"Are You Ready to be Strong?"
Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive to the Strong Female Character Stereotype

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[1] In the last two decades, the term "strong female character" has circulated popular culture with growing frequency. The phrase and the proliferation of the trope as a *modus oporandus* on screen and in print has become so common that commenters set it under a critical if not strictly academic lens. For example, Bijhan Valibeigi on the website *Black Girl Nerds* and Carina Chocano of *The New York Times* employ this trope and Carly Lane of *The Mary Sue* broaches it, though not explicitly. Each of these critics identifies the "strong female character" as a problem, one for whom a solution has yet to be expressly identified, or at the least a solution that satisfies the modern audience's craving of complexity within storytelling and characters. The idea of the "strong female character" did not originate with Joss Whedon's Buffy Summers, but Buffy makes the best use out of that template, surpassing it completely and developing into her own person over the course of the show's seven-year run. To clump her into the often-used "strong female character" box would do Buffy a disservice, because she is not a "strong female character." Buffy is a person. A woman. And because of this, one can classify her as human, with all the flaws and imperfections that label brings to mind: she is strong, yes, but there is so much more to her than that. This essay asserts that Buffy is a potential solution for the "strong female character" stereotype through an examination of how the "strong female character" operates as a trope and how it is mapped onto specific characters from television and film through action and inaction. This essay also compares Buffy to other female characters both within and outside of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* demonstrating that Buffy herself subverts and actively tries to surpass the label.

[2] Many science fiction shows follow the line that female characters are breaking out of *traditional* roles by being "strong," equating that strength with being "masculine." Daniel Swensen, author of the science-fiction novel *Burn* and a regular blogger, says of writing female characters that the stereotype of being scantily clad and badass seems to "reinforce the idea that 'violence=strength'. Not that I mind ass-kicking characters, but groin-punching is a behavior, not a personality trait" ("On Writing Strong (Female) Characters"). This approach is what so many writers take when they want to write a female character and make her relevant to the story – they take a male character and simply invert the gender. But there is a sinister subtext to such a simple inversion in that the character is still rooted in patriarchy because the man's traits are treated as the norm. Maya J. Goldenberg says that society "[fails] to take seriously women's interests, identities, and issues, as well as failing to recognize women's ways of being, thinking and doing

as being equally valuable as those of men" (141). Such an outline demonstrates how the "strong female character" is created, operating under the veneer of being progressive when in actuality merely presenting male tropes in a female character and being overt and conscious about doing so. A traditional female character on television is without agency, displaying characteristics that are overt in how they treat the patriarchy as the default. She is submissive, passive, graceful, self-critical, and materialistic; she is defined by these qualities, possessing no personhood to speak of, and thus her character comes off as less of a person and more so as a representation of traits and characteristics, becoming a symbol for the weaknesses of women.

[3] To be a "strong female character" in a typical "progressive" show, one need only *not* be a stereotypical woman. Construction of such a character is dependent upon three things: She is physically strong; she is emotionally closed; and she is presented to the audience as traditionally sexy, thus reinforcing patriarchal ideals. Sherrie A. Inness outlines in her introduction to *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* the four core traits of what she calls "Tough Women:" "body, attitude, action, and authority" (24) and her elaborations on each criterion fit into what I have outlined as well: the weapons, body type, and clothing are all geared toward moving away from femininity while keeping and boosting the traits that fit under the male gaze.

[4] The "strong female character" archetype also hinges upon the double standards seen in writing male and female characters. Because women characters are often tokenized (i.e. put into a story because they are female), the bar for writing complex female characters is set much lower than it is for male characters. In a 2013 blog post on *newstatesman.com*, Sophia McDougall examines the word "strong" and how it relates to both male and female characters. One of the many points that she brings up is that complex male characters are never characterized as "strong." "What happens when one tries to fit… iconic male heroes into an imaginary 'Strong Male Character' box?' The ones that fit in most neatly are usually the most *boring*," and most male characters would not be able to fit ("I hate Strong Female Characters"). Batman, Sherlock Holmes, and Iron Man, she argues, would all have a rather tough time trying to fit into the box labeled "strong," because they are so much more than that. Yet look at how the "strong female character" box encompasses the majority of the female characters identified as "strong" ("I hate Strong Female Characters"). With this box, women are treated as a unified whole, stripped of their character complexity or uniqueness. Examples of the "strong female character" model in science fiction range from *The Avengers'* super spy Black Widow, to cyborg no-emotions Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager*. Both of these women are classified as "strong" by the majority of their fans. While they do contain aspects of female empowerment, their characters are nothing more than archetypes – nothing more than "strong." An analysis of both in contrast to *Buffy* demonstrates their limitations as characters.

