

## Warren Mears and the Slaying of Incel Culture

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[1] It was a rare privilege to be a young girl raised by nerd parents, being allowed early access to a culture many women never manage to enter. With a mother who is a self-described “super-nerd,” it was made clear to me that not only was being a nerd possible for a woman, it was fun. As her daughter, it was almost required. Yet this same privilege has made women like me both victims and perpetrators of hegemonic and toxic ideologies within nerdism; I have been the victim of gatekeeping, and yet still find myself trying to do the same to others. Though I work in a game store that sells items for Dungeons & Dragons, Magic: The Gathering, and other tabletop games, and participate in all these things, I am still treated by the store’s customers as if I know nothing about the games we sell. On more than one occasion, I have been asked a question by a customer, answered it, and was simply told that they want to ask my boss, a white man. When my boss gave them the same answer, it was accepted completely and immediately. Similar instances have occurred with my coworkers who present male: my answer is met with skepticism, my male-presenting co-worker delivers the same answer and his word is taken as truth. Despite the frustration I feel in these situations, I am ashamed to admit that I too judge people on whether they are nerdy “enough.” I find myself rolling my eyes when someone confuses Marvel comics with DC comics. Nerd culture has become increasingly competitive, with women often on the losing side.

[2] As a female nerd, it is hard work to integrate yourself into nerd culture. Surrounded by media that portrays only males as true nerds (On *Big Bang Theory*, only the men are “real” nerds: see Pop Culture Detective’s video *The Adorkable Misogyny of The Big Bang Theory*) and male nerds who subscribe to that same idea, I am repeatedly faced with disdain from male nerds when approached in nerdy settings. Though I have read comic books since the dawn of my memory and have seen the *Star Wars* saga more times than most, it is still easy to feel like I do not belong at comic and game stores, whether because I’m stared at by the male customers or talked down to by the staff. Even my knowledge of nerdy lore is continually questioned because of gender. It’s not enough to be a fan, I often have to prove that I know “enough” by answering absurd trivia questions. If I do not jump through these hoops, I must defend myself against accusations of “posing” for wearing nerdy t-shirts. Like so many women, I have been gatekept from my interests by these accusations, reducing female nerds like me to either a lesser echelon of nerd or into a predatory being who uses sexuality to gain the favor of men.

[3] The Trio which is comprised of Warren Mears, Jonathan Levinson, and Andrew Wells in the sixth season of Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides a metaphor for the attitudes of toxic nerd men within the nerdism. Despite their attitude of victimization, they have not been victimized by Buffy, but instead have victimized others. In the season four episode “Superstar” (4.17), Jonathan attempted to control reality through the manipulation of dark magic. Similarly, while not taking place onscreen, Andrew attempted to summon demons to attack a school play. So, while it is accurate to state that the Trio are the Big Bad during *Buffy*’s sixth season, Warren’s lack of respect for human life, willfulness, temper, and insecurity mixed with a desire for power, make him the most dangerous of the three. Warren is the clear leader; he establishes

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

the culture of the group and drives its agenda. It is Warren who first identifies the Slayer as a problem, a classic example of toxic masculinity in which female figures are viewed as a “threatening other” (Salter & Blodgett 26). Through his attitudes and actions, Warren Mears exemplifies toxic nerd masculinity and provides an all-too-realistic view of the misogyny and violence that is pervading the nerd community, leading to such infamous events as the 2014 Isla Vista killings, which occurred near a sorority house at the University of California–Santa Barbara perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, who, because of his video manifesto, has become a posthumous inspiration of the incel movement.

