

**Postmodern Bites:
Angel as an Embodiment of Postmodern Masculinity in *Angel***

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[1] Since it aired as a spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* has – in the same way as its predecessor - attracted a great deal of academic interest and writing. It is the present essay's aim to approach the TV text from a postmodernist as well as masculinity studies perspective: it is to be revealed in how far *Angel*, the vampire with a soul, embodies a specific contradictory/ambivalent form of masculinity that could be termed postmodern masculinity. As David S. Gutterman puts it, "Postmodern theories of subjectivity, identity, and agency ... can be useful not only for rethinking governing cultural values but also as a framework for actively seeking social change" (224). What he tries to convey is that postmodernism's embrace of instable and variable identities could challenge assumptions of what a real man is. Thus, postmodern masculinities, varying between being hegemonic and non-traditional, could be viewed as counter-hegemonic identities, as they propose more positive and pro-feminist models of masculinity.

[2] It is worth considering in how far *Angel* can be referred to as a postmodern text. *Angel*'s postmodernism will be ascribed to two aspects, namely intertextuality as well as its setting Los Angeles. Referring to Linda Hutcheon and Christopher Butler, postmodernist ideas of identity will be rendered ambiguous, fluid, and heterogeneous. This approach is in stark contrast to Enlightenment philosophy and modernist reasoning which theorize identity as "a stable, coherent self" (Flax 624). Alternatively, in my understanding, postmodern male identity is rather incoherent, for it simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the trope of the classic, patriarchal, *bear-hunting* male. In the analytic part, I will interpret the vampire *Angel* as an embodiment of postmodern masculinity, as he is both highly masculinized and feminized. Although he is definitely not created as a gender-bender or gender-fucker, it will be indicated in how far *Angel* can be viewed as an example of alternative and non-heteronormative masculinity.

[3] One aspect of *Angel*'s postmodern condition is its intertextuality or genre-mixing. Christopher Butler writes that most postmodern texts tend to circulate "in a sea of *intertextuality*" where perceived boundary lines separating them from one another become blurry and are playfully loosened (25). *Angel* also swims in a sea of film and TV intertexts, for its genre cannot be narrowed down "to particular ends," meaning that it is a multi-generic TV show (Butler 25). At first sight, the use of monsters, vampires, all in all mystical creatures, situates *Angel* undoubtedly in the realm of horror/fantasy, however, the series also shares formal and thematic similarities with film noir, science fiction texts as well as superhero narratives. Considering *Angel*'s noirness, Allison McCracken states that "the recovering alcoholic as *Angel*'s dominant metaphor, and *Angel*'s urban setting, the main character's status as detective and enforcer (working outside the law), and the use of flashbacks to account for his personal demons and reveal his character's troubled past all

attest to noir's influence" (133). Seemingly, *Angel* is intertextually hybridized in terms of genre, for it mixes fantasy elements with noir elements. Furthermore, the episode "Happy Anniversary" (A2013) deals with a physicist trying to freeze time, whilst "Supersymmetry" (A4005) also has a science fiction plot, as Fred publishes her theory about alternate dimensions in a scholarly journal and also opens a portal to a parallel hell dimension. Janet K. Halfyard also identifies *Angel* as a superhero narrative, for Angel meets the requirements for definition as a comic-book superhero: he had a problematic relationship with his father and immediately murdered his whole family after becoming a vampire, his vampire identity is a secret identity in the human world, his vampiric superpowers link him to Superman, his use of demon-fighting gadgetry as well as his way of standing up for justice while being positioned outside the legal forces links him to Batman. Halfyard also remarks that Superman and Batman references and allusions are a common device in *Angel* (150-54). Besides, "The Girl in Question" (A5020) can be regarded as both a parody and pastiche of American as well as Italian mafia movies and TV shows: Angel and Spike, another vampire with a soul also originally belonging to the cast of *Buffy*, have to retrieve a demon's head, the *Capo di Famiglia*, from Rome to LA. *Angel*'s planned mixing of genres can be viewed as a form of postmodernist intertextuality.

[4] Another aspect that renders the show postmodern is its setting, the city of LA. According to Sara Upstone, LA is particularly postmodern, as it confronts one with "a chaotic and destructive reality" as well as Otherness. In her words, Angel and the city of LA become interrelated through their shared Otherness: "LA and Angel's marginality are caught in a reciprocal partnership, entwined intimately so that attention to one only heightens the focus on the other, acting to re-affirm the place of both at the centre of the show" (103). Thus, LA's status as a space defined by marginalization and Otherness, for example represented through Angel's vampire identity as well as the presence of usually othered demons and monsters, accounts for its postmodernism (103-6) Interestingly, Otherness and notions of "marginalized identity" are at the heart of most postmodern fiction as well as postmodernist theory (Butler 57).