[5] Many fans have praised Black Widow for being a well-written and engaging character. Yet looking at this character objectively it becomes clear that she uses her sexuality to get the better of her assailants, then uses blunt force to subdue them, all without exhibiting the slightest bit of emotion (*The Avengers*). That is not to suggest one could not read into Widow's character, but taking the film as it stands on its own, viewers are presented with little on which to chew. The scene introducing the character is treated as comedy and rightly so; Widow's antics are over-the-top and come off less as intimidating and more so as catering to our expectations of women not being womanly. Jeffrey Brown, author of *Dangerous Curves*, poses the question "[when] women are portrayed as tough in contemporary film… are they merely further fetishized as dangerous sex objects" (43). I would extend that question and ask, if women are fetishized as "dangerous sex objects," does that not rob them of complexity? Black Widow seems to answer that question with a yes. Throughout the film, Widow is dependent on being able to kick ass and be beautiful. She is without agency, or at least any agency that could be meaningful in creating a female character that is above being "strong." Anytime Widow's emotions are represented in the film or her potential to grow as a character is broached, they are seen as being part of an "act," with her character demonstrating in reality that she has no emotions, because, as Inness points out, "such a display would interfere with her performance" (28).

[6] In contrast, the physical powers that Buffy displays and the actions that she takes based on and around physical prowess are rarely the focus of an episode, and the characters in *Buffy* instead embrace their gender roles in a hyper-conscious way. Lorna Jowett states in her book *Sex and the Slayer* that "Buffy's 'femininity' makes her acceptable on network television and offers a kind of recognition to viewers – she is not 'Buffy the Lesbian Separatist'... she is a 'girlie-girl' because she looks like one, even if her actions are viewed as 'feminist'" (62). Stereotypical women love to shop, are obsessed with hunky boys, and have to look their best all the time. Any one of these stereotypes can be found in Buffy's character, and she is still a fully developed person because she is neither defined by these stereotypes nor by the gender roles that she does or does not exhibit. Further, Jowett understands that "[*Buffy*] attempts to destabilize binaries through ambivalence and ambiguity and through the multiple intersections of the generic hybridity" suggesting that both the show and the character of Buffy embrace their gender's normalities even as they work to undermine them, something the "strong female character" explicitly chooses to eschew (12).

[7] Such a choice makes the "strong female character" weak in terms of depth. In *The Avengers*, Steve Rogers asks Tony Stark (both of whom are used as examples in McDougall's "strong male character" thought experiment from above) that were he to take away his Iron Man armor would there be anything left of Tony. Tony responds that there would still be "a genius, billionaire, playboy, [and a] philanthropist" (*The Avengers*). To quote McDougall, "adding the word 'strong' to that list doesn't seem to me to enhance it much." In comparison to that, look at how little there is to Black Widow. She is a hardened label of physical strength first, and a

character second. In contrast to Widow, Buffy's response to the same question that Steve Rogers asked Tony Stark is simple, yet telling:

> Angelus: "No weapons. No friends. No hope. Take all that away, and what's left?"

> Buffy: "*Me*." ("Becoming, Part 2" B2022)

Whedon established Buffy as a character who is more than her traits; the viewer is treated to multiple examples of Buffy showing her humanity prior to this exchange, and so her answer is simple yet encompassing of her character.