[4] Warren Mears is written as a caricature of nerdism. Despite having gone to school for engineering, he is jobless and still lives in his mother’s basement, which is decorated from floor to ceiling in science fiction paraphernalia. He spends his time debating various nerd scenarios with the other members of the Trio, Jonathan and Andrew, playing video games, and designing sex-bots for himself and others (until that goes horribly wrong). Nerdy, yet entitled characters like Warren have appeared often on other television shows and the audience has been led to believe that this kind of character, while awkward and a bit off-putting, are ultimately harmless. However, the writers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are very clear that Warren is no such thing. His violent temper and sexist views come through with only a few lines of dialogue, such as when he displays an eerily similar attitude that Incels have toward women when he says to Buffy, “You think you can just do that to me? You think I’d let you get away with that? Think again” (“Seeing Red,” 6.19, 00:41:53-42:00). Nerds in the audience should not identify with Warren but fear him and those he represents. Warren is so terrifying because he is an invasion of the real world into the fantasy of the supernatural. His violent acts are not fantasy, but a reality that women must face every day (Pack). Buffy can stop vampires with her eyes closed, but what can she do against a gun? In fact, for much of the season, she cannot stop Warren, and she nearly dies because of his actions. With Warren, the safe barrier between the supernatural and reality is destroyed, for Warren is man, not demon, and therefore, viewers may be more likely to empathize with his plight. But the creators of the Warren Mears character, Joss Whedon and Jane Espenson, were clear that Warren deserves no empathy despite his humanity because he is a type of man all too common in that has the power to do destroy as efficiently as other *Buffy* Big Bads that have claws or fangs. Warren is to be feared because unlike a demon, he could be walking next to us on the street, and he can hurt us so badly.

[5] For example, on May 23, 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger targeted a college sorority in a mass shooting and stabbing spree fueled by outrage over his “involuntary celibacy” (*Elliot Rodger*). Incels, or “involuntary celibates,” are a group of heterosexual men who feel “unfulfilled and dissatisfied with their sex lives,” and handle that dissatisfaction through misogyny, scapegoating, and hatred (Scaptura 2). As a result of this ideology, Rodger killed six people and injured 14 more and killed himself after posting a video and releasing a long autobiographical manifesto, in which he described his actions as necessary revenge because of the sex he had been denied (*Elliot Rodger*). Warren Mears, with haunting similarity, enacts revenge after his Trio’s defeat by Buffy (“Seeing Red,” 6.19, 00:41:53-41:59). Shooting wildly, he kills Tara and nearly kills Buffy. The eeriness lies not in the similarities of the actions themselves, horrible as they are, but in the motives and type of masculinity behind them. Rodgers and Mears both felt “perpetually beleaguered and disenfranchised” by society and women (Salter & Blodgett 123). Both felt denied the respect, sex, and power they felt they deserved, and both responded with

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

extreme violence towards those they hold responsible, resulting in the death of unwitting bystanders.

## “Villains”

[6] Since R. W. Connell introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity in her work *Gender and Power* in 1987, it has become an integral part of gender studies (Connell & Messerschmidt 829). Recently, the concept of toxic masculinity has become a way to describe specifically negative forms of masculinity, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the many masculinities and their positive and negative aspects. The term toxic masculinity has been employed to delineate certain negative masculinities from other, less toxic, masculinities rather than vilify all forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 829). Thus, it is important to understand nerd masculinity and its difference from other types of masculinity. Nerdiness is not inherently toxic, nor is nerd masculinity. As in all types of masculinity and femininity, nerd masculinity has the potential to become toxic through violent and hateful behaviors.

[7] The visibility of the nerd community seems to have expanded exponentially in the last decade, propelled by a greater exposure in popular media and United States culture such as through the popularization of superhero movies along with an increased access to digital comics and table-top games. This increase in popularity has expanded nerdiness beyond the “uncool” and into a culture of its own. This cultural evolution has brought a diverse audience to nerdism, but the culture of insecurity surrounding male nerds, likely a result of their representation as a subculture of men with an inability to perform traditional hegemonic masculinity, has led many male nerds to feel oppressed by the “mainstream” (Salter & Blodgett 5). Therefore, rather than allowing the growth in the diversity of nerds to transform the culture itself, traditional (white, male, middle-class) nerds have lashed out against this increasing diversity, hoping to preserve the appearance of their superiority and power within science fiction and fantasy universes. White male nerds have attempted to maintain their status as the superior (and only) nerds through gatekeeping practices designed to maintain their power over non-traditional nerds that are viewed as an Other. This attitude has already created disturbing situations like Gamergate, a harassment campaign against female and progressive members of the video game industry. Spawned from a controversy around false allegations of sexual relations between a female game designer and the male journalist who reviewed her work, it became a months-long targeted harassment campaign against multiple women in the video game industry. Not only was the original game designer harassed, but the vitriol spread to feminist media critics, other female game designers, and even actresses. Each of these women received threats of assault, sexual and otherwise, and had their personal information stolen and posted publicly for other potential harassers to see.

