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Vampires and School Girls: High School Jinks on the Hellmouth



Joyce: "Well it stops now!"

Buffy: "No, it doesn't stop. It never stops. Do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is? How dangerous? I would love to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or, god, even studying! But I have to save the world. Again. ("Becoming," Part II, 2022)

Introduction

(1) *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* treads an entertaining if uneasy course between conservatism and contemporary feminist girl power. On the one hand the weekly successful tackling of monsters emerging from the hell mouth denotes a conservative underwriting of the certainties of the American Dream's superheroes—that wrong can be righted, quests can succeed: evil is visible, tangible and destructible. On the other hand, Buffy, ostensibly physically more suited to be a prom queen or a cheer leader, and a bit of an American Beauty, is a feisty example of late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century girl power. Buffy possesses the energies of the New Woman, the mid-century tomboy of girls' comics, "Supergirl," teen heroines. She is a girl with a mission, and a manager/mentor (Giles, who provides the academic references), a girl with a team of friends who support her on her missions to sort things out, to dismember and dismantle the latest monstrous emergent from the Hellmouth.

(2) But as a slayer she is herself on the edge, "Other" in her powers, irritated at their intrusion into teenage life, dedicated to her mission, yet in love with a vampire, Angel, who loses his soul when he sleeps with her. No monster, but a friend to many who have historically been construed as monstrous, a karate-kicking, small-town, female Van Helsing (*Dracula*) in teen clothes, Buffy intervenes with vampire slayer conventions as the series intervenes with vampire fiction formulae.

(3) That set of descriptions in itself positions Buffy as a new take on women in vampire fictions. The representation of the feisty virginal schoolgirl interweaves with (bleeds into?) the image of the female recalled from vampire and other horror tales. Conventional vampire tales and films, *Dracula* (1897, film 1997), the whole Hammer horror *Dracula* related film series, Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), and even episodes of *The X-Files* television series usually configure women as hapless victims, or, if vampires, as voracious, seductive, and deadly. Their sexuality, seen as dangerous in terms of a patriarchal status quo, must be constrained, their deviant energies must be destroyed and order restored. Contemporary radical feminist vampire fictions, and films, on the other hand—"O Captain my Captain," a short story by Victoria Forrest, *The Gilda Stories* (1992) by Jewelle Gomez, and Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, (1977, 1985, 1988)—variously refuse such simplistic rejections. Recognizing the vampire in ourselves, these contemporary Gothic texts tend to present a more sympathetic figure whose subversive activities are both exciting, and in their deliberate breaking of taboos and boundaries, provide an opportunity to critique social norms, while refusing to restore a status quo which clearly operated on lies and artifice. The contemporary feminist vampire is often a creature with a moral crusade too, rather than a creature who must be killed because of a moral crusade. Lesbian, biracial, rock star, space captain, contemporary feminist vampires offer life beyond death to the dying, love across boundaries of gender, time and mortality. The subversion is celebratory as well as rather moralistic in a liberated, carnivalesque (i.e. subversive of restrictive rules) sense. Buffy's beloved Angel, in terms of his literary ancestry, is easy to identify (and to identify with). He is in the mould of Anne Rice's Louis (*Interview with the Vampire*, 1977) the vampire with a heart, a sense of morality, problematizing his given role as deadly outsider except when, his soul lost ("Innocence," 2014), he embraces its violent destructiveness again.

(4) So where does Buffy fit into this economy of vampire exchanges? She is uneasily positioned between conventional vampire figures and vampire hunters, and radical feminist revisions of the myth, which inscribe women's power as positive, not to be condemned. As such then, Buffy suits the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New woman, the nineteen-fifties tomboy hero, and the contemporary girl power mould. Maybe that is long overdue, maybe that is why we like her—she is subversive enough, energetic, not too radical, and at heart an ordinary girl (kind of). Some of the very difficulties we have with girl power appear in difficulties we have with Buffy. But the comic book questing energetic slayer, almost too close to the evil she has to destroy, is a figure for our times.

Buffy: A History in Girls' Fictions

(5) Buffy, as vampire slayer, lover of a vampire, teen heroine, is also in a long, interrupted, line of teenage fictional heroines. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century girls' novels, and the annuals/comics of the nineteen-

fifties and sixties are full of stories which feature young girls with energy and power who use the tactics normally found in male sleuths to track down crime, right wrongs, and return order. They are morally driven avenging angels, but also subversive schoolgirls. In their energetic activities these young women question and trouble the conventional representations of women's lives in the movies and magazine images of the period. Popular cultural forms such as fifties and sixties films, and magazines for women consistently concentrate on woman as homemaker. Women's magazines contain recipes, patterns for clothes making, and articles about gardening and how to make your husband happy. Younger girls' magazines often concentrate on looking pretty, makeup, how to find the right boyfriend and keep him. Each peddles a very conservative version of womanhood. In the cinema we see an uneasy mixture of film noir femmes fatales who are punished for their energy and daring, and the light romantic comedy female roles: all Doris Day and singing, Mom, girl next door and domestic bliss. Such conservative representations of women were not surprising given the aftermath of a war which needed to return women to the kitchen so the men could regain their ground in the workplace and the home, in the economy and in the hearts of their families. But the schoolgirl novels, comics and annuals developed a very different kind of version of young womanhood, energetic, adventurous plucky, imaginative—boy-like in fact. Sexuality was not an issue here, and the adventurous young women fought singly or together to re-establish a moral status quo. They did not seek boyfriends.

