



Holly G. Barbaccia Buffy in the “Terrible House”



(1) In numerous interviews, creator Joss Whedon has explained that the inspiration for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* struck while he was watching horror films and TV shows in which pretty women run away from or get killed by monsters in alleyways. Whedon claims he wanted to give this paradigmatic girl-victim a new role: that of the monster-killing hero. Whedon’s explanation of his own artistic inspiration reveals at least two things about him as a film-viewer and maker: first, his description suggests his awareness of the pervasive, archetypal quality of the traditional, mainstream horror film. Second, his description rather coyly fails to account for the more marginal genre of the “slasher film,” in which the pretty girl often does kill the monster in the alleyway.

(2) Slasher films have attracted feminist academic attention in recent years, most notably from theorist Carol J. Clover. Clover’s groundbreaking article, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” was first published in 1987 and continues to influence feminist film critics today. With some success, these critical inquiries have recuperated the genre as one that might actually indicate shifting ideas about gender roles and female agency. Whedon nods both to the “slasher” as a subgenre and to feminist film theory in the Season 3 episode, “Helpless.” In “Helpless,” Whedon grafts the slasher scenario onto the Buffyverse but makes significant changes, based, I think, both on feminist responses to the genre and also on his own understanding of the show’s audience demographics. Though Whedon puts his title character on a continuum with the slasher’s female but “boyish” victim-heroes, Buffy becomes a hero with whom her predominately female audience can identify in a way not accounted for by most feminist criticism about horror.

(3) In the introduction to her book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1993), Clover delimits her inquiry to “[those subgenres] of [1970’s and 80’s] American cinematic horror . . . in which female figures and/or gender issues loom especially large: slasher films, occult or possession films, and rape-revenge films” (5). More specifically, Clover argues convincingly that these subgenres (especially the slasher film) make possible certain quasi-transgressive viewer identifications: she proves that the mostly male audience of the slasher film identifies less with the sadistic monster than with the monster’s female victim-heroes. Clover ends her book by imagining a different kind of audience, this one for her own work: “at least some horror filmmakers read Freud . . . and film criticism” (232), she notes. Ultimately, she challenges these hypothetical, literate filmmakers: though the “slasher film proper has died down. . . . There may . . . be life in the amazingly durable and adaptable vampire movie” she claims. And, she adds, contemporary horror films do

not “take the kind of brazen tack into the psychosexual wilderness that made horror in the seventies and eighties such a marvelously transparent object of study. Unless and until the direction changes again, I suspect we will soon be back to the dominant fiction in its dominant forms, out of which we must dig meanings rather than have them displayed so obviously and so spectacularly before us” (235-236). I would guess Whedon reads both Freud and film criticism, but in any case, he and Clover come to the slasher aesthetic with what look like similar projects: to recuperate horror for women.

(4) If *Buffy* resembles the next stage of the slasher genre as imagined by feminist film theory (which may not surprise us), it consciously reproduces and parodies these same things in Season 3’s most unsettling episode, “Helpless” (originally titled “18”), which first aired on January 19, 1999. The episode’s basic story goes like this: it’s Buffy’s 18th birthday, and her mentor, or Watcher, Giles, has been hypnotizing and then secretly injecting her with muscle relaxants and adrenaline suppressors. We learn that part of the slayer’s rite of passage involves the “Cruciamentum,” a test controlled by the Council of Watchers during which a physically weakened slayer must defeat a monster in a pre-designated, inescapable location, using only her “imagination and cunning.” Of course, the test goes horribly awry when the monster escapes and kidnaps Buffy’s mother, Joyce, in order to lure the slayer back to his lair. In an *11th Hour* interview conducted in April of 2000, episode-writer David Fury explains that Whedon revised the original concept for the show, in which Buffy’s rite of passage would consist of a drug or hypnosis-induced hallucination that all of her friends were vampires. Fury explains that “Joss . . . changed the test to make it about [Buffy] losing her powers instead.”^[1] Whedon’s change effects a major shift in emphasis. Instead of a possible metaphor for the evils of teen drug use (Fury’s concept), Whedon transforms the episode into an unnerving allegory of a newly adult woman who discovers that a patriarchy exists, that it authorizes her own power, and that female normalcy within that system equals helplessness. Why this allegory needs such a formulaic backdrop becomes clearer as we investigate the intersections and disparities between “Helpless” and the paradigmatic slasher film as Clover describes it.

