Slayage: The International Journal of Buffy+ 19.1-2 [53-54] Summer/Fall 2021

Exploring the Whedonverses: The Challenges of Creating a Whedon Survey Course

Jenna Bates

Introduction

"If you could teach anything, what would it be?" Ask a hundred teachers that question, and you'll get a hundred different answers. Many teachers long to create courses around their favorite television shows and directors, knowing their dreams more than likely will come to naught. Like them, I had fantasized for years about teaching an entire course on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), never imagining I would have the chance to do so because too often, popular culture, especially popular television, is viewed as a less-than-academic subject, particularly when it is connected to genres such as horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Administrators, parents, colleagues, and sometimes even students themselves mistake viewing film and television for a low-brow, passive activity that has nothing to teach outside of pop culture. Analyzing visual texts, however, can achieve and even go beyond many of the same objectives we attempt in the study of literature. To that end, I began incorporating video early in my two-decade

Jenna Bates has been teaching high school for the past nineteen years. She holds a master's degree in English literature from The University of Akron and a master of arts in teaching from Kent State University. She has been an adjunct instructor at Kent State University in the Department of English, the School of Media and Journalism, and the Honors College. She teaches English Language Arts at Bio-Med Science Academy, a public, independent, STEM school, where she focuses on authentic subject integration and helping students make meaningful connections between literature and the world beyond academia. She lives in Northeast Ohio with her husband and two cats.

teaching career in both secondary and college classrooms. Using the moving image, especially when teaching classic texts like those by Shakespeare, has generated positive results in terms of teaching analytical skills and eliciting student engagement. It was not until a decade ago, however, that I felt comfortable enough to bring a few of Joss Whedon's visual texts into my classroom. Since then, I have had success in helping students make connections between such texts as *Beowulf* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,[1] particularly in terms of the development of the hero archetype. More recently, I used *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*[2] as a capstone for a unit on heroes in one of my high school English courses, and I continue to investigate ways to engage even the most reluctant learners by pairing classic, printed texts with more recent visual works. I was not focusing exclusively on Whedon in these high school courses, but using even a couple of his texts engaged and challenged students. In 2013, Kent State University's Honors College invited me to create a new course entirely of my choice and design. There it was, my Whedon fantasy staring me in the face. And then it staked me in the heart.

I was practically beside myself with anticipation and excitement at the prospect of creating a survey course of Whedon's work. After my proposal for a course titled *Exploring the Whedonverse* had been approved, however, my enthusiasm quickly waned. What the hell had I just done? Not only was Whedon among some of the most prolific of modern writer/directors at the time, but also criticism both scholarly and journalistic was still being churned out with some frequency. Questions about the structure of the course also gnawed at me, some of which I had never before considered when contemplating a Whedon course in the abstract. These questions focused on the time constraints of the course, student

familiarity with the subject matter, supplemental material, and assessment. One question lead to another until I even questioned exactly what a Whedon work is.

I spent most of an entire year planning *Exploring the Whedonverse*, and at the writing of this essay, I have taught the course twice. During the span of the two years I planned, taught, and revised this course, I eventually answered the questions posed above. This essay, originally written during the summer of 2015, offers some options and inspirations to those instructors who may be considering designing a Whedon survey course specifically, but it may also provide some useful guidance for educators who may attempt the teaching of any screen serial narrative. Here I outline one planning process, offering suggestions concerning the choosing of texts, the possibility of using a theoretical framework as a foundation, the benefits and possible pitfalls of assigned readings, and options for assessing student learning.[3]

It is important to note that additional factors would have to be considered were I to teach this course again. Since teaching the course in 2014 and 2015, accusations of misogyny and racism have been levied against Joss Whedon, a global pandemic rendered the world impotent, and perhaps even more importantly, the plague of systemic racism, white supremacy, and white fragility had a glaring, international spotlight turned on it. Long-standing institutions, as well as the individual organizations within those institutions, were challenged with the truth of their own complicity in such structures.

In revisiting this essay for publication, I have been plagued with the question of its continued relevance. Does the work of Joss Whedon matter anymore? It has been nearly a quarter century since the debut of what many consider to be his

magnum opus, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and much of his work now bears the mark of anachronism. When I think now about how Whedon does or does not deal with race; his weaponization of characters of color; or his particular brand of late-20th century, white feminism, I wonder if Whedon has anything new to teach us or if his work is best observed as one would examine an artifact in a museum: dated, sometimes uncomfortably amusing, often somewhat unsettling? I don't know.

I have revised this essay to reflect some of these concerns; however, not having yet had the opportunity to restructure the course with these particular issues at the forefront, I am leaving the core of the essay intact, for that is where the anecdotal information lies. Many of my conclusions would still apply to the creation of a Whedon survey course or to any course concentrating on serial screen narratives. Tracing as it does a course that was more possible in an earlier context, the essay does remain something of an artifact, and I treat it as such. Accordingly, where appropriate, I have included considerations that now would have to be taken into account in the planning of a course devoted to teaching the Whedonverse, which, I think, might result in a more richly layered seminar.

I do think that Whedon's works may still serve as a foundation to begin meaningful conversations about topics such as racism and misogyny and how those topics were either confronted or ignored in Whedon's work. We must be careful to push beyond fanatical praise of Whedon, the person, to honest criticism of these works within the historical context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. We can still talk about his oeuvre as groundbreaking as long as we factor in its context, and openly discuss its missteps regardless of context. These are important considerations, and they may raise

even more questions. To paraphrase bounty hunter Jubal Early in *Firefly*'s "Objects in Space" (1.14), does this thing still have a purpose or is it up to us to imbue it with meaning? I'm not sure, but it sure strains the mind a bit, don't it? (00:19:16-17).

Becoming the Whedon Course

"Did my pet have a vision?" Spike ("Halloween," *BtVS* 2.6, 00:15:43-44)

When designing a course, beginning at the beginning may seem evident; yet even what the beginning is when planning a survey course devoted to the works of Joss Whedon is difficult to identify. Choosing texts or devouring related academic scholarship may seem some obvious choices, but the starting point may actually lie with the students' prior knowledge of the moving image. Instructors should not assume that because students spend a good deal of time watching the moving image via streaming services, in movie theaters, or on cable television that they have a real understanding of it or how the many elements work together to construct meaning. It may therefore be beneficial for the syllabus to reflect time devoted to the basics of film composition. This activity can be scheduled into the syllabus as an introductory lesson, or it could be included in bits throughout the seminar. Students may require a working knowledge of the basics of camera movement, mise-en-scène, shot angles, camera distance, and editing what Steven Goodman calls media or film "grammar" (5). Not only does such an education provide students with a common vocabulary when critiquing moving images, it also reminds them that they should not become apathetic to these crucial

elements simply because the moving image is a part of their everyday lives:

> Even though [these images] may appear to the viewer as natural or unintended, these elements are the result of conscious choices (artistic, financial, or logistical) on the part of the media makers, such as whether to shoot in film or video, black and white or color, in close-up or wide angle, from street level or a helicopter's perspective, handheld or on a tripod, in a studio or on location, with music and sound effects added or without, lit with bright color or in shadow. (Goodman 5)

Through their formal education, students generally possess fairly extensive training in finding meaning in printed texts through syntax, diction, and various literary devices, but when dealing with the moving image, they are confronted with more than words. Meaning can also be found in costuming,[4] lighting, set design, as well as in the acting itself, and students may need to be encouraged as mine needed to be to seek meaning in these visual elements.[5]

Representing the Whedonverses: Using Key Themes to Guide Course Content

"We're talking violence, strong language, adult content …" Buffy
("Welcome to the Hellmouth," *BtVS* 1.1, 00:39:19-22)

Deciding exactly what content to address is also easier said than done. The works of Joss Whedon include more than two hundred hours of footage, and choosing what to include and what to omit can be challenging, particularly because even

identifying what a Whedon text is can be hard to pin down as he has functioned as creator, writer, director, producer, as well as composer of various works. In addition, he has collaborated with numerous writers and producers who had major creative influence on "his" work, including David Greenwalt, Jane Espenson, Tim Minear, and Marti Noxon. Whedon is the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but is an episode of that series written and directed by someone else still considered to be "his" work? On the other hand, he did not create the original Avengers concept or characters; however, he did lay the groundwork for the series' cinematic incarnation by writing and directing the 2012 and 2015 films. Are *those* Whedon texts? Whether an instructor subscribes to the specifics of auteur theory, these are the questions that must be asked and choices that must be made in a course that is built around a single "visionary."

In addition to these somewhat abstract intricacies, there are also several approaches to contemplate when choosing texts for the course. Time, of course, is always a primary factor when determining what can and will be viewed in class. (The benefits of in-class viewing are described later in this essay.) The first time I taught the course, it met twice a week for about fifty minutes each class. With most television episodes coming in at around forty-three minutes, that left precious little time for class discussion, and it immediately ruled out the in-class viewing of longer works like *Serenity* (2005), *The Avengers* (2012), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), and Whedon's version of *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012). It also meant that we could view only one episode of any given show per week, limiting my choices to a total of fourteen viewings, dedicating the first week to introductory material. The structure I had in mind was to view an episode during the first of two weekly class meetings and

then discuss it and any supplemental readings during the following class.

