

“You Know, I’m Extremely Youthful. And Peppy!”

Buffy, Playing Girl, and Popular Culture Representation of Sex-Worker Feminism

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“What’s the sitch?”

[1] The scene opens displaying a school building with sounds of eerie music playing in the background (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, B1001). The quiet is disturbed as a boy breaks a window into a classroom. Behind him, a girl in a Catholic school uniform asks timidly, “Are you sure this is a good idea?” The boy persists and when the girl protests, implying she is scared, the boy comments “oh, you can’t wait, huh?” His implication of sexual contact is clear as he kisses her. After ensuring they are alone, the girl turns back to him but her face has changed. She was not the helpless school girl she was believed to be; rather, she is a vampire. As her teeth sink into his neck, Darla has made her entrance. With it she has shepherded in not only a show that would become a cult classic, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*), but also a subject matter that will be prominent in the Buffyverse – playing on femininity to achieve one’s goals. Although this theme is not unheard of from a feminist perspective, *BtVS* offers an interesting milieu in which it is facilitated, challenged, and supported.

[2] Portraying femininity for personal gain is a core concept for sex-worker feminism. Sex workers typically do so for financial rewards whereas the women of the Buffyverse utilize this tactic to achieve a variety of objectives. Such playing on the idea of femininity is illustrated by various personas exotic dancers will create while dancing. Eva Pendleton explains “[w]hen sex workers perform femininity, [they] purposefully engage in an endless repetition of heteronormative gender codes...Using femininity as a...tool is a means of exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings” (79). Female sex workers perpetuate the stereotypes of femininity and female heterosexuality in their performances. They do so to gain personal advantage despite such work originally established as a means to subjugate them. Utilizing their female sex provides a unique contrast to what many consider to be a stereotyped model of womanliness, such as timid or submissive to men. This conscious use of the female sex can be seen displayed boldly and accurately in today’s popular culture, albeit often unaware by the general population. This representation of sex-worker feminism will be discussed as well as how it challenges cinematography as defined by Laura Mulvey, how it holds up to neo-Marxist critiques, and why it elicits concerns from feminist viewpoints. Buffy and other *BtVS* females will be analyzed as they encompass sex-worker feminism, portraying it directly into modern-day homes.

[3] First, however, a more comprehensive look at sex-worker feminism must be provided. When a sex worker performs, they are playing a part to achieve their goals. Katherine Frank describes how “stripping involves a conscious, creative, and sometimes pleasurable kind of reflexive masquerade,

a form of doing and sometimes subverting ‘girl’” (179). By “girl”, Frank refers to the standard of heterosexual femininity defined by Jane Ussher. Ussher’s girl constitutes a multi-layer stereotype of the female sex (355). The stereotype includes a female as helpless without a man, expected to remain sexually pure while simultaneously fulfilling over-sexualized expectations (the virgin/whore dichotomy) and who is incapable of success without a male counterpart. When a female plays the role of helplessness and purposeless without a man, but uses this façade to exploit men for financial gain, she defies the definition of girl and also the stereotype of femininity.

[4] Performance of “girl” to attain goals is an issue not without controversy for feminists. On the one hand, this performance subverts the feminine ideal by defying historical constructs of submissive female. On the other, it can lead to perpetuating the concept that women are manipulative. For some feminists, it is a way for a woman to take advantage of her sex at the expense of men. “Naked? No. I am a performer, as fully clothed as anyone... even without my bikini, if only through my painstaking ministrations to the ‘costume’ of my bare body” (Frank 173). If a woman chooses “to masquerade as a sex object” (Ussher 372), they are not conforming to the very persona of femininity they are portraying.

[5] There are personal and financial rewards gained by performing this type of femininity. Frank references her work ethic “kicking in” when she got “a great deal of pleasure... from a job well done... not to mention incredible feelings of self-efficacy by... performing a submissive

femininity” (177). Some competing views from feminists would condemn her actions for working as an exotic dancer because doing so perpetuates female stereotypes. Despite such criticisms, Frank points out that in “an economic system where women face unequal job opportunities, sex work is one way young women can get ahead” (199). While men see the woman merely as a sexual object, the woman utilizing this perception for personal gain is at its very essence contrary to the submissive role she is playing. Taking advantage of men for financial achievement changes the meaning of the term, images, and expectations of femininity. It would imply that, unlike many other societal settings, playing girl can facilitate a level of power over men. Examples of playing girl providing additional advantages can be seen in television female action and superhero characters.