[5] Research on postmodern masculinity focuses on its negative sides primarily. Most critical accounts, as for example Mark Storey's essay "And as things fell apart" dealing particularly with Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, describe postmodern masculinity as being a crisis or as being in a crisis. This crisis of masculinity then apparently results in masculinity-as-psychopathology. Ellis's protagonist Patrick Bateman, a mass-murdering investment banker, engages in an "unprecedented celebration of sexual violence against women:" he dismembers women's bodies, rapes them orally, and forces a living rat up one woman's vagina (Brannon 239). I intend to turn away from this rather negative view, however, in order to formulate a thesis of postmodern masculinity as an alternative and positively connoted masculinity. The following comment by Linda Hutcheon will be made use of as a basic point: "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges ..." (1). In the same way, in my reading, postmodern masculinity is a contradictory phenomenon, one that installs traditional masculinity and simultaneously subverts it, one that is masculinizing and simultaneously feminizing its very subject: meaning that, at the same time, hegemonic and

pro-feminist masculinities are produced. The result is an alternative masculinity that defies to be centered or to be defined unilaterally. This definition goes hand in hand with the Lyotardian conception “that we now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in crisis and decline” (Butler 13). Hence, masculinity can no longer be considered a stable master narrative or monolithic myth, as there is no one definition of what it means to be a man and as male subjects can be gendered ambiguously. I will resist phrases such as *postmodern masculinity as crisis* as these bear to negative a connotation, and by analyzing Angel I will attempt to make evident how postmodern masculinity is alternative and new.

[6] Undoubtedly, Angel can be interpreted as a masculine man, for after all he is extremely muscular and strong, rather broody, particularly handsome and attractive to both women and men and matches with the role/image of the hero saving the damsel in distress. Essentially, Angel’s status as a powerful and dominant male hero is constituent of what Mike Donaldson terms an idealized version of masculinity, namely hegemonic masculinity (2-5). In the first episode of the series, “City Of,” (A1001) Angel single-handedly beats up and dusts three vampire guys and thereby saves two girls who would have been killed otherwise. Later, when he visits a party with Tina, a girl he is supposed to protect, the female host asks (about Angel): “who is this hunk of tall dark and handsome?” In the same way, a gay talent scout calls Angel “a beautiful, beautiful man” and hands over his card to him. Seemingly, Angel’s handsomeness or his effect on both heterosexual women and homosexual men is ascribed to an image of traditional masculinity, namely the tall, fit-bodied, black-wearing hunk. As Halfyard puts it, he strikes one as an epitome of superior (corporeal) hypermasculinity: “Angel is not a man but above man: a superman” (156).

[7] When analyzing Angel’s masculinity, it seems insightful to examine his relationship with Darla, his former lover. Darla sired Angel. In “To Shanshu in L.A.,” (A1022) *Wolfram & Hart* resurrect Darla as a human (Angel had staked and killed her a few years before). From “First Impressions” (A2003) on, Darla’s and Angel’s new-found relationship can be read as hard-boiled hero trapped by femme fatale: without Angel knowing about her existence, she gains control of Angel’s dreams and makes him sleep for hours while forcing him to have sweet dreams in which they are romantically and sexually involved. In male discourses on film, the femme fatale’s fatality, i.e. deadliness, was ascribed to her ability to avail herself of her “sexuality as weapon” in order to put forth the destruction of a man for her own benefit. It seems noteworthy, however, that oftentimes the femme fatale’s deadliness is not based on violent actions or actual enforcements of murder, but rather lies in “her very presence,” that is to say her power to fascinate men sensually and sexually (Martin 206-208). The same holds true for Darla: it is her very presence or sexual lure that makes the otherwise abstinent and controlled Angel live out his heterosexual masculine desires, but that also makes him a plaything of her manipulations. The scene revealing this duality has two levels, the metadiegetic dream level and the diegetic reality level: On the dream level, Angel dreams of coming home to his hotel after having slain a demon and being greeted by Darla. She characterizes him as a hero by addressing him as “always the protector, but never the protected” and subsequently seduces him. On the reality level, Angel is positioned in his bed sleeping, his upper body naked, while Darla, also naked, crawls over him and accords with the image of a devouring spider-woman by remarking about Angel “I could just eat you up”

