

Lesbian-type Lovers: Heterosexual writer bias and the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché in the portrayal of the Tara/Willow relationship

By Alissa Wilts

"I'm so evil and skanky; and I think I'm kinda gay."ⁱ When Willow comes face-to-face with her vampire double in the third season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, her reaction foreshadows future events: she comes out as a lesbian in the fourth season, and goes evil in the sixth. But more than simply revealing buried personality traits, in "Doppelgangland" Willow makes a connection between being evil and being a lesbian. Though the negative connotations were likely not intentional on the part of the BtVS writers, such a connection perpetuates the harmful stereotype of lesbians that has been repeatedly portrayed in film, television and literature. Though *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a program founded on the principle of flouting clichés, in particular the one about the helpless blonde girl in the alley who gets attacked by all the monsters, the program's representation of queer characters falls into the realm of the cliché. While the Willow/Tara relationship was generally represented in a positive light, their association with magic and the supernatural is problematic, as Edwina Bartlem points out in her paper "Coming Out on a Mouth of Hell," and it serves to reinforce long-inscribed homophobic assumptions that lesbians are dangerous, transgressive, and mysterious beings outside of "normal" society. At the end of season six, the death of Tara and the emergence of Evil Willow creates a "two-for-one lesbian cliché package,"ⁱⁱ conforming to what has been labeled the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché, and igniting a debate about the impact of negative representations, and the importance of authorial intentions in the depiction of lesbians and lesbian couples, both in general and specifically concerning Willow and Tara.

It is worth mentioning that my intention in this analysis is not to beat up on the writers of *Buffy* for creating a "bad" portrayal of lesbians; the fact of the matter is that I love *Buffy* — I've watched all seven seasons twice since the series finale aired last May. But I think it is important to talk about the reasons why harmful stereotypes continue to be perpetuated — even on a groundbreaking show like *Buffy*.

First of all, let us discuss a sampling of lesbian representations in the media, the idea of positive versus negative images of lesbians, and the concept of the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché — both in general and as these topics apply to the portrayal of the Tara/Willow relationship in *Buffy*,

after which I will go on to the idea of the heterosexual writer bias that I believe is at work in the depiction of lesbians in the Buffyverse.

It is important to be aware of the historical context into which the Willow/Tara relationship was introduced. But the recognition of a history of lesbian representation is only the tip of the theoretical iceberg, and in her essay "The Death of the Author and the Resurrection of the Dyke," Reina Lewis argues that "It is not enough to write lesbian subjects [...] into history and literature unless we also question that subjecthood."ⁱⁱⁱ Recounting a sample of lesbian representations in literature, film, and television does not tell the entire story, but it gives us a place to start in the discussion of the importance and impact of the Willow/Tara relationship.

Literary lesbian characters have been around since the Victorian period for certain, particularly in fin-de-siècle literature, and possibly earlier. Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," for example, portrays an image of vampiric lesbianism. Lizzie allows the goblins in the market to crush their fruit all over her body, then takes that symbol of male sexual power back to her ailing sister Laura and says "Eat me, drink me, love me," and "suck my juices."^{iv} The sisters' lesbianism is a temporary indulgence that functions as salvation for Laura, who had started on the path to sexual knowledge that generally ends in death, according to the narrative of the fallen woman in Victorian literature, by accepting and consuming fruit from the seductive male goblins. Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 novella, *Carmilla*, draws on the story in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's unfinished poem "Christabel" to tell the tale of a vampire lesbian who seduces innocent young girls. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), which has been called the first novel in English on the topic of "sexual inversion," was banned because of its so-called realistic portrayal of lesbian experience, and landed Hall in court answering to an obscenity charge. On top of the real-life drama surrounding the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, the story itself is bleak and hopeless, as it tells the tale of a tomboy nicknamed Stephen who chooses to die rather than to subject the woman she loves to the oppression of an intolerant society. Less than ten years after Hall's lesbian tale was published, Djuna Barnes came out with *Nightwood* (1937), in which same-sex love between women is described as "'insane passion for unmitigated anguish,' and the main character says of her lesbianism, 'There's something evil in me that loves evil and degradation.'"^v More recently, lesbian writers like Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, and Jeannette Winterson have inscribed their experience of lesbianism into literary history, giving lesbians a voice in the depiction of that experience. But even in today's literary landscape, clichéd lesbian representations still occur frequently. For example, Susan Swan's 1993 novel *The Wives of Bath* perpetuates the "crazy lesbian" stereotype in both its book form and its 2001 film adaptation, *Lost and Delirious*. In the book, Paulie murders a man, cuts off his genitalia and attaches it to herself in order to prove to the family of her lover that she is a boy; the movie depicts a slightly less gruesome ending, but it still ends in death, after a rejected Paulie goes slowly insane and ends up jumping off a roof.

