

## Problematic Tropes of Bi Women in the Whedonverses

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[1] Fans, critics, and academics have previously written in depth on the topic of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* (1997-2003) most controversial couple, Willow and Tara. While it has been widely praised as a positive example of a same-gender relationship in a mainstream TV show, this representation has also been polarizing among lesbian and bisexual fans of *Buffy*, as well as academics, due to different interpretations of how Willow's sexuality is portrayed.

[2] As outlined in Em McAvan's essay "'I Think I'm Kinda Gay': Willow Rosenberg and the Absent/Present Bisexual in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Willow's path of sexual discovery can be read as bisexual via the mostly nebulous representation of her orientation as neither entirely lesbian or straight, before eventually declaring herself as "gay now" ("Triangle" *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 5.11, 00:33:53-55). While this has often been interpreted as a subversion of the heterosexist trope of bi "But Not Too Bi," (in which, according to *TV Tropes*, a bi or bi-coded character is only temporarily visibly attracted to someone of the same gender before returning to visible heterosexuality), McAvan points out it still carries the weight of negativity that comes with presenting bisexuality as a temporary or transitional state compared to monosexuality.

[3] However, it can also be argued that Willow's character arc is a representation of the lesbian experience of compulsory heterosexuality (as characterized by Adrienne Rich's paper

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“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”), or that Willow is a representation of sexual fluidity (an interpretation explored in detail in Gail Wald’s essay “Is Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s Willow Rosenberg a Lesbian or Bisexual?” and “Our Willow, Ourselves” by Lindsey King-Miller). These are, of course, valid points when the character of Willow is analyzed on her own. However, I argue that these points are undermined when taken in context of the handling of female bisexuality present elsewhere in Whedon’s works, not to mention within a wider context of bi representation in society. Analyzing how bi and bi-coded women are represented as a group alongside Willow can help to determine whether her development is an isolated artistic choice for her character or a part of wider problem with portraying bi women.

[4] It is also important to analyze explicit bisexual representation alongside instances of coding characters as bi, via them being labelled by the creators as bi officially or unofficially outside of the show, or by giving them traits that are commonly associated with bisexuality, from having sex and romantic relationships with both men and women, to getting them to fit into bi stereotypes (for example, sexual and moral indecisiveness). This is especially important when dealing with fictional characters who are not clearly labelled or only convey their sexuality implicitly (aka queer-coding), which usually occurs because of being created under censorship or for an audience that would not necessarily have a nuanced perspective on sexuality and gender (additionally, the term queer-coding originated from representations of villains in Disney’s animated films that were created under both these restrictions, which is further detailed in Ren Martinez’s essay “Fabulously Fiendish: Disney Villains and Queer-Coding”).

[5] In the same way that characters can have their queerness implied by representing them as gender-nonconforming or camp, the more specific term bi-coding relies on viewers’ inferring a character’s sexuality through appearance, relationship histories, and stereotypical behavior, with the focus on signaling bisexuality above other orientations. According to Kenji Yoshino’s study “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” this tactic has been employed frequently in representing bisexuality in media, not just because of censorship issues, but also because society’s bi erasure necessitates

bisexuality being stereotyped as a nebulous or invisible orientation, so it is represented in an equally vague way.

[6] It is through cues in Willow's character arc that McAvan can argue that Willow can be interpreted as a bi character despite Willow not labelling herself as bi, and it is through these cues that I am able to analyze Whedon's similar characters in comparison to Willow. However, I would also like to emphasize that if there is a clear intention from creators to represent a character self-labelling as something other than bi, where it is not left open to interpretation or hints at bi representation, then it is not bi-coding.

[7] Likewise, genuinely sexually fluid and undecided people exist in the real world and can interpret fictional characters as representing themselves. Yet I think it is worth highlighting that Whedon's characters are ultimately a product of the writers' imaginations and agendas; they are intended to depict their ideas about these orientations and have no agency of their own to convey the complexity of self-identification.

