

Nothing Normal about the Monsters:

Postmodern Monstrosity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "Normal Again"

[1] The supernatural/horror genre, especially in its postmodern form, offers authors and audiences an abundance of textual landscapes. It combines the realistic with the fantastic to create unique, complex and limitlessly variable storylines that allow us to examine the human condition. Elements intrinsic to the genre include themes of monstrosity—which often can be read metaphorically as representations of either humanity's fears or society's own monstrous potential—and the exploration of the relationships between the monstrous and the human. This article investigates postmodern constructions of monstrosity within the example of one episode, "Normal Again" (B6017). A postmodern reading of the episode is most effective in exposing the series' potential for social commentary. This is demonstrated through an exploration of the transgressive nature of the range of monsters encountered throughout the series, and specifically the unusual nature of the season's main nemesis, The Trio, as well as this episode's main monster, Buffy herself.

[2] Postmodernism emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century, resulting from disillusionment in the West following the horrors of the two World Wars, the Holocaust, use of the atomic bomb on a civilian population, the Vietnam War and other atrocities (Pinedo 87). These traumas entered the public consciousness relentlessly via the unprecedented efficiency of contemporary communication technologies. Postmodern ideology rebels against modernist ideals, especially the belief in continuous progress and the notion that humanity is inevitably propelled towards continual and uninterrupted improvement—a 'Grand Narrative' theme discussed and rejected by postmodern thinker Jean-François Lyotard (Barry 82-83; Lyotard). Postmodernism, in its response to modernism, thus, emphasizes uncertainty and the validity of multiple perspectives. Jean Baudrillard, for example, discusses how the pervasive

influence of communication technologies on people's lives erodes distinctions between reality and imagination or illusion, resulting in what he terms a "culture of 'hyperreality'" (Barry 84). As postmodernism rejects ideas of grand narrative and objective truth, it also questions notions of clear boundaries or binary oppositions, calling traditional institutions of authority into question—a theme ubiquitous in the writings of Michel Foucault (Rabinow; Pinedo 86).

[3] Postmodernism found expression in all forms of art and culture. Moreover, its ideology challenged the supposed division between high versus low culture, rejecting the modernist notion of a dichotomy of art versus mass culture, and promoted the blurring of previously established genre categories (Pinedo 87-8). The cinematic horror genre has proved particularly susceptible to postmodern ideas and suitable for their expression in both form and content, a propensity that has extended to television series with supernatural content. Pinedo describes the main features of postmodern cinematic horror narratives as pertaining to the "violent disruption of the everyday world", transgressing and violating boundaries, challenging the validity of rationality, rejecting narrative closure, and offering a "bounded experience of fear" (90-1).

[4] Tania Modleski emphasizes the disruption of pleasure as both a feature of horror movies, as well as postmodernism in general (cited in Pinedo 88). According to Modleski, this is achieved through narratives that reject closure, minimal development of plot or characters, and the use of characters that defy audience identification because of their lack of development or likeability (Modleski 160-1). Pinedo is critical of Modleski's argument because it ignores the fact that contemporary horror cinema is, in fact, pleasurable. It may be added that postmodern television series with a supernatural focus, which emerged in the 1990s well after Modleski's writing, made a particular contribution to the re-working and

advancement of postmodern horror. While the defiance of narrative closure remains a staple of postmodern television with horror or supernatural content (with the ending of “Normal Again” being an excellent case in point), television series operating under American industry conventions must rely on the likeability and development of (at least some of) their main characters to attract and retain viewers. Furthermore, due to their serial nature, television shows offer unique opportunities for the postmodern approach to flourish and reach its full potential by allowing for complexity of overarching and overlapping story arcs at the episode, season, and series levels. Certainly, neither lack of character or plot development, nor narrative simplicity, is criticism that could fairly be made against *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[5] The texts of *Buffy*, and “Normal Again” in particular, explicitly lend themselves to a postmodern reading, as has been discussed by other writers. Len Geller, for example, focuses on the exemplary treatment of the theme of alternate realities in “Normal Again” and discusses the merits of realist versus antirealist interpretations of the text. This is explored in particular in relation to Buffy’s “choice-situation”, the context to which is the complete absence of an epistemological resolution to the question of which of the episode’s two realities is the “real” one. Arguing for a neo-pragmatic version of the antirealist reading, Geller concludes that this very question becomes redundant. Patricia Pender discusses *Buffy*’s postmodern approach as defying resolution of debates over the series’ politics, in particular with regard to the question of whether *Buffy* should be read as a feminist or anti-feminist text. Pender concludes that, “[i]nstead of considering *Buffy* as a political blueprint for either feminist transgression or patriarchal containment..., we might more usefully identify *Buffy* as a site of intense cultural negotiation in which competing definitions of the central terms in the debate—revolution/apocalypse, feminist/misogynist, transgression and containment—can be tested and refined” (43). Like Pender, this article recognizes *Buffy*’s postmodernist propensity for creating discourse, resulting in what Caitlin Peeling and Meaghan Scanlon call “the

