

**Dawn as Ophelia:
The Conflicting Femininities of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

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Gang Girl:

A potent symbol of female degeneracy. The gang girl was the teenage bad girl par excellence, who, it was assumed, had quit school, stole from strangers and family alike, instigated street fights, and had multiple sex partners. (Franca Iacovetta, *Gossip, Contest, and Power in the Making of Suburban Bad Girls*)

Ophelia:

In the story of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the obedient daughter who kills herself, drowning in grief and sorrow when she cannot meet the competing demands of Hamlet and her father. *Reviving Ophelia* presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile. (Maria Gonick, *Between "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia"*)

Dawn:

Nobody knows who I am. Not the real me. It's like, nobody cares enough to find out. I mean, does anyone ever ask me what I want to do with my life? Or what my opinion is on stuff? Or what restaurant to order in from?

— "Real Me" (5002)

Introduction

[1] Throughout the decade leading up to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s debut on network television, a number of polarized discourses surrounding adolescent femininity were already mainstream subjects in American culture. With the publication of psychologist Mary Pipher's book *Reviving Ophelia* in 1994, a resurgence of "moral and social concern...and fascination" over girls' fragility overtook the nation, along with a completely different "phenomenon"—girl power, originally a more "rough edged" movement derived from the punk "Riot Grrrls" of Washington. (Gonick 1-6). Though these competing perspectives have been difficult for both scholars and critics to reconcile, probing the wide range of beliefs and values they contain is essential to understanding *Buffy*'s place as a third wave feminist artwork in a postmodern era, where the definition of the self is split and changeable (*Fighting the Forces* 43). It may be easy to think of *Buffy* as simply "Whedon's take on *Reviving Ophelia*—building a girl's self-esteem [to] suggest that she attack her fears head on" (Tucker 1). Such an assumption, however, is simplistic, given the number of differentiated characters in the series and their various "embodiments" of femininity, some which are more in compliance with the

girl power “standard” than others. The introduction of Buffy’s younger sister Dawn is perhaps the series’ most obvious example of a deviation from this “norm portrayal” of the empowered female—one that recognizes Pipher’s conceptualization of a “damaging,” “problematic,” and “painful” adolescent experience which renders girls extremely vulnerable and passive (Pipher 310). The extensive development of Dawn’s character, however, in later seasons¹ suggests that it is possible to outgrow and overcome this state of “feminized” helplessness while still in one’s teenage years. Hence, having used the figure of the gang girl with Buffy to accustom their fans to teen female empowerment, the series creators braved their fans’ enormous resistance to Dawn to show them what reviving Ophelia—for Pipher, a classic example troubled adolescent female—and recovering girls’ lost sense of self might look like (*Reviving Ophelia*).

The Rationale: Gang Girl vs. Ophelia

[2] While Buffy’s juvenile delinquent past and slaying profession certainly make her comparable to the gang girl, Dawn, alternatively, assumes the role of “Ophelia.” Unlike her “outsider sister” Buffy, Dawn is a special kind of reject—a girl whose rebellious behavior, isolation, and self-hating tendencies are amplified to extremes throughout the series’ fifth and sixth seasons. Though Buffy and her group of friends in high school could certainly claim “outsider status” for themselves, for the most part their exclusion was “a source of strength” and solidarity—not a burden (Zettel 110). As Sarah Zettel points out, “Being distanced from the norm gave them [the Scoobies] the ability to see clearly, move freely and empathize with others” (Zettel 110). Dawn, however, does not belong to a gang of “outcasts,” but rather suffers the “demons” of teenage life alone, save for the occasional visit with her friend Janice or some positive encouragement from the Scoobies, especially Spike, Willow and Tara (*Sex and the Slayer* 55). As a result, this intense isolation places her in a much different classification than from Buffy—one with its own negative and more severe set of consequences.

