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Buffy as role model: her significance for female viewers

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Buffy as role model

Is BtVS: a feminist show?

This question has been posed by, among others:

Rhonda Wilcox

Patricia Pender

Lorna Jowett

Dawn Heinecken

Zoe Jane Playdon

Buffy as role model

Issues addressed include:

Femininity and female power

Patriarchal succession

Race and class

Narrative and generic tradition

Normative sexuality

Feminist ethics

Buffy as role model

Is BtVS transgressive and subversive

or

does it reinforce normative femininity?

Buffy as role model

Theoretical approach:

'media effects' research

VS

Constructivist: audience interpretations

Buffy as role model

John Fiske (1987)

David Morley (1980)

'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.' (Fiske, 1987:63)

Ang, I. (1985) Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination.

Buffy as role model

My research: an interview study of regular BtVS viewers

What do the characters and events mean to them? To what extent does the show resonate with their own lives in a meaningful way?

Buffy as role model

Participants:

- 8 women, 3 men
- Aged 24-51
- Various occupations

Buffy as role model

Nancy (24) an accounts administrator

Catherine (28) a secretary

Jenny (32) a community development
officer

Julie (33) a researcher

Audrey (51) a teacher

Buffy as role model

- Buffy as a strong female character
- Being like Buffy
- Buffy as a positive influence

Buffy as a strong female character

...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)

Buffy as a strong female character

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)

Buffy as a strong female character

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)

Buffy as a strong female character

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)

Buffy as a strong female character

...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)

Buffy as a strong female character

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)

Buffy as a strong female character

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

...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)

Being like Buffy

...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 (Nancy)

Being like Buffy

... 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...(Nancy)

Being like Buffy

... 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.

(Jenny)

Buffy as positive influence

... 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)

Buffy as positive influence

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. (Audrey)

Buffy as a positive influence

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)

Buffy as a positive influence

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.
(Jenny)

Buffy as a positive influence

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. (Nancy)

Conclusion

The relationship between media texts and individual psychology is complicated

Empirical research with viewers and textual analysis both have a role

Conclusion

We need Buffy back!