(“First Impressions” A2003). The scene described above displays Angel as manipulated by Darla, a potent and - at least for him – dangerous woman that has obliterated his self-control by intruding his dreams. She has thereby unmanned him. Janey Place makes the point that the femme fatale is at first presented as a powerful, free and also dangerous woman, but eventually her power and freedom (the two characteristics that make her dangerous for men) are limited or even eliminated by the male narrative of the film (56). *Angel* is no exception from this rule, for when Angel finds out about Darla’s mind tricks, he attempts to re-gain his self-control as well as re-instate his masculinity. Angel’s attempts to man himself again find their climax in “Reprise” (A2015) when Angel finds Darla (as a vampire again) at his hotel, he smashes her to a wall and starts kissing her. When she pushes him away, he grabs her arm and throws her through a glass window and thereafter they have sex. Afterwards, Angel threatens Darla by giving her two options: either she will leave LA or he will kill her. Although the final sex act may be explicitly consensual and Darla never shows visible signs of fear, the scene starts out as a rape scene. In fact, Angel behaves like a violent rapist when he forcefully projects his desires on Darla and gets physical. Angel’s radical sexual come-on can be read as a re-affirmation of his supremacist masculinity. By debasing and eventually penetrating the woman who has formerly castrated him symbolically through exerting control over him, that is to say by making him her phallus, he re-stabilizes traditional gender power dynamics. In “Offspring,” (A3007) Angel’s status as a patriarch becomes literal, as now pregnant Darla returns to LA and informs Angel that he is the unborn child’s father.

[8] In the foregoing analysis Angel’s masculinization was ascribed to two points, namely his hypermasculine body as well his sometimes patriarchal behavior. In the analysis to come, Angel’s feminization will also be ascribed to bodily as well as behavioral aspects. Angel’s body seems to be both a site of objectification and penetration. As McCracken puts it, his body is “not only or merely visual spectacle but ... the object of continual, unrecuperated assault by young women within the narrative” (120). Hence, Angel’s trained hard body is at the same time a soft and sexualized body. In her discussion of action heroes of the Reagan era, Susan Jeffords remarks that “the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or person of color, whereas the hard body was, like Reagan’s own, male and white” (25). In *Angel*, however, it is Angel’s male and white body that becomes a traditionally femininely gendered soft body at the various instances when he is pierced with stakes or shot at. “Untouched” (A2004) serves as a good example. When Angel tries to talk to a teenage witch, she unintentionally forces a metal stake through his upper body. Thus, Angel, the superhero of the narrative, becomes the bearer of the bleeding wound, which serves as a symbol of castration in Freudian theory and is thus linked to the supposedly castrated women, the site of lack (Creed 2-7). In the scene from “Untouched,” however, it is the young teenage witch who is positioned as penetrator/castrator, whereas the male hero is positioned as penetrated/castrated. By visualizing men, especially hypermasculine men like Angel, as penetrable and thus soft bodies, *Angel* undermines patriarchal gender myths and specifically deconstructs the myth of the hard, impervious and thus unfeminine body of the male superhero. In McCracken’s formulation, *Angel* uses the “deployment of the penetrable male body to critique normative masculinity and explore the instabilities of contemporary gender categories” (131).

[9] What is more, McCracken identifies Angel as “‘metrosexual’ before the term was coined” (134). Angel’s metrosexuality is linked to his accordance with “West Hollywood’s gay subculture:” his fairly muscular body, his dandy-like style, his interest in art and literature, his talent at drawing as well as a certain tendency to narcissism (134). Besides, both male as well as female characters think of Angel as gay at certain points and Angel also becomes a locus of queer desires. At various instances in the first season, heterosexual Doyle hints at Angel’s remarkable sexiness (134). In “Judgement,” (A2001) Angel sings the song “Mandy” by rather queer-coded singer Barry Manilow and in “Orpheus” (A4015) it is revealed that Angel has been to numerous Manilow concerts. At these points, it is indicated that hero-like figures such as Angel can have a tendency for *softie* or camp music. In short, Angel is feminized through displaying his male body as a penetrable site as well as through marking his appearance and behavior as metrosexual.

[10] This essay analyzed Angel’s masculinity as postmodern and hypothesized postmodern masculinity as contradictory – as both masculinized and feminized. The first part of the analysis argued that Angel’s impressively trained body can be viewed as a sign of hypermasculinity, for he is superhumanly strong, muscular and also an epitome of male attractiveness. Above that, his status as helper of the helpless and savior of young women in distress constructs him as a traditional male hero figure. In his relationship with Darla, he acts like a hard-boiled noir male: as a matter of fact, he punishes Darla for her transgressive, femme-fatale-like behavior in order to re-instate his masculinity and to re-construct male supremacy. Angel, however, is also feminized. His hard body is at the same time a soft, penetrable, destructible body. Hence, the patriarchal role allocation of women as penetrated and men as penetrator is reversed and deconstructed in *Angel*. Similarly, Angel’s metrosexual appearance and behavior signify an alternative and new form of masculinity, one that fearlessly embraces traditionally femininely gendered traits. Conclusively, Angel can be referred to as an example of postmodern, alternative masculinity, oscillating between masculinization and feminization.

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