Moving on to more film representations of lesbians, *Daughters of Darkness* (1970), *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971), and *The Hunger* (1983) continue the tradition of lesbian vampires started by Sheridan LeFanu's novella, *Carmilla*. *The Fox* (1967), *Personal Best* (1982), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), and *Gigli* (2003) all portray women who "get over the thrill and head back to boystown."^{vi} *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) depicts a possessive, insecure, man-threatened, sadistic lesbian who drinks too much, and the film portrays lesbian relationships as short-lived and vulnerable to infidelity. The Shirley MacLaine-Audrey Hepburn vehicle *The Children's Hour* (1961) presents an accusation of lesbianism as the ultimate way to ruin the lives of two young schoolteachers. Hepburn loses out on the potential "perfect life" with the doctor who sought to marry her, and MacLaine ends up hanging herself when she finally does confess her abiding love for her friend. In *Basic Instinct* (1992), Sharon Stone's character and her lover are murderers, and the jealous girlfriend goes crazy and ends up dead; plus, Stone ends the movie by foregoing murder in favour of having all kinds of graphic heterosexual sex with Michael Douglas. *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) is based on a horrifying true crime story in which two girls murder one of their mothers, and their actions are blamed, in part, on their intense and sometimes sexual relationship. Finally, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) ends with one woman arranging the murder of her ex-girlfriend and then killing herself.

Some of the best-known television representations of lesbians before Willow and Tara arrived on the scene include: *Roseanne's* Nancy, played by Sandra Bernhard, who ends up dating guest-star Tim Curry even after coming out as a lesbian; Angelina Jolie as a drug-addled, doomed fashion model in the TV movie *Gia*; and Ellen Degeneres as the first out lesbian in a sitcom title role, which was cancelled less than a year after the coming-out show amidst rumours that the show had become "too gay."

To summarize the diverse representations that I have listed, we see lesbians who are vampires, drug addicts, murderers or murdered, suicidal or insane, in a phase, deranged, possessive, unfaithful, and certainly never, ever happy. To be a lesbian, according to the aforementioned examples, is to be doomed to unhappiness (like Willow at Season Six's end), death (like Tara) or cancellation (like *Ellen*).

Considering this history of lesbian representation, the Willow/Tara relationship was, from its very beginning, "overloaded with expectation far in excess of the expectations audiences have of mainstream images."^{vii} According to the Children Now 2001 Prime Time Diversity report, only 2% of television characters are queer, 92% of which are gay men. That leaves only 0.16% of television characters identified as lesbians.^{viii} So as *Buffy's* lesbians arrived on the scene, they were a welcome rarity for an appreciative lesbian audience, as well as the catalyst of a great deal of discussion about what it means to see lesbians on television, how they should be presented, and whether or not great care should be taken in order to create positive images of lesbians.

As Edwina Bartlem points out in “Coming Out on a Mouth of Hell,” the images we see on television are not an exact replica of real-life; however, “fictional representations are still important sites where viewers negotiate personal and cultural concepts of sexuality and subjectivity.”^{ix} The Willow/Tara relationship was not just an image with which real-life lesbians could identify; it was also a lesson for non-lesbian viewers about queer women and their relationships. For the first time, two women were portrayed in a relationship on television with very little emphasis placed on their sexuality. At the beginning of their relationship, the cultural assumption of heterosexuality made it necessary for Willow to deal with coming out to her friends; but after that was done, Willow and Tara were just a fact of life — just another relationship in the Buffyverse, on equal terms with the heterosexual relationships in the series. Their lesbianism was no longer an issue. They were free to exchange terms of endearment, like “baby” and “sweety,” to have occasional spats (just like straight couples), and to be publicly affectionate. In the fifth-season episode “Family,” the wiccan lovebirds even share a very public dance in the middle of The Bronze, and no one even bats an eyelash.^x Their affection for one another, in this case, is portrayed in the context of general society; instead of locating their display in a uniquely queer setting, such as a gay bar, Willow and Tara share their moment out on the dance floor amidst a crowd of heterosexual couples. What message does this convey to the audience? Lesbian love and affection is not a secluded, hidden, or frightening activity; rather, Willow and Tara’s relationship is depicted as everyday — in other words, normal.

