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**Cynthia Bowers**

## **Generation Lapse: The Problematic Parenting of Joyce Summers and Rupert Giles**

(1) Much of the storytelling on *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer* has focused on Buffy's and her contemporaries' efforts to subdue a number of external threats: the Master who plans to reopen the Hell Mouth and destroy the world; Mayor Wilkins' diabolical intention to enslave and destroy all humankind; Adam's Frankensteinian plot to create of super-race of human-demon hybrids. But the most perilous threats to Buffy's, and indeed, her generation's, welfare has come from much closer to home. The parenting by and of her mother Joyce and her Watcher Giles is a recurrent theme on the series, one which strongly suggests that the monsters Buffy and her cohorts slay are not limited to those that exist more comfortably beyond their immediate households but also threaten their safety within them.

(2) In fact, the three episodes that have focused on the adults charged with Buffy's welfare—"The Dark Age" (2008), "Ted" (2011) and "Band Candy" (3006)—uncomfortably link Joyce's and Giles' generational "lapses" to past and present drug and alcohol abuse. Series' creator Joss Whedon and his writers seem committed to exploring aging Boomers' parenting incompetence and its relationship to drug abuse. In the first of these episodes, "The Dark Age," Giles' reckless, youthful dalliance with the demon Eyghon conjures images of a drugs-and-violence culture that results in the murder of nearly all of Giles' associates; in the second, "Ted," Buffy's mother selfishly indulges her need for a man with the help of a drug-induced Stepford-like haze; in the third episode, "Band Candy," Joyce and Giles form a drugged and dangerous alliance that is potentially disastrous not only to Buffy but to all of the helpless and abandoned infants of Sunnydale. Typically, the series presents the younger generation's successful efforts to negotiate the parental generation's failures by making explicit and applauding the teens' unselfish generational values.<sup>[1]</sup> These episodes in particular foreground the adults' "lapses" into self-indulgence, materialism, and substance abuse, all of which cause a crisis of parenting for Buffy that is at least as frightening than her encounters with the external monsters she routinely faces. Each episode also provides evidence of the younger generation's adoption of parental roles and skills and their remarkable success in so doing.

(3) In "The Dark Age," the demon Eyghon may be read as a metaphor for LSD made explicit by Giles' early episode "bad trip" dream flashbacks. Eyghon also represents irresponsible sexuality, violence, and murder, underscored by Giles' youthful nickname "Ripper" with its violent associations. But Eyghon also symbolizes a kind of cultural monster unleashed by Giles' and his contemporaries' irresponsible "generation" and literally demonizes the selfishness, self-absorption, and drugs and sexual experimentation often associated with the 1960s' psychedelic youth culture.<sup>[2]</sup> Not even the conservative Giles of the 1990s, the episode's teaser makes clear, can suppress this fiend even under layers of tweed and adult reformation.

(4) The link between the Baby Boom's youthful embrace, and adult disavowal, of the drug culture they created has been studied recently by Mike A. Males. Citing the work of historians Neil Howe and William Strauss, Males writes that Baby Boom neo-Puritans, under whose banner the "fuddy-duddy" Rupert Giles seems at first glance to operate, have "grown up" to "a new sense of responsibility and self denial"

imposing strict moral standards on themselves and their peers"—and most assuredly on their children (340). This description suits Giles' commitment to Buffy's Slayer training, to instilling in her a deep sense of personal and generational responsibility—"once into every generation" a Slayer is born. Yet, as the narrative of "The Dark Age" unfolds, it becomes evident that Giles hopes Buffy will do as he says and not as he did.

(5) Giles' recurring nightmares force him to relive his youthful involvement with "the worst [gang] that would have him." Two former members of that gang appear suddenly in Sunnydale: one, Philip Henry, tries to warn Giles of Eyghon's reappearance; the other, Deirdre Page, now possessed by the demon, stalks and murders Henry before he can warn Giles. Giles is shaken by Philip Henry's death and understands clearly what it means: in a telling moment, Giles, alone in his apartment, drunk and distraught, whispers into the mirror: "So. You're back." Who or what is "you" we wonder? Does Giles fear a relapse into his murky past? Or is he referring to the demon? To what degree are they one and the same?

(6) The episode heads toward crisis when Giles uncharacteristically fails to meet Buffy to protect the hospital's weekly blood shipment. His responsibility-lapse begins the Buffy's parenting of the adult. Alerted by Giles' absence from the hospital rendezvous, Buffy concludes that something must be wrong, especially since Giles "counts tardiness as, like, the eighth deadly sin." When she appears, full of concern, at his doorstep, she is plainly alarmed by his distracted behavior and obvious drinking, his memory lapse and unusual withdrawal. When she presses him for details, she's told abruptly to mind her own business: "It's complicated, Buffy, and quite frankly, it's private," he snaps. These behaviors—drinking alone, personality changes, loss of interest in one's work—are all typical symptoms of depression and/or drug or alcohol abuse which Buffy observes, and responds to, with parent-like attention.

(7) Since Giles refuses to, or becomes incapable of, assuming his adult responsibilities, Willow, Xander, and Cordelia must supply the lapse. Willow, especially, substitutes her own for Giles' research functions, but more importantly, she adopts his parent-like authority. She breaks up the childish sparring between Xander and Cordelia, insisting they either commit one hundred percent to the task before them—discovering how to destroy Eyghon—or, with a revealing use of pronoun, to "get the hell out of my library!"

(8) The metaphorical link between Eyghon's conjuration and 1960s-style experimentation with drugs and sex is reinforced both in Giles' confession to Buffy and in Willow's research. Giles tells Buffy that Eyghon's "generation" was induced during a "deep sleep" suggesting the receiver's tuned-out receptive state. The others' summoning of Eyghon produced in them all an "extraordinary high." When one of their number, Randall, "lost control," Giles recounts, "Eyghon took him whole." "We tried to exorcize the demon," Giles continues, "but it killed him." After a pause, he adds, "We killed him," perhaps for the first time accepting responsibility for his "generation's" reckless and lethal actions. Willow's research makes the link to sexual experimentation: Eyghon's appearance created a "euphoric feeling of power" among his followers; "ancient sects used to induce possession for bacchanals and orgies."

(9) Buffy's parenting of the older generation is observable in her predictable rescues: she rescues the blood shipment at the hospital; rescues Giles and the others from the ghoul Philip Henry; rescues Giles from the possessed Jenny. She also rescues, at her own peril, the very undeserving Ethan Rayne, final surviving member of the cabal and Giles' rogue ex-partner whom audiences will remember as the unscrupulous costume-shop owner in "Halloween" (2006). Unlike Giles, who is consumed by self-pity and regret and who is helpless before the real danger his "generation" has produced, Ethan is viciously self-preserving, eager to substitute Buffy for himself with the demon. Eyghon has, of course, left deep marks on Giles and his cohorts, both visible and invisible. The tattoo that marks Eyghon's followers is tangible evidence of their reckless past. Ethan marks Buffy with the tattoo to symbolically transfer the consequences of his own generation's irresponsibilities onto hers; then, with an "acid" bath, he erases his own mark.

(10) Adults on the series, particularly as personified in Giles, Buffy's mother Joyce, and in Principal Snyder, seem convinced that the younger generation is out-of-control, in need of "Watching," correcting, and policing. However, as Mike Males argues, teen drug abuse and violent crime is largely a media myth; in

fact, he writes, "the increase in major crimes committed by adults closely tracks skyrocketing drug abuse among aging Baby Boomers" (11). Real threats to teens' stability comes from within their own families; drug use and related violence among parents "creates more family instability and . . . leads to negative views of kids among adults unwilling to face their own misbehaviors" (11). Aging Boomers, like Ethan Rayne, attempt an artificial transference onto an innocent younger generation. Adults in "The Dark Age" are ineffective or murderous, haunted by their youthful sins, impotent to maintain their responsible roles or eager to abdicate them.

(11) Ethan's actions much more obviously demonstrate the older generation's failure to protect or provide for youth (a theme that runs through all three episodes) and a willingness of the older generation to sacrifice the young for its own self-interests. Only Angel is able to face and subdue Eyghon, but only by becoming himself momentarily possessed by the demon. Angel's participation in Eyghon's demise is a troubling, though momentary, acknowledgment of his darker side, of the demon that will later shatter Buffy's most private world. Adults, even the 240-year-old seemingly benign Angel, are never what they seem.

(12) "The Dark Age" might be characterized as an attack on Buffy's generation from the Left: the '60s rebellious drumbeat—sex, drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll—is obviously invoked by Giles' violent, zoned-out demonic possession. "Ted," on the other hand, may be read as an attack from the Right: in this episode, hypermoralist patriarchy plans to contain the Summers' women within artificially constructed "family values." The title character, whose last name is (as if to underscore the point) Buchanan, shares with his metaphorical hippie brother Ethan Rayne a strong will to self-preservation and a predisposition toward violence and drug use.

(13) "Ted" can be divided into two parts. In the first half of the episode, Buffy expresses an instinctive mistrust of her mother's new boyfriend, Ted, and resists his efforts to win her over. Her friends at first advise her to give him a chance, Willow offering a "pop" psychoanalysis of Buffy's reaction: "separation anxiety, the mother-figure being taken away, conflict with the father-figure." But Buffy, alerted by her mother's "Stepford-like" behavior, trusts her own feelings, concluding: "I'm pretty good at sensing what's going on around me and there's definitely something wrong with this Ted." She's right, of course—in the second half of the episode, the Scooby Gang discovers that Ted, whom Buffy accidentally "kills" after a violent confrontation in her bedroom, is actually a homicidal robot, who, over a period of fifty years, has first enchanted and then serially murdered each of his gullible new wives.

(14) Joyce's parenting failures in this episode are more frightening than Ted's later violent outbursts because her betrayal of Buffy's confidence and trust violates so profoundly the mother-daughter bond. Initially, Joyce is merely annoyed with Buffy's doubts about Ted, and, early in the episode, recites what has obviously become a Summers' household mantra: "It's not exactly like men beat down the door" she begins, "when you're a single parent," Buffy says, completing her mother's well-worn complaint. Buffy feels betrayed and embarrassed when she learns, during the miniature golf game, that Joyce has told Ted about her grades. And she is deeply hurt when her mother disregards her assertion that Ted threatened to slap her for cheating at miniature golf. Joyce scoffs at Buffy's account of the incident, criticizes her "attitude" toward Ted, and then chastises Buffy for dishonesty. Joyce parrots Ted's version of the confrontation and finally defends Ted for "protecting" Buffy from embarrassment by declining to tell her friends that she had cheated. Joyce later betrays Buffy by allowing Ted to discipline her, to "handle" Buffy's reaction to the news that the couple may become engaged. At the end of the first part of the episode, after Ted's "death," Joyce shuts Buffy out, implicitly refusing to believe Buffy's account of what actually happened in Buffy's room.

(15) In the first half of the episode, Joyce is shown to be desperate and selfish; her need for a man blinds her to the effects her relationship is having on her hurt and confused daughter. Part of that blindness is caused, we later learn, by the food Ted has been preparing which is laced with drugs that keep Joyce "mellow and compliant." But Joyce cannot be entirely excused for her enthrallment to Ted because the tainted food can be read as a metaphor for sensual indulgence as well as sexual domination and satisfaction. When Buffy tells Joyce that Ted threatened to slap her, Joyce uncharacteristically dismisses the allegation as preposterous while greedily consuming a pan of sticky-buns Ted has prepared for breakfast.

Nibbling sensually and licking her fingers, Joyce coos "This is so delicious!" Buffy's accusation, one would suppose, would at least plant some misgivings in her mother's mind. Instead, Joyce ignores her daughter's claim in order to gratify her sensual needs, selfishly placing her own desire above her daughter's fear. Once again the gratification of personal needs is linked to drug use and associated with the parental generation.

(16) Joyce's self-indulgence and abdication of parental responsibility connects to Ted's imposition of patriarchal "family values." Joyce seems prepared to suspend her duty and surrender her authority to a strong man in exchange for a kind of oblivion in which father knows best, makes the rules, and governs the "little ladies" with a firm hand. But "family values" Buchanan-style only thinly disguise a struggle for power and dominance foregrounded by the number of representations of invaded or transgressed female space in the episode. In the teaser, Buffy discovers that her front door is open and unlocked. She moves toward the kitchen and hears a glass crash to the floor and her mother exclaim "No!" Rushing to the kitchen door, she discovers her mother and Ted in a cozy embrace. His presence in the kitchen, and his incessant cooking, suggests his co-optation of a traditionally female sphere. Ted later usurps the head of the table at dinner, imposes grace before the meal, calls himself "Daddy," and infantilizes the already submissive Joyce by referring to her with the insulting diminutive "Joycie." In probably the episode's most frightening scene, he lurks in the darkness of Buffy's bedroom, going through her drawers and reading her diary, waiting ominously for her return. When he is "resurrected," he re-enters the house uninvited, but is significantly subdued in the kitchen where Buffy beats him with that traditionally female weapon, a frying pan. At this moment, Buffy symbolically reclaims hers and her mother's space with the triumphant declaration "This house is mine!"

(17) Like Ethan Rayne, Ted Buchanan is ruthlessly self-preserving, disregarding the needs or welfare of the younger generation: "Your mother and I *will* be happy" he declares to Buffy, silencing her objections. Ted's, and his ideology's, will to survive is of course exaggerated by the fact that he is a robot; his anti-feminist, hyper-moral patriarchy is, like himself, utterly artificial and mechanical, devoid of human sensibility. Ted attempts to exercise extreme patriarchal authority to govern, to rule, and to punish, and when he attacks Buffy in her bedroom, in a horrifying representation of domestic violence, he threatens her with institutionalization. Grasping her diary, which is filled with secret Slayer details (of which her naive mother is unaware), Ted snarls "From now on you'll do what I say when I say or I show this to your mother and you'll spend your best dating years behind the walls of a mental institution." Ted's threat to institutionalize Buffy registers the "solutions" offered by youth-blaming pronouncements of hyper-moralist Rightist Boomers like William Bennett and Gary Bauer. Males argue that parental incompetence, and not teen rebellion, is responsible for the appearance of a number of "kid-fixing" services and "tough love" programs that have "spawned a vast and growing legion of treatment, programming, behavior education, and other services designed to manage" so-called recalcitrant youth (232). Such "fixes" for "delusional" and rebellious young women like Buffy would certainly be appealing to Ted Buchanan.

(18) Simply put, Ted, like all patriarchs, will control and/or contain transgressive and potentially transgressive women who refuse to conform to his warped expectations. He will even use violence to maintain his dominance over Joyce. In the second half of the episode, the "resurrected" Ted (who had only been shut down and not killed by Buffy) menaces the now non-drugged Joyce when she insists she, and not he, convey the news of his return to her daughter. Ted slaps her and slams her against the kitchen wall shouting: "I don't take orders from women. I'm not wired that way!"

(19) Buffy and her friends once again rescue a lapsed adult. Willow and Xander help Buffy spy on Ted at work; Willow discovers the drug in the tainted cookies; all of them, including Cordelia, investigate Ted's 1950s lair, discovering the bodies of his previous wives; at the end of the episode, they help Buffy dispose of Ted's short-circuited, burnt-out remains. And typically, Joyce's convenient unconsciousness in the end prevents her from ever learning the truth about Ted, providing viewers with another example of the adult generation's inability to understand the real horrors facing their children.

(20) "The Dark Age" (2008) and "Ted" (2011) present separate but equally poor parenting by both Giles and Joyce. In "Band Candy" (3006), Joyce and Giles form a disastrous alliance; the abdication of their parental responsibilities is once again linked to drug and alcohol abuse, violence and criminal behavior. The

situation, though presented comically, is nevertheless terrifying to Buffy and her friends who are saddled with the responsibility not only to rescue the adults but also to save the next generation, Sunnydale's helpless and abandoned infants.

(21) The title of the episode echoes slang for cocaine ("nose candy"), and the adults who come under the influence of the drugged chocolate bars exhibit behaviors associated with cocaine use—wild nightclubbing at the Bronze, recklessness, violence and indiscriminate sexuality. But their behavior is not linked to their own generation; rather, it is associated unfairly with the teens'. Buffy and her friends are sobered and repelled by the excesses they observe in the adults partying at the Bronze, yet, accustomed as their generation has become, they transfer the adults' misbehavior to themselves—Willow and Buffy cry "They're behaving like a bunch of *us!*" This is, of course, utter nonsense since Buffy's gang is for the most part either scrupulously sober or repulsed by their own experimentation with controlled substances.[3] On the contrary, the series' format celebrates the teens' moral superiority and commitment to defeat the forces of evil, most often figured on the show in the adult demons Buffy routinely defeats.[4] The episode unfairly obfuscates, and thus implicitly excuses, the adults' drug use by "demonizing" the source of the drugs. In "Ted," the drugs are administered by a homicidal robot; in "Band Candy," they are distributed, tellingly, by Mayor Wilkins' African-American demon-assistant, Mr. Trick, whose warehouse appears to be staffed almost entirely by other African-Americans. In both cases, adult drug use is deflected, and, as we shall see, the blame and consequences shouldered by the youngsters.

(22) As in the other episodes, Buffy is alerted by observing adults' lapse-behaviors. Giles misses class, and Miss Barton, substituting at Principal Snyder's request, untypically tells the students to pretend to study until Snyder goes away. Inquiring into Giles' absence, Buffy discovers her mother at his apartment; Joyce and Giles, often cool toward each other, surprisingly cooperate in Buffy's scheduling. Buffy is further astonished when her mother, who has until then forbidden her to drive, hands her the car keys. Buffy, elated to have the car keys, is not yet aware that both Joyce and Giles have come under the influence of the band candy. Having gotten rid of "their" child, they party—drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and listening to loud rock music.

(23) The relationship between drug use, violence, and crime becomes more evident later in the episode when the teens observe the adults drag racing, necking in the park, and stealing candy off the backs of hijacked trucks. Giles, described by Xander as "bad-magic-hates-the-world-ticking-time-bomb-guy," dresses in tight jeans and tee-shirt, prefers his nickname "Ripper" (introduced in "The Dark Age") and speaks in place of his cultured "Received Pronunciation" a Spike-like "punk" London accent. To impress his "date," Joyce, he breaks a shop window and steals a coat she has been admiring. He then taunts and beats a police officer, takes his gun, then straddles a giggling and again-submissive Joyce across the hood of a police car. He tells a concerned Buffy to "sod off" when she objects to his behavior, and in the warehouse he pulls the policeman's gun on Ethan Rayne, his evil nemesis, who, perhaps not surprisingly, returns in this episode. Joyce's behavior is equally out-of-character. She is seemingly titillated by her attraction to "Ripper," cheerfully accepts the stolen coat, mouths off to Buffy, and for some reason is in possession of a pair of handcuffs which suggest a level of sexual danger and experimentation her daughter has no wish to explore!

(24) Predictably, Buffy and her friends come to the rescue not only of the intoxicated adults but also Sunnydale's helpless infants who, as part of the Mayor's and Mr. Trick's diabolical candy-plan, will become, as Willow discovers, a grisly tribute for the demon Lurconis. Both Joyce and Giles are useless before the demon, Giles more interested in trouncing Ethan than defeating the demon, Joyce fighting off the unwanted advances of a besotted Principal Snyder. Joyce is afraid for the infants, fussing helplessly, but shrinks from actually taking any action. And though Giles assists in beating off the Mayor's cohort, Buffy's quick thinking finally incinerates Lurconis. Buffy, exhausted and worried about the SATs she is preparing to take the following morning, is stunned when her mother tells her to "blow them off"—she'll write Buffy a note. The ever-dutiful Buffy, we should note, chooses to take the SATs despite the tiresome necessity to parent her unruly parental figures.

(25) In all three of these episodes, the teens are either punished or suffer unfairly because of adult lapses and irresponsibility. In "The Dark Age," Buffy's confidence in Giles is seriously undermined, and she has to use her own money (which she was saving for new shoes) to remove the tattoo that had unfairly marked her as a member of the cult of Eyghon. In "Ted," Buffy is threatened, slapped, and beaten, then blamed for Ted's "death" by the doubting (and apparently all-male) Sunnydale police force; Giles betrays her by talking to the police after Ted's "death"; her classmates shun her in the hallways. In "Band Candy," she is forced to pay for the damage to her mother's car even though the accident was caused by a stoned adult who blindsided her. And Snyder insists Xander and the others "volunteer" to clean up the "vandals'" damage to the school lockers and walls. The adults, blind to their own incompetence, refuse to accept responsibility for their failings and deflect blame onto their innocent offspring, creating in them confusion, instability, and a kind of terror potentially more destructive than might be conjured by "ordinary" demons.

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[1]Robert A. George has noted the values of his own "X" Generation as "ideologically and racially diverse, direct, straight to the point, reality based," independent and ingenious at problem-solving (28-29). The forthcoming book, *Millennials Rising*, by historians Neil Howe and William Strauss on the values of children born since 1985 supports George's observations, concluding "they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct" with more in common with the World War II generation than with their Baby Boom parents (Steinberg 3). Diversity, directness, ingenuity, teamwork, good conduct are all characteristics which could be fairly ascribed to Buffy Summers and her friends.

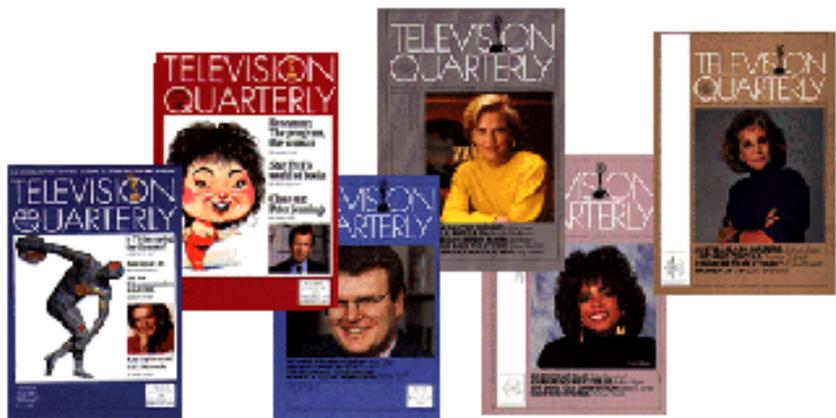
[2]George outlines the characteristics of the Baby Boom generation as experimental, inquisitive, self-indulgent, and liberal—embracing their anthem "sex, drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll" (27-28).