[6] Joanne Hollows and Rachel Mosley have argued that feminism is *in* popular culture and it would be an error to discuss the two separately (1). They suggest that popular representation of feminism is the means by which individuals, outside of academia, learn of feminist theory (2). Such feminist representation is not, however, without objections. In a *Girls Gone Wild* society, feminists often claim that popular culture is detrimental to women when they are frequently over-sexualized and shown in demeaning, stereotypical fashions. After all it can be difficult to think of appropriate feminist principles coming from the television. Merri Lisa Johnson recommends that feminists lose the strict binary view that popular culture is either good or bad for feminism (17). Such an approach, which Patricia Pender describes as a “good *Buffy*/bad *Buffy*” manner, is short-sighted (38). It negates the opportunity to fully analyze feminism in television or other popular culture media. Historically television has provided its share of female action characters such as

Charlie's Angels and *Wonder Woman*, and more recently *Nikita (La Femme Nikita)*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *Sydney Bristow (Alias)*. All of these characters played the girlish stereotype at some point for personal gain, if only to hide their true identity. *Buffy* and the women of *BtVS*, however, take playing girl to an entirely new level.

“I feel like a girl.”

[7] *Buffy* struggles between Slayer responsibilities and the desire to be an ordinary girl. Early on while she is still in high school, *Buffy* attempts to further extend her role as girl in order to feel and act more normal. For example, she tries out for cheerleading (*The Witch*, B1003) and later campaigns for homecoming queen (*Homecoming*, B3005), only to be denied both when her Slayer duties interfere. Seen as attempting to be more normal by those around her, *Buffy* inadvertently solidifies her ability to play the role of girl as a means to protect her Slayer identity. Jessica Price draws an even clearer distinction by noting how during the day *Buffy* acts more feminine as a school girl, whereas by night she is different when performing Slayer duties (217). Such a persona and drive to fit in have also possibly misled some scholars. Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider have claimed that *BtVS* is no more than a show about the “girl next door” stereotype (296). Cathleen Kaveny has gone so far as to suggest that, as a “delicate-looking blonde... [*Buffy's*]... fragile appearance... do[es] not correspond well with her vocation as a vampire slayer” (19). Such claims imply that *Buffy's* appearance and girlish attributes are a problem. Quite the opposite, these are precisely how she facilitates the role of girl to obtain her goals, and consequently how *BtVS* portrays this aspect of sex-worker feminism without many consumers’

realization.

[8] The sex-worker-feminist ideal of playing girl as a means to an end is easily transferred to Buffy. Buffy plays girl in daily life both as a means to hide her Slayer identity and when carrying out Slayer responsibilities. During nightly patrols through Sunnydale, vampires, demons, and even more everyday villains all succumb to her portrayal of the helpless young girl. They learn too late for their own survival that she is capable of destroying them and far from helpless. Furthermore, Buffy is “that girl with the goofy name” (*Fredless*, A3005) which perpetuates the stereotype of a “valley girl,” a construct often seen as a ditsy airhead, or Lorna Jowett’s “girlie-girl” (25). The very essence of being a Slayer is designed to exploit generalized female characterizations.

[9] The men who created the Slayer’s powers and lineage gave them an inherent ability to play roles, including girl, to their advantage. We get a sense of three distinct uses of Slayer power by considering Buffy, Kendra, and Faith. Contrary to Buffy, Kendra refuses to play the role of girl in order to accomplish her goals. She focuses solely on slaying, avoids relationships with friends and even family, and denounces the use of anger. Kendra is the only Slayer of the three that is killed, sending the message that her way is wrong and Buffy’s is right (Helford 29-30). Faith’s use of her inherent abilities and how she “executes power” (Moldovano 208) becomes much more complex. As a “non-stereotypical femme fatale” (Moldovano 212), Faith’s role changes from hero, to antihero, to villain, to victim, and back again to hero over the course of *BtVS* and *Angel*.

Throughout both series, she “use[s] sex as a tool or weapon” (Cocca 7). Consequently, arguments could be made that Faith is consumed by self hate, leading her to use sex in inappropriate ways. But there is still room to make the claim that she too plays girl. Where Buffy tends to play the wholesome girl-next-door role, Faith conversely plays the bad girl. Faith plays girl with Xander, Riley, and other men of the Buffyverse in order to obtain her own goals. Sometimes this includes sexual conquest for Faith. When she does, it is for “her desire and no one else’s” (Moldovano 194) which allows her to further bend the notion of stereotypical ideals of the male partner’s pleasure being paramount over the female. Regardless of which girlish construct is used, playing girl is still facilitated to obtain both of these women’s objectives. While Buffy plays girl for goals viewers find to be appropriate, Faith also plays girl, albeit a different kind and for different goals.

