



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindasvið

## **Slaying Literature**

*Metaphor and Characters in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Óskar Örn Eggertsson**

**September 2010**

**Háskóli Íslands**  
**Deild erlendra tungumála og bókmennta**  
**Enska**

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## Summary

Joss Whedon is a storyteller who created *Buffy the Vampires Slayer*, a television series about a young girl who is chosen to fight the supernatural evil. She makes friends who help her when she needs it, and enemies who are frequently demonic and generally evil. Whedon uses many metaphors in the series, most notably one where the demonic adversaries are metaphors for personal struggles.

As a storyteller, Whedon created a world – similar to what the audience recognizes – in which his fantasies of the supernatural can take place. This world is frequently known as the “Buffy-verse”, named after the main protagonist in his most successful creation for television. He created stories for his setting with compelling characters who some began as nothing more than simple people, but as they grew into adulthood and in power the audience watched captivated. Whedon once said about his characters that “[they] are people who care about one another and when their world is upset, *you* care about it.” (Golden, 241)

This thesis looks at the seven seasons of Buffy, and the four major characters of the series, separately and finds important the uses of literary tools, such as metaphor and foreshadowing. The thesis also looks at how the main characters are affected by choices, and how they grow into adulthood and in power.

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## Introduction

“The Earth is doomed.” These are the words of Rupert Giles, a fictional character who plays a major part in the television show known as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show tells the story of a teenage girl who is destined to fight the forces of evil in the small town of Sunnydale, California. Giles uses these words to describe the situation when he realizes Buffy and her friends – who help her fight evil – do not seem to understand how serious it is. He says the words at the end of the first story-arc of the show and repeats them in the final episode before the gang enters into the final battle. The words mark the beginning of the series when the gang that will continue unchanged until the very end is formed, and they also mark the very end of the series when the gang meets before entering the battle that will determine the future of the world.

Joss Whedon is the creator of *Buffy*, as well as few other television shows that never reached the same level of popularity. He also wrote scripts for such movies as *Toy Story* and the original *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* movie which, made in the early 90s, marked the origin of Buffy Summers. In *The Watcher's Guide*, Golden and Holder explain how Whedon got his inspiration from his own experience from high school (240). Whedon is a storyteller; he uses Buffy as metaphor for teenagers and even grownups who must battle their own demons. As a storyteller, Whedon “can wield a metaphor as well as a one-liner” (Kloer, 1998) but also uses foreshadowing on occasions, as well as flashbacks and a healthy mix of drama, horror, and comedy. Kloer also describes Whedon’s abilities in his article “Channel Surfer”: “He [Whedon] also manages to acknowledge the heavy stereotyping and clique wars that occur in high school while not falling prey to it, something not all shows about teens manage” (1997). He may not deserve all the credit since many scriptwriters have also worked on the

series – however, that does not change the fact that the series can be viewed in much the same light as literature.

This thesis is written with the intention of analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a story rather than as an actual television series. To do so it focuses primarily on the literary aspects and avoids depending on television studies too much. Each of the main characters is analyzed separately and each of the seven seasons broadcast is analyzed. This thesis will look primarily for metaphors, but foreshadowing and other literary aspects will also be looked at. Television is just a new way to tell a story, and much like literature took over from oral storytelling, so television will take over from literature. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a story – told through the medium of television – about how Buffy Summers grows up and makes choices.

## **Characters**

Without characters there can be no story. Of all the characters that appear throughout the series, only four of them last from start to finish. Through seven years of television the audience watch as the characters become more than what they were to begin with. Buffy starts as a simple warrior who wants nothing more than to be a normal girl, but becomes a leader and a legend. Willow starts as a shy girl who is skilled with computers but becomes one of the most powerful witches of the West. Xander is first seen as a young boy with boyish dreams, but later grows up and gains more experience in life than his friends. Giles is the librarian who becomes a figurative father to the whole group. It is all about growing up, making the right or wrong choices and living with the consequences. That is what these core characters do, so each character will receive a closer look.

## **Buffy Summers**

Buffy is the main character of the series and the show's namesake. She is the Chosen One, the one who must fight the forces of evil in the universe of Buffy, the so-called Buffy-verse. Although fighting evil is the overarching theme of the series, the show also focuses on day-to-day life and how Buffy copes with being a teenager and growing up. Buffy is forced to move to Sunnydale with her mom when, after she burnt down the gym of her old school, no other school will accept her (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1.1). After meeting with Giles, the school librarian and her appointed Watcher, the appointed trainer and teacher of the Slayer, she reveals that she has no interest in being the Slayer any longer. However, she is forced to fight off vampires to protect her new friends, Willow and Xander, and stops a ritual that is meant to release an ancient vampire from its prison (*The Harvest*, 1.2). She realizes that even though she does not want to be the Slayer, someone must fight the evil forces that seem to be drawn to this small town.

Another opportunity arises for Buffy to leave behind the life of the Slayer when Kendra, another vampire slayer, arrives in town (*What's My Line?: Part 1*, 2.9). The arrival creates a lot of confusion since a new Slayer is only chosen when the old Slayer dies. After some thinking, Giles figures out how this could happen (*What's My Line?: Part 2*, 2.10):

Giles: Good Lord. You were dead, Buffy.

Buffy: I was only gone for a minute.

Giles: Clearly it doesn't matter how long you were gone. You were physically dead, thus causing the activation of the next Slayer.



Buffy is tempted to retire from being the Slayer since Kendra is effectively a Slayer and has far better training in the skills necessary to the Slayer. Events force Buffy back into her role, however, and Kendra is murdered by Buffy's homicidal ex-boyfriend's ally (*Becoming: Part 1*, 2.21).