[3]See Xander in "Reptile Boy" (2005), Buffy in "Beer Bad" (4005) and Willow in "Something Blue" (4009) for their experience with and responses to alcohol.

[4]Rhonda Wilcox writes convincingly of the teens' "dread of becoming an adult" and the series' association of vampirism with adulthood (16; 22).



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## Publications

### Richard Campbell with Caitlin Campbell Demons, Aliens, Teens and Television

(1) As a 51-year-old journalism professor and occasional TV critic, I get asked by friends and colleagues, what do I watch on television (when I'm not watching consummate network news professionals butcher presidential election predictions)? While they no longer raise an eyebrow about *The X-Files*, I get blank and sometimes open-mouthed stares when I announce – without embarrassment—“*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,

*Angel*, and *Roswell*, on the WB.”

(2) I have my 16-year-old daughter, Caitlin, to blame for this. An honor student, soccer player, and avid reader, she introduced me to *Buffy* and the WB a couple of years ago. At the time, I just thought I would do my fatherly/media critic duty: watch a few episodes and point out the error of her TV ways. But something else happened. I got hooked. I liked *Buffy*. The improbable story of a teenage vampire slayer, set against the backdrop of life at Sunnydale High School (*Buffy*'s now moved onto college), kept my interest with its sly humor, action adventure, and wide-ranging portraits of teens and teachers. To me, this was not only a skillfully written show but dead-on in capturing the conversational rhythms of teenagers and exploring issues that permeated their lives – friendship, jealousy, self-esteem, responsibility, rules, sex, good and evil. Watching *Buffy*, I got insights about the occasional clumsy ways of adults in turning responsibility over to teens so they can make decisions, learn the consequences, and grow up. Last season I also got hooked on *Angel*, a *Buffy* spin-off starring *Buffy*'s former vampire-with-a-soul boyfriend, and *Roswell*, a series about three alien-human hybrid teens and their close encounters with corrupt g-men, bad aliens, and guidance counselors.

(3) Armed with new insights into teenage culture, I found myself getting more and more annoyed during the 2000 presidential election at the way that popular culture aimed primarily at teens (admittedly some if it too violent and exploitative) became a whipping boy for the demise of civilization. “The Media” and “Hollywood” – whatever these all-purpose clichés mean – became easy targets for politicians – a transparent attempt to distract citizens from the increasing limitations of a bloated two-party system run by insiders who have managed to alienate most young people from politics. With both mainstream presidential candidates pandering to “seniors” over the prescription drug issue, Hollywood and The Media became short-hand symbols for political attacks on screen violence or sexually explicit material aimed at “juniors.” Older voters concerned about medical issues were likely to vote; teenagers ticked off by politicians who demonize them and their culture were not. Media fare became to the 2000 election what crack cocaine was to the 1988 campaign – something that all politicians could rally against, a shared adult Mission from God. (And we all know how the political focus on The Drug War and the 1980s’ “Just Say No” campaign ended alcohol and drug addiction in our time.)

(4) Even the amazingly popular and seemingly benign *Harry Potter* books – by British author J. K. Rowling—got into the act in summer 2000 with the release of the fourth book in the series. Cultural conservatives like literary critic Harold Bloom weighed in to pronounce the books drivel and unfit for enshrinement into the Literary Canon. Religious fundamentalists also rose up in numerous towns to protest the series for classroom use because Rowling deals with magic and wizardry, apparently offering a competing point of view about the nature of spirituality that scares some school board bureaucrats or inflexible parents who think they have to abandon the First Amendment to protect children.

(5) Well, my daughter hooked me on *Potter* as well. I picked up the first one to see what the fuss was about and couldn't put them down. While probably not candidates for Great Books 101, the *Potter* series nevertheless tell wonderfully imaginative and compelling stories that have given many hard-working teachers new life in introducing new generations of children to reading. For me, the *Potter* books and my own addiction to the WB are all of a piece. *Harry Potter* and the WB shows tap into cultural interests in the mystical, in the supernatural, in things beyond the routines of “normal” life. My daughter says her attraction to the series is partly how the books take her out of her everyday world and transport to her to interesting, sometimes fantastic places. This works for me too. Living in a time where our spiritual lives are often undernourished or untended, it would seem that everyone from the cultural elitists to Christian fundamentalists would welcome these stories that take our children beyond the cynicism and coarseness that often so dominates our cultural landscape.

(6) The remainder of this essay offers a defense rather than a demonization of culture aimed at young readers and viewers – from the *Harry Potter* series to the WB series. I am partly trying to redress an imbalance here, given that far too much critical writing on teen culture focuses only on the most violent or exploitative kinds of popular music, video games, and horror films. While its important to address the negative impact of this kind of culture, there are other sides to the story. I have invited my daughter, who inspired this piece and with whom I enjoy these stories, to add her perspective to mine. In spite of our shared

fascination with these series, we see them from points of view separated by the gender gap and 35 years.

### ***Harry Potter***

**(7) Dad:** The first four Potter books follow the British boy wizard, Harry Potter, from age 11 to 14 through his first four years at the Hogwarts School (it's a seven year program and series – tougher and longer than my Ph.D. adventures). Away from school in the off season, Harry has to do hard time with his intolerant uncle and aunt and gross cousin Dudley. These folks are Muggles – messed up, uptight middle class humans with no witch or wizard powers. In the first book, Harry—whose parents were killed when he was a baby by the evil Lord Voldemort – is an embarrassment to his aunt and uncle. To them, his special powers mark him as odd, weird, and different. And this is partly what I love about the books. They get at feelings that kids have about adults who misunderstand them, who underestimate them, or who can't fathom how they are different. Extraordinary fantasy and imaginative play make these books special, but they are more often about the ordinary problems of kids struggling to find their way in a world governed by adults – some wise and supportive, others mean, oblivious, and self-absorbed.

**(8) Caitlin:** What I love most about the Harry Potter books is their ability to suck anyone into their pages. When I opened up *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (the first book of the series), I was skeptical that a 16-year-old whose favorite book is *Jane Eyre* could swallow the mush I was about to read. I was happily mistaken. In about two days Harry joined Jane on my bookshelf. All four Potter books transport the reader into a world of potions, brooms, giants, eccentric wizards, spells, final exams, and never-ending possibilities. As I read, I related to every event as if it were happening to me: when Harry won the Quidditch (the soccer-like wizard sport played on broomsticks) final, it was me being hoisted onto the school's shoulders; when the entire school hated Harry for losing Gryffindor 150 house points (each of the four school houses earns points throughout the year; the house with the most points wins the House Cup), it was me they detested. I was thrown into an amazingly magical world where school no longer included memorizing the periodic table elements or trigonometric identities but where young witches and wizards were taught to make a pineapple dance, mix a forgetfulness potion, ride a broomstick, and tend to a half-horse, half-bird called a hippogriff. Knowing that a junior in high school would love to live in this incredible world of magic, I can safely assume that the thousands of other children entangled in Harry's life would too.

### ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

**(9) Dad:** Like the Potter books, *Buffy* mixes together supernatural themes with the ordinary world of kids – negotiating normal school experiences by day, slaying wicked vampires by night. Joss Whedon, creator and executive producer of *Buffy* (and also *Angel*), has said that he intended the show as “a horror story about high school, and that's exactly what high school life is like ... both literally and metaphorically.” So the story is never totally fantastic, cut off from the reality kids know. In fact, it works because it stays grounded in everyday problems—identity issues, sexual tensions, popularity contests, and too much homework. Like the range of characters at Hogwarts, *Buffy* offers a smorgasbord of teen and teacher character types. Among my favorites are the spoiled and snobby Cordelia, who's now moved on to serve as secretary to the soulful Angel; the smart and sweet Willow, who's moved on from a doomed relationship with werewolf boyfriend Oz to a lesbian liaison with her fellow witch Tara; and the British and bookish Giles, who serves as Buffy's mentor and “watcher.” Giles is particularly important to me. Unlike a number of teen oriented programs that portray adults as idiots, Buffy casts Giles as a complex teacher/parent, who recognizes his proteges' need for independence but also serves as a knowing adult who watches – not over them but with them. But, for me, the smart mix of suspense and comedy remains the main attraction on *Buffy*. Take this exchange from an early episode during which a menacing but tiny “fear demon” appeared:

Giles (Buffy's mentor): “Don't taunt that fear demon.”

Xander (Buffy's friend): “Why, can he hurt me?”

Giles: “No, it's just tacky.”

In the end, Buffy steps on it like a bug.

**(10) Caitlin:** Dad's right. I also appreciate *Buffy* 's comic side. But above that I value its creativity. My favorite episode pits the Buffster against fairy tale demons whose evil agenda is to steal the voices of all the occupants of Sunnydale (the fictional California town that serves as Buffy's setting) and then collect their hearts. This episode is an example of the show's uniqueness because it was done almost completely in

silence. About 40 minutes of the show went by without one word or noise, yet the suspense and comedy that make *Buffy* so great were still there in full force.

(11) Ever since I started watching *Buffy* I have developed a secret desire to take kick-boxing lessons; and hey, maybe someday I'll actually do it. I wonder if the Spice Girls watch *Buffy*, because she is the epitome of "Girl Power." That's what I love about the show. Buffy's this totally kick !#@ babe who has the strength and skills to conquer any challenge that comes her way, but like every teenager, she still doubts herself. I've watched many episodes in which Buffy wonders if she's smart enough for college, strong enough to beat up some baddie, and special enough for her friends' attention. Every teen has awesome abilities and potential, and just like Buffy, can't always see them. Buffy may have supernatural strength but she still has her weaknesses, making her the ultimate inspiration to kids.

### Angel

**(12) Dad:** In 1999 Joss Whedon told a college audience, "*Buffy's* about becoming and *Angel's* about dealing with what you've become." Set in Los Angeles, *Angel* is the improbable story of a 247-year-old vampire with quite a wicked past. His story is about redemption—about accepting the consequences for awful choices, taking responsibility for those choices, and trying to make amends. He now runs a detective-like agency to help the tormented. These are powerful lessons, often set in a violent urban world. While I acknowledge that this show is sometimes more violent than it needs to be, I still think TV violence has a place, particularly when viewers are provided with a context and see the consequences of the violence, which often happens on *Angel*. Clearly kids are vulnerable to media images if parental and peer networks break down. Still, I subscribe to Bruno Bettelheim's notion in *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*: that young people already know that violence and depravity exist in the world but need help in seeing that they have the power and resources to make choices and oppose these forces. Storytelling, whether in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* or in TV tales like *Angel*, can show kids they are not powerless against the evil in the world.

**(13) Caitlin:** Like *Buffy*, *Angel* has a comic side attached to its primarily dark and suspenseful plots. My favorite silly addition to the show this season is having Angel sing karaoke (poorly, very poorly) to the tunes of Barry Manilow – and you have to watch the show to get all this—in order for a mind-reading demon to help him best serve the needs of a current distraught client.

(14) I also enjoy the chemistry between the show's three main characters: Angel, Cordelia, and Wesley. The once snobby and spoiled Cordelia became employed by Angel when her attempts at an acting career proved futile. As a result of all the suffering she has witnessed, this materialistic Valley Girl has gradually become more caring and compassionate. Like Angel and Cordelia, Wesley first appeared on *Buffy*, acting as the slayer's uptight and foppish replacement watcher. He came under Angel's employment when he arrived in L. A. as a "rogue demon hunter"—dressed in black leather and riding a Harley. Wesley, also as a result of aiding Angel, has become a stronger person. While Angel works to redeem himself, Cordelia struggles to grow up, and Wesley fights to be taken seriously.

### Roswell

**(15) Dad:** Lots of the characters we are discussing here—particularly Harry Potter, Buffy, and the Roswell kids—wrestle with self-esteem issues as they make their way through their teen years. Even though many of these characters are very skilled, often in extraordinary and supernatural ways, they have self doubts and are often misunderstood by the authority figures around them. This is another powerful theme that resonates with young viewers. Match that theme with a compelling action adventure narrative—three alien-human teens searching for their destiny, keeping their secret, and dodging government agents and alien shape-shifters (who are not unlike cameleon-like political candidates who morph into also sorts of self-serving shapes in the course of an election). With *Roswell*, the WB has another fascinating, although often uneven, program. *Roswell* got off to a good start – smartly portraying the tales of the main characters against the backdrop of a Roswell café and a tourist-trap museum (which recounts the tale of the famous 1947 alien sighting). "Normal" and hybrid teens work at the café and the museum, where wacky tourist believers don't realize they are rubbing elbows with actual aliens.

(16) But this usually smart show relies too often on an overdose of teen sexual tension. It also could take a lesson from *X-Files* and intersperse its darker conspiracy plots with more playful tales – particularly of alien teens trying to make their way through high school. I also want to lodge a formal complaint against the pseudo-hip glamour, not only on *Roswell*, but on too many of these WB shows. It's as if the producers dress characters so they could glide right from the set to a photo shoot for *Teen* or *Tiger Beat* magazine. (As my 21-year old son said recently when I tried in vain to hook him into an episode of *Buffy*: "Aren't there any ordinary looking people on this show?") I found the 2000-01 second-season premier of *Roswell* particularly distracting because all the main characters looked like they'd spent the off-season shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch and getting their hair redesigned by a Rodeo Drive stylist. Trendy leather and strategically mussed hair seem out of place in unpretentious Roswell, New Mexico. Maybe it's just my age but I'm annoyed that the WB powers-that-be think viewers will only go for these characters if they present themselves as the new wave in fashion design and hair makeovers.

**(17) Caitlin:** All right, Dad, don't go dissing my show now. *Roswell* has not (as you so haughtily put it) become "often uneven." The show is focusing on a darker aspect of itself and cannot always intermingle its suspenseful plot with "playful tales." *Roswell* is a new show and (unlike *The X-Files*) hasn't had seven seasons to get into a groove; it's like a teenager who hasn't found her identity yet, so lighten up, Old Timer!

(18) Dad also neglected to mention the double meaning of the aliens on the show, which is more important than what the characters are wearing. Every teenager deals with feelings of "alienation" and *Roswell* handles the subject very well. The kids on the show, while fighting off enemy aliens and corrupt government conspirators, struggle to find their place in society.

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(19) I concede my daughter's point that *Roswell* may need time to develop. Still, there's too much focus on youthful style, good looks, and gratuitous libido. Maybe the networks—new and old—are responding to the spring 2000 cancellation of NBC's acclaimed *Freaks and Geeks*, which along with *My So-Called Life* has been the finest program ever about adolescent and teenage life on network television. The program featured a strong cast of very "ordinary-looking" kids struggling with the everyday problems of adapting to high school bullies and negotiating their independence from bewildered parents and insensitive teachers. With good humor and almost no sentimentality, *Freaks and Geeks* may have fared better on the WB, UPN, Fox, or cable where it would have been given more time to build a loyal audience. The old clueless networks, however, panicked by their tumbling audience shares, keep lurching after another fad hit like *Millionaire* or *Survivor*. Today the old networks yank a weakly rated show from their schedules faster than an assistant principal pulls a tardy student into detention. When Judd Apatow, executive producer of *Freaks*, learned that the new time slot to "save" the show would pit it against ABC's *Millionaire*, he knew the show was dead: "When I heard that our big relaunch was facing Regis, I knew it was over. . . . The sad part is that a show like *Millionaire* makes every network think there is a quick, cheap fix to their schedules. . . . They become less interested in supporting harder-to-sell quality shows when they think there is a golden calf out there that can solve all their problems."

(20) The networks today prefer the lack of controversy around quiz shows, which was also true in the 1950s—until the scandals. Good teen television, on the other hand, usually embraces controversy. Remember that NBC and Fox both passed on *Buffy*. In spring 1999, the season finale of *Buffy* was postponed for several months because WB execs thought that a violent battle seen staged at the high school graduation was inappropriate in the wake of Columbine. We still live today in a time when the media images of Columbine linger, still overdetermining how many adults see young people and sustaining the stereotypes that teenagers – if we don't watch them carefully and if we don't control their media fare – might just go berserk. The smart ironic twist in shows like *Buffy* and *Angel* is the way they go right after the news media and adult stereotypes of demon teenagers. In *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Roswell* teens ARE often demons and aliens, and the high school experience, as Joss Whedon notes, is a "horror story" that is often about alienation. Kids get the joke.

(21) In the end, I would encourage parents to watch these shows with their kids. And, I strongly encourage taking the television sets out of kids' bedrooms and putting them in common areas. The bedroom is the place to read *Harry Potter* while television often does its best work as a communal activity. (This season we have added NBC's *Ed* and Fox's *Boston Public* to our shared TV interests.) Many of the TV programs Caitlin and I have discussed here are among the best written on television. Although they are flawed in the way that many

programs suffer under pressure of weekly deadlines, at their best they help teens wrestle with problems of popularity or self-esteem, and what to do about some of the bad stuff that happens in the world – that even the most conscientious parents can't protect their children from. Kids are resilient. They are media savvy and generally smart about good and bad TV. (In their decision not to vote in the 2000 election, many young citizens certainly sent a message to major parties about the phoniness, artifice, and "shape-shifting" of over-managed presidential TV campaigns concerned primarily with image.) Adults should trust teens to be responsible for their media choices and listen to them about why the stories they like are important, instead of fixating on their choices only as an opportunity to lecture on "having better things to do" and "all the crap that's on television." One of the best things I've learned from watching TV with Caitlin is seeing the world more from her perspective and taking her seriously. And I think she would agree that my take on some of our favorite shows has revealed insights about her father – and about the strangeness of parents in general. Let's use teen television as an opportunity for some shared conversation about how hard it can be growing up in world where adults get to make most of the big decisions – and as the network news grown-ups demonstrated in November 2000 – sometimes get them wrong.





**Richard Greene and Wayne Yuen**

## **Why We Can't Spike Spike?: Moral Themes in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*<sup>[1]</sup>**

(1) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be viewed as a morality play: every week, Buffy and her friends fight evil in some form and in so doing make complex moral decisions. The moral principles that underwrite Buffy's relationships with her non-human counterparts can be explained with an eye toward developing a clear picture of her overall moral system. We will test these principles for consistency and plausibility. Finally, we will explicate in some detail what we consider to be the chief pedagogical virtue of the show: that it is reflective of the complexity of the various moral dilemmas one encounters in the real world and the intuitions that tend to guide our moral decision making, and through clever use of allegory it takes well-supported stands on a number of pressing moral issues.

(2) To understand Buffy's moral system, one needs only to look at her relationships with other characters in the show. Start with Buffy's relationship with Angel (a vampire who has had his soul restored by a gypsy curse): it speaks immediately to the fact that not all vampires are evil. What makes Angel stand apart from other vampires is that he has a soul, or more specifically, that because he has a soul he has no desire to harm people (More precisely, since plenty of persons with souls do desire to harm others, perhaps the correct thing to say is that because Angel has a "good" soul he has no desire to harm people). It follows then, that Buffy slays vampires not because they are soulless or because they are vampires, but because they harm human beings.

(3) So we can summarize Buffy's first moral principle as *Do not harm those who typically do not pose a threat to human beings*. (By "typically" we mean under normal everyday circumstances. Lions, for example, under certain circumstances pose threat to human beings, but we don't want to say that they typically pose a threat to human beings. Vampires, on the other hand, do typically pose a threat to the citizens of Sunnydale). We can also, as a first approximation, take its opposite as a moral principle, viz., *One ought to stop (either by killing or by incapacitating) those who typically can or will harm other human beings*. This principle, however, stands in need of revision. In the episode "Ted," (episode 2011) Buffy kills Ted, believing him to be a human being, because he poses a direct threat to her mother and herself. Even though Ted poses a threat that is equal in severity to the threat posed by vampires (albeit the threat is different in kind), Buffy is despondent when she thinks that she has actually killed a human being, and she is subsequently relieved when she discovers that Ted is an android and not a human. Thus our second principle becomes *One ought to stop (by killing or incapacitating) all non-humans that typically can or will harm other human beings*. Further evidence that Buffy is operating in accordance with something akin to this principle is seen in the episode in which Faith (another slayer) kills one of the human henchmen of the evil town Mayor. Despite the fact that the human poses a significant danger to humans (he is assisting the Mayor, who is attempting to become an omnipotent demon), Buffy admonishes Faith for killing a human. Moreover, Faith is unable to reconcile the fact that she, up to that point a protector of humans, has actually killed a human. This event drives Faith to become a rogue slayer in the employ of the forces of evil. Humans, therefore, have a special status in Buffy's moral system. This special status makes them exempt from being seriously harmed by her, even if they do harm others.

(4) A third moral principle comes into play when the evil vampire Spike is brought into the show as a permanent character: *Do not harm those who pose no immediate threat*. When The Initiative (a top secret branch of the U.S. Military which does research and experiments on demons and vampires) embeds a chip in Spike's head to prevent him from hurting humans, a new dynamic in the relationship between Buffy and Spike is created. There are several reasons why Buffy should eliminate Spike while he is incapacitated. First, Spike wants to kill Buffy, and should he get the chip removed he would be in a good position to do so; second, he can still harm her in a variety of ways, as illustrated when he aids Adam (an initiative-created cybernetic human-demon soldier which could not be controlled) in causing dissention among Buffy and her friends. Buffy has no reason to believe that Spike will not take advantage of any situation in which he can harm her.