(6) The magazines of the nineteen-nineties and early twenty-first century conversely are much more likely to concentrate on romance, make-up and boyfriends than these tomboy heroines' powerful exploits. *Buffy*, however, offers a new variant of the active teenage girl. Buffy herself is both the feisty, tough drop-kicking, morally vengeful character, dispatching hordes of vampires and monsters with well-aimed thrusts of the nearest available crucifix-like or stake-like object, picking up and tracking down and dispatching evil wherever she meets it. She is a tomboy in so far as she acts out the slayer role, taking on superhero characteristics more conventionally associated with men—Superman, Batman, Spiderman—with the notable exception of Superwoman and Wonderwoman, who are also her foremothers (though she differs from Superwoman and Wonderwoman in her ability to critique conventional American society, which they always fail to ironise).

(7) *Buffy* also comes from a long line of children's' and young adults' fiction from the U.S. which spring from a version of the 'American Dream'—pioneering spirit, self-fulfillment, exploration and self-determination, a mixture of the spiritual and the worldly. In *What Katy Read*, a feminist re-reading of 'classic' stories for girls (1995), Shirley Foster and Judy Simons note that U.S. girls' books—the *Little Women* novels, and *What Katy Did*, in particular, had great influence on a British readership and British authors. Their appeal was:

American ideals of freedom and independence, greater ambivalence regarding a clear-cut, gendered identity, and the consequent emergence of the tomboy figure. (1995 19)

Angela Brazil's school-experience-based girls' stories (*The Madcap of the School*, 1917) are British versions. The twenty-six pupils at Marlowe Grange School have a great sense of solidarity and a communal ethic. These stories and others like them provided an opening for different, lively, positive versions of life for girls:

If we see ideologies of femininity in terms of a unitary if over-determined, progression towards passivity, domesticity and a reproductive role, then the representation of femininity within the school story clearly stands as an expression of resistance and subversion. (Gill Firth in Steadman et al., 123)

Girls adopted authority positions, suffered emotional crises, jealousies and tensions all within the educational context.

(8) Tomboys developed from American nineteenth-century texts, although in many English novels they can be seen as "naughty" and rather deviant. Angela Brazils' character Raymunda Armitage is a figure we can identify with for her beliefs that rules are there to be broken, order to be disrupted and judicial power to be established (see Simon & Foster 201). Those books find a readership in post First World War society and then influence the readership of post Second World War society. *Buffy* and her friends generate a similar rule-breaking behavior for ultimate, energetic, positive, good, post-Vietnam War teenagers in a period when we are skeptical about all wars but continue to fight them in reality, and here through fantasy.

(9) Young girls of the UK-originated 'fifties and 'sixties comics and annuals—*Girls Crystal*, *School Friend*, *Girl*—solve crimes, rout baddies, display feats of intelligence that would stun a secret agent and are never sexually molested even if promised in marriage to some historical figure. A 1961 *Girls Crystal* Annual story, "The Wedding Wreckers," has plucky boarding school chums search out the dastardly impostor who, pretending to be their favorite form mistress' fiancé, attempted to wreck the wedding. The disguised girls hide on board ship, and expose the villain, attending the wedding as bridesmaids as a reward. Air hostesses figure in several tales in *Girls Crystal*, the *Treasure Book for Girls* (Collins 1960). If we take one specific example of an annual, Girls Annual no 9 (Longacre 1961) we find an interesting range of representations of energetic young women fighting the good fight. In "Angela: Air Hostess" in *Girls Annual*, Angela is brave and kind. The dog Angela hides saves the lives of all on board by alerting them to a short-circuit. A semi-subversive act (hiding a dog on a plane) leads to rescue in the skies. An illustrated tale of the explorer and nurse in Africa, Mary Kingsley, sits alongside tales of how girls are learning to fly planes or behave with velour in the skies, on high seas, up mountains. So, in another short story, a brave young girl named Justine climbs high mountains in a "snowball," searching for an owl, and rescues her male companion. In "Porpoise to the Rescue." Tessa takes the little boat out on the roaring seas to save children. In the one book or "annual," there are two tales of rock-climbing heroines and two of sea-rescuing heroines, instructions on sailing and flying and two real-life heroine tales along with information on cooking, sport, nature and hobbies ("Add a sparkle with sequins," "Make those traveling slippers," among them).

(10) The only two mildly fantastic tales are one about stage superstitions and another with an actress

whose house has a secret door which conceals costumes. Fantasy adventures are not favored, but exciting versions of girls' lives produce endless opportunities to show both girls and boys how strong, able, bright and successful these young women can be. The challenge is not really a fully feminist one. Doors are opened, fathers smile approvingly, young men are impressed. However, they might not be feminist, but neither is romance the only or the specific desired end. These young women, like Buffy, are energetic and determined, but also attractive and interesting in the conventional mode of the period and they solve crimes, sort things out and bring back order. More conservative in their versions of right and wrong than Buffy, they nonetheless provide an earlier model of the same kind of powerful, everyday crime/evil-busting energetic young woman with a mission. However outdated their values (to us as twenty first century readers), these earlier heroines nonetheless offered a powerful positive role model for girls and young women of that period and dramatized for such young women the alternatives to boyfriends, romance, domesticity, clothes and recipes to remove spots or dye from your hair.

