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BOOK PROFILE: TELEVISED MORALITY

A profile of Gregory Stevenson's *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Hamilton Books, 2003. 316pp. \$42.00 paperback. ISBN 0-7618-28338

GREGORY STEVENSON'S *Televised Morality* is a serious investigation of the moral complexity of TV's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (hereto after referred to as *Buffy*). Much like the TV show it analyzes, *Televised Morality* works on multiple levels, with the superficial and most obvious layer not necessarily being the most meaningful. On the surface, *Televised Morality* is an analysis of the ways *Buffy* comments on contemporary moral issues. Through an accurate, interesting and informative analysis, Stevenson convincingly argues that there is a lot to be learned from watching *Buffy* with an open and critical mind. Stevenson suggests that TV be taken seriously as a site for moral deliberation and commentary. Understood as an art form that communicates moral meaning and exposes the limits of absolutism, TV disrupts moral decision making by complicating moral worldviews. Stevenson treats these disruptions and complications positively. He rejects simple moral worldviews as self-deceiving, self-serving and unable to respond adequately to the world's complexities. *Televised Morality* uses *Buffy* as an occasion to think about what constitutes morality in an age where TV dominates moral discourse and where religion's authority on moral values is increasingly marginalized.

As a television show and cultural phenomenon, *Buffy* was different from other shows. Besides the rarity of shows that engage or blend the genres of fantasy and horror or have strong female leads, *Buffy* enjoyed popular fan support on the Internet and serious academic attention in the forms of books, conferences and journal articles. To watch and be a fan of *Buffy* was to give up the safety of normal TV conventions. On *Buffy*, characters died and betrayed expectations, regular characters suffered physical and emotional tragedies, and the show's mythology was deepened and re-written. It was a show about how the unfamiliar and unsafe lurks beneath the familiar and ordinary. But *Buffy* was more than an unsafe TV show. To think with *Buffy*, or to try and think through

Buffy, is to think against the grain of issues like the role of women in society, alternative sexualities, the nature of the hero, of good, evil, sacrifice, redemption, community, guilt, and violence. Because *Buffy*-thinking is always counter to conventional wisdom and tradition, it is an unsafe way of thinking. To try and think morality with and through *Buffy* results in a morality that exposes the limitations of conservative and traditional moral thought. *Buffy* makes televising morality unsafe for morality.

Where Stevenson succeeds in making *Buffy* unsafe for morality, he is less successful at making *Buffy* unsafe for religion. This shortcoming/oversight is significant because some of the harshest criticisms of the show are motivated by a perceived anti-religious or anti-Christian bias. Stevenson succeeds in showing how moral thought could learn from *Buffy* but seems to reverse that momentum by presenting *Buffy*'s depiction of sacrifice, redemption and community in Christian terms that should not threaten potential Christian viewers. Stevenson can draw from *Buffy* because the TV show has a reputation for being different and for being thought about differently. Necessarily, thinking about something, in this case morality and religion, alongside *Buffy* means that at the end of the thought the reader should think differently about both.

Taking place in the fictional California town of Sunnydale, *Buffy* explores life on a "hellmouth" (a portal through which demonic forces gained entry to this world). In each generation one girl is chosen to be the slayer and is gifted with supernatural strength and healing powers. There are many potential slayers; when one slayer dies another potential is elevated to the status of slayer. It is the slayer's responsibility to hunt down and kill vampires, demons, warlocks, witches, and those who use supernatural forces to harm others. Though she accepts her responsibility as slayer, Buffy Summers (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar) also wants a normal life. It is the conflict between her desire to be normal and her responsibility for the safety of those around her that provides the plot for *Buffy*. In her struggle against evil, Buffy is aided by her friends: Willow, who over seven seasons goes from a shy, bookish nerd to a powerful, and at one point evil, witch. Willow falls in love, loses her boyfriend, and eventually realizes her own homosexuality. Also aiding Buffy is Xander, a social outcast who never acquires any special powers but who is committed to Buffy. Through his life-long friendship with Willow, he staves off an apocalypse Willow wants to bring about when her girlfriend is murdered. Overseeing the group is Giles, the high school librarian who also functions as Buffy's 'watcher' (mentor and trainer) and surrogate father. If this were all that *Buffy* were about the show would neither have lasted long on TV nor have garnered the fan base and academic support that it has. Series creator Joss Whedon and the writers took great care in crafting the fight against real incarnations of evil as a metaphor for the emotional roller-

coaster of high school and college life. Stevenson rightly points out that those who fail to appreciate the show's ability to move between the literal text of *Buffy* and its metaphorical subtext miss many of its points and its moral complexity.

