

Buffy the Patriarch Slayer

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[1] In the pilot episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*), titular character Buffy Summers proclaims, “First of all, I’m a Vampire Slayer. And secondly, I’m retired” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” (B1001, 18:43–18:46). This marks the beginning of seven years of television spanning from 1997–2003 where Buffy struggles between the identity chosen for her by a centuries old tradition and the identity she wants: that of a normal American teenager who has friends, goes on dates, and spends her weekends partying. The concept of the Slayer was conceived by series creator Joss Whedon. Having grown tired of horror movies which depict “bubblehead blonds” being murdered in “dark alleys” by monsters (Bellafante 84), Whedon decided to create a female character who, when in danger, can defend herself with her powers. Buffy wields the strength to fight and defeat demons, vampires, and other monsters, but she does not want to devote her life to this cause. Instead, she desires to find a balance between being the Slayer and being an individual. Like the Victorian fin-de-siècle New Woman, Buffy knows exactly what role she is expected to fulfil but rebels against it. Her rebellion involves approaching her duties as a Slayer in nontraditional ways inspired by Third-Wave feminist values such as showcasing her femininity, prioritizing personal desires, and situating herself as an individual who blatantly rejects the patriarchal expectations set upon Slayers by the Watchers Council. Buffy’s actions destroy the patriarchal society she exists in and paves the way for other Slayers to carry out their duties with freedom of action and choice.

[2] The New Woman, a figure born in the late nineteenth century, is known for rebelling against patriarchal and social constructions of what a woman should do and be. Early models of the New Woman are seen in Gertrude Colmore’s 1911 novel *Suffragette Sally*, which documents

a semi-fictionalized account of the suffrage movement. The women who fought for their rights are considered New Women because they resisted the social norms of womanhood that were established by patriarchal figures. One upper class male character who is against the suffrage movement, Mr. Bilkes, summarizes the traditional expectations of women at the time when he says that “the place of a woman [is] her home; up in the nursery looking after her children, more especially the baby; down in the kitchen, seeing to her husband’s dinner” (Colmore 61). This is the patriarchal “ideal” that women sought to challenge in the dawn of the New Woman era. Over time, New Women began to rebel against *all* patriarchal expectations of womanhood in order to gain agency and power.

[3] While New Women have succeeded in many ways in achieving equality, rights, and agency in the decades since the Suffrage Movement, women have continued to face persistent forms of oppression. Eighty-six years after the events of *Suffragette Sally*, *BtVS* depicts a predominant form of modern oppression in which elite men use their power to stifle women. This oppression is brought to life metaphorically as the series takes place in a fictionalized world where vampires and monsters are a daily threat to society, and it is expected that “one girl in all the world born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires [will] stop the spread of their evil” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” [B1001] 17:47–17:53). Unlike the women in *Suffragette Sally*, Buffy does not have to fulfill the traditional ideal of a housewife who devotes her life to caring for her husband and children. However, she is still expected to satisfy a traditional role as enforced by an elite, governmental group of largely white men known as the Watchers Council. Buffy is assigned a male Watcher, Rupert Giles, who is a representative of the Council and must “train” and “prepare” her (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” [B1001] 19:01–19:03). The Watcher ensures that the Slayer lives up to her destiny as a figure with “physical prowess” who is

cunning, imaginative, confident and self-reliant (“Helpless” [B3012] 13:13–13:21). Buffy possesses these qualities but does not necessarily want to wield them as often as she is expected to because they contradict with what she wants for her life. She feels she must rebel because she does not want to find herself trapped in a life where she fully succumbs to slaying and cannot achieve her goals as a teenager and young woman.

[4] There are many forms of rebellion a New Woman can act upon depending on the type of oppression she faces. In *Suffragette Sally*, for instance, women rebelled to gain the right to vote. Suffragettes rebelled violently by committing crimes to force attention to their cause while their counterparts, the suffragists, believed peaceful protests were enough. Other modes of rebellion taken on by New Women include enrolling in educational institutions, becoming emancipated, and “[living] and [loving] in ways that [defy] convention” (Nelson qtd. in Otto and Rocco 6; Otto and Rocco 1). These are the forms of rebelling that Buffy takes on. She is supposed to devote her life to killing vampires, but her wish to live as human a life as possible encourages her to finish high school, go to university, and even fall in love with the very creature she is designed to kill. These actions accumulate over the series’ run and give Buffy the confidence to emancipate herself from the Council when she declares, “I don’t think I’m going to be taking any more orders. Not from [a Watcher], not from [the Watchers Council]” (“Graduation Day, Part One” [B3021] 32:37–32:43). New Women also rebel by adopting ways of living that are commonly associated with men, such as “holding a job, drinking, going to clubs, and having sexual relationships outside of marriage” (Otto and Rocco 9–10). As a teenager in the 1990s, Buffy wants to take part in these activities and finds a way to do so, even under Giles’s constant surveillance. She regularly skips “patrolling” (seeking out vampires to kill) to go to an all-ages nightclub with her friends, has numerous sexual encounters, and

