

Breaking Conventions to Build the Buffyverse

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"...it [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*] captivates the 14-year-old and the 50-year-old, the political and the literary, the thoughtful and the vacuous; it is an allegory of American high school and teen social life; it asserts girl power; it is humor and pathos, death and duty and another day, love and hatred, and is so incredibly complex, complex enough to represent the experience of living in this world, which, if we're honest, is not what most television is about." (Adams 11)

[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the television series - the concept was adapted from the 1992 movie of the same name to better reflect creator Joss Whedon's vision) made its debut on America's new WB network as a midseason replacement in 1997. The quirky title reflects the show's central paradox - that the warrior chosen to protect the world from vampires, demons and other bringers of the apocalypse is a petite, bubbly, adolescent girl with a penchant for bad puns and shoe shopping. As such, it cannot simply be categorized as any one subgenre of television fiction - *Buffy* contains elements of horror, comedy, action-adventure, teen drama and even law enforcement programs, by turns embracing and perverting the conventions and expectations arising from these fields. It is further distinguished as a distinctive and layered program by its unique narrative structure centered around a strongly-themed season, use of extended metaphor, commitment to risky changes in narrative and character, and a postmodern awareness of its own techniques. This marks it as not only entertaining but open to multiple levels of interpretation, encouraging viewers to both relate personally to the characters and their world, and also examine the show within a wider context, taking into account its history and references to other texts. While predominantly intended by the network to attract those in their teens and twenties, the show developed a cult audience from many age groups and drew the attention of academics and critics alike (Millman). This was both the result of its "genre busting" nature and of the show's deliberate catering to avid fans - rewarding viewer attention through impressive continuity, foreshadowing, commitment to detail and the creation of a cohesive mythology.

[2] The character of Buffy Summers herself is a deliberate denial of one of the most predictable clichés in horror, that of the beautiful blonde girl who is murdered in a dark alley. Joss Whedon asserts that "The idea of *Buffy* was to subvert that idea... and create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim" (Whedon). She is a struggling, yet powerful hero as well as a fun-loving young woman, equally worried about the fate of the world and acceptance from her peers, by turns flippant and serious,

and, importantly, feminine. Unlike the archetypical figure of the action-adventure genre - a lone masculine hero whose power lies in physical strength (Rutherford) - Buffy relies closely on others, particularly her "Watcher" (guide and mentor) Giles, and best friends Willow and Xander. The importance of this relationship is highlighted in the penultimate episode of *Buffy's* fourth season, *Primeval* (4021), when the four (recently reunited after an argument in *The Yoko Factor* (4020) in which Buffy declares: "I guess I'm starting to understand why there's no ancient prophecy about a Chosen One . . . and her friends.") defeat the previously unstoppable Adam by magically combining their essences. Buffy's superior physical strength is clearly not enough to win all battles - she also needs the support of her friends through Giles's intellect, Willow's spirit and Xander's heart. As such, her heroism is both inspirational and attainable to fans - while her super-human physical power is used to fight the evil undead, the underlying message is clear: that even though one may be a flawed, everyday person, through courage and friendship, (metaphorical) demons can be faced down and a kind of personal heroism achieved.

[3] *Buffy's* narrative structure of is one its most distinctive features. While most *Buffy* episodes contain a 'stand alone' story, they also contribute to the overriding arc of their season, giving the show a strong sense of direction and meaning - events which seem minor in one episode may have major consequences in the future. An example of this can be found in the episode *Halloween* (2018), when core characters are temporarily transformed into their trick-or-treat costumes - just one happenstance of this is Xander turning into a soldier. Although the transformation is reversed at the end of the episode, the plot point proves vital eight episodes later in *Innocence* (2014) when Xander uses his memories of the event to break into an army base and steal a rocket launcher, later wielded by Buffy to destroy a powerful demon and avert the end of the world. To fans, this is both incentive to actively watch and rewatch episodes, paying attention to small details in the first instance, and noting instances of foreshadowing in the second. Furthermore, it is testament to the planning and attention of the show's creative team, thus legitimizing dedicated viewer interest in the knowledge the text has been well-crafted.

[4] Even if an episode bears little continuation of the season's central narrative (which is generally centered around fighting a particularly threatening force of evil, the season's "big bad") it will tie in with the related thematic arc of the season. While the third season's main villain is rogue slayer Faith (in her assistance of the evil Sunnydale mayor), her actions towards Buffy also serve as an embodiment of the theme of betrayal. This theme is reinforced and explored by other instances of betrayal throughout the season - Buffy's betrayal of her friends by keeping an important secret in *Revelations* (3007), Willow

and Xander's affair as betrayal of their significant others in *Lovers Walk* (3008), Giles' betrayal of Buffy to submit her to a life-threatening test devised by the dictatorial Watcher's council in *Helpless* (3012), to name but a few - to create a layered and cohesive whole. This allows such a theme to be addressed within the context of different situations and characters - in this case, no one character is innocent, blurring moral boundaries and meanings, and in the process opening up possibilities for discussion and thought not likely were the idea to be explored only within one episode.