“The Gang Girl”

[3] Though not quite popular in high school, Buffy is for the most part, a “well-connected” girl, as she depends on her watcher and group of friends for assistance with

¹ I am referring here to the end of season 6 and the entire 7th season.

slaying and averting forthcoming apocalypses. Her (small group of) peers, furthermore, is also able to understand her frustrations about leading a double life as well as pick up what more “policing” and “level-headed” adults might miss, as for example, in season two’s “Innocence” [2014] when Willow, realizing that Buffy has slept with Angel, tells an ignorant Giles to stop prodding her (Bowers 3). Beyond Rupert Giles, however, there are a number of adults in Sunnydale—namely those who do not know her true identity—who throughout the series’ have a much different conception of Buffy. From their perspective, she is the “gang girl,” or juvenile delinquent—a point made clear to us from the beginning of the series, when Buffy’s mom Joyce reminds her of her expulsion from Hemery in L.A. after burning down the school’s gym. Thus, it is no surprise that when Buffy arrives in Sunnydale, authority figures are wary of her. In the series premiere, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” [1001] even pushover Principal Doug Flutie is disturbed by her history:

Flutie: A clean slate, Buffy, that's what you get here. What's past is past. We're not interested in what it says on a piece of paper, even if it says... (reads) Whoa.

Buffy: Mr. Flutie...I know my transcripts are a little... colorful.

Flutie: Buffy, don't worry. Any other school they might say 'watch your step', or 'we'll be watching you'... But, that's just not the way here. We want to service your needs, and help you to respect our needs. And if your needs and our needs don't mesh...

[4] Hence, as the series progresses, Buffy’s bad start soon develops into a high school long “career,” as her Slayer duties require her to break a number of rules which adults consistently interpret as “criminal” behavior. Flutie, for example, in the next episode “The Harvest” (1002), immediately reprimands her for attempting to leave school grounds, though it is part of a noble effort to save Xander’s friend Jesse. By the time Principal Snyder arrives, she has been elevated from a “teacher’s concern” to (in his own words) “the most troublesome student in the school.” As an authority figure, Snyder’s opinion is valid—after all, she skips class (“The Harvest” 1002, “Bad Girls” 3014), runs away (“Becoming, Part 2” 2002), and trespasses on others’ property (“Killed By Death” 2018, “Choices” 3019) throughout the show’s first three seasons (Iacovetta 16). In essence, she appears to fit psychologist Tim Brennan’s model of the “rebellious and constrained middle class drop-out girl”—“angry, refractory, and alienated” (37). Lisa Brinkworth, however, presents us with a second, more severe archetype of the female juvenile delinquent: the “tank girl,” a “cocky, feminist, aggressive, new breed of

criminal...[who] knows how to work the system, dresses smartly for court, and turns the tables violently on repressive and sadistic men” (46). Save for the latter part of this description, we can note the similarities—even Buffy cannot escape violent clashes with the police. In “Becoming, Part Two,” when she is wrongly accused of Kendra’s murder, a female cop radios to her partner: “We have a homicide suspect...female, blond[e], approximately sixteen years old...[and] dangerous.” As viewers, we must face up to the criminal justice system’s definition of Buffy, even though her violent actions have clearly been taken out of context². Furthermore, sociologist Laurie Schaffner reminds us that this “type” of juvenile delinquent certainly has a real-life basis—in her study *Capturing Girls’ Experiences of Community Violence*, she provides us with a strikingly similar account of “Elizabeth Martin”—“a bright, blonde, sixteen year old ‘Valley girl’ from suburban Northern California,” detained in a juvenile detention facility for assault with a deadly weapon. Martin explains:

I was in detention in Oakland and my dad came to pick me up from there. On the way home, I told my dad, “Give me the cell phone—I gotta call my boyfriend.” He’s all, “No way—you are in big trouble.” So all I did was kind of show him this little knife on my key chain and he goes all ballistic when we got home, he calls the police and now I’m in here for assault or brandishing a knife or something like that! (105)

[5] Schaffner goes on to attest that the “case illustrates...[how] violence has become part of the contemporary dominant mainstream and youth culture in the United States,” given that even the quintessential “California girl” cannot evade crime, despite her comfortable “middle class background” and family (107). Though Buffy—being raised by a single parent—isn’t in a completely comparable situation, Schaffner’s statement also suggests that “female violence” in a postfeminist era is in some respects unavoidable. “In some ways,” she asserts, “the fascination with a ‘new’ violent female offender is not new...[rather] a notion emerged that the women’s movement had ‘caused’ a surge in women’s serious crimes...” (45). This misconception, criminologist Meda Chesney-Lind argues, [has been] “one of the most widely held beliefs concerning female delinquency” since the mid 1970s (95). Hence, such an assumption makes the term “girl power”