With the death of Kendra, a new Slayer is chosen – a girl by the name of Faith, who arrives in Sunnydale after the death of her Watcher (*Faith, Hope and Trick*, 3.3). Although she considers her mother's idea of letting Faith take over the vampire slaying – after all, she is taking over her friends and home – Buffy realizes that being a Slayer is not something you just walk away from, and that there is no retirement plan. In addition, Faith turns out to be a bad apple when she accidentally kills a human being and claims that she does not care (*Consequences*, 3.15). Buffy is then forced to fight her when she attempts to kill one of Buffy's friends (*Graduation: Part 1*, 3.21). Faith represents the corrupted version of Buffy, and the fight between them can be seen as a figurative fight that the heroine has with herself.

When Buffy has gotten into college (*The Freshman*, 4.1) she learns the dangers of dating college boys and drowns her sorrow in alcohol (*Beer Bad*, 4.5), only to learn that she does not belong to the beer drinking community. To make things worse, an accidental curse from Willow makes Buffy and Spike fall helplessly in love, despite their intense hatred for each other (*Something Blue*, 4.9), foreshadowing that Buffy will never have a normal relationship. It also foreshadows Spike's attraction to Buffy which begins in season 5 (*Out of My Mind*, 5.4) and the sexual relationship Buffy shares with Spike in the 6<sup>th</sup> season.

Another personality crisis arises with Faith's return. In *Who are You?* (4.16),

Faith has switched bodies with Buffy and is living her life. The episode focuses on Buffy's struggle to return to her life, even though she does not really like being the Slayer. Not so surprising then are her reasons for wanting to return to her life, claiming them to be that Faith is dangerous and is stealing her friends and family.

Buffy's role is as the Slayer first and a student second, although she tries to be both. However, a new role is forced upon her with the death of her mother (*The Body*, 5.16): Buffy must take on the role of a mother-figure for her sister, Dawn. Before the beginning of the fifth season, Dawn did not exist but was created by monks to hide a powerful relic from the evil goddess Glory (*No Place Like Home*, 5.5). From another point of view, Dawn was added to the show to replace Buffy's mother and to mark the change from Buffy being a teenager to her becoming an adult. In a sense, Dawn exists in order for Buffy to be a mother and have to deal with everything that entails. As a sister and a mother-figure, Buffy sacrifices herself to protect Dawn (*The Gift*, 5.22). Dawn's insertion into the show is foreshadowed twice: When Buffy speaks in her coma with Faith (*Graduation: Part 2*, 3.22) and again when Buffy speaks to the spirit of the first Slayer in a dream (*Restless*, 4.22).

It would seem, however, that even death can not keep Buffy from being the Slayer. Thanks to Willow's efforts and magical ability, Buffy is brought back to life (*Bargaining: Parts 1 & 2*, 6.1&2). However, alongside being back from the dead, Buffy must take up responsibilities, such as running a household and continue to be a mother-figure for Dawn (*Flooded*, 6.4). When she can not get a loan she realizes she must get a job, which does not get off to a good start (*Life Serial*, 5.5). In *Life Serial*, Buffy attempts to continue college but with little success; she becomes bored to tears attempting to work in retail, and her job at Xander's construction site ends with disaster.

It does not help that Andrew, Jonathan and Warren – nerdy criminals calling themselves the Trio – are sabotaging her every attempt at getting a normal life. Despite their involvement, Buffy does not realize the Trio's existence until they accidentally turn her invisible (*Gone*, 6.11).

Whilst being invisible in *Gone*, Buffy sees her invisibility as an escape from her reality. She continues her sexual relationship with Spike, which started in *Smashed* (6.9), gets revenge on a social worker and even commits a crime, stealing a vehicle. Earlier in the same episode, the aforementioned social worker has threatened to ruin Buffy's household by removing Dawn from her care. After all, Buffy appears to invite questionable characters to her home, to be dating Willow, to have no job, and to be unable to make Dawn concentrate on her homework. The threat forces Buffy into a state where she does not want to be herself and she seeks to change herself by cutting her hair. Despite the effort, no one gets to see the new Buffy until the Trio reverts her from being invisible to being herself again. Buffy also mentions that when she found out the invisibility would kill her she wanted to live for the first time since she was brought back to life in the beginning of the sixth season. In *Once More With Feeling* (6.7) she reveals to her friends that she was not in any hell dimension like everyone thought, but was in fact somewhere she thought was Heaven. Wanting to stay alive is a definite hint that Buffy is accepting her life and responsibilities. In a similar vein, Buffy also notes that she no longer wants to hide Dawn from the dangers of Buffy's extracurricular activities but rather wants to embrace Dawn into them (*Grave*, 6.22).

Buffy eventually gets a job at the Doublemeat Palace (*Doublemeat Palace*, 6.12), but the work is difficult and she must take double shifts with little or no warning. In addition, the grease from the burgers is difficult to wash off, not to mention the place

is the hunting ground of a monster who likes the Doublemeat staff because of the grease. Even Spike sees that Buffy is miserable there. Despite all that, she decides to keep the job in order to take care of Dawn and pay the bills. She makes the decision much like an adult would and basing it on what is better for the whole rather than for a single individual.