Stevenson's contention is that when TV usurps religion as provider of narratives through which cultural truths and values are expressed, identified and constructed, it becomes a site for the consideration and revaluation of moral beliefs. By dealing with these questions, TV has established itself as a cultural authority that now challenges religion as the moral voice of America. For Stevenson, it is less important that morals and values come from TV than it is that TV is where moral sentiments and attitudes are put into play and where their usefulness and efficacy is tested against various scenarios. Drawing from R. W. Beardsmore's *Art and Morality*, Stevenson says that art "functions indirectly by facilitating a better understanding of life that then allows us to make more informed moral decisions" (xii). Stevenson adopts Beardsmore's conclusion that greater appreciation for life's complexities leads to more informed moral decisions. Stevenson sees TV's role as secondary, though necessary, in the formation of one's moral beliefs. TV plays a vital role in the formation of moral beliefs because allows for "a greater understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, by exploring the reality of the human condition with all its virtue and vice, its potential and failure," (18) but it does so only indirectly because "art is not designed for the clear communication of moral propositions. Its moral message, if any, is implicit rather than explicit" (18). Because one watches TV to be entertained and not to learn, TV can indirectly complicate moral belief. *Buffy* is perfectly suited to this understanding of the relationship between art and morality because it is both funny and serious, giving the appearance of not taking itself too seriously while dealing with mature themes in a complex way.

Stevenson contends that moral frameworks failing to account for "the dark impulses of humanity and face them squarely" are ineffectual (19). The pristine vision of the world they depict is unrealistic and does not equip the individual or the community with the necessary tools for dealing with a world in which evil is encountered in many shades of gray. *Buffy* confronts this issue by challenging the absolutism with which one can separate good and evil: the character Oz is mellow, understated and self-controlled. On nights when there is a full moon, Oz is a werewolf; if allowed to roam free, he would hunt and kill others. As a general rule, it would seem wise to eliminate these evils upon identifying them. Instead, Stevenson commends *Buffy* for creating a moral situation that challenges such reductive and unreflective thinking. Where it would seem that the elimination of evil would better serve the community, *Buffy* demonstrates how it is unsafe for morality by relativizing that rule. By choosing the exception to the rule instead of the rule that protects the community, *Buffy* calls moral thinking

and decision making into question. The point is not that moral decision making is impossible because every rule or decision can be compromised by an exception. Instead, moral decision making is always going to be complex: “*Buffy’s* perspective on good and evil is not a relativistic one in which the categories of good and evil are constantly redefined based on current circumstances, but neither is it an absolute one in which good and evil are always clearly defined” (73). A morally simplistic worldview would collapse under the weight of life’s experiences and would lead to a self deceptive self-righteousness that would obscure the complex character of the world.

One frequent criticism of the *Buffy*-verse is that absent the Christian god or a single transcendent value, the show preaches a relativism that makes moral decisions seem random and arbitrary. However, Stevenson does not find this to be the case for *Buffy*. If the nature of moral decision making is made difficult by life’s complexities, it does not mean that moral decision making is impossible. The appreciation for moral complexity and the rejection of a simplistic moral worldview that clearly defines good from evil may make an individual’s or community’s moral framework seem disorganized and incoherent. For Stevenson, the moral center that holds this disparate framework together is a sense of responsibility that leads to service and a belief in the preciousness of life. Stevenson writes, “*Buffy’s* slayerhood functions as a metaphor for all those who have been gifted in life. She presents the charmed ones who possess a power the others lack, whether that be the power that comes from popularity, privilege, intellect, athleticism or attractiveness … For those who have been blessed in life, it is a reminder that those blessings come with a moral responsibility that leads not to superiority but to service” (96). If *Buffy’s* morality is relative because of the perceived absence of transcendent values, then it is relative to the absolute values of life and responsibility for serving and protecting those with less. Stevenson asserts, “Social justice is about the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. It is grounded in the principle that the possession of power carries with it the price tag of responsibility, in this case the responsibility for the weak, the outcasts, the marginalized ones of the earth. *Buffy* places a high premium on the underdog and the empowerment of society’s powerless” (184). In a world where transcendent values are absent, responsibility for the safety and protection of those with less justifies and organizes moral decision making.

With that moral framework established, Stevenson can assess how *Buffy* acts out responses to several contemporary moral issues. Stevenson does not find in *Buffy* a critique of technology, organized religion, extramarital sex, those in power, the government, violence and the use of weapons, the law, alternative sexualities, or magic because they are all morally neutral. What is subject to moral scrutiny is their use, specifically, whether their intended use was for the benefit of the less

fortunate or for personal gain. Buffy and her friends model multiple sides of these issues, with the moral worth of their actions being determined by the responsible use of the power inherent in each. The consequences of each character's behavior, how he or she feels about him or herself, and the community's perception of the character are the consistent indicators of whether or not the character's actions were acceptable. Their use says less about these issues in-and-of-themselves but says everything about the character and the moral worth of the person using and/or abusing them. In the course of the show, "one message that resonates clearly throughout *Buffy* is that all individuals bear ultimate responsibility for their actions, even though a variety of factors may influence those actions" (156).

