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**Buffy as role model: her significance for female viewers.
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Slayage, 2010**

Introduction

In bringing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to our screens, Joss Whedon introduced a strong female lead character. This, at least at the time, was relatively unusual in itself, but he is also reported as wanting his character to reverse the fortunes of the typical young female character in the horror genre; Buffy was able to take care of herself and was to become a force to be reckoned with rather than a mere victim. Her character therefore arguably creates possibilities for disrupting the stereotypical femininity and patriarchal relations so commonplace in popular fiction, especially those forms of popular fiction aimed at young audiences.

There has been a good deal of debate around the question as to whether *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be considered a 'feminist' show and the matter of its feminist credentials has been addressed by numerous *Buffy* scholars, including Rhonda Wilcox, Patricia Pender, Lorna Jowett, Dawn Heinecken, and Zoe Jane Playdon to name but a few. The issues that have exercised *Buffy* scholars on this matter are varied, including:

Femininity and female power
Patriarchal succession
race and class
Narrative and generic tradition
Normative sexuality
Feminist ethics

Buffy scholars have therefore posed a number of questions about the feminism, or lack of it, implicit in the show. Does *Buffy* demonstrate that young women can be capable and strong and that they can be leaders of others (including men) or does it fail to escape the values of appearance and romantic relationships embedded in normative femininity?

Does the show present positive images of alternative sexuality for young women or does it reinforce heterosexist values?

Can *Buffy* only be considered a feminist icon if you are white and middle class?

Can the show escape the normative expectations of gothic horror and teen romance narrative genres or are the desires of its female characters inevitably limited by these?

In sum, is the show transgressive and subversive or does it reinforce normative femininity for its young female viewers?

But the enthusiasm with which such questions have been explored, at least in part, testifies to our collective belief that IT MATTERS what answers to these questions we give. It matters because, however we conceptualise it, we felt that TV shows have the power to influence the way we think about ourselves and our world.

I am not going to discuss the arguments that have been put forward about *Buffy* as a feminist show. I think they all have merit, and are the products of a generally painstaking and rigorous analysis of the *Buffy* canon. Instead, my question focuses on how this text is 'read' by viewers.

This focus is in contrast to the psychological tradition of 'media effects', which takes a largely quantitative approach and seeks to measure the effects on behaviour of specific media texts. Such

work has principally focussed on the relationship between violent TV and aggressive behaviour. Psychologists have been slow to move beyond this paradigm, whereas research within media and cultural studies has in the last 20 to 30 years taken a more constructivist stance, one that sees media 'messages' as not a property of the text itself but as the, potentially very varied, meanings that the audience finds in such texts. The work of people such as John Fiske and David Morley has been influential here, and Fiske says of Morley's work: 'Its value for us lies in its shift of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subject to socially and historically situated people. It ... contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its reading subjects.' (1987:63)

In TV audience research, this has led to a concern to understand the nature of the audience's engagement with a show from the viewer's perspective and to reveal the meanings that people draw from their viewing experiences. A classic example is Ang's (1985) analysis of what the US soap "Dallas" meant to its audience. Further research from this perspective seems to suggest that the meanings that viewers draw from a TV show depend, at least to some extent and amongst other things, upon their own personal biography and cultural background. It is within this constructivist paradigm of media research that I want to locate my own research.

As a Buffy fan and a social scientist, I was naturally intrigued by my own engagement with the show and curious about what it meant to other Buffy enthusiasts- and indeed I was not alone in this curiosity as I had come across and taken part in at least one online survey of Buffy fans. But there is a limit to the complexity of the issues that you can probe in a questionnaire- I wanted to talk to people about watching Buffy, to give them the opportunity to explain in depth what it is that strikes a chord with them and why. So I decided to undertake a small research study and in this paper I will report on this project in which I interviewed Buffy viewers about their engagement with the show, and about any relationship they felt it had to their own experiences and personal history.

I was interested in how people engage with the show, what the characters and events mean to them and in the extent to which the show resonates with their own lives in a meaningful way. So I did not set out to examine feminist issues or to seek out my participants' feelings on Buffy as a role model, and so I didn't initially ask any questions specifically about this. However, for at least some of my female participants this turned out to be plainly important and as it began to emerge as a theme, I started to probe for it in subsequent interviews.

As it turned out, several of my female respondents spoke about how they regarded the character of Buffy as an important role model, either for themselves personally or for young women in general, and this is specifically what I am going to talk about today.