subversive potential of the show.” Such a reading can be applied to the constructions of monstrosity in *Buffy*, creating, in this case, discourse on the supposed dichotomy of good versus evil.

[6] In the context of this article, monstrosity is understood very simply as that which is characterized as evil, cruel, and able to excite horror. In classic horror or supernatural narratives, constructions of monstrosity traditionally represent one side of the human/demon or good/evil dichotomy. In newer texts such as *Buffy*, the transgressive tendencies of postmodern narrative continuously blur boundaries, and complicate and problematize such “Grand Narrative” dichotomies. Mary Alice Money discusses the series’ monsters as the excluded “Other”, and examines the fluidity of its constructions of monstrosity. *Buffy*’s monstrous are able to redeem themselves, and having achieved rehabilitation, the monstrous lose their Otherness and become included. While Money focuses on the progressive humanization of *Buffy*’s monsters, these transgressions of the boundaries between “good” and “evil” and the human and the monstrous are not one-directional. Thus, the focus here is on the monstrous potential within the human and even the heroic characters in *Buffy*, even Buffy herself.

[7] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* centers on a high-school teenager who, at the age of sixteen, learns that she is the latest of an ancient line of all-female demon fighters who are, one at a time, called upon to protect humanity from all imaginable kinds of supernatural threats. The following seven seasons of *Buffy* see the title character faced with a comprehensive range of archetypal coming-of-age challenges, in addition to the relentless onslaught of the supernatural, with both of these dimensions regularly mixing for optimal plot development and narrative complexity. One of *Buffy*’s fundamental elements—and a clear example of the

series' postmodern blurring of boundaries—is the utilization of supernatural themes as stand-ins for the real challenges of adolescence and young adulthood.

[8] In the sixth season, Buffy is faced with an existential crisis following her resurrection and expulsion from a heavenly dimension. Depression and apathy result in her alienation from those around her, as well as from herself and her role of the slayer. She finds herself the sole provider for her younger sister, trapped in a minimum-wage job, and eventually enters into an unhealthy sexual relationship with a former-enemy-cum-forced-ally whom she professes to hate and despise, the vampire Spike. Almost as an insult added to injury, season six's "big bad" is not the grand enemy the audience (and possibly Buffy herself) has come to expect, such as a Master Vampire (season one), an entire secret government organization and its Frankensteinian creation (season four) or a god (season five), but instead The Trio, who are a group of three geeky young men with "one clear, super-cool mission statement", which is to "team up and take over Sunnydale" ("Flooded" B6004).

[9] This is the backdrop against which the plot of "Normal Again" unfolds. Buffy is stung by the poisonous extremity of a demon summoned by The Trio, which causes her mind to alternate between two realities; that of the Buffyverse (that is, the supposed reality of the series) and an alternate reality that resembles our own world. In the latter, Buffy has spent the past six years in a mental institution. The events and many inhabitants of the Buffyverse, including Buffy's closest friends and her sister, are mere delusions of her schizophrenic mind. Provided with the means to eliminate either one of the two realities, the challenge posed to Buffy in this episode is to decide which reality she belongs to. After a period of confusion, Buffy first decides to eliminate the Buffyverse in favor of the apparent comfort of a world in which she is once more the protected single child of a complete nuclear family where her mother is still alive and her parents are happily married (Jowett 190). Released

from the burdens of growing up or being a supernatural savior, she can be normal again, a longing for which Buffy has exhibited on numerous occasions previously. The decision causes Buffy's mind to return to the Buffyverse and Buffy to violently attack her friends and sister and put them in mortal danger. Recoiling from the violence, however, Buffy's mind slips back to the alternate reality, in which her mother, who is no longer alive in the Buffyverse, delivers the pep talk that reignites Buffy's belief in herself and in her strength to face and overcome any challenge. Strengthened by this encouragement, albeit intended by Joyce to direct her to a different goal, Buffy chooses to abandon the supposedly real world of the mental institution and returns to the Buffyverse to save the day. In true postmodern fashion, the episode ends with a shot of a catatonic Buffy and her distressed parents in the reality of the mental institution, emphasizing the absence of any certainty over (as well as the irrelevance of) the question of which reality is the "real" one (Geller). This is arguably the most unsettling moment in the entire episode, taking the viewer closest to the disruption of pleasure described by Modleski.

