From Virtuous Virgins to Vampire Slayers:
The Evolution of the Gothic Heroine from the Early Gothic to Modern Horror

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[1] Although today the gothic is a well-known and loved genre, the gothic heroine did not have a particularly auspicious beginning; Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* did not present any female characters of emotional depth. It did serve, however, to set up the most important aspect of the gothic heroine for many years to come: an infallible purity.

> The very words "Gothic heroine" immediately conjure up a wealth of images for the modern reader: a young, attractive woman (virginity required) running in terror through an old, dark, crumbling mansion in the middle of nowhere, from either a psychotic man or a supernatural demon. She is always terminally helpless and more than a bit screechy, but is inevitably "saved" by the good guy/future husband in the nick of time. (Female Gothic, Introduction)

Upon closer inspection, however, it is apparent that the gothic heroine's actions are not necessarily as simplistic as they first appear:

> This construct certainly has its roots in the Female Gothic of the 18th century, but the reality is much more complex than the modern reader's image might suggest. Gothic heroines, particularly Radcliffean ones, are quite contradictory in their actions and implications. (Female Gothic, Introduction)

This complexity has deepened through the years to embrace heroines who are often much less socially acceptable on some levels. Where the early gothic heroine tended to conform to society's concept of femininity while moving beyond her peers in terms of courage and resourcefulness, today's heroine has extended her reach far beyond society's changing expectations to create a new type of heroine, a hybrid of the earlier gothic heroine and the more traditional idea of the medieval knight.

The Gothic Heroine: A Girl Apart

[2] When discussing the gothic heroine, it is important not only to define who she is, but also how she differs from other literary heroines of her time. There are two ways in which the gothic heroine is set apart from her peers, and only one of these is within her control. Almost inevitably, the gothic heroine is intended to be the best at everything she does; she is sometimes so seemingly perfect as to appear self-parodying. The standards of what this perfection entails have changed over the years as societal expectations of women fluctuate; a modern gothic heroine is valued more for her strength and outspokenness, while an earlier heroine might be

prized for her purity and silence. Regardless, however, she is often more intelligent, more beautiful, more accomplished, and more resilient than any other woman – and in the earlier novels - more chaste. These are the characteristics within the control of the young woman. There are, however, outside factors surrounding the behaviour of the gothic heroine. By the very nature of the genre, these women are faced with huge obstacles—from depraved monks to bigamist husbands--particularly in their quest to maintain their perfections. These obstacles are nearly always overcome with grace and ingenuity.

Introducing a Modern Heroine: Buffy, Slayer of the Vampyrs

[3] The contemporary gothic heroine both draws on, and responds to, the earlier suppositions about the ideal virtues of the traditional gothic heroine. Notably, in the early 1990s a young screenwriter, Joss Whedon, conceived the idea of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He describes the concept as such:

> The first thing I ever thought of when I thought of *Buffy: The Movie* was the little...blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed, in every horror movie. The idea of "Buffy" was to subvert that idea, that image, and create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim. That element of surprise...[and] genre-busting is very much at the heart of both the movie and the series. (Whedon)

Although Whedon later dropped out of the film due to differences in creative vision, he revived Buffy in the form of a TV show that would run for seven years and eventually develop a cult-like following. In some ways, Buffy is a cross between the traditonal gothic heroine – beautiful, pure of heart, and resourceful – and the traditionally male role of knight in shining armour:
> BTVS transposes concepts of chivalry and knighthood from aristocratic and gendered definitions as this young woman and her friends arm themselves night after night to make their town of Sunnydale a safer place. (Sainato, 138)

The idea of reworking a stock character who had always been victimized, keeping many of her same personality traits and allowing her to fight back by killing vampires, is one of the main feminist themes that runs throughout the show. Although Buffy has been discussed in terms of women and feminism from various angles, the subject with which we are concerned is that of her relation to earlier gothic women.