[10] Slayers are not the only females in the Buffyverse to play girl; the female vampires do as well. The opening scene in which Darla ushers in *BtVS* provides first glance at how Darla operates. Specifically, she plays girl frequently to obtain her goals. Although destroyed early in *BtVS* (*Angel*, B1007), Darla returns from the dead in *Angel* (*First Impressions*, A2003 – *Lullaby*, A3009) and viewers learn that Darla was once a sex-worker who, just before her death, was given a second life by the Master. Darla was Angel’s sire and eventual mother of Angel’s son, Connor, and spends most of her time in *Angel* conspiring, manipulating, and attempting to gain control and power. To do this, and to feed on humans along the way, Darla plays on her sex appeal and stereotypical female constructs just as she did when she donned the persona of Catholic school girl in *BtVS*. Darla’s use of the girl stereotype may reinforce the idea that women are manipulative. What’s

more, she enlists assistance from fellow vamp Drusilla and the duo often play the girl-on-girl impression for unsuspecting male victims. This too can lead to concerns among feminist scholars as it can perpetuate the ideology of lesbian acts performed for male sexual pleasure instead of for the pleasure of the women themselves. As with Faith, vampires play girl for their own ends and in their own way. Such depictions support Ussher, Frank, and Pendleton's view of sex-worker feminism. For Darla, as with Buffy, it is a conscious choice to play roles in order to acquire what she needs. Such scenes also illustrate a challenge to the manner with which women are watched on television. Specifically, women in entertainment have been largely considered as being viewed strictly from a male perspective, similar to the way as are women in sex-work.

[11] Mulvey suggests that female characters are subjected to three "male gazes" (6-18). The first is the gaze of the camera which often focuses on specific body parts which reduces her to a sexual object. Second is the gaze of the male characters where the female becomes the object of their desire. The third gaze is that of the viewer which is positioned to identify with the main male character and consequently objectify the female. Buffy is a prime example of how today's television does not operate strictly within these gazes.

[12] Molly Brost addresses how additional gazes should be considered by suggesting that the gaze does not necessarily limit either the object of the gaze or the viewer. She also argues that in many cases viewers are led to identify with a female character and not a male character, contrary to the

past. This is certainly true of Buffy as the protagonist, so she does not fit that element of the historical male gaze. The roles of male and female characters of the Buffyverse further challenge the gaze issue with respect to their interaction between each other. Male characters are often not gazing *at* Buffy as Mulvey would suggest. Rather, the men are gazing *with* Buffy at something else such as an attacking vampire. In those circumstances, removing Buffy as the object of desire in lieu of her being the hero, she again refuses to conform to the male gaze paradigm. Furthermore, when the men are observed in the same scene as Buffy, the men become the ones being gazed *at* by the viewers. That too is contrary to the standard gazes. As such, Buffy does not hold to historical accounts of the gaze and does so while playing girl.

[13] An additional component to the gazes that should be considered in contrast to how they have been previously defined. Mulvey's gazes place the female in the role of being seen as sexual objects by the men. The women are something to be obtained by men. Buffy, Faith, Darla, and even Drusilla, however, frequently reverse these roles. Each of them uses their sexuality to obtain what *they* want. And what they want is often *not* sex. Buffy wants any advantage that will take down a demon. Faith typically is working toward some larger end game. Darla and Drusilla, especially as seen in *Angel*, often want what will further their ongoing desire for power. As mentioned, this may lead viewers (especially male viewers) to condemn Faith, Darla, or Drusilla as villains or otherwise inappropriate. That does not change the means by which they pursue their own objectives.

[14] The sexual object gaze in today's popular representation is also not limited to heterosexual men as consumers. Women gaze at other women as sexual objects. Men are also often sexualized and gazed at by both women and other men. Any version of Superman is portrayed by a tall, dark, and handsome male actor and filmed in a way that accents body parts that signify sex. Even in *Angel*, Angel is often seen shirtless or in just a towel. In short, both men and women are sexualized on television and consequently both become sexualized in popular culture. Such sexualization may currently remain imbalanced between the sexes, but in playing girl some female characters are starting to tip the scales.

“I say *my* power should be *our* power.”

[15] Sexualization furthers another key concept to feminism – power. Feminist principals are highly concerned with the issue of power and control. Institutionalized oppression of women has led to significant deficits of power for women, as well as how they are viewed when they push against such sexism. Jowett cautions that frequently in popular culture when women demonstrate strength and power it becomes identified as ‘feminist’ while weakness becomes seen as ‘feminine’ (77, 94). Feminism calls for equality among the sexes including leveling the playing field in who has the power and how it is used. When considering a feministic view of power within the constructs of popular culture, Buffy said it best in *Checkpoint* (B5012):

No review. No interrogation. No questions you know I can't answer. No hoops, no jumps. No interruptions....Everyone just keeps lining up to tell me just how

unimportant I am. And I finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them... Because I have power over [them].