[8] Instead of avoiding woman stereotypes, *Buffy* is acutely aware of how its characters' stereotypical traits are being displayed, and the show is careful to display those traits in context next to the characters' other traits. The writers also make an effort to always place the characters in situations that reflect them as people regardless of whether or not they are being stereotypical. In the words of feminist and historian Frances Early:

> I would like to suggest that the woman warrior theme in *Buffy*—as presented through the mixed genre of fantasy/horror/adventure—represents an attempt to demystify the closed image of the male warrior-hero not merely by parodying through comedic means this powerful stereotype but also by offering a subversive open image of a just warrior. As well, although Buffy is male-identified [that of being the action hero and engaging in male-dominating activities like fighting], she and her friends also partake of traditionally perceived female-gendered ways of thinking and behaving. (18)

This gender complexity is what *Buffy* does so well, and as Early points out, this representation is made possible by presenting Buffy the character as not only a sexy kung-fu fighting blonde, but also as someone who is still a woman with complex emotions. She experiences conflicts within herself about responsibility and adulthood in regards to her sister Dawn ("Tough Love" B5007) and needs to deal with actual economic crises in Season Six ("Flooded" B6004). She grapples with an overall sense that she is more than her composite parts with regards to her constant responses and rebellions against her Slayer nature as discussed below.

[9] While strength is the "strong female character's" primary trait, a more traditional female trait also rears its head here: sexiness – being fetishized under the male gaze. *Star Trek: Voyager*'s Seven of Nine operates alongside Black Widow as a fetishized female character. She is the ideal female in the eyes of young men, having a distinctly "masculine" personality with the body of the ideal patriarchal woman. A human-turned-cyborg at an early age, Seven is liberated from the Borg Collective by the crew of the starship *Voyager* who turn her back into a human

with a few cyborg remains around her eye, neck, and hand as a reminder of her past ("Scorpion" VOY3024-4001; "The Gift" VOY4002). Jeri Ryan even says as much in an interview with Michael Logan: "I knew exactly what I was in for when I had my first costume fitting" ("Super Moms"). One need only look at Seven of Nine's uniform—a form-fitting cat-suit designed explicitly to accentuate her physically feminine aspects—to see that marketers were playing up her sexiness, and while the interview in which this was stated also discusses how Seven is a well-written character, her intended purpose was to conform to the norm of being there to look sexy. Brown observes that Seven's characteristics are "decidedly masculine.… in stark contrast to her cold, business-like manner… Seven's appearance firmly places her within the pantheon of sexy cyborgs and sci-fi babes" (97). He does go on to say that Seven displays more "feminine" qualities of emotion and kind-heartedness (97-98), which is true, but *Voyager* presents Seven's emotions as a novelty, as a means of discovery for her character ("The Raven" VOY4006; "One Small Step" VOY6008; "Human Error" VOY7018). The discovery of emotion as a character journey is indicative of how most shows treat emotional "strong female characters," with the emotional part something that women must somehow "learn" or grow into instead of being written with emotions in mind from the start. Once again, the emotions=weakness argument comes up with Seven's "discovery" of her emotions. Her predicament could be seen as being far worse than just conforming to one role for women, as her intended role as serving the eyes of young men and her "strong female character" conformity means that she is not given freedom from either camp but instead trapped in both.

[10] With *Buffy*, the main character is rarely bereft of emotion, certainly not to such a degree that renders her emotion*less*. In the Season One finale, Buffy is terrified that she will die because of a prophecy involving the Slayer and the rise of a powerful and ancient vampire. Sarah Michelle Gellar plays Buffy's reaction in a real way, at first laughing in disbelief only to turn to anger and then obvious fear, tears filling her eyes. She pleads to Giles in a panic, "I'm sixteen, I don't want to die!" ("Prophesy Girl" B1012) as she looks up at her teacher in despair. Where other shows might develop their protagonists to evolve in such a way where they abandon their humanity (or in Seven's case, discover it through accepting and mastering a physical power), Buffy never loses sight of her humanity.