[5] This focus on theme is vital to another of the series' notable characteristics, the extended metaphor - a device rarely seen on prime-time television, where narrative is largely self-evident. While the supernatural elements of the show contribute to a strong story, underlying this is another level of meaning, as the literal demons faced by Buffy and friends on a weekly basis have more figurative counterparts in the life of the viewer (Creeber 42). "High-school is hell" is the metaphor overriding the first three seasons, a mythologizing of Western adolescence which encourages the viewer to relate to the characters on a personal level of shared experience, despite the obvious differences between the 'Buffyverse' and the 'real world'. Issues highlighted in the first three seasons, set at Sunnydale High, are often posed as metaphors - a girl who no one pays attention to literally becomes invisible (*Out of Mind, Out of Sight* 1011), a privileged swimming team forced to take performance enhancing drugs really become monsters (*Go Fish* 2020), and a 'pack' of bullies who prey on unpopular students are possessed by the spirit of cruel hyenas (*The Pack* 1006). As Whedon says of the show: "[...] it mythologizes it [growing up] in such a way, such a romantic way-it basically says, "Everybody who made it through adolescence is a hero." And I think that's very personal, that people get something from that that's very real" (Robinson).

[6] A notable example of this technique takes place in *Buffy's* second season episode *Innocence* (2014), after Buffy consummates her relationship with the souled vampire Angel. The story which follows is not uncommon within the teen drama genre - that of the girl who finds, after losing her virginity to her boyfriend, that he seems to have become a different person who does not really love her after all. Typically, this might be played out by the boyfriend ignoring the mistreated girlfriend and moving on to other women. On *Buffy*, Angel has lost his soul (through a combination of a gypsy curse and his 'moment of true happiness'), changing his nature to that of the evil Angelus who attacks Buffy, threatens and kills her friends and attempts to bring about the apocalypse. Eventually, Buffy must send him to hell to save the world, and does so - at the very moment his soul is restored (*Becoming Pt2*, 2022). This epic metaphorical representation of a source of angst from everyday life means the viewer can read the story

both as heroic myth - inspirational and tragic - and a personal story whose characters can be understood and related to.

[7] Another example of an extended metaphor is particularly noticeable throughout *Buffy's* fifth season in the existence of Dawn, Buffy's sister, whose sudden creation (by magic) altered the memories of all who know her. When Dawn and her family initially become aware of her otherworldly origins, their reactions show the storyline as a metaphor for adoption, Dawn's fear and anger that her family is 'fake' only being assuaged at Buffy's insistence that 'It doesn't matter where you came from...You are my sister.' (*Blood Ties* 5013). At the same time however, Dawn's fears of literally not being 'real', of being nothing but a liability to her family and friends, can also be seen as a metaphor for the adolescent search for selfhood and struggle to define an authentic and useful identity. Because of *Buffy's* openness as a text, viewers can interpret metaphors such as this in multiple ways, relating to their own different positions, experiences and interests.

[8] The sudden transformation of the character of Angel from Buffy's closest ally to her cruelest enemy reflects another of *Buffy's* most notable narrative devices inspiring active fan negotiation. Nothing in *Buffy* can be taken for granted to remain the same or to develop in an expected manner, instead the world is in a state of constant flux. Change often alters even some of the show's most important relationships. Important characters die unexpectedly (Buffy herself has died and been resurrected twice, both times with life-altering consequences) and morality is never unchangeable (Spike, an evil vampire introduced in season two and responsible for the death of thousands, gradually is transformed by his initially reluctant love for Buffy, eventually finding redemption through his sacrificial death in the series finale *Chosen* (7022)). Rather than keep the characters forever in high school, "*Buffy* riskily, passionately, embraced change" (Appelo), the destruction of the core of the show's initial premise symbolized by the obliteration of the school in the third season's climactic battle in *Graduation Day* (3022). Some core characters moved away, others continued education at the local college or found employment - dramatically altering the environment and situations typical of the series. Sixth season Buffy's post-resurrection depression, struggle to provide and care for her young sister and problems evolving from an unhealthy sexual relationship with vampire Spike are very different from the concerns of her teenaged self just a few seasons earlier. These changes prevented the show from ever falling into a stifling rut of predictability, and allowed the characters to grow and change, their relationships becoming more complex as a result of their accumulated experiences.

[9] As discussed previously, the structure of *Buffy's* episodes and seasons is firmly established - however, the show "ruthlessly mocks its own conventions" (Appelo), as in *Once More, With Feeling* (6007) when Buffy's sister is kidnapped her wry acknowledgement: "Dawn's in trouble. Must be Tuesday" (the day *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* went to air in the USA). In *The Zeppo* (3013) Buffy's melodramatic battle to prevent the opening of 'the hellmouth' is trivialized to become a subplot when seen through the eyes of Xander struggling to find his place in the world. The show ironically garnered its only Emmy nomination for writing after responding to continued praise for its sharp dialogue with *Hush* (4010), in which all characters were rendered speechless for the majority of the episode. Such breaks with tradition acknowledge fan familiarity with the show's regular format, while also reminding them not to become too comfortable with it, as the pursuit of creativity ensures the text changes and is unpredictable.

