predator - see his unpleasant observations on the women in the canteen in the opening scene of "The Initiative" (4007).

[25] In his commentary for "The Initiative" (4021), David Fury confirms that there was a sense of "painting themselves into a corner" as the season headed for its climax and resolution.

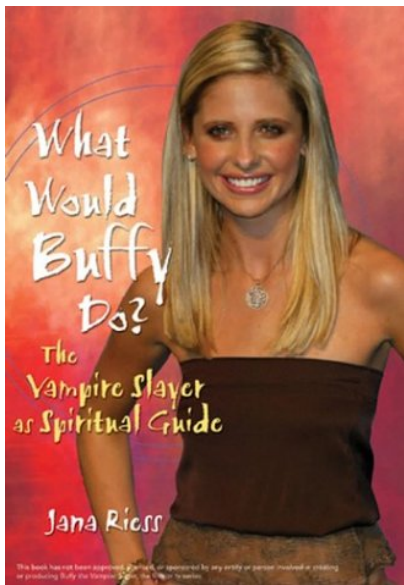
[26] Buffy uses exactly the same phrase when rejecting his advances at the end of "Fool for Love" (5007).

[27] In "Crush," we see him taking out his rage on a mannequin dressed up as Buffy in similar misogynistic fashion: "you ungrateful bitch!" he roars, smashing a box of chocolates over the mannequin's head.



Jana Riess

The Monster Inside: Taming the Darkness Within Ourselves



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"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power."
--Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Oenone"

"One may defeat a thousand obstacles and adversaries, yet he who
defeats the enemies within is the noblest victor."
The Buddha

"This thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine."
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 5 Scene 1

(1) In "Primeval" (4021), the über-Buffy tells Adam that he could never understand the source of her power. She is partially correct—as we saw in the chapter on friendship, Adam has no concept of the deep power that resides in Buffy's close relationships with her core group of friends. But this isn't the entire story of her strength. In the following episode, the dream montage "Restless" (4022), Buffy dreams that Adam, now in human form, says that although aggression is a natural human tendency, he and Buffy come by their aggression in another way. "We're not demons," Buffy answers flatly. "Is that a fact?" Adam responds. It's a fascinating hint of the seasons to come, which will divulge the other source of Buffy's power: darkness. Ironically, it is the villain Adam who accurately voices Buffy's worst fear: that she, like him, is a hybrid of both human and demon.

(2) *Buffy* has never shied away from exploring themes of darkness and ambiguity. Even the premise of the show—which rests on the delicate balance of power between good and evil, vampires and the Slayer who hunts them—points to the pervasive nature of darkness. One of the series' most compelling messages is that this darkness is not simply an external force to be easily staked, dusted, or otherwise conquered. It is an ongoing inner reality for every person. "Particularly today, the vampire serves as our reflection," argues literary critic William Patrick Day in *Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture*. "After all, when one stands next to Dracula and looks in the mirror one sees only oneself." It's an astute observation; on *Buffy*, the vampire serves as a stand-in or a metaphor for some of the darkest impulses and animalistic tendencies of human nature. Particularly in the last three seasons of the show, *Buffy's* focus on evil moves from the monster without to the monster within.

(3) How do we deal with the darkness inside ourselves? What happens when we become our own worst enemies, as the Scoobies do in the deeply *noir* sixth season? How can we acknowledge and respect our own darkness without plunging ourselves into its abyss? In this final section, we've been exploring how *Buffy* can teach us lessons about saving the world. But unless we acknowledge our ability—and often, our hidden desire—to do harm, we're unlikely to do much good. We will not save the world unless we know fundamentally that we are saving it not only from external threats but from the monsters inside ourselves.