[8] Because these fictional characters are viewed within a real biphobic world and because there is room for interpretation, there will be people (for better or worse) who will label them as bi or equivalent to bisexual without another context offered to them, simply because bisexual is the most well-known label for non-monosexual identity, which can support negative stereotypes and result in negative consequences for real life bi-identifying folks (according to studies such as Barker et al.'s *The Bisexuality Report: Bisexual Inclusion in LGBT Equality and Diversity*), as well as queer people in general.

[9] In this essay, I will focus on the most prominent representations of female bisexuality, sexual fluidity and bi-coding in the Whedonverses: Willow, Buffy (particularly from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comics), "wishverse" Willow (the original Willow's evil vampire counterpart from an alternative dimension), Faith (an anti-hero slayer also from the *Buffy* television series and comics), and Inara Serra from *Firefly* (2002). I argue that the presentation of these characters in the wider Whedonverses does indicate a bigger problem with handling bi and bi-coded women in media—portraying them as oversexualized, one-dimensional, immoral, predatory, promiscuous, confused, untrustworthy and/or in a transitional state between gay

and straight—which casts the characterization of Willow in a less positive light.

[10] An obvious place to start the analysis is with Willow. However, it would seem difficult to truly understand the full implications of her portrayal without comparing her to her “wishverse” counterpart. Wishverse Willow (first introduced in “The Wish,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3.9) embodies all the worst aspects of the depraved bisexual vampire archetype: she is predatory, manipulative, irredeemably evil, and unabashedly bisexual.

[11] Wishverse Willow’s bisexuality is revealed through her sexual relationship with wishverse Xander, her preference of using seduction on her female victims for her own enjoyment, and her predatory sexual propositions towards regular Willow. When she is first introduced, she is portrayed as oppositional to regular Willow, as a stark contrast to someone who is defined by being bookish, socially awkward, kind and meekly heterosexual.

[12] Her categorization as a particularly meek straight woman is one of the more important aspects of this contrast, i.e. as someone who mostly resembles the patriarchal ideal of a “girl next door,” a relatively competent and attractive young female who is not oversexualized and is generally shy and non-threatening to men and women alike. Part of this characterization relies on heterosexuality being assumed as the default orientation for women—aka heteronormativity, as defined in “Heterosexual by Default, Homosexual by Deviation” (Anne)—and that presumably good hetero women are chaste or at least do not engage in as much transgressive sexual behavior as men or bad women.

[13] Regular Willow, at this point in the show, did not show any signs of same-gender attraction or truly despicable behavior, so under heteronormative assumptions, it is easy to infer that she is a conventional good heterosexual and vampirism turned her from a disempowered hetero woman into a violently confident bisexual.

[14] “It’s horrible. That’s me as a vampire? I’m so evil and skanky... and I think I’m kinda gay,” regular Willow muses (“Doppelgängland,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3.16, 00:29:18-28), making a point to highlight that last detail about her alternative self, as if the possibility of a “kinda gay” Willow is also a bit disturbing and very unlike our regular Willow.

[15] Buffy reassures her that a vampire's personality has nothing to do with the living person they once were, to which their vampire ally Angel responds with "well, actually. . ." (00:29:28-37). He never finishes his thought, but his implication is clear: parts of regular Willow's personality do carry over in wishverse Willow. This moment of identity questioning is foreshadowing and begins regular Willow on a path of sexual discovery that would define her eventual character empowerment, which is outlined thoroughly in Jessica Ford's chapter "Coming Out of the Broom Closet: Willow's Sexuality and Empowerment in Buffy."

[16] As the series progresses, regular Willow shows what she does share with wishverse Willow: her fierce intelligence (growing from young geekiness in school to mastering witchcraft to an almost god-like extent), capacity for cruelty (most apparent in her phase as alter-ego dark Willow, who gruesomely dispatches her foes by flaying them alive), and her sexual attraction to women (beginning with her key relationship with Tara and continuing with lovers Kennedy in the television series, then Aluwyn and Aura in the comics).