When the Trio summons a demon that gives Buffy the delusion that she is in fact insane and that Sunnydale, her friends and her being the Slayer is part of her insanity (*Normal Again*, 6.17), she is faced with a difficult choice between two alternatives. She can either believe that she is insane, that Sunnydale does not exist and that her parents are still married, or she can believe that she fights the forces of evil alongside her friends as the Slayer. She does not take the antidote to the demon's poison after she loses faith in her reality and starts believing that she is actually insane. It gets to the point where she almost kills her friends in order to remove the anchors of her so-called delusion. In the end, however, after kind words of faith from her imagined mother, Buffy fights back the poison and saves her friends. The episode removes the imaginative from the series, even if only for a short while. It takes the fiction that the series has built – the setting of Sunnydale, the forces of evil, magic, her friends, etc. – and shows what Buffy could really be like outside the Buffy-verse. It even looks at the series themselves as a part of insanity with larger than life villains. More importantly, the episode marks Buffy's definite acceptance of her role as the Slayer.

In the seventh season, Buffy gets a job at the new Sunnydale High as the school's counselor, a job that fits her because she likes to help others and she is close to the students' age for them to feel comfortable (*Help*, 7.4). She also takes on yet another role as leader. When the Slayers-to-be are hunted down, Buffy takes them in and

prepares them to face the menace that hunts them (*Bring on the Night*, 7.10). Her leadership is challenged and although she did not intend to lead she quickly accepts the responsibility (*Chosen*, 7.22).

### **Xander Harris**

Xander's role is, at the beginning of the series, that of the comedy relief. He is awkward, sarcastic and easy-going. He is the character who is in no way special except because he tries. Buffy is the Slayer, Willow is a witch, Giles is the Watcher – and Xander is the normal, goofy kid. Xander is the guy who uses comedy and goofs around to avoid trouble. He describes himself rather accurately in *Witch* (1.3): “I laugh in the face of danger. Then I hide until it goes away.”

That is not to say that Xander is completely useless. Aside from Giles, he is the only character of the core team who can drive. He is also a fairly decent carpenter, making a weapons-chest for Buffy's birthday (*Older and Far Away*, 6.14) as well as fixing the living room window on several occasions. He also gets his own episode dedicated to his adventures when he needs to fight off a small gang of undead zombies who are going to blow up the school (*The Zeppo*, 3.13).

What makes Xander special is that although he is a very run-of-the-mill guy, he always tries to help, even if doing so is mortally dangerous. In *The Harvest* (1.2) Xander is driven to tag along with Buffy to help his friend Jessie in spite of frequent warnings. Xander feels very strongly about who are his friends and who he does not like. While he is willing to risk life and limb for his friends and even those he does not know all too well, he is usually the first to suggest letting those he hate die or killing them, no matter how friendly or helpful they have proven to be. That point of view is

seen both in relation to the vampires Buffy has been sexually involved with and when Willow attempts to kill Warren in season 6.

Xander's romantic interests never work out very well. He has a crush on Buffy during the first season, which he finds out is unrequited (*Prophecy Girl*, 1.12). During that same season he is seduced by a giant preying mantis who is posing as a teacher (*Teacher's Pet*, 1.4) and he later falls for the *Inca Mummy Girl* (2.4). Xander does have a relatively normal dating relationship with Cordelia, the show's recurring damsel in distress, during the second season but that too ends badly when he kisses Willow (*Lover's Walk*, 3.8). He later has a short fling with Faith, the vampire slayer (*The Zeppo*, 3.13) but that does not evolve into anything more serious than a one night stand. Xander's longest relationship begins with a former demon's declaration of attraction to him in *Graduation: Part 1* (3.21). His relationship with the demon, Anya, does however not officially start until next season. Having been a demon for a thousand years makes Anya an interesting character who is trying to understand how to be human. She ends up becoming controlled by her love for both Xander and money. She even develops a dance to celebrate the acquirement of money (*All the Way*, 6.6). Their relationship comes to the point of the wedding day. After Xander leaves Anya at the altar, they have a complicated relationship of love and hate for the rest of the series.

The audience is given a strong hint very early on that Xander does not care much for school and has trouble studying. This hint appears in *Welcome to the Hellmouth* (1.1) when he asks Willow for help:

Xander: You know, I kinda had a problem with the math.

Willow: Uh, which part?

Xander: The math.

This continues when, instead of following his two best friends to UC Sunnydale for higher education, he takes a road trip for the summer and finds a job. After several attempts, he gets into construction work and even gets promoted (*The Replacement*, 5.3), proving that he is not in fact completely without worth as he thinks he is.

As mentioned before, Xander is also the only one of the three friends seen successfully driving. Other characters appear who can drive but only half of the original gang knows how. Interestingly, it is the male half that drives. Xander is never actually seen learning how to drive; he just suddenly seems to know how. On the other hand, the audience knows that Buffy can not drive because she is seen driving “like a spaz” (*Band Candy*, 3.6). But Xander can drive and even gets a car just to become the group's wheel man, something that gives him a sense of belonging to the group (*The Zeppo*, 3.13).

In essence, Xander is the outcast among those who are special because he is normal. He does not have to make choices that involve life or death because he is never in a position to make those choices. His choices are more down to earth, revolving around such things as doing his day job and planning a wedding. The choices he makes are more frequently those that the audience can relate to; the audience does not have to worry about whether they have to kill the love of their lives to save the world or not! Xander's are more mundane choices. “What can I do to fit in?” and “Do I really want to go through with this wedding?” are the questions Xander asks himself, and his are the questions most of the audience have or will ask themselves. Xander knows he is not special, but his mundanity does give him amazing insight, as evidenced in the pep talk he has with Dawn in *Potential* (7.12):

Xander: Seven years, Dawn. Working with the Slayer. Seeing my friends get more and more powerful. A witch. A demon. Hell, I could fit Oz in my shaving kit, but, come a full moon, he had a wolfy mojo not to be messed with. Powerful. All of them. And I'm the guy who fixes the windows.

Dawn: Well, you had that sexy army training for a while and the windows really did need fixing.

