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"Solving Problems with Sharp Objects": Female Empowerment, Sex and Violence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

D'Hoffryn : "Isn't that just like a slayer. Solving all her problems by sticking things with sharp objects." ("Selfless," 7005)

[1] It has become *de rigeur* in research on the Buffyverse to cite Joss Whedon's premise that he "designed Buffy to be an icon, not just a TV show" (Whedon, 2003a). Based on its portrayal of a strong female protagonist, the nature of that icon has been firmly linked with contemporary phrases like girl power', 'female empowerment' and 'feminism'. This iconic status has been the theme of laudatory articles appearing as the show has ended its seven year run (Dauber 2003; Green 2003; Hockensmith 2003a; Mason 2003; Miller 2003; McDaniel 2003; Ostrow 2003; Richards 2003; Tsai 2003). Joss Whedon, in a panel discussion for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences where he repeated his icon claim, also described the "very first mission statement of the show" as "the joy of female power, having it, using it, sharing it" (Whedon, 2003a). As the show has ended, we can now assess what is the sum of the show's achievement as a dramatic statement about gender, whether or not Buffy as hero truly "represents her gender, herself, and more" (Daugherty, 2002, 153) and in what way?

[2] Given Whedon's premise, it is not surprising that Pender asserts: "If one of the principle motivations of popular cultural studies is to decode the political subtext of any given work, then the central concern for students of the Buffy phenomenon is the question, is *Buffy* feminist?" (Pender 2002, 36). Academic analysis has circled around the "transgression/containment" model which "dictates that Buffy is "good" if she transgresses dominant stereotypes, "bad" if she is contained in cultural cliché" (38). Some assessments like Wisker's, *"Buffy The Vampire Slayer* treads an entertaining, if uneasy, course between conservatism and contemporary feminist girl power?" (Wisker, 2001), posit an ideological divide. Others, limited by being written early in the show's run, prematurely adopt Whedon's desire to subvert the horror genre 'female-as-victim' role, as a basis for subverting gender roles in *Buffy*, as the beginning and end of the story. Thompson, for example, asserts that the show is in a 'males-cannot-measure-up' scenario, fitting the criteria of a radical feminist superiority discourse: "Even Cordelia, the archetypal high-school cheerleader "bitch" has a strength of character which males in the series cannot match" (Thompson, 2003). However, one does not have to go further than Xander saving the world at the end of Season Six, or Spike doing the same at the end of Season Seven, to realise that "strength of character" is not exclusively the province of females in the Buffyverse. In both Spike and Xander's case, the message seems to be that whoever is best placed at the time to save the world is the one who should do it, gender being irrelevant.

[3] There is no question that the show's exploration of female empowerment is linked to the concept of power in male/female relationships. Season seven is essentially an exploration of what Buffy's power might mean in a leadership context as she takes her role to the level of commanding an Army in a war against the First Evil. The storyline has Buffy battle a sexism-spouting misogynist villain, the preacher Caleb. She successfully fights off the first Watchers' attempt to force demon power into her, a form of mystical rape, to strengthen her in the fight against the First Evil (as they had done to the very first Slayer). Finally, Buffy's discovery of the Scythe in the stone, forged by ancient female Guardians who through history monitored the patriarchal Watchers to help protect the Slayers, enables Buffy to reject patriarchal precedent and to change Slayer lore. In the final battle, she gives up her chosen status and shares her powers with potential Slayers all over the world, rejecting the idea that her life has to be predestined. For all the didacticism of that triumph, as one writer succinctly puts it, "girl power" alone is not enough to propel a narrative, otherwise…Charmed might not seem so inane" (Menon, 2003).

[4] While gender subversion is the intent of Whedon's premise, we were given a narrative that was prepared to take risks in exploring that premise. There are moments of ambiguity and flux where, thankfully if one values complex drama or comedy, the premise is stretched and played with to give the audience resonant dramatic, emotional, and ideological possibilities beyond its stereotypical empowerment boundaries and icons. Vint is right when she says *Buffy* "opens productive space for getting young women (and others) to see how meanings are constructed" (Vint, 2002, 24). I would take Vint's perception of ideological tension a step further and argue that tension is creatively cultivated in the show's dramatic negotiation with its own premise. Whedon encourages us to specificity in ideological terms: "We think very carefully about what we're trying to say emotionally, politically, and even philosophically while we're writing it", but he qualifies this:

"The process of breaking a story involves the writers and myself, so a lot of different influences, prejudices, and ideas get rolled up into it. So it really is, apart from being a big pop culture phenomenon, something that is deeply layered textually episode by episode. I do believe that there is plenty to study and there are plenty of things going on in it, as there are in me that I am completely unaware of." (Whedon, 2003b)