I decided that I would concentrate only on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly* (2002), and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008) in this first rendition of the course, since *Angel* (1999-2004) was a spinoff, and some of the same characters and ideas found in *Buffy* repeat themselves in that show. I did not feel that I could do justice to the complicated narrative structure of *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) in the time allotted, so I omitted it as well but encouraged students to watch it on their own. I chose to include ten *Buffy* episodes since that show is representative of the bulk of Whedon's work, along with three *Firefly* episodes and *Dr. Horrible*. On the end-of-course evaluations, however, the only (but consistent) criticism was that the course had concentrated too heavily on *Buffy*. With that in mind, I revamped the course for the following spring, this time as a three-credit hour seminar that met for seventy-five minutes twice a week. The extra time allowed me occasionally to show two episodes in back-to-back class periods since we still would have half an hour in each period at the end of the screenings to discuss the episode. I ended up cutting a couple of episodes of *Buffy* so that this time I could include *Angel* and *Dollhouse*, making the course a more comprehensive survey of Whedon's work.

After deciding *how many* episodes of each I could reasonably include in a semester this time eight episodes of *Buffy*, two of *Angel*, three of *Firefly*, *Dr. Horrible*, and two of *Dollhouse* I had to decide *which ones* would make the cut. The three most critically acclaimed and beloved episodes of *Buffy*, "Hush" (4.10), "The Body" (5.16), and "Once More with Feeling" (6.7), were obvious choices. The others were far more difficult to choose because not only are they numerous but also cover a

wide range of topics. There is certainly legitimacy to instructors choosing their own favorite episodes; chances are the episodes are favorites for a critically sound reason. Teachers may choose episodes that only Whedon wrote and directed if practicing auteur theory, as the title of the course suggests. It also might be of academic value to compare and contrast episodes written and directed by Whedon to those of his collaborators. In fact, were I to teach the course again, I would now consider comparing episodes written by Whedon to those of his collaborators. For instance, I might now show students the group of *Buffy* episodes featuring identity erasure/metamorphosis/fragmentation and compare if and/or how this motif is handled differently depending on the writer. Possibilities would include: "Something Blue" (4.9) written by Tracey Forbes; "Superstar" (4.17) and "The Replacement" (5.3) written by Jane Espenson; "Tabula Rasa" (6.8) written by Rebecca Rand Kirshner; "Halloween" (2.6) written by Carl Ellsworth; and "Who Are You?" (4.16) written by Joss Whedon. The manner in which the writers tackle the topic of identity in these episodes perhaps particularly in terms of gender identity could yield some interesting scholarship and enhance students' skills of intertextual and intratextual analysis.

The approach I ultimately chose was two-pronged; first, I decided to anchor the course by introducing Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth.[6] Even students who are not previously familiar with the more salient components of the hero's journey as explained by Campbell can recognize certain plot archetypes that are endemic to Campbell's work. Building on that foundation, I then narrowed the focus to motifs of feminism, sex and power, family, and communication, although there are undoubtedly others that could be included. In an updated version of the course, I would certainly include the subtopic of

race, addressing the pervasive whiteness (and white supremacy) in Whedon's works as well as the weaponization of people of color in his projects.[7] When I first taught the course, the excellent collection of essays titled *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, was not yet published, and I now would be compelled to include several of its essays as supplemental readings, particularly "'The black chick always gets it first': Black Slayers in Sunnydale" by Lynne Edwards; "'I have no speech, no name': The Denial of Female Agency Through Speech in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" by Rachel McMurray; Nelly Strehlau's "She's White and They are History: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Racialization of the Past and Present"; and "Zoe Washburne: Navigating the 'Verse as a Military Woman of Color" by Mayan Jarnagin..

Whatever approach instructors use, they may find as I did that these underpinnings provide a valuable framework for students and allow for deeper analysis because of the connectivity among the works. I should also note that the particular structure I outline and found successful is in keeping with my personal experience as an educator in North America and recognize that other instructors may choose to alter their curriculum in accordance with the demands and traditions of their own institutions.

The Monomyth as Foundation

"In every generation, there is a chosen one ..."
("Welcome to the Hellmouth," *BtVS* 1.1, 00:00:01-04)

Through his lifetime study of world mythology, Joseph Campbell argued that "mythology everywhere [is] the same, beneath its varieties of costume" (2). Whedon has contributed prolifically not only to vampire lore but also to the development

of many a hero who crosses "those difficult thresholds of transformation" and who continues to navigate those ancient "rites of passage" (Campbell 6). Whedon creates again and again "the redeeming hero, the carrier of the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence will liberate the land" (Campbell 11). Although Campbell's works can be problematic, especially when applied to female heroes[8] and blanket cultural assumptions, Whedon's texts still may be discussed in the context of Campbell's framework, the way Whedon both attempts to shoehorn his heroes (especially the female ones) into the monomyth, and the way he sometimes subverts it, as with *Dr. Horrible*. Buffy, Angel, Malcolm Reynolds, and Echo fall into the traditional roles espoused by the monomyth. That is, until they resist them. Although all of these heroes follow the many steps in the hero's journey,[9] Whedon constantly subverts the viewer's expectations of these protagonists. This foundational investigation worked well by providing students with a particular and efficient vocabulary through which they could discuss the works and focus their analysis. Approaching the class from within this framework allowed students to return to the familiar and the traditional, to think about how Whedon's characters do or do not comply, and what this suggests about the ideologies behind these texts. In other words, it forces them to ask questions about Whedon's motives and what he and his collaborators are possibly trying to teach us through these stories that evoke both the ancient and the modern simultaneously. As the class continued and students grew more comfortable with the narratives, it became less necessary to refer back to this foundation explicitly. Instead, as we moved beyond our viewing of *Buffy* in particular, where the monomyth is perhaps most relevant, students could begin to hone in on the thematic aspect of the class and analyze

what Whedon suggests about these motifs through his handling of them in various settings.

The Female Hero and Whedon's Feminism

"Have you ever been with a warrior woman?" Wash ("Bushwhacked," *Firefly* 1.3, 00:32:43-45)

The most obvious way that some of Whedon's characters do not comply with the traditional journey of the hero is that many of them are women. There are, of course, many myths and legends that revolve around women, but by and large the "journeyers fit the violent-loner-male profile" (Cochran 42). These characters Buffy, Willow, Faith, Echo, and others both embrace and defy the traditional heroic traits as outlined by Campbell. Buffy, Willow, and Faith (and perhaps *Dollhouse*'s Echo and *Firefly*'s River) are, in effect, chosen at birth to be exceptional in some way. Buffy is the Slayer, "the one girl in all the world, a chosen one, one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampire" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1.1, 00:17:40-48). Except she's *not* the only one. There are two Slayers throughout most of the series, and by the end of the series, there are hundreds. This event demonstrates Whedon's interest not only in subverting *our* expectations of what a hero can be but also subverting the expectations he *himself* created. Willow and Echo do not exactly have supernatural births as far as we know, yet both eventually demonstrate that they are exceptional Willow through her powerful magic and Echo in her ability to resist and eventually assimilate the imprinting of other personalities onto her own. All of these women are essential to saving the world. They are called to adventure like their male counterparts, and all respond whether willingly or reluctantly. Though the world of *Firefly* does not necessarily

allow for extraordinary circumstances surrounding the births of Zoe, Kaylee, Inara, or even the exceptional River, they are called to action and respond with heroic courage, determination, and skill, contributing to saving the universe from the unfeeling, maniacal, and ironically-named Alliance.[10]

These varied constructions concerning women of power are where an organic discussion of Whedon's feminism[11] arises, and that is one of the primary motifs we study in class. Indeed, Meghan Winchell concludes that *Buffy* is "the ideal text to introduce young skeptics to feminism" (73). But Whedon certainly doesn't stop with *Buffy*. The scholarship on this aspect of Whedon's works is plentiful, and I assign many articles that offer analysis of Whedon's particular "warrior woman" brand of feminism. Teachers certainly could center the entire course on feminism, particularly since Whedon specifically "asserted Buffy's feminist nature and mission" (Winchell 78), a mission that extends to many of his other works. Of particular interest may be the depiction of third wave feminism, girlie-culture feminism, or "postfeminism" that is inherent to *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and *Dollhouse* (Brace). Numerous scholarly articles deconstruct Whedon's feminism in a variety of ways. For instance, one article I assign deals specifically with how Buffy's brand of feminism includes violence (Marinucci). Another argues that Buffy emasculates the male characters in the show, draining them of their power in a "gonad-feeding frenzy" (Kenyon 26).[12] Others investigate how feminism evolves (or in the case of one article *de*volves) in *Firefly*. There are also those that deconstruct the complicated portrayal of women in *Dollhouse*.[13] Students never failed to note how women were portrayed in each series and each episode, and their initial observations of these portrayals needed little instructor guidance. Students were usually adept at noting Whedon's creation of physically and

emotionally strong female characters and could easily define how this strength was depicted within the larger story arcs. However, they sometimes required more prompting when investigating more subtle facets of these warrior women, and they benefited from being asked about costuming, dialogue among the female characters,[14] and, of course, their various interactions with male characters. In a revision of the course, this discussion would need to include Whedon's troubling focus on white-centered feminism and his representation of women of color. As Lynne Edwards notes, Buffy is "white, middle-class, very attractive, heterosexual, and very feminine" and also "has no friends of color, nor are there major recurring characters of color, aside from occasional minor players" in the first six seasons, effectively erasing "race in this feminist text" (39-40). McMurray further asserts that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* "ultimately fails as a third-wave feminist text [...] because the series finale still privileges the white, American, middle-class experience over all others" (52). A new course would not be complete without including criticism of Whedon's lack of intersectional feminism, his centering of the white, middle-class, American experience while simultaneously devaluing other cultures by categorizing them as associated with the oppressive past (Strehlau 97).

