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Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

The hit television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which ran seven seasons from 1997-2003. It was created by Joss Whedon and was directed by Whedon Himself and several other people, most of whom were men. The series was about a young woman named Buffy who was chosen to protect the world from all evil. She and her group of friends help save their town from various evils such as vampires, demons, and other supernatural beings. This show was known for being a feminist show, but conveys negative messages about sexuality on occasion and is racist as it lacks adequate representation of people of color. In this journal, I will look at how the hit television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* perpetuates feminist ideals but struggles with racism and negative messages about sexuality.

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Post #1: Season 1 Episode 1, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," 10 March 1997

This episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* serves as the pilot for the series, establishing the premise of the show as well as building on the recurring themes that will be seen throughout the series, including hidden racism, and class privilege.

Buffy, the main protagonist of the show, arrives in Sunnydale after being expelled from her previous high school in Los Angeles for burning down the gymnasium. She also happens to be the main super-heroine of the series and its namesake. She is designated as the slayer, which

gives her extreme agility, reflexes, and strength. It is established that Buffy and her single mother are well off, belonging to the owning class. They have their own home in what appears to be southern California. Money is clearly not an issue for this family of two as they were able to pick up and move to a new town without trouble. Her status of privilege shows through when she burns down the school gymnasium and is not punished for it other than facing expulsion.

All of the other main characters that will recur for seasons to come are identified as well. Willow, the kind-hearted young woman that Buffy befriends and saves is an aspiring student at Sunnydale High who takes her studies very seriously. Giles is the watcher, the school librarian--equivalent to that of a side kick. Xander is Willow's longtime friend and former kindergarten lover. Buffy befriends him, too, though his interest in Buffy indicates he would rather date her. Cordelia is one of the popular women at school. She embodies many negative stereotypes about young women, including being superficial and self-centered. She insults Willow based on her appearance and clothing, saying that she is a nerd. This type of behavior is what fuels the patriarchy.

The demographics of Sunnydale do not match that of what one would expect from a small(ish) town in southern California. It is predominately white. There were only three people of color that I saw when watching the episode. Two of them were background characters--extras with no lines--serving only as filler. The other character of color was a young, black woman whose only line was some superfluous gossiping, only to have a dead body fall out of a locker onto her. This sends that message that the lives of white people are more relevant to the narrative than those of people of color.

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Post #2: Season 1 Episode 4, "Teacher's Pet," 25 March 1997

The theme of sexuality sets the tone for this episode of *Buffy*. After the biology teacher at Sunnydale High School is murdered, a new substitute, Ms. French, takes over. Ms. French is conventionally attractive. She also crosses ethical lines by soliciting affairs with her male students, only to kill them like she did to her predecessor. This reinforces the status quo view of women's sexuality as something evil and manhood being measured in terms of heterosexual sex.

Ms. French is not actually a human, but a giant praying mantis in the form of a human woman. Her goal is to procreate to make more of her species. However, there is a caveat--she will only mate with male virgins. Xander happens to be in her class and a virgin. However, at the beginning of the episode, there are a few of his peers sitting at the bar in their local club discussing sex. This makes Xander insecure, so he tries to one-up them, implying that he has sex on a daily basis, even though that is far from the truth. However, one of Xander's peers that was sitting at the bar is also a virgin. Ms. French also took him back to her house to rape him. When Buffy, Willow, and Giles find Ms. French's house to save the two, they connect the logic that Xander and his peer must be virgins. They both deny it and Xander's peer threatens legal action if word gets out. This sets the notion that a man can not be a man unless he has had sex is perpetuated as feels the need to lie; that in order to become a man, a boy must engage in heterosexual sex.

The fear of female sexuality is also perpetuated in this episode. Why did the writers have to make Ms. French an overtly sexual being that rapes minors? Why did they have to make her a verminous, insect-like creature that kills her prey after she is done using her victims? Perhaps it

relates back to the fear of female sexuality. The fear of women having control over their own bodies, something that is *not normal*, something that is *deviant*.

It is also important to mention that the word rape was never used at any point in this episode. It is assumed that Ms. French raped Xander's peer, but other language, such as "mate" and "fertilize," is used to describe the event ("Teacher's Pet"). The perpetuates the notion that men cannot be raped, even though it is not true and proven wrong by this episode.

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### Post #3: Season 2 Episode 20, "Go Fish," 5 May 1998

This episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer is about the Sunnydale High swim team. The coach of the team drugs all of the swimmers with steroids hidden in the sauna steam that turns them into sea creature-like beasts. Since Buffy is the slayer of all evil, it is up to her to solve the problem and to expose issues such as sexism and sexual assault in the educational setting.