[8] Hegemonic masculinity has been the subject of much discussion for the last several decades, and it would be superfluous to discuss it further here. It is, however, necessary to discuss hegemonic masculinity in order to differentiate it from toxic masculinity. To participate in hegemony is not inherently the same as participating in toxicity. Hegemonic masculinity only becomes toxic when it is enforced on oneself and others, and further encourages violent and sexist attitudes and/or behaviors. There are plenty of men who engage in hegemonically

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

masculine behaviors, but that does not make them wrong or bad. But when my hegemonically masculine friend tells my subversively masculine friend to “man up,” that is when they become toxic. Warren forces Jonathan and Andrew into further violence as the actions of the Trio continue, as well as encouraging their sexist views towards women as objects to obtain, such as when Andrew instructs Warren to use the cerebral dampener on “Ooo, the one with the bazoombas. Go for the one with the bazoombas. Yeah, the bazoombas. Bazoombas! Bazoombas!” (“Seeing Red,” 6.19, 00:09:22-00:09:29). Toxic masculinity is characterized by an “extreme demand for power, control, and domination” that extends beyond systematic patriarchy and is rather an individual demand for control (Scaptura 12). Warren has been taught his patriarchal notions by society, but his violent expansion of these views was chosen, not taught. Thus, while toxic masculinity is born out of the system of hegemonic masculinity, it is a separate entity. Toxic masculinities are distinct because of their “intense need for control and power” that is not seen in hegemonic masculinity, as well as the harm that is then caused by these intense needs (Scaptura 12). Efforts to achieve the desired power typically involve socially and/or physically destructive actions, as demonstrated time and again by Warren’s actions, such as in his attempt to take over Sunnydale through robbery, murder, and other mayhem (“Flooded,” 6.4, 00:28:17-00:28:33).

[9] Despite the desire of male nerds to have social power, they are portrayed in the media in a way that characterizes them as consummate failures in their performance of the exact thing they are seeking, namely, the power inherent in those able to properly perform hegemonic masculinity. They are unfit, socially awkward, unable to “get the girl,” lacking hand-eye coordination, and interested in subjects like science fiction, table-top games, comic books, and video games. Therefore, because nerds exist in a world where they are unable to successfully meet the norms of traditional hegemonic masculinity, they must create their own version of it. Hegemonic masculinity is shaped by cultural issues, and this is true for nerd culture as well, and in the case of nerdism, nerd culture shapes hegemonic nerd masculinity (Elliot 252). The creation of a hegemonic nerd masculinity allows those like Warren Mears to prove their masculinity; in the case of Warren specifically this means using his technical and scientific skill to gain power in the nerdism through displays of those skills, such as the creation of super-weapons like the Freeze Ray (“Smashed,” 6.9, 00:07:31- 00:08:04). So while he cannot live up to standards of physical strength (as indicated by a lack of physical prowess as compared to Buffy), Warren, and nerds like him, create their own hierarchy in terms of cultural knowledge and who the biggest fan is, like when the Trio fights about which actor played the best “James Bond,” citing specific instances of the Bond movies to prove their superior knowledge (“Life Serial,” 6.5, 00:33:06-19, 00:35:41-36:14, 00:36:36-48).

[10] Nerds are not limited by their lack of physical prowess, however. Through this expansion into the scientific and technical, nerd masculinity breaks out of the margins of society and integrating with traditional hegemonic masculinity as “dominance and technical mastery are increasingly interwoven” (Salter & Blodgett 47). Engineering and computer science skills, much like those possessed by Elon Musk or Bill Gates, respectively, represent a type of power which Warren was honing “at a tech college in Dutton” and are becoming equated with physical strength and monetary power as society becomes more reliant on technology (Salter & Blodgett 47). Nerd hegemony was created so that even those male nerds who are still subordinated by traditional hegemonic masculinity are able to create their own systems of hierarchy in order to

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

subordinate others, in essence, building a reality where white male nerds are superior to any other type of nerd. Like any hegemony, this can become toxic through the enforcement of nerd hegemony on other nerds.