(5) So why doesn't Buffy spike Spike? There appear to be three moral factors working in Spike's favor. First, in his incapacitated state, there can be no "fair" fight between him and Buffy. This factor also exemplifies another reason why Buffy does not harm humans; in general, they are not a fair match against her superior strength (although the members of the Initiative are, because of their mechanically and drug-enhanced bodies). On numerous occasions, members of Buffy's team reassure Spike that it would be wrong to harm him while he is in this state. Our heroes are operating on the general moral principle that defenseless people, animals, etc. should not be harmed. Giles summarizes this when he says, "Look, look, Spike . . . we have no intention of killing a harmless . . . uh, creature. . . ." (episode 4009) Thus the second factor that serves to protect Spike is the principle that potentially harmful agents should not be harmed provided that they can be controlled. This principle is best illustrated by the case of Oz (a werewolf who is a contributing member of Team Buffy when not in wolf form). Being a werewolf, Oz has an instinct to hurt people while he is a wolf. However, since locking him up during a full moon can largely control him, more permanent forms of control are not required. The chip in Spike's head functions as his "prison."

(6) While both factors serve to keep Spike alive, there remains a compelling reason for killing him, viz., that he still poses a threat. So one wonders why Buffy doesn't, in fact, spike Spike. The most important reason is that Spike has utility. Spike has access to information about demon and vampire activity in the area, which at times proves to be invaluable to Buffy. In return for this information, Buffy and company provide money, occasional protection from The Initiative, a place to stay, or sometimes even butcher's blood. Without this utility, given the long-term threat he poses, killing Spike would be just as permissible as killing a rabid dog that has been temporarily restrained.

(7) Buffy's relationship with Spike, however, is not always *quid pro quo*. In a number of episodes Buffy and the gang have blackmailed Spike for information, while appearing to derive a great deal of pleasure from doing so. Whereas blackmailing Spike appears to raise no moral concerns for our heroes, blackmailing humans is considered to be both intuitively morally impermissible and inconsistent with Immanuel Kant's formula of humanity: *Treat rational creatures as ends in themselves and never only as means to an end*. This further illustrates the difference in status between humans and non-humans in Buffy's moral reasonings. Thus, in addition to the principles stated above, come into play the following: 4) *No harm should be done to those who don't harm humans*; 5) *Unless there is some urgent pressing matter, fairness should be taken into account*; 6) *Those that do harm humans but can be controlled should be controlled*; 7) *When the benefits of a good opportunity outweigh the risks of a dangerous situation, the good should be attempted*.

(8) The above principles seem intuitively sound, but how applicable are they to the real world? After all, they are derived from a fictional television show about demons and vampires. Although the majority of people in the real world (perhaps all) never slay demons and vampires, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* nevertheless has pedagogical value. Through allegorical depictions of ethical situations, it reflects the complexity of the moral world in which we live.

(9) Buffy's sophisticated moral universe does not assume that difficult decisions can be made without

consequences. Unlike many other television shows, decisions made in the show affect subsequent episodes, and sometimes permanently change the characters in the show; the moral universe is not simplified in order to allow appropriate decisions whose repercussions fully unfurl within an hour. Moreover, the show does not ignore competing value systems. Most notably, the Initiative's "institutional" ethics is presented, at least nominally, as a viable ethical alternative. The Initiative's ethics seem to follow the standard military ethic of avoid harming civilians and anything identified as an enemy may be eliminated or captured. In this case, it is especially easy to identify enemies, they are demons and vampires. But historically this "institutional" ethic has led to questionable activities, such as the Japanese internment during World War II. Buffy's value system is also not without flaws. No character in the show is portrayed as perfect, as each of the characters have been morally faulted at one time or another (for example when Buffy kills Ted, although only subsequently redeemed hindsight, Buffy does act questionably in causing his fall down the stairwell). And although Buffy's moral decisions tend to be the most favorably portrayed in the show, the Initiative also presents compelling arguments for some of their actions.

(10) Further evidence that *Buffy* is reflective of real-life ethical situations can be adduced from various quotidian circumstances in which the characters find themselves. A dominant conceit of the show is that Buffy is an extraordinarily (even supernaturally) gifted teenage girl who nevertheless maintains her "normal" teenage personality and concerns. Teenagers often find themselves having to weigh their moral obligations (as well as other obligations) against their desire to fit in, be cool, be accepted, feel normal. Buffy, on more than one occasion, opts to put her moral responsibilities aside in order to pursue a "normal" teenage lifestyle, often with negative consequences. Similarly, the largely ineffectual Spike, whose instincts incline toward mischief and violence, finds that he must co-exist with and occasionally even assist people he dislikes (i.e., Buffy and the "Scooby Gang," as they mockingly refer to themselves) in order to survive. Again, the problem of working with people whose sensibilities are different from, even antithetical to, our own is part of our everyday lives. Xander must deal on a regular basis with feelings of inadequacy caused by two factors: first, he has no remarkable personal skills (he lives in his parents' basement, on occasion he must drive an ice cream truck to make money, and he is physically uncoordinated, as is evidenced by his slap-fight with the vampire, Harmony (Episode 4003)); second, those around him are not only skilled, but have supernatural abilities (Buffy is a slayer, Willow is a practicing witch, his girlfriend Anya is a recovering demon, and Oz is a bassist in a popular alternative rock band). It goes without saying that young people routinely experience insecurities like Xander's, albeit generally in less fanciful contexts.

(11) *Buffy* also explores the moral dimension of being a social animal. What does one do when one's social obligations conflict with one's occupation, or birthright as the case may be? How should a person act when he discovers that his girlfriend has been in love with a person he finds morally reprehensible? Riley Finn (Buffy's most recent boyfriend and demon-hunting member of the Initiative) struggles with this question when he discovers that Buffy had been romantically involved with the vampire Angel.

(12) In addition to the above considerations *Buffy* addresses a number of other moral issues which bear on issues that confront the real world. For example, parallels can be drawn between the moral status of demons and the moral status of animals in our society, thus raising important questions regarding animal rights. Demons are routinely treated as means to an end—roughed up for information, or used to run interference. Thus, it is clear that in Buffy's moral universe in many cases non-humans enter the moral sphere only to the extent that they have utility, and more importantly their moral status does not grant them rights and privileges (unless via some agreement to that effect). Interestingly, on this matter, Buffy *et al* are not acting in accordance with Kant's Formula of Humanity as many demons (such as Doyle, Angel's demon sidekick, and Angel himself) are rational creatures (whatever their other shortcomings may be), and not merely animals. *Buffy* also touches on the related questions of precisely what makes a person bad, and how we ought to treat those who differ from us.

(13) It may help at this point to develop a classification of various types of television programs that in one way or another present moral situations and / or depict persons as moral agents. We can imagine these programs as existing along a spectrum of complexity, with varying degrees of reflexivity and allowance for shades of moral ambiguity. On one end of the spectrum we might expect to find shows like *Full House*,

*Touched by an Angel, Seventh Heaven, Highway to Heaven*—shows that exemplify what we call “after-school special” morality. On programs like these, moral situations are presented as relatively clear-cut instances of right and wrong where it only remains for characters to find their way to a patently correct answer. Typically, good characters are the protagonists, and will choose to do the “right” thing (recognizing it as such); bad characters are the antagonists, and will invariably choose to do the “wrong” thing (except when a central theme of the show is their conversion from an erroneous moral position to an ethically correct position). Good characters are generally rewarded for their virtuous actions, and bad characters are punished for their selfishness and malice. A typical scenario might be one in which a teenager is tempted to smoke marijuana in order to fit in with his peers, but comes to realize the folly of such a course of action. He is “rewarded” by landing a date with the head cheerleader, who as it turns out thinks that “drugs are bogus,” while the pot-smokers end up in an automobile accident. The pedagogical efficacy of these shows lies chiefly in their potential for instilling productive values in the very young or in persons with limited cognitive ability. A key element in Aristotelian moral philosophy is the claim that in order to achieve *eudaimonia* (roughly, “happiness”), one must develop proper moral habits well before one can engage in proper moral reasoning; the shows mentioned above aim to satisfy this requirement by leading viewers through rote motions of ethical indoctrination, with little or no room for interpretation.

(14) A second category of moral programming, slightly further along the spectrum of complexity, exemplifies what we call “culpable clown morality.” Shows in this category—e.g., *All in the Family, The Jeffersons, Married with Children, and Just Shoot Me*—operate along the lines of classical satire, lampooning recognizable “types” who appear as ridiculous by virtue of their selfish, crude, or prejudiced social attitudes. Such shows exhibit an increased level of sophistication over shows in the first category in that their protagonists are often weak moral agents, and in that it is often this very weakness that makes the characters endearing or at least sympathetic on some level. For example, the character of Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* is on one level a reprehensible bigot who makes slurs against various ethnic, religious, and social groups (as well as against women); on another level, he is a loveable father figure whose shortcomings serve to enhance his all-too-human fallibility. Moreover, characters like Bunker (or even the more absurdly degraded Al Bundy on *Married with Children*) are not fully responsible for their shortcomings, as they are presented as subjects within an ideological system that promotes such attitudes, and in which they are ultimately victims to the same or a greater extent as the persons or groups they denigrate. The pedagogical thrust of shows like these presumes a viewer with a more advanced moral awareness than those at whom the “after-school special” programs are directed: this viewer has developed the ability to make moral judgments, and (it is hoped) may recognize his or her own shortcomings in the satirical mirror held up by the buffoon-figure, and accordingly amend his or her behavior.

(15) Related in a morally relevant way to “culpable clown” shows are voyeuristic “reality” shows such as *The Real World, Survivor, Road Rules, Big Brother, etc.* These shows are not written with morality *per se* in mind (for that matter they are not written at all); rather they are constructed in such a way as to place persons with conflicting personality types into stressful and somewhat claustrophobic circumstances. The result is always the same: at least some of the persons on the program behave in bad ways (e.g., resorting to name calling, back-stabbing, scheming to have the person or persons with whom they are at odds removed from the situation, rallying support against that person with the others on the show). Again, the limited pedagogical value of “reality” shows is that they can teach the reflective and somewhat morally sophisticated agent something about him or herself. On the one hand, the fact that these shows actually depict real life (to some extent) may increase the pedagogical force of these shows over that of “culpable clown” programs. On the other hand, this type of show suffers from the shortcoming that they offer no guidance for moral decision making. One might identify with an unethical agent to some degree or recognize bad properties in oneself, but one is not offered an alternative way of behaving; whereas with “culpable clown” programming there is typically another equally sympathetic character presenting an alternative “correct” course of action.

(16) A third category of moral programming, again moving further along the spectrum of complexity, exemplifies what we call “*faux* realistic morality.” Shows in this category—e.g., *ER, Chicago Hope, NYPD Blue, and Law and Order*—operate by appearing to present complex moral dilemmas from a detached objective viewpoint, thus claiming a sense of moral authority while retaining a non-committal stance with

respect to resolving tough moral dilemmas. The veneer of realism absorbs the audience but fails to deliver any actual moral guidance; morality is merely used to generate dramatic tension. Once the dramatic tension has been relieved the focus on the moral issue tends to vanish. One virtue of these shows is that the moral dilemmas they depict are not simple cases composed of clear-cut instances of right and wrong; rather, they are often “no-win” situations in which every alternative has both an upside and a downside, as is the case with many real-life moral dilemmas. A typical scenario might involve a physician who must choose to violate hospital policy or perhaps the physician’s code of ethics in order to save someone’s life (perhaps by using a treatment procedure that has not been approved for use). The moral and dramatic tension are intertwined as both sides of the issue are presented and argued for by sympathetic characters on the show. The pedagogical value of these shows is that they provide us with a good sense of the varieties of tough ethical choices with which one might be confronted.

(17) *Buffy*, by contrast, exemplifies the chief pedagogical virtues of the above categories of moral programming while avoiding the shortcomings of each. While “*faux* reality” shows raise moral concerns in order to create dramatic tension, *Buffy* appears to consciously “take on” moral issues for their own sake, occasionally laughing at itself in the process, as we see in the episode “Who Are You?” (Episode 4016) when Faith inhabits Buffy’s body (and vice versa). Here Faith practices impersonating Buffy in front of the mirror by saying, “You can’t do that—it’s *wrong*. You can’t do that because it’s naughty. Because it’s wrong. Because it’s wrong. You can’t do that. It’s wrong.” Moreover, *Buffy* provides us with a vast array of moral dilemmas ranging in complexity and sophistication from the clear-cut cases of the “after-school special” program to the no-win situation of the “*faux* realistic” program, and is, thus, reflective of the type of moral situations that confront us in real life. *Buffy*, however, goes further than these shows by taking a sophisticated moral stand on complex moral issues. In most cases the stand that Buffy and company take is the intuitively correct stand, but *Buffy* doesn’t rest on intuition alone; rather, and this is the show’s greatest virtue with respect to issues of morality: it supports the stand it takes by appeal to general moral principles (a necessary feature of sound moral reasoning).

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## Kevin McNeilly, Christina Sylka, and Susan R. Fisher Kiss the Librarian, But Close the Hellmouth: “It’s Like a Whole Big Sucking Thing”

### 1.

(1) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* investigates the means of its production as a television series. It examines the meaning of viewership, or what, in Buffyspeak, we should call being a watcher. *Buffy* parodies television language and mass-media iconography to seek out an affective politics for its medium, refusing anaesthetic passivity in favour of culturally astute self-consciousness. The program invites viewers to negotiate the tension between access and restriction; at issue are the structure and dissemination of information itself. *Buffy* offers a critique of the social and the cultural — of the content of the on-screen world, of television as a genre, and of the American socius — and of the processes by which those bodies of cultural and social knowledge are shaped. Two correspondent modes of viewer response are interrogated and challenged in *Buffy*: identification and mediatization. Its viewers consider how watching television fosters passivity, in audience identification with characters and events — how we learn the thrill of looking at things happen, rather than making them happen.

(2) We also witness an abrogation of agency in viewing: we are mediatized, willingly relieved of our immediate rights as social or cultural actors. *Buffy* works as our proxy in the human cosmos, reduced on the small screen to the Buffyverse; she fights for us and for our values, not so much in the literal sense — clearly, she’s a fictional construct — but figurally, by representation. Displacing real emotional and moral conflict into that illusion, we invest her figure with our political energies, and she dispels our anxieties over worldly action and having to make a difference. At the same time, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* formally refuses to function as a substitute, and consistently draws attention to the disabling and desensitizing mechanics of watching. By foregrounding its illusory capacity, the show refuses the proxy and exposes representation as a ruse. As television, it sucks us in, but it also demonstrates our resistance to getting suckered. Two key spaces in *Buffy*, the library and the Hellmouth, and a specific visual figure, the kiss, point up this contradiction in television form, which operates simultaneously as inhibitor and as enabler, as filter and as gate. Watching flattens out experience into representational schema, as if thrown on a scrim, and attends to the structures of delivery, the screens, that produce and subtend the act of watching itself. *Buffy* both enacts and interrogates its screening.

(3) Kissing is a bodily trope for the connections and impediments that the library — the figural node from which information flows — and the Hellmouth — the ultimate sucking orifice — create. Kisses are sacramental and illicit, visual displacements of erotic connection; they mark points of contact, exchange, and collusion, vital functions of both Hellmouth and library. But they are also transgressive, as their deadly extension in the vampire’s bite confirms. “Smoochies,” as Willow calls them, both enliven and threaten, caress and wound. When, in “Something Blue,” an emasculated Spike drinks from a blood-filled mug emblazoned with “Kiss the Librarian,” *Buffy*’s twinned flows of eroticism and information — otherworldly and ordinary — intersect. *Buffy* and cohorts expend their energies stopping the ravenous mouths of vampires and keeping the Hellmouth closed; they prevent the mutual exchange of fluids between vampires

and victims, what Buffy herself calls “a whole big sucking thing,” thus preserving the sanctity of Sunnydale and “saving the world.” Concurrently, the library, as the Hellmouth’s flipside, must remain open, its information flowing. A discursive intercourse needs to be sustained and enabled by the library, if Buffy is to know what demon she faces. Television viewing both faces and effaces that demonic visual flow.

## 2.

(4) Giles is the Watcher, a nominal displacement of the show’s viewers who participate in events by proxy, at best. He allegorizes us, our stand-in in a very specific way. Watchers are never proactive; things are done before our eyes, even to us, but never by us. Yet the librarian, as watcher, stands for a paradoxical mode of activity, of enactment as a self-effacement from the field of action. The librarian is a decentred center, the subject organizing information flows, who provides a mechanism for the dissemination of Buffy’s strength, her moral will, but who is nonetheless removed from will or agency: a catalyst. Giles gives Buffy a context, a body of knowledge and a form within which to operate. The librarian is an unremarked figure of control. As the one who grants access to what was previously unknown, to the true nature of things, he governs the unfolding of events with clarity and ruthless accuracy. But access is never his to attain; he can only act as an enabler for others: a gatekeeper rather than hero. He reads, he watches, he articulates, he maps, he diagrams: he arranges the field through which the other characters move, act, do. Occasionally, as in “Passion” following the death of Jenny Calendar, he enters the field of action (in this case, battling Angel), but almost immediately he is taken out again, slugged by Buffy herself: “You can’t leave me. I can’t do this alone.” She needs him not as a fighter, but as her support, her guide, her watcher.

(5) Giles mediates, discursively, between Buffy and her world. After we learn of his past as “Ripper,” his role becomes increasingly that of spell-caster and summoner; in “The Witch,” for example, Giles works with Amy to reverse her mother’s incantations. But “spell” in the context of *Buffy* has another, more literal meaning: *spel*, in Old English, refers not to magic but to narrative — a story, a telling. His interventions are verbal; Giles “consults his books,” which typically (after sufficient “research”) yield proper names, strengths, weaknesses and histories of Buffy’s foes. He tells her, and us, what we’re dealing with. Library-work provides and shapes the narrative line of each episode, the path to follow.

(6) The library is not exactly a physical location. In the conclusion to the third season, the books are removed from the shelves and taken away to Giles’s apartment, so that the space, dead-center over the Hellmouth, can be used to explode the ascended Mayor. Throughout the fourth season, Giles, unemployed both as librarian and watcher, remains the “knowledge guy,” still able to consult “his books”: volumes always identified by the possessive adjective as belonging explicitly to Giles. The library, as channeled knowledge, goes with Giles and is wherever he is. Giles, no matter how sidelined he may appear — watcher rather than agent — always offers the framework, that allows Buffy’s repeated heroic narratives to unfold, and to close. His agency is not as character, but as narrator. This is not to claim that he is a stand-in for the writers or the producers of the show, or even for Joss Whedon; it does suggest exactly how what we’ve been calling viewer “identification” really operates in the show itself.

(7) For viewers, identification implies passivity and disempowerment: reduced to a relation of sameness (Latin *idem*, the same), we are placed in a mimetic relationship with those we watch, and relinquish individuation to those we view. We ally ourselves voyeuristically to type, discovering pleasure in the displaced mirroring to which we accede. Watching becomes doubly complex in *Buffy*, inasmuch as this acceding is enacted and interrogated in the show itself: it’s about watching, even as it demands that it be watched. Narrative unfolding, *diegesis*, absorbs us because it bears witness to the ways we look, to how we have learned to watch. Mimesis, imitation and identification produce a parodic style, one which mirrors us back to ourselves even as it presents us with a break: a reminder that, as parody, it puts our identifications rather caustically, though perhaps lovingly, at issue.

(8) Giles embodies this identification, this self-erasure, for us. He is, literally, our advocate, our mouthpiece: kissing the librarian amounts to acknowledging the parodic aspect of our own implication in the work of watching, of our immersion in the medium. In *The Art of the Motor* (1995), Paul Virilio interrogates the hegemony of t.v. journalism through this same concept:

Up until the twentieth century, to be MEDIATIZED meant literally being stripped of one's immediate rights. . . . Beating an enemy involves not so much capturing them and captivating them. The economic battlefield would soon blur into the field of military perception, and the project of the . . . communications complex would then become explicit: it would aim at world mediatization. (6, 14)

The dichotomous divisions in the Buffyverse — friend or enemy, human or demon — mesh thoroughly with Virilio's martial terminology, and the moral overtones of Buffy's battles to save the universe from evil suggest a coincidence of polity and mass media that Virilio also explores:

[T]echnical mediatization has progressively revived the techniques of primitive mediatization; attempting to confiscate our immediate rights, without overt violence, it endlessly aggravates the casting aside that excommunication used to accomplish, plunging the greatest number into a now socially untenable *reality effect* with all the resultant geopolitical chaos. (20)

(9) Vampires, as human-demon hybrids, unknit the fixed dualism that undergirds Virilio's pointedly anti-television argument — and suggest, particularly in the figure of Angel, a redemptive possibility within a mediatized cosmos. Virilio's evocation of the "reality effect" also points to a means of securing a critical vantage-point from which our complicity in our mediatization might be seen; we are allowed the possibility, briefly, of gating the surge of visual information and reasserting our privilege as agents in our own viewing lives. Virilio's point is taken up by Pierre Bourdieu, in his short essay *On Television*:

The political dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television have to do with the fact that images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critics call a *reality effect*. They show things and make people believe in what they show. The power to show is also a power to mobilize. . . . [It] implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups. (21)

Whereas for Virilio, the reality effect of television news points up an increasing chaotic global instability, for Bourdieu the impingement of the real onto the viewed offers a purchase for effective political action, for changing the way things are. The reality effect permits us to resist the swell of identification, to assert our contradictory presences in that flow.

(10) What constitutes Buffy's reality effect? It is fiction, not news. We do not necessarily mistake ourselves in her white "one Starbucks" California town. Vampires and superheroes preternaturally gifted in the martial arts aren't *real* (a fatal doubt in most vampire films). The verisimilitude that permits our self-recognition is not so much of a specific world-view, but pertains to viewing itself. Buffy and the Scooby gang, as we watch, put watching to the test. What remains real about the show is its insistence on acknowledging its own formal limits as television: its reality effect inheres in its parodic style. It reminds us, while we're watching, that we are watchers. We identify with their wry, media-literate gaze.