[10] As well as the widespread appeal created by its innovative narrative techniques, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also inspires a more committed loyalty in a cult fan base by the complexity of the universe established within the text. The attention paid to continuity is especially relevant here, rewarding long-time fans with reminders of past episodes which might slip past the more casual viewer unnoticed. When in *Doppelgangland* (3016) a vampire version of Willow from an alternate universe appears, just one of her actions is to "turn" (into a vampire) a never-before seen girl named Sandy. The consequences of this action only become apparent two seasons later in *Into the Woods* (5010), when we next see vampire Sandy seducing Buffy's college boyfriend Riley - without any reference to her previous appearance on the show, which only avid fans will recognize (Kaveney 36). Less obscure are characters such as Jonathon and Amy, both of whom appeared infrequently in minor roles in the show's first season, yet sporadically recurring throughout the characters lives, both eventually having major impacts on core characters in the sixth and seventh seasons.

[11] Avid fans are especially encouraged to grapple with the layers of meaning present in the text's instances of foreshadowing. Because the narrative arc is planned well in advance, clues to future events may be found in earlier episodes, rewarding fans devoted enough to engage with ambiguous messages. Buffy's dreams, often prophetic, are a rich source of these messages. In the third season's *Graduation Day Pt 2* (3022), a comatose Buffy is told in a dream: "Miles to go - Little Ms. Muffet counting down from 7-3-0." This refers to the inexplicable arrival of Buffy's sister Dawn in season five, which would lead to Buffy's sacrificial death at the end of that season - two years, or 730 days after this episode. This is reinforced by Buffy's dream in *Restless* (4022), a year later, as when looking at a clock reading 7:30

Buffy is told "That clock's completely wrong" (as her death is now only a few months away), and "Be back before dawn" - Dawn will come into existence in the next episode of the show (the first of the fifth season) and the statement can only be understood when reread in hindsight to understand its reference to the future character (Wilcox).

[12] *Restless* (4022) provides an example of another strength of the show which attracts committed fans: an attention to detail. One of the best instances of this in the entire series occurs in this episode's first act, when Willow dreams she is painting a Sapphic verse on her lover Tara's naked back. While to the vast majority of the show's audience the Greek letters will be undecipherable, the inscription is an invocation to Aphrodite, which is responded to by the goddess's promise to make whoever the poet desires love her back in return "if she does not love, soon she shall love - even unwilling"(Bowman). The particular verse has special meaning for the pair - Sappho and Aphrodite as representative of their being lesbian and witches respectively, but also on another level because Willow in the future will indeed use magic to sustain her love with Tara (Bowman). Although this scene lasted only twenty seconds at most, the effort to include such detail is impressive.

[13] A similar level of detail has gone into the construction of the mythology surrounding the function of the slayer. In the first season, the basic tenets of the role are established ("one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires" - *Welcome to the Hellmouth* (1001), "One slayer dies, the next one's called!" - *Prophecy Girl* (1012)), leading the way for the emergence of a second slayer in the second season, as a result of Buffy's temporary death (she drowns and is revived by CPR). Later, Buffy (and thus the viewer) encounters the spirit of the First Slayer on a vision quest, learns the histories of two slayers who die at the hand of Spike and discovers the origin of the slayer's power, which plays an important role in the show's final episode. The accumulation of detail here serves to create a coherent set of rules within the universe in which the story takes place - while they contain strong fantasy elements, their consistency means the committed viewer can relate to that space, and the increasingly complicated nature of this reinforced the idea that the world is as varied and complex - and thus rich in meaning - as their own.

[14] Furthermore, each episode is peppered with reference to both popular and high culture, playfully interacting with the viewer's world and encouraging them to incorporate life knowledge in their reading of the text. Buffy and her friends repeatedly refer to themselves as the "Scooby Gang" (Adams 208), likening themselves to the young adventurers of cartoon Scooby Doo. The characters seem to enjoy

twisting such references to reflect their own voice and situation, as when Buffy complains that Giles is "trying to Scully me" in *The Pack* (1006) - relying on the audiences' association of skepticism with *The X-files* character. And after a less than inspiring speech from Buffy on the eve of a major battle in *The Gift* (5022), Spike notes that it isn't "exactly the St Crispin's Day speech", later quipping "we band of buggered" - an intentional misquote of the famous line from Shakespeares' *Henry V*. This postmodern intertextuality and mingling of high and low culture connects the 'Buffyverse' and its characters to the 'real life' of the viewer, making them feel both closer to and more involved with the text.

[15] Joss Whedon has created in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a story which appeals to many through its clever mix of humour, action and drama which refuses to be categorized. *Buffy's* distinctive narrative techniques ensure its stories resonate with viewers and is open to their interpretation, creating adaptable relationships between different audience members and the text. Its carefully planned structure and use of metaphor reinforce clear themes, and unpredictable nature prompts creativity from the show's writers and anticipation from its viewers. Through layered meanings established by foreshadowing, thorough detail and continuity, the committed viewer is rewarded with what Ken Tucker, critic for *Entertainment Weekly*, dubbed a "rich, expansive mythology that could accommodate any comment Whedon and co wanted to make on contemporary culture (Adams 5).

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