### “Seeing Red”

[11] A core aspect of toxic nerd masculine violence is born out of the actual, perceived, or expected rejection of men by women (Thacker 2). Rejection violence, or the violent reaction of men towards women who reject their advances, is a commonplace aspect of toxic nerd masculinity (Thacker 1). Warren’s toxic nerd masculinity is stoked throughout the sixth season in a variety of ways, from Buffy’s emasculating rejection of his power to Tara and Willow’s rejection of him, vis-à-vis their rejection of a heteronormative lifestyle. Those nerd men who find sexual and romantic success difficult may begin to feel that they are being denied their right to have sex with women, which is a telltale sign of burgeoning toxic nerd masculinity. They respond to this impotency by acting violently against those women whom they feel have wrongly and capriciously denied them.

[12] The episode “Dead Things” (6.13) provides a prime example of Warren Mears performing rejection violence. In this episode, the nerdy villain group the Trio has created a Cerebral Dampener, a mystical mind-controlling tool that makes people susceptible to the demands of the user (“Dead Things,” 6.13, 00:04:10-55). While testing it, Warren runs into his ex-girlfriend Katrina Silber (“Dead Things,” 6.13, 00:09:11). He responds to her rejection of him by using the Cerebral Dampener on her and bringing her back to the Trio’s lair in his mother’s basement (“Dead Things,” 6.13, 00:12:37-45). There, they dress her up, and Warren attempts to use the Cerebral Dampener as a neurocognitive roofie. Before the sexual assault can begin, however, Katrina manages to break free of the spell. She rejects Warren and his attempt at masculinity again, condemning the Trio for attempting to rape her: “You bunch of little boys, playing at being men” (“Dead Things,” 6.13, 00:15:35-51). By calling the Trio “little boys,” Katrina further emasculates them, implying to the audience that there is nothing manly about them and, in essence, shaming them for needing to manipulate or assault her to achieve sexual dominance. This is important for the audience: the writers are openly saying that “real” men ask for consent, a contrast to the toxic masculine viewpoint of “I take what I want.” As Katrina tries to escape, however, Warren smashes her in the head with a glass bottle and breaks her neck (“Dead Things,” 6.13, 00:16:15-17). This attempted rape by the Trio and the final act of violence by Warren encapsulate the rage inherent within the “Incel” movement, and it demonstrates their sense of entitlement towards intercourse and relegation of women to an inferior status.

[13] Given that sexual relationships are a core aspect of the heteronormativity needed for traditional hegemonic masculinity, failure to satisfy those standards is perceived as a threat to one’s dominance and can result in toxic nerd masculinity. In order to restore his control, a toxic male nerd then attempts to regain that dominance through violence (Thacker 7). Warren’s violent acts are examples of the reaction towards rejection that characterizes this toxic version of nerd masculinity. When Katrina rejects Warren for the first time, Warren violently forces control over Katrina through mind-altering means and uses the opportunity to attempt further sexual violence.

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

When she rejects him for the second time, Warren's sense of entitlement to her body drives him to escalate his violent tendencies through a physical assault culminating in Katrina's murder.

[14] The second motive behind toxic male violence is that of domination: preserving male power and continuing female subordination (Thacker 11). Since many male nerds live under the assumption that they are marginalized within society, despite an increasing acceptance of nerdiness into mainstream culture, typically through society's increasing reliance on technology and representation in popular culture, they may feel an even stronger need to defend their social worth than those who feel they are adequately performing masculinity (Thacker 14). This need for dominance is exhibited through implied or actual violence, which is a strategy employed by nerd men to enforce their place in the social hierarchy above "lesser" nerds and women. For example, in "Seeing Red" (6.19), the Trio retrieves a pair of mystical orbs that give the carrier strength and invincibility, and with this newfound power, they plan to commit a robbery. This literal pair of balls grants Warren the physical power to live up to traditional hegemonic masculinity, transcending his physical limitations as a nerd. Warren now feels that he is undefeatable because he has metaphorically "gotten a pair" and can now live as the superior man he believes himself to be. Despite Warren's self-assurance, Buffy defeats him and in the process is able to crush the artifacts, metaphorically castrating him with her bare hands and taking away his access to traditional masculinity. Warren manages to escape, and the next day he bursts onto Buffy's property, brandishing a gun and yelling, "You think you can just do that to me? You think I'd let you get away with that? Think again" ("Seeing Red," 6.19, 00:41:53-59). These angry declarations imply that Buffy had no right to actually defeat Warren, who (in his mind) was entitled to his power and anything he did with it, even criminal activity. Following this tirade, Warren shoots Buffy and sends wild shots over his shoulder as he runs away again, accidentally murdering Tara in the process. This is a prime example of a toxic male feeling emasculated and needing to assert his masculinity through violence in the same way that Incels such as Elliot Rodgers violently asserted their masculinity.