Women and Sex

"They also made me aggressively sexual, and phenomenally creative in bed." Echo
("Meet Jane Doe," *Dollhouse* 2.7, 00:17:29-35)

Inevitably, conversation about feminism turns to discussion of Whedon's portrayal of sex and power. Although Whedon has famously said that he did not wish to punish his

heroine for having sex the way so many horror films had done in the past, he admittedly failed miserably on that account in *Buffy*. The protagonist is, of course, punished when she has sex for the first time with the vampire Angel. Because the gypsy curse that enables him to keep his soul is essentially broken by Angel's moment of true happiness,[15] Angel becomes Angelus and proceeds to torment Buffy until she is finally forced to kill him, sending her one true love to a Hell dimension. So much for the lack of punishment.

She is again punished when she sleeps with college student Parker, who rejects her in an albeit less dramatic way than Angelus, but in one that seriously damages Buffy's self esteem. Buffy does not fair all that better with Riley; their sex life is fraught with unpleasant complications, including becoming inhabited by spirits at a house party, Riley's inadvertently cheating on Buffy with Faith, and then with Riley's very consciously frequenting what is, essentially, a vampire drug den. When Buffy and Spike begin a sexual relationship, things go from bad to worse. Buffy is repulsed by her own desires, Spike attempts to rape her, and the world almost ends. As Carla Montgomery succinctly notes, "In Sunnydale, there is no such thing as safe sex" (154). Although I did not show most of these specific episodes in class (the exceptions being "Innocence" [2.14] and "Becoming, Part 2" [2.22]), I would consider doing so now, especially since the advent of the #MeToo movement and #TimesUp. Spike's attempted rape of Buffy would seem to be of particular relevance within the context of these movements, though I might hesitate to show that particular episode ("Seeing Red" [6.19]) in class given the subject matter.

In *Angel*, Cordelia experiences similar punishment for her sexuality. A night of passion ends with an unwanted pregnancy

that could end up killing her. When she sleeps with Angel's son Connor, she again becomes pregnant, this time with Jasmine, a maggot-faced god who intends to take over the world. Jasmine's birth leads first to a comatose state and then eventual death for Cordelia.[16]

The *Buffy* and *Angel* 'verses aren't the only place this punishment for women having sex appears. Penny in *Dr. Horrible* is publicly humiliated and killed after Captain Hammer, corporate tool, seduces Penny into "givin' it up hard" (00:24:45). Arguably, many of the women in *Dollhouse* are also punished for their sexual roles even though some of them are forced into these roles. Echo's "engagements" frequently end in dire circumstances as with "The Target" (1.2), which opens with her in bed with a client whom, we are told, she only recently met. Not long after, she is literally hunted by this man. Although Priya doesn't voluntarily give herself over to the Dollhouse, she is punished nonetheless by being raped multiple times by her handler as well as by the wealthy man she rejected. Contemporary discussions of these episodes and the issues they raise would have to take place within the context of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, which could yield results more critical of Whedon's portrayal of the circumstances in which these characters find themselves.

Although Whedon certainly portrays healthy sexual relationships for many of his characters, these are almost always long-term, monogamous relationships like those of Willow and Tara, Wesley and Fred, and Zoe and Wash (though all still end in tragedy). Never do we see a brief sexual encounter between two consenting adults result in anything but heartache, until *Firefly*.

In *Firefly*'s universe, "women are [...] free to revel in their own sexuality" (Taylor 132), and Companions, akin to the Italian

courtesans of the Renaissance, are held in the highest esteem, even though their trade is sex.[17] Companions like Inara are very much in control of who patronizes their business. They have agency in every aspect of their lives, and Inara has particular agency when she decides to head out into the universe aboard *Serenity*. Her character is still problematic, however, in that Mal insists on calling her a "whore" and demeans her choice of career. Joy Davidson defends Mal, explaining that he honors "women as warriors and comrades. But [Inara's] capitulation to the caprices of men especially men of a certain class provoked a congested fury in Mal. Companion or whore, ruby or glass, it was the same to him if she allowed herself to be reduced to a shiny bauble, crafted for display and contracted to sparkle, when he knew her to be so much more" (123).

The character of Inara generated quite a bit of class discussion, with about half of the class chastising both Mal and Whedon for their treatment of her character. The other half defended Mal's actions, claiming they come from his repressed feelings of jealousy. They also tended to cite Mal's utmost respect for Zoe as his second as proof that Mal does not live in the dark ages of misogyny. This group also praised Whedon for realistic character development, saying that Mal did not grow up in the arguably more progressive central planets and therefore would have less evolved opinions about Companions.

Despite these debatable problems with Inara's character, Kaylee demonstrates Whedon's evolution (through the writing of Tim Minear) when it comes to women and sex. When Kaylee first meets Mal in "Out of Gas" (1.8), she is having sex with the then-ship's-mechanic, Bester. We assume that this is not a long-term relationship; in fact, we can easily assume that the two just met. Unlike Whedon's other female characters in similar sexual situations, Kaylee is far from punished for the act.

Instead, she walks away with a new job and an opportunity to see the universe. She acquires a new family whom she loves and who love her dearly in return. In this way, Kaylee serves as a productive counterpoint for students wishing to consider the ideological framings of sex and gender roles in *Firefly* and in the Whedonverses in general.[18]

Instructors could certainly create an entire course following Whedon's treatment of women and sex, particularly in light of recent allegations regarding his misogyny; there is plenty of material there. However, instructors should realize that structuring a course by narrowing the focus this much would have the drawback of omitting some powerful pieces that present other themes integral to Whedon's work, such as the varied way Whedon's texts represent family and community.

Found Family

"I was just afraid if you saw the kind of people I came from, you wouldn't want to be anywhere near me." Tara
("Family," *BtVS* 5.6, 00:41:44-50)

In the course of the hero's journey, the hero receives supernatural aid in the form of a "protective figure […] who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 57). Applied to Whedon's works, these protective figures come in the form of a self-made family, which was another one of Whedon's mission statements when he created *Buffy* (Whedon). In traditional stories, the protective figure is often male, typically the wise man who plays "the role […] of the guide, the teacher, the ferryman" (Campbell 60). In *Buffy*, we are presented with Giles, the knowing teacher-librarian who guides Buffy on her journey to fulfilling her destiny as Slayer. Giles performs his traditional role as guide

and teacher to the letter. As the series continues, however, he becomes more than that; he becomes Buffy's father figure, loving, nurturing, and protecting her in ways far beyond those of which her own father, Hank, is capable. In addition, Buffy acquires an entire alternative family who supports her emotionally and physically, aiding her in fighting off evil but also sharing movie nights, holiday meals, and other typical family activities. One could easily argue, in fact, that Buffy has a far more intimate relationship with Xander, Willow, Giles, and even Tara than she does with her own mother, Joyce.

The motif repeats itself in *Angel*. Although Angel leaves Sunnydale essentially to live a lonely life seeking redemption, he acquires a close family unit in the form of Cordelia, Wesley, Gunn,[19] and Fred. (A potential revision to the course would include an analysis of Gunn as weapon as well as his marginalization in the Angel family, whether by his own interiorized sense of inferiority, or by the way others read his position.) Although Angel's newfound family has its challenges and temporary estrangements, Angel's "blood" family, namely Darla and Drusilla (and, to a certain extent, Spike), prove to be far more dysfunctional, revealing "a bond of self-interest, competition, and patriarchal control," and so Angel rejects them time and time again (Locklin par. 6). Even when Angel fathers a son, that relationship, too, is continually fraught and bears little resemblance to the connections he has made with his chosen circle.[20]

In *Dollhouse*, Echo, Victor, and Sierra forge a familial bond even in their Doll states. They enjoy each other's company, take meals together, and confide in one another. Eventually, Topher and Adelle join this family unit, as well, supporting and fighting alongside one another. Arguably, *The Avengers* represent the most dysfunctional yet incredible family

unit of them all. Once again, we see that blood family (or those who are perceived as blood family) does not necessarily provide the strongest support, as in the case of Thor, his father Odin, and his treacherous adopted brother Loki. It is only when Thor teams up with the other Avengers that he becomes whole in many ways. Many of the superheroes are reluctant to work together, yet once they do, they are virtually unstoppable. Amidst all the mayhem, there are the kinds of jibes that siblings exchange, good-natured rivalries that are typical among family, and even family meals of shawarma. Again and again, Joss Whedon tells us that true family has very little to do with blood ties; it is about connection, respect, and support. The family we choose is the family we can trust.