[10] One of the ways in which "Normal Again" reveals the complexity of representations of monstrosity in the series and season levels of *Buffy* is through various references to the range and variety of monsters Buffy has encountered during the course of the entire series, as well as to the particularly implausible nature of this season's main nemeses, The Trio. This technique is encapsulated when the Doctor (in the non-Buffyverse reality) attempts to "ground" Buffy to (that) "reality": "And your enemies – look at them. You used to create grand villains to battle against. And now what is it? Just ordinary people you went to high school with. Not gods or monsters. Just three pathetic little men who like to play with toys." This comment is one of several times that the Doctor critiques the implausibility of the Buffyverse in comparison to the supposed reality Buffy seems to be waking up to. He emphasizes that the increasingly absurd narrative indicates that her supposed delusions may

be nearing the end of their lifecycle. In doing so, the Doctor makes the argument that Buffy's deluded mind has to some degree lost its ability to make up "proper" monsters, and that this signals a resistance to the delusions and a wish to return to "reality" and sanity. This proposition that The Trio as monsters are less valid and not to be taken as seriously as those that came before may be read as a meta-commentary, in that the audience is dared to question the validity of the writers' choice to construct this season's main nemeses in this way. The writers may, in a tongue-in-cheek way, be challenging the audience to review the limits of their own readiness to suspend disbelief in increasingly implausible, even ridiculous, narratives. Just as Buffy's sanity is called into question, so is the audience's. However, the Doctor's comment also delivers a succinct reference to the variety of the constructions of monstrosity encountered in *Buffy* through the course of the series. A central point made here is the notion that, not only is the Buffyverse inhabited by any kind of non-human monstrosity imaginable—a postmodern feature itself in terms of the mixing of (sub)genres and blurring of boundaries between them—but that the superheroine is now challenged by "[j]ust three pathetic little men", who, no less, are peers of Buffy's through their high-school connection.

[11] Two important points are being made here. First, monstrosity in the Buffyverse is not limited to the non-human, the extraordinary, or the Other. Second, monstrosity is created and eliminated, and in fact changeable, in an infinite number of ways, a theme that strongly dominates the overall *Buffy* narrative. The moral ambiguity of the characters, both major and minor, and their continuous shifting between categories of "good" and "evil", are characteristic features of the series (Braun 89). Both of these points clearly speak to the postmodern approach of rejecting certainties and clear boundaries, and particularly the undermining of supposedly correlated dichotomies such as human versus monster and good versus evil. Thus, in the overall narrative of the series, the fact that a classic type of monster such as a werewolf can be essentially good is contrasted with the fact that The Trio, that is,

humans, cause some of the most monstrous acts encountered in the series, including attempted rape and murder committed with little to no sense of remorse (“Dead Things” (B6013)), and eventually the murder of one of the main characters, Tara (“Seeing Red” (B6019)).

[12] Of course, it is because they are human that The Trio’s acts are perceived as more horrific than those of the more “ordinary” monsters in the *Buffy* series, who engage in much the same types of atrocities. Moreover, they are easily identifiable as peers of Buffy and the audience themselves, whose average age was 26 according to demographics data for the series after the first season (Longworth 215). Considering the particular success the series has had amongst what might be termed the “geek audience” of cult television, the three nerds even are relatable to the audience to some degree (and to varying levels, as discussed below). Here again, postmodernism is at work, as the potential for identification, even relatability, of these characters assists to break down the boundary between text and audience. Furthermore, this identification serves the subversive potential of the series, as the viewer may also be compelled to examine themselves in relation to the less pleasant character traits of The Trio’s members. To use an example from another episode, “Dead Things”, Jonathan’s obvious recoil from Katrina’s straight-up statement that The Trio’s plan to magically enslave her and turn her into a mindless sexbot amounted to nothing but rape has significant potential to challenge audience members to examine their own attitudes towards gender relations and the continued prevalence of misogyny.

