

"One Girl in All the World:"

The Portrayal of the Female Hero Figure in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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#### Abstract

There have been an abundance of critical studies focused on the hero figure throughout the years, one might even say an over-abundance. There is an obvious absence in most all of these studies when looking from essay to essay, though. While critics have covered a wide variety of male heroes quite extensively, the female hero is almost absent in these studies. The heroine is a very present entity in popular television, especially over the past two decades. With iconic characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer (along with female friends such as Willow, Cordelia, Tara, etc.), Sabrina, the Teenage Witch, Xena Warrior Princess, the witches of *Charmed*, as well as many that fall into secondary roles, it seems that there has been no shortage of strong women to look up to throughout the 1990s and 2000s. This paper will examine *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* primarily, using some other shows as contextual evidence, studying how the female hero is portrayed, and how this image is juxtaposed against that of other women, and the male figures in the television series. The study will show that undoubtedly television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (as well as its spin-off *Angel, the Series*) made huge leaps in portraying women as strong, independent characters who function separate from their male counterparts as successfully as when they (the men) are present. Inevitably, however, patriarchal structure insinuates itself into the shows, casting a shadow over some of this progress.

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During the seven season run of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one aspect the program was praised most for was the wide range of personalities and indeed, types of people, the characters were able to represent. While the show seems to be populated with many characters that have supernatural abilities to elevate them, there are certainly several characters that are labeled as "normal" (meaning no powers to speak of), and even within this television universe where superpowers are sometimes the norm, many of the characters possess traits which misalign them with the traditional hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity. What makes this show unique?

There are plenty of television shows based around the concept of vampires, especially currently, however that the hero in this show is a female makes it undoubtedly special and therefore the show does stand out from the pack. This paper will examine *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* primarily, using some other shows as contextual evidence, studying how the female hero is portrayed, and how this image is juxtaposed against that of other women, and the male figures in the television series. The study will show that undoubtedly television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (as well as its spin-off *Angel, the Series*) made huge leaps in portraying women

as strong, independent characters who function separate from their male counterparts as successfully as when they (the men) are present. Inevitably, however, patriarchal structure insinuates itself into the shows, casting a shadow over some of this progress.

Inevitably the character that the discussion must begin with is Buffy Summers herself. As the heroine of the television show, she is presented to the audience in what is clearly meant to be a pro-feminist manner. When we first meet her, and as we follow her along through the seasons, we see that she comes to rely on the assistance of several others, many of which are male, many of whom she forms romantic relationships with. Buffy comes to rely implicitly on the advice and wisdom of Rupert Giles, her Watcher, who becomes, quite obviously, her father-figure as the seasons progress. This is interesting to note as Buffy's actual father, Hank Summers, divorced with her mother before the pilot episode, and though we hear through Buffy's and her mother's words that he continues to make plans to see her in the through the first season or two, Hank rarely seems to follow through.

Because of the absence of Buffy's biological father, Giles' influence over her would seem to indicate her compulsion or need to have a father figure in place, that without this, perhaps she feels she is lacking. This concept is an inherently contrasting one to that of the strong female hero. That is not to say that relying on others in general – (or even relying on Giles specifically, in Buffy's case, since he is, undoubtedly the most intelligent character on the show) – is a weak or negative character trait. That is not my argument at all. What makes Buffy such a unique and successful Slayer, after all, is the willingness of her friends to always stand up and help her. Indeed, though, the absence of her father seems to manifest itself over and over again, most notably in the season 6 episode titled "Normal Again." At this point in the series, Buffy has already made the ultimate sacrifice to save the world – she allowed herself to die so everyone

else could live ("The Gift"). After doing so, Buffy goes to heaven and is at peace, however her friends (especially Willow), due to their intense grief and unwillingness to let her go convince themselves that Buffy must be in a hell dimension that they have to save her from and four of the characters (Willow, Tara, Xander, and Anya) bring Buffy back from the dead, careful to do so behind the backs of people such as Giles and the vampire Spike, who would have been opposed ("Bargaining"). In the episode "Normal Again," Buffy is stabbed by a demon with venom possessing hallucinogenic qualities. As her hallucinations grow stronger, Buffy allows herself to believe in them more and more, because in that world her parents are still together and the "monster stuff" is the hallucination. Because of this episode's nature, it is plain to see that even as deep into the series as season 6 Buffy still has issues with the way her parents split up, and especially how her father decided to gradually extract himself from their lives completely.