[15] Incels and toxic masculine men feel they are owed a relationship, and, like them, Warren is willing to do horrendous things to have his desire. In "I Was Made to Love You" (5.15), *Buffy* viewers meet April, a robot created by Warren to be the perfect girlfriend because, according to Warren, "I felt like I deserved to have someone" ("I Was Made to Love You," 5.15, 00:29:10-12). Thus, he created April to love him, to care "about what [he] cares about, and... want to be with [him]. She listens to [him] and supports [him]" ("I Was Made to Love You," 5.15, 00:29:32-40). Notably, Warren never mentions or demonstrates making an effort to do the same for April because, in his mind, a woman should serve him, not the other way around. When April's predictability gets to be boring to him, rather than re-program her to be her own person and free her from her love of him, he simply leaves her to die (run out of batteries) and runs off with Katrina, whom he finds more interesting ("I Was Made to Love You," 5.15, 00:29:59). April's desires do not matter to Warren because they are the desires of a woman and so inherently unimportant. Warren's creation of April demonstrates his misogyny in that he literally programmed April to be his interpretation of the perfect woman. In Warren's mind, a perfect woman is an object over which he has total control, so, it stands to reason that in Warren's mind, a perfect girlfriend should think only of him. For example, in April's 60 lines of dialogue, 39 directly reference Warren ("I Was Made to Love You," 5.15). She is single-minded in her desire and need for him. Warren admits to programming a feedback system that causes April pain if she

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

does not respond to his call (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5.15, 00:36:39-50). Viewers later learn that April had been waiting for Warren’s return, as he programmed her to do. April has several other programmed behaviors that show the depth of Warren’s brand of toxic nerd masculinity, as represented by the ways she speaks of him, arguing, for example, that Warren “can’t make mistakes,” “she should do or be whomever Warren wants,” “her job is to serve him,” and “crying is blackmail...good girlfriends don’t cry” (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5.15, 00:36:39-43). In these revelations throughout the episode, viewers get a clear picture of Warren’s misogynistic views of what the perfect girlfriend should be: subservient, helpful, caring, trusting, and, most of all, obedient. The depth of Warren’s toxic nerd masculinity and his lack of appreciation for the value of a woman’s life is evident both in all of April’s pre-programmed behaviors and his ability to leave her like a discarded object.

[16] After creating April, Warren finds himself attracted to Katrina, a real young woman who, unlike April, gave Warren a “hard time,” by challenging him as an individual (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5.15, 00:30:15). Much to Warren’s chagrin, however, Katrina has a mind of her own. Viewers do not get much of a chance to see if Warren is a better boyfriend to Katrina than he was to April, but based on their few lines of dialogue in “I Was Made to Love You” (5.15), it is very unlikely: Warren orders Katrina to the kitchen and tells her to shut up because her concerns are not important to him (00:25:11-23). Even when we see Katrina later in the series, Warren counters her last attempt at agency (going to the police) in the most definitive way: by murdering her. Even though his attempt to hypnotize, kidnap, and rape his ex-girlfriend is criticized by both Katrina and his fellow Trio members, Warren’s misogynistic beliefs led him to refuse to accept responsibility for his actions and instead punish Katrina for not submitting to him like a “good woman.” By this time, Warren has fully developed his toxic masculinity: his need for power and control goes beyond simply fitting into hegemonic society. His hyper-violent, sexist, toxic masculine response is not unlike the actions and doctrines of Elliot Rodger and other Incels who have blamed their heinous acts on the women who have in their minds victimized them through capricious and spiteful rejection.