This brings us back to the necessity of analyzing the subjecthood of lesbian characters, and to the question of the social impact of negative versus positive images. Reina Lewis asserts that “For lesbian readers, the emphasis on positive images limits the sort of writing that is acceptable.”^{xi} June Arnold and Bertha Harris take the notion of positivity as a negative thing even further than Lewis as they “debunk the protective myth surrounding positive images by arguing that in refusing to represent the unpalatable and contradictory elements of lesbianism, writers are disenfranchising lesbians from their own experience.”^{xii} But to argue that fighting for positive representations is to ignore the whole of lesbian experience is to disregard the long history of negative representations of lesbians. As the people of the online forum “The Kitten, The Witches and the Bad Wardrobe” ask in their piece “The Death of Tara, the Fall of Willow and the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché FAQ,” “We’ve had enough dead lesbians in the past, is it too much to ask that a show which prides itself on being ground-breaking and cliché-subverting actually keep the lesbian couple alive for once?”^{xiii} Tara and Willow’s relationship was an important representation precisely because it was, on the whole, a portrayal of two normal young women in love, and the show’s acknowledgement of the everyday normalcy of their relationship has an impact on non-queer viewers who may never have met a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person in their life – to their knowledge. Considering how few lesbian characters there are (if you’ll recall, 0.16% of television characters), taking into account the overwhelming prevalence of examples that can

be classified as negative portrayals, and considering also that television is a social educational tool, to deny that we are due some positive images of lesbians is to allow society to add even more negative images of lesbians to an already massive pile, and to perpetuate homophobia.

On the other hand, would we in the queer community become complacent without negative images to discuss and combat? Would we, as Reina Lewis suggests, “find comfort in the ease of reading’ positive images which, rather than motivating them to articulate their experience and rebel against repression, may give a false sense of security and encourage inactivity.”^{xiv} Negative images may serve the purpose of maintaining awareness of discrimination in our society, but at the same time they perpetuate that discrimination. This is not to say that eliminating negative images of lesbians in the media would eliminate homophobia; that would be akin to saying that getting rid of gun violence on television would absolutely reduce the number of gun-related murders. Nothing is a sure bet. But if we wish to strive for equality and the elimination of homophobia in Western society, then portrayals of lesbian relationships in the media like that which was presented in the fourth and fifth seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* need to become the rule, rather than the exception.

The Willow/Tara relationship was, in general, a much more positively presented lesbian relationship than those that preceded them. But as Edwina Bartlem suggests, we must ask, “has the show challenged stereotypical representations of lesbianism, or merely perpetuated them?”^{xv} How are Willow and Tara similar and different from lesbian characters that came before them? The tradition of queer monsters and vampires “symbolically associate[s] homosexuality with contagion, reinforcing the notion that gay and lesbian people are predatory and are determined to recruit more members.”^{xvi} Willow and Tara were constructed as allies of the hero – moving lesbians in the *Buffy* narrative from their traditional place on the side of evil into the good guys’ corner. The development of their relationship does not indicate that Tara made grand overtures to seduce Willow, or to “recruit” her; instead, the progression of their affection toward one another is chronicled in tender moments, like their conversation in the episode “Who Are You?” in which they discuss Tara’s outsider status, and Willow’s desire to have something that is just hers:

Tara: I am, you know.

Willow: What?

Tara: Yours.^{xvii}

Instead of appearing as the “corrupting agent”^{xviii} who converts Willow to the proverbial dark side (ie. lesbianism), Tara is a shy stutterer who thinks that Willow is “really cool.”^{xix} When threatened by the return of Oz in “New Moon Rising,” rather than act like a jealous, possessive girlfriend, Tara tells Willow, “I’ll still be here. We’ll still be friends,” and “You have to be with the person you love.”^{xx} Tara never displays predatory behaviour in her advances toward Willow, and their relationship becomes a romance anyway – without the standard stereotype of the lesbian corruptor coming into play.