Another of Buffy's characteristics that both breaks hegemonic codes of femininity while simultaneously catering to them as well is the way she looks in conjunction with her supernatural abilities themselves. As the Slayer, Buffy is the Chosen One. There is "one girl in all the world chosen to fight the forces of darkness." Essentially, under the guise of a petite, blonde, teenage girl, a superhero is hidden. This concept stemmed from the writer, Joss Whedon. He said this about the creation of the series: "I'd seen a lot of horror movies which I'd loved very much, with blonde girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys and I just germinated this idea about how much I'd like to see a blonde girl go into a dark alley, get attacked by a big monster and then kill it!" (Whedon, 1998). The idea was a novel one. Further, Buffy herself is, in some ways, turned into a masculine figure in the way that she kills: using a stake, an undeniably phallic symbol. So in essence, she is asserting dominance in a masculine manner, though she is a female character.

In Sara Buttsworth's article "'Bite Me': Buffy and the Penetration of the Gendered Warrior Hero," she discusses the discrepancy between Buffy's powers and her appearance as well. She notes that Buffy's features are delicate and she is portrayed as a slim, petite, attractive blonde despite her strength, or in opposition to her strength, as a means of "disguise," just as her earlier predecessors, such as the Bionic Woman, utilized real, physical costume disguises to conceal their identity. In the Bionic Woman, the article indicates that the costume is employed to reassure the viewer that "a woman's attitude is only skin-deep... [and] the use of disguise allows a revelation of 'true femininity' under a tough exterior. This defuses the threat these women pose to a gender order which associates strength with masculinity—not femininity" (190). Conversely, Buffy's camouflage is her gender itself. She never conceals her identity or hides who she is.

Although "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" features the supernatural prevalently in its storylines, it is well known for tackling very realistic issues. Head writer and creator Joss Whedon is known for writing storylines that do not wrap up in neat little bows, and strives to depict each storyline as realistically as possible in an attempt to reveal something honest and telling about the characters that the audiences can relate to. Within the Buffy-verse there are many examples. In season two, for example, Buffy deals with the consequences of losing her virginity. After she and Angel (a 250+ year old vampire with a soul) sleep together on her birthday, Angel's soul, which was a curse given to him with the stipulation that he would lose it should he experience a moment of "true happiness" is expelled from his body, leaving only the demon Angelus ("Surprise"/"Innocence").

Throughout the remainder of the season, Buffy has to deal with the many and various emotions attached to this, since she has essentially lost her lover, and yet someone ugly and

murderous is walking around with lover's face, the man she has allowed to take her virginity, while facing up to what her mother and her friends' reactions are. This story arc not only deals with the repercussions of making the decision to have sex, but also what happens when that person turns out to be different than who they initially seemed to be. This story arc also reiterates the fact that Buffy is indeed not alone, despite what she may do or think; her friends and her mother stand by her unconditionally. The season culminates with Angel regaining his soul just after his counterpart Angelus has opened a portal that has the capability to suck the world into hell; the only way to close the portal is to sacrifice Angel, which Buffy, in anguish, as she is finally face to face with the man she loves again, does, as is her duty as the Slayer ("Becoming Part II"). This storyline depicts very well the idea that not all love stories get a happy ending, and although Angel does return from hell the next season, Buffy and Angel are never to reunite as a couple again and, in fact, Angel moves away at the end of season 3.

Also of note then, are the relationships that Buffy is a part of throughout the series in general and why, if the television show is so "pro-feminist" and is so encouraging of female independence that for a long time Buffy seems to have a need to be in a relationship, a need that can easily turn dangerous and harmful for both her, the other party in the relationship, or both. It should be noted that I am not arguing that the character of Buffy should not have been in romantic relationships. It is not my contention that romantic relationships make a character inherently weak. However the character of Buffy in particular seems to be heavily compelled to have a significant other throughout much of the series.