(11) No episode foregrounds this self-conscious visualization better than "Superstar." The program — overrun with narrative conventions standardized in the show (fighting, research "Scoobies," demonic necromancy) — is permeated and rewritten from within, as the content of the show spills over onto the television framework. Jonathan emerged in the second season as an in-joke, an extra repeatedly threatened and rescued. Over the course of three seasons, Jonathan develops from a non-speaking bit part at the margins of the program to the focus of an episode, "Earshot," where his attempted suicide is thwarted by Buffy, who has overheard his thoughts. As Jonathan is recognized, so too the invisibility and normalcy of the sidelined viewer, a bystander without the power to speak or act, is brought to the fore. Like Xander, Giles and Willow — but without even the privilege of being in the gang of rejects — Jonathan is the show's most unremarkable person. Unlike Giles, who at least watches and informs, or Xander and Willow, who bear witness to Buffy's secret acts of cosmic heroism, Jonathan really does nothing that contributes to the narrative; he lurks on the margins, and sees things happen. He's not just shy, but camera-shy.

(12) In "Superstar," Jonathan magically turns the tables to become the protagonist of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The program begins *in medias res*, as if Jonathan were the hero of the series; the confusion and delight we experience at the outset, recognizing playful inversions, is tempered by the show's thorough misrecognition of itself. We know what the characters, initially even Buffy, cannot: that things aren't quite right. Near the middle of the episode, Adam sits before an array of surveillance monitors — like us, he watches the Buffyverse on t.v.— and points to the mediatized nature of Jonathan's magic, its mucked-up reality effect: "These are lies. None of this is real. The world has been changed. It's intriguing, but it's wrong." Human beings are put under a spell by television, because, according to Adam, they "sense so little," as opposed to his supernal "awareness"; or, as Jonathan tells Riley, "People can't always see what's right in front of them." Jonathan's image is rendered extensive by mass media; he is a superstar because he appears as the superhero — because he represents himself as a t.v. "star." Cracks appear in the magic when Buffy wonders how he can have been in so many places simultaneously, which is a pluralizing function of the multi-channel universe; Adam, after all, watches many screens at once. The unstable perfection of "Jonathan" comes to appear as a patchwork of deceptions that cannot resolve into a coherent character; that perfection, after all, is a discursive construct rather than an ontological given. Buffy, replaying Jonathan's shift from bystander to hero, must overcome her "ordinary" weakling status — a flawed slayer relative to Jonathan's flawless prowess — and expose Jonathan's spell as mere glamour. When she kills the demon externalizing Jonathan's sloughed-off failings, Jonathan returns to his ineffectual status, and the artificial memory of his heroism ebbs from the collective consciousness of Sunnydale.

(13) Like viewers, Jonathan resumes his unremarkable position on the sidelines. Buffy exposes misrecognitions engendered by the spell of television, and sets things right by undoing the mediatized identifications in us, as we long to belong, to be "friends" with her. We watch her demonstrate how not to get sucked in by watching. Still, things do not return to the way they were before. In the epilogue, Buffy notices Jonathan standing off to the side, and reproaches him for forcing Sunnydale to be "actors in your sock puppet theater": victims without agency. What persists, even as memories of the altered television cosmos fade, is human resilience, and a piece of advice: "Things are complicated. They take time and work." Spells don't achieve what "work" — thinking, seeing clearly — can: true friendship (or, for Buffy and Riley, true love). Jonathan reminds us temporarily that something true exists beyond the mediatized confines of what we watch; action on *Buffy* is not so much staking and kung fu as it is critical thinking, using what we see and hear to resist the seductive vampirism, the life-draining mediatization, of how we look on, overlooked.

### 3.

(14) Representations of the tension between access and restriction shift from figures of visual mediatization — glammers, spells, illusions — to embodiments in kisses, a change most precisely articulated in "I Only Have Eyes for You," when Buffy as spurned schoolboy lover and Angel as transgressive teacher share a transgendered embrace. The kiss not only dispels the spirits at the show's climax, but also allows Buffy to come to terms, momentarily, with her unresolved guilt over her demon lover, and to reidentify herself as Slayer. It inverts the "true" kiss that released Angel's soul in "Surprise." But more is at stake than erotic reversal. The dialogue is laced with ocular tropes from the beginning, a visual language that focuses on Buffy's subjectivity, and on reasserting her heroic capabilities. Early on, Buffy is approached by a classmate who wants her to invite him to the upcoming Sadie Hawkins dance (another instance of gender-role reversal). "I'm not *seeing* anybody," she replies, "ever . . . again, actually." The dialogue between the ghost-lovers, ventriloquized through three sets of characters in the episode, begins with James crying out "I'm going crazy not *seeing* you." Giles, presuming the poltergeist is Jenny Calendar, gesticulates at Willow: "Don't you *see*?" The visual is explicitly linked with an erotic dissonance and loss, a failure in the lover's bond, an absence. To see (someone) means simultaneously to be connected, to understand, and to sense their presence — all modes of identification.

(15) The visual structure of the episode both assumes and enhances this fractious seeing. When those possessed by James assert they won't "just disappear," viewers confront a visual irony, since what we see is not what they see, at least not immediately. The ghosts, until Buffy envisions them, remain invisible to us. Only when Buffy finally assumes the role of James does the point-of-view cut from the present to 1955,

shifting back and forth between visual (and visionary) frameworks, tracing an essentially duplicitous mimicry. At crucial junctures, mirrors are used to foreground the disjunction of appearance and reality created by haunting — Cordelia watching her snake-bitten face deform — and then in the climactic encounter in the music room, when a possessed Buffy sees James return her gaze. Faces, markers of human appearance (as well as loci of kissing), are also structures of mimicry; Buffy refers to Angel's evil incarnation as "the demon that wears his face." What we see and who we are are at odds.

(16) Xander explicitly names this irony "some freaky channeling thing," referring to his history teacher saying one thing and writing another — a snatch of the ghost-lovers' dialogue — on the blackboard. His metaphor is doubly resonant: what happens is not only spiritual channeling, but also television channeling. The juxtaposed visual frameworks create an effect of channel-switching, or really the bleeding of one channel into another, as dialogue and images shift contexts. Principal Snyder, near the beginning of the episodes, coordinates all of these threads — visual media, visual language, visual multiplicity — in a single tirade directed at Buffy:

I'm no stranger to conspiracy. I saw *JFK*. I'm a truth seeker. I've got a missing gun and two confused kids on my hands. Pieces of the puzzle. And I'm going to look at all the pieces carefully, and I'm going to keep looking until I know exactly how this is all your fault.

Despite the foregone conclusion, Snyder's quest for truth through "looking" is exactly the narrative trajectory of the episode: to resolve fractured channels into a coherent, truthful view.

(17) This truth is given its absolute form — as absolution, forgiveness, and even healing — in the episode's title-song, music to which ghostly student and teacher secretly dance and which James plays as he prepares to shoot himself; "I can't see anyone," the first line of the lyric runs, "but you," coupling disappearance and longing to visual enthrallment. But rather than one subjectivity subsuming another, and the "I" (or even eye) of James overwhelming the identities of those he possesses (in a version of the loss of viewing agency through identification and mediatization that we have been mapping), what manifests in this embrace is actually a resistance. When he returns to his lair thoroughly disturbed by the kiss, the evil Angel washes his face and torso, a displaced Lady MacBeth, describing himself as "violated." When Drusilla and Spike press him to say what has contaminated him, he answers with one word: love. As in the gypsy curse, when the purity of Angelus's evil is disrupted and blocked by the return of his soul, love seems to constitute a resilience, a residue that won't wash away. Even the demon who wears Angel's face (an appearance of innocence, we're told in "Angel," that gave him his vampire name) still has some repressed inkling of who he was, and of what it means to love. "Love" and "soul" variously name the truth that Buffy, and even Snyder, are seeking; more importantly, in terms of the visual schema of *Buffy*, what emerges in the kiss is not a loss of agency but rather the realization of a resistance to being spellbound, possessed, overwhelmed. "I Only Have Eyes for You" produces a model for proactive watching, a means by which to assert, even through viewing, one's autonomy as a viewing subject, to disable being "sucked in" by a vampire's kiss.

#### 4.

(18) "The Zeppo" most potently invites viewers to enact this resistant watching, visually actualizing critical response. "The Zeppo" was directed by James Whitmore, Jr., who also directed "I Only Have Eyes for You," and the two episodes evince a thematic and a formal continuity. The technique of juxtaposing narrative threads is extended here, to incorporate forms of intersection, interruption, and cross-talk. The reversals of "I Only Have Eyes for You" become thoroughly enmeshed in the episode; the marginal and the central tug at one another, changing places and forcing the invisible to gain visibility, the weak strength, the decentred to find their focus. We learn to notice what has gone unremarked, and to be noticed ourselves, as viewers. "The Zeppo" leaves an opening, formally, through which watchers can impact, televisually. Our marginalized stand-in is Xander, on whom the episode focuses, but who is notably absent from the opening battle, having been knocked unconscious and left under some debris before the on-screen action commences. All the Scooby gang insist that Xander stay "safe . . . out of harm's way," away from the action. An ostensibly separate storyline emerges when he can't integrate himself with the rest of the gang,

and must follow his own sub-plot — a marginal narrative that becomes both crucial for and unacknowledged by the “main” battles that Buffy and the others must fight, once again, to save the human universe. Xander, significantly, is also excluded from the heroic spectacle of the show itself, as his opening lines ironically make clear: “Good show everyone. I think we have a hit.” Playing the role of Jimmy Olsen or Zeppo Marx, Xander can’t be a protagonist: he is effeminized, pacified and side-lined — “fray-adjacent” as Buffy puts it.

(19) But as the gender-reversals in “I Only Have Eyes for You” and throughout the whole run of *Buffy* make clear, the typology of machismo and effeminacy won’t hold up. Stereotypical roles are interrogated, to dismantle the polarities of activity and passivity, agency and victimization that they produce. Throughout “The Zeppo,” Xander’s masculinity gets called into question: he can’t play football with the other “guys”; Jack O’Toole — the “psycho” with the big phallic knife named Katy — tells Xander to “be a man” and tries to initiate him into a “gang” of dead bullies; Xander picks up a car-obsessed girl to prove he can be a chick-magnet (as opposed to “demon magnet”), even though he is sexually passive, needing Faith as macho woman *cum* driver to “steer him around the curves.” His goal, in the terms laid out by the episode, is to attain “cool,” which appears at first (as Cordelia teases him and compares him to O’Toole) to be machismo, but actually goes much deeper. “Cool” is a version of what other episodes name “soul” or “love”: that unperturbed and durable aspect of self, that will not surrender. Xander queries Oz, for example, about what makes him cool, and Oz, ever taciturn, remains non-committal (foreshadowing Xander’s own silence at the end of the episode, when he does attain “cool”). Cool is precisely what escapes discursive framing, the tactics of overwriting and subsuming that characterize both identification and mediatization — or, for that matter, vampirism. Oz responds to Xander, “You’ve got some identity issues.” He affirms the ways Xander’s relentless self-consciousness and outsider status put identity, sameness, in question, and also the instabilities in the production of a subjectivity capable of meaning and action.

(20) Having sex with Faith marks a transition to “cool.” Their encounter is an inversion of Buffy’s first and fatal time with Angel. But where Angel loses his soul after the purity of intercourse with the virginal Buffy, Xander gains an irreducible sense of self-possession when the very experienced Faith shows him how to be “up with people.” When we glimpse the mirror image of Faith and Xander in bed, reflected in a dormant television screen, the conceit becomes plain: their vital, energizing, corporeal encounter is mediated by the screen. The reflection produces a meta-image, frame within televisual frame — we’re watching an image of a t.v. set on our own televisions — but can only throw back an image of lived experience when the t. v. is turned off; if we switch our own sets off, for example, we would likely see our own images reflected back at us. The intense bluish gloam of an activated screen effectively obliterates our own image, overwhelming it with cathode light. Xander, overwhelmed by Faith (who perches atop him and whose back is really all we see in the reflection), nonetheless discovers who he is, momentarily, when he is pushed off-screen, frame-adjacent.

(21) “The Zeppo” isn’t really demanding that we turn off *Buffy* to watch our own reflections (even if this might be an effective means of refusing mediatization). Rather, it reminds us of our own presence as watchers, our implication in the viewing process of the show itself. It suggests how to rediscover ourselves when we’re faced with obliteration, with potentially losing ourselves in the spectacular image. Our absorption by image throughout “The Zeppo” is strategically interrupted. For example, earlier in the episode Xander looks to others for what to do about his problems with Jack and the boys; but, just as Giles goes looking to the “spirit guides” for answers and is refused (at a point where he meets Xander in a graveyard), Xander’s calls for help are either deflected or silenced. He tells himself, “Buffy’ll know what to do,” and heads off to find her, but we immediately cut to Buffy in a hyper-bathetic encounter with Angel — by this time, a set-piece in *Buffy* — who exclaims, “I don’t know what to do.” Not only does the irony of the montage force Xander back on his own resources, but it also produces a key interruption. When Xander walks in on Angel and Buffy, the romantic mood-music abruptly fades and they glare at him; his presence essentially breaks the frame, and reminds us that this is a *Buffy* cliché, with Angel and Buffy playing the same roles and spouting the same dialogue they do on the verge of every cosmic catastrophe. Xander backs off, and the romance resumes, but as viewers our attention has been redirected, and fractured. We recognize the ways our expectations have been controlled by the conventions of generic television. We might compare the failed romantic encounter between Wesley and Cordelia in “Graduation Day,” a kiss that

takes place in the library adjacent to the Hellmouth; here, a kiss is not a giving of self but a reminder, as Cordelia wipes her mouth and their mutual lack of passion becomes self-evident, of autonomy. A kiss is a means of resistance, as it was in "I Only Have Eyes for You," to getting lost in someone else. It draws us back to reality, as the contrived romantic mood — misty lenses and swelling violins — fractures and dissipates.

(22) Xander, post coitus, repeatedly interrupts his own train of thought in amazement, drifting in and out of attention: "I just had sex." While he may seem distracted, his distraction also reintroduces a self-conscious subjectivity into the mix; we aren't allowed any sympathetic absorption or unqualified identification alongside him. Xander enters the fray of self-awareness, of knowing what to do, and then steps back, critically distant from what he's doing, considering what has happened and what might; his dialogue throughout the episode involves a running commentary on what's happening to him, and what he's making happen: "I should have . . .," "I shouldn't have . . . ." The episode calls this scrutiny *noticing*; a crucial component of being cool, as Cordelia sarcastically points out, is being perceived, as if — she tells Xander — anyone "actually noticed you were there." Xander's quest for notoriety parallels the ways in which viewers are implicated in the show as it unfolds: we get noticed, but in a specific way. Xander's heroic actions, after all, are unnoticed even by Buffy and the Scooby gang, whose own heroics "nobody will ever know." To be cool is not so much to be perceived by others as it is to attain a self-perception, a confidence in one's physical and cognitive capacities. Xander is able to respond to Cordelia, at the episode's close, by not responding. Viewing, by implication, does not depend on interactivity, on characters or situations actually reacting to our presence. Viewer response, our agency as watcher, is rather a mode of self-awareness engendered by the interruption of the televisual by itself. Once we become even liminally cognizant of our mediatization, its alluring absorption cannot wholly succeed. We notice ourselves, momentarily, in the screen.

(23) To recognize what this awareness produces in us beyond itself, we need to consider the Hellmouth. Pursuing Xander, one of O'Toole's "boys" pauses to peer through the round portal in the library doors — a kind of displaced camera lens. We do not see what he sees (nor do we ever catch more than glimpses of parts of the emerging demon, as Willow notes in the aftermath, claiming to have seen its unforgettable "real face," a view from which our mundane perspective is barred). But we do see his face, hear his inarticulate reaction: "Woah." If the Hellmouth, once opened, provides access to a supernatural world-view, a transcendental perspective on "the truth" which, as the spirit guides inform Giles, could only bring about "chaos," then the narrative thwarts that access. Just as, once attained, "cool" becomes inexpressible, so too is the "truth" always beyond verbal frameworks. Instead, the librarian, the slayer and their cohorts strive to control the unruly tentacles of such knowledge that threaten to overwhelm and devour. They mediate, intervening and interrupting to cut off our mediatization, our glamorized gaze. Xander's role, in "The Zeppo," is emblematic; despite his fray-adjacency, in the boiler room at the climactic battle in a sidelined skirmish with a villain from another narrative, his action is central, at ground-zero. The explosion he averts by playing it cool ("I like the quiet") threatens to rip the Hellmouth wide; by not doing anything, by standing by, Xander effectively shuts the Hellmouth tight — even if no one will ever know it. Closing the Hellmouth restricts access, but also keeps the world — the Buffyverse — cool, and ultimately gives it shape, both as a visual framework and as a set of narrative conventions. Still, Xander's subplot ends on an ironic note; Oz, now a werewolf, is inadvertently released from containment and devours the chaotic O'Toole. Containment, that is, can never be absolute, but remains a question of careful, critical and self-conscious access.

(24) Despite his Zeppo-like behavior, Xander has from the first season always been enmeshed in the dynamics of fray and containment that shape Buffy's battles. In "Welcome to the Hellmouth," he emerges from the library stacks having overheard Giles and Buffy parlay over the role of the slayer. His proximity is not voyeuristic or parasitic, however. He never remains in the background, but always contributes crucially to the action — despite his presentation at the opening "The Zeppo." In "Prophecy Girl," it is Xander not Angel who can revive Buffy; vampires, as Angel points out, have "no breath." Xander acts as a repository of a certain life-force, which can never be overruled by the demonic no matter how sidelined he may appear to be. He acts as the viewers' stand-in, not to the extent that we identify with him, but so that we discover the means to figure our own self awareness, and resist the mediatizing vampirism of the television

image. Through Xander, we notice.

(25) Throughout *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, we refuse — temporarily, perhaps, but effectively — to allow ourselves to be sucked in. The Hellmouth-Library subtends a necessary contradiction; to stop an unruly disclosure of demonic power and an overwriting of self by forces beyond its grasp, a counterflow of information, of kissing, of narrative works to be let loose. Knowledge, and sometimes blood, wants to be streamed through proper channels. And those channels — circulatory systems, discursive constructs — both shape and are shaped by the channel structure of television. At the same time, *Buffy* produces a resistance to channeling, a refusal to be governed by frameworks outside of individual agency: watching both accedes to mediatized vision and fractures the means by which mediatization, and conscious absorption, can take place. We are made aware of the contradiction embedded in looking on. And as a program thoroughly aware of television genres and conventions, *Buffy* confronts this paradox in its own visual form: the mutual vampirism of viewer and viewed.

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**Gabrielle Moss**

## **From the Valley to the Hellmouth: "Buffy"'s Transition from Film to Television**

(1) The Buffy who fights demons in Sunnydale today is a far cry from the air-headed Buffy who fought vampires on the big screen in the early nineties. In the transition from film to television, *Buffy* has mutated from a bubbly Valley girl into a feminist heroine more in accordance with Joss Whedon's original vision. In this essay, I would like to examine the cultural currents which allowed for the emergence of a stronger, more complex Buffy, the differences in medium that facilitated this change, and the consequences of this transition on the depiction of young women in the media. I would like to examine the Girl Power wave of the mid-nineties, its impact on the character of Buffy as part of a larger media impact, and, in turn, *Buffy's* impact on the portrayal of young women on television and beyond.

(2) The film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was released in 1992 as a campy send-up of the era's reigning teen film genres, supernatural horror as exemplified by the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and *The Lost Boys* (a film Paul Reubens' glam vampire henchman is clearly meant to lampoon) and teen comedy such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Valley Girl*. "Buffy" the film existed as paper-thin parody, with many of the laughs at the expense of its Valley Girl caricature heroine. Buffy's vapid and stereotypical femininity repeatedly place her in danger, and her lack of ownership of her own sexuality, displayed when she is reduced to a trance state during her pseudo-seduction at the hands of vampire Lothos, results in the death of her Watcher. Buffy is marked for slayership by a mole on her neck, her menstrual cramps act as a danger-detection system, Lothos seduces her in her dreams—she is a slayer barely in control of her own body. "Buffy" sticks to an obvious and physical gender logic, displaying her triumph over feminine weakness by wearing pants. Buffy's struggle as a woman and slayer is one to feel comfortable in both her womanly body and powerful role, and in the end, she is neither; at the film's close, dancing with her boyfriend Pike, Buffy tells him she does not want to lead, and he says the same. Not comfortable leading or being led, "Buffy" exists in a limbo, not ready to be a powerful warrior nor content being her former beautiful airhead self. Potentially a powerful statement about the drama of growing up and womanhood, this sentiment is not fully tangible under the film's many layers of distracting parody.

(3) Ultimately, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sees itself as a comedy rather than horror film, and much of the film's humor is derived from the perceived incongruity of "Buffy" and "Vampire Slayer," of a gum-cracking Valley teen being accorded power and responsibility. Despite her vampire-slaying prowess and heroism, Buffy is portrayed as a comic figure, and any possible social significance to be found in this depiction of one teenage girl's struggle to understand herself as a powerful figure is undermined by the film's cartoonish campiness (a high school principal places detention slips on the corpses of slain students; Buffy declares, "I'm the chosen one and I choose to go shopping"). Though creator Joss Whedon maintains that the script for "Buffy" was created as a tribute to the girls who were victimized in the era's slashed films, "Buffy" the film drowned in its own campiness and limp parody of teen horror films. Whedon himself later said, "When you wink at the audience and say nothing matters, you can't have peril" (Jacobs 20), and far from being any sort of feminist parable about taking back the haunted night, "Buffy" was an extremely timely film dependant on the movies it mocked, with a teen savior heroine who was almost a decade away from being

anything other than a joke.

(4) The teen films "Buffy" sought to lampoon fell out of fashion soon after *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was made, leading popular cinema into several years of dominance by action films and the occasional "chick flick" emotional drama. At the same time, in other forms of media, the roots of the Girl Power movement which would one day allow "Buffy" to exist as a serious girl power feminist heroine were beginning to grow.

