



**Robert A. Davis**

## ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and The Pedagogy of Fear**



[Editors' note: The bibliography for Professor Davis' essay will be available soon. Please check back.]

The mystery years: the sly  
beginnings of secret loves,  
objects flaring, amber in the dark,  
hallowed, like the afterlight of icons.

John Burnside, "Everything is Explained by Something That Happened in Childhood," *Feast Days* (32)

(1) In one sense, the literary and cinematic ancestry of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seems self-consciously clear. Episode by episode the program makers mischievously invoke the full catalogue of gothic horrors, knowingly parading an endless series of monstrous exhibits whose thoroughbred credentials from the archives of gothic fiction and film make them instantly recognizable to the viewing audience. The intertextual echoes and allusions have also a serious structural purpose, as the conflicts they provoke are skillfully used by the writers to deepen and elucidate the show's underpinning mythology, and to authenticate its ambitiously conceived inflection of literary vampirism.

(2) If there is something counterfeit in this process, then the fakery is also strongly foregrounded in the show's recycling of its thematic materials. Episodes such as "Nightmares" (1010), "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (2016), and most obviously "Halloween" (2006), highlight the program's attractive capacity for exposing the factitiousness of the genre from which it derives whilst continuing to affirm its peculiar allure. Of course, impenetrable layerings of the false, the hybrid and the fabricated have lain at the foundations of gothic art since its beginnings (Hogle 2000), drawing attention to the central place of reproduction and imitation in its motivating aesthetic. Failed imitation and botched reproduction are key gothic preoccupations. Frankenstein's Creature fails to assume the humanity intended by his maker; vampires reproduce an evil simulacrum of life rather than its true essence; even an "originary" gothic creation such as Horace Walpole's house at Strawberry Hill openly selects and exaggerates elements of early medieval architectural style rather than sedulously copying them.

(3) The gothic tradition's obsession with incomplete or sham representation is the source of much of the critical enthusiasm which currently surrounds it. If it is the gaps and shortfalls in the materials of gothic art which produce its distinctive feelings of horror, then criticism seeks always to interpret the slippages in signification which give rise to these responses. They are hence habitually re-read by contemporary theory as encodings of gender, race, class or religious anxieties. The visceral fears which the gothic excites stem, it is argued, from difference and otherness, those displaced tensions which at their most radical succeed in calling into question the unexamined ground of individual subjectivity and social identity.

(4) The critical rhetoric which the gothic attracts assumes its most highly wrought forms in discussions of sexuality, which is repeatedly described as if it were the gothic's truest, most insistent topic, communicating itself urgently through the genre's every shift and evasion. Vampirism is, of course, affirmed as the most achieved and transparent expression of this relationship, exposing to the critical and psychoanalytical gaze a seemingly limitless range of sexual taboos and transgressions thinly disguised in the bloodthirsty predations of the undead (Craft 1984). Robert Mighall has recently challenged the predominance of psychosexual hermeneutics in the interpretation of vampire literature, pointing out that "a vampire is sometimes only a vampire and not a sexual menace" (Mighall 1998, 94). In its handling of its literary and filmic heritage, *Buffy* raises a similarly ironic reservation about the pansexualism which affects critical appreciation of the genre. It does this almost self-parodyingly in its constant and hyperbolic references to sexuality; in the pervasive innuendo of dialogue and gesture throughout the teleplays, and the overt yet stylized intensification of sexual longing in the series' most accomplished plotline: the evolving relationship of Buffy and Angel. There are moments in the show when this suggestiveness is overstated and wearing. At its weakest, the camera in *Buffy* dwells too longingly on the bloom of the pubescent flesh of the preternaturally beautiful characters, as if to accentuate the transience and vulnerability of their youthful allure, showcasing only their victimhood to the observing eye of the audience (see eg "Reptile Boy," 2005). But the popcorn eroticism of the *Buffy* teleplays more regularly subverts the voyeurism which is too often and too readily seen by theorists to be both the appeal and the critical subtext of vampire narratives. The quick-fire wit and sparkling sarcasm in the scripts actually succeed in decoupling the vampire thematics from their allegedly inescapable sexual meanings, not by avoiding sexuality but by mainstreaming it into the most humorous and spontaneous aspects of the dialogue, normalizing what is customarily regarded in the genre and its commentaries as pathological. *Buffy* reminds the viewer that for older adolescents High Schools, with or without vampires, are erotically charged locations for which no spectral or monstrous alibis are required. In this respect, as in others, *Buffy* lays strong claim to the status of a genuinely late, postmodern gothic. It appears to defer to the critical discourse through which its primary ideas are appropriated and understood by the culture it addresses, whilst reflecting that discourse back at the surrounding culture in teasingly