[11] As demonstrated in the previous examples, most writers tend to bypass the nuances and the difficulties in writing humanized women characters in order to spoon-feed audiences a condensed version of what they as writers wish to convey instead of digging in and exploring their characters fully. To do this is to leave out a crucial aspect of what makes up humanity in its entirety. As McDougall points out: "where the characterization of half the world's population is concerned, writing well is treated as a kind of impressive but unnecessary optional extra…" And when these women characters in the sci-fi/fantasy genre are received well, most of them are written as though they were men, thus rooting female success within a masculine lens, again treating masculinity as the norm against which other traits must be measured.

[12] For the "strong female character" to be effective, she must also somehow already be suited to, well versed in, or otherwise familiar with, the commonly masculine role that she is attempting to fulfill. As a warrior, for example, a common, "routine" scene might have the woman be brash and completely capable on her own next to all of the other hotshot soldier guys around her, often outperforming them and showing them quite blatantly that she is their equal, or more often, their better. This method is both tried and trite and persists today with characters such as *Captain America: The First Avenger*'s Peggy Carter. While she may have evolved and taken a cue from *Buffy* in her own show *Agent Carter*, she was introduced in *Captain America* as a "strong female character." McDougall comments on the ramifications and implications of this portrayal as what audiences are seeing as a representation of "good writing" for female characters, stating: "That a female character is allowed to get away with behavior that, in a male character, would rightly be seen as abusive (or outright murderous)… reveals the underlying deficit of respect the character starts with, which she's then required to overcome by whatever desperate, over-the-top, cartoonish means to hand." Clearly, the "violence=strength" phenomenon is a problem that persists even into the 2010s, and McDougall makes clear the double standard by which women characters are measured. They are capable of over-the-top actions so as to convey to an audience that they should be taken seriously.

[13] By contrast, *Buffy* makes its female characters violent and presents Buffy in particular as being the strongest in the room, but the violence of the characters is almost never able to overshadow their humanity and realism. Thus, this is a case where a "female character is allowed to get away with behavior that, in a male character, would rightly be seen as abusive" because the female characters on *Buffy* are not exclusively "masculine" or "feminine," nor are they just abrasive. Swensen makes his final argument as follows: "A female character can ask her boyfriend to open the pickle jar, or hate taking out the trash, or follow her intuition when her brain is telling her a different story. That does not magically make [her] weak. What makes them weak is defining them only by that sort of thing." Labels deemed progressive do not automatically make the characters that display them in the right. The "strong female character" is something that has obviously been embraced by many as a good thing, but to hold up one-note characters whose mission statement is *to be the woman of the cast* is to sell audiences short; it creates an imbalance both in effort on the part of the writers and in how much audiences must be engaged to accept female characters over male ones.

[14] It could be argued that despite these problems the "strong female character" has made it possible for women to be better represented in fiction and this is absolutely true. But writers should move past this base starting point. McDougall states that she has heard a number of propositions that intend to help the majority of women characters be recognized as more than "strong," stating "What about 'effective female characters', for instance? But it is not enough to redefine the term. It won't do to add maybe a touch more nuance but otherwise carry on more or

less as normal." Goldenberg suggests an actual dualistic approach when looking at gender, pointing out that there is the A (male) category, but that there is also the B category: "we need two subjectives, A and B, instead of only one and its negation, as it is the B category, existing in an A:B gender relationship, that adequately captures the type of category of 'woman' that feminists should be working toward constructing" (146). This solution seems obvious when put in those terms, and it may be true that this is what the "strong female character" was trying to strive for in the beginning. Though it got lost along the path to this goal, the goal itself is a worthy one.

[15] *Buffy* is an example of such a show that reaches the goal of having its characters operate within their own systems without sacrificing the humanity or femininity of its characters. The show develops its characters in such a way to where they are going against the normality of their gender and stereotypes, plus using that motivation of getting away from stereotype as a launching point and not as an end goal, thus turning them into real people. Jowett states that "[*Buffy*] offers postfeminist and postmodern representations of gendered identity in that the identities of its main characters are shifting, in that the ensemble cast offers multiple versions of gender and sexuality" (12). The characters on *Buffy* are human, and so do not resort to this type of pseudo "male" behavior all the time. *Buffy* seeks to utilize the supernatural as a means to demonstrate the natural, that growing up can be a living hell, that you will have to face demons here and there, but in the end, you persist and prevail, because there is so much to live for. As Buffy says to her sister Dawn, "I don't want to protect you from the world. I want to *show* it to you" ("Grave" B6022). This is one of the central themes that drive the show forward, and again illustrates how far the show is from just being about a "strong female character."