(5) Girl Power as we know it can debatably be traced back to the "Riot Grrrl" movement of the early 1990's. Localized in the Pacific Northwest, Riot Grrrl was a feminist movement composed mostly of teenage and twenty-something and generally white and middle-class young women, with a focus on the arts and media. Though often the audience of popular media such as films, teenage girls were rarely catered to. Miramax Films chief Bob Weinstein asserted that "[t]wenty years ago, conventional wisdom was that you had to make movies for seventeen-year-old boys. They drove the market place. Girls deferred to boys" (Bernstein 88). Riot Grrrl was an anger-based feminine subculture, exposing and celebrating the anger young women were usually encouraged to hide, directed mainly at societal institutions, expectations, and pressures. Riot Grrrl also focused on a clear conveyance of the teenage female experience, and how it differed from the one depicted by the media. "Riot Grrrls felt able to open up, to write honestly about their experiences of being in a band, of sex and sexual harassment, of personal politics and revolution" (Raphael, xxviii). Riot Grrrl forged a link between young women and creation and criticism of media, while demanding attention about issues affecting the lives of young women.

(6) Over the next several years, young women began coming to media prominence, particularly in popular music. Female musicians, many with current or former Riot Grrrl affiliations, such as the bands Hole and Bikini Kill and singer-songwriter Liz Phair, began what was perceived as a female takeover in nearly every form of popular media. Riot Grrrl "undeniably gave women more confidence to make music" (Raphael, xxix), but as the topic of "Women in Rock" gained interest and support, it expanded from Riot Grrrl's expression of self-righteous anger to a movement to express the spectrum of women's experiences. The early nineties saw vast amounts of attention lavished on the concept of Women in Rock, in the form of magazines and television specials, and the concept snowballed out from there into other art-forms, all taken with the concept of female as creator.

(7) By the mid-nineties, a cross-media change appeared to have occurred in attitudes toward women, particularly young women as creators and performers. At the same time, attention was for the first time being given to the various issues of female adolescence. A generation of girls growing up in the wake of 1970's feminism, as they hit adolescence, was suddenly in the limelight regarding self-esteem, eating disorders, and other long-ignored perils of girlhood. In her Generation X feminist anthology, *Listen Up!*, Barbara Findlen said, " We are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives" ( xii); logically, this was the first generation of teenage girls to have issues widely addressed by feminist media. The wounded teenage girl became an icon of the mid-nineties. She got single-sex math classes and self-help books (Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls*), all ostensibly to raise her self-esteem. To empower the white, middle class teenage girl became a major media goal, with countless news magazine covers and prime-time specials devoted to it, many with portraits of intense teenage victimhood like this one from Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*:

Cayenne was a typical therapy client. She had had a reasonably happy childhood. With puberty, the changes and challenges in her life overwhelmed her. Her grades fell, she dropped out of sports and relinquished her dreams of being a doctor. As she moved from the relatively protected space of an elementary school into the more complex world of junior high, all her relationships grew turbulent. She had decisions to make about adult issues such as alcohol and sex. While she was figuring things out, she contracted herpes. (35)

Though it claimed to desire to empower teenage girls, the mid-nineties victim-centric media wave truly discovered a new demographic. The first generation of girls to have grown up with feminism was now ready to be catered to. The teenage girl, once a shadowy figure to the media at best, was now a target market.

(8) The phrase “Girl Power” was originally coined in association with Riot Grrrl, but Girl Power as we now know it is a curious mix of softened feminist politics and economics. By the mid-nineties, “many . . . of us have integrated feminist values into our lives, whether or not we choose to use the label ‘feminist’” (Findlen xiv), and “Girl Power,” a term that not only lacked many of the negative associations the word “feminism” but openly declared its focus to be teenage girls, a group rarely spoken to or considered by mainstream feminism, came to represent a new kind of feminism for middle-class, teenage America. The subject of various mall-sold t-shirts and Spice Girls songs, Girl Power exists as imagined empowerment through self-esteem but actualized empowerment through purchase. Political activism marketed with matching nail polish, Girl Power has come to mean a fuzzy, de-fanged feminist philosophy of “Girls Kick Ass!” combined with mass realization by marketers of the \$82 billion disposable income teenage girls have every year (Bernstein 87). The little sisters of those who had been the targets of the mid-nineties self-esteem campaign, the girls of Girl Power came of age directly after Ophelia was revived. In her book, *Raising Their Voices*, Lyn Mikel Brown suggests that “girls’ increased anger and assertiveness at eleven and twelve reflects their emerging comprehension of the culture they are about to enter and their place as young women in it” (15). “Girl Power” tended to reach younger girls most strongly, girls who had reached their age of anger during a time when they were encouraged by the world at large to indulge it. Perhaps the mass healing worked; middle-class white girls were now “more self-reliant” (Bernstein 88) and were changing the shape of media the only way adolescents can—through their spending habits. In the second half of the nineties, girls who had grown up in the era of various “Year(s) of the Woman” in everything from film to politics, began making box office successes of films with strong teen female leads, such as *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic*. The next challenge Girl Power would take on in its takeover of modern media was to re-create the traditionally misogynistic teen horror film into something teenage girls could identify positively with.

(9) The first step toward the modern reclaiming of horror as a genre in the name of Girl Power occurred in 1996’s *Scream*. Despite a heavy dose of parody, *Scream* bent traditional horror film rules pertaining to female sexual independence and mores, and conveyed a strong message of female empowerment (the film’s heroine shoots the villain with the assurance that in “her movie” he won’t come back). *Scream* existed as a milestone in Girl Power, the first real mass media document to champion it. *Scream* set off the cinematic arm of the media wave that Girl Power rode, and like the teen media wave before it, this one would soon come to be dominated by romantic comedies and gore-filled horror outings. However, this media wave catered to young women, and soon self-determined young women became central figures in teen-oriented films. One of Girl Power’s first major media coups was to reclaim the teen horror film, a traditional site of female degradation, and force it to become re-shaped into a vehicle for female empowerment. “In the 70’s and 80’s, the women in those types of films used to be the victims,” said Miramax mogul Bob Weinstein. “They were there for eye candy . . . What’s happened in the nineties is that females are the heroines. Young women have something to identify with” (Bernstein 88).

(10) Two years before *Scream*, in 1994, while still little more than a footnote in the “Women in Rock” issue of *Rolling Stone*, Girl Power saw its first impact in television, “My So-Called Life.” Though cancelled after one season due to poor ratings, *My So-Called Life* was a critically praised dramatic exploration of the life of a teenage girl. Dealing with issues of sexuality, scholastic and familial pressure, and female independence, *My So-Called Life* was a watershed in Girl Power media history. Also, the strong grass-roots campaign to return it to the air after its cancellation, a letter-writing campaign that later led to the broadcast of re-runs of the show’s first season on MTV, was spearheaded by adolescent girls, foreshadowing the media power the teens of the Girl Power generation would soon wield. Several years passed after the cancellation of *My So-Called Life* with no real attempts to create further Girl Power television, until early 1997, when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* aired on the fledgling WB Network.

(11) A direct descendant of *My So-Called Life* —creator Whedon himself has referred to it as a cross between *My So-Called Life* and *The X-Files* (Tracy 22)—*Buffy* debuted in the midst of Girl Power’s cinematic prime but was the first television show of the late nineties teen media wave. Differing from its cinematic predecessor in many ways, such as location and premise (partially for metaphor’s sake, partially due to the changing times, and partially out of convenience for the show’s plot), the Buffy who now protected Sunnydale bore many surface similarities to the Buffy who roamed the Valley but immediately proved

different. The change in media—film to television—was more conducive to the depiction of a multi-faceted Buffy than a ninety-minute film, but more had occurred than simply more screen time. In the wake of the Girl Power takeover, Joss Whedon's original vision, of the triumph of the bouncy blonde victim from slashed films "who was always getting herself killed" (Whedon), could exist as a reality.

(12) The Buffy of television was a significantly stronger character than the Buffy of the screen; as the first television ambassador of Girl Power's "Take Back the Night"-type reclaiming of horror, Buffy became a far different slayer than her screen sister. With the loss of the film's precognitive menstrual cramps, Buffy was no longer victim to her fate but master of it, determining danger with keener than average senses and fighting skills. Buffy Summers is a girl tightly in control of herself and her life in all the ways the previous Buffy was not.

(13) *Buffy's* appropriation of horror as a feminist form is so dramatic because, despite steps forward made in films such as *Scream*, violence on the part of female characters in horror films is still accepted only in terms of self-defense. The typical female horror movie heroine—the "last girl standing"—is permitted to use violence of any sort, because she is "[p]reyed upon, tormented, and terrorized, she is pushed to the limit and driven to fight by any means necessary" (Pinedo 77). Though "Buffy" exists more in the vein of the gothic and supernatural (where, from Mary Shelley to Anne Rice, there has traditionally been a place for females, at least as creator) rather than the more recent "splatter" genre, *Buffy* inverts all of slash cinema's clichés about female victimization. Joss Whedon has said, "[T]he idea of 'Buffy' came from, a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and not only is she ready for him, she trounces him" (Whedon), and within the series' first episode, Buffy has done just that, in a sequence modeled on classic slash cinema: Buffy runs down a dark dead-end alley like a thousand pretty blonde girls on celluloid before her, but she is the first not only to come out alive, but with her foot across her stalker's neck.

(14) *Buffy* exists as a show filled with sexuality, both literal and metaphorical. The dichotomy of young women's sexuality—the societal push to be a virginal "good girl" yet sexually available and desirable—is a theme repeatedly approached by the show, frequently represented by the use of doubling, particularly in the show's third season. In that season's "Faith, Hope, and Trick" (3003) the character of Faith is introduced, a fellow vampire slayer who acts as Buffy's raw id, seduces Scooby Gang member (and long-time wannabe-paramour) Xander and openly admits to (and enjoys) the sexual nature of vampire slaying. Clad in black leather and tattooed, Faith presents Buffy's dark side, which she occasionally tempts Buffy to indulge ("Bad Girls," 2012), and with her absentee parents and dead Watcher, Faith is perhaps a nod to the film's Buffy, a glimpse of what reality may present for a girl in the film's circumstances. "Doppelgängland" deals with the theme of sexual doubling even more explicitly, with the re-introduction of "evil Willow," a sado-masochistic (see "The Wish's" extremely sexualized torture of Angel by Willow) sexpot double of shy Willow, suggesting a powerful sexuality bubbling beneath Willow's bookish exterior (and prompting the classic Willow remark, "I'm so evil and skanky. And I think I'm kinda gay"). The topic of the dual lives of teenage girls and the choices they must make regarding them is dealt with in simpler terms in the show's first episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," in a scene where Buffy is dressing before her mirror:

Buffy: (holding up a tight vinyl dress) Hi, I'm an enormous slut.

(holding up a floral patterned dress) Hello, would you like a copy of "The Watchtower"?

Dodging the sexualized bite of vampires, yet surrendering her virginity to one, "Buffy" displays the complexities of decisions that teenage girls must make, the tangled threat of their own sexuality they must learn to negotiate. Not content to be "good" or "bad" girls, the women of "Buffy" show teenaged sexuality to be the complex, sometimes strong, sometimes confused thing it is, and it is the frankest dealing with such ever on television.

(15) Buffy's increased independence is also showcased in her dealings with her Watcher; television Buffy begins where the cinematic Buffy left off, starting the series with a chip on her shoulder about her destiny, but faith and trust in her Watcher, yet over time defying him and eventually becoming autonomous. Though the television addition of a "Watcher's Council" neuters her Watcher to some extent, the creation of a more fallible Watcher facilitates a more empowered Buffy. While the film's Slayer is forced into sudden

and awkward autonomy by the death of her Watcher (a death partially attributable to her lack of will power), television Buffy takes her independence slowly, eventually reaching the point where slaying can be navigated with the aid of a Watcher as a peer, not an authority figure. (*Buffy* is a show with an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide: all positive authority figures—Principal Flutie, Giles, Principal Snyder, Prof. Maggie Walsh—must eventually be killed, dethroned, revealed as evil, or some combination of the above.)

(16) Buffy's independence and strength as both a woman and a slayer is also emphasized by the television show's lack of a male equal. The film portrayed Buffy's mortal love interest, Pike, as nearly as adept as she at vampire slaying, while the series' Buffy can find her match only in a 200-year-old vampire, Angel, and later, in a paramilitary soldier. Furthering the concept of Buffy's singularity of strength is the presence of her effete British Watcher, Giles, and sarcastic and unmacho Scooby Gang members Xander and Oz as the major mortal male presence for the first several seasons. Buffy's strength is unparalleled and inverts the gender stereotyping inherent in a super-heroics situation. Season Two's "Halloween" raised the question of gender roles on *Buffy* by dressing several major characters in hyper gender-stereotype costumes, and then having them each take on the persona embodied by that costume (Buffy becomes a helpless British aristocrat and Xander a soldier, while Willow, after putting a sheet over her revealing Halloween costume, ends up embodying the "Reviving Ophelia"-era teenage girl stereotype: a scantily clad invisible woman), suggesting that gender is simply a costume, a "drag" we don for approval.

(17) Particularly after the introduction of Faith, Buffy reveals her dark side more often than any super heroine (Wonderwoman? Bat Girl?) before her Buffy attempts murder for love and revenge, Buffy has sex, Buffy drinks too much and gets sick; she does these "bad" things not without consequence (hangovers, de-evolution, loss of souls) but without the undue shame and punishment of an after-school special. Fighting skills and magical knowledge aside, Buffy is most remarkable for simply being the first well-rounded, realistic portrait of the life of a young woman on television. Since the rise of Girl Power, television Buffy can be something the early nineties slayer never could be: a real teenage girl.

(18) Buffy stands out in social contrast to her film counterpart; though flashbacks have shown Buffy leading a life of cheerleading and popularity similar to her predecessor, her strength has been in her evolution into an everywoman, her journey from a vapid pom-pom girl into self-possessed savior of the human race, hinting that there was more going on behind the cinematic Buffy's cotton-candy façade. The changes Buffy has faced, from film to television, and even within the run of the series, show an identifiable evolution in the depiction of young women in that era. Ideal females of their times, film Buffy's transformation into TV Buffy, her evolution from caricature to full being exemplifies the changes that have occurred in the reign of Girl Power.

(19) *Buffy* the television series differs from the film importantly in that it was the trailblazer of its particular media (Girl Power horror and teen television) instead of coming late to the teen trend party like *Buffy* the film. The change in medium creates a wider sphere of influence in a more effective medium for conveying a mass message. While *Buffy* has created the template for tough television heroines, few have followed in its footsteps quite so boldly; other shows of the teen television renaissance, many on *Buffy's* WB Network, deal with the issues of life as a teenage female, but in a more traditional comic way (*Felicity*, *Popular*) or as a side-note to the angst of male teens (*Dawson's Creek*, *Roswell*). *Buffy* still stands relatively alone.

(20) Each Buffy has been emblematic of her era; cinematic "Buffy" of the Valley girl eighties, television "Buffy" of the Girl Power nineties. The premise of both *Buffy's*—of having the weight of the world on your shoulders and having to fight just to remain true to yourself—is a story of growing up female, a story generally considered not worth telling before the advent of Girl Power. Television Buffy gets to grow up in a way cinematic Buffy never did. A long journey from the Galleria, Girl Power has brought *Buffy* to a place where the fate of humanity lying in the hands of a teenage girl can be more a one-note joke.

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**Rhonda V. Wilcox**

## **"There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' *Buffy*": *Buffy* and the Monsters of Teen Life**



This essay first appeared in *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* and appears with the permission of the author and Heldref Publications.

(1) "I have often said 'There will never be a "Very Special Episode" of *Buffy*'" (Rochlin 19). This comment by Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, repudiates those television series which aim for redeeming social value by focusing episodes on unmediated presentations of social topics such as AIDS or alcoholism. Whedon specifically mentions *Beverly Hills 90210*, but one could add the names of many series —*The Wonder Years*, *Party of Five*, *Seventh Heaven*—to the list of those which over the years have advertised those "very special" episodes. In *Buffy's* world, by contrast, the problems teenagers face become literal monsters. Internet predators are demons; drink-doctoring frat boys have sold their souls for success in the business world; a girl who has sex with even the nicest-seeming male discovers that he afterwards becomes a monster. And underlying the various threats is a repeated one: the horror of becoming a vampire often correlates with the dread of becoming an adult. Yet even in the face of all these monstrosities, the context of dialogue and interaction makes the characters believable teens.

(2) In fact, *Buffy's* dialogue establishes a second level of significance directly related to the symbolic social monsters. The striking differentiation of the teen language in *Buffy* has often been commented on. The language of the teens starkly contrasts with that of the adults. This linguistic separateness emphasizes the lack of communication between the generations, as does the series' use of the symbolism of monsters to represent social problems. The teen attitude towards parents' inability to deal with real-world horrors is suggested through Buffy's concerned but naive mother, who throughout two seasons never sees the monsters or knows her daughter is the Slayer. The symbolism recreates the need to bridge generational division which is suggested by the language patterns. Viewers must understand both the language and the symbolism to see the reality of teen life. Life and language are not so simple as problem-of-the-week tv would suggest, and *Buffy* acknowledges that fact.

(3) The situation and relationships in *Buffy* are on the surface mundane. Sixteen-year-old Buffy Summers, a high school junior, has moved from LA to the small California town of Sunnydale with her divorced mother, after having been expelled from her earlier high school. Her looks and conversation at first win her

an entree with high school social queen Cordelia Chase. However, she refuses Cordelia's advice to avoid Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris, who are stigmatized as, respectively, a brain and a geek. Buffy's refusal to scorn the two—in itself a bit of heroism in the teen social world—combined with the discovery of her past leads to her being consigned to "loser" status.

(4) The other side of Buffy's life, however, roots her even more firmly in loser territory. As soon as she enters the school library, librarian Rupert Giles informs her that he knows she is the Slayer: Into every generation a single girl is born—the one chosen to fight the vampires, the demons, the powers of darkness. Giles has moved from a job as curator of a London museum to be Sunnydale High's librarian expressly in order to be Buffy's Watcher—her adult advisor and trainer. While Buffy has exercised social heroism, she has absolutely no desire to be a superhero. "A Watcher," says Giles, "prepares [the Slayer] . . ." "Prepares me for what?" asks Buffy. "For getting kicked out of school? For losing all my friends? For having to spend all my time fighting for my life and never getting to tell anyone because I might endanger them? Go ahead—prepare me" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth"). Buffy Summers' life is considerably more difficult than Clark Kent's.

(5) Her romantic life is even more problematic. Charming but hapless Xander falls for Buffy literally from the moment he crashes his skateboard at first sight of her outside school. Since Willow has been romantically fixed on Xander since their childhood, this is an inconvenience only made worse by the fact that Buffy's affections lie elsewhere. Angel, a dark, handsome, mysterious stranger occasionally appears to warn Buffy of threats from the vampire world. He cites his being older as the reason he is resisting a relationship, but when, inevitably, they kiss, he "sprouts fangs" (McDonald 20). In the *Buffy* variation on vampire lore, [i] vampires have the memories and personalities of humans, but the human soul has been replaced by a demon. The single exception—the single trustworthy vampire—is Angel, who was cursed by gypsies after he killed one of their teenagers, and who himself appears much younger than the standard first-season vampire in *Buffy*. Rather than stake him, the gypsies decided to expel the demon and restore Angel's human soul so that he would feel the pain of the knowledge of his misdeeds. The gypsies want him to exist only to suffer, and indeed, Angel, who no longer feeds off humans, is a tormented creature who is as much an outsider of the vampire community as Buffy is an outcast in the high school world. The fact that these two fall in love with each other only makes their lives more difficult. As Giles says, "A vampire in love with a slayer. It's rather poetic, really—in a maudlin sort of way" ("Invisible Girl").

(6) It might come as a surprise to some that when the magazine *George* published its September 1998 list of "20 Most Fascinating Women in Politics," Sarah Michelle Gellar's Buffy was the second in the list (right after Elizabeth Dole, but with a much bigger picture). *George* contrasts Buffy's healthy strength with the teenage girls discussed in Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, and notes "what she's really taking on is the regular assortment of challenges that threaten to suck the lifeblood out of teenage girls, like a suffocating high school hierarchy and a sexual double standard" (Stoller 113). Kathleen Tracy's 1998 guide to the series includes, with every episode synopsis, a brief description of the "Real Horror" to which the plot correlates. In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach provides a larger symbolic context when she notes that "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (145)—or, one might add, the slayer it needs. And while Auerbach's use of the term "age" refers to cultural period, her statement could be extended to apply to stage of life—in this case, adolescence. Instead of a patriarchal Van Helsing, *Buffy* provides a short, slight, teenage girl. It is nothing new for the science fiction and fantasy category of television series to symbolically represent teen difficulties: Harvey Greenberg's essay "In Search of Spock" explains how in the 1960s *Star Trek* represented teens' alienation in the famous half-Vulcan character. *Buffy* is especially successful at that symbolic representation.

(7) The pilot, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," establishes the series' mapping of the high school social mine field and the series' satirical stance. The show starts with a role reversal: a series of shots of the darkened high school explore the building after hours, and we are then shown two teens breaking in—a pretty, stammering, demure little blonde named Darla following a teenage boy who clearly hopes to "take advantage" of her. When she gets his assurance that they really are alone, her face changes to the demonic feeding visage of the undead. It is the little pleat-skirted cutie who will eat the boy alive. Their images descend from the frame, leaving only a school trash can in the distance of the shot. This is the

teaser.