[13] An important observation to make here is that The Trio are far from a monolithic entity. A clear hierarchy exists within The Trio, with the ambitious, remorselessly violent and misogynistic Warren as the ringleader, the “follower” character of Andrew a useful second, and the most sympathetic and redeemable character of Jonathan at the bottom. While thrown

together by their mutual high school history, geek interests and supernatural talents, each character's motivation for participating in, and their commitment to, The Trio's evil master plan is wildly divergent from that of the two others. This serves two main ends: to create significantly greater complexity in the constructions of (human) monstrosity and to increase the potential for social commentary by widening the opportunities for identification and self-reflection on part of the audience.

[14] The potential for audience identification is strongest in the case of Jonathan, whom we encounter on several occasions throughout *Buffy*, starting in the second season. For the most part, Jonathan acts in problematic, yet sympathetic, ways (e.g. his near suicide in "Earshot" (B3018) or his desperate attempt to escape the limitations of his real life in "Superstar" (B4017), which he sincerely regrets, once confronted with their negative consequences to those around him). Out of the three characters comprising The Trio, Jonathan's relationship to their evil deeds remains most problematic throughout, as he retains a moral core that continues to be at odds with many of The Trio's activities, and which eventually leads him to seek redemption in an honest way in season seven. His behavior is contrasted with the other two members of the group. Warren is essentially characterized by his sense of self-centered entitlement, which he relentlessly and remorselessly seeks to fulfill without any moral checks, resulting in the Trio's most violent actions, such as Katrina's and Tara's murders. Andrew, on the other hand, is the born follower whose ethics are variable to the extreme and largely dependent on whichever leader he ends up devoting himself to at any given point in the series. Thus, The Trio, each in relationship to their own individual sense of morality (or lack thereof), exhibit a range of constructions of the monstrous potential in humanity.

[15] Turning now to the examination of the main monster in "Normal Again", Flor and Kneis, in their psychoanalytic reading of the episode, argue that the text represents what they

term psychotic narration (68), suggesting parallels between elements of the show's narrative and categories of delusion (e.g., the superhero as a delusion of grandeur), and arguing for an understanding of the "popular text as a kind of collective symptom" (69). Unlike Geller, whose postmodern reading of the text concludes that questioning which reality is real is redundant, Flor and Kneis seem to presume the non-Buffyverse reality to be the real one, and Buffy's eventual choice to be a retreat into what is actually a delusion. The authors read Buffy's crisis in the episode (and in what seems to be presumed to be her real life) as Oedipal and, thus, argue that "[t]he Father is the monster of the episode" (72). Such a reading, which focuses solely on the individual's inner workings to the complete exclusion of any contextual (within the text) factors, offers little to nothing in allowing the socially critical potential of the series to be exposed. In contrast, this article's postmodern reading argues that the promise of the comfort of a "normal" family life represents a temptation that fuels Buffy's own monstrous potential and, thus, facilitates the construction of Buffy as the main monster of this episode—a proposition rife with social commentary.

[16] Of course, the argument that the titular hero of the series is this episode's main monster transgresses a significant boundary; that between hero and villain, protagonist and antagonist. It is, thus, deeply rooted in and representative of a postmodern reading of the text. The context and narrative realization of this transgression, however, both warrant closer examination in terms of their relationship to postmodernism. There are two main points to make: the first relates to the context that propels Buffy towards actions of monstrosity; the second relates to the way in which Buffy is both monster and slayer in the same narrative, undermining and saving the narrative at the same time.

[17] To explain either point, a brief examination of Buffy's crucial choice-options is warranted. When Buffy's friend Willow finds the antidote to the demon's poison, Buffy is

presented with the choice to either take or refuse the antidote and thereby choose between the two realities. Likewise, in the alternate reality of the mental institution, the Doctor encourages Buffy to choose “sanity” and eliminate everything from her mind that anchors it to the delusion of the Buffyverse. Again, whether to either heed or ignore this advice is Buffy’s choice. As Geller argues, there is no “epistemological resolution” to the question of which reality is the “real” one or in which reality Buffy is sane or delusional. Thus, Buffy’s decision is not, and in fact cannot, be based on that question. Instead, Buffy must choose which reality she belongs to; she must choose her own identity—who she really is. Each reality offers Buffy a way to eliminate the other reality, and the choice is hers alone.