Obviously the ongoing and iconic relationship of the series is between Buffy and Angel, which is never really resolved as far as either of their series is concerned. This relationship does very little to nothing at all in terms of revealing Buffy's character as more independent or

powerful, in fact, just the opposite at the beginning of the series as she seems, at times, far too distracted by what Angel is doing at any given time to characterize her as independent. From the first time Angel appears on the show ("Welcome to the Hellmouth"), the pilot, to the last time he appears on the show ("End of Days"/"Chosen") which is the series finale, he is characterized primarily as "the protector." While he is aware that Buffy is the Slayer and can function on her own, and while he enjoys watching her fight, in the end Angel feels that it is his responsibility to "save" her from the world. This is part of the reason Angel had to be taken off the Buffy show, I believe, as his presence would never have allowed her to grow and mature.

The other two significant relationships that Buffy has throughout the series are that of Riley Finn and Spike. Buffy's relationship with Riley Finn would probably have to be considered the most "normal" out of the three, if only because he is the only one that is not a vampire. However just as Angel had the desire to be Buffy's protector, so does Riley Finn. The difference, though, is that as Riley is only human, he really is no match at all for Buffy and Buffy is self sufficient and always growing stronger. In the case of this relationship, the show is really pushing the boundaries of hegemonic codes in a very apparent way. The female in a relationship is not generally the more powerful one; she is the one that needs protected. Obviously this is not the case with Buffy.

This desire for Riley to be able to protect Buffy (not just physically, but emotionally) and Buffy's continuous dismissal of this protection on both counts as she is coming into her own as a Slayer makes Riley feel incompetent and unnecessary, the storyline coming to a head in the episode "Into the Woods" when Spike reveals to Buffy that Riley has been allowing female vampires to use him for blood in a "suck house." When Buffy confronts Riley, his feelings of inadequacy are finally revealed to Buffy, when Riley tells her that at least the female vampire

needs him. He gives her an ultimatum and tells her to stop him from leaving or he is going away, and at the end of the episode he is gone. This relationship is where we see a real shift beginning to occur concerning gender roles as it is easy to see that the character of Riley was feeling unwanted, unneeded, and unloved, which are traditionally feelings attributed to the female character in a relationship. Conversely, Buffy is attempting to deal with her "Slayerly" duties, a mother who is falling ill and a little sister, so she is steadily becoming more independent on her own and does not need someone to hold her up every moment of the day as she may have a few seasons prior.

The last significant relationship the Buffy is a part of throughout the series is the one she has with Spike, another vampire (100+ years old, grand-child of Angel). Before discussing the reasons why Buffy and Spike's relationship did not work and, in fact, was doomed from the beginning, it is important to understand how the two of them met and interacted prior to entering into a relationship, since Spike was a character on the show long before he was intimate with Buffy. In addition, how Spike came to be the way he is, is noteworthy as well when considering how he responds in certain situations.

Prior to becoming a vampire, William (Spike's given name), was probably one of the softest, kindest, gentlest characters in the entire series. William lived during the 1800s in England, where he was striving to be a poet. Though at the time no one thought he was very talented, William kept at it, writing poems to the ones he loved in an attempt to make them feel, though he was, for the most part rejected ("Fool for Love"). In many of the episodes William appears, he appears with his mother, to whom he was very close. Around the time that William was turned into a vampire, his mother was ailing, and so, when he was turned, unlike most other vampires who instinctively sever all human ties, William wanted to turn his mother in a desire to

keep her with him always and save her from the illness ("Lies My Parents Told Me"). Even after Drusilla (Angel's childe) turned William, it is quite apparent that despite whatever superficial disguise William/Spike may don, he was not made quite the same as the common vampire, and still has the ability to feel, emote, and express himself deeply, making connections with others as any human would. This causes him trouble, especially when it comes to his sire Drusilla, as William/Spike is madly in love with her for over a century and is described as being loyal only to her, however it is quite clear that Drusilla is not as devoted to their "relationship" and frequently strays out of their bed.