² Of course, in this instance, the system is actually being unfair to Buffy. The preceding quotation, however, is only meant to draw parallels on a surface level between the “tank girl” and Slayer. The more important point is that the cop’s description of Buffy illustrates how easily she can fit into the “mold” of juvenile delinquent.

problematic, as “feminist icon” Buffy also belongs to a subset of girls whose crimes have been dubbed “the shady side of liberation” (95).

“Ophelia”

[6] Dawn, on the other hand, fits into an entirely different category. Unlike her more assertive and violent sister, she is physically and emotionally “vulnerable,” “awkward...and oftentimes seems to be alone” (Jowett 54, Gornick 14). Additionally, throughout *Buffy*’s fifth season we see a variety of characters refer to her as “innocent” (Buffy, Ben, Spike, and the monks³), thus reinforcing the idea of her anticipated death as momentarily tragic. In other words, she is “protected and coddled” from life’s Big Bads—what scholar Lorna Jowett refers to as serving “the generic function of the damsel in distress” (57). This distress results from Dawn’s ineptness and inexperience at handling psychologically complex situations, which manifests itself in a number of harmful behaviors like cutting herself and stealing. These actions make other characters distance themselves and act hostile towards her—as evident with her middle school classmates in “The Body”⁴ (5016) (Wilcox 85). It is from this perspective that Dawn’s character fits in quite well with Mary Pipher’s notion of the Ophelia—a girl with little “inward direction...who loses herself in adolescence” and eventually resorts to self-destructive measures “because of grief” (4).

The Case for Ophelia

In The Beginning: Identity

[7] Dawn’s introduction to *Buffy* ushers in a new but arguably different focus on teenage life and its difficulties—one that is noticeably more constricted, since the show is primarily centered around “the Scoobies and their activities” (Jowett 54). While her arrival does allow the series to go back and “refocus on themes of generational conflict and responsibility,” Dawn’s main function within the narrative is as the Key—“a mystical energy not of this world,” which the Slayer must protect with her life (Jowett 55,

³ In “No Place Like Home” (5005), Monk: Human, and helpless. She’s an innocent in this. She needs you.

⁴ again, discussed later. Dawn’s peers have apparently picked up from somewhere the fact that she “cut herself once”...an “extreme” thing to do (5016).

“No Place Like Home 5005). This combination of circumstances, Jowett argues, explains why Dawn “is initially presented as alienated” in the show, and feels that “no one understands her”; but Dawn is also a *teenage girl*, who is constantly excluded from groups and questioning her identity (54). In “Real Me,” her first full-length⁵ episode in the series, she addresses these struggles head on—“Nobody knows who I am. Not the real me...It's like nobody cares enough to find out” (5002). This is essentially what Pipher refers to “true/false self conflict,” in which girls are forced by society to “suppress their authentic selves” in order to take on “culturally-scripted personas” (Pipher 26).

Consequently, Dawn’s voiceover makes it clear that she has her own distinct opinions about the Scoobies—from Xander (a schoolgirl crush) to Willow (the brainy role model), and of course, Buffy (the self-involved older sister). In turn, they also see her as a number of different “people,” from an annoyance (“I don’t think Giles likes me too much”) or fellow intellectual (“[Willow] likes school as much as I do”) to a “friend,” (“Xander” doesn’t look down on people”). It is unclear, however, if she incorporates any of these meanings into the definition of her “real self,” or even if such a “real self” exists. As Pipher notes in her study, “wholeness is shattered by the chaos of adolescence⁶; girls become fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions”⁷ (5). As a result, these two somewhat paradoxical perspectives⁸ bring forth two equally varied notions of female adolescence from the Ophelia movement—either that the teenage years are “a struggle to find a self, integrate the past and present, and find a place in the larger culture” (Pipher) or (as Simone de Beauvoir suggests) that they are “a time when girls realize that men have the power and that their only [agency] comes from consenting to be submissive” (48, 6).

Helpless?