[17] Where regular Willow ultimately differs from wishverse Willow (other than vampirism, of course), is that regular Willow ultimately chooses the side of good at the end of her journey of self-discovery. As Ford observes, regular Willow's moral compass and magical ability are intimately tied to her coming out story, particularly her relationship with her lover Tara. It is through collaborating with Tara that she is truly empowered to become a skilled witch working with the Scooby gang, and she only falls into a spiral of deep magic addiction and evil (instead of slipping temporarily) when Tara is gone. While there are many factors that regular Willow cannot control in her character development (such as Tara's death), most of her empowerment and disempowerment result from her own choices relating to her key relationships and sexuality.

[18] Two of the most important examples of this are when regular Willow chooses Tara over her ex-lover Oz ("New Moon Rising," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 4.19), and her decision to reform after trying to end the world as her alter-ego "dark Willow" ("Grave," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 6.22). Both times, she has the agency to choose evil with nobody to really stop her (in Xander's case he convinces her not to end the world with her god-like magic through the power of his

friendship), but both are resolved by regular Willow's being forced to confront her true feelings to side against evil and/or unhealthy paths.

[19] "Picking a side" here carries quite a lot of bi connotations, since biphobia assumes that bisexuality means choosing one option in a dichotomy (usually men or women, as Martinez observes in "I Kissed a Girl and I'll Deny It: TV Tropes and Bisexuality in Men and Women"), and it can be metaphorically extended to other dichotomies. In this case, Willow's choice between good and evil, and having a relationship with Tara or Oz, ties in thematically with exploring her bisexuality and skewed morality as foreshadowed in "Doppelgämland."

[20] However, instead of discovering and accepting that she is bisexual during this process (which would be the logical conclusion if her character arc truly mirrored bisexual wishverse Willow), she ends up openly identifying as gay, continuing to reinforce her lesbian identity and only entering romantic/sexual relationships with women after her time with Tara. At the beginning of regular Willow's arc, her sexuality is intentionally obscured presumably because of interference from censors (according to Amber Benson's recollections of playing Tara in that story arc in Laura Akers and Chris Hicks' interview, "Amber Benson on Buffy, Tara and Willow, Husbands & more...") and uncertainty as to how the story would develop.

[21] Joss Whedon admits in an interview on the *Fresh Air* radio show with David Bianculli:

The arc between Willow and Tara has a long and sort of tortured history. We had thought about the idea of someone exploring their sexuality, expanding it a little bit, in college because that's something that might happen in college [...] and it seemed like a good time for her to be exploring this and the question became, how much do we play in metaphor and how much do we play as her actually expanding her sexuality (Bianculli 11).

[22] After the television show's end, the actress who plays Tara, Amber Benson, while on a Paley Fest panel with Whedon also commented: "Joss kept Willow as a lesbian, rather than saying 'Okay, now she's done.' I'm really pleased with how that continued on, that she had somebody else, that she continued to be who she was, she stuck by her guns. She wasn't just a flip-flopper, you know what I mean?" ("Whedon, Gellar and More at the Buffy Reunion").

[23] These comments suggest two important things about Willow's characterization. Firstly, her sexuality was written as more fluid and experimental early in the writing process. And secondly, there was some belief that making her "a flip-flopper" (i.e. bisexual), and not a lesbian would have made her character's attraction to Tara and the story itself seem less authentic. Aside from the stereotyping involved in making these judgments (for example, assuming that bisexual/sexually fluid women are indecisive and cannot sustain attraction towards women), this differentiation between the two Willows creates some rather unfortunate subtext.

[24] An evil female bisexual is contrasted with a good-hearted lesbian; consciously or unconsciously their differing sexualities are seemingly connected to their morality. Regular lesbian Willow is redeemed with the power of love and her capacity to do good, whereas bisexual wishverse Willow is highly sexual but has no soul and therefore no compassion for anything; she does not seek redemption and dies having never achieved it. While wishverse Willow does have fans who celebrate her (for example, Kat Muscat's impassioned essay "The Virtues of Vamp and Dark Willow"), by dividing their characters into good and evil, the preferred reading is that we're meant to sympathize with regular Willow and hate wishverse Willow. And, because regular Willow's story arc is intimately entwined with her sexuality, it is easy to assume that lesbianism and bisexuality are being divided into good and evil, too.