"How Do You Like My Darkness Now?": Buffy

(4) "All those years fighting us," Dracula coaxes Buffy in the fifth-season opener (5001). "Your power so near to our own . . . and you've never once wanted to know what it is that we fight for? Never even a taste?" Slitting his arm with a fingernail, Dracula offers his own blood for Buffy to sample, urging her to "find it. The darkness. Find your true nature." She glimpses that darkness in her own memories, as her mind fills with abrupt images of herself fighting monsters, of the First Slayer, of a vein with blood coursing through it. In this episode Buffy is able to resist the call of the darkness within her, even while she yearns to know more about it. Casting off Dracula's mesmeric thrall, she stakes him (not once but twice, because she's watched all of his movies and knows that he always comes back) and pronounces him "eurotrashed." But the darkness remains, an unsettling presence within the Slayer. It's interesting to reflect on the old adage that the darkness is always most evident in the hour before dawn: in this episode, that aphorism turns out to be literally true, as Buffy discovers the depths of her own darkness just moments before the character of Dawn appears for the first time.

(5) Dracula's insinuations, and her intuition about her own darkness, lead Buffy to re-enlist Giles as her Watcher and begin a strenuous program of physical and spiritual training. She wants to know more about the source of her power, and about the other Slayers. Buffy realizes that Dracula actually understood her power better than she does, and she knows she needs a greater self-awareness. Although Buffy began the series as a teenager repulsed by the gore of her life—dead kids falling out of lockers, blood stains constantly on her clothes—she has begun to struggle with an evolving tendency to enjoy her power. Near the end of the third season, for example, she is ready to break the Slayer code by killing Faith, a human, to save Angel, a vampire (3021). Xander tells Buffy that he's worried about losing her, but it seems that he means "losing" her in a moral sense if she murders Faith. Faith, as many viewers and scholars have pointed out, "represents the darker side of Buffy herself: the power of the Slayer ungoverned by caution and unguided by morality." It's a fine line to walk. Buffy's life is violent by nature, and this reality changes her enough that Spike is not far wrong when he taunts good-boy Riley that Buffy is the type who prefers her men dangerous and dark ("Shadow," 5008). By that point in the series Buffy is going out patrolling more often—every night, in fact. But she really knows that this "patrolling" is closer to what Dracula calls it: hunting. There is darkness inside of her.

(6) More than two years later, we find out why. When Principal Wood gives Buffy a keepsake belonging to his mother, a former Slayer, Buffy wonders if the box will hold some of the answers she's been seeking (7015). The box contains shadow-casters, which tell a story when put in motion. First, the story goes, the earth was created, and was populated by demons and men. To fight the demons, the men enslaved a girl by chaining her to the earth. "And then—and I—I can't read this," says Dawn, who is translating the ancient document from Sumerian. "Something about darkness." The shadow-casting mechanism begins to spin of its own accord. "What about darkness?" asks Buffy.

(7) Her curiosity piqued, Buffy enters a portal into another dimension, where three men shackle her wrists and chain her to the ground. Her power, they inform her, descends from the way they created the First Slayer: by mating a girl with the essence of a demon. They offer to do the same for Buffy, increasing her power to equip her to fight the First Evil. In fact, they attempt to force this upon her, telling her that becoming one with the demon is the only way: "This will make you ready for the fight," says one of the shamans. "By making me less human?" Buffy responds, refusing to cooperate.

(8) Just as she did with Dracula, Buffy resists the allure of acquiring more power through darkness

because she rejects its accompanying loss of humanity. Screaming, she insists that this isn't the way. "You think I came all this way to get knocked up by some demon dust?" she demands. Even if she is not powerful enough to defeat the First Evil—and the apocalyptic vision that one of the shamans gives her just before her return to her own world is enough to convince her that she's not—she knows that power forged in darkness is too dangerous. Buffy is grateful for the knowledge she's gained from the Shadow Men and Dracula, whom she admits "opened [her] eyes a little." But instead of propelling her on a path toward deeper engagement with evil, this knowledge makes Buffy more wary of her own darkness and more conscious about choosing the light.

"The Wolf Is Inside Me All the Time: Oz

(9) Buffy isn't the only character who has to confront inner darkness. One morning in the second season, Oz awakens to a lovely day and is surrounded by trees and chirping birds (2015). The trouble is that he is naked and has no memory of how he lost his clothes or wound up in the forest. "Huh," he says in his usual noncommittal tone. It's the beginning of a new phase of life for Oz, and of a struggle between his loving human heart and the beast that seethes just below the surface.