(11) Bringing *Buffy* up to date in terms of contemporary magazines for girls, we find that male and female characters in the series both conform to definable categories found in these magazine fictions. One such magazine which has received critical scrutiny as typical of its kind is *Jackie* (a popular girls' magazine of the period), although the fictions of this and subsequent magazines themselves tend increasingly to be dominated not by fantasy writing but by the kind of photo-realism which leaves no space for fantasy. Angela McRobbie's analysis of the four categories of boys in *Jackie* fits the stereotypes found in several soaps including *Neighbours*, *Heartbreak High* and *Buffy*:

First, there is the fun-loving, grinning, flirtatious boy who is irresistible to all girls; second the tousled, scatterbrained, 'zany' youth who inspires maternal feelings in girls; third, the emotional, shy, sensitive and even arty type; and fourth, the juvenile delinquent, visually portrayed on his motorbike looking wild and aggressive but sexy, whom the girl must tame. (McRobbie 99)

Angel is clearly a fantasy version of the fourth kind of romantic hero, while Oz the erstwhile werewolf, is both arty and tousled and rather mothered by Willow, protected by friends for his own safety. Male figures in magazines are always idealized and romanticized. Female figures also conform to some extent, although the trusting blonde and the wild brunette are differently configured in *Buffy* as the energetic, kick-boxing vampire stalker (Buffy), and the transparent boyfriend stealer (Cordelia). The final category McRobbie defines is typified by Willow, computer-teaching, witchcraft-learning, dependable friend (Buffy has several of these characteristics also). McRobbie describes this character as:

The non-character, the friendly, open, fun-loving, 'ordinary', girl, (who may perhaps be slightly scatty or absent-minded). She is remarkable in being normal and things tend to happen to her, rather than at her instigation. Frequently she figures in stories focusing on the supernatural. (McRobbie 100)

But Willow and Buffy are both more complex and active than this stereotype (behind which they occasionally choose to hide-for self-preservation) suggests. Willow's dabbling in magic both troubles situations and saves the day, and while Buffy's track record for locating unpleasant activities and creatures is very high, she hardly stumbles upon them, but seeks them out actively to rout them and restore some temporary order.

(12) Unlike the pattern of plot in these later magazines, such as *Jackie*, it is possible in *Buffy* to have other than romantic relationships between males and females. The amusing take off of a romantic idyll between Buffy and Spike ("Something Blue," 4009) exemplifies the critique of the blinkered limitations of romance conventions. Buffy and Spike planning to marry and emptying their heads and lives of all other plans and activities is a boring spectacle and could only be a product of a botched spell by Willow, trainee witch, certainly not a romantic denouement. The Buffy version of the schoolgirl/teenager is more active and resistant to convention. Her love for Angel is both unconventional- he is a vampire (albeit reformed) and theoretically 'the enemy', and conventional in terms of playing out the fantasies romantic love offers as truths. Buffy and Angel must hide their love from polite society, and it is in a number of ways 'eternal' and 'unto death'. Unusually in terms of the usual clash between romance and social conformity, Angel is the one who is hurled into oblivion/out of himself/out of shared society when he transgresses and consummates his love for Buffy.

(13) But we must remember that we are dealing, in *Buffy* with a postmodern horror reading of teen fictions. It belongs to the boundary crossing genre of vampire fictions. *Buffy* is a fantasy take on contemporary magazines and earlier comics and fictions for girls. Fantasy offers space for critique, and vampires, aware of themselves as performers, acting out some of our fears and desires, are fantastic, excessive, figures of a mixture of contemporary fun/fear. Anne Rice highlights their imaginative potential, considering her own life and the use of the vampire figure:

The fantasy frame allows me to get to my reality. I'm telling all I know about everybody and everything in these books. It's an irony that as I step into this almost cartoon world, I'm able to touch what I consider to be real....this gave me a doorway- a vampire who's able to talk about life and death, and love and loss, and sorrow and misery, and viciousness and grief. (Rice in Riley 14)

(14) Unlike previous fantasy female figures (Samantha from the TV series *Bewitched* for example), Buffy's every delight is not to produce a good meal and avoid/annoy her overpowering mother, or to conform to feminine conventions in a variety of other ways, having used supernatural powers to sort out a few problems. Domesticated idylls are not Buffy's main aim. Willow is more likely to produce attempts at cookery while Buffy, with her friends to support her, (as do the girls in comics, magazines and annuals) has a small town to save (if

not the human race). *Buffy* queries conventional roles for women to some extent, but also enables us as readers/viewers to buy into the alternatives which contemporary fantasy, horror and vampire fictions represent: the thrill of something a little more subversive than a comic book heroine rescuing drowning dogs and climbing mountains.

Women's Horror and Vampire Writing

(15) Vampires are imaginative cultural constructs and as such they are also indicative of the fears and desires of a culture. In nineteenth-century Victorian England, frock-coated vampires stalked the streets and clubs (*Dracula*, 1897; Polidori's *Lord Ruthven*, 1819; *Varney The Vampire*, 1847). In an age which thrived on dichotomies, the vampire was a foreigner who dared to buy up London property and turned normally moral young ladies into voluptuous femme fatale seductresses (*Dracula*). Latterly we read back and recognize these contradictions, although it is certain they were not so widely recognized in their day. Elegant/hideous, godlike/bestial, vampires were destroyed using Christian icons, a move that reinforces the safety of conventional belief and restores order. As in all good horror tales, boundaries, tested and strained, are reinforced. The evil is without, order reigns again.

(16) In most conventional vampire tales, women are the victims of male vampires. They are weak, and easily seduced by these frock-coated gentlemen. Clearly of easy virtue, once bitten, they turn into fanged, voluptuous temptresses who desire to infect all the men who enter their lives. They are evil vamps, constructions of male fears of women's sexuality, who, once so constructed, need to be punished. Male sexual desire is blamed on its object, that object (women) turned into a focus of fear and loathing because of the male terror of being disempowered and overwhelmed which sexual desire potentially involves. Having been abjected, the woman is cast as a monster (Medusa is the favored figure here but female vampires and those who dissolve as wailing hags are also popular). Women are then punished. In the nineteenth century, fears of female sexuality rage throughout Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and the lesbian love affair of Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872). Vampires are usually portrayed as male, the most famous being Dracula, based on Vlad the Impaler. However, women can also be vampires, and not merely because they are bitten by Count Dracula. Elizabeth Bathory, the Sanguinary Countess and contemporary of Vlad, was a style victim of the culture that values women for their youthfulness. She bathed in the blood of over 600 virgins to remain youthful. In other cultures vampires also existed, e.g. in Egypt, the myths of which are the historical backgrounds to Anne Rice's vampire family sagas. In India vampiric female goddesses reign, explored in Poppy Z. Brite's short story "Calcutta" (1986). Their roots in myth and legend, these bloodthirsty historical figures are the two-dimensional great-grandparents of culturally constructed, constantly metamorphosing fictional vampires. In both the nineteenth and the twentieth century's more conventional vampire fictions, vampirism is a metaphor for sexual excess, particularly that of women, and must be punished. Death exorcises the sexual energies they represent.