[. . .]

Xander: They'll never know how tough it is, Dawnie, to be the one who isn't chosen. To live so near the spotlight and never step in it. But I know. I see more than anyone realizes because nobody's watching me. I saw you last night. I see you working here today. You're not special. You're extraordinary.

At that moment, the audience realizes Xander is not just the normal goof who screws things up and is of little use except to fix the windows. He is the person who helps everyone cope with their powers and their problems. He has another pep talk with Buffy in *The Freshman* when she is feeling alone (4.1) and even stops Willow from destroying the world in *Grave* (6.22). Much like he said to Dawn, he is not really special but extraordinary.

## **Willow Rosenberg**

Despite being best friends, Willow and Xander are opposites. Willow loves studying and school. She develops her magical powers to become an important part of the team. Although the rest of the gang would say that Xander is no less important, Willow has battled a goddess and brought Buffy back from the dead.

Willow starts the series as a nerdy girl with some skills in using computers. She



is proficient enough with these skills to hack herself into the town hall (*The Harvest*, 1.2). Because of her proficiency with computers she is also made a substitute teacher when the computer science teacher is killed (*Passion*, 2.17). Aside from her short-lived career as a substitute teacher, she has no real career to speak of, which also sets her apart from Xander. Throughout the seven seasons, Willow's career remains that of a student.

Computers are not Willow's only important skill: She begins practicing magic and by season six she has become one of the most powerful witches in America. Her aptitude with magic even becomes a big problem from time to time, such as in *Something Blue* (4.9) when she turns Giles blind, makes Xander into a demon magnet and makes Buffy fall madly in love with Spike, all by the use of a spell that makes her commands come true. The episode is a good lesson in “be careful what you wish for.” Her magical abilities have also come in handy, such as in restoring Angel's soul in *Becoming: Part 2* (2.22) and when she brings Buffy back from the dead (*Bargaining: Parts 1 & 2*, 6.1 & 2) so the audience can enjoy two more seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. During the sixth season of *Buffy*, Willow becomes more reliant upon her magic to the point where it becomes an addiction. During that season, magic becomes a metaphor for drugs. It gets to a point where she loses her romantic interest and puts her loved ones at great risk.

Willow has few unsuccessful romantic relationships and a couple of successful ones, one of which ends in tragedy. She has a long-running crush on Xander which does not really bloom. She also becomes involved with a demon who hides on the internet, claiming to be a fellow student (*I Robot... You, Jane*, 1.8). Willow becomes involved with Oz, who turns out to be a werewolf, in the second season. That relationship lasts

throughout season 3 and does not really end until season 4, when Willow begins a lesbian relationship with a fellow witch named Tara (*New Moon Rising*, 4.19). This is not the first time Whedon hints that Willow might be homosexual. In *Doppelgangland*, an evil vampire replica of Willow roams the streets of Sunnydale. Upon the doppelganger's departure, Willow claims that she might be gay (3.16). Being a witch like Willow, Tara helps her practice and performing more powerful spells. When Willow becomes addicted to using magic for even the smallest tasks, Tara tries to keep her from becoming too dependent on it. When Tara is accidentally shot and killed, that is what breaks Willow completely and drives her to dark magic (*Villains*, 6.20). During the time when she is using dark magic, she claims to be possessed by it (*Two to Go*, 6.21). During her time as the darker version of the innocent Willow, she even gets to the point where she attempts to destroy the world but is stopped by her long-time friend Xander (*Grave*, 6.22).

During the 6th season, Willow represents the person who makes the wrong choices. She gets involved with the wrong people. She allows her addiction to control her. When tragedy strikes she turns back to her addiction and to violence. She makes all the wrong choices and is mentally plagued by them for a long time after. During the final season, Willow has lost all confidence in herself and is so sorry about having almost destroyed the world that she unwittingly casts a spell that hides her from the perception of her friends (*Same Time, Same Place*, 7.3). For her, the seventh season is about forgiveness and regaining her confidence. She also plays an important role in the finale when she uses a relic to awaken the power within the Slayers-to-be (*Chosen*, 7.22). After casting the spell a newly awakened Slayer calls her a goddess. Based on what she is capable of doing, that description is not far from being accurate.

## Rupert Giles

Giles is Buffy's Watcher and teacher in the ways of being a Slayer. He is also the unofficial father-figure to the group and cares for them all not only as his friends but also as if he is their guardian. Giles is the grown-up of the group and also British, which makes him appear more civilized than any other character on the show. Although Spike is also British, he is more rebellious and wicked. Giles is far more tame and civil, both traits which he has acquired after his rebellious youth.

Giles is intelligent – one of the requirements of being a Watcher – and can read five languages (*Nightmares*, 1.10). Although he dabbles in magic he has learned not to take it too far. The most important thing Giles provides the group is his knowledge of the supernatural and his collection of books. He is often in control of the research the group does before going into a battle against the forces of evil. He is often the one who figures out what is going on, what they are about to fight against and how they must kill it. As a natural choice of career, Giles begins the series as the librarian at the school to which the rest of the group goes. It allows him easy access to his books and the library becomes a sort of headquarters for the Slayer and her “Slayerettes”.

After the group's graduation from the school he becomes unemployed or, as he likes to call it, “a gentleman of leisure” (*The Freshman*, 4.1). He remains unemployed until he becomes the owner of a local magic shop, a decision which causes Buffy to remark that former owners have had “the life expectancy of a Spinal Tap drummer” (*Real Me*, 5.2). The Magic Box – as the magic shop is named – becomes the new headquarters for the gang. There they have easy access to books about magic and the supernatural as well as room in the back for Buffy to train her martial arts. The Slayer's

headquarters then move to the Summers residence in season 7 after Willow has torn the Magic Box apart in her confrontation with Buffy and Giles in season 6.