(8) After the credits and theme song, enter Buffy—in nightmares, dreaming of the demons she has to fight. (It was her fighting of vampires at her old school that resulted in her expulsion.) She is awakened by her mom to tackle instead the difficulties of the first day at a new school. The ironically named and very un-Shakespearean Cordelia warns her, "You want to fit in here, the first rule is know your losers. Once you can identify them all by sight they're a lot easier to avoid." At this stage of events Xander and Willow have another friend, Jesse, a slightly taller, geekier version of Xander who internalizes the high school code. At the local teen hangout, the Bronze, Jesse is humiliated by Cordelia's rejection. Chatting with her girlfriends, she later classes him among "children" and says he's like a "puppy dog—you just want to put him to sleep." In fact, Jesse is put into the sleep of death when he is taken by the vampires. When the vampire Jesse shows up at the Bronze, he is immediately able to make Cordelia dance with him, and dismayingly he embraces the change. Confronted by his old friend, Jesse says, "I feel good, Xander; I feel strong" and later, again speaking of himself, adds, "Jesse was an excruciating loser who couldn't get a date."

(9) Harvey Greenberg, in his psychoanalytic discussion of teens and Spock, suggests that Spock's half-alien body reflects the physical changes adolescents sense taking place in themselves. The physical changes in this series' vampires' faces, along with their greater bodily strength, might be said to perform the same function (not to mention the fact that they stay up late). In the first season, the series focuses on confronting adulthood through confronting distinctly older vampires. "The Old Ones," both Giles and the Vampire Master call them—and both their physical traits and their language (of which, more later) suggest adulthood. And as Brian Aldiss says, aside from its sexual qualities, the typical vampire's most notable characteristic is that "It is ancient" (x). Of course, vampire feeding has long been paralleled to sexual activity,<sup>[ii]</sup> a rite of passage to adulthood which none of the teen protagonists of *Buffy* have undergone (in the first season, at least). When Jesse becomes a vampire, his sexual maturation is clearly suggested. But it is his rejection of "loser" status that really damns Jesse—his willingness to do anything to be accepted in high school, whether it is embracing vampirism or losing his virginity. At the moment he makes his declaration—"I'm a new man!"—he is destroyed, staked, turned to dust, the stake held in the unwilling hand of his best friend Xander ("Welcome").

(10) It is a distinct element of the heroism of *Buffy's* teen protagonists that they will not go to any lengths to avoid "loser" status. Buffy, Willow, and Xander endure regular mockery, but pursue what they see as right. Buffy and Xander, both of whom are considered irresponsible by adults, both take responsibility for their friends time and again. Auerbach notes that early, pre-Stoker nineteenth-century incarnations of vampires seemed to stress, in their relationships with chosen humans, the intimacy of friendship (14). In *Buffy* the most notable bond of friendship is among the teenage vampire-fighters.<sup>[iii]</sup> "Jesse's my responsibility," says Buffy, and, as they skip school to go looking for him, Xander says, "Jesse's my bud, OK? If I can help him out, that's what I gotta do. It's that or chem class" ("Welcome"). For her part, Willow declares, "I'm not anxious to go into a dark place full of monsters—but I do want to help. I need to" ("Welcome"). The result of this heroism is not praise, but the painfully realistic irritation of those whom it inconveniences. When Buffy's mom gets a call from the principal about her skipping class, the mother grounds the Slayer just as she is about to go out to face the demons. "Mom, this is really, really important," Buffy pleads. And mother answers, "I know—if you don't go out it'll be the end of the world." In fact, it may be exactly that; according to Giles the Watcher, hundreds of vampires are making a concerted attempt to release the vampire Master, open the mouth of hell, and end the world as we know it—unless the reluctant Slayer saves the day. As the mom says, "Everything is life or death when you're a sixteen-year-old girl" ("Welcome").

(11) Buffy does succeed in her life and death struggle; though she, Willow, and Xander can't save Jesse, they do save the world; they do make it possible for life to go on. And so Xander says, the morning after the vampire battle has been witnessed by a nightclub full of teens, "One thing's for sure; nothing's ever gonna be the same." Perhaps the most important moment of the pilot, and one of the most important in the series, comes in the sunshine of the next morning at Sunnydale High, when absolutely nothing has changed. Almost all the adults and the vast majority of teens have managed to deny what they saw. "The

dead rose," says Xander; "we should at least have an assembly." But, led by Cordelia, the students have decided it was "rival gangs." Giles, the Watcher, one of those rare adults who really sees what is going on, explains: "People have a tendency to rationalize what they can and forget what they can't." And of course his words apply to the social problems of the real world just as emphatically as they do to monsters.

(12) Even the socially heroic are sometimes vulnerable to peer pressure. The first season episode "The Pack" is ostensibly about Masai stories of possession by animal spirits—in this case, unusually vicious hyenas imported to the local zoo. But the humans the laughing hyenas possess are a clique of mocking high school students who take Xander into their fold. The episode opens with the four students teasing Buffy for having been kicked out of her earlier school. When they shift to weaker prey, the timid young man ironically named Lance, Xander pursues them into the off-limits hyena house to protect Lance, and so happens to be present when the possession takes place. In most episodes, most of Xander's lines are jokes; but in this episode, after he is possessed, for the first time his jokes pass over into cruelty. Buffy can't believe that Xander would act this way, and so she consults Giles about possible supernatural explanations. "Xander's taken to teasing the less fortunate?" asks Giles. "Uh huh," says Buffy. "And there's a noticeable change in both clothing and demeanor?" "Yes!" "And—well—otherwise all his spare time is spent lounging about with imbeciles?" Buffy says, "It's bad, isn't it?" and Giles replies, "Devastating. He's turned into a sixteen-year-old boy. Of course you'll have to kill him." Since this is the world of *Buffy*, it is not merely hormones at work, but possession. The result is different only in degree, however, not in kind. Xander finds it impossible to study; is cruelly rude to the adoring Willow; and lustfully leaps on Buffy. The latter activity is rather fortunate than not, since, while Buffy subdues Xander, he is separated from the pack long enough so that he misses their attack on kindly principal Flutie. In some schools, a teacher or administrator may be stabbed or shot by students. In Buffy's school, the students eat him. In the end, with the help of Giles and Willow, Buffy is able to return Xander to himself—and the instant after he comes to himself, he saves Willow from the knife-wielding animal-worshipping bad-guy zookeeper who arranged the possession. But the upshot of the whole episode is that Xander is left deeply embarrassed by his own animalistic/adolescent behavior. "Shoot me, stuff me, mount me," he says to Giles, the only other male regular in the first season.

(13) Some episodes of *Buffy* deal with more specific external threats. In "I Robot, You Jane," shy, sweet Willow is drawn into the clutches of an internet predator. When Buffy notices that Willow, an outstanding student, is missing classes, she is concerned to find that Willow is skipping school to chat online with the mysterious Malcolm. Willow, who is attractive but far from glamorous and even farther from popular, is indignant at Buffy's concern over her online relationship. "Why does everything have to be about looks?" she wonders. And Buffy replies, "Not everything, but some stuff is. What if you guys get really intense and then you find out he has a hairy back?" From worrying about the fact that Willow has not met Malcolm, Buffy and Xander soon move to worrying that she will meet him. As Xander says, "Sure he can say he's a high school student. . . . I can . . . say I'm an elderly Dutchwoman. Get me? And who's to say I'm not if I'm in the Elderly Dutch Chat Room?" As Buffy observes in alarm, "This guy could be anybody. He could be weird, or crazy, or *old* . . . ." The series implicitly calls attention to generational conflict and the horror of facing adults/adulthood as well as the particular horror of the internet predator. As viewers would have known since the beginning of the episode, Malcolm is downright ancient: he is in fact the demon Moloch, the corrupter. Once again, the friends put themselves on the line, and this time it is Willow who is saved—from one of the diabolical corrupters who are indeed out there on the internet.

(14) In the second season episode "Reptile Boy," Cordelia, who is only gradually and unwillingly drawn into the circle of friends with knowledge of the supernatural (read: adult) world, puts herself and Buffy in jeopardy when they go to a college fraternity party. One of the frat boys has decided he wants the good-looking Buffy to come, and to Cordelia's irritation her invitation is conditional on her bringing Buffy along. Buffy and Angel have been fighting over his reluctance to enter into a relationship with her; as he says, "This isn't some fairy tale. When I kiss you, you don't wake up from a deep sleep and live happily ever after." "No," says Buffy to her vampire, "When I kiss you I want to die," the death/sex metaphor echoing through the scene. As a result of their argument and Giles's insistently overworking her, Buffy decides—to the dismay of Xander and Willow—to lie to Giles and attend the party with Cordelia. Buffy and Cordelia end up easy prey at the party: "God, I love high school girls," says one of the frat boys. Each of them accepts a

drink which turns out to be drugged, and each ends up out cold in an upstairs bedroom.

(15) But the fraternity's humiliations are not limited to the females. One of the most interesting elements in the episode is the display of damage done to outsider males—in the shape of Xander, who crashes the party because he is worried about Buffy. (They repeatedly just miss seeing each other.) In a truly painful scene, the party crasher is forced—under the guise of his being treated as a pledge (an element of the story which suggests issues of its own)—to dress up in a blonde wig, half-slip, and giant stuffed bra, and made to dance in the center of a hooting crowd. After he is paddled and kicked out of the building, Xander mutters, "One day I'll have money—prestige—power—and on that day they'll still have more." Indeed, this is an unusually powerful fraternity—in large part because its members have sold themselves to the service of a snake-shaped white demon. The leader chants, "We have no wealth, no possession except that which you give us. We have no place in the world—and no power—except that which you give us." A Marxist would find a broad field to plow in this segment. If the patriarchal power structure has not been made clear enough, when the frat boys prepare to sacrifice Buffy and Cordelia to their demon lord, the leader tells Buffy that "no woman speaks to him." (One can hardly wonder why.) However, Buffy—with the help of Willow and the three outsider males Xander, Angel, and Giles—is able to win. Once again, friendship defeats the monster. But the moral about fraternities could hardly be clearer if Camille Paglia had preached it. As Buffy says, "I told one lie. I had one drink." And Giles replies, "Yes, and you were very nearly devoured by a giant demon snake. The words 'let that be a lesson' are a tad redundant."

(16) For any viewers who might not have caught on to the overall pattern yet, the second season two-parter "Surprise"/"Innocence" makes the social symbolism eloquently clear. In the second season, Buffy's confrontation of the shift from adolescence to adulthood focuses on sexuality. Like the pilot, "Surprise" begins with Buffy having nightmares, this time before she wakes up on her seventeenth birthday. In one of the nightmare images, her mother asks, "Do you really think you're ready, Buffy?" and drops and breaks a cup and saucer. Buffy's dreams are sometimes prophetic, and later in her waking hours this cup-dropping scene is played out in the context of her asking permission to get her driver's license, but the question of her readiness also relates to her having sex with Angel. The nightmare image most important to Buffy is the vision of Angel's being killed by Drusilla, a vampire he sired (and with whom he has in his demonic past had a relationship which is in effect incestuous [Appelo 25]). In her alarm, she goes to Angel's apartment, where he reminds her that not all her dreams come true, and they passionately embrace, parting with difficulty. At school, Buffy discusses the situation with Willow. (One might contrast this behavior with the failure to talk to each other of "most women in vampire movies" [Auerbach 57].) Willow notes that Angel is "cool" because "he would never push," and asks what Buffy wants to do. Buffy replies, "Want isn't always the right thing to do. But what if I never feel this way again?" This very believable teenage concern leads her to accept Willow's advice to "seize the day"; as Buffy says, "Once you get past a certain point, the seizing is sort of inevitable." Later in the day, when they face yet another encounter with a demon threatening Armageddon and Buffy worries that they can't know how long either of them will survive, Angel reminds her, "Nobody can. That's just the deal." But when they are actually attacked and barely escape, making their way to Angel's nearby apartment, they do—after one last "maybe we shouldn't" from Angel—go to bed together. The episode ends with Angel rushing from the sleeping Buffy out into the alley in the pouring rain, pain apparent on his face.

(17) The symbolic implications of having Buffy's first sexual encounter be with a vampire of course emphasize the dangers of sexual encounters, especially with an adult. Angel claims to be around 240; he appears to be about 24 as compared to Buffy's 17 years. In terms of the plot, the serious problem with their encounter is that the gypsy curse which restored Angel's soul did so for the sake of his unremitting pain. When he finds a moment's true happiness, his soul is once again exiled and the demon takes its place. Angel becomes Angelus, who now notes, "the pain is gone," and—immediately after making love with Buffy—seizes and feeds off a hooker. Afterwards, heated by feeding on the woman's blood, he lifts his head and blows steam out his pursed lips in a gesture that suggests a post-coital smoke. (The gesture is clarified when, later in the episode, Angelus smokes a real cigarette with the same motion. Angel does not smoke.) Buffy is left frantic with concern because Angel is missing; she is the girl waiting for a call after a sexual encounter, as another conversation with Willow makes clear. When she does finally find Angelus, he tells her, "You have a lot to learn about men, kiddo—but I guess you proved that last night." "I'll call you,"

he says, as he walks out on the weeping Buffy. Even then, Buffy cannot understand why her boyfriend would act that way. Angel originally introduced himself as "a friend" ("Welcome") and has repeatedly acted as one in a series which often focuses on friendship. But Buffy gradually discovers that having sex with her has literally turned Angel into a devil (who writes in blood over a dead body he knows she'll find, "Was it good for you, too?") Understanding now that he is not the man she thought he was, Buffy is able to endure his sneers in a later scene when he says, "You know what the worst part was? Pretending I loved you. If I'da known how easily you'd give it up, I wouldn't even have bothered." They fight ferociously and she wins. When she threatens him with a stake, he gloats that she is unable to kill him, and he is right. But Buffy being Our Heroine, she manages to draw on some inner reserve of strength and give him a good hard Slayer kick in the balls.

(18) One of the rare moments during the first two seasons when Buffy's mom seems to be almost aware of what is going on comes in this episode. The morning after Buffy has had sex for the first time, her mom asks if something is wrong and says "you just look . . .," trailing off, shaking her head. Adults in general and Buffy's mom in particular consistently misinterpret what is happening in the teens' world. Encounters with vampires, demons, and assorted other monsters get translated into more palatable problems: attacks by gangs on PCP, a gas leak, even an out-of-control scavenger hunt. This need for translation is emphasized throughout the series by the linguistic patterns of the different groups. Teen language is so clearly marked as separate in *Buffy* that *Entertainment Weekly* gave it the special name "Slayerspeak" (Howard; cf. Wyman). The bridge of symbolism needed between literal monsters and social problems is recapitulated by the bridge needed between teen and adult language in *Buffy*.

(19) The fact that many of the cross-generational conversations are between Buffy and Giles, the British librarian, accentuates the separation. As Buffy says to him in the pilot, "You're like a textbook with arms." When Giles considers asking computer-whiz Willow for help in a crisis, for instance, he says, "I've been researching this Harvest affair. It seems to be some sort of pre-ordained massacre. Rivers of blood—hell on earth—quite charmless. I'm a bit fuzzy, however. It may be that you can wrest some information from that dread machine." At the students' blank looks, he translates, "I want you to go on the net" ("Welcome"). Buffy voices a common response when she says in another episode, "I think I speak for everyone here when I say, 'Huh?'" ("Invisible Girl").

(20) Interestingly enough, most of the first-season vampires are placed on the side of the adults linguistically. The Master emits comments such as, "Tonight I shall walk the earth and the stars themselves will hide" ("Welcome") and "Here endeth the lesson" ("Never Kill"); other vampires make similarly pompous, quasi-religious remarks: "And like a plague of boils the race of man covered the earth. But on the third day will come the Harvest [. . .]" ("Welcome"). In the episode "Nightmares," there is a cut from Buffy's nightmare of the vampire Master's hand around her neck to her awakening to find her mother's hand in approximately the same spot, shaking her awake. The symbolic identification of the two adult characters is disturbing: vampire and mother, both, it seems, moving Buffy towards some sort of awakening. Later in that episode, the Master says, "We are defined by the things we fear"; both vampirism and adulthood seem to be frightening experiences in *Buffy*. There could hardly be a nastier incarnation of the patriarchy than the ancient, ugly vampire Master. The Master compares his vampire group to a "family" which is "work[ing] together for the common good" in an ugly parallel to a standard adult line ("Angel"). As Nicola Nixon points out in her discussion of the 1987 films *Near Dark* and *The Lost Boys*, vampire groups can sometimes be seen as "dysfunctional families" (120). Buffy's mother's desire for her to work hard and fit in is curiously echoed in the Master's chastisement of his disciples, which sounds alternately like the reaction of a disappointed father or a coldly dissatisfied CEO. While the darkly beautiful Angel (who speaks neither marked slang nor overly erudite archaisms) suggests the dangerously attractive sexual aspect of adulthood, the Master is associated with work and family. As Buffy moves closer to adulthood in later seasons, the vampire opponents are not just adults, but distorted reflections of herself—vampires such as the young-appearing leather-clad Spike and Drusilla, who speak in contemporary slang. But in the first season almost all of the vampires and the adults are clearly tied together linguistically, among other ways.

(21) Occasionally the teens will display their ability to speak the foreign language of adulthood. In "The Pack," for instance, Buffy speaks with kindly Principal Flutie about the little pig mascot he has bought for

the school's team. To placate the principal, she shifts from "He's so cute" to "He's a fine mascot and will engender school spirit." Similarly, Giles displays the ability to use teen language. When Buffy proves him wrong about the supernatural element in Xander's behavior, he promises to go to his volumes of paranormal lore and "Look stuff up" ("The Pack"). (Of course it must be noted that he is merely quoting an earlier line of Buffy's, rather than creating teenspeak himself.) Even the Master vampire occasionally displays consciousness of the other language, though he does so with scornful intent—as when he remarks preparatory to temporarily killing Buffy, "Oh good—the feeble banter portion of the fight" ("Prophecy Girl").

(22) More often than not, however, the difference is accentuated. And the difference is not simply that adults use big words and know more, but rather that teens know different things. When Buffy says, "My spider sense is tingling," she has to apologize to Giles: "Pop culture reference—sorry" ("I, Robot"). When she complains in another episode that Giles is refusing for once to consider a supernatural explanation, she says, "I can't believe that you of all people would Scully me," ("The Pack"), assuming knowledge of *The X-Files* television character famous for stretching rational explanations to cover unusual events. When Xander asks, "Does anyone else feel like they've been Kaiser Sozhed?" he counts on knowledge of the popular film *The Usual Suspects*, in which one of the characters assumes multiple false identities ("The Puppet Show"). And Cordelia translates Shakespeare by declaring that Shylock uses a "Twinkie defense," referring to recent and popularly discussed jurisprudence ("Invisible Girl").

(23) Furthermore, the students show their willingness to work outside the rules by their comfort in recasting the language. Barbara Bell has commented on this change of word form and function regarding the series *My So-Called Life*. Sometimes the changes come in word order, as when Buffy says, "We so don't have time" ("Welcome"). Sometimes they come in word form, as when another character refers to "Willow kissage" ("Innocence") or when Willow and Buffy admire a boy for his "Owenosity" ("Never Kill") or when Buffy asks, "What's the sitch [situation]?" ("Welcome"). Parts of speech may be varied, with an adverb becoming an adjective: "You're acting a little overly, aren't you?" ("Never Kill"). Or an adjective may become a noun: "Love makes you do the wacky" ("Some Assembly Required"). Sometimes the words are metaphorical or metonymic substitutions, as in "You're that amped about hell?Go there" ("Prophecy Girl"), wherein amped = excited, from audio amplification; or "I'll talk to you later, when you've visited Decaf Land" ("The Dark Age"). Students who are willing to operate outside the high school code are certainly not afraid of coloring outside the lines of language. Their use of the language is, in fact, daring. In the third season opener, with Buffy missing, Willow points out that "The Slayer always says a pun or a witty play on words, and I think it throws off the vampires" and Xander responds, "I've always been amazed with how Buffy fights, but in a way I feel like we took her punning for granted" ("Anne"). And the use of language is highly conscious, to the point of adding to series continuity. When Buffy finally conquers her nemesis the Master, her last word to his disintegrating corpse recalls the social stigma she, Willow, and Xander have endured: "Loser," she calls him ("Prophecy Girl").

(24) In sum, the use of language in *Buffy* reinforces the theme of adult ignorance—and the grace and wit of the language embody one element of the heroism of the teen characters. One might even recall E. M. Forster's definition of the purpose of art—that human creation of order in a chaotic world—to understand the power of the ludic elements of *Buffy's* symbolism and language. Buffy confronts the vampires of adulthood not only with weapons, but with words of her own. It is part of the grace and wit of the series that the courage of these adolescents in fighting social problems is translated into symbolism—a mediation of meaning which parallels the mediation of the teen language. Through both symbolism and language, in *Buffy*, the mediation is the message.

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[i] Auerbach comments on the multiplicity of vampire types through the ages and places: "There is no such creature as 'the Vampire'; there are only vampires" (5).

[ii] Note, e.g., Philip Martin's "The Vampire in the Looking Glass: Reflection and Projection on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," 84, 90.

[iii] The interrelationship of the supportive outsider friends in *Buffy* is quite different from the group interaction of those who hunt Stoker's *Dracula* with, as Auerbach describes it, a "corporate ethos" and the guidance of the "overbearing patriarch" Van Helsing (78).



**Gina Wisker**

## **Vampires and School Girls: High School Jinks on the Hellmouth**

**Joyce:** "Well it stops now!"

**Buffy:** "No, it doesn't stop. It never stops. Do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is? How dangerous? I would love to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or, god, even studying! But I have to save the world. Again. ("Becoming," Part II, 2002)

### **Introduction**

(1) *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* treads an entertaining if uneasy course between conservatism and contemporary feminist girl power. On the one hand the weekly successful tackling of monsters emerging from the hell mouth denotes a conservative underwriting of the certainties of the American Dream's superheroes—that wrong can be righted, quests can succeed: evil is visible, tangible and destructible. On the other hand, Buffy, ostensibly physically more suited to be a prom queen or a cheer leader, and a bit of an American Beauty, is a feisty example of late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century girl power. Buffy possesses the energies of the New Woman, the mid-century tomboy of girls' comics, "Supergirl," teen heroines. She is a girl with a mission, and a manager/mentor (Giles, who provides the academic references), a girl with a team of friends who support her on her missions to sort things out, to dismember and dismantle the latest monstrous emergent from the Hellmouth.