(10) When he learns that a werewolf has ravaged Sunnydale the night before, Oz phones his aunt (in one of the show's all-time most comical scenes) and manages to work a difficult question into their polite conversation: "Aunt Maureen. Hey, it's me. Um, what? Oh! It's, uh... actually it's healing okay. That's pretty much the reason I called. Um, I wanted to ask you something. Is Jordy a werewolf? Uh-huh. And how long has that been going on? Uh-huh. What? No, no reason. Um... Thanks. Yeah, love to Uncle Ken." Despite his understated approach, Oz knows that the bite he received from his toddler cousin has effectively cursed him for life: he is a werewolf, a condition for which there is no cure.

(11) Giles reveals that a werewolf is "a potent, extreme representation of our inborn animalistic traits" and "acts on pure instinct" with no conscience. When Oz first realizes that he must be the vicious Sunnydale werewolf, his first response is to withdraw from Willow and try to hide his secret from the Scoobies; he is terrified and ashamed. But after Willow discovers his secret, she indicates that she'd still like to have a relationship with him (and concedes that there are several days of the month when she's not exactly pleasant to be around, either). For the next two years, Oz settles into a comfortable routine of allowing himself to be caged three nights a month so that he doesn't hurt anyone. And apart from an isolated episode in which he breaks out of the cage and kills a zombie in "The Zeppo" (3013), the situation seems to work well for everyone.

(12) But Oz has never really come to terms with what it means to be a werewolf, to have an animal raging inside him. In the fourth season, he experiences a mysterious attraction to a woman named Veruca, a fascination that lures him from confinement one night when he is in wolf form (4006). He is bewildered when he once again wakes up in the woods with no memory of what transpired the previous night. Only this time, Veruca is lying next to him, and he comes to discover that she too is a werewolf. Veruca is Oz's character foil; she revels in being a werewolf, regardless of the destruction it causes for others, and she has given herself over fully to her dark side. Oz is both repulsed and enthralled by her, drawn to the darkness, freedom and danger that Veruca represents, but guilty and acutely conscious that he's betrayed Willow. For Oz—taciturn, stoic, gentle Oz—there's an intoxicating liberation in the uncaged life Veruca leads, even though he knows it's wrong and he doesn't want to hurt people. "The animal, it's powerful, inside me all the time," Veruca coaxes him. "Soon you'll start to feel sorry for everybody else because they don't know what it's like to be as alive as we are. As free." However, Oz knows that the freedom that Veruca extols comes at the terrible price of the lives of others, and that such callous depravity is unconscionable. At the end of the episode, Oz kills Veruca in werewolf form in order to save Willow's life, but then packs his bags and leaves Sunnydale. "Veruca was right about something," he tells the brokenhearted Willow. "The wolf is inside me all the time, and I don't know where that line is anymore between me and it. And until I figure out what that means, I shouldn't be around you . . . or anybody."

(13) Oz's struggles with the wolf inside him are a dramatic representation of the difficulties many people have in controlling unhealthy passions or living inside constraints. Writer and producer Marti Noxon, who wrote "Wild at Heart" (4006), says that the wolf "is the part that both men and women have, that you can destroy relationships even when people love each other." Oz longs to do what's right, but the darkness inside him—symbolized by the werewolf—demands to be seen. His struggle comes to fruition in "New Moon Rising" (4019), when he returns to Sunnydale and seems to have gained control of his werewolf tendencies. He has gone to Tibet, Romania, and other places to learn meditation and how to keep his "inner cool," even when there's a full moon. He tells Willow that he's a different person than when he left and can now be what she needs.