The episode starts out with one of the swimmers of the team flirting with Buffy at a beach party. A couple of days later, the two are driving the swimmer's car to school. Upon pulling into the parking lot, the swimmer tries to sexually assault Buffy. He starts by asking if she is wearing a bra, a question completely unrelated to the conversation at hand. When Buffy tries to leave the car, the swimmer locks the door. He tells Buffy that she must "like it rough" ("Go Fish"). She smashes his head into the steering wheel of the car to defend herself, breaking his nose. The principal oversees this encounter and blames Buffy, even though she is the victim. The swimmer says that Buffy was "leading him on," citing her clothing, even though she was dressed modestly ("Go Fish"). This is perhaps commenting on how women are treated when they claim that they were sexually assaulted. It is commonplace for a woman's clothing to be a factor in deciding

whether not the assault was justified. It is the old, sexist, and oppressive ideology that a woman must be “asking for it” if she shows any skin. It is also the reason that schools to justify harassing young women about their clothing decisions with arbitrary dress codes, using the boys as an excuse.

Later in the episode after three of the swim team’s swimmers, including the one who assaulted Buffy at the beginning of the episode, have turned into the creatures, Buffy confronts the coach about what he is doing and he pushes her into the sewer where the creatures are hiding. Buffy assumes that she was to be food for the creatures until the coach says “boys have other needs” (“Go Fish”). The implication is that Buffy is going to serve as a sex slave to the gross creatures. This is extremely violent, reducing women to providers of men’s pleasure. Fortunately, Buffy gets out of the sewer safely with the help of Xander, and the coach falls in. It is assumed that he is eaten by his mutant swimmers.

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#### Post #4: Season 3 Episode 1, “Anne,” 29 September 1998

The episode, “Anne,” takes a look at Buffy who has run away to Los Angeles to get a new start on life. There, she encounters a group of demons who traffick homeless and poor youths into slavery in another dimension. This episode provides commentary on how poor and homeless people are treated in United States society.

When Buffy ran away to LA, she got a job as a waitress at a nameless diner. It is clear that she completely left her middle-class lifestyle in Sunnydale to flee. She is now living in a small, run-down studio apartment in a poor neighborhood filled with noise pollution from the city. She works her shifts to support herself and live a quiet life. Throughout the streets, she

notices many old, homeless people wandering the streets mumbling “I am no one” to themselves over and over again (“Anne”). She runs into somebody she saved back in Sunnydale, who had recently been to her restaurant as well--Lily. Lily’s boyfriend is missing and Buffy agrees to help. They track Lily’s boyfriend to a homeless shelter that is really a portal to a hell dimension. This is the front for the human trafficking ring. This human trafficking ring put on by the demons is perhaps an allegory for the way the homeless are treated here in the United States. They are treated terribly and abused. They are forced to complete manual labor for the demons until they are too old to work any longer. Then they are spit back out through the portal onto the streets. This is only in a day though as time in the hell dimension goes by much faster than on earth. Many homeless people today are seemingly stripped of their identity, similarly to how the demons did that to the youths by making them deny their old identity. Homeless people today are seen as bums, and bums only; a nuisance that is an inconvenience to people of higher social standings.

Poor and homeless youths are the only ones that are preyed upon in this episode. The justification for this is that nobody really cares about them--that nobody will notice if they go missing. This translates directly to how very little care is given to the homeless here. They are often left out on the streets with very little resources. The government does not do enough to provide aid, or shelter to the homeless, using Dr. Gordillo’s formula of problematizing, *demonizing*, dehumanizing, and criminalizing them to only make oppressive legislation against the community. However, in all irony, the demons are what is doing this to them in this episode. Perhaps the demon in the real world is the government that does not care, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is bringing it to light.

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Post #5: Season 3 Episode 4, "The Beauty and the Beasts," 20 October 1998

A pair of Buffy and her gang's friends, Debbie, is in a relationship with a man, Pete, who is physically abusive. It is up to Buffy before this monster kills everyone who makes him jealous, revealing some hidden messages about race and gendered violence.