[25] This interpretation is supported further by the long history of bisexual women characterised as immoral, hypersexualised beings under heteropatriarchy, which is detailed extensively in Shiri Eisner's book *Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*. Eisner states that in a heterosexual male-dominated world, bi women are treated as both sexual objects and threatening transgressive figures. When series present no direct challenge to these misconceptions, audiences are pointed towards biphobic interpretations such as these.

[26] Furthermore, connecting bisexuality to monstrosity is so common in writing vampirism that it is often taken as essential lore, so much so that it is listed under the official *TV Tropes* web page "Lesbian Vampire aka Bisexual Vampire," explaining that a core part of representing many vampiric bisexuals is directly implying that bisexuality "is the result of a corruptive and malign influence, representative of moral decay." The point of this juxtaposition of

differing sexualities and moralities (as explained by Katherine Farrimond in her essay “‘Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film”), is to play on insecurities of sexual deviance. Since bisexuality is assumed to be an “unstable” sexuality because the attraction is not limited to one gender, the stereotype follows that bisexuals must be unstable in other areas, namely morality. Additionally, since vampires are heavily sexualized beings who are known for seducing their victims, connecting vampirism to a sexuality that is perceived as overly sexual and manipulative is a strong theme.

[27] In the case of the bi vampire, as Jo Eadie observed in “‘That’s Why She Is Bisexual’: Contexts for Bisexual Visibility” analyzing the film *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), “bisexuality [is] a convenient cultural shorthand” for contravention, excess and intense sexual passions. Eadie does stress that using this cultural shorthand is not inevitably biphobic, since it can be essential to convey certain themes and highlight issues for deconstruction with no direct malice against bisexuals. However, I argue still that it is hard not to take a negative interpretation when there is little or no effort to deconstruct these pervasive tropes or push back from their implications.

[28] The common plot progression for characters constructed around this trope is that this perceived instability will be eventually resolved, by the character literally and figuratively “picking a side” sexually and morally to the satisfaction of the audience and main protagonists. This long-standing trope is most often hetero-centric, with the titular hypersexualized female “choosing” heterosexuality or being punished for her bisexual behavior (usually by dying). However, recent iterations (including regular Willow’s story) replace the heterosexual redemption arc with a conversion to homosexuality, which can be interpreted as a positive twist on this convention, as it assumes neither that heterosexuality is the default nor that it is necessary for redemption or stability.

[29] However, Whedon does not so much subvert this trope as reposition it, since it still presumes bisexuality is a negative transitional state, which is not an uncommon misconception in the real world, with many real-life bisexuals claiming that they are maligned in their communities because of this stereotype (evidenced by studies such as *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations*). While the writers succeeded in creating a story arc that revolved



around empowering lesbians and avoided problematic stereotyping of lesbians as convertible to heterosexuality, it still comes at the expense of disempowering and disregarding bi women.

[30] Writers Joss Whedon, Doug Petrie, Drew Greenberg, Steven DeKnight, and David Fury were quite adamant in their support of constructing Willow and Tara's relationship as positive long-term representation on *Buffy* fan forum *The Bronze: Beta* ("Official Quotes on the Willow/Tara Storyline") and other media outlets such as *Entertainment Weekly* (Stack). It is difficult to say whether any of them fully realized the biphobic implications of representing the relationship as a transition for Willow from straight to gay; however, as *Buffy* fan Stephen Booth notes, these writers were at least aware of lesbophobic clichés before they started writing the clichés in the show: "They were aware of it, they indicated they would not repeat it...then they did it anyway." Therefore, it is possible to extend the skepticism that the show's writers were unaware of the impact of their actions to bisexual representation in *Buffy*. Furthermore, regardless of whether the writers knowingly created these unfortunate implications or are aware of them, the biphobic implications are there nonetheless and carry the same consequences as intentional negative representations.