Communication

"Talk. All talk. 'Blah, blah, Gaia. Blah, blah, moon." Willow ("Hush," *BtVS* 4.10, 00:10:10-15)

The final motif we explored in some detail is communication, an extension of the Whedonverse's focus on many of the other themes. Multiple times throughout his works, Whedon investigates the importance and limitations of communication. Most notably, in *Buffy*'s "Hush" (4.10),[21] we find that lack of communication quite literally leads to death, and "despite the fact that characters were talking constantly, arguing, debating and even shouting at each other, no one seemed to really 'get' what the other person was saying" (Cogan 117). Real communication happens when we stop talking. In "The Body,"[22] we find that many of Buffy's chosen family fail her because not only can they not communicate adequately with her during her mourning, but also they cannot communicate with one another. Buffy imagines twice during

the episode that medical professionals are lying to her; she doesn't trust the words they are using. And in one of the series' most heart-wrenching moments, Anya, who grapples with the kinds of complicated emotions the episode handles, says, "No one will explain to me why," as if anyone is truly capable of communicating the notions of life and death ("The Body," 5.16, 00:27:23-25). Yet it is only Anya who is able quite ironically, considering her typical lack of tact to verbally express the confusion that all the characters experience.

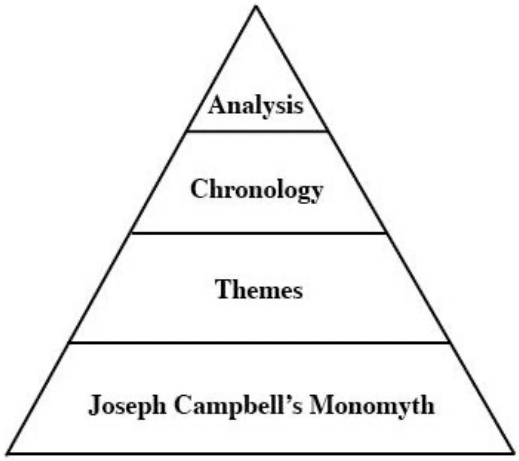
In *Angel*, lack of communication between Wesley and Angel ends in devastation with Angel losing his son and Wesley on the brink of death. For several seasons, Angel and Cordelia are unable to communicate their feelings to one another, and when they finally decide they will, they discover it is too late. Angel ends up trapped in a welded box under the ocean, and Cordelia finds herself ascending to become a higher being . . . sort of. Similarly, Mal and Inara are never able to declare their love for one another though it seems pretty clear to everyone else, and the short-lived series ends with Inara intending to leave Mal and the ship. Even in *Dr. Horrible*, Billy's inability to express his feelings for Penny ultimately leads to her demise and his symbolic death and resurrection as Dr. Horrible.

Communication, Whedon seems to tell us, is not only complicated, but also necessary for fulfillment and success. He also suggests perhaps ironically that words are not always the best form of discourse because they can get in the way of what is real, an important point for young adults who may understand better than most that "non-verbal communication is often more easily understandable than verbal communication" (Cogan 115). Using the motif of communication in nearly all of his works, Whedon suggests that effective

dialogue, though often difficult because it leaves us vulnerable, is worth the effort because it can save us.

Final Course Structure

"I like pancakes 'cause they're stackable." Buffy ("A New Man," *BtVS* 4.12, 00:22:36-38)



In the end, my course structure resembles a pyramid with the monomyth serving as the foundation for the course, particularly for the study of *Buffy*. Even though not every assigned episode corresponded exactly with a step in the hero's journey and there were times when serendipitous discourse led us away from discussing it at all it served as an effective initiation. In the beginning of the course, this framework provided students with a foothold when attempting analysis, especially for those previously unfamiliar with Whedon. This or similar scaffolding can be applicable to the creation of any serial screen narrative or traditional literature course as it provides a starting point for reluctant and/or timid students new to textual analysis. As the course extended into the semester, students needed to return to this framework less often as they became more comfortable with Whedon's style, characters, and tropes. Adding to that foundation were motifs that are frequently repeated throughout Whedon's works. This is not to suggest that the motifs I discuss in this essay are the most important or that any course not addressing one or more or all of them cannot be successful. They are merely the topics on which I chose to focus at the time and ones that seemed to best serve my original objectives. In

addition to these core structures, the course moved chronologically through Whedon's works, beginning with *Buffy*, moving on to *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Dr. Horrible*, and ending with *Dollhouse*. Within each series, the episodes were also screened in chronological order so that students could better follow the plot but also track character and theme development. Students finally were able to use these foundations to establish individual conclusions concerning the development and evolution of individual characters and various series.

Supplementing the Text and Spoiling the Story

"It may be that you can wrest some information from that dread machine." Giles
("The Harvest," *BtVS* 1.2, 00:09:34-37)

Classes exploring the Whedonverse especially college classes will more than likely supplement the many episode viewings with reading assignments that emphasize critical analysis. Although it may seem obvious to assign such readings, instructors need to consider the unintended consequences of doing so. As David Kociemba explains in his essay "To Spoil or Not to Spoil: Teaching Television's Narrative Complexity," these articles will inevitably spoil particular plot points, which, in turn, may influence and change how students view certain characters and events. This difference of reception could cause students to have unexpected responses to the texts that might prove challenging, though beneficial, to the design and execution of the course. Kociemba attempted an entirely spoiler-free class in his *Buffy* seminar and found that although this approach presented "a rhetorical challenge," the results were ultimately positive (9-10). Four years later, he ran an "all-spoiler course," and found that the results were just as positive,

leading him to believe "there may be no one best approach" (10). However, when constructing my own course, I found that if an instructor is to assign any academic scholarship in the class, it is nearly impossible to run a spoiler-free class. In nearly every article or chapter[23] even if it concentrates on one or two specific episodes other plot points, other episodes, and key character developments are revealed. For instance, even though Jennifer Crusie's article "Dating Death" makes sense to assign in conjunction with "Innocence" (2.14) and both parts of "Becoming" (2.21 and 2.22), it also mentions plot points in "Hush" (4.10), "The Body" (5.16), and more than a dozen other episodes. Students may not always understand these references, sometimes adding to their confusion rather than alleviating it.

In addition to the potentially confusing allusions in scholarship to parts of a series not considered in the course content, instructors need to contemplate what incoming students already know about the Whedonverse. After all, spoilers in scholarship are only spoilers if students are unaware of what happens later in a series. When I first taught *Exploring the Whedonverse* in 2014, all but two of my twenty students were already Whedon fans.[24] The majority of students had already seen most, if not all seasons of *Buffy* and *Firefly*. Many of them had seen at least some of *Angel* and *Dollhouse*. A few were keeping up with the comics, and a small percentage had already done initial research on their own, listening to DVD commentary, reading articles, and watching interviews. With that class, running a spoiler-free course was not an issue, and it made for lively and sophisticated discussions that centered not only on plot but also on issues of long-term character development, narrative structure, production aesthetics, and, of course, overarching themes that spanned several seasons. Not

that a class cannot discuss such elements during a spoiler-free class, but students who are completely unfamiliar with Whedon's work tend to concentrate almost wholly on plot, trying to predict outcomes and simply keeping track of what is happening within the larger story arc, especially when in-class viewings may skip several episodes or perhaps even most of a season. Inexperienced students may spend so much of the screening trying to place the characters and the story line within the larger narrative that they miss the more salient details.