Vampirism itself-depicted as uncontrollable desire and as sensual swoon for both victim and vampire-stands as a euphemism for sex, forbidden by social mores. And the sex itself is not of a normative nature. (Brownworth, 1996: xi)

The castratrix, fanged, vampiric woman is seen as dangerously powerful, sexually voracious and engulfing. She is equated with the overwhelming, fecund Mother who has the power to procreate but cannot let the child be itself, cannot let go. Julia Kristeva explains this offloading of fears of engulfment, prevention of individual identity formation. She labels that rejection of the 'not I', the body of the mother (then, by extension all women), as a move which debases women. So:

Fear of the archaic mother proves essentially to be a fear of her generative power. It is this power, dreaded, that patrilineal filiation is charged with subduing. (Kristeva 1982 102)

Disgust and horror at the Mother/vampire's generative and engulfing, destroying powers are mingled with the erotic. Conventionally:

Vampirism combines a number of abject activities: the mixing of blood and milk; the threat of castration; the feminization of the male victim. (Creed 70)

The female Dracula or vampire figure is masculinized because she penetrates her victim. She becomes an active predatory seducer. (Creed 70)

(17) The female vampire also represents potential dangers of sexual license. The terror she evokes peaks when that challengingly abject relationship of woman and woman is involved. Lesbian vampires are even more of a transgressive force than their gay male cousins.

The vampire's initial liberation of excess energies and disruption of normality is a very temporary affair. Social order is quickly restored, the cathartic experience nailed down again to the relief of the conformist audience/readership. This has, of course, always been the role of horror, and of much gothic. (Punter 1996)

Fears have to be dramatized, made concrete to overcome. Vampires have to be embodied to be made Other. Then they must be exorcised, leaving peace and order behind. Of course, such exorcism and defeat depends on a conventional belief that the Other, horror, fear and its figure the vampire is "Out there," rather than a socially constructed, externalized part of ourselves, as Nina Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, (1995) makes clear.

(18) While Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror* (1982), clarifies the positioning of woman and Mother as abject alongside those other elements which need rejecting from the body to recognize the self, later, in

Strangers to Ourselves (1988), she explores how the figure of horror (for the sake of our argument, the vampire) dramatizes endless potential for radical alternative behavior, for celebrating our Otherness. It enables us to recognize that the Other is part of ourselves.

(19) The vampire becomes a figure for radical re-appropriation partly because of this recognition in our more self-aware period. In contemporary times, vampires provide an opportunity for the overt exploration of cultural contradiction. Poppy Z. Brite's post Vietnam War American lost youth, abandoned in motels at roadsides, or by their families within ostensibly ordinary homes, find energy in vampire pairs and groups. They seek closeness to death because it enables them to face it out, control it, through becoming it. Anne Rice's vampires in *Interview with the Vampire* (1977) are more properly influences on the kind of vampires we find in *Buffy*. Louis is a reluctant vampire, feeding from small animals, tortured at the idea of killing humans, while he reveled in their pursuit in his early wilder days in New Orleans with his vampire initiator, Lestat. In his contradictory behavior, Louis closely resembles Angel: attractive, tormented about his vampire state, aware of role-play, vulnerable, always wearing recognizably black vampire clothing. The modern day vampire with a conscience is a more acceptable figure for our desires. He has learned the evil of his ways but must live with the consequences of conscience. Angel ordinarily does good, policing the old fashioned vampires who leap from behind gravestones during night patrols, except when, after sleeping with Buffy, Angel loses his soul and comes under demonic possession. Ironically, the man loses his soul through sex, rather than the woman, which would be the norm in conventional vampire fictions.

(20) Much of *Buffy* is similar to contemporary women's vampire fictions, although less radical in terms of gender play. In their work, contemporary women vampire writers embrace the radical challenge of the often androgynous figure of the vampire to dismantle patriarchy's reductive binary thought and behaviors. The vampire represents the unity of opposites, a boundary breaker: male/female, good/bad, dead/alive; they defy the categories and constraints of culture. They offer the potential for a liminal space, in which contradictions and critiques can be worked through. The Hellmouth is a threatened space but it is a space for embodying contradictions embedded in society and for both recognizing some and tackling some.