[31] As well as taking away a possible addition to the very short list of positive openly bisexual characters represented in media (which remains significantly below heterosexual and gay representation on television, according to GLAAD's annual report on LGBTQ inclusion *Where We Are on TV Report '16-'17*), narratives that position bisexuality as primarily transitional, antagonistic to gay and/or straight identity, or otherwise negatively, have a negative effect on the perception of bi women and bi women's perception of themselves. Paula C. Rust's study into the ideological divide between bi women and lesbians, *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics*, reported such a negative effect happening in the wake of lesbian-empowering feminist ideologies that also perceived bisexuality as a threat and/or a transitional state. In her study, ideologues that framed lesbianism as not only a choice but also "the right choice" to make if you were to free yourselves from heteropatriarchy enforced the idea that bisexuality is inferior and temporary while politically elevating lesbianism, and a surprising number of respondents (both lesbian and

bisexual) internalized that message, at least in part because of being surrounded by such rhetoric.

[32] Alongside Willow's transition from questioning to lesbian, elsewhere in the Buffyverse the traditional questioning-to-heterosexual bi tropes are still portrayed. Faith Lehane embodies this trope, albeit subtly, with her bisexuality shown predominantly behind the scenes or through innuendo. However, fan theorists such as King-Miller have picked up on Faith's being bi-coded; in her essay "Femslash Friday: Buffy, Faith, and Slayer-on-Slayer Action," she uses Faith's frankness about her sexual escapades and her flirtatious teasing of Buffy as evidence for her bisexuality. Writer Douglas Petrie has also openly acknowledged on the DVD commentary of the "Bad Girls" episode that the "lesbian subtext" of Faith written into the show, which explains why Faith's attempts to bond with Buffy, involves breathing on a windowpane to draw a heart with her fingers on the fogged glass and dancing provocatively with her at The Bronze nightclub ("Bad Girls," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3.14).

[33] Faith's relationship with Buffy, while initially combative and eventually outright hostile prior to her redemption arc, plays far more like a high school romance turned into a bitter break-up than it does a battle of wits between two warriors, including Faith invading Buffy's personal space like an overbearing ex-boyfriend and kissing Buffy on the forehead before escaping capture ("Enemies," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3.17). Arguably, this chemistry is a result of Faith using her natural proficiency at seduction on Buffy as just another tool in her arsenal of weapons—first to try to "seduce" Buffy into her way of thinking and then make a more sexually uptight Buffy uncomfortable—but this nonetheless is interpretable as sexual tension, and it is cited as such in analyses such as "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Bisexual Representation" by Lisa Ward. In addition, the actress who plays Faith, Eliza Dushku, also confirmed on a DragonCon panel that she considers Faith to "swing both ways," and that "she had a definite... thing for Buffy," further validating the bisexual subtext {"Buffy Panel"}.

[34] However, Faith's implied attraction to women is restricted to times when she is in a state between good and evil, and this attraction is visible as darkly obsessive and manipulative, because Faith occupies the role of rival to Buffy and general villain throughout most of her flirtatious episodes. This framing is oddly

similar to the way the various Willows are characterized, but this time it is Buffy who plays the good hetero woman and our heroic main character who is set up to contrast with Faith—her oversexed, sexually ambiguous, and deviant “dark Slayer” counterpart. Eventually, once Faith chooses the side of good, fighting for Buffy and other Slayers instead of against them, this same-gender attraction and flirtation disappears and is not alluded to again.

[35] Then there is Buffy herself, whose bisexuality only manifests in the continuation comics as a brief sexual liaison with another slayer (Satsu), which runs from “A Beautiful Sunset” (Whedon, 8.11) to “Wolves at the Gate” (Goddard, 8.12-15). Her bi experience is neither restricted to subtext nor as something necessarily evil, yet it does conform to the same running themes of temporariness and instability as the classifications of female bisexuality discussed earlier.