⁵ Dawn is featured in a brief scene at the end of “Buffy vs. Dracula” (5001).

⁶ Scholar Marnina Gonick argues that “the representation of adolescence as chaos feeds into many of the demeaning cultural stereotypes about girls and young women” (13).

⁷ “sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive,” etc. (Pipher 5).

⁸ Pipher’s argument is essentially contradictory. Earlier in the book, she explains that each girl has an “authentic self” which is forced by the dominant culture to suppress (8). Her latter discussion here, however, acknowledges a multiplicity of selves, a truly postmodern concept. Gonick argues, “this sense of a changing and unchangeable self is, however, problematized by postmodernism, which disrupts the possibility of an authentic self by noting the socio-historical contingency of subjectivity” (12).

[8] Dawn, however, is far from submissive. Rather, she is portrayed as “vulnerable,” “emotional” and “isolated” to heightened degrees that surpass those of the previous teen generation on *Buffy*⁹—and what Pipher classifies as normal female adolescent behavior (5). As Pipher herself explains, “Teenage girls are extremists who [only] see the world in black-and-white terms...there are no shades of gray”¹⁰ (55). Due to her “double nature as key [and little sister]—which makes her the ultimate object of protection for Buffy”—Dawn cannot be treated as the typical troubled adolescent, but rather as what Pipher refers to as a “sapling in the hurricane”—ready to blow over any minute (8). In these instances, Dawn is very quick to pick up on how others react to her, as for example, in the episode “Blood Ties,” when Buffy’s birthday party takes place. Coming down the stairs, she exclaims to her sister, “They were talking about me, just like everybody is!” (5013). Additionally, she addresses how she feels Buffy et al. seem to think of her: “Dawn's too young and too delicate to hear anything” (5013).

[9] Her sarcastic remark is, however, in some ways true. Dawn is physically powerless and does demonstrate her lack of “emotional maturity” in intense situations by resorting to self-destructive measures. Of course, the most obvious is “her cutting herself,” when she finds out the truth about her purpose, which Rhonda Wilcox calls “a reaction to questioning her own identity, reality...and incarnation in a human body,” and what Pipher would label as simply “a way to deal with psychic pain” (Wilcox 185). Nevertheless, the act itself brings about more interpretations and consequences than those discussed by both scholars—ones that namely deal with Dawn’s second realm of exclusion: junior high. The brief glimpse that audience gets of her daily activities there in “The Body” (5016) immediately calls attention to her social status as “outcast,” as she complains to a confidant about teasing and the new rumor of her “being adopted,” as she wipes tears off her face (Wilcox 185). Later in the episode, Kevin (a crush) calls attention to her “freak status” while empathizing with her. “Things get so crazed you know,” he explains, “[sometimes] you just wanna do something...extreme” (5016). Thus, he is able

⁹ What I mean more precisely, is that while *Buffy* has always functioned on a melodramatic level (and of course the characters have suffered) Dawn’s dual role as the Key and little sister put her in a much more precarious position than the other characters. Also, in this season, Dawn is fourteen—two years younger than Buffy when the series started—so her characterization and treatment by the Scoobies is more understandable.

¹⁰ I would argue that Dawn sees the world in black in white during her early years in the series.

to ignore the status quo opinion of Dawn in order to accept her for the “real person” she is. This short moment of bliss, however, soon lapses into “cataclysmic chaos” when she hears the news of her mother’s death (Pipher 54, Wilcox 185). In the hall, even Dawn’s peers are able to hear her, as she breaks right next to “prima bee-yotch” Kirsty and her group of friends (5016). Hence, she does “go mad with grief and drown”—albeit in her own [metaphorical] way (Pipher 4).