(21) Contemporary radical feminist vampire writers have found in the figure of the vampire marvelous potential for radical re-appropriation. In their work the status of vampires as cultural indices and metaphors has been re-valued, aligning them with a new feminist carnivalesque. They infuse the age-old figure with new life. Writers such as Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, Jewelle Gomez, Katherine Forrest, Angela Carter and Sherry Gottlieb have all re-appropriated the figure of the vampire and use it to question life and death, gender roles and romantic myths. Engaging with the challenge that conventional horror offers, of female victims and sexually voracious monsters, they have revived and reinterpreted the vampire to their own radical ends. They re-value the Mother, infuse their work with the disruptive power of the erotic, and centre-stage the vampire in a variety of challenging forms: rock star, flâneur, gay/lesbian/queer. These figures provide social critique, highlighting and questioning the enforced fixity of roles and behaviors. In *The Vampire Lestat*, Lestat's role as rock star almost endangers his everyday life as a vampire, although his endless energies exhilarate the readers as they do the audiences who revel in his ironic performance as vampire /rock star. Lestat realizes what Armand does in *Queen of the Damned*: humans adore the freedoms and energies vampires seem to represent, the way they act the part, act out the nightmares and tease the audience with the real/unreal, dead/undead performance. In the Theatre de Vampires in nineteenth-century Paris (*Interview with the Vampire*)the kick for the audience is the performance, enacting the vampiric draining to death. The kick for the vampires is double and ironic: that this is no performance- they really are draining someone's blood. Audience conscripts and hapless one-night performers leave in coffins. Angela Carter's "Lady in the House of Love" Countess falls victim to her own beliefs in romantic lies. A reluctant vampire who feeds on nocturnal animals and the odd wayward visitor, when she falls in love with the bicycling First World War soldier, she dies upon a kiss, leaving him a wilted rose. Romantic fictions celebrate the link between love and death, while offering eternity. Carter exposes their lies, while Sherry Gottlieb's photographer vampire Rusty, in *Love Bites*(1999) is worldly wise: she offers love and a life free from disease to the dying cop who pursues her. They settle happily ever after, serial meals hidden in the complexity of activities of a big city.

(22) One of the fundamental challenges which the vampire enacts is to philosophical constructions underlying social relations. Whether used as the worst kind of terror to be exorcised or, in its contemporary form as potential social/sexual transgressor to be celebrated, the vampire disrupts polarized systems of thought. It undermines Western logical tendencies to construct divisive, hierarchical, oppositional structures. In restrictive, repressive eras the vampire's transgression of gender boundaries, life/death, day/night behavior, its invasion of the sanctity of body, home and blood are elements of its abjection. But in its more radical contemporary form, it is no longer abject, rejected with disgust to ensure identity. And in *Buffy* there is opportunity for vampires and other monster figures to be similarly recuperated (some of them, at least). Vampires, as figures, are now being used to challenge repressive behaviors and offer alternative worldviews. We might well ask why it seems that vampires, and slayers, are part of a version of the imaginative projections of contemporary youth culture.

Vampires and Youth Culture: Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Death and Subversion

The vampire is the only supernatural creature who has become a role model.
(Poppy Z. Brite *Love in Vein* 1 ix)

(23) Vampires are potentially exciting in their libidinal excess, their challenge to everything everyday. They are now an unavoidable part of our contemporary cultural consciousness. Some writers even track down "real" vampires. Carol Page, seeking those who identify as vampires, notes of "bored-stressed out Americans" that they:

gladly escape into the fantasy of darkness, where exquisite men and women live in a world of power, wealth, and a rich yet perverse knowledge that comes from being very, very old. (8)

Fascination with vampires is frequently more radical and more fun. However, in the new economy of radical contemporary women's vampire fictions, violations of taboos are seen as a feminist/ queer challenge and revaluation. Vampire fictions are potentially imaginatively liberating and carnivalesque. In accordance with queer theory and Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque (1984), we can see political/sexual meaning in the vampire's body in relation to that of his/her partner/victim. Vampires resist temporal and spatial fixity. They shape-shift, disrupting unified notions of character (in *Buffy* this is largely indicated by facial distortions). They encourage and represent excess of blood and of eternal, devouring hunger. When this shifting excess is not punished, a radical challenge is issued to the polarized thought patterns and to conventional repressions and constraints.

(24) Vampire communities offer eternal life, albeit in a shape other than the everyday mortal one. This also aligns itself with the subversive, seductive promise of transgression {and performativity}. Armand in Anne Rice's *Queen of the Damned* is described as both demonic, a foul hideous predatory insect, and angelic, perpetually youthful and charming. The combination is compelling, disturbing the easy polarities of Western logic and Christianity:

Daniel stared hard at the creature before him, this thing that looked human and sounded human but was not. There was a horrid shift in his consciousness; he saw this being like a great insect, a monstrous evil predator who had devoured a million human lives. And yet he loved this thing. He loved its smooth white skin, its great dark brown eyes. He loved it not because it looked like a gentle, thoughtful young man, but because it was ghastly and awful and loathsome, and beautiful all at the same time. He loved it the way people love evil, because it thrills them to the core of their soul. (Rice *Queen* 106)

It is his beauty and his evil which attract Daniel, who longs to join the vampire company. Lestat, Armand, those of the blood religions in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, and Poppy Z. Brite's wild youths are lost souls who sometimes play with the borders of death, defying it in their search for alternative reasons for existence. Transgressive, Poppy Z. Brite's characters refuse to replace the tired old order at the story's close. Always, in even their most extreme actions, they remind us of our similarity to them, and of our shared humanity.

(25) Angel is just this kind of figure. In "Becoming," Part 1 (2021) we see his origins in 1753 Ireland, when he is attracted to Darla, whose offer to show him the world initiates him into vampire existence. Vampires' performative nature is most often employed as "dressing to kill" as a vampire (which the new vampire Angel certainly does), fulfilling mortals' fantasies in their frock-coated disguises. As members of a parallel world parasitic upon our own yet longer lasting, they enable us to scrutinize ourselves, to look closely at our equation of desire and disgust, love and death, and to recognize the vampire in ourselves. Vampires constantly manage a complex masquerade of being human.