appropriated and understood by the culture it addresses, whilst reflecting that discourse back at the surrounding culture in teasing, playful and ironizing forms. Paying homage to the genre does not preclude questioning it and the meanings with which it is currently invested. Indeed, a sincere engagement with the artifice of the gothic appears to demand such questioning.

(5) *Buffy's* traffic with the imagery and incunabula of the gothic is coolly nonconformist, even at times iconoclastic. It does not, however, exempt the program from intimate involvement with the complex patterns through which gothic romance expresses its contradictory relations with the sources of fear. The gothic is frightening, and stimulates fear even in those comical and postmodern occasions (common if not ubiquitous in *Buffy*) where fear is called forth only to be deflected or denied. Gothic traditions go on renewing themselves at the uncanny sites where culture simultaneously encounters its profoundest validation and confronts its most destabilizing uncertainties: the boundary zones associated with the body, mortality, the law, power, desire and secrecy which the technological and social changes of late capitalism have placed under such considerable stress (Punter 1998). At these locations representation is inverted, undone, "spectralized." Gothic art is therefore not displaced sexuality, rather gothic sexuality, in even its postmodern consumerist versions, furnishes a culture largely severed from traditional religious iconography with metaphors for the exploration of the terrors of selfhood, mortality and the limitations of the human, using and distorting what is perceived to be contemporary culture's only remaining source of possible transcendence: erotic love. Postmodern gothic as it is staged in *Buffy* continues to valorize the redemptive potential of erotic love (most explicitly in the twists and turns of the relationship between Buffy and Angel), but it does so fatalistically, portraying such love as under constant siege by a mocking shadow intent on disclosing its self-deception and inauthenticity. In this respect, *Buffy* extends one of the central strains of gothic polemics - revising and subtly undermining the claims of romantic art.

(6) The Romantic cult of youth and childhood is a particular target of gothic revisionism, and this continues vividly into the imagery and storylines of *Buffy*. The language of the High Romantic mode of representation is invariably loaded with a vitalist rhetoric: children and young people are a unique embodiment of the *life force*, predisposed to an intensity of feeling upon which the health of the human imagination is believed to depend; intermediaries between lived experience and transcendental influences hovering on the borders of perception. In bestowing these characteristics, Romanticism renders the child or adolescent an unparalleled object of desire, caught in a dialectic of remoteness and proximity (Davis 1992). Youth becomes charged with a numinosity that is quasi-religious in status, but which is denied the authority normally associated with objects of veneration, existing entirely within the ambiguous constructions of adult desire. "For the child," notes Lyotard in his essay "The Grip," "everything is trauma, the wound of a pleasure that is going to be forbidden and withdrawn" (Lyotard 1993).

(7) The language and symbolism which accrue to youth when it is approached in these terms have significant consequences for an understanding of the recurrent association of young people with the occult. It is not a coincidence that in the religious movement known as Spiritualism, which flourished in England and America between 1848 and 1890, among the leading mediums of the day were many children and teenagers (Owen 1985). The accentuation of their alleged spiritual qualities in the Romantic writing of the preceding century created just the right conditions for children to be accepted by the Spiritualist Churches as the best possible links between the realms of the living and the dead. When the apparitions spoke to Kate and Margaret Fox in New York in 1848, initiating the Spiritualist craze, they were doing no more than sowing ground long prepared by a particular set of juxtapositions of children and magic. As Coleridge had recognized long before, seeing children in this way was bound "to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural..." (Shawcross 1907, I, 59).