(2) But as a slayer she is herself on the edge, "Other" in her powers, irritated at their intrusion into teenage life, dedicated to her mission, yet in love with a vampire, Angel, who loses his soul when he sleeps with her. No monster, but a friend to many who have historically been construed as monstrous, a karate-kicking, small-town, female Van Helsing (*Dracula*) in teen clothes, Buffy intervenes with vampire slayer conventions as the series intervenes with vampire fiction formulae.

(3) That set of descriptions in itself positions Buffy as a new take on women in vampire fictions. The representation of the feisty virginal schoolgirl interweaves with (bleeds into?) the image of the female recalled from vampire and other horror tales. Conventional vampire tales and films, *Dracula* (1897, film 1997), the whole Hammer horror *Dracula* related film series, Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), and even episodes of *The X-Files* television series usually configure women as hapless victims, or, if vampires, as voracious, seductive, and deadly. Their sexuality, seen as dangerous in terms of a patriarchal status quo, must be constrained, their deviant energies must be destroyed and order restored. Contemporary radical feminist vampire fictions, and films, on the other hand—"O Captain my Captain," a short story by Victoria Forrest, *The Gilda Stories* (1992) by Jewelle Gomez, and Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, (1977, 1985, 1988—)—variously refuse such simplistic rejections. Recognizing the vampire in ourselves, these contemporary Gothic texts tend to present a more sympathetic figure whose subversive activities are both exciting, and in their deliberate breaking of taboos and boundaries, provide an opportunity to critique social norms, while refusing to restore a status quo which clearly operated on lies and artifice. The contemporary

feminist vampire is often a creature with a moral crusade too, rather than a creature who must be killed because of a moral crusade. Lesbian, biracial, rock star, space captain, contemporary feminist vampires offer life beyond death to the dying, love across boundaries of gender, time and mortality. The subversion is celebratory as well as rather moralistic in a liberated, carnivalesque (i.e. subversive of restrictive rules) sense. Buffy's beloved Angel, in terms of his literary ancestry, is easy to identify (and to identify with). He is in the mould of Anne Rice's Louis (*Interview with the Vampire*, 1977) the vampire with a heart, a sense of morality, problematizing his given role as deadly outsider except when, his soul lost ("Innocence," 2014), he embraces its violent destructiveness again.

(4) So where does Buffy fit into this economy of vampire exchanges? She is uneasily positioned between conventional vampire figures and vampire hunters, and radical feminist revisions of the myth, which inscribe women's power as positive, not to be condemned. As such then, Buffy suits the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New woman, the nineteen-fifties tomboy hero, and the contemporary girl power mould. Maybe that is long overdue, maybe that is why we like her—she is subversive enough, energetic, not too radical, and at heart an ordinary girl (kind of). Some of the very difficulties we have with girl power appear in difficulties we have with Buffy. But the comic book questing energetic slayer, almost too close to the evil she has to destroy, is a figure for our times.

### **Buffy: A History in Girls' Fictions**

(5) Buffy, as vampire slayer, lover of a vampire, teen heroine, is also in a long, interrupted, line of teenage fictional heroines. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century girls' novels, and the annuals/comics of the nineteen-fifties and sixties are full of stories which feature young girls with energy and power who use the tactics normally found in male sleuths to track down crime, right wrongs, and return order. They are morally driven avenging angels, but also subversive schoolgirls. In their energetic activities these young women question and trouble the conventional representations of women's lives in the movies and magazine images of the period. Popular cultural forms such as fifties and sixties films, and magazines for women consistently concentrate on woman as homemaker. Women's magazines contain recipes, patterns for clothes making, and articles about gardening and how to make your husband happy. Younger girls' magazines often concentrate on looking pretty, makeup, how to find the right boyfriend and keep him. Each peddles a very conservative version of womanhood. In the cinema we see an uneasy mixture of film noir femmes fatales who are punished for their energy and daring, and the light romantic comedy female roles: all Doris Day and singing, Mom, girl next door and domestic bliss. Such conservative representations of women were not surprising given the aftermath of a war which needed to return women to the kitchen so the men could regain their ground in the workplace and the home, in the economy and in the hearts of their families. But the schoolgirl novels, comics and annuals developed a very different kind of version of young womanhood, energetic, adventurous plucky, imaginative—boy-like in fact. Sexuality was not an issue here, and the adventurous young women fought singly or together to re-establish a moral status quo. They did not seek boyfriends.

(6) The magazines of the nineteen-nineties and early twenty-first century conversely are much more likely to concentrate on romance, make-up and boyfriends than these tomboy heroines' powerful exploits. *Buffy*, however, offers a new variant of the active teenage girl. Buffy herself is both the feisty, tough drop-kicking, morally vengeful character, dispatching hordes of vampires and monsters with well-aimed thrusts of the nearest available crucifix-like or stake-like object, picking up and tracking down and dispatching evil wherever she meets it. She is a tomboy in so far as she acts out the slayer role, taking on superhero characteristics more conventionally associated with men—Superman, Batman, Spiderman—with the notable exception of Superwoman and Wonderwoman, who are also her foremothers (though she differs from Superwoman and Wonderwoman in her ability to critique conventional American society, which they always fail to ironise).

(7) *Buffy* also comes from a long line of children's' and young adults' fiction from the U.S. which spring from a version of the 'American Dream'—pioneering spirit, self-fulfillment, exploration and self-determination, a mixture of the spiritual and the worldly. In *What Katy Read*, a feminist re-reading of 'classic' stories for girls (1995), Shirley Foster and Judy Simons note that U.S. girls' books—the *Little*

*Women* novels, and *What Katy Did*, in particular, had great influence on a British readership and British authors. Their appeal was:

American ideals of freedom and independence, greater ambivalence regarding a clear-cut, gendered identity, and the consequent emergence of the tomboy figure. (1995 19)

Angela Brazil's school-experience-based girls' stories (*The Madcap of the School*, 1917) are British versions. The twenty-six pupils at Marlowe Grange School have a great sense of solidarity and a communal ethic. These stories and others like them provided an opening for different, lively, positive versions of life for girls:

If we see ideologies of femininity in terms of a unitary if over-determined, progression towards passivity, domesticity and a reproductive role, then the representation of femininity within the school story clearly stands as an expression of resistance and subversion. (Gill Firth in Steadman et al., 123)

Girls adopted authority positions, suffered emotional crises, jealousies and tensions all within the educational context.

(8) Tomboys developed from American nineteenth-century texts, although in many English novels they can be seen as "naughty" and rather deviant. Angela Brazil's character Raymunda Armitage is a figure we can identify with for her beliefs that rules are there to be broken, order to be disrupted and judicial power to be established (see Simon & Foster 201). Those books find a readership in post First World War society and then influence the readership of post Second World War society. Buffy and her friends generate a similar rule-breaking behavior for ultimate, energetic, positive, good, post-Vietnam War teenagers in a period when we are skeptical about all wars but continue to fight them in reality, and here through fantasy.

(9) Young girls of the UK-originated 'fifties and 'sixties comics and annuals—*Girls Crystal*, *School Friend*, *Girl*—solve crimes, rout baddies, display feats of intelligence that would stun a secret agent and are never sexually molested even if promised in marriage to some historical figure. A 1961 *Girls Crystal* Annual story, "The Wedding Wreckers," has plucky boarding school chums search out the dastardly impostor who, pretending to be their favorite form mistress' fiancé, attempted to wreck the wedding. The disguised girls hide on board ship, and expose the villain, attending the wedding as bridesmaids as a reward. Air hostesses figure in several tales in *Girls Crystal*, the *Treasure Book for Girls* (Collins 1960). If we take one specific example of an annual, *Girls Annual* no 9 (Longacre 1961) we find an interesting range of representations of energetic young women fighting the good fight. In "Angela: Air Hostess" in *Girls Annual*, Angela is brave and kind. The dog Angela hides saves the lives of all on board by alerting them to a short-circuit. A semi-subversive act (hiding a dog on a plane) leads to rescue in the skies. An illustrated tale of the explorer and nurse in Africa, Mary Kingsley, sits alongside tales of how girls are learning to fly planes or behave with velour in the skies, on high seas, up mountains. So, in another short story, a brave young girl named Justine climbs high mountains in a "snowball," searching for an owl, and rescues her male companion. In "Porpoise to the Rescue." Tessa takes the little boat out on the roaring seas to save children. In the one book or "annual," there are two tales of rock-climbing heroines and two of sea-rescuing heroines, instructions on sailing and flying and two real-life heroine tales along with information on cooking, sport, nature and hobbies ("Add a sparkle with sequins," "Make those traveling slippers," among them).

(10) The only two mildly fantastic tales are one about stage superstitions and another with an actress whose house has a secret door which conceals costumes. Fantasy adventures are not favored, but exciting versions of girls' lives produce endless opportunities to show both girls and boys how strong, able, bright and successful these young women can be. The challenge is not really a fully feminist one. Doors are opened, fathers smile approvingly, young men are impressed. However, they might not be feminist, but neither is romance the only or the specific desired end. These young women, like Buffy, are energetic and determined, but also attractive and interesting in the conventional mode of the period and they solve crimes, sort things out and bring back order. More conservative in their versions of right and wrong than Buffy, they nonetheless provide an earlier model of the same kind of powerful, everyday crime/evil-busting energetic young woman with a mission. However outdated their values (to us as twenty first century readers), these earlier heroines nonetheless offered a powerful positive role model for girls and young women of that period and dramatized for such young women the alternatives to boyfriends, romance, domesticity, clothes and recipes to remove spots or dye from your hair.

(11) Bringing *Buffy* up to date in terms of contemporary magazines for girls, we find that male and female characters in the series both conform to definable categories found in these magazine fictions. One such magazine which has received critical scrutiny as typical of its kind is *Jackie* (a popular girls' magazine of the period), although the fictions of this and subsequent magazines themselves tend increasingly to be dominated not by fantasy writing but by the kind of photo-realism which leaves no space for fantasy. Angela McRobbie's analysis of the four categories of boys in *Jackie* fits the stereotypes found in several soaps including *Neighbors*, *Heartbreak High* and *Buffy*:

First, there is the fun-loving, grinning, flirtatious boy who is irresistible to all girls; second the tousled, scatterbrained, 'zany' youth who inspires maternal feelings in girls; third, the emotional, shy, sensitive and even arty type; and fourth, the juvenile delinquent, visually portrayed on his motorbike looking wild and aggressive but sexy, whom the girl must tame. (McRobbie 99)

Angel is clearly a fantasy version of the fourth kind of romantic hero, while Oz the erstwhile werewolf, is both arty and tousled and rather mothered by Willow, protected by friends for his own safety. Male figures in magazines are always idealized and romanticized. Female figures also conform to some extent, although the trusting blonde and the wild brunette are differently configured in *Buffy* as the energetic, kick-boxing vampire stalker (Buffy), and the transparent boyfriend stealer (Cordelia). The final category McRobbie defines is typified by Willow, computer-teaching, witchcraft-learning, dependable friend (Buffy has several of these characteristics also). McRobbie describes this character as:

The non-character, the friendly, open, fun-loving, 'ordinary', girl, (who may perhaps be slightly scatty or absent-minded). She is remarkable in being normal and things tend to happen to her, rather than at her instigation. Frequently she figures in stories focusing on the supernatural. (McRobbie 100)

But Willow and Buffy are both more complex and active than this stereotype (behind which they occasionally choose to hide-for self-preservation) suggests. Willow's dabbling in magic both troubles situations and saves the day, and while Buffy's track record for locating unpleasant activities and creatures is very high, she hardly stumbles upon them, but seeks them out actively to rout them and restore some temporary order.

(12) Unlike the pattern of plot in these later magazines, such as *Jackie*, it is possible in *Buffy* to have other than romantic relationships between males and females. The amusing take off of a romantic idyll between Buffy and Spike ("Something Blue," 4009) exemplifies the critique of the blinkered limitations of romance conventions. Buffy and Spike planning to marry and emptying their heads and lives of all other plans and activities is a boring spectacle and could only be a product of a botched spell by Willow, trainee witch, certainly not a romantic denouement. The *Buffy* version of the schoolgirl/teenager is more active and resistant to convention. Her love for Angel is both unconventional- he is a vampire (albeit reformed) and theoretically 'the enemy', and conventional in terms of playing out the fantasies romantic love offers as truths. Buffy and Angel must hide their love from polite society, and it is in a number of ways 'eternal' and 'unto death'. Unusually in terms of the usual clash between romance and social conformity, Angel is the one who is hurled into oblivion/out of himself/out of shared society when he transgresses and consummates his love for Buffy.

(13) But we must remember that we are dealing, in *Buffy* with a postmodern horror reading of teen fictions. It belongs to the boundary crossing genre of vampire fictions. *Buffy* is a fantasy take on contemporary magazines and earlier comics and fictions for girls. Fantasy offers space for critique, and vampires, aware of themselves as performers, acting out some of our fears and desires, are fantastic, excessive, figures of a mixture of contemporary fun/fear. Anne Rice highlights their imaginative potential, considering her own life and the use of the vampire figure:

The fantasy frame allows me to get to my reality. I'm telling all I know about everybody and

everything in these books. It's an irony that as I step into this almost cartoon world, I'm able to touch what I consider to be real....this gave me a doorway- a vampire who's able to talk about life and death, and love and loss, and sorrow and misery, and viciousness and grief. (Rice in Riley 14)

(14) Unlike previous fantasy female figures (Samantha from the TV series *Bewitched* for example), Buffy's every delight is not to produce a good meal and avoid/annoy her overpowering mother, or to conform to feminine conventions in a variety of other ways, having used supernatural powers to sort out a few problems. Domesticated idylls are not Buffy's main aim. Willow is more likely to produce attempts at cookery while Buffy, with her friends to support her, (as do the girls in comics, magazines and annuals) has a small town to save (if not the human race). *Buffy* queries conventional roles for women to some extent, but also enables us as readers/viewers to buy into the alternatives which contemporary fantasy, horror and vampire fictions represent: the thrill of something a little more subversive than a comic book heroine rescuing drowning dogs and climbing mountains.

### **Women's Horror and Vampire Writing**

(15) Vampires are imaginative cultural constructs and as such they are also indicative of the fears and desires of a culture. In nineteenth-century Victorian England, frock-coated vampires stalked the streets and clubs (*Dracula*, 1897; Polidori's *Lord Ruthven*, 1819; *Varney The Vampire*, 1847). In an age which thrived on dichotomies, the vampire was a foreigner who dared to buy up London property and turned normally moral young ladies into voluptuous femme fatale seductresses (*Dracula*). Latterly we read back and recognize these contradictions, although it is certain they were not so widely recognized in their day. Elegant/hideous, godlike/bestial, vampires were destroyed using Christian icons, a move that reinforces the safety of conventional belief and restores order. As in all good horror tales, boundaries, tested and strained, are reinforced. The evil is without, order reigns again.

(16) In most conventional vampire tales, women are the victims of male vampires. They are weak, and easily seduced by these frock-coated gentlemen. Clearly of easy virtue, once bitten, they turn into fanged, voluptuous temptresses who desire to infect all the men who enter their lives. They are evil vamps, constructions of male fears of women's sexuality, who, once so constructed, need to be punished. Male sexual desire is blamed on its object, that object (women) turned into a focus of fear and loathing because of the male terror of being disempowered and overwhelmed which sexual desire potentially involves. Having been abjected, the woman is cast as a monster (Medusa is the favored figure here but female vampires and those who dissolve as wailing hags are also popular). Women are then punished. In the nineteenth century, fears of female sexuality rage throughout Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and the lesbian love affair of Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872). Vampires are usually portrayed as male, the most famous being *Dracula*, based on Vlad the Impaler. However, women can also be vampires, and not merely because they are bitten by Count *Dracula*. Elizabeth Bathory, the Sanguinary Countess and contemporary of Vlad, was a style victim of the culture that values women for their youthfulness. She bathed in the blood of over 600 virgins to remain youthful. In other cultures vampires also existed, e.g. in Egypt, the myths of which are the historical backgrounds to Anne Rice's vampire family sagas. In India vampiric female goddesses reign, explored in Poppy Z. Brite's short story "Calcutta" (1986). Their roots in myth and legend, these bloodthirsty historical figures are the two-dimensional great-grandparents of culturally constructed, constantly metamorphosing fictional vampires. In both the nineteenth and the twentieth century's more conventional vampire fictions, vampirism is a metaphor for sexual excess, particularly that of women, and must be punished. Death exorcises the sexual energies they represent.

Vampirism itself-depicted as uncontrollable desire and as sensual swoon for both victim and vampire-stands as a euphemism for sex, forbidden by social mores. And the sex itself is not of a normative nature. (Brownworth, 1996: xi)

The castratrix, fanged, vampiric woman is seen as dangerously powerful, sexually voracious and engulfing. She is equated with the overwhelming, fecund Mother who has the power to procreate but cannot let the child be itself, cannot let go. Julia Kristeva explains this offloading of fears of engulfment, prevention of

individual identity formation. She labels that rejection of the 'not I', the body of the mother (then, by extension all women), as a move which debases women. So:

Fear of the archaic mother proves essentially to be a fear of her generative power. It is this power, dreaded, that patrilineal filiation is charged with subduing. (Kristeva 1982 102)

Disgust and horror at the Mother/vampire's generative and engulfing, destroying powers are mingled with the erotic. Conventionally:

Vampirism combines a number of abject activities: the mixing of blood and milk; the threat of castration; the feminization of the male victim. (Creed 70)

The female Dracula or vampire figure is masculinized because she penetrates her victim. She becomes an active predatory seducer. (Creed 70)

(17) The female vampire also represents potential dangers of sexual license. The terror she evokes peaks when that challengingly abject relationship of woman and woman is involved. Lesbian vampires are even more of a transgressive force than their gay male cousins.

The vampire's initial liberation of excess energies and disruption of normality is a very temporary affair. Social order is quickly restored, the cathartic experience nailed down again to the relief of the conformist audience/readership. This has, of course, always been the role of horror, and of much gothic. (Punter 1996)

Fears have to be dramatized, made concrete to overcome. Vampires have to be embodied to be made Other. Then they must be exorcised, leaving peace and order behind. Of course, such exorcism and defeat depends on a conventional belief that the Other, horror, fear and its figure the vampire is "Out there," rather than a socially constructed, externalized part of ourselves, as Nina Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, (1995) makes clear.

(18) While Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror* (1982), clarifies the positioning of woman and Mother as abject alongside those other elements which need rejecting from the body to recognize the self, later, in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), she explores how the figure of horror (for the sake of our argument, the vampire) dramatizes endless potential for radical alternative behavior, for celebrating our Otherness. It enables us to recognize that the Other is part of ourselves.

(19) The vampire becomes a figure for radical re-appropriation partly because of this recognition in our more self-aware period. In contemporary times, vampires provide an opportunity for the overt exploration of cultural contradiction. Poppy Z. Brite's post Vietnam War American lost youth, abandoned in motels at roadsides, or by their families within ostensibly ordinary homes, find energy in vampire pairs and groups. They seek closeness to death because it enables them to face it out, control it, through becoming it. Anne Rice's vampires in *Interview with the Vampire* (1977) are more properly influences on the kind of vampires we find in *Buffy*. Louis is a reluctant vampire, feeding from small animals, tortured at the idea of killing humans, while he reveled in their pursuit in his early wilder days in New Orleans with his vampire initiator, Lestat. In his contradictory behavior, Louis closely resembles Angel: attractive, tormented about his vampire state, aware of role-play, vulnerable, always wearing recognizably black vampire clothing. The modern day vampire with a conscience is a more acceptable figure for our desires. He has learned the evil of his ways but must live with the consequences of conscience. Angel ordinarily does good, policing the old fashioned vampires who leap from behind gravestones during night patrols, except when, after sleeping with Buffy, Angel loses his soul and comes under demonic possession. Ironically, the man loses his soul through sex, rather than the woman, which would be the norm in conventional vampire fictions.

(20) Much of *Buffy* is similar to contemporary women's vampire fictions, although less radical in terms of gender play. In their work, contemporary women vampire writers embrace the radical challenge of the often androgynous figure of the vampire to dismantle patriarchy's reductive binary thought and behaviors.

The vampire represents the unity of opposites, a boundary breaker: male/female, good/bad, dead/alive; they defy the categories and constraints of culture. They offer the potential for a liminal space, in which contradictions and critiques can be worked through. The Hellmouth is a threatened space but it is a space for embodying contradictions embedded in society and for both recognizing some and tackling some.

(21) Contemporary radical feminist vampire writers have found in the figure of the vampire marvelous potential for radical re-appropriation. In their work the status of vampires as cultural indices and metaphors has been re-valued, aligning them with a new feminist carnivalesque. They infuse the age-old figure with new life. Writers such as Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, Jewelle Gomez, Katherine Forrest, Angela Carter and Sherry Gottlieb have all re-appropriated the figure of the vampire and use it to question life and death, gender roles and romantic myths. Engaging with the challenge that conventional horror offers, of female victims and sexually voracious monsters, they have revived and reinterpreted the vampire to their own radical ends. They re-value the Mother, infuse their work with the disruptive power of the erotic, and centre-stage the vampire in a variety of challenging forms: rock star, flâneur, gay/lesbian/queer. These figures provide social critique, highlighting and questioning the enforced fixity of roles and behaviors. In *The Vampire Lestat*, Lestat's role as rock star almost endangers his everyday life as a vampire, although his endless energies exhilarate the readers as they do the audiences who revel in his ironic performance as vampire /rock star. Lestat realizes what Armand does in *Queen of the Damned*: humans adore the freedoms and energies vampires seem to represent, the way they act the part, act out the nightmares and tease the audience with the real/unreal, dead/undead performance. In the Theatre de Vampires in nineteenth-century Paris (*Interview with the Vampire*) the kick for the audience is the performance, enacting the vampiric draining to death. The kick for the vampires is double and ironic: that this *is* no performance- they really are draining someone's blood. Audience conscripts and hapless one-night performers leave in coffins. Angela Carter's "Lady in the House of Love" Countess falls victim to her own beliefs in romantic lies. A reluctant vampire who feeds on nocturnal animals and the odd wayward visitor, when she falls in love with the bicycling First World War soldier, she dies upon a kiss, leaving him a wilted rose. Romantic fictions celebrate the link between love and death, while offering eternity. Carter exposes their lies, while Sherry Gottlieb's photographer vampire Rusty, in *Love Bites* (1999) is worldly wise: she offers love and a life free from disease to the dying cop who pursues her. They settle happily ever after, serial meals hidden in the complexity of activities of a big city.