“Bad Behavior”

[10] Nonetheless, after Joyce’s (and eventually her sister’s) death, Dawn faces another set of problems, which have less to do with her “vulnerability,” and more with the lack of attention she receives from Buffy, and the Scoobies with her upbringing¹¹. After Buffy’s resurrection, these difficulties only increase. Nevertheless, the first instance where Dawn voices her feelings of being overlooked by her “new guardian” is in the very next episode after Joyce’s death, “Forever,” (5017) after she shoplifts a number of items from The Magic Box in order resurrect her mother, and then casts a spell in the house. When Buffy questions and criticizes her sister for trying something so daring, she is immediately met with the response:

“I don’t have anybody! You won’t even look at me! It’s so obvious you don’t want me around.”
 (“Forever” 5017)

[11] Though a bit overstated, Dawn’s main point more or less valid, given the fact her dazed sister was quite quick to send her off to Willow and Tara’s, following their mother’s funeral. In later episodes however, (most notably Rebecca Rand-Kirshner’s “Tough Love”) Buffy does begin to understand her role as a “substitute mother” better, and attempts to escape what Pipher calls “low control and acceptance parenting” (allowing Dawn to skip school, ignoring her) by offering the needed care and time to her sister (Pipher 86). In order to do this, she attempts to provide structure to her sister’s less-than-normal life by separating her from the rest of the Scoobies and encouraging her to do homework and chores. This “scheduled existence” and effort to bring her up firmly, however, quickly subsides after Glory’s attack on Tara and [of course] Dawn’s subsequent abduction (5019).

¹¹ A problematic word because of vagueness, but essentially Buffy taking on Joyce’s parental responsibility.

[12] After her resurrection, Buffy’s “dubious” parenting skills are called into question on a more consistent basis, as made clear with the caseworker Doris’s visit in “Gone” (6011), who notes Dawn’s “frequent absences” and “declining grades.” Additionally, Dawn continues shoplifting “habit” in later episodes (“Once More With Feeling”, “Older and Far Away”), which not much to our surprise, goes unnoticed by Buffy. It is not until Anya discovers a stash of goods in her room during Buffy’s 21st birthday party that Dawn is finally held accountable. Yet even then, Buffy encourages her sister to deny her guilt.¹² She cannot accept that fact that the new leather coat Dawn “bought” her is actually stolen merchandise—and also given their new financial situation, a “piece of clothing they could never afford” (29). Additionally, Buffy was also a “petty thief” in her own day; she demonstrates the same defensive behavior in a flashback from the episode “Becoming, Part 1,” when she mistakes her new Watcher, Merrick for a Bullock’s employee, “‘cause,” she explains, “I meant to pay for that lipstick.” Though we of course were not aware of Dawn’s existence during this time, one still might assume that Buffy wielded some influence over Dawn as a “rebellious” older sister, rather than the lax “alternative parent” of the present. Hence, if seen through this frame, we could also take Dawn’s shoplifting could an instance of trying on Buffy’s “gang girl” persona. Yet Dawn is alone—she has no group of peers to cause trouble with—rather her “klepto tendencies” are a way of getting the attention that Buffy is rarely able to give her. Furthermore, since Joyce’s death, finances have been more than tight. As Chesney-Lind, in her essay *Girls and Shoplifting* explains, “participation in the teen consumer subculture is costly, and if a young woman cannot afford participation, she is likely to steal her way in” (29). Hence, Dawn’s shoplifting habit is motivated by a number of factors: Joyce’s death, social isolation and Buffy’s neglect as she gradually becomes reaccustomed to life.

[13] Furthermore, until her sister’s heated romance with the similarly marginalized Spike, Dawn still feels camaraderie with the vampire—initially forged because of the decision to break into the Giles’ magic shop together in “Blood Ties” (Bates 1). Though to the casual viewer this may seem like a disturbing concept, Spike and Dawn’s “outsider” solidarity throughout *Buffy*’s fifth and sixth seasons’ functions

¹² In “Older and Far Away” (6014), Buffy: Anya, hold on, okay? (to Dawn) Tell her you didn't do this. Tell her it's a mistake.

similarly to Pipher’s model of the positive, or “life-saving” friendships between teenage girls:

“This absence of parental support made it clear that, from the beginning only had themselves to depend on for happiness.” (Pipher 332).

which draws many parallels to Bates’ and Gustafson’s quite different analysis of their relationship:

Marginalized individuals often exhibit delinquent or self-destructive behavior when caught in the crisis of acculturation (Stonequist, 1937). Dawn, especially during Season 6, exhibits a host of delinquent behaviors: she shoplifts, lies, skips school, and fails classes. Both she and Spike engage in self-destructive behaviors. Additionally, Spike’s primary coping mechanism, drinking, is another example of his self-destructive, self-loathing behavior (Bates, Gustafson, Porterfield, & Rosenfeld 2).