The development and existence of the Tara/Willow relationship within the *Buffy* narrative subverts a number of lesbian clichés. However, just as no one in real-life is perfect, neither are *Buffy*'s lesbians. While Tara and Willow's portrayal moves away from the trope of the seductive lesbian vampire, the trope of the lesbian witch takes its place. Though the witches' association with magic and the supernatural is a clever way to depict metaphorical lesbian sex on television at a time when homosexuality is still considered controversial enough for a network to debate whether or not to cut one small kiss from one episode, it is a problematic narrative strategy due to the history of Judeo-Christian traditions that have "stigmatized lesbianism and witchcraft as deviant, immoral and evil due to the symbolic threat that they pose to patriarchal power."^{xxi} *Buffy* is a show that revels in threatening patriarchal power, so the presence of lesbians in the Scoobies' inner circle is in itself subversive. But to associate lesbians and lesbianism with witchcraft still leaves them aligned with unstable, otherworldly powers, and "insinuates that lesbian desire and sexuality are anomalies that exist beyond the normal world, beyond representation on mainstream television and beyond the understanding of most viewers."^{xxii} To relate lesbian sexuality to powers that cannot be understood by general society is to leave room for lesbianism to be interpreted by the *Buffy* audience as something that is unnatural, unfamiliar, scary, and possibly even evil.

Up until season six though, the association of Tara and Willow's magic exclusively with the forces of good tends to subvert stereotypes. But when the magic is activated as an addictive substance in season six, its continuing relationship with lesbianism complicates the narrative meaning of being a lesbian in the Buffyverse and begins the descent into the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché that ends the season.

When Tara sings "I'm Under Your Spell" in "Once More With Feeling,"^{xxiii} we are aware that the meaning is both figurative and literal; Tara is in love with Willow, and also under the memory spell cast to make her forget about their magic-related argument. The double meaning of Tara's song equates lesbian love with magical manipulation.

Magic had already been cleverly and directly connected to lesbianism in the fifth season episode "Family," when Tara's father asserts, "You don't even try to hide it anymore."^{xxiv} Overtly, he was talking about Tara's indulgence in witchcraft, but the undercurrent of "god knows what lifestyle" gives the conversation its lesbian layer. So when Tara tells Willow, "You are using too much magic,"^{xxv} the implication is that Willow, like Ellen before her, has become "too gay." She has indulged so much in the "wiccan lifestyle"^{xxvi} that she becomes a manipulative, selfish, and eventually downright evil lesbian.

Tara once more connects lesbian love with magic at the beginning of her final episode "Seeing Red" while lying in bed with Willow, who had forgotten how things had been between them "without the magic." "There was plenty of magic,"^{xxvii} Tara replies, and then proceeds to spend the majority of the episode engaged in the first non-metaphorical sex that the couple was

allowed. At the end of the episode, Tara dies a random, horrible death, and I would argue that had she not returned to the magical lesbian embrace of her relationship with Willow, she may have survived.

Here is where the cliché comes in: the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché, which is essentially a variation of the minority cliché. Like the token black guy who is the first to be killed off in an action movie and the Native American villains in old western films, Tara and Willow end up dead and evil, respectively. And just like the horror flick teenagers who sneak off for some “alone time,” Tara’s death comes immediately after a scene of heavy sexual flirtation and at the end of an episode spent mostly naked in bed. Whether intentional or not, this association sends a message to the audience: lesbian relationships end in misery and death. Worse yet, in my opinion, Willow’s transformation into the season’s Big Bad sends the message that lesbian love is so intense and unhealthy that it causes mental instability. And just to add insult to injury, a man gets to save the world from the crazy, grieving lesbian with his yellow crayon story.

At this point, I’ll stand with Michel Foucault and ask “What does it matter who is speaking”^{xxviii} in the representation of the Tara/Willow relationship? While Foucault affirms the death of the author in his essay “What Is An Author?” Reina Lewi points to a writer/author divide that “posits the author as the point of origin constructed for the text by critic and readers, and the writer as the ‘real’ historical personage who manipulates physical materials to create the text.”^{xxix} It is this ‘real’ person – the writer him/herself – that interests me where the Tara/Willow relationship is concerned. We write what we know, as the old adage says, and as a result every writer inscribes a part of themselves – a bit of the writer’s own particular perspective on the world – on the texts that he/she creates. Therefore, it does indeed matter who is speaking when it comes to the portrayal of lesbians and lesbian relationships in the media, and it is worth considering the effect of a writer’s (sexual) identity on the text that he/she creates – including consideration of the stereotypes that one may unwittingly perpetuate thanks to one’s lack of awareness and/or personal investment in avoiding such stereotypes.