Emerging moral ambiguity

"The emerging defender works in greys" (Sainato, 144)

[4] One of the main issues that shows contrast with the earlier examples the gothic heroine is the way in which the show *Buffy* deals with the moral ambiguity of the modern world. This is true

of many examples of modern gothic fiction. There is a significant difference between these and the moral questions dealt with in earlier fiction. With older gothic fiction, good and bad are in blatant opposition; they don't raise any difficult questions. *Buffy*, however, deals on a regular basis with shades of grey. The characters on the show often appear to be morally relativistic; Buffy is notorious for applying situational ethics rather than allowing her actions to be dictated by any power, be it a tangible group such as the Watchers' Council or more vague ideals perpetuated by society. Nowhere is this clearer than in Buffy's relationship with Angel. For nearly three years Buffy maintains a relationship with the vampire Angel despite her status as vampire slayer. She bases her judgements and actions on a continuous re-assessment of her situation, rather than any set of rules. This is in contrast with organized groups such as the Watchers' Council and the military operation The Initiative, who are portrayed as moral absolutists. The show demonstrates through ambiguous or complex characters why such rigidness is a negative trait. Demons such as Spike and Angel seek redemption for their actions, while other demons are known to be morally neutral or even exceptionally good.

[5] There is often a fear of "otherness" at the root of the gothic. In the early gothic, this was generally a religious or racial otherness. Throughout the Victorian era right into the twentieth century it was more a matter of class difference. Finally, in the modern gothic, this otherness has come to be represented symbolically, particularly in *Buffy* by the demons. In the spin-off series *Angel*, when Angel attempts to explain that demons – or "Evil Things" as the police officer Kate insists on calling them – can be just as morally ambiguous as humans he has difficulty articulating this point:

> Angel: It's just that the...uh...Evil Thing -- turns out that it wasn't an evil Thing.
> Kate: The Evil Thing wasn't an evil Thing?
> Angel: Well, it was an Evil Thing, in terms of that word. It just wasn't an evil Evil Thing.
> Kate: There are not-evil Evil Things?
> Angel: Well, yeah.

> (*The Prodigal*, A1015)

Much like with Buffy's experience of attempting to convince The Initiative that not all demons are evil, Angel finds that even in this day and age people grasp for something to define unequivocally as the enemy. This grows harder and harder as more moral ambiguities arise. A particularly poignant of example of these moral ambiguities in Buffy rests in Riley's addiction to being fed on by vampires; as Gwynn Symmonds discusses in "Solving Problems with Sharp Objects": Female Empowerment, Sex and Violence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*", Buffy ironically has little patience for shades of grey when it comes to the average vampire. She, in fact, falls prey to the same fear of otherness that she rejects in those who can not see that Angel or Spike might be good:

The most interesting contrast of terms in this conversation is when Riley calls the vamps who bit him "girls" and Buffy quickly counters with the correction "Vampires. Killers". She cannot understand what Riley is trying to tell her because the moral terms in which she judges the human/vampire dichotomy do not allow her to understand Riley's attraction to it. They fail to communicate but the real source of the distance between them is the limitation of Buffy's moral compass. There is no place, at this point in her journey, for moral ambiguity or shades of grey (Symmonds, 13)

In telling Riley that his behaviour is unacceptable, Buffy sets herself up as being permitted a different standard of morality than her peers – an issue that arises frequently in the show. Although she is undeniably different from those around her, Buffy's refusal to allow others to explore their own grey areas is one of her limitations.

Purity and the Modern Gothic

[6] One reason for Buffy's refusal to allow others to explore the darker side of Sunnydale may be that she views herself as setting an example for her friends; a role that the gothic heroine often took on in her earlier incarnations. As the gothic heroine has progressed, her role as a model for others has not diminished. She retains her sense of purpose and purity. This purity, however, is not necessarily of a sexual nature. Buffy's purity often stems from a purity of purpose, or of heart. In the *Buffy* episode "Helpless," where Buffy thinks she may be losing her powers, Angel reassures her that being a slayer is not all that makes her special. He relates to her the first time he ever saw her:

I watched you, and I saw you called. It was a bright afternoon out in front of your school. You walked down the steps... and...and I loved you. (…) 'Cause I could see your heart. You held it before you for everyone to see. And I worried that it would be bruised or torn. And more than anything in my life I wanted to keep it safe... to warm it with my own. (*Helpless*, 3012)

Angel speaks here of a different kind of purity. Whereas an earlier heroine might have been praised for her sexual purity, here Angel is praising Buffy for her purity of heart, soul, and purpose.