In juggling discourses about male and female power, the show works to embed them in a dramatic context that encourages a range of gender possibilities that make for a far less static 'girl power' thesis. "The basic idea, the empowerment of girls and the toughness of this life, was always there, but it grew beyond my best intentions" (Murray & Kloer, 2003). Just as "generalisations about gender can all too easily erase the multiplicity of experiences of gender" (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 2003, 47), a too easy acceptance of what 'empowerment or 'girl power' might mean in the

Buffyverse may lead us to miss the true value of the show's exploration of such labels for the female experience. The simple reversal of culturally demarcated gender differences so that "women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defined as masculine, as long as the man then steps into her position), so as to keep the whole structure intact" (Kaplan, 2000, 129) is not exactly what we get in *Buffy* because the reversal of gender roles is never a simple dramatic flip.

[5] Sharing gender roles, rather than reversal, is closer to what we are given in Buffy and Spike's relationship. There is a partial gender role reversal in Spike's damsel in distress role leading up to Buffy's rescue of him from the Ubervamp's torture and the First Evil's imprisonment of him in Season Seven. Buffy is "not much for the damselling" ("Chosen," 7022) but Spike often is. Nor is he always in control of the sexual action between them. One of the "main indictments of Hollywood film has been its passive positioning of the woman as sexual spectacle…and the active protagonist as bearer of the look", a product of "masculine desire" (Stacey, 2000, 450). Spike is objectified for the female audience in scenes where he is shirtless or naked while little is seen of Buffy's body by comparison, even to the point where Buffy is, ironically, totally invisible in 'Gone'(6011) and Spike is, despite strategic placement behind props, barely covered. Spike's beauty, his desirability, "becomes a function of certain practices of imaging –framing, lighting, camera movement, angle (Doane, 2000, 421) so that the male is an object of spectorial sexual voyeurism. Buffy also loses "some traditionally feminine characteristics" (129) to Spike in the relationship. He wants to analyse their relationship, "So, we gonna chat this out, or what?" ('Gone', 6011) and talk about what is happening between them in an effort to get her to acknowledge, or at least name it: "What is this thing we have?" ('Dead Things', 6013), a process she rejects.

[6] However, there are fissures in this reversal. While the female audience is encouraged to gaze, as Mulvey defines that term (Mulvey, 1975) at Spike's body with pleasure, we do not get Buffy gazing lustfully and directly at Spike. She is not literally "the bearer of the look" despite the fact that Spike's body is there to be looked at. She desires him but, because it is in spite of herself, we see little of her indulging the pleasure of contemplating the object of her desire. Though he has no inhibition in raking her body with his eyes, as he kneels in front of her and sings of his love in the Musical, she turns away. While pining after Buffy with unrequited love, Spike still embodies the traditional male as seducer role. His physical touch or caresses arousing her despite herself in the Bronze balcony scene in Dead Things (6013), for example, where he draws her into a public sexual encounter she initially wants to avoid. What we have here are shifting gender roles, shared between the male and female characters. The sharing, rather than simple reversal, of traditional male and female roles by Buffy and Spike, such as their partnership in saving the world in Chosen (7022), are tentative attempts in *Buffy* to change the discourse of gender reversal through circling imaginary or symbolic boundaries to represent an option of "empowerment" that is more than a 'pattern of oppositions':

What rather has to happen is that we move beyond long-held cultural and linguistic patterns of oppositions: male/female (as these terms currently signify); dominant/submissive; active/passive; nature/civilization; order/chaos; matriarchal/patriarchal. If rigidly defined sex differences have been constructed around fear of the other, we need to think about ways of transcending a polarity that has only brought us all pain. (Kaplan, 2000, 135)

I would like to argue, that *Buffy* is **tentatively** attempting to transcend polarity, in particular, through its exploration of the aspects of Buffy's empowerment that relate to her engagement with violence and sex.

[7] Female empowerment in *Buffy* is typically described as linked to her ability in the masculine role to 'kick butt' as the positive stereotype of the female aggressor (Hopkins, 2002). Buffy appears empowered as a Slayer because the violence she uses works in the fight against evil and saving the world. Until Xander saves the world with love in 'Grave' (6022) it is the main tool in an apocalypse. Xander, petulantly when he feels under appreciated for his use of it, calls it "quality violence" ('The Zeppo', 3013). Given that the evil guys seem to be good at it too, with "all those fancy martial arts skills they inevitably seem to pick up" ('Lessons', 701), it is a "solid call" to use it:

Xander: You don't know how to kill this thing.
Buffy: I thought I might try violence.
Xander: Solid call. (Killed by Death, 2018)

Buffy's violence is in response to attack from the other side and she does not get to choose another method in those circumstances. Buffy knows that there is an art to her violence and she is proud of that. It takes training and it is about survival. She is not paid to kill but she has a calling to do it and, like any good employee, she is workmanlike in her execution. This dedication is comically highlighted when she is politely apologetic at having to stake an elderly woman who has been sired by Spike, "Sorry, ma'am, but it's my job" (Sleeper, 708).