In order to make himself more masculine for Debbie, Pete has been taking a special potion to increase his macho appeal. However, this comes a side effect: he becomes a figurative and literal monster. The potion he is taking is making him have outrageous mood swings. When he and Debbie are about to hook up in the janitor's closet of Sunnydale High. Pete notices that his potion jar is empty and Debbie confesses to dumping it. This sends Pete into a rage, hitting Debbie across the face and giving her a black eye and a nosebleed. Debbie did nothing to deserve to be beating. Pete's abuse is his own personal problem that he takes out on Debbie. If anything, Debbie was trying to help him by ridding of the toxic potion. However, Pete also goes after the other men on Debbie's life that make him jealous. One of the men was one of Debbie's peers from her band class. They would horse around, but their relationship was completely platonic. Pete could not handle this and killed Debbie's friend. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does a good job at making it clear it is not Debbie's fault that she is in an abusive relationship; that it is Pete's fault for hitting her. This is reinforced by the fact that Pete is not only a figurative monster but a literal one, too, as he takes on the form of some creature when he goes into his rages.

This episode is the first out of the five episodes I have examined critically that features a person of color with more than one line. The school counselor, Mr. Platt, a black man, helps Buffy through her emotional tough time. He is also Debbie's counselor. This, of course, made

Pete jealous, so he killed the counselor. The first black man in the five episodes I reviewed was killed within the first 30 minutes of the episode. This, unfortunately, is a very common trope in television today and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* participated in it whether it was intentional for the black man to die, or not.

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Post #6: Season 4, Episode 22, "Restless," 23 May 2000

This racist episode takes place after Buffy and her crew complete their final battle of the season's main antagonist. In order to beat the antagonist, Buffy and her crew had to call up the power of the first slayer through a powerful spell. The first slayer is a woman of color, a black woman to be specific, who is of African descent. The episode does not make it clear of what nationality she is, which could imply two messages to viewers: that all Africans and African culture is the same, or that this slayer pre-dates the era of national boundaries. After conjuring up the original slayer's spirit for help in the fight against evil, the spirit remains, haunting Buffy and her gang in their own dreams.

I found the way that the writers portrayed the first slayer in this episode to be quite racist. Her goal seems to be to kill the gang in their dreams. I have two problems with this. First, the whole point of the slayer is to fight vampires, demons, and all things evil. This contradicts her desire to kill Buffy and her friends, as Buffy is a present-day slayer who fights evil and her gang is there to help. Buffy is not evil, so the spirit of the first slayer should have no reason to go after them. The second problem I have with this portrayal is the fact that it perpetuates racist ideologies about black people--it perpetuates the stereotype that black people are violent for no reason and criminals.



The visual representation of the first slayer is not much better than ideological portrayal. She is posed as animal-like. She crawls on all fours and growls; she is feral and primal. She borders not even being human. The visuals provide support for white domination over people of color and reiterate the guise of Europeans bringing civilization to justify colonization. Buffy also comments on the first slayer's hair, which is in the form of dreadlocks. She says that it is not "workplace appropriate" highlighting her own racism and disapproval of black people's hair.

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#### Post #7: Wiccans, Witches, and Paganism in *Buffy*

One of the reasons I am drawn to the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is its representation of witches and other alternative religions in an overwhelmingly oppressive, Christian culture. Willow Rosenberg and her partner, Tara Maclay are not only sapphic lovers, but high-level Wiccans and witches, too.

Throughout European and American history, women labeled as witches have been subject to harassment, persecution, violence, and even death. I think is due to the fact of the Christian churches overwhelming influence on European and Euro-American culture, as well as the people who have been colonized by that culture. It is not a secret that the institution that is the Christian church has been around for a very long time, and will likely be here for many years to come. Since the church is a fundamentally sexist institution, its reign has led its followers to adopt patriarchal views. A part of this patriarchal oppression has taken the form of so-called "witch hunts." These hunts usually entailed death to the woman who was accused of being a witch, even though these women were usually trying to help others with their magic and alchemy. Witches were deemed as evil.

Willow and Tara seem to challenge centuries of wrongdoing to women who were labeled as witches. They are the embodiment of good in its most basic definition as they help Buffy and her gang fight off evils. Without their help, the Buffy would be dead and the show would have been canceled seasons earlier. The two are human and do make mistakes, sometimes big ones, but they are there to help just like the witches of yesteryear.

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Post #8: Season 5, Episode 11, "Triangle", 9 January 2001

This episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* touches a bit on Anya's past. During a spell Willow is trying out, she gets distracted and the spell goes awry unleashing a giant troll demon named Olaf. The troll that was unleashed goes around the town of Sunnydale and causes mass amounts of destruction. However, it is made clear that Anya used to date the troll over 1000 years ago before she was transformed into a vengeance demon and he was an actual monster. Anya implies that Olaf was an abusive lover; an alcoholic and unfaithful. I feel that the writers of this episode portrayed this abusive partner similarly to how they did in the episode "The Beauty and the Beasts" in season three. Olaf is, or was a figurative monster, so Anya used some magic to turn him into a literal, grotesque creature.