(14) But Oz discovers that he can consistently control his wolfish impulses only when Willow is not around, because his love for her calls forth both the best and worst in him. When he learns that she is involved with Tara, Oz transforms once again into a werewolf, his bodily metamorphosis a metaphor for the confusion and jealousy inside of him. Even though it's daylight, his strong negative emotions are enough to make him lose all his hard-won control. At the end of the episode, he leaves Sunnydale, realizing that even if Tara hadn't come into Willow's life, being around Willow makes his wolf surface more readily, and this danger means that they should not be together. For Oz the best way to live with the darkness is to remove himself from what provokes it, even if this is emotionally heartwrenching.

"The Battle's Done, and We Kind of Won": Coping with Ambiguity

(15) Good and evil, Giles tells Buffy, are actually "terribly simple. The good guys are always the stalwart and true; the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats. We always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after." Given that the episode in which this dialogue occurs is called "Lie to Me" (2007), we would be right to suspect that Giles is being satirical. "Liar," Buffy responds. They both know it's never that simple.

(16) Just as there is darkness within every person—symbolized by the "demon" in Buffy and the "wolf" inside Oz—*Buffy* assumes a densely nuanced moral universe. Some vampires are good, and some humans are evil; choices are not depicted as being purely and obviously right or wrong, but fraught with complexity; answers are never absolute but conditional and often in flux. Is it any wonder that the close of the musical episode (6007) has Giles qualifying his joy at defeating yet another demon with the line, "the battle's done, and we kind of won"?

(17) One of the most intriguing aspects of this show is that its writers allow their characters to wrestle with such ambiguities and to be monumentally flawed. Buffy can be selfish and sometimes shallow; Willow's insecurities threaten to destroy her and others; Xander's fear of the future cripples his growth into a mature adult, and he winds up breaking Anya's heart. In the Buffyverse, as in life, most good people have elements of darkness in them, and some "evil" characters turn out to be good. Or at the very least, they often speak the truth: the Mayor is the first person to make Buffy and Angel think seriously about whether a future together is realistic, and Spike intuitively understands (and exploits) some of the tensions the Scoobies are experiencing in their relationships in the fourth season. In the seventh season, one of the things that makes the First Evil so pernicious is that it's not reliably unreliable. When it appears to several characters on the same night in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007), the First does not *always* lie. There are some truths mixed in with its noxious fictions, and it knew all about special times she had shared with Tara. How can people tell the difference between the First's lies and its truths? Clearly, on *Buffy* villains can actually be more honest than the characters allow themselves to be, so dealing with them is always a tangled and messy enterprise.

(18) Ambiguity is a difficult reality to live with. As we've already seen, the fourth season is a time for Riley to begin to learn to think for himself rather than simply obeying orders from his "superiors." He gainfully attempts to navigate a world that, for him, is newly complicated, because he has long depended on the military to direct, guide, and instruct him. Through his interactions with Buffy and her friends, Riley also comes to understand the more subtle entanglements of the war between good and evil. He has always compartmentalized good and evil the way Professor Walsh and the Initiative taught him: humans are good; demons are bad. But one of Buffy's gang is the vampire Riley knows as "Hostile Number 17" (a.k.a. Spike), who sometimes works with the Scoobies to kill demons; Riley also learns that Buffy once had a vampire as

a boyfriend. In “New Moon Rising” (4019), Riley is about to kill a werewolf when he realizes that the monster is actually Willow’s ex-boyfriend, Oz. Whereas moments before, he had been poised to kill the werewolf and was utterly sure that it was simply a “thing” and a “killer,” now Riley realizes that reality is more complex than he has ever imagined. Knowing that his simple rubric doesn’t work anymore, Riley comes to accept Buffy’s explanation that “besides the wolf thing, Oz is a great guy.” The black-and-white paradigm of “demons bad, people good” no longer serves to explain the realities that Riley’s now observing in the world—not the least of which is that Professor Walsh, his trusted human mentor, turned out to be so deadly.