[8] It has also been frequently noted that Buffy fights with words as well as blows, that language for her is a weapon (Wilson, 2002, Overby & Preston-Matto, 2002). The "banter portion of the fight" (Prophecy Girl,1012) is acknowledged by both villains and the Scooby heroes as a ritualistic and essential part of the fight scenario. Lame repartee can signal inevitable defeat as much as a poorly placed kick or punch. Repartee, whether Buffy's or from the core Scooby group, is a vehicle for the female empowerment message. "If I was at full Slayer power, I'd be punning right about now" (Helpless 3012). As Overby and Preston-Matto point out, in placing Buffy in the traditionally male stance of the sardonic hero, the show participates through language in gender reversal, as it does when it gives male characters like Xander the more feminine "self-directed" mocking and self-deprecating lines. Allusively self-referential as always, the show uses a nonsense pun to signal that having robot Buffy, the Buffybot, as a stand in Slayer when Buffy is dead, is not nearly as effective as having the real Slayer. "That'll put marzipan in your pie plate, bingo!"(Bargaining Part 1, 601) As Spike says, the Buffybot will never be Buffy "exactly" because Buffy is more than a fighting machine. Her language is not just the sarcastic word trappings of battle but, essentially, a signifier for the hero she is. This joy in

language is, for Buffy herself, a part of the thrill of the fight. When the punning is bad, the fun goes out of the fight. "That's it? That's all I get? One lame-ass vamp, with no appreciation for my painstakingly thought out puns? I don't think the forces of darkness are even trying" ('Wild at Heart', 406). Language is Buffy's power, not simply because it is a part of her arsenal, but because it is the way she announces who she is. Concomitantly, her enemies are never more threatening than when they have the truth-telling zinger to contribute to the encounter: "I think we already know what Lady HacksAway wants" (Selfless, 705). The leader of the Vengeance demons, D'Hoffryn, devastatingly pinpoints the lack of subtlety in Buffy's violent approach to some of the problems she wants to solve. Manipulation of language for Buffy, as it is within the text of the show overall, is liberating. If Buffy were less articulate, she would appear more brutal. The effect of this word play in the context of Buffy's use of violence is one of putting the audience "fray-adjacent" (The Zeppo, 3012). We, and the show, have perspective on the violence, as we do on every other aspect of the shows construction, cliché or not. We are given the distance to consider what the violence is being used to do or reveal or tell, what the blow is **for**, and how violence as metaphor is constructed is never forgotten.

[9] However, the show makes very specific use of violence beyond its role in action sequences and in word play to define Buffy's strength and weaknesses. Violence is recognized as a part of Buffy's power but, in Xander's embarrassment that Buffy has brought her slaying into the real world of his job, we are reminded that while violence works in saving the world it is messy and annoying in other contexts, "No. No, not here. Not at my job. That's your job" (Life Serial, 605). Buffy does not like to think that violence is her main resource:

Buffy: I wasn't gonna use violence. I don't always use violence. Do I?
Xander: The important thing is *you* believe that.
("Inca Mummy Girl," 2004)

She often knows that what works on the killing fields of Sunnydale in the fight against demonic evil may in fact hinder her in building relationships and a life. The Slayer Faith killing a human and Buffy's mistaken belief that she was herself responsible for Katrina's death, due to the manipulation of the Nerd Trio, are just two instances where the show supports Buffy's moral compass. The misuse of violence in the context of the loss of human life, in those two instances, is something that Buffy does not feel she can explain to someone like Spike, who is a demon without a soul:

SPIKE: And how many people are alive because of you? How many have you saved? One dead girl doesn't tip the scale.
BUFFY: That's all it is to you, isn't it? Just another body!
SPIKE: Buffy-
BUFFY: You can't understand why this is killing me, can you?
SPIKE: Why don't you explain it? (Dead Things, 6013)

It is ironic that Buffy beats an unresisting Spike, who loves her, within an inch of his undead life after she asserts the sanctity of human existence. In this scene, she is losing control of her anger and unleashing the full fury of her Slayer violence, leaving us with the sense that "the best theme song for the relationship would probably be "Sympathy for the Devil"" (O'Hare, 2002). Buffy is brutal in her beating of Spike and, as his vamp face changes to his bloodied human one, the show condemns the misuse of her 'girl power'.