[14] Consequently, their relationship can be taken in a number of ways—either as rebellious or positive. (I would argue both evaluations are true.) It is clear, however, that the two are “linked by [their] liminal status” and exclusion from the Scoobies, which affects them both in an emotionally detrimental¹³ way (Bates 3). Thus, it can be argued that their relationship forces the audience to reflect on whether their deeds truly shape them as good or bad people (or vampires). Jowett, in reading Dawn as a “moral” character in her book *Sex and the Slayer*, points this out:

[Of course] in seasons 5 and 6 Dawn displays mostly “bad” behavior, but this is largely ascribed to typical teen rebellion, and I read her primary characteristic as innocence, so she is always a *good girl* (54).¹⁴

[15] Once the Buffy and Spike’s romance comes to an end, we see this point of view both accepted and rejected by Buffy. As Buffy explains to Dawn in the sixth season finale “Grave” (6022): “Things haven’t been okay...[they’ve] really sucked...but it's all gonna change...the woman you’re gonna become...[she’s] going to powerful. I don't want to protect you from the world.” Indeed, once Buffy vows not to protect Dawn anymore (“Real Me”), their relationship *does* change for the better. By rejecting her sister as the “innocent” she once was in season five, Buffy’s “epiphany” reveals to us the emergence

¹³ i.e., they feel depressed because they are excluded

¹⁴ In other words, Wilcox argues, Dawn’s “bad behavior” is “coded clearly as teenage rebellion or cry for help, rather than as morally “evil” (in the overall good-versus-evil metanarrative). She continues, “All the Way” (6006) conflates different kinds of innocence in Dawn, proving she is really good: she does not realize her date is a vampire and she has never kissed before” (55)

of a new viewpoint: Dawn as non-victim—the empowered female the show is striving to promote.

Outgrowing Ophelia

[16] If Pipher argues that adolescence as a period where girls “crash and burn socially and developmentally...lose their assertive personalities, and become self-critical and depressed,” then it can also be argued that there are other stages in life where such intense despair and powerlessness for women does *not* occur. This topic is ultimately what *Reviving Ophelia* fails to address, with its unintelligible leap from “girl” “as the unwitting victim” to women in later life “[who] regain their preadolescent authenticity with menopause” (Pipher, Gonick 12). As a result, there is also virtually no discussion about how *adolescence* as a whole might be divided into a number of phases, or how teenage girls might *regain agency* after enduring and learning from traumatic experiences—and thus view themselves as “powerful” or “special” in their own right (Helford 23). These omissions, therefore, point out the author’s failure to address how her title character might be revived, while the series actually does revive Ophelia by addressing these issues.

[17] Nevertheless, for example, as the show’s seventh season progresses, we see Dawn develop more and more into a young adult. In the premiere “Lessons” (7001), we see that Buffy finally trusts her enough to give her a slayer training session “because [Dawn] wanted to” —something unthinkable, if we were to look back on the girl from two years ago. Additionally, she is resourceful enough to protect Sunnydale High students Kit and Carlos from zombie-ghosts invading the basement, before her sister arrives in “full gear” to save the day.

[18] The debilitating love spell cast in “Him” also draws a comparison between Dawn and Pipher’s excessively “vulnerable” and “moody” female adolescent archetype. In the episode (strikingly similar to season two’s “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” 2016) Dawn falls in love star quarterback R.J. Brooks, and becomes desperate to win his affections.¹⁵ Her “obsession” eventually leads her to try out for the cheerleading team and humiliate herself in front of her peers—a “standard” high school experience—though of

¹⁵ along with the rest of Sunnydale’s young women affected by the spell

course, her reaction reminds us of the “constantly whining” Dawn from the show’s earlier seasons:

Buffy: Come on, Dawnie. Come out. Dawn, sweetheart, it's not that bad.

Dawn: How would you even know? R.J.'s never gonna notice me now. Go away!

On the bathroom floor, Buffy sees her cheerleading outfit, shredded.

Buffy: Dawn, what is that?