[7] It can be argued that within a modern context, women need even more strength of purpose and conviction to keep them from succumbing to temptation. As women have become more empowered, they have gained more possibilities for rebellion, even as society has come to view their rebellions as less transgressive. The fact that Buffy possesses an enormous amount of physical power, but uses it primarily for good, helps to demonstrate her purity. She is contrasted with the rogue slayer Faith, who is corrupted by the power given to her. In her very first appearance, it is obvious that Faith approaches slaying from a different angle than Buffy. After a kill, she comments to Buffy, "Isn't it crazy how slayin' just always makes you hungry and

horny?" (*Faith, Hope, and Trick*, 3003). Buffy, who has always seen slaying as a necessary if unfortunate duty, is taken aback by this comment. Although Buffy is not prudish, she approaches slaying on a certain level with the same solemnity that an earlier heroine might approach chastity.

Male Role in the Gothic Narrative

[8] Although the diminished importance of sexual purity in the modern gothic changes the role of men in the genre, they still have a significant function. The male figures in Joss Whedon's world often tend toward the extreme of gothic heroes, even if they do not perform heroics. Xander Harris, whose contributions to the fight against evil often entail wisecracks and jokes, nevertheless distinguishes himself in his acceptance of the female slayer as a leader and an impressive figure. Never does he question her abilities based on her gender. This is a trait common in the "Buffyverse": Whedon's male characters, with a few notable exceptions, either accept or embrace Buffy's strength. For the most part, even amongst the most evil of Whedon's male villains there is a certain sense of gender equality. Even the monsters Buffy fights never question her strength simply because she is female. They may often mistakenly believe that they will be the first to conquer the slayer, but this generally stems from an overestimation of their own skills, rather than an underestimation of hers.

[9] The most obvious exception to the lack of sexism is the seventh season's secondary villain, the evil preacher Caleb, who is doing the bidding of the season's primary evil, the incorporeal First. While the First is interested in much loftier goals, Caleb is a raging misogynist whose favourite pastime is torturing "dirty" girls. He is introduced to the show when he picks up a young woman running from monsters that he has set on her, and nearly kills her before tossing her from a moving vehicle. In one of Whedon's less subtle moments, Buffy later kills the nigh-indestructible preacher by cleaving him in two from the groin upwards.

[10] Much more subtle than the example of Caleb were the critiques of patriarchal society that were peppered throughout the show. The most obvious of these concerns the Watcher's Council, and the first men who created the slayer. The Watcher's Council, although it employs female watchers, is run in a way that is condescending and lacks respect toward Buffy and her friends. This is in spite of the fact that few of the watchers have ever had to endure a real battle. That the watchers supervise, but do not participate, is a tradition dating back to the shamans who first created the slayer. The later actions of the Watcher's Council are also reminiscent of the fourth season's military group "The Initiative", a predominantly male demon-hunting branch of the government. There, in spite of being able to take out numerous commandos on her own, Buffy was looked down upon for being female -even by her commando boyfriend Riley.

[11] Earlier in the gothic genre, just as earlier in many parts of literature and in reality, a man offering to take care of or give orders to a woman was not seen as negative. In many cases, it was considered chivalrous, or at the very least was considered the correct action. Many of the organizations and characters in *Buffy* who attempt to control the character's actions are not

ostensibly evil. Both the Watcher's Council and the Initiative, in spite of the betrayals and opinions of certain members of the groups, exist to fight the spread of evil in the world. Although this gets into difficult territory in *Buffy* as different characters debate the nature of evil – thus calling into question the identity of the enemy - these groups are apparently on the side of good. However, because of their patriarchal values, Buffy ends up in confrontation with them. In this way, the show differs from the earlier gothic, not because all the male roles have altered, but because of the way the women - and men – of *Buffy*'s world react to their interference.

[12] Buffy's fight against a male-dominated society is not confined to organizations; over the seven seasons, Buffy has three steady boyfriends who each bring a new question to the table. When she is involved with Angel, Buffy is quite young, and the relationship goes poorly. When she loses her virginity to him on her 17th birthday, the gypsy curse that had restored the vampire's soul is broken, and - soulless - he torments her until she is forced to kill him. Although he returns, soul restored, in the next season, their relationship is never quite the same. Ostensibly because of her age, Angel takes it upon himself to make the decision to end the relationship.

[13] In seasons four and five, Buffy is involved with Riley Finn, a member of the underground military organization The Initiative, who are bent on halting demonic activity (as well as conducting experiments on captured demons). Although Riley is a good person, he is accustomed to giving or following orders, and never really adjusts to the moral ambiguity that Buffy brings to the job. He resents her physical strength – he wants a woman he can protect, and more often than not it turns out that he needs her protection.