It is clear that Spike has a fascination with Buffy from the first time he observes her fighting. At the time, this appears to be more of a predator's observation but by season 5 it is revealed that Spike has feelings for Buffy, and he tells her this directly ("Crush"). As a demon, despite the fact that he is more capable than most at discerning emotion Spike is unable to deal with Buffy's rejection and in the episode "I Was Made to Love You" a story arc begins that depicts objectification of women in its most base form. In the episode, Buffy encounters a "manufactured woman" – a robot, that a man has created, who is destroying the city intent to get back to her "Master." This gives Spike the idea that if he is unable have the real Buffy, maybe he could have the next best thing, and at the end of the episode, after the robot is defeated, Spike sneaks out to speak with the creator of the robot and places an order.

This storyline comes to a head a few episodes later in "Intervention," when Buffy and her friends find out about the robot and what he has been using it for, however Buffy's opinion of Spike – that he is disgusting for creating a robot to use like that – is shaken when she realizes Spike has allowed himself to be tortured almost to death in her absence in order to protect her younger sister. What makes this so interesting is, that despite that fact that Spike made the

unseemly decision to objectify Buffy, literally, after her rejection of him, his other actions of selflessness spoke loud enough to override that discretion.

By the time Buffy accepts Spike as a partner, however, she has already sacrificed herself and literally been dragged back from the grave. Initially Buffy feels that Spike is the only one that she can confide in because he was not a part of bringing her back and also because he is already dead. The pair finally have sex in the episode "Smashed," and the title of the episode is fairly indicative of the type of relationship the two of them are going to have throughout the season. Buffy uses Spike in the worst way, exploiting the emotions she knows he has for her, and although he knows Buffy is doing this, Spike initially allows it because he feels that this might be the closest he is ever going to get, or that maybe he can eventually win Buffy over to feel more. Buffy finally faces up to the fact that she is just using Spike in the episode "Dead Things" and breaks things off with him in the episode "As You Were," saying that although she wants him she can never love him so it would not be fair. She leaves Spike standing alone in the rubble of what used to be his home.

This story arc comes to a close in the episode "Seeing Red," after having a sexual encounter with one of the other characters on the show, Anya, who was meant to get married earlier in the season but was left at the altar by Xander, Spike comes to the conclusion that all he needs to do is convince Buffy. He shows up at her house and attempts to do just this, and in doing so almost succeeds in raping her, backing off only just in time, coming back to himself, horrified at what he almost managed to do. Spike ends up leaving town, then, saying that things will be different when he returns, and when he comes back, indeed, he has earned himself a soul. These storylines discuss several issues that relate to the struggle of power between men and women and aid in the understanding of the text as either pro-feminist or otherwise. In this

particular story arc, Buffy appears as very weak, due to the fact that she is still recovering from being ripped out of heaven. She makes many mistakes and mistreats many people; the issue of abuse is dealt with within her relationship with Spike, once again flipping the script on what would be considered the traditional hegemonic code. In this relationship, the female is abusive toward the male, and because Spike has a government chip implanted in his head at the time, there is nothing he can do to fight back; the male is the powerless one in this situation until he realizes that he can still hurt Buffy now that she has returned from the grave. However Spike does not utilize this power until his attempted rape at the very end of the season, where the audience is shown yet another weak image of the heroine of the series.

Undoubtedly there are other characters in the series that help to flesh out the television show as one that can be considered in terms of its contributions to breaking gender stereotypes (or not). In the series, the character of Anya, who first appears in season 3 "The Wish," is a vengeance demon with the power to bend and alter time, maim, and murder traitorous husbands and lovers, etc. This character, as she progresses through the show, loses her powers as a result of doing her job (exacting vengeance on cheaters). This can essentially be read that she is being punished. In season 6, when she is finally preparing to marry Xander, a main character that she has been dating for most of the series, he leaves her at the altar ("Hell's Bells"). Angered by this, Anya goes to her boss and gets her powers back, however she is not as talented at her job as she formerly was, and is unable to fulfill the duties with as much bloodlust as she once did and so she has her powers taken away for good, after requesting one of her wishes to be recanted, feeling remorse for her actions. This suggests that, because Anya was/is in love with a man, she is less capable or incapable of performing a job as sufficiently as before she allowed her emotions to "get to her." Notable as well, is the fact that her superior, as a vengeance demon is a

male. Although her position as a vengeance demon is one that is meant to be powerful, empowering, and one that puts her in a position that is superior to that of the people surrounding her, in the end, it is a male demon who she reports to, meaning that even in this facet of the television show, it is conforming to the prescribed hegemonic codes.