I feel that this episode also transcends gender expectations. Women in society are expected to be small, weak, and submissive. Men are supposed to be big, strong, and act tough. Besides Buffy's character directly challenging these gender expectations as she is anything but weak and submissive, Anya crosses these lines. She was fed up with Olaf's abuse and disregard for her so she took matters into her own hand and made him a troll. It creates a head spin for many because women in television, film, and the media, in general, are usually the ones to have

violence perpetrated upon them by men. Women only commit violence or stand up against men on screen occasionally, whether it be for reasons of self-defense or otherwise. Knowing that Anya stood up for herself back in the year 0880, and put Olaf in his place flips this notion on its head.

Turning Olaf into a troll is what got Anya her former job as a vengeance demon. As this type of demon. As a vengeance demon continued work in helping women who are wronged by men in their relationships by granting wishes that serve as karma.

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Post #9: Season 3, Episode 14, “Bad girls”, 09 February 1999

At this point in season three of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, viewers have been introduced to Faith. At the end of season one, Buffy died for a few minutes. This triggered a new slayer to emerge. The next young woman in line: a black woman. Since one of the themes of the show seems to be death to people of color, she was met with an untimely departure. Faith shows up. She appears to be the polar opposite of Buffy, and the episode “Bad Girls” brings this to light. The Madonna-whore dichotomy could not be less prevalent.

Buffy is young, blonde woman. She has only had sex once in her life at this point in the series and is not portrayed as a very sexual person. She is the fighter of evil, so naturally, she is the embodiment of all things good. Buffy represents purity. Faith has brown hair, which is looked down upon as opposed to blonde hair. Faith is overt about her sexuality. In “Bad Girls”, she stabs an innocent man by accident. This makes her turn to evil side in which she helps the mayor with his ascension. Faiths come to represent evil. Buffy is the Madonna, Faith is the whore.

In a sense, the dichotomy between Faith and Buffy reinforces the patriarchal view of women's sexuality. Buffy is pure and blonde, so she is represented as good. Faith has brown hair and is open about her sexual desires and conquests, so she is represented as evil. Like the episode from season one, "Teacher's Pet", sexuality is associated with evil, and purity is adjacent to goodness. The message behind this dichotomy between Buffy and Faith is that women who have sex are in some way bad and that purity is virtuous, which corresponds to society's view on sexuality. This is a theme that is prevalent in the series until later seasons.

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Post #10: Season 2, Episode 19, "Only Have Eyes for You", 28 April 1998

This episode focuses on an affair between a male student at Sunnydale High and a teacher from 1955 that turned out tragically. The female teacher wanted to break things off with the student as she felt the affair was unethical. The male student could not handle this so he shot his teacher after school hours and then proceeded to kill himself. Nearly 50 years later, the spirits of this former couple are possessing various students, staff, and faculty members at night to recreate the violent and tragic end to their two lives, claiming those who fall victim.

The reason why the male student killed his teacher, and he does the same in the recreation is because he feels that she should be the only one to be able to love the teacher. He is possessive over this woman and commits a violent act over her wanting to leave him. This is perhaps an allegory for abusive relationships. Usually, a male partner will not let his female partner go, to get out of the relationship without there being drama or gendered violence.

Once Buffy's gang figures out what happened and why the school is being possessed they seem to defend the young man and justifying his need to make amends with what happened that

one night in '55. Buffy is not having it, though. She completely disagrees with young man's need for reconciliation. She feels that what he did to that innocent teacher was awful, and he should have to live the rest of his dead life as spirit knowing the fact. She feels that he should not get a free pass because he regrets his decision. She is making a statement by not giving him sympathy--something that domestic abusers get too often.

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Overall, I would say that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a feminist show. It does have its host of issues, including racism and the demonization of sexuality. I can only recall one black character who appears with lines in more than one episode and does not get killed or die. Though, Buffy's character is empowering. She is a fighter who transcends traditional gender roles and expectations, who is a hero and believes in sisterhood. Many of the other women in the show challenge the roles and expectations of women in society, too. This is why *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* goes down as my absolute favorite women-in-pop-culture-moment, as well as one of my favorite series in general.

## Works Cited

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