(19) Riley’s moral evolution in encountering ambiguity suggests how uncomfortable living with shades of gray can be. Like him, Buffy sometimes wishes that the world were more clear-cut, and that her decisions would be easier. “I like my evil like I like my men,” she complains in “Pangs” (4008). “Evil. Straight up, black hat, tie-you-to-the-train-tracks, soon-my-electro-ray-will-destroy-Metropolis *bad*.” She rarely gets it, though, because absolute moral certainty remains distressingly elusive on *Buffy*. In fact, when Buffy returns from the dead in the sixth season, she sings that her heavenly sojourn was characterized by “no fear, no doubt” (6007). In other words, paradise for her was an absence of ambiguity. But in the Buffyverse, such clarity cannot be achieved on earth, where good and evil mingle freely, and determining the most ethical course of action is often difficult.

Living with Our Shadow Selves

(20) Ambiguity finds its most disturbing expression when we poke around inside ourselves, exploring the maze of contradictions within. We are spiritual and carnal, altruistic and selfish, magnanimous and narrow-minded, good and evil. What twentieth-century psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the “shadow self”—our darker double—is always with us. Jung told a relevant story about an upstanding family he once knew: the father, a Quaker, “could not imagine that he had ever done anything wrong in his life,” Jung said, and he “would not take on his shadow.” The man’s denial of his shadow self played out in his children succumbing wholly to darkness, Jung believed; one of them became a thief and the other a prostitute. “Because the father would not take on his shadow, his share in the imperfection of human nature, his children were compelled to live out the dark side which he had ignored,” Jung claimed. Although we may not agree with Jung’s conclusion that this man’s children took on their father’s shadow in destructive ways, Jung’s overall idea—that denial of our shadow selves is destructive to everyone around us—speaks a very real truth. As Joss Whedon notes in the voice-over commentary on “Wild at Heart” (4006), the most dangerous people are often those who are totally unaware of their dark sides. “Nobody thinks that they’re a bad guy,” Whedon says. “Nobody thinks that they’re not righteous. I’ve dealt with people that are truly villainous, I mean *villainous* . . . people who have done appalling things to other people on purpose. And they think that they’re righteous.”

(21) For Jung, and for us as well, the key is a greater self-awareness, with the goal of full identity integration. As Xander discovers in the very funny fifth-season episode “The Replacement” (5003), the human psyche is composed of deeply intricate components that are delicately balanced. When Xander is accidentally hit by a demon’s ray gun, it splits his identity so that one Xander seems poised and forceful, but humorless; the other is unkempt and unconfident, but funny. (And he can do the all-important “Snoopy dance.”) They are two sides of the same coin—represented by the shiny nickel that the suave Xander keeps twirling in his fingers throughout the episode. Neither can exist without the other, and both come to realize that they are integral halves of the same whole. When the two are magically re-integrated at the end of the episode, Xander knows that he has both aspects inside him and can draw upon them both. The next day, he and the Scoobies move his things to the lovely new apartment that the forceful, confident Xander rented. His integrated identity is the principal factor in his long-deserved exodus from his parents’ basement and his increased ability to move forward with his life.

(22) Xander’s example suggests the importance of integrating the many conflicting aspects of what we call the self. But what about integrating darkness into our personalities? On *Buffy* it’s not just the “monster” characters who need to learn to tame their own darkness; all of the principals routinely grapple with their dark sides. Giles, for example, hardly seems the type to have an inner ogre, but in the second season we learn that in his youth, he had a renegade and troublesome life as “Ripper” (2008). Giles spends much of

his adult life trying to forget his Ripper period, or at least to stem the tide of the damage he did then. But we see a shade of Ripper in Giles now and again, such as when he uses his demon status in "A New Man" (4012) to terrorize Professor Walsh, who ridiculed and sneered at him once before. The Ripper part of him takes a certain perverse pleasure in seeing Professor Walsh run for her life. But "Ripper" is also an aspect of Giles that he can enlist in his fight for good, so Giles sometimes employs his dark side to stanch the power of evil. In "The Gift" (5022), for example, Buffy has the chance to kill Ben, ending Glory's reign of power once and for all, but she cannot do so because Ben is a human being. Although the Slayer cannot end Ben's life, Giles remarks that he is bound by no such heroic code, and calmly smothers Ben. Ironically, it's because Giles can tap into his darkness that he is able to do some good, defeating Glory forever. It's a morally ambiguous act—like many such acts on *Buffy*—but a necessary one.