eventually gets a job and becomes self-reliant. Like the women in *Suffragette Sally*, Buffy's motivation to retaliate against a governmental power stems from a desire to achieve basic rights under their rule. She does not want to be stifled and forced to reject a social life, personal interests, and a successful future in order to meet the needs of the Watchers Council. To rebel, Buffy prioritizes the very desires the Council wants her to forgo. She channels the qualities and values of the New Woman of the 1890s, who by then had come to be known as feminists.

[5] As New Women evolved into feminists, the quest for women's rights, equality, and power in society remained central to the movement. These goals are realized and achieved in ever-evolving ways as feminism goes through different waves. When *BtVS* premiered in 1997, feminism was in its third wave. This consisted of "a new generation" of young women coming of age in "a world colonized by mass media and information technology" (Snyder 177; 178). It is significant that Third-Wave feminism belongs to a new generation as each episode of *BtVS* famously opens with the reminder that "in every generation there is a chosen one" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" [B1001] 00:00–00:03), implying that Buffy, being the chosen one, is a representative for her entire generation. Little is known about the Slayer who preceded Buffy aside from the fact that she died the same year Buffy was called to be the Slayer. It is possible that the previous Slayer was close to Buffy's age and part of her generation; however, she does not live to experience the full development of Third-Wave feminism the way Buffy does. Furthermore, even though Buffy's temporary death in season one calls a second and then third Slayer who exists throughout the series' run, Buffy does not frequently work alongside an additional Slayer. The show strictly revolves around Buffy and *her* personal experiences, meaning that she is the only Slayer shown to live through Third-Wave feminism in its entirety and learn the movement's values. Buffy becomes empowered by Third-Wave feminism and

explicitly rejects Council regulations. When her Watcher recounts the importance of her duty to her, she stops him, saying:

BUFFY: Blah, blah, blah. I've heard it, okay?

GILES: I really don't understand this attitude. You've accepted your duty. You've slain vampires before.

BUFFY: Yeah. And I've both been there and done that, and I'm moving on. ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" [B1001] 17:53–18:03)

While Buffy evidently knows what is expected of her as the Slayer, she also knows that it is not realistic for her to risk her life and future. One of the main goals of Third-Wave feminism is for women to create "their own version of feminism that addresses their different societal contexts and the particular set of challenges they face" (Snyder 178). Buffy's unique challenge is to find a way to live her life while also fulfilling her Slayer duties. She cannot stop being the Slayer unless she permanently dies, but she cares enough about the greater good to understand the importance of her calling. Her solution is to put distance between herself and the demanding requirements of a Slayer by reworking the Slayer title to fit her developing identity. This identity consists of a young woman who lives the life she wants and a Slayer who works on her own terms.

[6] In altering both her identity and the required identity of a Slayer in order to fit her own needs, Buffy enacts another facet of Third-Wave feminism. This is the third-wavers' ability to "embrace a multiplicity of identities" and "accept the messiness of lived contradiction" (Snyder 177). Apart from her identity, the contradictions in Buffy's life can also be seen in her powers. As a Slayer, Buffy has super strength and innate fighting abilities. These are traditionally attributed as masculine qualities, but Buffy contradicts this by maintaining a highly feminine appearance. Channelling femininity is a major strand of Third-Wave feminism. Third-

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wavers refer to this as “girl power,” in the sense that girls can “reclaim the feminine” while “[doing] anything they choose” (Harris 1). In the season one episode “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date” (B1005), Buffy desperately wants to go on a date with a boy from school instead of breaking into a morgue to search for a potential vampire, leading to this fight with Giles:

GILES: Another date? Don’t you ever do anything else?

BUFFY: This is the *first* date. There’s never *been* a date, okay? This is my maiden voyage. ...

GILES: Buffy, maintaining a social life as a Slayer is problematic at best.

BUFFY: This is the nineties. The *nineteen*-nineties, in point of fact, and I can do both.