One way to solve this issue is to assign viewing outside of class. With various subscription services available, instructors should not hesitate to do so. However, even if students could commit to watching four hours of footage a day, it would still take fifty days to watch Whedon's main television works (excluding endeavors like *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* [2013-2020]). Since my class had been scheduled during spring semester each time, I found it helpful to contact my students as soon as my class list was available to encourage them to begin watching as many *Buffy* and *Firefly* episodes as they could prior to the beginning of class, over winter break. As Kociemba observes, however, winter break still is not long enough for the average student to complete all the necessary viewing. To that end, I developed a kind of annotated episode list for *Buffy* and *Angel* and distributed it along with my syllabus on the first day of class. Next to each episode, using a series of symbols, I noted which episodes we would view communally in class, which they should definitely watch on their own, which they should watch only if they had time, and which they could skip completely. Creating a similar list for *Firefly* and *Dollhouse* is unnecessary because of the more manageable number of episodes. In fact, *Dollhouse* is almost impossible to parse out for viewing because

the story arc changes so dramatically over the course of its two seasons. Students really do need to watch the whole thing in order to grasp the vision of the piece; however, watching a couple of early episodes like "Ghost" (1.1) and "Man on the Street" (1.6) can serve as an adequate introduction to the series and can generate some meaningful analysis even without students possessing big-picture knowledge of the entire series.[25]

When I taught the class again in 2015, even though I had contacted the class as winter break began, encouraging them to watch as many episodes as possible, only about half of the class did so. Many of them came to the class with next to no experience with Whedon's works, though most of them had at least seen *The Avengers* (2012). This lack of experience, especially in contrast to the background of the previous class, posed some challenges. Although it was certainly interesting to hear students predict how events might shape certain characters, their analysis was too often plot-centered, and they were frequently frustrated by their lack of knowledge about the various series as a whole, especially when others in the class were self-professed fans from the beginning. Fans of the show were more often than not uncertain whether they should spoil future episodes for their peers by pointing out errors in their predictions, and their less-experienced classmates were periodically frustrated by spoilers, or rather, negotiating their desire for and abhorrence of said spoilers. As a result, class discussion was sometimes tedious and once or twice shut down completely. The spoiler-heavy scholarship seemed to do little to quell this frustration; being told that Tara's brain is sucked by Glory or that Skip acts as Cordelia's spirit guide means very little if a student has not yet been introduced to the characters of Tara, Glory, or Skip. At the end of the semester, students indicated that they would have preferred to have specific

episodes assigned to them outside of class. I thought the syllabus appendix had done just that; however, it seems that students interpreted "suggested viewings" as just that, suggestions. In the future, although I will still encourage students to view as many of Whedon's texts as they can prior to the beginning of class, I will also require viewing key episodes at home to bridge this gap from week to week. Six years later, the idea of the "Whedon fan" may be a diminishing factor, especially considering his waning completion of original content. When I mention him in my high school courses, I typically get blank stares. Therefore, instructors new to teaching a Whedon survey course should be prepared for the majority of the class to have little or no previous experience with his work, except, perhaps, for his work in the Marvel universe.

What these two very different teaching experiences demonstrate is that instructors of any serial screen narrative simply cannot plan a perfect syllabus that anticipates the experiences or the needs of every student. Requiring students to preload their viewing will probably result in some of them watching certain episodes twice, but they will no doubt benefit from a second viewing, having gotten the plot out of the way during the initial screening and being able to concentrate on details and analysis during the communal viewing. When assigning critical analysis in the form of reading assignments, instructors also need to decide whether these articles will be completed prior to or following a communal viewing. Spoilers aside, I have found the most success in assigning readings after a viewing because students then possess a better context for understanding and analysis. Although "teachers risk students becoming less critical readers of the scholarship, as they must take the author's word for it without having fully experienced

the artwork themselves" (Kociemba 8), in a 75-minute class period, students were able to view the episode and discuss their immediate reactions to it. The scholarly analysis then serves more to validate or refute the students' analysis rather than spoon-feeding seemingly established opinions to students.

Assessing Students of the Whedonverse

"The grade that you receive will be the last we swear." Bad Horse
(*Dr. Horrible's Sing-along Blog*, 00:06:48-50)

Assessing what students have learned in a class that focuses on visual media can be difficult. Traditional tests and quizzes that emphasize plot seem out of place and more suited to trivia games than in a classroom that focuses on analysis. In a discussion-based seminar, an instructor could create a participation grade, but not all students are comfortable expressing their opinions verbally, especially when some of their peers may be more familiar with the content. Certain students sometimes tend to dominate discussion and debate, but that does not mean that they are necessarily more learned than those who express themselves very little or not at all. Instead of these methods, I chose a multi-pronged approach to assessment that included a combination of participation, article summaries and reviews, and a wide-open final project to encourage creativity and maintain the dynamic of this lively discussion-based course.

First, students earned participation points for coming to class since the communal viewing aspect of the class is so important. Instructors certainly could assign all viewing to take place outside of class, thus eliminating any problematic time crunch, but there are too many advantages to communal

viewing. One obvious advantage is that instructors can be certain that students have indeed seen the assigned episode. Further, the viewing will no doubt take place in a setting that demands more focus. Students watching at home may just as likely to be texting, playing a game, talking to friends, or fixing dinner while they watch. A classroom environment typically demands more focused attention. Students should be encouraged to take notes while they watch so that during class discussion, they will not forget any pertinent developments they may wish to highlight during the discussion immediately following.[26] And that is where the communal aspect is of the utmost benefit. During a viewing, students are able to hear or see others' reactions, an appropriately- (or inappropriately-) timed laugh, a gasp, sometimes even tears, as is often the case with "The Body" (5.16). These expressions cue viewers into key elements of the text and encourage students to consider their personal responses to these elements. Immediately following a viewing, students are able to provide nearly instantaneous feedback to one another. As one student pointed out, "I found that others picked up on things that I would never have caught even after multiple watches" (Risser). Students who have never seen an episode before are able to provide first impressions, often indicating surprise at the way a character reacted or the way the episode subverted our expectations regarding narrative, theme, character, or ideology. It is also occasionally beneficial to have the power to stop the video at certain points during a viewing to point out noteworthy elements.

The time after a communal screening also allowed students to ask for clarification about anything they may have found to be confusing about the episode. Another benefit of communal viewing is that the instructor is instantly able to

stimulate thinking on a particular topic after the presentation of an episode. For instance, a seemingly simple question like "Who is the hero?" after viewing *Dr. Horrible* can result in stunned silence or a flurry of debate. Without any hesitation, some students name Captain Hammer as the hero because he possesses more traditional heroic traits. Some students recognize Dr. Horrible himself as the hero but still struggle with fitting his villainous tendencies into the heroic archetype. Others hold Penny up as the hero, claiming that she is the only character who wants to do good. In order to focus student thinking on the subject, I constructed a basic worksheet that students are able to complete in pairs during class. The sheet asks them to trace the journey that each of the main characters completes in terms of the basic components of the monomyth: departure, fulfillment, transformation, and return. By using the monomyth framework once again, students are given a foundation on which to build an argument. It helps them to hone their focus and construct a solid thesis, which they then argue in class.

In addition to participation points related to communal viewing, students are required to complete five scholarly article summaries and reviews. These were pretty straightforward. On most days devoted to class discussion, students were assigned the reading of two to four articles usually connected to the episode we had screened during the previous class. They chose one of these articles, summarized it and then reviewed it, noting any important points, arguments with which they disagreed, if they thought the thesis was presented clearly and supported well, and if they thought the article contributed to scholarship in the genre. Although students were required to write about only one of the articles each time, they often mentioned the other essays, naturally comparing and contrasting them. To that

end, I often assigned essays that offered opposing viewpoints. For instance, during our study of *Firefly*, I assign "The Captain May Wear the Tight Pants, but It's the Gals Who Make *Serenity* Soar," which argues that the women of *Firefly* are strong, able, sexually aware, and empowered (Taylor). On the same day, I assign "I Want Your Sex: Gender and Power in Joss Whedon's Dystopian Future World," which proposes that the western genre limits the role of women in the show, thereby creating a "series in which power is very largely defined by physical power, which is mostly employed (and possessed) by male characters" (Holder 145).[27] In the latter article, Nancy Holder voices her disappointment that Whedon's choice of genre "precluded the empowerment of women as a main theme" (152). Students hotly debated these two conflicting essays, and it was fascinating as well as informative to observe which argument each student agreed with, as well as the fervor with which they wrote about both. I should also note here that my students, being Honors students who have demonstrated academic excellence, required very little guidance in terms of writing these summaries and reviews. Even in the second class, where student engagement was generally less palpable than the inaugural class, students were proficient writers and were able to work far more independently than other students may be able to. Students less familiar with scholarly writing may require more guidelines, structure, and focused questions in order to complete written assignments like this.

Topics like Buffy's being "merrily racist" (King 199) and presenting the show's protagonist as primed to become "the new young woman" espoused in fascism (King 206), generated the most dynamic discussions as well as the most detailed writing. More importantly, allowing students to express their knowledge in written form fairly often (about every third week),

gave a voice to those students who felt less comfortable expressing themselves verbally. What I found was that the quietest students were often closeted fans who already knew Whedon's work sometimes better than I did. They were able to make clear and thoughtful arguments and observations about not only the episodes in question but also about the scholarship related to those episodes.

In terms of a final exam, again a traditional test did not seem adequate to assess what students had learned throughout the semester. Writing an analysis of some sort was the obvious choice, but that, too, seemed to fall a bit flat in the face of what was normally a lively and dynamic class centered around communal viewing experiences, discussion, and sometimes fiery debate. As my students were also Honors students, writing papers was a bit run-of-the-mill for them. They have all been excellent writers, and most of them could churn out a ten-page analysis of any one of the themes we covered in class with little effort. Instead, I decided to leave the final up to them. Basically, I asked them to prove to me what they learned in any way they could as long as the final product produced real analysis and was in part connected to at least one of the main themes we had discussed in class or to Campbell's theories connected to the hero's journey.

This assignment both intrigued and terrified them.