[14] The last of Buffy's relationships is not really a relationship at all. Over the last two seasons of the show, Buffy engages in sexual activity on a fairly regular basis with the series' former villain, the vampire Spike. While Angel represents the all-knowing, kind, protector hero, and Riley the more demanding character (who, because of his "all-American" persona, never really fit into Buffy's gothic world at all), Spike represents the drastic shifts from a lovesick man to a gothic villain, and finally to the epitome of the feminist, female-accepting man. Buffy is at first disgusted by what she sees as Spike's crush on her, and later is horrified when, in the episode *Seeing Red* (6019), Spike attempts to rape her. However, this experience serves as a catalyst for Spike, who goes off on a quest and is finally successful in having his own soul restored. He emerges from this to eventually understand his attraction to Buffy, and at her lowest emotional point of season seven he helps restore her faith in herself with this expression of his love:

> When I say, "I love you," it's not because I want you or because I can't have you. It has nothing to do with me. I love what you are, what you do, how you try. I've seen your kindness and your strength. I've seen the best and the worst of you. And I understand with perfect clarity exactly what you are. You're a hell of a woman. (*Touched*, 7020)

Here, at the end of the series, Spike shows what he has learned. He has emerged from the shadow of Angel, seen by many fans as Buffy's real love, to show an understanding of her that exceeds that of any other character. Where the other men who dated Buffy interacted with her on the level of the gothic hero, Spike transcended this to interact with her on the level of a person.

Lesbian Relationships

[15] Beyond the traditional heterosexual relationships in *Buffy* lies the exploration of the female relationships. The idea of love between two women has been alternately embraced as natural and vilified through representations of gothic women. Interestingly, intimate relations between women were not seen at first as a threat because women were deemed sexless:

> Female friendships and their intimacy register as either benign or threatening, depending on specific cultural anxieties. […] during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, European women enjoyed tolerance for their intimate friendships due to cultural denial that women experienced sexual desire. (Prescott, 493)

It was only with the advent of the "New Woman" at the end of the nineteenth century and the emerging realization of women's sexuality that women found themselves having to defend relationships previously seen as innocent.

> In the Gothic form, in which characters always encounter their doubles such that individual identity is undermined, the mistress and servant become natural doubles, engaged in perverse, erotic, and competitive relationships. They share a privacy and intimacy normally reserved only for lovers. Yet they struggle for power until one or the other dies or leaves the house. (Blackford, 236)

This fear of relationships between women is in stark contrast to the relationship 40 years earlier between Mina and Lucy of *Dracula*. Coming on the cusp of the feminist revolution, this relationship was praised by many men as an example of women at their best. Coming as they do at the end of the century, Mina and Lucy are some of the last women to be seen as totally non-threatening in their relationship, and even they are coming on the cusp of societal change.

[16] The most obvious example of a lesbian relationship in the modern gothic is that of Willow and Tara, who have become iconic not just within the realm of *Buffy* fans but within gay and lesbian culture as well. Willow and Tara are very open with each other, and interestingly are commonly thought of as the most conventional and healthy relationship on the show. Whedon rarely brings politics into the plot, even through these characters, and it takes perhaps two episodes for the other characters to be shown adjusting to this relationship. However, the women demonstrate both an understanding that their love may not be acceptable to everyone, as well as a defiant need to prove themselves to others, when they are questioned by a Watcher's Council interrogator regarding Buffy:

> Willow: Questions, great.
> Tara: Well, we can answer questions.
> Nigel: Good. I need to know a little bit more about the Slayer, and about the both of you. Your relationship, whatever you can tell me.
> Tara: O-o-our relationship?
> Willow: We're friends.
> Tara: Good friends.
> Willow: Girlfriends, actually.
> Tara: Yes, we're girlfriends.
> Willow: We're in love. We're ... lovers. We're lesbian, gay-type lovers.
> Nigel: I meant your relationship with the Slayer.
> (*Checkpoint*, 5012)

Although this exchange is intended to be amusing, it also serves to show how many women still feel the need – not unjustly – to prove themselves in their relationships with one another. It is partially this openness and need to show their love to the world that makes them one of the most popular and successful (in terms of longevity of their relationship) couples within the Buffyverse. Even in Buffy erotic fan fiction, which is notorious for bondage scenes, these two characters are almost always depicted in a loving, romantic, more conventional relationship.