(8) When they appeared to traffic between the living and the dead, between reality and the transcendent, children and young people in the Romantic vision acquired precisely the kind of symbolic power promised them in fairy tales and folklore. Their voices were listened to, and they were accorded authority in their communities. The Romantic myth was momentarily wrested from the dominion of its adult creators and became a way of speaking and resisting, affording children the means to contest the elaborations of adult desire on its own terms. This turning by children of the figurations of desire back on the adults who perpetrate them highlights an infrequently observed thread in the Romantic mythology of youth and childhood, and casts light upon the ambivalence which haunts all attempts to rationalize the presence of fear in the lives of the young. When children themselves are seen to be *sources* of fear, whether within the life of the imagination or within the life of the communities in which they dwell, a point of crisis has been reached. The resources of art and traditional culture cease to ratify a social or affectional bond, and instead describe a gulf, an absence, an essential alienation of the rival subjectivities of adult and child. In such an arrangement, innocence and guilt, like ignorance and knowledge, become the mutually-defining signifiers of a shame-culture (Postman 1982). Adults and children come to occupy separate spheres bound together only by the costly combination of trepidation and enthrallment with which each regards the other.

(9) This is the juncture at which the gothic imagination begins its task of interrogation. The same cultural mythology which affirms the vibrant authenticity and intensified sensation of the child or young person also encodes childhood, and adult-child interdependency, in a series of troubling forms which, by their obscenity, call into question core Romantic values and assumptions. The archetypal gothic nightmare of the vampire, it can then be argued, circulates elements of the Romantic cult of childhood and youth through the dark underside of Romanticism's unconscious, touching with horrified fascination on the fears which haunt visionary notions of self-begetting, symbolic rebirth, and the organicist metaphors of adult-child continuity in which so much of high Romantic thought optimistically trades.

(10) Literary vampirism, especially, articulates in a cunning gothic irony profound misgivings about the Romantic investment in childhood and adolescence "The children of the night" menace the stability of the adult community with the promise and the threat of their own daemonic immortality: a disastrous arrest of growth and decay which parodies the Romantic yearning for a permanent childlike vitality unencumbered by the biological destiny which subjects real children and young people to the maturational processes of time and change. Vampire sustenance, moreover, involves a parasitic suckling of the body fluid of the living, particularly young women, in a perverse imitation of the life-giving agency of the maternal breast. Stoker's *Dracula* absorbs these fears by dramatizing the conflict between two communities, between, in effect, two species, competing for survival: the voluntary, rational, adult band of vampire hunters led by Mina and Van Helsing arranged against the involuntary, instinctive, mutually dependent phratry of the vampire kindred condemned to their tragic homelessness (Stoker 1983). Parents and parent figures die with remarkable frequency in Stoker's novel: Harker's solicitor-mentor, Lucy's mother, Holmwood's father, as the dominant order sacrifices its filial connectedness in order to defeat a rival, pseudo-familial grouping in which individuals are bound to each other quite literally by ties of blood. Adults versus children: the vampire mocks the affinities of the Romantic family romance and its elevation of domestic piety. Thirty years before

children: the vampire mocks the attitudes of the Romantic family romance and its elevation of domestic piety. Thirty years before Stoker's invention, one of the most genuinely chilling of all gothic protagonists is the child-vampire Carmilla in Sheridan Le Fanu's neglected short story of the same name (Le Fanu 1993, 243-320). *Carmilla* confirms the association of vampires with perpetual youth, and openly declares the alluring horror of the corrupted adolescent who can be blamed and scapegoated for the confusions of adult desire. "Sometimes the playful, languid girl, sometimes the writhing fiend," Carmilla is condemned and finally exterminated because she outrageously embodies a compelling source of "the rapture of that cruelty which yet is love."