The final project was worth 30 percent of their grade, and I required the submittal of a proposal about halfway through the semester. Through the proposal, I was able to conference with students, guiding them to specific resources or asking them to provide more analysis or explanation of their final project. I did not make writing a paper off limits, and in the end, about 75 percent of students in both classes still wrote a traditional analysis essay either due to their comfort levels or

time constraints. However, the other quarter turned out to be brave souls who challenged themselves with something more creative. Final exam day was devoted to students presenting their projects or giving a brief synopsis of their essays. Admittedly, not all were successful, and some of the more creative projects failed to convey enough analysis. A couple of students put together video montages that exhibited technical excellence but lacked analytical depth. For example, one student created a technically proficient montage of *Buffy* scenes that were supposed to present three or four basic motifs vital to the series, but with no further explanation provided either in the form of a written analysis or through verbal explanation during the presentation, the project failed to convey the student's best intentions. Those types of failures, however, were few and far between.

Although many students were majoring in English and Communications, the class also comprised chemistry majors, digital media majors, as well as those majoring in psychology, geology, economics, fashion design, and even music composition. They all brought with them their particular skills, whether they wrote a paper or produced a more artistic project. One student successfully combined the two, creating a kind of video research paper that analyzed *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), complete with clips from the movie and a voiceover explaining his analysis.[28] Another student interpreted the hero's journey of Buffy Summers in cupcakes. She created several different flavors of cupcakes, each symbolizing a particular stage of Buffy's character development, which she then explained in both a written essay that accompanied her project as well as a verbal statement to the class on presentation day. Another student built an actual dollhouse with each room representing a different character of the show and symbols connected to

their individual character traits and growth. Several students wrote scripts, one reimaging *Firefly* as a 30-minute sit-com and another that forces all the Whedon characters into one cross-over film. One student imagined that Wash, *Serenity*'s pilot, had found all seven seasons of *Buffy* during an illegal salvage operation and proceeded to pair members of Serenity's crew with characters of *Buffy,* all presented on PowerPoint with photos and detailed explanations. One particularly successful project featured seven mixed media drawings, one for each season of *Buffy*, each representing a step of the hero's journey.

Although the papers were generally well done and quite interesting, with topics including generation separation in *The Cabin in the Woods,* Topher Brink being a "big damn hero," the weaponization of Black Widow,[29] and River Tam as a version of the Oracle of Delphi,[30] the creative projects were always the standouts, generally demonstrating sophisticated analysis and depth of understanding. Students who chose the less traditional route expressed relief and excitement at not having to write yet another paper and being able to draw on their individual skills and imaginations to demonstrate comprehension. In this way, the entire class was able to benefit from hearing their peers' ideas and from seeing how uniquely they interpreted those ideas, thus engaging their thinking about the Whedonverse even until the last minute of class.

Expanding the Whedonverse

"No power in the 'verse can stop me." River
("War Stories," *Firefly* 1.10, 00:38:12-14)

Surprisingly, analysis of the Whedonverse and student success did not stop there for many of my students. About a quarter of the way into the first course, a student approached

me about advising an organization devoted to Whedon studies. After doing some investigation, we discovered that as a part-time faculty member, I was not eligible to advise an official club, but the student was undaunted. With the aid of several seminar peers, the student eventually formed an official student organization called *Expanding the Whedonverse*. The group's private Facebook page boasted forty-four members at its inception, though according to one student there were typically ten active members at any given meeting. The group met about every two weeks to discuss focused topics like themes in *Buffy*, *Firefly*, or *Much Ado About Nothing*.

How many students, after taking a class on Shakespeare, calculus, Plato, or biology immediately start an official student organization dedicated to that topic? This club was not simply a study group; this was a social and academic, structured organization with elected officers. For them, the course was only the beginning; they wanted more. That's the kind of engagement that Whedon studies elicited at the time:

> For me, I love his confidence as a writer and producer. He's able to capture his viewers so quickly and so entirely and then he's never afraid of keeping his ratings as a reason to have something change in the plotline. He's not afraid to kill off any of [his characters] and when he does, he trusts his viewers to continue watching, and we do. I hate science fiction. I can't make it through a single *Star Wars* movie nor *Star Trek*. I hate all vampire stories and most other topics that he's done, but [I] can sit there for hours on end and watch any of his works, and I'm constantly trying to figure out whether it's the character relationships, the dialogue, or his loyalty to a handful of actors that appear in all of his works that keeps me riveted

> to my television. It always intrigues me to see what he'll do next with his characters and why. Mostly, I don't understand what makes him so much better than other writers and producers, so I'm enthused to study the things he's done regardless of whether that's in class, in a group or on my own, so that maybe I can figure it out. (Cosgrove 2014)

Notice this student's choice of words and phrasing: she's trying to *figure out* Whedon. It's not about just liking his work; it's about analysis, interpretation, and understanding for her as well as others. Another students writes of the group:

> I really wanted to continue discussing Joss Whedon outside of class because I found that by discussing his work with others I was able to understand more about his works. There are often so many layers and connections in Joss's works and by discussing with others I found that a deeper level of understanding and appreciation for the work is gained. So many of his works are very complex and smaller things are easy to miss. […] The conversations in the club were less academic than in class; we still often discussed themes, characters, plot and meanings behind the works […]. (Risser 2015)[31]

I wondered if five years later, the students would feel the same way, so I contacted one of them in 2020 and asked her if she was still interested in Whedon, and if she thought he still had anything to teach us. Her response follows:

> I think that, much like any other writer/actor/film/show/etc., we still have a lot to learn

> from Joss Whedon if we take those lessons with a grain of salt. In the 1990s and 2000s, Whedon was arguably at the forefront of feminism and empowering women in media. Buffy inspired thousands of young girls to do and be, more. Watching it now reminds us where we came from and shows us where we still have yet to go. But, as he has produced less and less in more recent years, he becomes more and more obsolete. Additionally, in light of allegations against Whedon, I think it is important, in some ways, to separate the work from the creator. Whether or not these allegations are true, the works stand alone, teach great lessons, and are enjoyable. But notoriety and success [shouldn't] allow Whedon to treat people poorly and they don't mean we need to hold him in high esteem, like we might his works. Much like people have done with J.K. Rowling with her opposition to the LGBTQ+ community, we can appreciate the works that Whedon produced while not condoning his behavior. Even re-watching *Firefly* recently, there are still new things I learned or things I appreciated in a new light and I think it's important to share these shows with a younger generation. There is always something to be gained by looking to the past. Some of those things may not be politically correct by today's standards, but that doesn't erase their importance. Nor the influence they held on the formation of people in the last two and a half decades and the media that has since been produced. (Cosgrove)

The response to Whedon's work, whether from 2014 or 2020, is generally complimentary and suggests that studying his work is almost essential in order to gain a full understanding of the zeitgeist of a particular period in time as well as in television

history; however, the latest response is obviously somewhat tempered by recent events, not just regarding Whedon personally but within the larger context of cultural shifts that have taken place over the past six years and have reshaped our perceptions of his work. In such a short time, student response has been recalibrated from what was arguably the unadulterated praise of a fan to a more thoughtful, academic acknowledgement of his place in televisual history.

In this way, Whedon still challenges and subverts expectations in multiple ways, and students respond to that, and, I think, would continue to respond to it although possibly in different ways. It is why teaching Whedon's texts is both rewarding and infinitely challenging. Constructing a Whedon survey course ain't easy, and it's only getting more difficult as his work becomes seemingly more dated. That's not to say that it is the same as putting together a course on Shakespeare or Austen, where the texts have endured the test of time and carry canonical status. Although Shakespeare and Austen scholarship certainly continues, the authors themselves ceased contributing to their own body of work hundreds of years ago. One of many challenging as well as exciting aspects of teaching a course that investigates the works of a living artist like Whedon is that he continues to contribute to his *oeuvre* (sometimes in unintended ways), both in terms of new texts and commentary, even while the class is taking place. His work evolves (or doesn't) in real time.

In the 2005 film *Serenity*, Mr. Universe tells Mal "You can't stop the signal" (00:40:15). The line was a nod to the tremendous fan response to and support of *Firefly* after it had been cancelled. It also could be an effective metaphor for Whedon's endeavors. You can't stop the signal because not only is the signal far-reaching, but also it keeps changing. Constructing a

class around these texts is certainly challenging and even potentially problematic, but it can still be rewarding if situated within its historical context and with attention paid to contemporary criticism. In fact, I would argue that presenting a course within this framework could produce even more lively debate, critical thinking, relevant cultural connections, and academic scholarship than the course I taught six years ago. Whedon himself said, "There was a time before I felt I was a real writer, when I was a yarn spinner and I just wanted to tell a story until it was over. But then there came a time where I was like, 'No, I want to understand something through writing this that I might have not understood before. I want people to come away with something to think about'" (Whedon qtd. in Johnson). In a Whedon survey course or any screen narrative course this becomes the real touchstone. What is it exactly that we are supposed to think about as we watch *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Mal*, *Echo*, and *Dr. Horrible* take their journeys, especially as we view them within new cultural contexts? Ask a hundred students, and you'll probably get a hundred different answers. But that is the very journey Joss Whedon takes us on when we "go visiting [his] intentions" ("Objects in Space," 1.14, 00:29:08-09). Through his heroes, we can discover that "the stories we read, listen to, watch, and role play teach us about who we are and who we are not, how we should and should not think and believe and hate and love" (Cochran 43). In the end, that may just be worth the time and effort that goes into the extensive preparation for a Whedon survey course and the thing that keeps us coming back to certainly explore and possibly expand the Whedonverse.