[16] If the "strong female character" is created by only being physically strong, being emotionally closed, and being heterosexually appealing, then *Buffy* demonstrates through commentary how to avoid or dial down these stereotypes. In the first episode of the series, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (B1001), Buffy is shown as a normal teenager first with only hints of her Slayer powers sprinkled throughout the first half of the episode. When she does break out and display her Slayer powers, it is a good half way through, and even then it is a mere kick to the back of a supposed enemy before engaging in conversation. Buffy is shown to be witty, abrasive, decisive, commanding, aloof, charismatic, worrying, blunt, sarcastic, frustrated, perky, upbeat… and this is all just in the pilot! Compare this swathe of emotions to the comparatively little *Star Trek Voyager*'s Seven of Nine displays in her introductory episode and subsequent episodes or to the non-existent emotions complimenting Black Widow both in *Iron Man 2* and in *The Avengers*. When the final action sequence happens in "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Buffy is established as a character beforehand instead of relying on action to show how she must be taken seriously. Moreover, the character that is established is not one who abandons womanhood in favor of her Slayer duties, but instead one who embraces femininity and humanity wholeheartedly.

[17] Indeed, the Slayer role with which Buffy is most associated in and of itself could be seen as an example of an aspect of the "strong female character" stereotype, of having no emotion and relying on physical strength. With that in mind, the show offers push-back to the title instead of embracing it, and in so doing, constructs a critique of the trope. Throughout the show's first three seasons, Buffy is constantly shown as wanting to be a normal girl despite her title as Slayer preventing her from being so ("Prophecy Girl"B1012; "Innocence" B2014). Being the Slayer and juggling a normal life (and also remaining inherently feminine in the way she is written) is not easy for Buffy. Giles says to Buffy in "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" (B1005), "When I said you could slay vampires and have a social life, I didn't mean at the same time." Here, as in other scenes throughout the first few seasons, she is told by those older or better trained than her that she is a fighter and must be nothing more in order to fulfill her destiny, and that she must be alone in order to do so.

[18] The mindset that Buffy displays throughout most of Season Two is one of believing that the Slayer role and a personal life cannot be intermixed – her life as a teenage girl is separate from her Slayer duties. In contrast to Season One, Buffy is now more accepting of her duties, but this mindset does not rob her of emotion. When her mom is told that Buffy is the Slayer, Buffy is all too accepting that she can only be the Slayer and nothing more, yet conveys this to her mom in tears of pain and anguish: "It never stops. Do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is? How dangerous? I would *love* to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or, god, even studying! But I have to save the world. Again" ("Becoming, Part 2" B2022). Her emotional pain juxtaposes her identifying with the Slayer role beautifully in this scene, as her priorities are rooted in emotion and human frailty.

[19] Kendra, the second Slayer called when Buffy briefly dies, provides a contrast to Buffy's reliance on emotions as Kendra is the embodiment of the Slayer role and a representation of the "strong female character." Kendra displays the same traits as Black Widow and Seven of Nine. She is physically empowering, attractive, emotionless, and tuned explicitly for battle. Jowett comments that Kendra "[as] the Slayer… functions mainly in the public ('masculine') sphere, and her unfamiliarity with emotions and relationships can be read as an absence of 'natural' female skills" (46). Kendra eschews emotion, and even tells Buffy that "emotions are weakness… You shouldn't entertain them" ("What's My Line Part 2" B2010). However, the show recognizes the flaws in Kendra's character, and thus in the "strong female character" model, and unlike Seven of Nine and Black Widow who had none of their masculine characteristics challenged by other characters, Kendra is called out as a flat character. Buffy says that "...my emotions give me power. They're total assets!" Kendra and the "strong female character" model are both challenged by Buffy when she disputes Kendra's methods and calls out her remoteness as weakness. This strengthens Buffy's character and tells the viewer that the show recognizes the failure of the "strong female character" model and is seeking to challenge it.