Participants

The participants in the research were 8 women and 3 men, aged between 24 and 51, with most in their 30s and having various occupations. Although not all of them saw themselves as fans, they were all regular and enthusiastic viewers of the show. Five of the women had something to say about Buffy as a role model, and these are the women I am going to talk about today (false names):

Nancy, 24, an accounts administrator

Catherine, 28, a secretary

Jenny, 32, a community development officer

Julie, 33, a researcher

Audrey, 51, a teacher

Findings

What came out of these interviews was a strong sense of the importance of figures like Buffy for women in general, especially young women, and often for these particular women themselves. Buffy's strength, power and resilience, her capacity to fend for herself without the need for male

protection and her independence and ability to survive in a male-dominated world were important to these women, and it was clear that in some cases they derived a sense of support and validation in their own struggles from watching Buffy.

In their responses, the women were highly aware and appreciative of the challenge that Buffy's character presents to normative and stereotypical ideas about young womanhood and femininity and to gendered power relations. They sometimes felt this on a personal level, but also recognised the impact that such representations could potentially have upon viewers more generally. Three themes emerged from these women's responses: 'Buffy as a strong female character', 'Being like Buffy', and 'Buffy as a positive influence'.

Buffy as a strong female character

The women expressed their appreciation of Buffy as a female character showing both physical and mental strength, something that is arguably relatively rare in TV shows:

...there has always been such a reliance on strong male characters and it's so refreshing to see good strong female characters who 'kicks butt' shall we say (laughs)... Heroes like that have always been traditionally male; you know your comic book superheroes are always male, males, very few female characters like Bat Girl is a sideline to Batman and Cat Woman is as well, they are like following a strong male whereas Buffy is the lead. (Jenny)

I think I like her character because she's sort of seen as a strong, like, physically and mentally...and a strong woman as well. I suppose I relate to that, I like women with a bit of strength (laughs). I like to think, I'm not a feminist but I like to think that women have got equal rights and I suppose that sort of comes out in her physical abilities...(Catherine)

That's the whole key to the whole programme, is that she's a small blond girl but she's got this amazing power and strength, and special calling. (Julie)

Some of the women particularly valued the fact that Buffy is also a feminine character, signalling that femininity and strength need not be mutually exclusive, challenging normative expectations:

I just liked the fact that the Slayer was a girl...watching it with my daughter, and as a woman, I liked the fact that she was independent, that she stood up for herself, that it was almost counterintuitive to the image she presented- she's small, she's petite, she's girly in the sense of what she wears and how she projects her image and I certainly liked that... it's about confusing expectations and being something other than what you might appear... I particularly like the idea that the young woman can be the strong one on whom people rely for her strength. (Audrey)

...the balance there is that although they [the female characters] are strong they've still got strong feminine sides and they are not butch, masculine. They're still feminine and they've still got vulnerabilities and again it's all balanced out. (Jenny)

I like the fact that it bucks those stereotypes...in the show it's been pointed out quite a lot that she's only a little girl and yet she has all this power and strength, and I think that's good, it's very satisfying (laughs). (Julie)

And the reversal of usual gender power relations was also attractive, as reported by Catherine:

V: So what do you like to see Buffy doing?

C: I like to see her beating up the men (laughter)

V: Beating up the men (laughter)

C: Yeah, erm, yeah. I think it's just her power and...sort of control over it all.

Being like Buffy

Some of the women spoke about their wish to be 'like Buffy' in some way, signalling that this character served as a source of identification for them. Buffy's physical and mental strength, her power and capacity to cope with life were qualities that were attractive to them and that seemed to have direct relevance to their own lives. There was a strong explicit or implicit reference to gender relations and gender expectations in their responses, suggesting that they were aware of the potential tensions between strength and femininity:

...to be a girl and to be that powerful would be great, I think... it's partly thinking, 'wouldn't it be great to be like her?' you know, to be strong and to be that pretty blond girl and yet having this amazing strength, and I think it's rare to see a female character as well that's so...is that powerful really... I'd never try and take on (laughs) someone in a dark alley for example, but ...maybe not even consciously but you just sort of think, yeah, I can do these things ...you know, perfectly capable of doing this, that and the other and remembering that women are just as capable of doing lots of things. (Julie)

For Nancy, Buffy's strength was something that she aspired to in her own school days and something that she saw as key to 'getting through' the trials and tribulations of the education system. Being accepted as a girl, even to be regarded as fashionable and popular, was something that she wanted alongside being accepted as someone who was strong and who could take care of herself:

...you always wanted to be strong, because obviously girls weren't looked upon as, as strong characters, especially not the way that Buffy was looked upon ...and you always wanted to be like that, you wanted to be the popular girl, to have the fashion sense and it was things that I was aspiring to I think, trying to be popular, trying to get through school ...wanting to, to just get through it without having being bullied ...you know, I think I kind of wanted to be thought of in that way and, and not sort of shunned because I was a girl

The strength and power that Nancy saw in Buffy was important in surviving a school environment fraught with the prospect of being bullied:

... you wanted to show that you had this strength, this power, and for people not to shy away, I wouldn't ever, you know, harm anybody but just so people would or the guys at school wouldn't mess with you basically, you know, and you could go through school, you wouldn't have any hassles...