[36] The love affair, despite being short-lived, is a mostly positive experience for both parties and ends amicably in comparison to Buffy’s previous relationships with men. However, similar to the way Faith’s sexuality is framed, Buffy’s sapphism is restricted to one person. Buffy also never once fully identifies herself as bisexual or goes into much detail regarding her sexuality; from the start she and others doubt that she can have a genuine sexual/romantic relationship with Satsu, even after choosing to have sex with Satsu and reporting positive sexual feelings for her.

[37] The affair opens Buffy to suspicion and derision from some of her peers who are presented as having more stable sexual orientations. For example, her sister, Dawn, and her friend Willow are shocked at the revelation that Buffy had a “one-night stand” with a woman, with Willow even taking Satsu aside to quietly explain that Buffy is “not a friend of Sappho” aka not a real lesbian as she is. Willow’s on-and-off-again lover Kennedy is openly somewhat hostile to Buffy once she finds out about her relationship with Satsu, accusing her of wanting to touch Willow and calling her a “lez-faux.”

[38] Lewis Call suggests in “Slaying the Heteronormative: Representations of Alternative Sexuality in Buffy Season Eight Comics” that this behavior can be interpreted as part of deconstructing the bisexual experience and is therefore worth exploring, because biphobia from both lesbians and hetero women is certainly not uncommon for real-life bi women and contributes to

their social marginalization according to the findings of Hayfield, Clarke, and Halliwell's sociological study "Bisexual Women's Understandings of Social Marginalisation: 'The Heterosexuals Don't Understand Us But Nor Do the Lesbians'." Additionally, women questioning their sexuality later in life and facing backlash for doing so is not out of the ordinary either, which is explored in further detail in John Dececco's study *Lesbian Epiphanies: Women Coming Out in Later Life*.

[39] Then again, the biphobic behavior is not directly countered or refuted with words or actions from Buffy or any other character; even Buffy herself doesn't attempt to counter their claims, so it allows for that biphobia to be normalized rather than challenged. By not offering a clear context for representing bisexuality positively and putting unstable bisexuality in opposition to supposedly stable monosexual orientations, just as in the case of Faith and Willow, the creators allow people to easily come to these interpretations. Secondly, it is still relegated to simply a "phase" in Buffy's life that does not come from a place of love but darker feelings of loneliness and a need for experimentation (much in the way Faith's sexual behavior appears to be born of obsession and desperation for affection). Throughout her short sexual relationship with fellow Slayer Satsu, Buffy admits to having not had such a pleasant experience with sex for a while.

[40] When in bed together, post-coitus, Satsu immediately doubts the validity of Buffy's attraction: "I know what this is. I know you didn't just... turn gay all of a sudden" (8.12). In turn, Buffy agrees she is not gay, but she also does not question whether she is not straight. However, she does say: "Tomorrow, I'm gonna think about what we did. And I'm gonna blush. And then I'm gonna smile. But I'm not sure it goes any further than that" (8.12). Clearly sleeping with Satsu influences Buffy, in quite a positive way that makes her at least a bit unsure about her orientation and feelings for Satsu. Yet instead of exploring the prospect of Buffy being significantly attracted to Satsu and women in general, both parties deny the possibility almost immediately.

[41] Similarly to the way regular Willow's sexual orientation is juxtaposed with Wishverse Willow, Buffy's ambiguous sexual attraction is set in stark contrast to Satsu's fixed lesbianism. Buffy's attraction to women is unreliable and limited to Satsu; meanwhile,

Satsu is experienced and certain of her romantic feelings towards Buffy and other women, and their relationship ultimately ends partially because Satsu wants commitment and Buffy cannot envision it going any further than a short fling. Buffy then returns to sleeping with men (ex-boyfriend Angel to be exact), which fits into the idea that her sexual encounters with Satsu were just a phase after all. Whedon was also candid in interviews about what he intended their story to be and why they would not label or explore what Buffy's orientation is. Whedon is quoted in George Gene Gustines' *New York Times* piece "Experimenting in Bed When Not After Vampires," claiming that: "She's young and experimenting, and did I mention open-minded?"