(26) There are also often not merely androgynous, but gay or lesbian, crossing gender as well as life/death boundaries. All gendered roles are recognized as constructs in postmodernism (see Joan Riviere, 1989), and vampires are a paradigm for this. Sue Ellen Case explains how the lesbian vampire can be read using queer theory which foregrounds same-sex desire without labeling the gender of those desiring and desired. Lesbian vampires, conventionally figured as monsters, are represented by contemporary women writers in a very positive light. Queer theory/belief by destabilizing "the borders of life and death," refusing "the organism which defines the living as the good" (Case 3), positions the queer as "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 3; Gelder 61), very much the role played by the vampire. Lesbian vampires in the work of Katherine Forrest, Jewelle Gomez and others are positive, nurturing figures, boundary breakers who need no punishment, powerful, sexually active women. Celebrating, dramatizing and recognizing the self in this "Other," this strange being, is enabling, radical, liberating. The figure of the gay or lesbian vampire is the ideal icon of a celebratory otherness. In a new take on vampire fictions, Gomez' *The Gilda Stories* (1992) engages with transgression as liberation, through an African American lesbian vampire focus. *Nite Bites* (1996), the first collection of vampire stories by women, explores a feminist perspective on the genre located in the domestic. Socially and ideologically engaged, many tales, as in Poppy Brite's edited collections *Love in Vein 1* and *2* deal with lesbian vampires and rescript romance.

(27) Today, then, at the end of the century, the vampire becomes the ideal myth to explore and enact imaginative, radical critique of restrictive, oppressive cultural regimes. It can be energetically erotic, critical of repression and hypocrisy, celebrating rather than demonizing women's sexuality and power. Much of the radical energy expresses itself through transgression of gender boundaries and the valorization of homosexual and lesbian relations, themselves most frequently seen as transgressive and marginal. Vampire fictions and the vampire myth in the hands of contemporary women writers explore and enact the practice based in queer theory by defying all boundaries, refusing categories and destructively oriented definitions of difference, expressing the carnivalesque. Vampires have some rather nasty social habits, but as metaphors they offer a fascinating parallel and perspective on our own lives. As Nina Auerbach says "the best vampires are companions" (Auerbach vii.) They are our others, and ourselves. This recuperation and celebratory transgression fuels much of *Buffy*, even though much else such as grade chasing and {prom dancing} is less challenging, quite conventional. *Buffy* occupies a space between the more radical contemporary women's vampire fictions and the condemnation of the vampire and all forms of Otherness, or difference. In doing so, it attracts a wider audience, more used to teen soaps, and can cause them too to think about the nature of conformity and transgression, of hypocrisy and power relations, of recognizing the Other we abject, in our selves.

Updating Evil: Complexity and Performativity

(28) One of the things which is fascinating about the series and Buffy's role within it is the negotiation between conventional representations of teenagers in such school- and college-based international soaps as *Heartbreak High* and *Neighbours* (both Australian) *Grange Hill* (British), *Happy Days* (U.S.) and the performative role of not just the vampires, but Buffy and her friends. In updating figures from myth and legend, the series highlights their constructedness in culture. It also refuses to punish. While truly evil vampires dissolve into dust nightly in large numbers at a stake in the heart, other monster creatures live on happily, supported by their friends, given space within the friendship society of the school. In this scenario, *Buffy* the series aligns itself with radical feminist or post-feminist horror; an intervention on the genre similar to feminist interventions in women's crime writing. Vampires, (Angel, and even Spike) witches (Willow) and werewolves (Oz) can be accommodated within the social circle; they do not have to be punished and destroyed. They are truly recognized as the alter egos of everyday teenagers. The horror "turn" is avoided: the creature of horror, the Other, is recognized as ourselves, and does not have to be punished and interred. *Buffy* does have it both ways: it is both an entertaining and rather typical teen series, and a radical feminist or post-feminist horror piece. Why it might more properly be considered post-feminist is just because it does have it both ways. Buffy herself can be a conventionally attractive teenager, an American "Spice Girl" who through her performance highlights the constructedness of this role, displaying its appeal and its limitations. While her largely nocturnal role as a slayer dominates her life, she still has classes to attend, grades to try to keep up with, and friendships to maintain, as well as a mother to placate. Like the schoolgirls heroines of US and UK fiction—novels and comics—of a previous age, Buffy is both interested in being a "normal" teenager, conforming to some of the educational and socializing expectations of her years, and a subversive hypocrisy- and evil-destroying avenger.

(29) There are several kinds of evil which surfaces in people explored in *Buffy*. One kind of evil is conventional: pure, embodied, palpable, nasty, destroyed by the combined forces of good (teenagers working together with Giles). Another kind of evil is the everyday evil of those who oppress difference: Principal Snyder, Buffy's mother and the variously bewitched or straightforwardly bigoted witch hunters. Conventional horror relies upon such conventional representations of evil, and the ability of the genre to punish them, restoring a sort of order.

... the pleasure offered by the genre is based on the process of narrative closure in which the horrifying or monstrous is destroyed or containedthe original order is re-established.

(Jancovitch, 1992, 9)

In the episode "Lie to Me," Rupert Giles and Buffy's discussion ironizes the closure of conventional horror, highlighting how blinkered and inappropriate it is.

Buffy: "Does it ever get easy?" Giles: "You mean life?" Buffy: "Yeah, does it get easy?" Giles: "What do you want me to say?" Buffy: "Lie to me." Giles: "Yes, it's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after." Buffy: "Liar."

(Lie to me)

(30) There is also a third kind of "evil" or set of figures who have conventionally been represented as evil. And it is here that the text becomes more post-modern. The other halves of Willow, Oz, and Angel are all figures of conventional evil who are in fact heroes within the show. They are split selves whose Other can be tolerated, managed, is recognized as part of ourselves. Buffy destroys Angel to save the world from Acatlha (*Becoming*, II), but he returns and is recuperated despite a stunningly extensive set of victims who suffer directly at his hands when (as Angelus) his soul has been lost. Fans writing to the Internet sites doubted the credibility of a potential recuperation. But how could we lose Angel? And in a sense, he is not to blame. He has to be recuperated. To a lesser extent, tolerance and nurturing of the full moon werewolf Oz is similar. Like a wayward sibling, he is locked up for his own and everyone else's protection. Here Buffy's organizing and nurturing character appears. Working with Willow and her friends, she ensures that Oz is protected from himself, as others are protected from him. The cage in the library is a very "normal" kennel for Oz the werewolf.