Notes

[1] See, e.g., David Fritts' "Warrior Heroes: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beowulf."

[2] Though it is advanced for most high school students, I have used Anouk Lang's analysis of serial narrative, "'The Status is Not Quo!': Pursuing Resolution in Web-Disseminated Serial Narrative" as a way to discuss visual texts and as an introduction to the kinds of academic writing students will encounter in college.

[3] As all educators know, planning a course is typically a more organic experience than what articles on pedagogy would lead readers to believe, but organic experiences can also be incredibly time consuming and are often fraught with missteps. In this essay, I certainly do not wish to suggest that there is only one prescriptive approach to creating a screen narrative survey course. Instead, I offer only my own experiences, anecdotal evidence, and conclusions, as well as more recent hesitations in the creation and structuring of such a course.

[4] See, e.g., Robbie Dale's "Undressing the Vampire: An Investigation of the Fashion of Sunnydale's Vampires" and Patricia Brace's "Fashioning Feminism: Whedon, Women, and Wardrobe."

[5] Students may also need some direction regarding the difference between television and film. H.R. Coursen's "Uses of Media in Teaching Shakespeare" deals with these differences in great detail. In his perhaps somewhat now dated essay, Coursen cites critics who say that watching television is a passive and meaningless activity that cannot educate but argues that the small screen can be "an element in the educational process" (193). W.G. Walton, in "Bringing Performances into Classrooms through Multiple Media" also provides a very clear and concise list of the differences between film and television.

[6] Since teaching the Whedon course, I have continued to use this anchoring method with great success. I have used the monomyth to teach elective courses on *Star Wars*, but I have also used the concept of good and evil as a course framework. See Phillip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect*.

[7] We see such weaponization in Sineya, the First Slayer; Kendra; Forrest Gates; Charles Gunn (whose very name underscores weaponization); Jasmine; Zoe; the problematically named Jubal Early; and The Operative. See "On Soldiers and Sages: Problematizing the Roles of Black Men in the Whedonverses" by Candra K. Gill *in Joss Whedon and Race* (2017). See also Neil Lerner's "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space.'"

[8] See Sarah Nicholson's "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell."
[9] Rhonda Wilcox among others has applied the monomyth to *Buffy* specifically, so detailing the many steps of the hero's journey in this essay would be redundant. See Tanya R. Cochran's essay "And the Myth Becomes Flesh" in *Buffy in the Classroom*. In this essay, Cochran explains her application of the monomyth to *Buffy* in one fifty-minute class period. I have used very much the same foundation but have extended it over the entire fifteen-week course.
[10] Whedon's disdain for the corporate machine could be another motif to study. See Erin Giannini's *Joss Whedon Versus the Corporation*.
[11] See Lorna Jowett's "Whedon, Feminism, and the Possibility of Feminist Horror on Television."
[12] Kenyon's article caused some of the most heated debate in the class. Although most students admitted to finding some of Kenyon's points to be thought-provoking, they summarily dismissed her overall thesis.
[13] See Angela Zhang's "Buffy and Dollhouse: Visions of Female Empowerment and Disempowerment" and "'A Painful, Bleeding Sleep': Sleeping Beauty in the Dollhouse," by Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs.
[14] See Faye Murray and Holly Golding's "Women Who Hate Women: Female Competition in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."
[15] See Marguerite Krause's "It's a Stupid Curse."
[16] This is also where instructors would have to consider bringing up Whedon's alleged misogyny in the writing out of Charisma Carpenter's character as well as his alleged treatment of other actresses on set. For an overview of these allegations, see "Buffy stars say Joss Whedon created 'toxic environment' on show" (Siddique). See also Jacqueline Potvin's "Pernicious Pregnancy and Redemptive Motherhood: Narratives of Reproductive Choice in Joss Whedon's *Angel*."
[17] See also Andrew Aberdein's discussion of Inara and Greek hetaeras.
[18] See, e.g., Laura Beadling's discussion of Kaylee as reflecting third-wave feminism.
[19] See "An Inevitable Tragedy: The Troubled Life of Charles Gunn as an Allegory for General Strain Theory" by Rejena Saulsberry (2017).
[20] Jean Lorrah writes about self-made families in *Buffy* and *Angel* in *Seven Seasons of Buffy* and *Five Seasons of Angel* respectively. See also Jes Battis's *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *and* Angel.
[21] For an excellent lesson on non-verbal communication, see Brian Cogan's very detailed essay, "'Can't Even Shout, Can't Even Cry' But You Can Learn! Non-Verbal Communication and 'Hush.'" See also Rhonda Wilcox's chapter "Fear: The Princess Screamed Once: Power, Silence, and Fear in 'Hush'" in *Why Buffy Matters* for a fascinating analysis of this ground-breaking episode.

[22] See Wilcox's "Death: They're Going to Find a Body."
[23] Among other considerations in constructing this course was required reading material. Not wanting to burden my students financially, I required the purchase of only two books and put all other material, with the exception of articles found on *Slayage*, on reserve at the library. However, students expressed frustration at this arrangement, and it became clear quickly that many of them were not doing the required reading.
[24] For the purposes of this essay, "fans" refers to those students who have had a previous, positive experience with several of Whedon's works and specifically scheduled the class because of this experience.
[25] The students in my second course were most intrigued by *Dollhouse*. They found the series to be Whedon's masterpiece and indicated that they would rather study less *Buffy* and devote far more class time to *Dollhouse*.
[26] My classroom had a window to the hallway. I would open the blinds halfway, allowing enough borrowed light into the classroom for note taking.
[27] Holder reprints this comment from a friend's email but agrees with the statement, stating, "She's right."
[28] I was so impressed with this method, I have since assigned my high school students to use it, requiring them to create a kind of mini-documentary that revolves around the topic of saving the world.
[29] See Michael Marano's essay "River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse" in *Serenity Found* and Lisa K. Perdigo's essay "'This One's Broken': Rebuilding Whedonbots and Reprogramming the Whedonverse" in *Slayage*.
[30] This paper, "River Tam: The Oracle of Serenity" by Lyndsey Schley was eventually published in *Watcher Junior*'s Spring 2015 edition.
[31] Both students granted permission for their words to be used here.

Works Cited

Aberdein, Andrew. "The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?" *Investigating* Firefly *and* Serenity: *Science Fiction on the Frontier*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran, I. B. Tauris, 2008, pp. 63-75.

The Avengers. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Robert Downey, Jr., Chris Evans, Scarlett Johannson, Chris Hemsworth, and Mark Ruffalo, Marvel Studios in association with Paramount Pictures, 2012.

Battis, Jes. *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *and* Angel. McFarland, 2005.

Beadling, Laura. "The Threat of the 'Good Wife': Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave Feminism in *Firefly*." *Investigating* Firefly *and* Serenity: *Science Fiction on the Frontier*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran, I. B. Tauris, 2008, pp. 53-62.

"Becoming." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season on DVD*, Season 2, Episode 22, Mutant Enemy, 1998, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

"The Body." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season on DVD*, Season 5, Episode 16, Mutant Enemy, 2000, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Brace, Patricia. "Fashioning Feminism: Whedon, Women, and Wardrobe." *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon*, edited by Dean A. Kowalski and S. Evan Kreider, The University Press of Kentucky, 2011, pp. 117-132.

"Bushwhacked." *Joss Whedon's Firefly: The Complete Series*, Season 1, Episode 3, Mutant Enemy, 2002, written and directed by Tim Minear, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd edition. New World Library, 2008.

Cochran, Tanya. "And the Myth Becomes Flesh." *Buffy in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching with the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell, McFarland & Co., 2010, pp. 35-45.

Cogan, Brian. "'Can't Even Shout, Can't Even Cry' But You Can Learn! Non-Verbal Communication and 'Hush.'" *Buffy in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching with the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell, McFarland & Co., 2010, pp. 114-125.

Cosgrove, Colleen. "Untitled Facebook message." Received by Jenna Bates, 7 September 2014.

---. "Untitled Facebook message." Received by Jenna Bates, 30 December 2020.

Coursen, H.R. "Uses of Media in Teaching Shakespeare." *Teaching Shakespeare into the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Ronald E. Salome and James E. Davis, Ohio University Press, 1997, pp. 193-200.

Crusie, Jennifer. "Dating Death." *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Television Show*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2003, pp. 85-96.

Davidson, Joy. "Whores and Goddesses: The Archetypal Domain of Inara Sara." *Finding Serenity*: *Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's* Firefly, edited by Jane Espenson, BenBella Books, 2004, pp. 113-129.

Dale, Robbie. "Undressing the Vampire: An Investigation of the Fashion of Sunnydale's Vampires." *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 19-40. https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/dale_-_slayage_18.1_-_pp._19-40.pdf.