(23) Willow is another character who struggles with the darkness within her but learns to control it. In the alternate realities of the third-season episodes "The Wish" (3009) and "Doppelgängerland" (3016), we get a glimpse of Willow as her alter ego: still clever and "kinda gay," as she puts it, but also purely evil and without conscience. When we see her evil side come to fruition late in the sixth season (6020-22), it's almost as if the prophecy of these episodes has been fulfilled: Willow becomes her evil twin down to the last detail. Even the words that she utters before killing Warren—"Bored now"—echo those spoken by her villainous counterpart in the third season. Dark Willow is determined to erase all evidence of the mousy, sweet Willow of old ("Willow doesn't live here anymore," she jeers), and nearly ends the world with her rage.

(24) By season seven, after being rescued by Xander and rehabilitated by Giles, Willow has learned to be very, very cautious of her own dark side, refusing to do magic at all even when it would help the Scoobies. She is, Buffy says, the "Wicca who won't-a" (7015), anxious that using magic will bring back dark, veiny, scary Willow. After she is temporarily possessed by the First Evil in "Bring on the Night" (7010), Willow is terrified, as she collapses on the floor crying: "It's still in me," she wails. "I feel it!" But by season's end, Willow casts the spell that saves the world, using the essence of the Slayer Scythe to empower all of the potential Slayers with superstrength. In doing so, she becomes transfigured, her hair a glowing white in contrast to the raven black hair and eyes she sported when she surrendered to dark magic a year before. This Willow is transformed by goodness and light, looking toward heaven as she reaches within herself to strike a powerful blow against evil.

(25) Finally, Angel is another character who obviously struggles with the darkness inside him. His journey is taken up in the next chapter, but for our purposes here it's worthwhile to note that Angel offers an example of the best and worst that we are all capable of. In her essay "The Good, the Bad, and the Ambivalent," Laura Resnick reminds us that even *good* Angel experiences ongoing temptation and a desire to kill:

Angel's inner darkness may be supernatural and demonic, but it's a rare person—and a rare *Buffy* fan—who has never once wanted to seize something he has no right to take; never once wanted to give free rein to instinct and desire with no thought for social mores; never once wanted to act out of anger without consideration for the consequences, and never once wanted to break a strict and unsatisfying diet (even in context, cold pig's blood sounds pretty unappetizing) Though we may feel repelled by or wary of the demonic urges living so close to his surface, Angel's struggles are nevertheless *our* struggles—taken to dramatically heightened extremes by the supernatural qualities of the Buffyverse.

What makes Angel such a remarkable character is that against all odds, his desire to do good so often conquers the evil he carries all the time.

(26) *Buffy* is all about confronting our dark sides and learning to live comfortably—or at least to co-exist non-violently—with our monster selves. Many people would rather deny their dark shadow, pretend it isn't there. But ignoring it entirely, according to the show, is as dangerous as allowing it to rule our lives. We have to find ways to acknowledge it and recognize its power without allowing it to take over. Ironically enough, the show's message seems to be that we are more likely to act on our evil intentions if we remain unaware of them; like Faith in the third season, we will easily surrender to the glorious darkness of our shadow selves if we aren't continually questioning our own motivations.

(27) In the end Buffy's greatest battle is not with demons or vampires, but with herself, with the inner darkness she cannot completely slay. It will always be with her, just as our own demons will continue to pursue us. What we will do is our choice: give the darkness license to damage ourselves and others, or respect and control the shadow's power. As Willow learns in the seventh season, she doesn't need to "be a bigger, badder badass than the source of all badness" (7002). She needs to learn to control her darkness so that it does not control her. In the end, she discovers, it's enough just to be Willow, with all of her complexities, all of her darkness, and her much stronger goodness.