(20:22–20:56)

Buffy wants to experience everything that comes with being an average girly teenager, like preparing an outfit and doing her makeup to go on a date with her crush. In stressing the fact that it is the 1990s, she argues that she has a right to do what she wants—this is not an era when women can be forced to stay indoors or told what to do, especially not by a man. They can get their jobs done *and* have fun. Buffy proves this by ultimately going to the morgue after her date to kill the newest threat, thereby combining her contradictory physical abilities and appearance.

[7] It is important to note that channelling femininity does not weaken Buffy or other women in any way. In fact, reclaiming femininity is such an important element of Third-Wave feminism because it allows women to “appear girlish without being passive, for femininity does not preclude power [or] agency” (Harris 7). In choosing to dress in fashionable clothing and focus on their appearance by doing their makeup and styling their hair, women are able to appear very feminine without hindering their power and strength. Buffy does exactly this but takes it a step further by using her girly appearance strategically, just as New Women did (Otto and Rocco

8). When facing Buffy, many villains do not realize she is the Slayer or that she possesses the strength she does. She is small and trim, is often dressed in skirts and heels, and regularly has her makeup, hair, and nails done. As such, villains believe she will be an easy target and they undermine her. In the premier episode, one vampire, Luke, belittles Buffy based on her appearance, calling her a “child” and “little girl” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” [B1001] 40:33; 40:43), echoing real life male perceptions of women who appear as Buffy does. Buffy strategically allows her foes to believe whatever they want. She knows that doing so will allow her to take them by surprise with her strength and abilities, which ultimately helps her kill them. Buffy lives up to the Third-Wave feminist argument that women can look however they want while still exerting agency.

[8] While women can fashion themselves in any matter fitting to them and still be powerful figures, this does not necessarily mean that others will accept their power. For women like Buffy who choose to appear highly feminine, their agency is still undermined by those who associate their “cute” appearance with weakness. In these cases, women must call upon their aggressive nature in order to be heard and enact change. However, even when women use aggression to reach the fullest extent of their power, patriarchal forces find ways to demean them. Historically, men are the ones who decide how society reacts to women’s aggression. As men are often confused and unsure how to respond to this attitude, they could react with “condemnation, [humour], or anxiety” (Zuckerman 238) and encourage others to react the same way. For example, men in *Suffragette Sally* repeatedly refer to suffragettes as “unsexed” (Colmore 55), suggesting that they lack “appropriate” femininity due to the aggressive manner in which they demand their rights. In the novel, women are ignored so frequently and easily that suffragettes must demand attention by destroying public property or inciting riots. In *BtVS*, the

male-dominated Watchers' Council does not let the Slayer's aggression go uncontrolled. The Council encourages the Slayer to wield aggression as she would a weapon and to separate it from her emotions because "emotions are [a] weakness" (What's My Line, Part Two" [B2010] 28:08–28:10). As part of her rebellion, Buffy lets her emotions, and therefore her aggression, run rampant. In "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" (B1005), Buffy mistakenly believes that her date has been killed by a vampire and is sent into a blind rage. She uses this rage to fight the vampire and does not stop until it is dead. Buffy allows her feelings for her date to influence her aggression and, even though this is supposed to be a sign of weakness, it motivates Buffy to work harder. By merely allowing herself to feel, Buffy takes a unique approach to Slaying that goes against the Council's rules. Despite patriarchal forces attempting to stifle the suffragettes' and Buffy's aggression, these women reclaim and command their aggression and use it to lead their rebellions.

[9] When a woman is in full control of her aggression and understands how to use it to achieve her goals, she gains the confidence to take what she wants when she wants it. This is certainly true of the New Woman, who "rather than asking for new rights...simply claimed them" (Otto and Rocco 1). This claiming takes place in *Suffragette Sally*. The two women who help incite the suffrage movement, Annie Carnie and Christina Amherst, try to act peacefully by asking a question in a government meeting and expecting a response, but are ignored. This shows other women that, if they are to get what they want, they need to "interrupt solely as a protest" (Colmore 220). By interrupting, protesting, and going on hunger strikes, suffragettes take direct action towards getting what they want. Third-Wave feminists take a similar approach to the New Women of *Suffragette Sally*. They call "for immediate direct action" and "do not feel the need to spend a lot of time constructing ambitious theoretical analyses or justifying on what

grounds they are asking; they just do it” (Snyder 188). Buffy, above all, wants a normal life outside of being a Slayer. Since she cannot simply have this, she takes it. In one episode, she tries out for her high school cheerleading team without telling anyone, leading to the following interaction with Giles:

GILES: You have a sacred birthright, Buffy. You were chosen to destroy vampires, not to wave pom poms at people. And as the Watcher, I forbid it.