[17] The same traits that Warren Mears displays on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, such sexism, a penchant for violence, misogyny, and the objectification of women, are pervasive throughout nerd culture. Male nerds may feel that they are overlooked by women who instead choose men perceived to be superior because they can more successfully perform hegemonic masculinity. While the Trio are all undoubtedly nerds, one can argue that Warren, unlike Jonathan and Andrew, is a prime example of Inceldom. He is entirely immersed in popular culture, a sure sign of nerdism, but his goals are also aimed at sexual conquest (Hoffman, 6). The Trio’s whiteboard to-do list includes “girls” listed twice, along with a plethora of other objects they plan to acquire, illustrating the objectification of women present in toxic nerd masculinity (“Flooded,” 6.4, 00:28:41). Like the incel, Warren sees women (specifically, having sex with them) as symbols of status. His actions towards Katrina establish an acceptance of heterosexual sex without intimacy as not only acceptable, but a form of success (Salter & Blodgett 26). Having a woman, which is how he sees having sex with a woman, is a way to prove that he is a real man.

[18] Male nerds often claim that their interests and skills are criticized by a mainstream culture that does not value what they have to offer, similar to the way that toxic male nerds treat those they have othered. Nerd narratives written by men drive the othering of marginalized people

### *Watcher Junior* (12.1)

similar to what is found in traditional hegemonic masculinity because much of nerd media is born out of straight white masculinity and continues to mainly represent that masculinity, while symbolically annihilating anything and anyone seen as other (Salter & Blodgett 5). An example of this rejection of the other can be seen in the way that strict homophobia pervades the Trio, which is interesting considering that despite never being explicitly stated, Andrew's awkwardness around Warren as well as other subtle jokes in the script seem to imply that the Andrew is gay and terrified to tell his fellows. An admission of this type would be problematic because it would certainly be construed as weakness by Warren, for the toxic male culture practiced by the Trio is also toxic to itself. This culture is one that requires constant competition through the performance of risky acts of crime, so as to prove who is the most clever or dangerous or manly (Salter & Blodgett 26). So, while the Trio may call themselves a team, they are instead a hierarchy, with Warren firmly entrenched at the top, and Jonathan and Andrew forced to accept his plans of violence, aggression, and misogyny or face the kind of ostracization that they force onto those they have othered.

### **Out-Groups: The Robot, the Slayer, the Witch, and the “Frigid” Girlfriend**

[19] A vital aspect of Inceldom is the adoption of an ideology that divides the world into binaristic “us vs. them” categories. This ideology creates social groups that they can oppress, which in the case of Incels is typically women. Incels utilize this ideology to separate themselves “from women and sexuality” by making victims of them, thus enhancing their perceived power (Salter & Blodgett 8, 12). This powermongering is often explicitly aimed at those who lack the right amount of “real” nerdiness; those without enough knowledge and/or skill in the right fandoms or games. This subjugation is extended to all those people who do not present themselves like quintessential nerds: white, male, and heterosexual (Salter & Blodgett 68). Those who are outside of this majority must continually prove their validity as nerds by being subjected to questioning and other forms of gatekeeping. Women are especially subject to this kind of prejudice: often being accused of attention-seeking rather than “actually” being a nerd. They are also often looked at with skepticism and distrust until they have finally proved their mettle—not that they can though because every new male nerd they meet will demand further proof of adequate nerdiness. Those few women who are accepted as real nerds are seen as “unicorns”—near-mythical creatures who are the subject of intense desire by male nerds. The reaction to these unicorn women, however, is one of entitlement. Nerd masculinity includes the belief that, unlike a hegemonic “jock,” they are “nice guys” who deserve to have sexual partners (Salter & Blodgett 132). This belief promotes the idea that nerd men should be getting dates, whether out of pity or appreciation, and when they do not, this is “fuel for... incel culture” (Salter & Blodgett 67). It is Warren's complaint that Katrina will not give him a second chance that leads to his attempt at raping her. She, unlike April, is worthy of Warren (in his mind) because of her beauty and sexual attractiveness; therefore, Warren automatically feels entitled to her. Thus, he rejects and ignores April and with the same attitude forces Katrina to submit to him. In Incel culture all women are inherently part of an out-group that can be either shoved aside or claimed at will. This has led to and continues to lead to the harassment of and violence towards women by the Incel movement.