(5) Most importantly for our purposes, typical slasher films share three elements, enumerated in Clover’s “Her Body, Himself”: the Killer, the Terrible Place, and the Final Girl. ^[2] The first two crystallize most famously in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (which is arguably not a slasher itself, but which provides the model for many imitators); the Final Girl emerges as a recurring figure more recently, in the 70’s and 80’s. “Helpless” employs these same elements but tweaks each one into a slightly different shape. In her summary of the Killer figure, Clover identifies the prototypical slasher-film monster as *Psycho*’s Norman Bates, who “[has] introjected his mother, in life a ‘clinging, demanding, woman,’ so completely that she constitute[s] his other, controlling self” (194). *Buffy*’s Council of Watchers chooses the parodic Zachary Kralik to be the monster in Buffy’s Cruciamentum precisely because he is psychotic: while alive, Kralik tortured and killed a dozen women, and he hasn’t gotten much nicer since. He’s addicted to pills, without which he seems to experience incredible pain, but this phenomenon never gets explained. Kralik explains to Buffy’s mother, Joyce, whom he has kidnapped: “My mother was a person with no self-respect of her own, so she tried to take mine, ten years old and she had the scissors, you wouldn’t believe what she took with those . . . but she’s dead to me now. Mostly ‘cause I killed and ate her.” Kralik’s mother literally stunts his sexual development by castrating him with scissors: Kralik literally introjects his mother by eating her (face first, if we’re to judge by his threats against Joyce). The joke is all too transparent, but Kralik adds a little irony when he comments, “I have

a problem with mothers. I'm aware of that." However, Kralik's "controlling self" doesn't seem to be his introjected mother so much as the male-dominated, hierarchical, "patriarchal" Council of Watchers. Kralik exists outside this power system – he's insane, drug addicted, and undead – yet the system uses him as a puppet by exploiting these very characteristics. Though Kralik continues to "play [the Council's] game" in "Helpless," he breaks "their rules." Even more disturbing, Giles acts in the exact same way: he carries out the Council's questionable imperatives and reflects Kralik in his lack of personal agency but also ends up outside the system when he helps Buffy. The space between Watcher and monster blurs, suggesting that Kralik merely presents one face of the Killer. Both Kralik and Giles perform their roles with the approval of a patriarchal administration that doesn't want to get its hands dirty by weeding out the weak slayers.

(6) Apparently, the Council designs its rules after the Hitchcock aesthetic. The head Watcher, Quentin Travers, directs the *Cruciamentum*, the very name of which pays homage to Hitchcock, whose infamous suggestion to "torture the women" "Helpless" takes up explicitly, if it also codes that suggestion in Latin. Travers chooses the abandoned, decaying "Sunnydale Arms" boarding house as Kralik's own Bates' Motel, and he makes sure that this "spook house" (as it's described in the shooting script) meets the requirements of the typical Terrible Place.^[3] Clover observes that the terrible place usually manifests as a house or a tunnel: in "Helpless," it contains both. "What makes these houses terrible is not just their Victorian decrepitude but the terrible families – murderous, incestuous, cannibalistic – that occupy them," Clover states (201). Indeed, the homoerotic union between Kralik and his first vamped victim, the feminized Watcher's assistant Blair, results in immediate cannibalism as they make a meal out of the other Watcher's assistant. The typical terrible house usually includes some sort of macabre shrine to the presiding mother figure, and in "Helpless," Kralik literally has Joyce bound and gagged in an inner chamber. He has also wallpapered at least one entire room with Polaroid shots of her from different angles. And the tiny, dark room in which he has trapped Joyce turns out to be attached to a tunnel-like laundry chute, as we learn when Buffy jumps down it to find and save her mother. Finding Joyce becomes a trip back to the womb for Buffy, surely significant on her birthday.