Giles' love life is very much like that of the rest of the group. He has a few short-lived relationships, and the one relationship that seemed to have potential to last ends tragically. His relationship with Jenny Calendar, a teacher at school, starts early during the 1st season. Jenny is a witch of the new age, something she herself refers to as a “techno pagan” (*I Robot... You, Jane*, 1.8). Unfortunately, their relationship ends in tragedy during the latter half of season 2 with Jenny's murder. In *Band Candy* (3.6), Giles' mind is reverted back to adolescent state. During that episode the audience not only sees what kind of teenager Giles was – a personality that is very different from what is normally seen on the show – but he also hooks up with and has sex with Buffy's mother. The sex scene is not included in the episode but subtle hints of the act are included in the episode's ending and in a later episode Buffy's mother confesses (*Earshot*, 3.18). Because they were both under the influence of magic that returned their minds to the state of teenagers, both feel very awkward about it and about each other. The last woman to have any sexual relationship with Giles is an old friend of his from England. The audience knows the woman has known Giles since he was a teenager because she refers to him by his old nickname, Ripper. Aside from these three women, Giles has few if any relationships worth noting. It is possible that his relationships are not as important as those of the rest of the gang. After all, the show was created as a metaphor for the problems of normal teenagers. Giles' relationships would therefore be there to show that grown-ups can also have relationships and also have problems related to those relationships. His relationships are also seen from the teenager's point of view. As the father-figure in the episodes, his relationships with women are often met with

Buffy's disapproval. She even confronts him about it in *The Freshman* (4.1):

Giles: I'm not supposed to have a private life?

Buffy: No! Because you're very, very old, and it's gross.

The relationship Giles has with Buffy is an important one for the overall story of the show. Buffy's parents are divorced and so Giles becomes her active father-figure. As her Watcher, he is supposed to train her and teach her what it means to be a Slayer. He does take on more responsibility however, and even supports her financially when she is having trouble running a house-hold (*Life Serial*, 6.5). Buffy even compares him to her parents. Giles is given a very solid position of father-figure through a cunning absence of any group-member's father. Buffy's father appears only twice during the whole seven seasons of the show, once in *Nightmares* (1.10) and again in *Normal Again* (6.17). In his first appearance, Buffy's father is one of Buffy's worst nightmares, claiming Buffy is the reason for her parent's divorce and that he does not care for her. In his second appearance, he is a representation of what Buffy's life could be if her real life were her insanity. Xander's parents appear only once, in *Hell's Bells* (6.16), although they do make their presence known occasionally while Xander lives with them. His father is an alcoholic who often argues loudly with his wife. Xander once described them as "incompetent burglars" when they come home one time arguing (*The Replacement*, 5.3). Willow's father never appears in the show and is rarely discussed at all. As the father-figure to the group Giles is the father who is shown positively. While other father-figures are shown as absent or alcoholic, Giles is always ready to help and is almost always tame and civil. There are exceptions, of course, such as when he leaves

Sunnydale and goes back to England for the majority of the 6th season. He leaves because Buffy is relying too much on his help for mundane tasks and to be the actual father of her home, allowing her to be a child again with less worries. He understands that in order for Buffy to learn how to stand on her own two feet he must leave.

### **The Series**

It is widely accepted that on the show “the monsters are frequently metaphors for things teens have to face as they mature” (Golden, 240). Watching the show with a critical mindset, the audience can spot the metaphorical references to the troubles of a normal teenager. A demon on the internet is not just something that corrupts your soul. The demon is a metaphor for the dangers of meeting someone online who could be someone other than he says he is (*I Robot... You, Jane*, 1.8). Having sex with a vampire which leads to the vampire losing his soul and becoming a murdering psychopath is not just a gypsy curse but a representation of the fear that having sexual intercourse will ruin your life (*Innocence*, 2.14). The phrase “the past comes back to haunt you” is taken very literally in *The Dark Age* when a demon that Giles conjured in his teenage years returns (2.8). Golden and Holder explain this well in *The Watcher's Guide*: “This isn't really about vampires and demons, though Joss loves those things. It's about personal demons. It's about high school.” (240)

Whedon bases the show partly on his own experience with high school. Like David Greenwalt, a co-executive producer, said: “If [he] had had one happy day in high school, none of us would be here” (Golden, 240). Although first three seasons do focus on high school, the series continue and the primary characters graduate. They go on to higher education at the local university where new problems arise and old ones have not

been entirely solved. “Buffy's assistant-friends Xander and Willow are outcast nerds who dub themselves “the Slayerettes” and become heroic, while Cordelia, the coolest girl in school, frequently needs rescuing” (Kloer, 1997). Since Whedon seeks inspiration from his own experience, it is perhaps safe to assume that he had a similar social status during his own high school years. The series show the effects of belonging to an outcast group by including the so called queen-bee of the school, Cordelia. Although frequently in danger and saved by Buffy and her friends, Cordelia continues to treat them with disrespect and cling to her social superiority. After graduation however, things begin to change. Buffy and Willow go to university, where they are socially accepted, and Xander leaves the education track and joins the working community. Knowing his stand with high school and by looking at the series critically, perhaps Whedon has a milder opinion of universities.