[17] That is not to say, however, that none of the female relationships in Buffy are sexually unconventional. It is often implied or explicitly stated that Darla and Drusilla have engaged in sexual relations, as discussed by Laura Diehl in "Why Drusilla's More Interesting than Buffy". The article focuses on what Diehl terms "the discursive history of female sexuality as vampiric" (1). However, Diehl also discusses how "The erotic transgressions of Drusilla and Darla and in Buffy and Angel counter the ideology of romantic love that oppressively binds women to heterosexual monogamy and procreative sex" (44). This is a major change from earlier female gothic relationships; although other writers have certainly explored female sexuality through vampires (J Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* being a prime example), Whedon portrays the relationship between Darla and Drusilla as being primarily positive, despite its connotations of sadomasochism.

Bondage/non-consensual sex

[18] Drusilla and Darla are certainly not only characters on *Buffy* to engage in unconventional sexual practices, as scenes of bondage and non-consensual sex, both explicit and implicit, are common in the gothic genre. Bondage is a subject familiar to *Buffy* fans; it figures predominantly in much of the fan fiction composed about the show. The prevalence of this element in the fan fiction is directly tied to its pervasiveness on the show, where it is both referenced casually and shown explicitly. The writers of *Buffy* use it in turns to amuse, to titillate, and to shock. In the episode *Consequences* (3015), when Faith is being restrained by Angel after she attempts to rape Xander, they discuss a common term in bondage for the word spoken when a sub wants to end the scene:

Faith: "I know what it looked like, but we were just playing."
Angel: "And he forgot the safety word. Is that it?"
Faith: "Safety words are for wusses."

With this, Faith indicates that her interest in confinement and forced sex-play goes beyond role play, and demonstrates a much more dangerous need for literal control.

[19] In a similar show of women taking a "top" role in sex, a scene in the third season episode *The Wish* (3009) shows a vampire version of Willow from another dimension having Angel chained so that she can torture him whenever she pleases. When vampire Willow is later accidentally summoned to our dimension, she laments the loss of this toy, saying "This is a dumb world. In my world there are people in chains, and we can ride them like ponies." In this case, the reference to bondage is used mostly for comedic effect. However, seeing Willow dressed as a dominatrix and torturing people with matches was a huge shock to many viewers. This episode, *Doppelgangland* (3016), shows Willow as wanting to break out of her role as the ideal gothic heroine – someone who is intelligent, resourceful, and attractive, but leaves the fighting to another party – to become someone who is perceived as less boring and submissive. Although the experience of coming face-to-face with her vampire doppelganger shows Willow the potential consequences of being too out of control – something mirrored in season six when Willow actually loses control of her magics and becomes just as evil as her vampire twin – this is a catalyst for Willow to begin to break out of her shell and begin to assert herself within their group.

[20] Although some of the above is used to amuse, *Buffy* has also dealt at times with serious cases of not simply bondage, but of non-consensual sex. Although this serves as a catalyst for his quest for a soul, Spike's attempted rape of Buffy marks one of the only times where Buffy is truly defeated. It is important to note, however, that this episode is meant primarily to deal with Buffy's self-doubt and Spike's need for change. This not coded as an erotic scene, rather it is something that was highly disturbing to both the viewers and the actors. This is not bondage or S&M play; it is an abuse of sexual power. Generally, prior to *Buffy*, scenes of sex in the gothic were non-consensual. *Buffy,* along with other modern works such as those of Anne Rice, brought in the element of sexual play that was consensual but still bondage-related.

[21] As with all of the issues that arise in Buffy, however, the idea of consent in sex is often a blurry area. As Carolyn Cocca discusses in her article "First Word 'Jail', Second Word 'Bait': Adolescent Sexuality, Feminist Theories, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer", issues of consent are contentious even amongst different factions of feminism. Although radical feminist argue that issues of consent are inherently gendered – that a woman is by default more vulnerable in her sexual relations – Whedon takes a more liberal feminist approach, showing both the male and female characters as falling prey to problems of consent. Buffy's failed first sexual encounter with Angel, which turns her lover into a monster, may seem the first choice for discussion of problems of consent relating to age. However, Whedon turns this on its head in his portrayal of

Willow's first sexual experience, which is also with an older male; "For Willow, there seemed
to be only positive effects from her first sexual encounter with Oz; it is made clear that it is not
his first time and that she worries about this, but it is made similarly clear that Oz's feeling for
her are very strong." (Cocca, 9). Beyond issues of age and consent, and in contrast with the idea
that women are always more sexually at risk, Whedon also shows Xander being sexually used
and discarded by Faith (The Zeppo, 3013). Whedon demonstrates with these scenes the
complexity of sexual relations – a complexity that is new to the gothic given its roots.