## **Smashed: Ending Toxic Nerd Masculinity**

[20] If Warren Mears is toxic nerd masculinity, then who can defeat it? Buffy, of course. She is both part of nerd culture, being an eponymous character in a piece of media that is a part of that culture, as well as having no interest in gaining the approval of toxic nerd culture. Instead, she fights against it, never succumbing to the misogynistic beliefs espoused by Warren. In our reality, the Slayer cannot only be “one girl in every generation” like Buffy is, but must be the entire community of those affected by toxic nerd masculinity (“Welcome to the Hellmouth,” 1.1, 00:00:00-04). Buffy’s treatment of Warren can be used as a model for all nerds to defeat villains such as these villains, by reassessing the role of diversity in nerd culture, confronting instances of toxic nerd masculinity as a unified front, and promoting healthy masculinity and diversity representation within nerd media. The show and the titular character provide guidelines to combatting violence and hatred in real life.

[21] Buffy exists as a female main character within the science fiction genre and is an example for how to incorporate characters outside of the traditional (white, male, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual) bodies into science fiction, fantasy, and all other aspects of nerd culture. As a strong, well-developed female title character, Buffy represents what much of nerd culture lacks: female characters in positions of heroic authority. The Slayer’s physical power and ability coupled with her inherent “girliness” rethinks gender binaries as well as the gender-based hierarchies that are traditionally “produced, maintained, and rationalized” within nerd media (Salter & Blodgett 61). Rethinking gender hierarchies will not only pave the way for women to be crucial members of nerd culture but will also show male nerds that it is acceptable to behave in ways counter to hegemonic masculinity, creating a sense of masculinities rather than a singular masculinity. When men are relieved of the pressure to behave in ways that encourage toxicity, they will be able to find new, healthy masculinities and positive ways of interacting with minority nerds. Slowly, nerd media can help promote positive change and elimination of gender binaries. Fantasy and science fiction narratives help nerds tell stories about a better world, thereby influencing reality to come closer to that utopia. With the influence of multiple masculinities and femininities in nerd media, these ideas will become more pervasive in nerd audiences.

[22] Just as Buffy is rarely as effective without her Scoobies, feminist nerds cannot act in isolation. Nerd media (and nerds themselves) need heroes who can confront the hierarchies and social challenges that are still fought today. Buffy was able to symbolically fight sexual violence, but there should be a variety of diverse Slayers challenge the variety of issues we still face in society (Pepe 9). Nerd media needs to include heroes outside of the white male norm so that everyone can see women and minorities as heroes and deserving of equal respect. It was not until Buffy and Willow worked together that they were able to effectively confront the Trio, and it is that same “female collaboration and solidarity” that the nerd community needs (Pepe 10). Rather than submitting to practices of gatekeeping, and being skeptical of women claiming to be nerds, female nerds should support each other’s interests. A woman identifying as a nerd should *always* be accepted as such, and other women should help her participate and grow in her interests. In almost every case, no matter what differences they had, Willow and Buffy are loyal friends to each other, and when they allow their differences to come between them, neither Buffy nor Willow are able to accomplish their goals (Pepe 10). It is when they allow themselves to be

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

divided that these women are the most vulnerable. When Buffy tries to stop the Trio on her own, Warren and Andrew are able to escape on jet packs. Similarly, when Willow goes after the Trio alone, she breaks her own code of ethics by killing Warren by gruesomely flaying him alive. It is the same within the geek community. Pepe points out that Warren's "toxicity proved to be catching," in the sense that he attempts to infect Andrew and Jonathan with mixed results and the same goes for all toxic nerd masculinity (20). Willow "caught" Warren's toxicity when she fought Buffy, and female nerds can "catch" toxicity and perpetuate it by criticizing other female nerds for not being nerdy "enough." Women must often prove their nerd worth by answering gate-keeping challenges in ways above and beyond what a white male self-identifying nerd would, as my experiences working at a game shop have demonstrated. Yet the victims of this gatekeeping are not immune to partaking in it themselves; rather they fall into the habits of the culture and enforce expressions of nerdiness just as heavily. Women must find the balance of how much femininity they are allowed to express—too much and they are not considered a "real" nerd, too little and they are considered "posers."