A power imbalance remains, but no longer are men the sole owners of it in today's television series. Neither are men the only way masculinity is depicted (Jowett 120). Women are also seen using their power over others (including men) to further their attainment of goals. Buffy remains in power after she has Willow activate all Slayers (*Chosen* B7022), and even long after the end of *BtVS*. In *Damaged* (A5011), for example, we learn she still has the power and is in charge. Having lost trust in Angel, she sends Andrew and twelve Slayers to collect a girl who, although the girl does not know it, is a Slayer. It has been argued that the female empowerment message of Buffy's decision to globally activate the Potentials into full Slayers is overshadowed by Buffy's dictatorship over the other girls (Spicer 1). A feminist view of power and control would call for equality and the Potentials' consent to the change. Consequently, here Buffy again may cause controversy for feminists. However, it may be the case that it is not so much dictatorship as it is Buffy's experience which leads to her training, teaching, and eventually caring for all Slayers.

[16] Her significant level of power and responsibility, coupled with a life of playing girl, takes a toll on Buffy. As a feminist viewer, a concern emerges – Buffy becomes thrust into a stereotypical female caretaker role. Buffy works to protect her family and friends through incredible extremes. It costs her life first because she views it as her destiny as the Slayer (*Prophecy Girl*, B1012), and

again in order to save the life of her pseudo-sister, Dawn (*The Gift*, B5022). There is no greater caretaker sacrifice than of one's own life. But it is not just her friends, family and Sunnydale which Buffy must protect; she also must save the world. Buffy fights off world destruction so many times that it becomes a tongue-in-cheek joke to her and her friends as just another day in their life. Consequently, Buffy is also consistently in the role of global caretaker. This is especially problematic for feminism because, as Miller has pointed out: "feminist ethicists stress the importance of mutual dependency, not one-sided dependence. One must care for oneself, as well as for others. For women, this requires rejecting the feminine stereotype of the selfless giver" (40). Villaverde expresses similar concerns when she notes that there is a "double-edge sword of the feminist ethic and traditional role of women" (67). Women such as Buffy forfeit their own personal goals to play the role of caretaker, but on a larger scale – caring for the entire world. This forces them into a sort of super caretaker.

[17] It may be unclear if such depictions have positive or negative consequences for viewers, especially young women. Villaverde (68-71) supports current trends and views of feminism in popular culture, but fears that they go too far when they suggest to young women that they can be a superhero, as long as they still remember they have to be willing to save the world. When thrust into such a role, the lines of playing girl also become blurred. Playing the role of the feminine to achieve an end may be permissible, but when it leads to additional responsibility has it gone too far? Is that when feminists who share concerns with Villaverde can assert that it is yet another reason women should avoid using the depiction of girl as a means to an end? This pitfall is

difficult to avoid for our heroines. However, the suggested consequence may be due to the responsibility that comes with power, regardless of their sex or use of the girl stereotype.

[18] Being the one with power does not mean Buffy, or any female hero, needs to take the sole responsibility or role of caretaker. Has the ideal of independence pushed feminism so far as to suggest that the title 'independent woman' need to be taken literally? Despite any stereotype to the contrary, men need and receive support from others every day. Why then would a woman be required to do everything by herself to be considered equal? For Buffy, her surrounding support structures are consistently there to assist. Lila E. Villaverde has suggested that the characters that surround action heroes often provide such support and balance to the heroine (74). This is clearly demonstrated with Buffy.

[19] *BtVS* is clear to its consumers that "Buffy's friends are a large part of her power" (Price 217). *Primeval* (B4021) literalizes the support that Willow, Giles and Xander bring to Buffy when they transfer part of themselves (spirit, mind and heart, respectively) to help her defeat the season's Big Bad, Adam. This theme is later referenced throughout consequent seasons and such a prominent theme that Jowett has gone so far as to say that *BtVS* "consistently undermine[s] the notion of individual heroism" (199). Miller has argued that these three supporting characters are essential to Buffy's very identity (38). They are consequently part of the caretaking responsibilities.