With that in mind, how is it possible that a show like *Buffy*, founded on the shattering of one long-standing cliché, could end up perpetuating a whole other cliché? Queer people are not the majority in our society; from the perspective of sexuality, heterosexuality is the dominant culture. It is estimated that 1 out of 10 people identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered; none of that 10% was involved in writing season six of *Buffy*. Because Tara and Willow were television’s longest-running queer couples, the glbt community’s investment in their storyline was intense; their relationship was a break from the labeling and the “othering” of lesbians. *Buffy*’s writers had no personal queer experiences to inform their writing decisions; their heterosexual experience failed to recognize the history of lesbian representation and made it possible for them to accidentally duplicate the historical images of lesbians that dominate our film, television and literary culture. This heterosexual writer bias equates the lesbian experience with

that of the show's straight white characters, and assumes that it's fine to do bad things to the lesbians as long as the straight people suffer too. The problem with that argument is that *Buffy's* straight characters do not suffer in the same way. At the close of season six, if you were a queer character on *Buffy*, your chances of being either dead or evil were 100% - death for Larry and Tara, and evil for Andrew and Willow. And while Xander and Anya suffer through Hell's Bells, they, unlike Willow and Tara, are both still alive and still carry the potential for reconciliation into the seventh season.

In the end, the biased perspective of *Buffy's* heterosexual writers privileges the straight experience and perpetuates stereotypical images of lesbians, even though I'm quite certain that they had nothing but good intentions. On the positive side, seasons 4 and 5 present lesbians and their relationships as a normal fact of life. The degeneration of the Tara/Willow relationship into stereotypical models in season six has more to do with cultural baggage than actual malicious intent. Great strides forward have been made as more and more queer characters are making their way into our entertainment, and the *Buffy* team deserves applause for their contribution to the increased visibility and acceptance of lesbians, though the mortal and nearly apocalyptic resolution of the Tara/Willow relationship falls into cliché models thanks to the bias of the straight perspective on gay reality.

ⁱ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Willow] "Doppelgangland" 3.16

ⁱⁱ The Death of Tara, the Fall of Willow and The Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché FAQ – <http://www.stephenbooth.org/lesbiancliche.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, Reina. "The Death of the Author and the Resurrection of the Dyke," 17-32. *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1992.

^{iv} Rossetti, Christina. "Goblin Market." *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, p. 74. Penguin Books: New York, 1994.

^v Faderman, Lillian, ed. *Chloe Plus Olivia*, p. 297.

^{vi} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Willow] "Tough Love" 5.19

^{vii} Lewis, Reina. p. 28.

^{viii} Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché FAQ

^{ix} Bartlem, Edwina. "Coming Out on a Mouth of Hell," *Refractory: a Journal of Entertainment Media*. March 2003, vol. 2.

<http://www.ahcca.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/journalissues/vol2/edwinabartlem.htm>

^x *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Family" 5.06

^{xi} Lewis, Reina. p. 27

^{xii} Lewis, Reina. p. 28

^{xiii} Dead/Evil Lesbian FAQ

^{xiv} Lewis, Reina. p. 28

^{xv} Bartlem, Edwina, p. 1

^{xvi} Bartlem, Edwina, p. 3

^{xvii} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Willow & Tara] Who Are You? 4.16

^{xviii} Bartlem, Edwina, p. 2

^{xix} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Tara] Who Are You? 4.16

^{xx} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Tara] New Moon Rising 4.19

^{xxi} Bartlem, Edwina, p. 7

^{xxii} Bartlem, Edwina, p. 9 – 10

^{xxiii} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Tara] Once More With Feeling 6.07

^{xxiv} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Mr. Maclay] Family 5.06

^{xxv} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Tara] All The Way 6.06

^{xxvi} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Xander] Family 5.06

^{xxvii} *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [Tara] Seeing Red 6.19

^{xxviii} Foucault, Michel. "What Is An Author?" *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. St. Martin's Press: New York, 1989.

^{xxix} Munt, Sally. *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1992, p. 19.