Dawn: Just the end of my life! (storms off to her room to cry more)

[19] This overly dramatic moment reaffirms Pipher’s metaphor of teenage girls similar in temperament to LSD addicts—“intense, changeable, internal, often cryptic or uncommunicative, and of course, dealing with a different reality”—and yet this is *not Dawn*, at least as we have come to know her by the program’s season (58). Additionally after the charm has worn off Dawn undermines the very same notion that Pipher supports:

Dawn: (sighs) I'm just so...the way I acted, the way I talked to you. I feel so stupid. And all over a spell...

[20] The episodes “Conversations with Dead People” (7007) and “Potential,” (7012) additionally establish Dawn as a strong teenage character who exhibits great feats of courage and resourcefulness. In the former, Dawn retaliates against the First’s incarnation of Joyce, alone in the house while performing a banishing spell. Despite being thrown around by a mystical hurricane and slashed across the face, she is still able to bear it; her scenes vary from poignant reminiscence to comical empowerment, as for example when she shouts: “I cast you out in the void. That’s right! Die, you bastard!” In the next episode (“Sleeper”) when Willow finds her home alone among the wreckage, she quickly brushes it off (“I’m all right”) and begins discussing her Mom’s “appearance” with Willow. Additionally, in “Potential,” Dawn gets her moment of glory when saving warding off Bringers from her friend Amanda, who has not discovered her “special” powers yet. She demonstrates physical prowess and ingenuity similar for her sister’s (a mistake caused her to think that she is the next slayer-in-training), but quickly realizes that she has not been “chosen” in mid-fight and gracefully lets Amanda take center stage. In short, though not a “potential,” as she had hoped, Dawn is eventually mature enough accept Xander’s advice—that she should appreciate herself for who she is— regardless of her more sidelined position. He explains:

They'll never know how tough it is, Dawnie. To be the one who isn't chosen, to live so near to the spotlight and never step in it. But I know. I see more than anybody realizes because nobody's watching me. I saw you last night. I see you working here today. You're not special. You're extraordinary (7012).

Hence, Xander's piece of encouragement reminds us of the incredible humbleness and self-restraint that Dawn exhibits throughout the show's later seasons. By the time Dawn faces the Scoobies' final battle in "Chosen," she no longer resembles a "tragic figure" but a hero—she returns Xander's favor by saving his life, and getting him out of Sunnydale High just in the nick of time (7022, Gornick 11).

Conclusion

[21] If one is to look at *BtVS* as a series that both embodies and the encourages female empowerment through its characters, then we also must remember that each figure will take his or her own time to develop and deal with painful adolescent experiences individually. While Buffy faces rejection and disparagement by authority figures and peers alike, she is also assertive and confident enough not to take their condemnation that seriously. Dawn, however, must take a little more time. Unlike Buffy, she is much younger than her sister was when the show began, and serves a dual emotional¹⁶ and narrative function that none of the other Scoobies can claim. As a result, Dawn's "heightened" psychological instability and "helplessness" posit her as "unappealing" and "distant" compared to her sister's efficacious and self-assured female friends. It is in this state, that she most clearly personifies Pipher's idealization of Ophelia (Gornick 12).

[22] Nevertheless, Dawn must eventually "grow up" and achieve a more authoritative status—which she does in *Buffy*'s seventh season, while still in her teenage years. What *Reviving Ophelia* presents is an incomplete and generalized picture of adolescence, as a single state where young girls are "torn apart by the hurricane" and "never fully recover" (Pipher). The evolution of Dawn's character, however, suggests that girls can overcome their "vulnerability" and regain authority, even in the most traumatic and desperate throes of youth, which is clearly a "girl power" aim. Therefore, if fans of the series and cultural critics are willing to suspend their dislike of Dawn and

¹⁶ Unfortunately, this word is too vague. To be clearer, "emotional" in this case means to make Buffy and the audience identify with and emotionally connect with Dawn, as the protagonist's "little sister."

approach the development of “the slayer’s little sister” with an open mind, then a wider range of discourse about the ambivalent, linked, and paradoxical nature of these two viewpoints can be opened up and applied to greater discussion about teenage power, powerlessness, and femininity.

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