[10] In that beating, violence is a vehicle for exploring Buffy's attempts to transfer a quick fix, provided by the Slaying skills required to fight evil, to solving problems in her personal relationships. However, when the kill is not clean in Buffy it is a signifier of emotional meltdown:

Buffy: What? I kill vampires, that's my job.
Giles: Well, true, true, although you don't usually beat them into quite such a bloody pulp beforehand. Everything alright? ('Ted', 2011)

Violence is emotion in *Buffy,* it reveals inner life, and the characters fight their own demons when they fight the monster of the week. "How do you make each unstoppable monster unique and threatening?" Whedon was asked:

"We got into a problem with that. We kept saying, "This monster can't be killed." It's like, "Well, have you used violence?" It was never about the unstoppableness. It was never about the monster. It was about the emotion. The monster came from that. We didn't always make them unique. We tried as much as possible, but what was important was how they related to the characters and that's what made them unique." (Topol, 2003)

As Buffy takes out her self-loathing on Spike we are at the nadir of her use of violence. We are about as far as we get in the show from that sense of her resilience in the struggle to cope with life that is the heart of Buffy's empowerment: "Strong is fighting! It's hard, and it's painful, and it's every day. It's what we have to do" ('Amends', 3010). As she speaks those words to a suicidal Angel, Buffy is not talking about her action hero Slaying role, which seems straightforward by comparison. In the struggle to find the will to live and deal with life as it is, for Angel to find the will to go on, you need more than fancy fight moves and repartee.

[11] Her sexual relationship with Spike, embodying the sexuality of violence and the violence of sexuality, supports and questions our sense of Buffy's empowerment. Xander, when he finds out Anya slept with Spike, echoes what Buffy has been feeling about the fact that she is sleeping with everything she hates: " You let that evil, soulless thing touch

you. You wanted me to feel something? Congratulations, it worked. I look at you - and I feel sick - 'cause you had sex with that" ('Entropy', 6018). Xander's words confirm Buffy's worst fears about what her friends would think of her if her sexual liaison had been known to them. Her self-loathing puts her "at the mercy of her life":

Buffy . . . goes through horrible pain every year. But last year, she really lost herself. And I think the audience felt that lack. They felt the lack of the strength . . . of, you know, grabbing that sword when Angel's about to stab her and saying, "I've still got me." …And I understand why they need that.. because I need it, too…that very positive message that we had at the very beginning of the show… Buffy empowered again, instead of seeing her at the mercy of her life. . . (Lee, 2002)

I'm not entirely in agreement with Whedon's assessment of Season Six, particularly given the prefiguring of Buffy's future depression in her often cynical view of life as a Slayer doomed to die young:

Buffy: (interrupts) World is what it is. We fight. We die. Wishing doesn't change that.
Giles: I have to believe in a better world.
Buffy: Go ahead. I have to live in this one. ('The Wish', 309)

Such cynicism has always held the seeds for a descent into the depression-like state she develops after coming back from the dead. While dying and being resurrected will do that sort of thing to you, so will being the Slayer.

[12] She has come close to losing part of herself in other seasons. Her break-up with Riley was about that fluidity of her heroic self when she is confronted, as she is in her relationship with Spike, with moral ambiguity. In the underbelly of the vampire world, where the weak vampire dregs ply a centuries old trade of feeding for money on those who find the "hazards of the underworld" addictive" in 'Into the Woods' (5010), Buffy confronts what Giles tells her is not "less ambiguous evil" like Glory. Buffy, angry at Riley for paying for the rush of being fed on by vampire "trulls", wants the Buffyverse to stay black and white, and she asserts she knows what to use violence for: "Vampires are vampires. And my job description is pretty clear". Hurt by Riley's betrayal, she is in no mood to hear Giles's uncertainty about killing the purveyors of this addiction. For Giles, the willing complicity of the humans in their victim-hood, muddies the moral clarity of her role as defender of "people out there who deserve your help", who are not colluding with the vampires in their fate. For Giles the distinction is about "focus", about where her efforts in the fight against evil can be best spent. Fighting unambiguous evil makes decisions and actions, heroism, simpler. When Buffy finally goes with Xander, Giles, and Willow to clean out the nest and finds the building abandoned, the palpable disgust she has towards "these creeps" feels personal. Her attitude and language is that of someone who has found that the fight here is not about her destiny but about the intrusion of some of the worst aspects of the vampire culture into her personal life. Riley, the epitome of normal and safe to her, the man she trusted, has sought out the very thing she is trying to stamp out. Buffy is turning her anger at Riley on the vampires, much as she turns her self-loathing on Spike in the alley beating.