(11) Part of the scandal which Carmilla occasions in the eyes of her antagonists lies in her flouting of the social and symbolic ties of the conventional patriarchal family. Her oft-noted lesbianism is representative of this insofar as it signifies a wider female and adolescent autonomy unheeded of the demands of family and society, repudiating submissiveness and resistant to the imposition of inherited feminine roles and responsibilities (Veeder 1980). Above all, Carmilla's ambiguous sexuality and agelessness have a heuristic function within the story, because they challenge the ambitions of orthodox knowledge and masculine and adult reasoning. Carmilla initially possesses an aristocratic immunity from both the modern bourgeois professionals who are too sophisticated to believe in vampires and the superstitious traditionalists whose feudal deference cannot contain or constrain her version of vampirism. In the end, as in *Dracula*, only the secret knowledge of the career vampire hunter, Vordenburg, proves capable of overcoming Carmilla's self-possession and securing her downfall. In hovering indefinitely between contrasting images of the female adolescent, Carmilla's vampirism casts Romantic representation itself into doubt and refuses, until death, the symbolic order of the family romance and all of its sexual, generational and social identifiers. It is, indeed, for just this perversity that Carmilla must be destroyed (Gelder 1994).

(12) *Buffy's* subversion of the laws and taboos of the kinship system is accomplished through a similar, if altogether more uncertain, disruption of established institutional bonds and the orthodox management of knowledge. In episodes such as "School Hard" (2003), the notion of "siring" is used to hint at the disordered and anti-domestic affiliations which exist in the vampire clans, with their powerful suggestions of incest and intergenerational confusion and alienation (Genge 1998). The lineage of the vampire "community," and its abnormal means of replication, decenter the ethical and emotional economy of the family - preserved by both Christians and their Romantic critics as the essential building block of social renovation - and casts into doubt the structures of moral and intellectual reasoning to which the privileging of the family unit has given rise in bourgeois societies. It is possible in this light to read Buffy Summers herself as an essentially conservative figure, despite her superficially magical trappings, defending a highly traditional, even reactionary, set of assumptions about community, knowledge and power from the menace of counter-cultural versions of youth and belonging. Buffy would then be the latest in a long line of vampire hunters, including Vordenburg and Van Helsing, whose function in the gothic universe is the anti-gothic task of recuperation - suppressing the ideological alternatives the gothic briefly and shockingly unleashes. Within the terms of her own narratives, the anarchy Buffy most consistently contains is the threat of genuinely radical alternatives to the largely docile and normative teen culture she and her friends embody.

(13) The paradoxes of Romantic childhood to which modernity is heir are not confined, of course, to the fevered productions of decadent art. Profound and elusive tensions in the cultural construction of categories such as family, childhood and adolescence find expression wherever the unresolved internal pressures of large movements of social feeling enter the discourses of history. Certainly, the late 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries - the crucible of the gothic - witness an eroticisation of childhood and of the maternal within which lie the origins of many of the moral conventions of modern child-rearing - from maternal breast-feeding, through the domesticity of the emergent nuclear family, to the centrality of the mother in the play, instruction and intimate socialization of children (Gelpi 1992). "The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order," writes Terry Eagleton, "will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections" (Eagleton 1990). Examination of the culture of fear in the lives and the imaginary representations of children highlights a slippage within one of the key zones of that emergent order, refocusing the imagery of childhood and adolescence to bring out the ideologically invisible influences of hierarchy, subordination and mutual envy in inter-generational transactions.