Issues of Choice and Agency

[22] Although the power to make sexual decisions is an important one for the modern gothic
heroine, the ability to make choices in others areas of life is just as crucial. Due to the very
nature of her powers, Buffy in many ways lacks the power of choice just as much as do her
gothic predecessors, and even lacks the freedom some of her female contemporaries. In her
wedding vows to Xander, Anya promises to honour, "but not to obey you, of course, because
that's anachronistic and misogynistic" (*Hells Bells*, 6016). Buffy, on the other hand, has her
powers bestowed upon her by a patriarchal system, and although she could refuse to do the work
assigned to her, her morals do not permit her to do so. Throughout the seven seasons, however,
she strives to make her own choices even when they could have disastrous results. This is most
apparent with the huge risk she takes in the series finale. Although the girls who have the
potential to become slayers are chosen to receive the powers, Buffy and Willow make it so that
they are able to choose whether or not, as well as when, to accept these powers. Buffy informs
the assembled potential slayers, many of whom who have been injured or seen comrades killed
because they lack the power that belongs to the "chosen one", that, "This is where *you* make a
choice" (emphasis mine). She informs the group that the slayer line began when a girl was
imbued with demonic powers by a group of cowardly but powerful men, and that "This woman
(Willow) is more powerful than all of them." This sort of acknowledgement of female
empowerment is obviously implicit throughout the show, but this is one of the most obvious
instances.

The Potency of Names

[23] Along with addressing the issue of self-agency, Whedon addresses the idea of power over
others. The idea of being able to name or label a person has long been thought to instil the
namer with power over them, and has thus been a source of contention for many feminists. This
particularly ties in with the virgin/whore syndrome, which assigns women only two possible
titles. It has been suggested that:

> …to be self-determined one must first claim the right to self-definition and naming. Since
> the "master-subject relationship is based partly on the master's power to name and define
> the subject", the defining of women as either "evil" or "innocent" assigns to them a status.
> (Wyman, 213)

As pointed out in Wyman's article, the word "define" is derived from the Latin word definite, which means "to limit". If women's role in society is defined as, or limited to, her role as either suitable mother or prostitute, then men – or anyone using these terms – are able to use women's sexuality as a form of control.

[24] The idea of names containing power is utilized from the very first episode of *Buffy*, both in jest and seriously. After finding out that several people have already found out her secret identity in spite of her best efforts, Buffy finally encounters a vampire who does not know who she is, and feigns relief: "I tell you, keeping a secret identity in this town is a job of work." (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1001) Later on, in a season 2 episode where Buffy informs Giles that a friend of hers is already aware of her powers, Giles draws her aside and asks "You are not, by any chance, betraying your secret identity just to impress, um, cute boys, are you?" (*Lie to Me*, 2007). These examples are indicative of the fact that much of Buffy's safety and that of her friends and family relies on an element of secrecy. However, Buffy does not always treat her identity with the seriousness it deserves. When Giles warns her not to reveal her secret, she responds glibly:

> Giles: If your identity as the Slayer is revealed it could put you and all those around you in grave danger.
> Buffy: Well, in that case I won't wear my button that says, 'I'm the Slayer, ask me how!'
> (*Never Kill a Boy on the First Date*, 1005)

This response is typical of Buffy, who both understands the gravity of her situations and rejects a serious consideration of her duties in favour of a sarcastic remark.

[25] The name Buffy itself, just like the names of some past gothic heroines, implies much about the character. It is difficult to imagine a more feminine sounding name than Buffy, and she often has to feign weakness to live up to her name. In the episode *Phases* (2015) when Buffy must attempt to throw the class bully in self-defence class, Willow reminds her that "Remember, you're supposed to be a meek girly-girly like the rest of us." The name itself is mocked within the show in the very first episode, *Welcome to the Hellmouth* (1001), when some of Buffy's classmates are discussing her arrival to the school. One girl, later identified as Aura, comments to her friend "What kind of a name is Buffy anyways," before greeting her friend Aphrodesia and referencing another friend named Blue. These references turn Buffy's name into a sort of satire, where viewers tuning into to the show may expect what the name promises – a classic gothic heroine, or "meek girly-girl" – only to be surprised by what they find.