(7) This observation leads us to the last figure in both Clover's and Whedon's equations: the Final Girl. "The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in the memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl," as Clover names her (201). The Final Girl embodies abject terror; she alone looks death in the face, but she also finds the strength to "stay the killer long enough to be rescued . . . or to kill him herself." In the first option, Clover likens the Final Girl to "Red Riding Hood, saved through male agency," for all her survivor pluck (203). But the second version of the Final Girl, who becomes more popular in American slasher films of the late 70's to mid 80's, needs no male savior. And unlike the classic horror movie *Psycho*, the lower-brow slasher film presents the Final Girl as the main character from the outset; the fan can identify her instantly because "[s]he is the girl scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends, she is not sexually active . . . Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in extreme situations . . . although she is always smaller and weaker than the killer, she grapples with him energetically and convincingly. The Final Girl is boyish, in a word."

(8) Whedon's victim-hero meets some of these requirements, but radically departs from others. Crucially, in "Helpless," it takes Buffy becoming a "normal girl" first in order to become a "Final Girl" by the episode's end. At first, this seems like wish fulfillment for Buffy – after all, the slayer spends the first two seasons of the show

wishing she were “normal.” But by this point in the series, Buffy clearly enjoys her powers, and she enjoys them in a way that aligns her more with the slasher Killer than with the Final Girl. The episode opens with Buffy play-fighting with her vampire boyfriend, Angel. She and Angel “aren’t having satisfaction in the personal sense” for all their grappling and straddling, because to do so would make Angel lose his human soul and become the evil (and Latinate) Angelus. After she leaves Angel’s mansion, Buffy visits Giles for a training session, during which her anxious handling of a phallic-looking crystal and her obvious need to “work off extra energy” by patrolling for vampires cuts the session short. But not so short that we don’t witness Giles hypnotizing Buffy by telling her to look at the “flaw at the center” of a large blue crystal, and then injecting her with a huge needle. The moment couldn’t be more disturbing: Giles, usually more a father figure than mentor, performs his actions coldly and without expression. When next we see Buffy, she wears pigtails and a baggy green jacket, and ruthlessly engages in torturing a vampire, throwing him down a playground slide and taunting him verbally. Buffy exchanges the sex she can’t have for the violence she can. She becomes the classic slasher-film sadist, but even as she enacts the role, she experiences a dizzy spell. Suffering from a latter day version of greensickness, the sexual frustration associated with unmarried, often anemic girls, Buffy quickly becomes the victim. The vampire she has been pursuing turns the tables, straddling her in the way she straddled Angel during the mock fight, and, pressing her own stake to her heart, whispers obscenely “Let me know if I’m not doing this right.”

(9) Though Buffy escapes this sexualized encounter, she loses her self-confidence. In a conversation with Giles, she announces: “I have no strength, no coordination. I throw knives like . . . like.” “A girl?” Giles suggests. “Like I’m not the slayer,” Buffy responds. When Willow asks her what will happen if she doesn’t get her powers back, Buffy suggests there may be a “whole lot of good sides to it,” but stops fantasizing about normalcy almost immediately. And again, in a conversation with Angel, Buffy expresses her fears of becoming normal: “I’ve seen too much now. I know what goes bump in the night. Not being able to fight it—what if I just hide under my bed, all scared and helpless?” The last thing Buffy wants to be at this point in the series is a normal girl. In voicing these anxieties, Buffy equates “normal” with “helpless,” a move that gives the episode an almost allegorical quality.