(31) Other reversals of the representation of women as victim or evil figure are fascinating in *Buffy*. Buffy herself is a moral figure; she stamps out/kick-boxes or stakes out evil, exerting her power over its several manifestations. She is attracted by an unconventional vampire who tries to curb his feeding habits, but her attraction to and affinity with vampires does not turn her into the voracious femme fatale usually associated with, for example, the power relationship between Count Dracula and his chosen women. And in fact the fifth-season opener, with Dracula's failed attempt to convert Buffy, specifically repudiates such a relationship. Even when bewitched enough to select Spike, her desire is nicely, neatly, conventionally, ironically directed at wanting to get married. She took a great deal of time before she slept with Angel.

(32) But on the other hand, Buffy does not buy into the conventional safety constructions for young women in conventional horror: woman's purity, need for protection, vulnerability to treacherous seduction which can leave them actively over-sexed, morally badly behaved (!) and then sacrificed (as a societal punishment). Denis Wheatley's Christina in *To the Devil a Daughter* (1953) is a good example. Christina's father sold her to the Devil at birth. She turns into a seductive vamp (definitely seen as demonic: drinking alcohol, smoking, trying to seduce young men) on the eve of her twenty-first birthday. Christina is eventually rescued by her future husband who lies, saying that she is no longer a virgin—so her worth to the devil would have plummeted. Of course, she no longer wants to drink, smoke, seduce young men when her soul is no longer the devil's property. Today, Buffy herself does not bother with the heathen mythic protection of virginity. She is a modern young

woman without being either a pure virginal character or a rampant femme fatale. Her role refuses this dichotomy of a past age. Instead, it embraces both Buffy's moral role as slayer superhero, and her normal impulses as a teenager in love with Angel. Again we have it both ways.

(33) But this is not to suggest that the high school community is riotous, unconventional, liberated, despite some strange nocturnal activities. For example, magic for its own sake is to be controlled rather than let loose. And no one in Buffy's group on the Hellmouth thinks to use the supernatural to further their own ends(or not for long). Those who dabble in spells for wicked ends—even manipulative love potions—cause havoc. There is a certain sense of order in the high school community perched precariously on the leaking hell mouth. Willow casting a love spell, gets it all wrong (*Something Blue*). Only good spells really work effectively and are not punished. Magic is fine, mythical figures are recuperated, but basic values of maintenance of life must be preserved. Buffy and her witch, werewolf or vampire friends are very aware of the roles they play, and this heightened sensibility is also a feature of contemporary more radical horror.

(34) With radical feminist vampire writing, of which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a special case, the trick is to recognize the performativity: the characters self-consciously act out an often hyped-up, self-aware, even parodic version of being a vampire or a monster, and their alter egos or in this case, slayers. Postmodernist, self-aware magical horror figures then attack real evil themselves, and question, or undermine, the complicit complacency of a repressive society (represented by such characters as Principal Snyder). They carry on with their good work against a context, on the Hellmouth, of a collusive and repressive society which cannot itself see any of its own dark sides. Mothers who would hand their daughters over to be burned as witches, principals and mayors(planning ascension as demons) who lurk on the edge and enable the evil to be let loose, and other collusive power figures all remind us of the Salem witch hunts. In a reference to these witch hunts, Buffy's own mother, Joyce fails to recognize real evil, and victimizes her own daughter as a consequence. Joyce would, it seems, see Buffy burned as a witch when doubting her real value (*Gingerbread*, 2nd series). Yes, she is bewitched herself of course, but it says a great deal about mothers! In *Gingerbread* the Babes in the Wood fairytale is reread. A Hansel and Gretel demon dons the guise of the two lost children. The inhabitants of Sunnydale, believing witches sacrifice young children (Wiccans such as Willow don't) turn against the girls and drag them to the stake. This incident replicates the obsessions of the Salem witch hunt and trials (1692) when 19 men and women, convicted of witchcraft, were hanged on Gallows Hill, Salem village. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* emphasized a political reading of witch hunting (stamping out what seems to refuse to conform—his indictment of the communist witch-hunting of the McCarthy era). It also frighteningly dramatized the obsessive, accompanying madness. Buffy's mother is on a high of suburban domestic conformity when she incites local activism. The treatment of Buffy, Willow and teen witch Amy also says a great deal about conventional societies' ethical blips over the punishment of witches as scapegoats, the loading of all evil onto poor witches/marginalized old ladies, in order to try to embody and erase an evil which actually resides in all of us.

(35) If conventional society fails to recognize that evil is a product of its own rifts, leaks up through its own everyday hellmouths, emerges from the cracks and fissures in what seems like an everyday conformist society, then this blinkered ignorance will lead to chaos. Buffy and her self-aware evil-slaying friends know this. They point out the hypocrisy of such pretence. They act. As teenagers in an everyday conformist small town, however, they are all subject to the controls of some of the very figures whose hypocrisy and blinkeredness they point out.

(36) *Graduation Day, part II*, is a fine example of Buffy and her friends taking on the powers of tangible evil, head on. The mayor plans ascension as a demon and times his major moment of shape-changing to coincide with his speech to the graduation class of 1999. The scene is set for one rite of passage, graduation, as another, ascension, builds up. Rows of gowned, ostensibly demure teenagers watch Principal Snyder's sycophantic introduction, hear his snide remarks about how they only just made it to graduation. Then they watch the mayor proceed through his cue cards about maturing and ascending to a higher state. He does not know they know what he has planned. Every ambiguity rings home to all the students. An eclipse covers Sunnydale, the hellmouth opens. At the moment of his transmutation he turns into a monstrously fanged huge serpent, like the sea beast Perseus slays to rescue Andromeda in the legend, like Japanese horror film monsters, like "Mother" in the film *Aliens*. The darkness enables his vampire hordes to encroach on the graduands, from behind. But Buffy and all her year are ready like a medieval army, shooting crossbows of burning wooden stakes, impaling vampires with swords and short stakes, while in the other direction, twentieth-century flame-throwers engulf the monster, one of whose first victims, fittingly, is Snyder.