Jenny also identified with Buffy, drawing a parallel in her own life where she needed to be seen as capable and effective in a male-dominated environment; she appreciated seeing another young woman (Buffy) represented with these strengths:

...my last job I was in a very male dominated environment in that I was in charge of a building, so I was dealing with workmen and a lot of males all the time and they assumed that because I was female that I wouldn't know what I was talking about and ... that presented a challenge because it meant I went out of my way to make sure I knew what I was talking about so that they couldn't pull the wool over my eyes and it's nice to see somebody else coping with things in a similar situation as I have.

Buffy as positive influence

The idea of Buffy as a role model for young women was evidenced in the women's responses. Buffy's strength and intelligence, her self-reliance and life-skills were seen as important characteristics, and the women saw this counter-stereotypical representation of young womanhood

as potentially influential. It could give female viewers an enhanced sense of their own potential capabilities and also demonstrate to a wider audience that young women can be strong and capable:

... still sometimes you come up against other people feeling that girls and women are supposed to conform to a particular stereotype... as a woman, I think definitely that's part of the reason why I identify with it, or I like the show so much because I think it's great to see a woman having that much power, and also being respected by other people..
...y'know, she's the one everyone listens to... I'm a feminist, I wouldn't say I'm a man-hating kind, I'm not, I think men and women should be equal, but sometimes it's good to think that, yes, it shows that women can be just as powerful, can do things that men wouldn't think they could do. (Julie)

When asked about whether watching a character like Buffy could make a difference to how girls and young women think about themselves, Audrey replied:

I'd like to think so...again it's about confusing expectations and being something other than what you might appear... her independence, her strength and her intelligence, her self-reliance. The idea that you don't need to have a partner in order to have an identity. All of those things I think are useful for people, for young women, to think about themselves.

Jenny agreed. Talking about both the characters of Buffy and Willow (Buffy's friend) she says:

Oh yeah definitely I mean particularly if you look at Willow's intelligence and her studies etc, I mean that's something that any young woman could aspire to, to bettering themselves in that way and, you know, Buffy trying to cope with running a household and bring up her younger sister after her mother's death. They are all things that are relevant to life, aren't they?

Jenny also emphasised that these representations could be an important alternative to other 'role models' who may reinforce young women's view of themselves as defined by their bodily appearance:

Yeah definitely particularly for a young audience I think, because there has been so much in the newspaper recently ... teenage girls, they're following supermodels as role models and having problems with diets etc and I think it's much better to have a strong, lets say, a suffragette type role model than a catwalk model, who's only there really as a clothes rack at the end of the day.

When asked if she felt characters like Buffy might be important for young people, Nancy was emphatic:

Definitely, because they need to show to other people, not necessarily just to the girls, to other people, to the lads, to the mums and dads that the girls can be ... they don't necessarily have to be big...and I think they need that figure to look up to and they do need to aspire to that...and I think that Buffy does portray that kind of character and obviously you have some girls going in and they dress like her and act like her, and because they act so strongly and with such confidence people tend to leave them alone ... and characters in a series like that, that girls and lads watch as kids as they grow up...if you give them a little taste of something that they can do then they pick up on it and it makes them stronger so I think characters like Buffy are very important.

Discussion

The issue of the relationship between media texts and individual's behaviour, thoughts and feelings- in short, their psychology- is a complicated one. Even within the media effects paradigm of research, it is virtually impossible to assess the impact of a text upon its viewers in more than a very short term timescale. How can we possibly assess whether watching Buffy really does empower young women and provide them with psychological resources for dealing with the events they must face growing up and making their way in a man's world, rather than reinforcing in them the expectations of normative femininity and heterosexual relationships? Empirical research cannot satisfactorily answer this question. When my research participants talk of Buffy as a role model for themselves this is not empirical proof that watching Buffy has indeed had some objectively definable influence upon their lives.

However, textual analysis alone is also unable to do more than highlight some of the possible meanings that are made available to those who 'read' the texts, the viewers who watch the TV show. And if we are persuaded of the claim that viewers are active, meaning-making beings who interpret the text through the web of personal experiences and social circumstances that make up their biography, then we need to listen to what they have to say about their viewing. It means taking their reflections on this seriously, while recognising that the discourses that gender our experience and maintain inequalities are not always visible to us to articulate in the same way as a TV show is.

In the years since Buffy came to an end, the place for a strong female lead character on prime-time TV, with whom young women might identify in some positive way, remains unfilled at least in the UK. If the character has any power to encourage young women to think about themselves in terms other than their appearance and sexuality, then we need Buffy back!

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