In *Buffy*, the difficulty of making complex moral decisions becomes intertwined with the intentions that motivate actions. In contrast, characters with a simple and naïve moral code often make self-centered decisions in order to deny new meanings and values that would complicate their worldview. Characters with a complex and nuanced moral code often sacrifice themselves (sometimes literally) and their understanding of the world because they come to understand new truths about others that are more meaningful and more important than their own. This makes willful self-deception the worst sin in *Buffy*. But it also makes emotional growth from sacrifice the highest virtue and redemption the dominant theme in *Buffy*. Though Stevenson does not say it, his text implies that those who do not "get" *Buffy* ("In 2002, the Parents Television Council ranked *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* number one on their list of top ten worst shows on television from a moral standpoint. This capped off previous years' rankings as the fourth and third worst show on television" (12)) belong among the willfully self-deceiving who are making self-centered moral judgments to preserve their simplistic moral worldview. They are those who refuse to see beneath the surface depictions of sex, violence and the occult to see the emphasis on sacrifice, redemption and community. Where Stevenson rightly criticizes those who refuse to have their moral vision complicated, he does not come out as strongly against those who refuse to have their religious vision disrupted by *Buffy*'s unique take on sacrifice, redemption and community.

The narrative arc of seasons five through seven involve Buffy's sacrificial death to save the world, her resurrection at the start of season six, and dramatic fight with The First (the source of all evil) in season seven. Relying on others is particularly difficult for slayers because only one is called, only one has the power, and therefore only one has the ability to fight. Buffy's moral development is realizing that her strength comes from those around her as much as it comes from her supernatural gift. Buffy's resurrection at the start of season six is about her friend's concern for her soul (they imagine she is in hell) as much as it is

about their inability to live without her. That Buffy's friends cannot live without her reveals a failing on her part: her inability or unwillingness to share her powers in a way that empowers those around her. As a result, they do not feel they can be successful without her. Buffy returns from the dead confused and alienated from her friends because they removed her from a peaceful and happy heaven. In seasons six and seven, Buffy moves close to and away from her friends as she attempts to understand her life and the nature of her power, which others seem unable to live without. At times she relies too heavily on others and they cannot meet her expectations. At other times, she alienates others by not including them in the fight. Ultimately, she can only defeat The First by relying on Willow's ability to cast a spell that gives the powers of the slayer to all the potential slayers all over the world. This action is similar to the end of season four in which Willow cast a spell to unite Willow's, Xander's and Giles's abilities in Buffy. At the end of season seven, the series finale, the spell that Willow casts gives Buffy's powers to all the potentials; instead of there being one slayer, the world is now populated by empowered young women ready to seize control of their lives using their powers to protect others.

Stevenson correctly points out that one will not find Christian themes and meanings by stripping away *Buffy*'s pagan veneer and that Christian theology is not lurking underneath the show (Cf. 65). However, he does see Buffy's moral foundation built upon a Christian framework: "*Buffy* employs Christian teachings as a vital piece of its moral foundation. The cross of Christ in particular strongly influences the presentation of certain characters and gives definition to the themes of sacrifice, love, redemption and forgiveness" (260). Stevenson does not take Christianity to task the same way he does narrow moral visions. In the series' final minutes, Whedon re-writes the show's mythology and provides perhaps the strongest critique of Christianity: the power possessed by the savior figure is not possessed by one but shared by all. Buffy realizes that as the savior figure she is responsible for sharing her power with others, not assuming all the responsibility for herself. It would be self-serving to keep her power isolated among a select group of insiders. Buffy's sacrifice at the end of season five was a selfish sacrifice meant to maintain her own narrow understanding of what it means to be the slayer. Her sharing of her gift in the series finale was redemption for that mistake. In several compelling minutes, the audience is forced to rethink all the moral goods previously attributed to Buffy, her friends, and the group of people that chose to fight and die beside her. The conclusion should be that the goods were not good enough, that more can always be done, and that there is an obligation to do so. A truly moral community is one that recognizes the gift of power and uses that power to help others. Moral growth comes from realizing the power within and turning it outward to benefit others, not from locating it outside oneself and remaining alienated from it. Such a reading makes the show

unsafe for theologies that view being Christian as a blessing instead of a responsibility.

Stevenson's analysis of *Buffy*'s moral framework is comprehensive and engaging. Fans of the show will realize what they miss most (the wit, the action, the compelling story-lines) while those who are unfamiliar with *Buffy* will realize what they missed out on. As a suggestion of the moral worth of complex moral frameworks and decision making, *Televised Morality* is detailed but also interesting, subtle and thought provoking. Intended for college classes, *Televised Morality* would provoke intense and thoughtful discussions about the role of mass culture in influencing public morality and religious sentiment.

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