[42] On the other hand, bi representation in *Firefly* significantly differs from what is found in the Buffyverse, but enters with its own complications. As the ship *Serenity*'s resident courtesan or "companion," Inara Serra fits neatly into the "sacred whore" bisexual archetype<sup>1</sup>. As Loraine Hutchins defines it in her essay "Bisexual Women as Emblematic Sexual Healers and the Problematics of the Embodied Sacred Whore," "sacred whores/prostitutes" follow Hindu and Buddhist traditions of erotic healers and priestesses, in which the often-vilified profession of sex work is elevated to a much higher rank in society and is given spiritual significance. Hutchins identifies that bi women are embraced into this archetype because their bisexuality empowers them to expand their sexual powers beyond just one gender, and as bi women are pigeonholed into sexualized roles by society, they can turn their oppression into a profitable skill.

[43] In the sci-fi universe of *Firefly*, the sex work of companions is normalized and well-paid, and companions wield considerable power and are afforded agency over choosing clients. Rather than Inara's sexuality being weaponized as a destructive force (as we have seen from wishverse Willow and Faith), it is both spiritual and benevolent in nature, and allegedly enriches the lives of her clients as a type of therapy or entertainment. There is no ambiguity over where Inara stands morally: she is upfront about her career in sex work, takes pride in it, and consistently sticks to her convictions. She is loyal to the crew of *Serenity* and uses her unconventional talents to help and give pleasure to people; she is unmistakably one of the good guys and never in a transitional state between good and evil.

The role of companions also adds credibility to her bisexual behavior being genuine rather than superficial or having darker motives, since it is made clear that she accepts and engages in sex work entirely on her terms. She willingly engages with both men and women as sexual partners, and none of it is forced upon her or necessary for her existence, indicating at the very least that she is not repulsed by being sexual with women.

[44] Despite this overall positive portrayal, the episode “War Stories” (*Firefly* 1.10) highlights that it is still incredibly rare for Inara to choose female clients. The one time that Inara is shown with a woman client—known only as The Councilor from the planet Ezra—Inara, while in conversation with her, confesses that she was chosen because Inara is able to relax around her, offering respite from her demanding male clients, which serves her own needs of intimacy and of being herself just as much as her client is relieved by her. She states, “most of my clientele is male,” and she further notes that she selects women not because she finds them physically attractive per se, but because they are “extraordinary in some way.”

[45] It’s not clear whether Inara engages in these types of relationships because she is bisexual or if she’s enjoying the benefits of being in relationships with women who are less demanding of her than men are.<sup>2</sup> While there is no question of it being a phase or experimental this time, because Inara’s sexual rendezvous with The Councilor does seem to be an on-going engagement, ambiguity is generated over the strict limits of their relationship. This ambiguity is further complicated by the fact that the only character who Inara is seen to be unambiguously romantically and sexually attracted to is a man, Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds.

[46] By making their mutual attraction clear and Inara’s attraction to The Councilor uncertain, Inara’s feelings for women become secondary to her attraction to Mal, fitting into the trope of narratively valuing the affections of a man more than women. Furthermore, she is still not free of the stigma her sexuality and profession carry in her universe (a reflection of the stigma that sex work still evokes in our current society). Even though she is personally respected by Mal, she is still derided by him for being a sex worker and has her promiscuity thrown at her as an insult when they have a disagreement, usually with Mal calling her a “whore” (“Shindig,” *Firefly* 1.4, 00:33:52-00:34:10).

[47] Since Mal is the main character, his comments carry significant weight as an audience avatar (according to Deborah Pless's analysis in "Inara Serra and the Future of Sex Work"), as do the rest of *Serenity's* crew whose adventures we follow and sympathize with. The stigma of bi women sex workers is highlighted in the crew's reactions to seeing Inara service a female client in "War Stories," in which the crew are not only surprised that Inara's client is a woman but can't help but ogle at the spectacle, underlining it as unusual. Othering her same-gender relationship in this way is made worse by Jayne's reaction, which Whedon writes as comic relief using what Don Tresca points out as "pornographic humor" in "Skeletons in the Closet: The Contradictory Views of the Queer in the Works of Joss Whedon."