## **Season 1**

One of the main themes in the first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is the terrors of starting at a new school, making new friends and high school in general. Even in the very first episode Buffy learns that she can not lead a normal life, even if she moves from Los Angeles to Sunnydale. Both Xander and Willow learn that high school is terrifying. To emphasize how horrible high school really is, Whedon placed it right on top of a so-called Hellmouth, “a center of mystical convergence” as Giles explains it (*The Harvest*, 1.2). It might just be a plot device, but it does bring a lot of monsters to the high school which makes it appear worse. This season focuses on the threat of vampires. The main villain of the season is an ancient and powerful vampire titled the Master. While most vampires can hide their demonic visage in the Buffy-verse, the

Master is so old that he can never appear as a mortal human being.

However, Buffy does not only fight against vampires, and in *Witch* (1.3) she and her friends need to deal with a witch who is using her magical powers to get on the cheer-leading squad. The episode can be taken as an example of how some parents envy their children and regret how their lives turn out after graduation. In *Witch*, the mother who was the head cheer-leader and prom queen in her high school regrets having lived an uneventful life after graduation. She turns to magic and changes bodies with her daughter, who she thinks is wasting her life. The episode also takes on the discussion of parents pressuring their children.

The idea that teenagers change and become more like animals is also discussed in the first season when Xander is possessed by a hyena spirit. In *The Pack* (1.6) Giles even suspects that Buffy is too worried about his changed behavior:

Giles: Xander's taken to teasing the less fortunate?

Buffy: Uh-huh.

Giles: And there's noticeable change in clothing and demeanor?

Buffy: Yes.

Giles: And otherwise all his spare time is spent lounging about with imbeciles?

Buffy: It's bad, isn't it?

Giles: It's devastating. He's turned into a 16-year old boy. Of course, you'll have to kill him.

The episode also discusses getting into the wrong crowd, how that can affect person's behavior and lead them to do things they would normally not do, such as bullying your



best friend and eating a raw pig.

The primary theme of *I Robot... You, Jane* (1.8) is the dangers of internet romance. After accidentally releasing a demon onto the internet, Willow gets romantically involved with the demon when he poses as a boy in a chat-room. Although the episode does spice it up by giving the demon couple of minions, the message is made quite clear: Be careful who you speak to online; they could be anyone. Xander realizes the danger and explains it to Buffy by saying that he could pretend to be an elderly Dutch woman and no one would be the wiser. Certainly, that is what the episode focuses on; a demon pretends to be a teenage boy using the internet as the perfect mask. The episode also includes an important foreshadowing which the audience will frequently get back to. In the end of the show Buffy and Xander try to make Willow feel better by reminding her how bad their relationships have been; Buffy in love with a vampire and Xander seduced by a giant bug. At that point, Xander makes a comedic remark that they will never have normal relationships. Later seasons indeed reveal; none of them have a normal relationship and the ones they do have frequently end badly.

## **Season 2**

Although the second season of Buffy also involves surviving high school it focuses on the sexual experience from several different points of view. Every major character gets or has a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Buffy's mother is shown having a romantic interest. Even the major villains of the season are a vampire couple. Buffy has her first sexual experience, which will change things for the worse. Spike also appears for the first time in this season, which sees some of the classic monsters of both

literature and myth, such as a witch, a werewolf, a Frankenstein monster replica, a mummy, and of course vampires.

The theme of the season is revealed fairly early on. In *Some Assembly Required* (2.2) an intelligent student has successfully revived his dead brother using scientific methods. The problem is that the brother is not entirely happy and wants a mate. They embark on a hunt for female body-parts but realize that in order to find a head that is fresh enough for them to use they need to murder the girl it belonged to. The monster is willing to kill for the sake of not being alone and for his own lust, something his genius brother is not prepared to do.

In *Inca Mummy Girl* (2.4) a female mummy is revived and pretends to be an exchange student from Mexico. In order to keep her mortal appearance she needs to suck her mortality from others, a process that is fatal. When Xander develops a crush on her and she falls for his boyish charms, things become far more complicated. In the end, Xander must choose between his friends and the girl he has feelings for. The episode teaches that you cannot always trust the people you care about. They can turn out to be completely different from what they allow you to see, or even dangerous.

The episode *Reptile Boy* (2.5) has Buffy tricked to a frat-house where she is to be sacrificed to a demon god by a fraternity. The boys sacrifice girls to this demon so that their families will remain rich and powerful. The episode serves as a metaphorical warning against older boys with money, hinting that they get what they want but don't care who gets hurt in the process.

In *Ted* (2.11) the audience sees how children can be affected when a single parent has a romantic relationship with someone who is not as kind as they look at first. Ted is kind to Buffy's mother and her friends but becomes violent towards Buffy. It is

an ideal episode to show how a child can view an outside grown-up who becomes intimate with the child's single parent.

The dangers of having a child at too young an age are the subject of the episode *Bad Eggs* (2.12). Buffy's class is given eggs to give them practice in taking care of a child. The eggs turn out to be demonic spawn that attach themselves to a living host to dig out the demonic mother. The episode is an example of how having a child in high school is a bad idea and that you should wait until you are truly ready before you have unprotected sex.

Probably the best example of the sexual theme in the second season comes up in the two-part episodes of *Surprise* (2.13) and its conclusion *Innocence* (2.14). The two parts are divided with Buffy's first sexual experience. Her vampire boyfriend, Angel, was cursed by gypsies with a soul, a fact that has kept him friendly throughout the first and second seasons. However, with their sexual intercourse the curse is broken and Angel loses his soul. He changes and turns to massacre and mayhem. It is a clear message that is explained in a later episode (*Beauty and the Beasts*, 3.4), that you must be careful with whom you share your first sexual experience because they might change, become violent and simply not be who they used to be. Angel also serves as a warning that high school students should not practice sex. After Angel gets his soul back he stays on the show until Buffy graduates in the third season, but then leaves. During that time, Buffy can not have sex with him as he would return to his murderous alter ego. It is not until the fourth season that Buffy can have a normal sex life. In her confrontation with Angel in *Becoming: Part 2* (2.22), Buffy has a metaphorical breakup with Angel during which she sees Angel again as the one she fell in love with. Although the breakup is final, they get together again in the third season.

*Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* (2.16) focuses on Xander when his girlfriend Cordelia breaks up with him on Valentine's Day due to peer pressure from her friends, the popular girls. It is a show about what a broken heart drives a person to do and how the revenge for its breakage can get out of hand. To get his revenge, Xander gets the help of a witch who casts a love spell on his ex-girlfriend so that he can be the one to break up with her. When the spell backfires, every single woman on Earth falls madly in love him, except his ex-girlfriend. It is worth noting that the episode is also a good example of how mad love can get, to the point of murder and violence. The episode also shows how high school can have a sort of a caste system that reigns over the students and determines who can be dating whom. In that context, Xander and Cordelia can be seen as rebels who fight against that system.

### **Season 3**

The third season of Buffy focuses on two things: On the one hand it focuses on graduating. This is the final year of high school and Buffy and her friends prepare to leave the school forever. Buffy and Willow prepare to get into a university while Xander is just happy that he never has to attend another class after the end of high school. The dreadful feeling that you will not graduate is given a metaphorical representation when the main villain of the season decides that the graduation ceremony will be the starting point of his ultimate villainy.

The other focus of the season is corruption. Not only is the main villain the mayor of Sunnydale but a true corruption takes place when the new Slayer, Faith, turns rogue. Faith starts off as a sort of wild Slayer; she is not exactly villainous but she enjoys fighting monsters, perhaps a little too much. When she is betrayed by her fake

Watcher (*Revelation*, 3.7) she starts having a more difficult time trusting others. When she accidentally kills the mayor's human secretary her new Watcher tries to have her arrested instead of trying to help her out like Buffy wants (*Consequences*, 3.15). This only drives a bigger wedge between Faith and those she is supposed to be able to trust, and she joins the mayor. As an extra twist on how evil the mayor is and how he will later lay ruin to all of Sunnydale, he turns out to be kind and generous to Faith. He practically treats her like he's the loving father she never had.

The corruption theme also appears in separate episodes, such as in *Beauty and the Beasts* (3.4) when a student creates a drug that will turn him into a Mr. Hyde imitator. The episode is an example of how power can corrupt. The young student creates the drug to become more powerful and impressive to his girlfriend but it gets to the point where he becomes obsessed by the power it brings, and it changes his behavior.

In the episode *Enemies* (3.17) an attempted corruption takes place when the mayor has Angel's soul magically removed and has Faith try to enlist Angel to work for the mayor. Additionally, when Angel first appears in the third season Buffy believes that his stay in a hell-dimension has corrupted him and left him mad (*Beauty and the Beasts*, 3.4).

## **Season 4**

The fourth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* begins when both Buffy and Willow are starting their education at UC Sunnydale after having graduated from high school. Having the majority of the season take place at the university suits it well since the themes of science and education play a big part in this season. Underneath the

university is a secret laboratory run by the government of the United States. There they do experiments on the supernatural creatures that roam around Sunnydale and create scientific defenses against them.

Education and intelligence gets a reverse treatment in *Beer Bad* (4.5). The episode makes the blunt message that beer has a negative effects on your intelligence – even the title refers to how bad it is. A special beer that is brewed at a bar which the university's students frequent makes the drinker revert back to a Neanderthal-like mental state. A gang of students who seem perfectly intelligent become affected, making them stupid and primal.

Education has other appearances, although it serves more as inspiration than as an actual theme. In *The Harsh Light of Day* (4.3) the focus is aimed at an artifact that is said to be a sort of a holy grail to vampires, a definite reference to the Arthurian legends and mythical history. *Pangs* (4.8) focuses on American history, specifically that which involves Native Americans during the settlements. It is perhaps no wonder since the episode involves Thanksgiving.

The main villain of season 4 is properly revealed in *Goodbye Iowa* (4.14), and the monster is a good fit with the science theme of the season. The monster, called Adam, is created by the secret military laboratory by combining human and demon body parts with added technological machinery to give the creature extra edge. Adam sees himself as the next step in evolution and intends to bring the whole world up to pace with it.

## **Season 5**

Family is what keeps season 5 together. The family in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

is not the average, run-of-the-mill nuclear family but rather that of a chosen family. The core family is made up of friends rather than blood-relations (Burr, 265). The fifth season makes several references to the family theme however, and the metaphorical references are what this section will focus on.

One of the most important changes in the family core is the introduction of Dawn at the end of *Buffy vs. Dracula* (5.1), and in *Real Me* (5.2) where Dawn gets a more thorough introduction. Dawn is Buffy's sister who is suddenly introduced into a group that seems to have known her from the very beginning. In truth she is a magical energy given form and history by monks. They even created memories of her for her whole family and her friends. Effectively, she has always been around. It is a nice trick to introduce a formerly unknown character and have her immediately belong to the group without her having to somehow stumble upon Buffy's secret by some mishap. She simply knows. The second change – which is no less important – is the death of Buffy's mother in *The Body* (5.16). What follows is that Buffy takes over the responsibilities that her mother had and begins taking care of Dawn as her substitute mother. In practice, with the arrival of her sister and the death of her mother, Buffy becomes the mother of a troubled teen. This is a significant change in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series because it no longer focuses on the student who is growing up but rather the single mother who has to take care of her troubled teen and her own metaphorical demons, as well as trying to get an education.