BUFFY: And you’ll be stopping me how? (“Witch” [B1003] 00:46–00:59)

Buffy does not explain her reasoning for joining; she does not have to. She *wants* a normal life, so she *takes* a normal life. Buffy reminds Giles that he cannot do anything to stop her even if he tries because *she* is the one with the supernatural powers who fights evil for him and the Council, and therefore they cannot stop her. Just like the New Woman and Third-Wave feminist, Buffy does what she wants and does not feel that she must explain herself. This is yet another form of Buffy’s rebellion against the Council. She does not allow them to influence her decisions or get in the way of her goals because she is paving a new identity for the Slayer.

[10] Buffy and the women in *Suffragette Sally* do not rebel against their respective patriarchal constructions of womanhood just to benefit themselves. They change the rules, resist, and live life the way *they* want in order to create better lives for the women who come after them. This too marks these characters as New Women as the New Woman is strongly associated with freedom, “independence in public and personal life,” and “new possibilities of visibility and movement in the public sphere” (Otto and Rocco 9). Women’s freedom persists in Third-Wave feminism as well, along with “equality, justice, and self-actualization” (Snyder 192). Buffy and the women in *Suffragette Sally* create conditions for women to live more freeing, equal lives. The ultimate effect of Buffy’s rebellion takes place in the series finale, when Buffy has magical

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assistance in forcibly breaking the generational succession of Slayers. Every girl in the world who may have become a Slayer becomes one at once, making slaying a group effort that is controlled only by the girls themselves. Buffy says in a famous speech from the show's finale:

In every generation, one Slayer is born because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. ... I say we change that rule. I say *my* power should be *our* power. ... From now on, every girl in the world who *might* be a Slayer, *will* be a Slayer. Every girl who *could* have the power, *will* have the power. *Can't* stand up, *will* stand up. Slayers. Every one of us." ("Chosen" [B7022] 28:33–29:25)

The final season of *BtVS* is devoted to Buffy using everything she has gained from her rebellion to empower a new generation of Slayers, and this speech marks the peak of her effort. Because Buffy wanted to experience normal young adulthood, she single-handedly rewrote the rules of a thousand-year-old patriarchal institution and eliminated the need for the Watchers' Council. Buffy empowers young women all over her world so they are no longer stifled under oppression. Instead, they can be confident and powerful, and stand up for themselves the very same way Buffy did for seven years. *Suffragette Sally* sees similar results. Even though the book ends before the characters get to reap the rewards of their rebellion, we know they were successful. Women eventually got the vote and that marked the beginning of wider freedom, equality, justice, and visibility in society. These women are each "[symbols] of progress and modernity" (Otto and Rocco 8) just like the New Woman. They destroy the constructs of their society to enable progress in a modern world.

[11] The Watchers' Council expects Buffy to be a warrior who devotes her life to fighting evil and protecting humanity until the day she dies. Even though Buffy knows this and is assigned a Watcher who ensures that she lives up to this destiny, she does not feel the pressure to

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dedicate her life to Slaying. She has matured in the Third-Wave feminist era which encourages women to live their life in a way that works for them and reminds them that no one can diminish their power. Buffy rebels against the Council's expectations by putting her desires and aspirations as a teenager and young adult before slaying. She spends time with her friends, develops romantic relationships, pursues her interests, and is empowered by her girly appearance. Only at the end of the day, once Buffy has achieved her personal goals, will she stake out a cemetery to fight vampires. As a result, Buffy changes what it means to be a Slayer. No longer is the title synonymous with sacrifice and total devotion. Slaying has been relegated to a single element of a woman's multifaceted identity. As a New Woman, Buffy resists patriarchal expectations, rebels, and enacts change. She invents a new world order where all women can be powerful, stand up for themselves, and resist their oppressors. Even though Buffy's actions are contained to an imaginary society where supernatural creatures exist and one girl must fight them all, the lessons Buffy teaches are realistic and largely applicable to the real world. The speech she delivers in the series finale is not just delivered to the characters in the show—it is delivered to each young viewer who may feel they do not have the power to stand up for themselves. Buffy empowers *all* women around the world to live like a rebellious Slayer and serves as a reminder that women, empowered as they have become since the dawn of the New Woman, must continue to resist their oppressors.

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