(14) The manifestation of such deep cultural fears may rightly be said to occur at moments of social and cultural change. But they need not be confined forensically to the past, and, indeed, their re-emergence in many of the products of contemporary popular entertainment can be seen to align revealingly with current anxieties about childhood in the Western world, made visible at the various problematic locations where modern adults and children negotiate their social and symbolic transactions (Higgonet 1998). *Buffy's* setting in the middle class American High School of Sunnydale evokes inevitable comparisons with the Columbine tragedy, where black-clad teenagers, self-styled avengers, arrived on an ordinary March morning in 1999 and shot to death dozens of their classmates. The eponymous heroine is, like so many young females in the lineage to which she belongs, the "Chosen One," "called forth in every generation" to defend humanity from the depredations of demonic forces which constantly threaten it from its own most dangerously repressed areas of feeling. Unknown to the oblivious staff and pupils, of course, their school sits on top of a "Hell Mouth" out of which there issues weekly a bizarre array of comic-book gothic horror figures - mostly themselves dismorphic teenagers - each bent upon encroachment and destruction. Only Buffy and the Scooby Gang stand between the school and its colonization by the forces of evil. With the exception of the Giles, the librarian who is Buffy's "Watcher" and instructor, sympathetic adults in the series, especially teachers, are portrayed as ineffectual or as monster fodder. The school is a place frequently reserved for sexual display and peer-group rivalries. The only form of learning seen to be valued is the conventionally despised esoteric knowledge needed for uncovering and liquidating supernatural enemies. One episode of the series, "The Pack," depicts (albeit off-camera) the dismemberment of the particularly useless school principal by a gang of students temporarily transformed into hyena-hellhounds.

(15) It is easy to discern beneath these surface fantasies of *Buffy* the gothic intelligence probing a deep-rooted and pervasive malaise associated with contemporary Western culture's confused and ambivalent attitude to youth, which, as has been said, is also an important aspect of the unfinished business of the Romantic revolution. Allied to this is the contemporary American loss of faith in the spaces and institutions of civic meaning - schools, teachers, suburban neighborhoods; the bewilderingly contradictory representation of young people simultaneously as agonizingly vulnerable victims, as calculating perpetrators of meaningless violence from the edges of society, and as sophisticated defenders of mainstream Western values. The strong intuition is that the environment around young people has ceased to be predictable or safe. Like infantilizations such as the "inner child" of consumer psychotherapy, or urban myths of the pedophile, what the fantasy narratives evacuate, of course, is the question of responsibility. If, for example, US schools have become key locations for the unconscious articulation of a *fear for* and a *dread of* children, artifacts of late capitalist consumer culture such as *Buffy* largely efface the issue of adult culpability - the blame which attaches, for example, to the strictly non-occult American practice of affording schoolchildren ready access to firearms.

(16) The relationship of *Buffy* to the gothic pedagogy of fear - the textual strategies by which the gothic contests the claims, and redefines the objects, of romantic desire - is undoubtedly a highly ambivalent one. *Buffy* sometimes succumbs to a kind of narcissism in which it treats its teenage themes too ponderously, as if fascinated by its own production values (eg "Inca Mummy Girl," 2004). Conversely, there are episodes where the series trivializes dilemmas and sacrifices an awareness of moral purpose to the high-octane thrill-seeking of its central conflicts (eg "I Only Have Eyes for You," 2019). But the best storylines of the series succeed in dramatizing the ambiguities of the postmodern gothic, showing how the gothic tradition now struggles to make its fundamental insights meaningful to a culture desensitized by the horrors of its own sense of history, and frequently distanced from the conventional sources of fear by its scientific rationalism and finely-tuned capacity for irony. In skillfully composed episodes such as the climactic "Becoming" (2021, 2022), all of these inhibiting influences are taken up into the storyline and powerfully defamiliarized. The enduring fascination of the notion of radical evil is both exhibited and mocked; the proximity of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century knowledge to the most primordial fears of loss of identity and consciousness of self is cleverly exposed; the much-vaunted immunizing powers of irony are celebrated while their limitations are subtly questioned. Above all, the confinement of young people within what Marina Warner has termed the "manichaeian diptych" of angel and devil (Warner 1994) is seriously resisted by the demonstration of an independence of will, action and self-fashioning unwilling merely to discharge a preordained destiny. *Buffy's* gothic revisionism places the series very firmly in a genealogy which, for all its history of paradox and self-contradiction, uses the powers of enchantment to disenchant us of some of our most crippling illusions.

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