[18] To understand how Buffy is propelled towards monstrosity, it is worth examining the purpose of the mental institution setting. In the action notes of the episode’s screenplay, the Doctor is described as “[a]s kind-looking and compassionate as they come” (Gutierrez). The Doctor is indeed portrayed throughout the episode as having nothing but Buffy’s recovery at heart. No ulterior motives are implied at any point of the episode. As Geller argues, it is important that the reality of the mental institution and all its inhabitants are presented as non-threatening and kind, in order to make this reality a plausible choice option for Buffy. However, this does not preclude a reading of the episode in terms of its commentary on institutionalized psychiatry. While constructed as benign in his demeanor and well-intentioned within the boundaries of his own paradigm, the character of the Doctor is dehumanized by his lack of an actual name. Further, the cinematography distinguishes and comments on each reality. The Buffyverse scenes are filmed with the usual overabundance of color that characterizes the series. In contrast, the scenes taking place in the mental hospital are filmed in bleak institutional colors. Even Buffy’s parents, who are clearly not directly linked to the institution itself, are clothed in subdued colors. The drab institutional cot, with its restraints for both arms and legs, is prominently featuring in many of the hospital scenes,

dominating the final shot of the scene in which Buffy for the first time learns explicitly where she is and has supposedly been for the past six years.

[19] A. Susan Owen notes that *Buffy* treats science with skepticism and “mark(s) ‘evil’ as a consequence of modernity’s faith in science and rationalism” (24). The sidelining of the issue of sanity in Buffy’s choice, as discussed by Geller, and the emphasis on the medicalization and (threatening nature of the) institutionalization of insanity in one of the two realities, whether intentional or not, is reminiscent of a Foucauldian discourse on madness (Flor and Kneis 73). The point to note here is that, however well-intentioned, the scientific solution presented by the Doctor to Buffy that she should rid herself of all that anchors her mind to her delusions (i.e., her “imagined” friends and sister), in combination with the promise of a “normal”, protected, and unburdened existence, leads to Buffy’s violence in the alternate reality of the Buffyverse. It is the scientific treatment of insanity that causes Buffy to become the monster. In multiple ways, the validity of scientific rationality is called into question, while boundaries along the nexus of sanity/rationality/placidity and insanity/irrationality/violence are thoroughly transgressed, meeting two of Pinedo’s characteristics of postmodern horror.

[20] The second point marking Buffy’s postmodernist appearance as this episode’s monster relates to the apparent contradiction produced by the fact that she is also the episode’s savior—a point made all the more interesting by the fact that she is the monster in the Buffyverse, while it is her heroic ability as an ordinary, institutionally oppressed girl within the non-Buffyverse to find her inner strength that enables her to save the day. The episode essentially mirrors the struggle Buffy has been undergoing for the course of the sixth season, marked by depression, alienation, and apathy with regard to her responsibilities as an adult and as a slayer, and her desire to escape. In a self-reflexive way, Buffy faces this same struggle in a

much more literal manner in “Normal Again”. Throughout the season, as a result of her own existential crisis, Buffy has committed what can be described as monstrous acts, such as the neglect (to some degree) of her duties as the guardian and parental figure to her sister Dawn. Her monstrous turn in “Normal Again” as well as her recovery from it, thus, symbolically represent a climactic resolution of this struggle. Wilcox argues that *Buffy* uses “the symbolism of monsters to represent social problems” (16). “Normal Again” shows its audience that, presented with the right combination of overwhelming life challenges, any one of us can turn into a monster—representing yet another construction of the monstrous potential within humanity.

[21] As Buffy resolves her dilemma by choosing the Buffyverse over the alternative of a protected and unchallenged life, she regains her identity as the slayer and her strength to meet life’s challenges, making “Normal Again” a crossroads episode and to a great degree self-reflexive in terms of the relationship of the episode’s plot to the greater story arc of the season. Moreover, it is Buffy’s choice not to be the monster that saves the day, reminding us that some fights must be carried out internally and can only be lost or won within the individual; in other words, the line between monster and savior within every human being may be a very fine one indeed. As argued above, if Buffy is asked to question her sanity, so is the audience for having been complicit via their decision to suspend disbelief and, moreover, to continue to do so. As Alderman puts it, “If we believed what Buffy believes ... we *would* be mad” (11). Likewise, the audience is challenged to examine their own potential for monstrosity.

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