[20] If Kendra embraces the Slayer role, Buffy is wary of its effect on her. She understands that being the Slayer, being the "strong female character" is not enough to make up a character's humanity; she still wants to live as normal a life as possible, after all, and while Kendra's solution of shunning emotion may make her the more proficient in battle (Buffy admits in the same episode that Kendra's fighting style is better than hers), Kendra lacks imagination, companionship, even friends. The lack of these things leaves her at a disadvantage, because without them, she has little to fight for. In the Season Five episode "Intervention" (B5018), Buffy become quite frightened about what the Slayer role is doing to her:

> Buffy: "I can beat up the demons until the cows come home, and then I can beat up the cows. But I'm not sure I like what it's doing to me."

> Giles: "But you've mastered so much. Strength and resilience alone-"

> Buffy "Yes. Strength, resilience. Those are all words for hardness. I'm starting to feel like being the Slayer is turning me into stone"

To be the Slayer is to be bereft of emotion, and to show that this is now having a profound effect on Buffy demonstrates that she is not just about the physical power within. She is emotional, and she is in conflict with the Slayer power that seeks to bury that emotion. Buffy continues to express her worry to Giles, noting that "to slay, to kill. It means being hard on the inside. Maybe being the perfect Slayer means being too hard to love at all." But this is part of Buffy's charm and her power. She is not the perfect Slayer. She seeks balance between her emotions and her Slayer duties precisely so that living without emotions does not happen, so that she does not become Kendra, so that she does not become the "strong female character." In this scene with Giles, Buffy displays emotions ranging from humor to guilt to sadness to fear and the subtext to this in relation to the stereotype is based on showing how a female character might not want to be emotionless, that perhaps eschewing femininity is not in her best interest.

[21] If the Slayer represents emotionlessness and physical empowerment for women at the behest of patriarchal rule, Faith Lehane represents the sexual dominance that the patriarchy might find appealing in women and one that the "strong female character" stereotype liberally applies to its women. This portrayal also serves to present Buffy with a darker version of her Slayer self. Jowett writes that Faith arguably "verbalizes the viewer's enjoyment of both sex and violence in the show" (86). She notes that Buffy is a "Good Girl" while Faith is a "Bad Girl." Faith uses her sexuality as a weapon and abuses her physical power for her own personal gain. While Buffy exhibits Faith's sexual desires and participates in using her body as a sexual weapon, the former is exempted from falling into the same "Bad Girl" category as the latter because of the way this abrasive and assaulting behavior is presented to Buffy's character as a

development of an already-established person, rather than as an introductory characteristic as seen with Faith. In "Faith, Hope & Trick" (B3003), the first shot of Faith is her dancing provocatively on the dance floor, indicative of her central traits as a character. In "Who Are You?" (B4016), Faith and Buffy switch bodies leading Faith to run rampant through Buffy's life. Faith's experiences in Buffy's body allow her to see the world in which Buffy lives and also see that Buffy is more than what Faith thinks her to be. Jowett comments that Faith in the end "desperately tries to destroy herself and retain the Buffy-body that represents approval and respect" (85). That Buffy is more than a Slayer is an appeal in and of itself, even to another, less fortunate and more typical Slayer like Faith. Thus, Faith, who has now been established as representing an aspect of the "strong female character," seems to want to escape that box, again illustrating how the show is commenting on the limitations of the trope, though this time showing how Faith deals with this disadvantage, through anger and frustration. Her lack of remorse for killing an innocent in "Bad Girls" (B3014) and continued denial in "Consequences" (B3015) highlight her erraticism and demonstrate purposefully her mockery of "masculine strength," i.e. lack of emotions, violence as progressive, and anger both as reactionary and as motivational.