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Neil Patrick Harris, Nathan Fillion, and Felicia Day, Mutant Enemy Productions, 2008.

Edwards, Lynne. "'The black chick always gets it first': Black Slayers in Sunnydale." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 37-50.

"Family." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season on DVD*, Season 5, Episode 6, Mutant Enemy, 2000, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Fritts, David. "Warrior Heroes: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beowulf." *Slayage: The Online International Journal of* Buffy *Studies*, vol. 5, no.

1 , 2005, 32 pars. https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/2628853/fritts_slayage_5.1.pdf.

"Ghost." *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Season One*, Season 1, Episode 1, 2009, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

Giannini, Erin. *Joss Whedon Versus the Corporation: Big Business Critiqued in the Films and Television Programs*, McFarland, 2017.

Gill, Candra K. "On Soldiers and Sages: Problematizing the Roles of Black Men in the Whedonverses." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 253-267.

Goodman, Steven. *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change.* Teachers College Press, 2003.

"Halloween." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection*, Season 2, Episode 6, Mutant Enemy, 1997, written by Carl Ellsworth, directed by Bruce Seth Green, Twentieth Century Fox, 2005.

"The Harvest." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season on DVD*, Season 1, Episode 2, Mutant Enemy, 1997, written by Joss Whedon and directed by John T. Kretchmer, Twentieth Century Fox, 2001.

Holder, Nancy. "I Want Your Sex: Gender and Power in Joss Whedon's Dystopian Future World." *Finding Serenity*: *Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's* Firefly, edited by Jane Espenson, BenBella Books, 2004, pp. 139-153.

"Hush." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season on DVD*, Season 4, Episode 10, Mutant Enemy, 1999, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

"Innocence." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season on DVD*, Season 2, Episode 14, Mutant Enemy, 1998, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

Jarnagin, Mayan. "Zoe Washburne: Navigating the 'Verse as a Military Woman of Color." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 200-214.

Johnson, Frank. *The Wit and Wisdom of Joss Whedon*. Google Ebook, 2015.

Jowett, Lorna. "Whedon, Feminism, and the Possibility of Feminist Horror on Television." *Joss Whedon vs. the Horror Tradition: The Production of Genre in* Buffy *and Beyond*, edited by Kristopher Karl Woofter and Lorna Jowett, I.B. Tauris / Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 201-218.

Kenyon, Sherrilyn. "The Search for Spike's Balls." *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Television Show*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2003, pp. 25-29.

King, Neal. "Brownskirts: Fascism, Christianity, and the Eternal Demon." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy : Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, edited by James B. South, Open Court, 2003, pp. 197-211.

Kociemba, David. "To Spoil or Not to Spoil: Teaching Television's Narrative Complexity." *Buffy in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching with the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell, McFarland & Company, 2010, pp. 7-21.

Krause, Marguerite. "It's a Stupid Curse." *Five Seasons of Angel: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Vampire*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2004, pp. 103-113.

Lang, Anouk. "'The Status is Not Quo!': Pursuing Resolution in Web-Disseminated Serial Narrative." *NARRATIVE*, vol.18, no.3, Oct. 2010, pp. 367- 381.

Lerner, Neil. "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space.'" *Investigating* Firefly *and* Serenity: *Science Fiction on the Frontier*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran, I. B. Tauris, 2008, pp. 183-190.

Locklin, Reid B. "Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Domestic Church: Revisioning Family and the Common Good." *Slayage: The Online International Journal* of Buffy *Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, 23 pars. https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/2628893/locklin_slayage_2.2.pdf.

Lorrah, Jean. "Love Saves the World." *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Television Show*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2003, pp.167-175.

---. "A World Without Love: The Failure of Family in Angel." *Five Seasons of Angel: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their*

Favorite Vampire, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2004, pp. 57-63.

"Man on the Street." *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Season One*, Season 1, Episode 6, 2009, written by Joss Whedon and directed by David Straiton, Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

Marano, Michael. "River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse." *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe*, edited by Jane Espenson, BenBella Books, 2007, pp. 37-49.

Marinucci, Mimi. "Feminism and the Ethics of Violence: Why Buffy Kicks Ass." Buffy the Vampire Slayer *and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, edited by James B. South, Open Court Publishing Co., 2003, pp. 61-75.

McMurray, Rachel. "'I have no speech, no name': The Denial of Female Agency Through Speech in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 51-71.

"Meet Jane Doe." *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: The Complete Season 2*, Season 2, Episode 7, 2009, written by Maurissa Tancharoen, Joss Whedon, and Andrew Chambliss and directed by Dwight Little, Twentieth Century Fox, 2010.

Montgomery, Carla. "Innocence." *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discuss Their Favorite Television Show*, edited by Glenn Yeffeth, BenBella Books, 2003, pp. 152-158.

Murray, Faye and Holly Golding. "Women Who Hate Women: Female Competition in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Joss Whedon The Complete Companion*, Titan Books, 2012, pp. 83-94.

"A New Man." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season on DVD*, Season 4, Episode 12, Mutant Enemy, 2000, written by Jane Espenson and directed by Michael Gershman, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Nicholson, Sarah. "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell." *Feminist Theology*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, pp. 182-193.

"Objects in Space." *Joss Whedon's Firefly: The Complete Series*, Season 1, Episode 14, Mutant Enemy, 2002, written and directed by Joss Whedon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

"Out of Gas." *Joss Whedon's Firefly: The Complete Series*, Season 1, Episode 8, Mutant Enemy, 2002, written by Tim Minear and directed by David Solomon, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Perdigao, Lisa K. "'This One's Broken': Rebuilding Whedonbots and Reprogramming the Whedonverse." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association,* vol. 8, no. 2-3, Summer/Fall 2010, 28 pars. https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/2628853/perdigao_slayage_8.2-3.pdf .

Potvin, Jacqueline. "Pernicious Pregnancy and Redemptive Motherhood: Narratives of Reproductive Choice in Joss Whedon's *Angel*." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, 33 pars. https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/2628853/potvin_slayage_14.1.pdf .

Risser, Emily. "Untitled Facebook message." Received by Jenna Bates, 1 June 2015.

Saulsberry, Rejena. "An Inevitable Tragedy: The Troubled Life of Charles Gunn as an Allegory for General Strain Theory." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 150-166.

Schley, Lindsey. "River Tam: The Oracle of *Serenity*." *Watcher Junior* vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 2015.

"Seeing Red." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season on DVD*, Season 6, Episode 19, Mutant Enemy, 2002, written by Stephen S. DeKnight, directed by Michael Gershman, Twentieth Century Fox, 2004.

Serenity. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Nathan Fillion, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Morena Baccarin, Jewel Staite, Summer Glau, Gina Torres, Alan Tudyk, Adam Baldwin, Sean Maher, and Ron Glass, Universal, 2005.

Siddique, Haroon. "Buffy stars say Joss Whedon created 'toxic environment' on show." *The Guardian*, 11 Feb. 2021.

St. Louis, Renee, and Miriam Riggs. "'A Painful, Bleeding Sleep': Sleeping Beauty in the Dollhouse." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 8, no. 2-3, 2010.

Strehlau, Nelly. "She's White and They Are History: Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Racialization of the Past and Present." *Joss Whedon and Race*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery A. Woodall III, McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 91-107.

"The Target." *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Season One*, Season 1, Episode 2, 2009, written and directed by Stephen S. DeKnight, Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

Taylor, Robert. "The Captain May Wear the Tight Pants, but It's the Gals Who Make Serenity Soar." *Finding Serenity*: *Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's* Firefly, edited by Jane Espenson, BenBella Books, 2004, pp. 131-137.

Walton, Jr. W.G. "Bringing Performances into Classrooms through Multimedia." *Teaching Shakespeare through Performance, edited by* Milla Cozart Riggio, The Modern Language Association of America, 1999, pp. 321-340.

"War Stories." *Joss Whedon's Firefly: The Complete Series*, Season 1, Episode 10, Mutant Enemy, 2002, written by Cheryl Cain and directed by James Contner, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

"Welcome to the Hellmouth." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season on DVD*, Season 1, Episode 1, Mutant Enemy, 1997, written by Joss Whedon, directed by Charles Martin Smith, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Whedon, Joss. "Welcome to the Hellmouth." DVD Commentary, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season on DVD*, Season 1, Episode 1, Mutant Enemy, 1997, written by Joss Whedon, directed by Charles Martin Smith, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

Wilcox, Rhonda. "Death: They're Going to Find a Body: Quality Television and the Supernatural in 'The Body.'" *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of* Buffy the Vampire Slaver. I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 174-190.

---. "Fear: The Princess Screamed Once: Power, Silence, and Fear in 'Hush.'" *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slaver*. I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 146-161.

Winchell, Meghan K. "Whedon Takes 'the Scary' Out of Feminism." *Buffy in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching with the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell, McFarland & Company, 2010, pp. 73-82.

Zhang, Angela. "Buffy and Dollhouse: Visions of Female Empowerment and Disempowerment." *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion, The TV Series, The Movies, The Comic Books and More*, Titan Books, 2012, pp. 401-06.

Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.