The primary story arc of season 7 is one that lends itself to this study as well. To defeat the villain of the final season, Buffy makes the decision to share her Slayer powers with all the girls around the world who have the "potential" to be a Slayer. She does this with the help of Willow (who is a witch), and in the series finale the idea of the "Chosen One" turns into that of the "Chosen *Ones*." What is interesting to note about the series finale, however, is that although Buffy makes this very selfless act, and shares her power with all the girls in the world that have the potential to be Slayers, in the end, her actions are not the ones that end up saving the world. Indeed, it is the sacrifice of Spike, who willingly gives up his life in order to save the others, that closes the Hellmouth and saves (most of) the gang. While it is true that Spike ends up getting resurrected in the fifth season of *Angel the Series*, it is undeniable that Spike, a male, was the one who saved the world in the final episode of a television series that, according to its creator was meant to be all about female empowerment.

In the spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel: the Series*, similar dynamics between characters can be found, presumably because it shares the same creator, many of the same characters, and many of the same writers. After Angel leaves *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, he gets his own series, set in Los Angeles. The two characters I most want to discuss are the primary female characters on the show, Cordelia Chase and Winifred Burkle.

It is significant to note that both of the women on the show end up dead before the series finale. Traditionally, women are viewed as items to be protected and kept safe and pure. Here,

on a spin-off of a series that has a female for its hero, it is interesting that while the spin-off has a male hero, the females under his "protection" do not make it to the end of the series.

Cordelia Chase is a character who made the transition to *Angel: the Series* along with Angel himself. During her time on *Buffy*, Cordelia was characterized as a "bitch:" snotty, rude, superior. However deep down she really did care about the well being of her true friends and she was always willing to make sacrifices to save them, a characteristic that continued when she moved to the spin-off, even as the "bitchiness" of her character was toned down just slightly. Cordelia Chase leaves the show in episode 100, "Thank You," where the Powers-that-Be allow her the opportunity to speak with Angel and her other friends one last time before ascending to a higher plane, becoming a higher being. This is significant because, although the females on *Angel: the Series* generally meet their demise, it is very common that they are then raised up on some type of pedestal, as is done here.

A similar situation can be seen when analyzing the character of Winifred Burkle. When the character of Fred comes onto the show, she is a slave girl who Angel rescues from an oppressive dimension. Fred is extremely intelligent but very soft spoken and shy, and throughout most of the series her attentions are fought over by several of the male characters on the show. Fred meets her demise when she inhales a mystical airborne "virus" and becomes infected with an ancient god-king, Illyria. This god-king intends to hollow out her body and use the shell to inhabit himself. Angel actually allows this to happen, as he finds out the alternative, saving her, would cause tens of thousands of people to die in her place ("A Hole in the World"). This is again, significant because although Fred has been allowed to die, a superior being is now in her place, and a male figure has actually been made to "hollow" out her body, a very

sexualized act in and of itself. That Illyria is a god-king, is yet another example of how the women in this series are raised above the other characters after their deaths.

Although the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tripped over some of the traditional patriarchal concepts as many other shows and movies do, it managed to accomplish what it set out to do over its seven seasons – present a positive and powerful female hero that could function on her own even though she was not afraid to ask for the help of others. It is difficult to discern whether or not the characteristics that fit into what would be characterized as the "traditional hegemonic code" were unconsciously included, or were purposeful. I do not think it would have added to the believability at all if the text could have been read as strictly pro-feminist all the way through; that is not the way life works and the characters would not have been as relatable. They would have come off flat. But I cannot be sure that this is the cause of the discrepancy that is being experienced every once in a while throughout this series (as well as the spin-off *Angel: the Series*).

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