(37) Though the embodied force of evil writhes rapidly through the school its followers have infested, Buffy is more than a match. She has switched gender roles. She can taunt the mayor/monster with his/its beloved Faith's blade and she can lead it to its death as the school is detonated into a huge ball of cleansing flame. The team are preserved, the evil is gone, the high school years are over, but they can all carry on into a new life in college. Although Angel says he must leave after Buffy has revitalized him with her own blood, his troubled appearance at the edge of the burning school, at a distance from the jubilant Buffy gang, promises the viewers that he will be back. This episode pulls together all the themes of school chum energy and unity against the hypocrisy and evil of the demonic (and of local society embodied in the demonic). Buffy's own mythic gendered role reversals cast her as Perseus slaying the monster; and here also the post-modernist, post-feminist take on the vampire-slayer role emerges. The obviously demonic evil vampires are reduced to ashes by the protectors of good and innocence—the school group. Buffy, however, has proven her recognition that not all vampires are evil: they are parts of us, like us. Her love for Angel almost kills her. The violently erotic near-draining of Buffy by Angel, dying, deliberately provoked to attack, emphasizes the technical equation of love and death in vampire fictions, but this time deliberately, consciously sought and survived (helped by her friends and modern medicine).

(38) As an example of radical contemporary vampire or horror fictions, Buffy and her friends offer an alternative way of coping with difference. That they are mythical figures (witches, werewolves, vampires) does not mean they need to be punished within and by society, certainly not in the context of their own take on society. They don't really do any harm. In the economy of this exchange their positions are part of the harmonious balance of a more tolerant and self-aware society—these teenagers' version of a twentieth/twenty-first century society which refuses polarization of good, bad, black, white, male, female, dead, undead.

(39) Quite apart from being immensely entertaining, then, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recognizes that the constructions of evil are part of our society, part of ourselves, and must be brought out of the Hellmouth, out of the neat houses and principal's study and into the open; faced up to, managed, not merely scapegoated.

Conclusion

Vampires were supposed to menace women, but to me at least, they promised protection against a destiny of girdles, spike heels and approval.

(Auerbach, 1995, p.4)

(40) Vampire tales, a special case of fantasy for young women, have been embraced as offering a popular, deviant alternative sense of youthful energy, and of teenage rebellion. Young in the 1950's when girls' comics were widespread and read by many young women, Nina Auerbach recalls vampire fictions, and I recall voracious devouring of horror fictions of all sorts—comics, films, the lot.

(41) Buffy maneuvers on a new crossroads of genres—girls' adventures, *Superwoman*, Spice Girls' girl power (Spike: "Oh, not with the girl-power bit" *Something Blue* 1999) and vampire fictions. Buffy, her friends and her adventures, operating in the liminal space of the Hellmouth, challenge the symbolic order (rules, conformity) and enact adventures in the imaginary or fantastic space, while also seeking the sane everyday conformity of teenage romance, high school dances, grade chasing. The fantasy escape world is ours as much as theirs; it enables us, the viewers, to side with a good which is for fun-loving, against the multiple evils—tangible nastiness from either side of the Hellmouth, whether male conformist power regimes or monsters. What Buffy does matters as it did for these earlier young women. Like the wedding wreckers in the *Girls Crystal* Annual, Buffy exposes hypocrisy, her own performativity highlighting that of others who are unreasonable and destructive—perhaps the more effectively because, unlike the earlier young women adventurers, hers is a sexualized role, not restricted to older, narrower constructions of female goodness]. The values Buffy upholds are eternal ones of loyalty to friends and family and oneself and carrying out a mission you are born to. The only lives she destroys are those of monsters, ghouls, zombies and vampires—the mean ones, not the flip sides of her friends and lover. When in *Bad Girls* (1999) Faith, the other slayer, shrugs off an accidental murder, Buffy is shocked. Not defiant of all human order and morality herself, Buffy cannot explain or tolerate such immoral wildness, even in the cause of cleaning up the town (or the world). Faith is eventually revealed as mad, and bad.

(42) But what is good and what evil is more difficult to negotiate and define in these more complex times when every bad guy is not wearing a trench coat or a squint but could appear in an attractive form, at least at first. Werewolves, vampires and witches are among Buffy's friends, but they are not bent on evil deeds (though the odd accident occurs). In fact, they fight evil; their stake is subliminal, the boundary between the hellish, the monstrous, and the everyday. They trouble these neat boundaries, showing them to be constructions. The monster in ourselves can be lived with in *Buffy*.. But what cannot be tolerated is the constructed hypocrisy of the American Dream: support for oppressive evil figures in roles of power; the condemnation of young women to the stake (Salem) and those of a different political cast to exile (McCarthy); the nurturing of boy-next-door serial killers. Monsters emerge from the locker room, on the walk home, or in the library In *Buffy*, appropriately, what's next door and everyday is about transmute into something nasty; it is often a dangerous fake.

(43) The reasons for *Buffy*'s wide audience are many. Buffy's message and formulae are similar to radical feminist vampire fictions: the transgression, the carnival and the excess, and the irony are all there. She also carries on the tradition of the independent schoolgirl adventurer. Finally, Buffy's own, complex, attractiveness is compelling and that of the lover she engages, the teenage thinking girl's vampire, Angel, is unavoidable.

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