[48] Jayne Cobb, the amoral but sympathetically portrayed mercenary, is shown clearly fetishizing the two women as a same-gender couple by commenting "I'll be in my bunk" upon seeing them together, implying that he intends to masturbate while thinking of them. This is a very "in character" response from Jayne, who is consistently portrayed as crude and misogynistic, but his behavior in this case goes virtually unchallenged on screen. Without the admonishment that he usually receives for saying something out-of-line, this comment passes as a casual joke that further legitimizes fetishizing female bisexuality. It is also notable that Inara is yet another example of a fictional bi woman whose sex life is a core aspect of her characterization; despite its being a much kinder depiction of bisexuality than what is present for wishverse Willow, Faith, or even Buffy, it still operates under the assumption that bi women are inherently sexualized.

[49] When these instances of bi and bi-coded women being represented in the Whedonverses are examined together, some unfortunate conclusions emerge. Whenever female bisexuality is represented, it is depicted as either villainous, sexualized, conditional, temporary, or all four traits at once. Taken as their own self-contained stories, they are perhaps not so harmful to the perception of bisexuals, but the Whedonverses do not exist in a vacuum where bisexuality is neither an oppressed orientation or maligned by the stereotypes present in Whedon's work. It can also be argued that that Whedon does subvert these tropes to make them less hetero-centric and true to lived experience of lesbians and bi women, but without

directly challenging the misconceptions about bisexuality that are still present in such subversions, they cannot be fully de-toxified.

[50] Furthermore, there are so few examples of positive representation of female bisexuality in Western media that not making any effort to address negative stereotypes that naturally occur in the narrative is not progressive and can even be viewed as tacit agreement with said stereotypes. Additionally, there is a certain amount of urgency in addressing tropes of this nature, as the misconceptions they propagate do have real world consequences for bi women and bisexuals as a group (according to Emily Page), from increased risks of suicide (read Annie Shearer's "Differences in Mental Health Symptoms Across Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Youth in Primary Care Settings") to higher instances of sexual assault of bi women (read Walters, Chen, and Breiding's *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation*).

[51] A possible answer is to simply have more representation for bi women that is genuinely diverse; then the more stereotypical or negative instances of bi representation can be balanced with examples that show bi people can exist outside such limitations. Setting the exploration of sexualities outside the setting of analogies of good vs evil would also help to avoid the tendency of casting bisexuality as antagonistic to lesbianism and heterosexuality.

[52] Another solution to widespread negative interpretations of bi women is to directly counter possible misconceptions generated in the text, particularly in fictional characters who experience biphobia from other characters and/or have more experience in relationships with one gender over another. Instead of characters passively accepting biphobic comments, they could call them out as bigoted or clearly show displeasure with such attitudes. Adding context and analysis to characters' orientations and motives would also help to remove stigma and ambiguity, simply by having characters label their sexuality clearly or go into a little more depth, instead of leaving the nature of their attractions ambiguous and juxtaposed with comparatively unambiguous monosexual identities.

[53] As the Whedonverses stand, they do not offer any of these solutions. Whether representing bi, sexually fluid, and bi-coded characters with negative connotations was intentional or not does not change the fact that it is in part contributing to negative depictions of



bi women and makes no effort to dispel those biphobic misconceptions. I do not suggest that the Whedonverses are set out with malice towards bi women. Rather, my analysis indicates that there are too many missed opportunities and miscalculations, so that it is easy to see the way this representation enforces particularly negative ideas about bi women, especially within a wider cultural canon where negative portrayals of bi women dominate.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: Scholars such as Andrew Aberdein argue for nuancing the categorization; see “The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?”

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: Cynthea Masson addresses this question at some length in “But She Was Naked! And All Articulate!': The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly*.”