[22] While Faith displays a masculine understanding of anger, that of anger driving her physically, Buffy channels her anger in different, perhaps more "feminine" ways as it drives her emotionally. According to Helford:

> Many episodes begin with Buffy using humor to mask anger while she displays physical aggression that is rarely portrayed as problematic or out of control. Typical is the teaser… in which Buffy is patrolling in Sunnydale Cemetery and must kill a newly awakened vampire as it emerges from the grave. After a few well-placed kicks, Buffy reaches out to stake the vampire, quipping, "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Buffy and you're… history." Humor lightens the violence of this and many other similar scenes in *Buffy*. (23)

While Buffy fails to recognize that she is in the wrong on occasion (when abusing Spike, for example), once again this is excused by the idea that this is not an inherent part of her character. Buffy is seen as being flawed in other ways besides being physically violent. Jowett comments that "[in] later seasons Buffy still exhibits 'bad' behavior: she uses alcohol irresponsibly, drops out of college, cannot hold down a job, neglects her sister, and has a deadbeat boyfriend…. In narrative terms, Buffy is 'excused' by a series of personal crises (her mother's death and her own death and resurrection)" (61). These excuses are absent for Faith to better represent her as a "bad girl." Faith even mocks Buffy and her role as the Slayer, exaggerating what Buffy might say to the vampires she kills: "You can't do that because it's *wrong*" ("Who Are You?" B4016). This provides both an in-universe and out-of-universe commentary on how problematic (insofar as her

relationship to masculinity is concerned) a character such as Faith is when placed next to a character such as Buffy.

[23] Season Seven brings Buffy the closest to the "strong female character" that she has ever come, making her into a hardened warrior and forcing her into making cold and calculating decisions despite her inclinations to the contrary. Buffy contends with her role as a Slayer as she always has, but this season deals with that arc in a way no other season of the show had done, pursuing the "Slayer" portion of the series' title far more than the "Buffy" portion. Ananya Mukherjea observes in her essay on *Buffy* and animality (what is thought of as distinctly non-human, and not feminine) that "[through] Seasons 7 and (in the comics) 8, [Buffy] increasingly becomes an instrument of 'just war,' a commander more in line with the First Slayer's insistence that her life must be all about the hunt, the pre-civilized drive to survive and kill or be killed but structured through military hierarchy" (67). This often leads to her giving some speeches are out of character, or too obvious in their attempt to make Buffy seem more powerful and commanding. For example, in the speech in "Chosen" (B7022), Buffy literally poses the question to her potentials "are you ready to be strong?" asking blatantly if they want to become the "strong female character," ignoring, it seems, the six years' worth of character growth and work that attempted to distance Buffy from that trope. In this season too, Buffy is cold, she buries her emotions, she closes herself off from people, and she does not deny this either: "You need me to issue orders and be reckless sometimes and not take your feelings into account" ("Empty Places" B7013). Here, as in other scenes throughout the season, she is seen taking on male-associated roles: militarism, commander of an army, and a blocking out of emotion.

[24] One could argue, however, that this plays into her character, that she is so exhausted and emotionally drained by this point in her career after having faced so much, that showing emotion or feeling is too taxing for her considering how the First Evil is attacking Buffy's people on a physical, emotional, and psychological level. Buffy behaving this coldly could be seen as a strength of her character, as by this point, the viewer has been treated to six full years' worth of character development; Buffy can get away with being more action-oriented and emotionally distant now. In his essay "*Buffy* and the Death of Style," Michael Adams comments on the developing darkness of Buffy's character, saying:

> [Though] Buffy comes to crisis in 'Empty Places' (7.19), she is nothing but confident in Season Seven; but the last season isn't notably humorous, and in it, wordplay is also depleted. In other words, the more confident Buffy becomes, the more she fixes herself to a purpose, the more she feels conviction, the less she indulges in the verbal style that has characterized her throughout her teen years. It isn't that the Apocalypse invites seriousness—it hasn't before. The change occurs, not in the circumstances, but in Buffy's response to them (85).