(10) When Buffy first encounters Kralik in a dark alleyway, she wears a Red Riding Hood jacket, the same jacket Kralik later wears to trick Joyce into coming outside the house (and, indeed, the same jacket Buffy will wear ironically in Season 4’s Halloween episode [“Fear, Itself,” 4004]). But in this scene, she runs away like Whedon’s archetypal blond victim or Clover’s first version of the Final Girl, and only escapes because Giles turns up to save her. Not until Buffy discovers Giles’ betrayal and her mother’s kidnapping does she become the second version Final Girl: she enters the Terrible Place of her own free will, wearing her girlishness and vulnerability with discomfort now that she has nothing to back it up. The male agency that authorized her power has betrayed and failed her, and she faces the Killer alone, de-phallicized without her stake and strength. She finally kills Kralik in the room containing Joyce by secretly filling his glass with Holy Water – when he takes his pills, Kralik drinks the water and disintegrates from the inside out. Buffy exchanges her usual stake for holy water (a weapon so un-phallic as to be feminine): here she truly departs from Clover’s Final Girl. Clover explains that part of the satisfaction the audience derives when the Final Girl stabs, castrates, or otherwise penetrates her pursuer rests on the fact that “all phallic symbols are not equal” (198). Just as the Killer typically uses, among other things, “teeth and [hypodermic] needles” because they are “personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into a primitive, animalistic embrace,” the Final Girl usually

turns the phallic object on her killer (198). But Buffy's holy water suggests a different kind of strength, still related to the patriarchal system that makes holy water holy, but nowhere near as symbolically masculinized as the stake. As Kralik turns to dust, Buffy says: "If I were at full Slayer strength, I'd be punning right now." She can't enjoy the death, and the trauma of being normal renders her a cynic instead of a sadist. Her last words to Travers after he tells her she passed the Cruciamentum but fires Giles for helping Buffy survive, are "Bite me": she equates the Council patriarch with Kralik in this moment and identifies the system as the monster which authorizes but also threatens her own power. Here, Buffy takes her first step towards breaking from the Council, which she does later in the season ["Graduation Day, Part II," 3022]: once she labels the patriarchy "monster," it becomes her duty to work against it.

(11) It seems to me that when Joss Whedon created the 1992 film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* he effectively took up the gauntlet that feminist film critics like Clover threw down, but the way he intensified *Buffy* for TV in 1997 makes it a better vehicle for exploring complicated "psychosexual" issues. He also aims his show at young women rather than men, as the recent inclusion of the Dawn character may indicate. Whether Whedon reads film criticism or not, he and Clover appear to come to the slasher aesthetic with a common goal. They both want to recuperate horror as a space in which sex and gender, among other things, can be explored boldly, through metaphors that anyone with a feminist decoder ring can interpret. Though the show often gets criticized for toting a pretty, stylish, slim hero, Buffy's stereotyped femininity is surely part of the point. Perhaps Buffy represents the middle rather than the most progressive end of the continuum of Final Girl victim-heroes, but whether or not this actually indicates a "visible adjustment in the terms of gender representation" remains to be seen (Clover 221).

Works Cited

Buffy Shooting Script Site, The. "Helpless." Written by David Fury, November 19, 1998, <http://www.mustreadtv.com/buffyscripts/>.

Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Slasher Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

_____. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *Representations* 20 (1987): 187-228.

Kincaid, Lisa. "Mister Furious." *The 11th Hour Web Magazine* (11 April 2000, <http://www.the11thhour.com/archives/042000/features/fury4.html>).

[1] Lisa Kincaid, "Mister Furious," *The 11th Hour Web Magazine* (Issue 11, April 2000, <http://www.the11thhour.com/archives/042000/features/fury4.html>).

[2] Clover's "Her Body, Himself" exists as a chapter in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, but my citations are from its earlier incarnation as a journal article in *Representations* (Number 20: Fall 1987, pp. 187-228).

[3] Though the episode's dialogue changes from shooting script to transcript, the set descriptions I found there confirmed my guesses about the atmosphere the writers/directors intended to create.