[20] The challenge of caretaker should also be considered as an issue of a superhero in general regardless of their sex. Angel, Superman, Spider-Man, etc. all struggle with the same challenge as female superheroes – they all at some point end up having to save the world. What is interesting is that while the actions of caretaking themselves remain the same regardless of the caretaker's sex, the term 'caretaker' has a history almost reserved for women. In fact, it is frequently assumed the woman will take on the caretaker role, while men are more often 'protectors.' Buffy is assuredly both a protector and a caretaker although she often "seems traditionally masculine [because] professional life is more important than domestic life" (Jowett 23). That notwithstanding, the super-caretaker role concern for her is a symptom of being a superhero. Playing girl and being female have nothing to do with the possibility of being pushed into the role of global caretaker and as such back into a stereotypical female role. Being an action or superhero does that all on its own for women and men alike.

"Where do we go from here?"

[21] An element relative to *BtVS* and femininity not yet discussed is the manner in which companies create and sell such television programming. Ratings keep television shows on the air and the utilization of sexual allure to sell a product is a time-honored tradition for television marketers. Commercials and print ads for *BtVS* were not concerned about highlighting the characters as brilliant examples of feminism. Rather, they were more focused on selling the physical beauty of the female characters, with an emphasis on Buffy's girlish appearance as enticement to watch (Jowett 42). Such marketing campaigns were geared in the manner of

Mulvey's gazes as they had a sexy woman whom heterosexual men would want to see more of so they would tune in to watch. Commercials and print ads for *BtVS* consistently utilized the sexual appeal of Sara Michelle Gellar, who portrayed Buffy. Sherryl Vint points out that Buffy "undoes the helpless-female stereotypes... the girl who got the hero but who never got to be the hero" (3). The secondary texts (e.g. magazine ads), however, depict a contradiction to her true nature by instead depicting highly sexualized images of Buffy. These images are clearly meant to entice the young heterosexual-male audience. Vint notes that many of the articles did in fact lead support of Buffy being depicted as the strong, powerful woman, even if the photos used to sell the product of the show depicted her otherwise (20). Mimi Marinucci concurs, writing, "Buffy's twofold status as both Slayer and sex symbol challenges the connection between women's vulnerability and women's sexuality. Buffy is sexy because of her strength, not in spite of it" (74-75). But the bait was well-played in the print ads, and the lure worked, increasing the show's ratings. They knew sex, as it is conventionally staged, would sell *BtVS* to new viewers.

[22] There is a caution here that is all too familiar to any feminist. Corporate utilization of the female form to sell products remains a heavily employed tool. Selling Buffy's sexual appeal in this fashion gave the network ratings while simultaneously giving feminism a kick in the gut. While such advertisements should continue to be addressed for change, it should not preclude the value that can be found within the Buffyverse. Far too often feminists speak out against what is wrong with popular culture, while neglecting to note what is good. As Johnson states: "As is the case in feminist sexuality studies, there is not enough work being done to articulate what we like about

television, what it does for us, what we do with it – while always taking note of where it falls short – as well as where we do” (16). This view can be extended specifically in relation to Buffy.

Because Buffy is both a “strong feminist role model, but also...she is not” (Vint 23), Buffy invites consumers to critically analyze how feminism teaches, encourages, and demonstrates its role within our lives. Historical, stereotypical, and sexist ideals of women and girls or how they should act is challenged with every episode. As a consequence, *BtVS* forces viewers to critically analyze and often redefine ideals of femininity.

[23] Playing girl to achieve one’s goals is controversial for various conceptions of feminism. As feminists, we want our female characters powerful, independent, and equal to their male counterparts. We want them to illustrate feminism to viewers and to do so in a positive light. *BtVS* “does not, though it sometimes is tempted to, offer us a closed definition of Buffy as a feminist symbol” (Symonds 30). Buffy and other Buffyverse women may not be perfect for all feminist theories. They may lead to discussions on where popular culture falls short for some feminists’ ethics. Carol Siegel, for example, has contended they fail us in their representation of sexual behaviors by perpetuating heterosexual norms and that sex always has negative consequences (61-64). The sex-worker feminism issue of playing girl will undoubtedly continue to be a source of discourse among feminists. Jowett (70) and Moldovano (212) both caution on utilizing one’s sex or gender roles in navigating a patriarchal structure. Hopefully, more of us will keep in mind Pender and Johnson’s warnings to avoid reading television depictions of feminism in dichotomies of ‘good *Buffy*/bad *Buffy*’ because “the most productive point of inquiry is precisely the way it is

always both” (Vint 24). Buffy and the ladies of the Buffyverse clearly do one thing very well – utilize the sex-worker feminist idea of playing girl. In so doing, they illustrate Vint’s notion perfectly. They provide strong, independent, and powerful alternatives to the passive and submissive ideas of femininity (good *Buffy*) while at the same time concerns of the male sexualization of women remain open (bad *Buffy*).

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