Seen in this way, Season Seven just manages to keep Buffy away from becoming the stereotype; her emotions, though buried, do surface at the right times and give the viewer a great lens into Buffy's brain. Mukherjea notes that "Season Seven is not bereft of style, of course, but the terms of style have changed radically, and the importance of style as an instrument of self-fashioning has diminished as the importance of purpose or mission has increased. Buffy is still clever, if rueful" adding that Buffy's "strength is her capacity to love" (Mukherjea 89), and that love of people in general shows itself in this season as well, now weighing so heavily on Buffy's mind because she is ordering strangers to die for her; she has become a general who must make hard choices, and one can see those choices and their ramifications gnaw at her in a very human way. The show's willingness to show Buffy as an imperfect, even ineffective, leader keeps her just human enough to not become the "strong female character" entirely.

[25] The question posed by Dawn to Buffy at the end of the series, "what are you going to do now?" ("Chosen" B7022) could be seen as a sly question posed to the producers of film and television in general. Now that this progressive, thoughtful, in-depth, character- and thematically-driven show has run its course, what is Hollywood to do with the breaking of its own standards? If the last ten years are any indication, it seems that modern television programming still has a lot to learn from *Buffy*. It cannot be denied that "recently… strong women have returned to television with a vengeance" (Brown 146) with some feeling like imitative *Buffy*-knockoffs and others having a tight and deliberate focus on character and personhood. Shows like *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD*, *Person of Interest*, and *Covert Affairs* provide examples of "strong female character" tropes for their women characters (albeit with more racial representation), relying on action, military-style tight-lipped personalities, and a fetishizing of beauty and physical strength. Film series adapted from young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* series seek to present their female leads as emotionally cold. On the other hand, shows like *Kim Possible*, *Supergirl* (2015),[1] and *Orange is the New Black* are all examples of shows with human, three-dimensional women characters in the lead.

[26] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a testament to the science fiction/fantasy genre that people are willing to watch a show of this caliber and are willing to attempt to glean some meaning from the messages that the show conveys. Messages of women empowerment, the breaking of gender norms, and especially female agency all mesh together throughout the work and the humanizing of the characters makes the show that much more compelling and helps those other elements not feel overt. Taking not only Buffy's physical aspects but also her emotional ones, her strength of character, her wit, her articulation of thought, and recognizing these qualities as a part of who we are as a people, helps make Buffy who she is and in-so-doing

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[1] For an analysis of *Supergirl*'s "Girl Power" and "Girly Power," see Allyson Gronowitz's article on *The Mary Sue*, "CBS's *Supergirl* Celebrates Girl Power and Girly Power" http://www.themarysue.com/cbss-supergirl-and-girly-power/. Both the show itself and this article call to my mind many elements found in *Buffy*.

helps the audience connect with her on a deeper level than they would if she were to fight week after week. Spike's speech in "Touched" (B7020), says it well:

> "When I say I love you, it's not because I want you, or because I can't have you—it has nothing to do with me. I love what you *are*, what you *do*, how you *try*…I've seen your *kindness*, and your *strength*, I've seen the best and the worst of you and I understand with perfect clarity exactly what you are. You're a hell of a woman. You're the one, Buffy" (emphasis added).

[27] The use of the "strong female character" model as a launching pad and not as the final product for *Buffy*'s characters is a boon to the show, and this is what has made *Buffy* the best solution out there thus far in addressing this specific problem. As Mukherjea states, "[demonic] spirits and two deaths aside, Buffy's humanity is proven by her choice to make her own life path, balancing her animal [read: Slayer, 'Strong Female Character'] urges and her social ambitions, integrating her many faces, needs, and talents… to protect humanity" (Mukherjea 68). Whedon takes traditional tropes and turns them on their head, certainly, but then he plays with them, deconstructs them and reassembles them in such a way that makes them his own. *Buffy* is an exercise in great storytelling and masterful character development. The empowerment the show gives to women is not overdramatized or pandering, instead conveyed through characters' emotions and intelligent storytelling; Buffy and her friends are all played with a presence that places their larger-than-life characteristics side by side with their all too human frailties. The direction, score, cinematography, the acting, and above all the writing, helps to make *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* an engaging and thought-provoking adventure throughout its seven-year run, able to keep all of its characters, especially Buffy Summers, human.

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