(22) One of the fundamental challenges which the vampire enacts is to philosophical constructions underlying social relations. Whether used as the worst kind of terror to be exorcised or, in its contemporary form as potential social/sexual transgressor to be celebrated, the vampire disrupts polarized systems of thought. It undermines Western logical tendencies to construct divisive, hierarchical, oppositional structures. In restrictive, repressive eras the vampire's transgression of gender boundaries, life/death, day/night behavior, its invasion of the sanctity of body, home and blood are elements of its abjection. But in its more radical contemporary form, it is no longer abject, rejected with disgust to ensure identity. And in *Buffy* there is opportunity for vampires and other monster figures to be similarly recuperated (some of them, at least). Vampires, as figures, are now being used to challenge repressive behaviors and offer alternative worldviews. We might well ask why it seems that vampires, and slayers, are part of a version of the imaginative projections of contemporary youth culture.

### **Vampires and Youth Culture: Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Death and Subversion**

The vampire is the only supernatural creature who has become a role model.  
(Poppy Z. Brite *Love in Vein* 1 ix)

(23) Vampires are potentially exciting in their libidinal excess, their challenge to everything everyday. They are now an unavoidable part of our contemporary cultural consciousness. Some writers even track down "real" vampires. Carol Page, seeking those who identify as vampires, notes of "bored-stressed out Americans" that they:

gladly escape into the fantasy of darkness, where exquisite men and women live in a world of power, wealth, and a rich yet perverse knowledge that comes from being very, very old. (8)

Fascination with vampires is frequently more radical and more fun. However, in the new economy of radical contemporary women's vampire fictions, violations of taboos are seen as a feminist/ queer challenge and reevaluation. Vampire fictions are potentially imaginatively liberating and carnivalesque. In accordance with queer theory and Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque (1984), we can see political/sexual meaning in the vampire's body in relation to that of his/her partner/victim. Vampires resist temporal and spatial fixity. They shape-shift, disrupting unified notions of character ( in *Buffy* this is largely indicated by facial distortions). They encourage and represent excess of blood and of eternal, devouring hunger. When this shifting excess is not punished, a radical challenge is issued to the polarized thought patterns and to conventional repressions and constraints.

(24) Vampire communities offer eternal life, albeit in a shape other than the everyday mortal one. This also aligns itself with the subversive, seductive promise of transgression {and performativity}. Armand in Anne Rice's *Queen of the Damned* is described as both demonic, a foul hideous predatory insect, and angelic, perpetually youthful and charming. The combination is compelling, disturbing the easy polarities of Western logic and Christianity:

Daniel stared hard at the creature before him, this thing that looked human and sounded human but was not. There was a horrid shift in his consciousness; he saw this being like a great insect, a monstrous evil predator who had devoured a million human lives. And yet he loved this thing. He loved its smooth white skin, its great dark brown eyes. He loved it not because it looked like a gentle, thoughtful young man, but because it was ghastly and awful and loathsome, and beautiful all at the same time. He loved it the way people love evil, because it thrills them to the core of their soul. (Rice *Queen* 106)

It is his beauty and his evil which attract Daniel, who longs to join the vampire company. Lestat, Armand, those of the blood religions in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, and Poppy Z. Brite's wild youths are lost souls who sometimes play with the borders of death, defying it in their search for alternative reasons for existence. Transgressive, Poppy Z. Brite's characters refuse to replace the tired old order at the story's close. Always, in even their most extreme actions, they remind us of our similarity to them, and of our shared humanity.

(25) Angel is just this kind of figure. In "Becoming," Part 1 (2021) we see his origins in 1753 Ireland, when he is attracted to Darla, whose offer to show him the world initiates him into vampire existence. Vampires' performative nature is most often employed as "dressing to kill" as a vampire (which the new vampire Angel certainly does), fulfilling mortals' fantasies in their frock-coated disguises. As members of a parallel world parasitic upon our own yet longer lasting, they enable us to scrutinize ourselves, to look closely at our equation of desire and disgust, love and death, and to recognize the vampire in ourselves. Vampires constantly manage a complex masquerade of being human.

(26) There are also often not merely androgynous, but gay or lesbian, crossing gender as well as life/death boundaries. All gendered roles are recognized as constructs in postmodernism (see Joan Riviere, 1989), and vampires are a paradigm for this. Sue Ellen Case explains how the lesbian vampire can be read using queer theory which foregrounds same-sex desire without labeling the gender of those desiring and desired. Lesbian vampires, conventionally figured as monsters, are represented by contemporary women writers in a very positive light. Queer theory/belief by destabilizing "the borders of life and death," refusing "the organism which defines the living as the good" (Case 3), positions the queer as "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 3; Gelder 61), very much the role played by the vampire. Lesbian vampires in the work of Katherine Forrest, Jewelle Gomez and others are positive, nurturing figures, boundary breakers who need no punishment, powerful, sexually active women. Celebrating, dramatizing and recognizing the self in this "Other," this strange being, is enabling, radical, liberating. The figure of the gay or lesbian vampire is the ideal icon of a celebratory otherness. In a new take on vampire fictions, Gomez' *The Gilda Stories* (1992) engages with transgression as liberation, through an African American lesbian

vampire focus. *Nite Bites* (1996), the first collection of vampire stories by women, explores a feminist perspective on the genre located in the domestic. Socially and ideologically engaged, many tales, as in Poppy Brite's edited collections *Love in Vein 1 and 2* deal with lesbian vampires and rescript romance.

(27) Today, then, at the end of the century, the vampire becomes the ideal myth to explore and enact imaginative, radical critique of restrictive, oppressive cultural regimes. It can be energetically erotic, critical of repression and hypocrisy, celebrating rather than demonizing women's sexuality and power. Much of the radical energy expresses itself through transgression of gender boundaries and the valorization of homosexual and lesbian relations, themselves most frequently seen as transgressive and marginal. Vampire fictions and the vampire myth in the hands of contemporary women writers explore and enact the practice based in queer theory by defying all boundaries, refusing categories and destructively oriented definitions of difference, expressing the carnivalesque. Vampires have some rather nasty social habits, but as metaphors they offer a fascinating parallel and perspective on our own lives. As Nina Auerbach says "the best vampires are companions" (Auerbach vii.) They are our others, and ourselves. This recuperation and celebratory transgression fuels much of *Buffy*, even though much else such as grade chasing and {prom dancing} is less challenging, quite conventional. *Buffy* occupies a space between the more radical contemporary women's vampire fictions and the condemnation of the vampire and all forms of Otherness, or difference. In doing so, it attracts a wider audience, more used to teen soaps, and can cause them too to think about the nature of conformity and transgression, of hypocrisy and power relations, of recognizing the Other we abject, in our selves.

#### Updating Evil: Complexity and Performativity

(28) One of the things which is fascinating about the series and Buffy's role within it is the negotiation between conventional representations of teenagers in such school- and college-based international soaps as *Heartbreak High* and *Neighbors* (both Australian) *Grange Hill* (British), *Happy Days* (U.S.) and the performative role of not just the vampires, but Buffy and her friends. In updating figures from myth and legend, the series highlights their constructedness in culture. It also refuses to punish. While truly evil vampires dissolve into dust nightly in large numbers at a stake in the heart, other monster creatures live on happily, supported by their friends, given space within the friendship society of the school. In this scenario, *Buffy* the series aligns itself with radical feminist or post-feminist horror; an intervention on the genre similar to feminist interventions in women's crime writing. Vampires, (Angel, and even Spike) witches (Willow) and werewolves (Oz) can be accommodated within the social circle; they do not have to be punished and destroyed. They are truly recognized as the alter egos of everyday teenagers. The horror "turn" is avoided: the creature of horror, the Other, is recognized as ourselves, and does not have to be punished and interred. *Buffy* does have it both ways: it is both an entertaining and rather typical teen series, and a radical feminist or post-feminist horror piece. Why it might more properly be considered post-feminist is just because it does have it both ways. Buffy herself can be a conventionally attractive teenager, an American "Spice Girl" who through her performance highlights the constructedness of this role, displaying its appeal and its limitations. While her largely nocturnal role as a slayer dominates her life, she still has classes to attend, grades to try to keep up with, and friendships to maintain, as well as a mother to placate. Like the schoolgirls heroines of US and UK fiction—novels and comics—of a previous age, Buffy is both interested in being a "normal" teenager, conforming to some of the educational and socializing expectations of her years, and a subversive hypocrisy- and evil-destroying avenger.

(29) There are several kinds of evil which surfaces in people explored in *Buffy*. One kind of evil is conventional: pure, embodied, palpable, nasty, destroyed by the combined forces of good (teenagers working together with Giles). Another kind of evil is the everyday evil of those who oppress difference: Principal Snyder, Buffy's mother and the variously bewitched or straightforwardly bigoted witch hunters. Conventional horror relies upon such conventional representations of evil, and the ability of the genre to punish them, restoring a sort of order.

. . . the pleasure offered by the genre is based on the process of narrative closure in which the horrifying or monstrous is destroyed or contained . . . ....the original order is re-established.

(Jancovitch, 1992, 9)

In the episode "Lie to Me," Rupert Giles and Buffy's discussion ironizes the closure of conventional horror,

highlighting how blinkered and inappropriate it is.

Buffy: "Does it ever get easy?" Giles: "You mean life?" Buffy: "Yeah, does it get easy?" Giles: "What do you want me to say?" Buffy: "Lie to me." Giles: "Yes, it's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after." Buffy: "Liar."

(*Lie to me*)

(30) There is also a third kind of "evil" or set of figures who have conventionally been represented as evil. And it is here that the text becomes more post-modern. The other halves of Willow, Oz, and Angel are all figures of conventional evil who are in fact heroes within the show. They are split selves whose Other can be tolerated, managed, is recognized as part of ourselves. Buffy destroys Angel to save the world from Acatla (*Becoming*, II), but he returns and is recuperated despite a stunningly extensive set of victims who suffer directly at his hands when (as Angelus) his soul has been lost. Fans writing to the Internet sites doubted the credibility of a potential recuperation. But how could we lose Angel? And in a sense, he is not to blame. He has to be recuperated. To a lesser extent, tolerance and nurturing of the full moon werewolf Oz is similar. Like a wayward sibling, he is locked up for his own and everyone else's protection. Here Buffy's organizing and nurturing character appears. Working with Willow and her friends, she ensures that Oz is protected from himself, as others are protected from him. The cage in the library is a very "normal" kennel for Oz the werewolf.

(31) Other reversals of the representation of women as victim or evil figure are fascinating in *Buffy*. Buffy herself is a moral figure; she stamps out/kick-boxes or stakes out evil, exerting her power over its several manifestations. She is attracted by an unconventional vampire who tries to curb his feeding habits, but her attraction to and affinity with vampires does not turn her into the voracious femme fatale usually associated with, for example, the power relationship between Count Dracula and his chosen women. And in fact the fifth-season opener, with Dracula's failed attempt to convert Buffy, specifically repudiates such a relationship. Even when bewitched enough to select Spike, her desire is nicely, neatly, conventionally, ironically directed at wanting to get married. She took a great deal of time before she slept with Angel.

(32) But on the other hand, Buffy does not buy into the conventional safety constructions for young women in conventional horror: woman's purity, need for protection, vulnerability to treacherous seduction which can leave them actively over-sexed, morally badly behaved (!) and then sacrificed (as a societal punishment). Denis Wheatley's Christina in *To the Devil a Daughter* (1953) is a good example. Christina's father sold her to the Devil at birth. She turns into a seductive vamp (definitely seen as demonic: drinking alcohol, smoking, trying to seduce young men) on the eve of her twenty-first birthday. Christina is eventually rescued by her future husband who lies, saying that she is no longer a virgin—so her worth to the devil would have plummeted. Of course, she no longer wants to drink, smoke, seduce young men when her soul is no longer the devil's property. Today, Buffy herself does not bother with the heathen mythic protection of virginity. She is a modern young woman without being either a pure virginal character or a rampant femme fatale. Her role refuses this dichotomy of a past age. Instead, it embraces both Buffy's moral role as slayer superhero, and her normal impulses as a teenager in love with Angel. Again we have it both ways.

(33) But this is not to suggest that the high school community is riotous, unconventional, liberated, despite some strange nocturnal activities. For example, magic for its own sake is to be controlled rather than let loose. And no one in Buffy's group on the Hellmouth thinks to use the supernatural to further their own ends (or not for long). Those who dabble in spells for wicked ends—even manipulative love potions—cause havoc. There is a certain sense of order in the high school community perched precariously on the leaking hell mouth. Willow casting a love spell, gets it all wrong (*Something Blue*). Only good spells really work effectively and are not punished. Magic is fine, mythical figures are recuperated, but basic values of maintenance of life must be preserved. Buffy and her witch, werewolf or vampire friends are very aware of the roles they play, and this heightened sensibility is also a feature of contemporary more radical horror.

(34) With radical feminist vampire writing, of which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a special case, the trick is to recognize the performativity: the characters self-consciously *act out* an often hyped-up, self-aware, even parodic version of being a vampire or a monster, and their alter egos or in this case, slayers. Postmodernist, self-aware magical horror figures then attack real evil themselves, and question, or undermine, the complicit complacency of a repressive society (represented by such characters as Principal Snyder). They carry on with their good work against a context, on the Hellmouth, of a collusive and repressive society which cannot itself see any of its own dark sides. Mothers who would hand their daughters over to be burned as witches, principals and mayors (planning ascension as demons) who lurk on the edge and enable the evil to be let loose, and other collusive power figures all remind us of the Salem witch hunts. In a reference to these witch hunts, Buffy's own mother, Joyce fails to recognize real evil, and victimizes her own daughter as a consequence. Joyce would, it seems, see Buffy burned as a witch when doubting her real value (*Gingerbread*, 2nd series). Yes, she is bewitched herself of course, but it says a great deal about mothers! In *Gingerbread* the Babes in the Wood fairytale is reread. A Hansel and Gretel demon dons the guise of the two lost children. The inhabitants of Sunnydale, believing witches sacrifice young children (Wiccans such as Willow don't) turn against the girls and drag them to the stake. This incident replicates the obsessions of the Salem witch hunt and trials (1692) when 19 men and women, convicted of witchcraft, were hanged on Gallows Hill, Salem village. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* emphasized a political reading of witch hunting (stamping out what seems to refuse to conform—his indictment of the communist witch-hunting of the McCarthy era). It also frighteningly dramatized the obsessive, accompanying madness. Buffy's mother is on a high of suburban domestic conformity when she incites local activism. The treatment of Buffy, Willow and teen witch Amy also says a great deal about conventional societies' ethical blips over the punishment of witches as scapegoats, the loading of all evil onto poor witches/marginalized old ladies, in order to try to embody and erase an evil which actually resides in all of us.

(35) If conventional society fails to recognize that evil is a product of its own rifts, leaks up through its own everyday hellmouths, emerges from the cracks and fissures in what seems like an everyday conformist society, then this blinkered ignorance will lead to chaos. Buffy and her self-aware evil-slaying friends know this. They point out the hypocrisy of such pretence. They act. As teenagers in an everyday conformist small town, however, they are all subject to the controls of some of the very figures whose hypocrisy and blinkeredness they point out.

(36) *Graduation Day, part II*, is a fine example of Buffy and her friends taking on the powers of tangible evil, head on. The mayor plans ascension as a demon and times his major moment of shape-changing to coincide with his speech to the graduation class of 1999. The scene is set for one rite of passage, graduation, as another, ascension, builds up. Rows of gowned, ostensibly demure teenagers watch Principal Snyder's sycophantic introduction, hear his snide remarks about how they only just made it to graduation. Then they watch the mayor proceed through his cue cards about maturing and ascending to a higher state. *He does not know they know* what he has planned. Every ambiguity rings home to all the students. An eclipse covers Sunnydale, the hellmouth opens. At the moment of his transmutation he turns into a monstrously fanged huge serpent, like the sea beast Perseus slays to rescue Andromeda in the legend, like Japanese horror film monsters, like "Mother" in the film *Aliens*. The darkness enables his vampire hordes to encroach on the graduands, from behind. But Buffy and all her year are ready like a medieval army, shooting crossbows of burning wooden stakes, impaling vampires with swords and short stakes, while in the other direction, twentieth-century flame-throwers engulf the monster, one of whose first victims, fittingly, is Snyder.

(37) Though the embodied force of evil writhes rapidly through the school its followers have infested, Buffy is more than a match. She has switched gender roles. She can taunt the mayor/ monster with his/its beloved Faith's blade and she can lead it to its death as the school is detonated into a huge ball of cleansing flame. The team are preserved, the evil is gone, the high school years are over, but they can all carry on into a new life in college. Although Angel says he must leave after Buffy has revitalized him with her own blood, his troubled appearance at the edge of the burning school, at a distance from the jubilant Buffy gang, promises the viewers that he will be back. This episode pulls together all the themes of school chum energy and unity against the hypocrisy and evil of the demonic (and of local society embodied in the

demonic). Buffy's own mythic gendered role reversals cast her as Perseus slaying the monster; and here also the post-modernist, post-feminist take on the vampire-slayer role emerges. The obviously demonic evil vampires are reduced to ashes by the protectors of good and innocence—the school group. Buffy, however, has proven her recognition that not all vampires are evil: they are parts of us, like us. Her love for Angel almost kills her. The violently erotic near-draining of Buffy by Angel, dying, deliberately provoked to attack, emphasizes the technical equation of love and death in vampire fictions, but this time deliberately, consciously sought and survived (helped by her friends and modern medicine).

(38) As an example of radical contemporary vampire or horror fictions, Buffy and her friends offer an alternative way of coping with difference. That they are mythical figures (witches, werewolves, vampires) does not mean they need to be punished within and by society, certainly not in the context of their own take on society. They don't really do any harm. In the economy of this exchange their positions are part of the harmonious balance of a more tolerant and self-aware society—these teenagers' version of a twentieth/twenty-first century society which refuses polarization of good, bad, black, white, male, female, dead, undead.

(39) Quite apart from being immensely entertaining, then, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recognizes that the constructions of evil are part of our society, part of ourselves, and must be brought out of the Hellmouth, out of the neat houses and principal's study and into the open; faced up to, managed, not merely scapegoated.

## Conclusion

Vampires were supposed to menace women, but to me at least, they promised protection against a destiny of girdles, spike heels and approval.

(Auerbach, 1995, p.4)

(40) Vampire tales, a special case of fantasy for young women, have been embraced as offering a popular, deviant alternative sense of youthful energy, and of teenage rebellion. Young in the 1950's when girls' comics were widespread and read by many young women, Nina Auerbach recalls vampire fictions, and I recall voracious devouring of horror fictions of all sorts—comics, films, the lot.

(41) Buffy maneuvers on a new crossroads of genres—girls' adventures, *Superwoman*, Spice Girls' girl power (Spike: "Oh, not with the girl-power bit" *Something Blue* 1999) and vampire fictions. Buffy, her friends and her adventures, operating in the liminal space of the Hellmouth, challenge the symbolic order (rules, conformity) and enact adventures in the imaginary or fantastic space, while also seeking the sane everyday conformity of teenage romance, high school dances, grade chasing. The fantasy escape world is ours as much as theirs; it enables us, the viewers, to side with a good which is for fun-loving, against the multiple evils—tangible nastiness from either side of the Hellmouth, whether male conformist power regimes or monsters. What Buffy does matters as it did for these earlier young women. Like the wedding wreckers in the *Girls Crystal Annual*, Buffy exposes hypocrisy, her own performativity highlighting that of others who are unreasonable and destructive—perhaps the more effectively because, unlike the earlier young women adventurers, hers is a sexualized role, not restricted to older, narrower constructions of female goodness]. The values Buffy upholds are eternal ones of loyalty to friends and family and oneself and carrying out a mission you are born to. The only lives she destroys are those of monsters, ghouls, zombies and vampires—the mean ones, not the flip sides of her friends and lover. When in *Bad Girls* (1999) Faith, the other slayer, shrugs off an accidental murder, Buffy is shocked. Not defiant of all human order and morality herself, Buffy cannot explain or tolerate such immoral wildness, even in the cause of cleaning up the town (or the world). Faith is eventually revealed as mad, and bad.

(42) But what is good and what evil is more difficult to negotiate and define in these more complex times when every bad guy is not wearing a trench coat or a squint but could appear in an attractive form, at least at first. Werewolves, vampires and witches are among Buffy's friends, but they are not bent on evil deeds (though the odd accident occurs). In fact, they fight evil; their stake is subliminal, the boundary between

the hellish, the monstrous, and the everyday. They trouble these neat boundaries, showing them to be constructions. The monster in ourselves can be lived with in *Buffy*. But what cannot be tolerated is the constructed hypocrisy of the American Dream: support for oppressive evil figures in roles of power; the condemnation of young women to the stake (Salem) and those of a different political cast to exile (McCarthy); the nurturing of boy-next-door serial killers. Monsters emerge from the locker room, on the walk home, or in the library. In *Buffy*, appropriately, what's next door and everyday is about to transmute into something nasty; it is often a dangerous fake.

(43) The reasons for *Buffy's* wide audience are many. *Buffy's* message and formulae are similar to radical feminist vampire fictions: the transgression, the carnival and the excess, and the irony are all there. She also carries on the tradition of the independent schoolgirl adventurer. Finally, *Buffy's* own, complex, attractiveness is compelling and that of the lover she engages, the teenage thinking girl's vampire, Angel, is unavoidable.

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