Buffy: Feminine or Masculine?

[26] Although Buffy may not be meek, there is no call to label Buffy masculine; part of her power comes from her overtly feminine appearance. In fact, while the show would be considered feminist by some, the main character rarely expresses any particular views on

feminism. In the episode *Some Assembly Required* (2002), Willow and Buffy sit and talk while Xander and Giles dig up a grave to find out if it has been robbed. The following conversation ensues:

> Xander: Y'know, this might go a lot faster if you femmes actually picked up a shovel, too.
> Giles: Here, here.
> Buffy: Sorry, but I'm an old-fashioned gal. I was raised to believe that men dig up the corpses and the women have the babies.

It should be noted, however, that Buffy's status as both overtly feminine and powerful has little to do with her status as slayer. In season two we are introduced to Kendra, a slayer who was called due to Buffy's brief brush with death in the season one finale. Kendra takes her duty as slayer very seriously. The girls at first do not get along, partially due to differences in training and approaches to slaying:

> Buffy: I don't take orders. I do things my way.
> Kendra: No wonder you died.
> (*What's My Line Part II*, 2010)

Their relationship deepens over time, however, and Buffy begins to feel sympathy for the other slayer, who has been trained from a young age and has difficulty forming emotional attachments.

> Kendra: In case de curse does not succeed, dis is my lucky stake. I have killed many vampires wit it. I call it Mr. Pointy.
> Buffy: You named your stake?
> Kendra: Yes.
> Buffy: Remind me to get you a stuffed animal.
> (*Becoming Part I*, 2021)

This exchange shows Buffy once again playing a nurturing role, as she is later forced to do much more often in after the death of her mother in season five, particularly in relation to her younger sister, Dawn. This balance of the motherly role with the violence inherent to being a slayer is just one more dynamic added to the complicated list of characteristics sometimes common to the modern gothic heroine.

Conclusion

[27] Over the years, the gothic heroine has developed from a perfectly proper young lady to a heroic defender. Regardless of this change, however, she has retained one important distinguishable trait: her ability to function as a role model for young women of her time period. Whether she is behaving with wisdom and propriety when faced with difficult life choices or patrolling the streets at night to keep the world safe from demonic activity, the gothic heroine has

a history of staying true to her values even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Although many have scoffed at the gothic as a literary genre, there is no denying that the gothic heroine presents not only an interesting case study psychologically, but an important record of both ideals of femininity and female advancements from her conception onwards.

[28] It is obvious from the many examples collected here that there is a lot more to the gothic heroine than her reputation would suggest. One of the modern gothic's most powerful women, Joss Whedon's nerd-turned-powerful-witch Willow, is, at the close of the series, possibly the most powerful woman on the planet. This is indicative of her progress within the series itself, as, in season four, when Willow attempts to join a college Wicca group in order to find some kindred spirits, her suggestions of practical magic are dismissed by the sceptical group leader in favour of a bake sale.   Following a sarcastic suggestion that this could be followed up with "rid[ing] around on our broomsticks," the leader informs her that "You know, some stereotypes are not very empowering." (*Hush*, 4010). In reality, stereotypes are never empowering, but it is the ability of the gothic heroine to assert the ideals of her generation while rising above stereotypes of female weakness and submission that in fact make the gothic heroine into a surprisingly fascinating and empowered character.

[29] Literature has often helped to reflect social anxieties about shifting positions of power; this responsibility is now being reflected in television and film as well. The gothic genre provides a powerful tool for understanding these anxieties, particularly because of the evolution from submissive to dominant women that is depicted in its works, and the move from simple moral rules to complex choices. Although it is certainly not the only genre that reflects the changing social positions of women, it does so in such a marked way that it allows for an in-depth study of these societal advances. It is a genre that is often not taken seriously within its own time by academics and critics, yet it seems to have a remarkable ability to remain within the collective psyche of society, as evidenced by the number of period courses taught in universities today that contain at least one example of this type of literature. *Buffy* is a prime example of how the gothic can influence both scholars and its audience at large while showing mutability in order to remain relevant to the changing world. In *The Gift*, when a bewildered young man who Buffy has just saved calls after her in shock, "But you're just a girl", Buffy replies "That's what I keep saying" (5022). This statement, in Joss Whedon's world, is not a negative; through its positive portrayal of strength in young women, Buffy has changed the meaning of "just a girl", and in doing so, has helped to pave the way for generations of gothic heroines to come.

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