The family theme plays a big part in the episode aptly named *Family* (5.6). The show is about Tara's family, which includes a long line of witches. The men of the family have manipulated the women, convincing them that they are demons and that the men need to keep them under control. It has been like that for generations until

Buffy and her friends challenge that tradition. When Tara's father demands that Buffy and her friends do not intervene and asks who they think they are, Buffy calmly explains that they are Tara's real family, suggesting that a chosen family is stronger than any blood relation.

In the season finale the true meaning of family is put to the test. In *The Gift* (5.22) Dawn is used to break down the boundaries between dimensions, the world is collapsing. Unless Dawn throws herself into the rift that is tearing the world apart, the rift will continue to get bigger until nothing is left. Buffy realizes that she can take Dawn's place and die instead of her but her plan is based on the idea that they both share the same blood, which may not be entirely true. Dawn is made of pure magic which Buffy is not. It is the magic that needs to die for the rift to close but somehow the blood relation – which is not even real – is enough for them to find a replacement. Buffy jumps through the rift and is killed in the process. Somehow, her plan was successful.

## **Season 6**

The sixth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* focuses on the theme of growing up. It involves making choices, good and bad, learning and accepting. Since Buffy died at the end of last season she has to be brought back to life in season 6. Doing so involves a powerful spell which Willow performs with the help of Xander, Tara and Anya. That specific spell gives Willow the confidence to believe she can do pretty much anything with magic, even to the point where she threatens Giles (*Flooded*, 6.4). More importantly, Buffy is dragged out from a heavenly afterlife which makes her feel that being alive again is too difficult for her to handle. Not only is she brought back to



life but she is thrust into more responsibility than that she had before her death. She has to grow up and learn how to handle the responsibility of taking care of the house and her family.

In order to escape her current financial problems, Buffy attempts to get a loan, but is denied because she has no income (*Flooded*, 6.4). What's more, the episode reveals the Trio; a band of three geeks who intend to use their combined specialties to take over Sunnydale. They will be recurring antagonists throughout the season, being more a bother than any actual threat until the showdown in *Seeing Red* (6.19). The Trio is also an ideal contradiction to the theme of growing up; instead of growing up they keep to their childish games and interests such as collecting action figures and playing video and board games.

Willow's addiction to magic, which serves as a metaphor for addictions for dangerous drugs, is another plot within the season. She begins to rely on magic for mundane activities to the point where Tara leaves her because of it (*Tabula Rasa*, 6.8). Things get even worse when Willow realizes her addiction is even harmful to others and finally seeks help for it (*Wrecked*, 6.10). She stops using magic completely until Tara is accidentally killed at which point she completely loses her mind and falls off the wagon. She loses herself almost entirely in black magic so she can get revenge for her lover's death, a path which ends with her trying to completely destroy the world and rid it of its pain. She is only stopped by Xander's heartwarming words of friendship.

Xander has his moment of growing up when he realizes he is not yet ready to grow up, leaving Anya at the altar (*Hell's Bells*, 6.16). He realizes that although he wants to live with Anya forever he is not ready yet to get married and start a family, especially not when his own parents are so dysfunctional.

## Season 7

The themes of the seventh and final season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* shown on television are conclusion and war. War is a big theme in this season; the big evil of the season is preparing an army of powerful demons and Buffy must prepare the potential Slayers for battle. Battle training, tactics and preemptive strikes are all subjects of the final season, as well as casualties. Conclusion is another theme that is referred to frequently, increasingly as the season nears its end. The season refers to previous seasons more than other seasons, for instance when Sunnydale High is rebuilt, a student almost turns invisible and when students think a statue that holds a witch is following them with its eyes. By referring to past seasons and episodes the audience gets a stronger feel that the series are coming to an end.

The Slayers-to-be get training from Buffy and Giles, Willow becomes romantically involved with one of the potential Slayers and Xander fixes the window in the living room. After an unsuccessful attack against the villain, the potential Slayers turn against Buffy and turn to Faith for leadership (*Empty Places*, 7.19). Faith's leadership is not more successful, leading the Slayers-to-be into an ambush in that very same episode. Buffy finds a new weapon, the ideal tool to slay vampires, and Willow uses its mystical connection to the source of the Slayer's powers to turn all the potential Slayers into actual Slayers to defeat the villain and destroy the Hellmouth in the process. With Buffy no longer the only one chosen to be a Slayer and the Hellmouth of Sunnydale permanently closed – and Sunnydale destroyed as well – Buffy realizes she can do whatever she wants to now (*Chosen*, 7.22).

## Conclusion

With the Hellmouth closed for good and Sunnydale no more, so ends *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s seven years run on television. It is not the end of the story however, and the eighth season is currently being published in comic book form. Buffy is the kind of story that can continue forever, one which the fans simply will not allow to end. In the end, it is not about the special effects, the choreography in the fight scenes or the demonic costumes. If it were, the fans could simply watch a single episode over and over again. What really makes fans devoted to the fictional heroine from Sunnydale is the story and how it connects to them. That is why they can watch the show again and again, and that is why they ask for more. That is why Buffy is one of the highest grossing television series with a female character in the lead. (Kloer, 1998)

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about the story and how the characters in that story learn through their choices and grow into adults. It is filled with metaphors, foreshadowing and other literary techniques. With a more careful analysis of the series more metaphors will appear and the viewer will see better the connection between Buffy and a literary masterpiece. Each season can be analyzed separately, such as has been done in this thesis, to find themes covering the whole season. Each character has been given great depth and is seen evolve and grow. These are not just characters the audience sees fighting monsters, casting spells and wielding satirical one-liners; these are characters with whom the audience can connect and see becoming something more than what they were. And their story does not end with the show. The audience knows there is more to come, even if it will never reach television.

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