[23] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represents an option: utilizing empowered women "working together, alongside men who escape the trap of toxicity in their inclusion" (Pepe 21), like The Scoobies. When nerds work together to create a safe, healthy environment for all other nerds, it promotes a cultural shift away from policing one specific type of nerd and towards accepting all forms of nerdism. Fortunately, every nerdy woman has the opportunity to be a hero like Buffy, Willow, Anya, Cordelia. Nerds should encourage the patronage of female nerd media creators as well as validate the interests of female nerds and promote the sharing of nerd culture with young women and girls. When I see a woman looking lost and bored in a comic bookstore, I don't roll my eyes at her; instead, I ask her interests and try to find her a series she would enjoy. This acceptance will confront and eventually end toxic nerd masculinity, as a united nerd culture has no room for toxicity.

[24] It is a community responsibility, then, to promote healthy, caring masculinities and diverse representation among nerd media. It is possible; some of the healthiest groups of friends are those who sit down at a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* together. I have seen movies, played card games against, and roleplayed with a diverse friend group. Rather than competing to determine the nerdiest among us, we encourage each other's participation. I have taught and been taught new games, introduced and been introduced to new fandoms. Science fiction and fantasy, unlike many other genres, has the power to create whole cultures and ideas out of nothing. The sheer imaginative power of nerd media has created galaxies, Republics, starships, Cylons, and so much more. It is this power that can "either challenge or reinforce hegemonic masculinity" (Salter & Blodgett 48). So far, hegemonic masculinity has been reinforced over and over with only a few attempts at challenging it. Unchecked, it has become unhealthy and toxic for men and women both as illustrated in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Isla Vista killings. But what if that trend could change? It can, and it is up to nerds to change it. Integration of values like "positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality" in nerd media can act as examples to all of nerdism as to how heroes act (Elliot 252). Including women and other minorities as main characters can be examples of how heroes look. Gender theory relies on the idea that gender performance is socially constructed, but if that is the case, it is possible to introduce "conditions under which masculinities can change" and, indeed, all of nerd culture can evolve (Moller 264). Right now, nerd media often represents heroes as awkward white men who manage to perform hegemonic

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

masculinity well enough to save the day and get the girl. Yet nerd media has the opportunity to represent heroes who eschew hegemonic and toxic masculinity, as men who are emotional, as women who are strong, as all of the kinds of people who exist in our world. When the definition of “hero” is expanded, the definition of “nerd” will expand, too. This is not a didactic command but a statement of truth: nerds have some of the most creative, intensely imaginative hearts and minds of anyone. So why can nerds not imagine a world free of toxic masculinity and full of heroes of all creeds? Buffy once had the opportunity to choose her reality. When poisoned with a hallucinogen in “Normal Again” (6.17), she could have chosen to submit, to resume life as a normal girl with no strength to fight off the forces of evil. Buffy chose to be a hero. Nerds, too, must choose the reality they want.

[25] The Warrens of the world will only gain power if left unchecked. They may not have magical orbs to give them physical strength, but Incels have already demonstrated the power of misogynist internet forums and YouTube manifestos. These men do not need to be flayed alive, but all of nerd culture needs to see that female nerds exist, will be heard, will be seen, will be Slayers. I choose to be a Slayer. In writing this, I have taken a stake to the silence surrounding how female nerds are treated. Those who read this can be Slayers, promoting healthy nerd culture and caring masculinities. Warren Mears may not have been a vampire or demon, but he was something far worse: something that can and does exist in the real world, a world without Buffy to protect it—a toxic nerd man. This world may not have Buffy, but it does have a vast population of diverse voices ready to be called Slayers.

*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

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*Watcher Junior* (12.1)

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