[13] Riley later tries to explain to Buffy why he allowed himself to be bitten. The most interesting contrast of terms in this conversation is when Riley calls the vamps who bit him "girls" and Buffy quickly counters with the correction "Vampires. Killers". She cannot understand what Riley is trying to tell her because the moral terms in which she judges the human/vampire dichotomy do not allow her to understand Riley's attraction to it. They fail to communicate but the real source of the distance between them is the limitation of Buffy's moral compass. There is no place, at this point in her journey, for moral ambiguity or shades of grey. It shocks her that Riley can claim to understand what the vampires are feeling: "You aren't a passion to them, you are a snack! A willing, idiotic snack." But Riley says what they feel is analogous to the passion he feels for her: "I know exactly what they feel when they bite me, because I feel it every time we're together. It's like the whole world falls away. And all there is… is you." For Buffy, the possibility that analogies can be made between human passion and vampire bloodlust, that there may be felt experiences the two species share, echoes her ignorance of the existence of the nests where human and vampires meet in an exchange of needs. Sunnydale, small town though it may be, still contains within its borders both experiences and knowledge of the world that both Buffy the young adult, and Buffy the superhero, do not have the ability to understand. So when she stakes the pathetic, skeletal female vampire running away from her, essentially because she was the one that drank from Riley, it is brought home to us that there are times when "Yikes! The quality of mercy is not Buffy" ('I Only Have Eyes For You', 2019). While Buffy is proved right when she asserts that "my emotions give me power", that anger can give the Slayer the "fire" she needs to win, she is missing their paradoxical impact when she continues on to say that "They're total assets" ('What's My Line', Part 2, 2010). Emotions can be violent and you can lose yourself in them and the pain they embody. Spike's assessment of what loving Buffy feels like: " I have come to redefine the words pain and suffering since I fell in love with you" ('Never Leave Me', 709) devastatingly pinpoints that fact. As Whedon says, emotional pain **is** Buffy's story: "Buffy in pain, story more interesting. Buffy not in pain, story not interesting " (IGN, 2003, 8).

[14] However, that pain is often multi-facetted, signaling life passionately lived even when it is debilitating. The violent, lustful and desire-driven sexual encounter in 'Smashed' (609) brilliantly portrays what drives Buffy and Spike's attraction to one another and how both violence and their sexuality define the way they both cope with life. As they trade blow for blow and insult for insult, we get two superheroes evenly matched in the fight and in a personal relationship where submission or dominance is sidelined as an issue, for all they will go on to play dominance sexual games. This scene is not about the reversal of gender roles as traditional gender roles are almost completely irrelevant to this violent coupling. Looking for a fight in that scene, Spike feels renewed power in the knowledge he now has that his chip does not prevent him from physically attacking her, that he is not "toothless". Everything that is predatory, dangerous, sneeringly derisive, and gleefully violent about Spike is conveyed in the way he warns her: "you oughta be careful" and goads her into punching him:

BUFFY: (small puzzled smile) Get out of my way.
SPIKE: Or what?

Unafraid, Buffy erupts into attack and, staggering from a flurry of punches and kicks that drive him backwards down the alley, Spike laughs. He punctuates his verbal counter attack with blows to Buffy's face and body that do not hurt her and immediately bounces back from blows, grinning. He is enjoying his newfound equality with her, as much as the fight itself, as the verbal barbs they both fling become as pointed as the accompanying blows.

[15] There is aggression in the fight music and it underscores their verbal barbs even when they stop trading blows to talk. The verbal, as well as the physical, sparring is as much about how they can emotionally hurt each other as it is about their superhero enmity:

BUFFY: You haven't even come close to hurting me.
SPIKE: Afraid to give me the chance?

When Buffy grabs Spike and pushes him up against the wall, cutting off another taunt by launching herself at him in a passionate kiss, we have the unification of sex and violence in their coupling. The ethereal, female choral voice underscoring as Buffy moves rhythmically against Spike, with its elegiac minor chords against low registers in the strings, creates a sense of melancholy. This could just as easily be a theme for a parting as a joining. As they stare at each other, prone on the floor, the music resolves on an A minor chord that signals inevitability. The music is telling us, along with the metaphor of the house falling down, that this sexual union is not going to bring them fulfillment. However, there is another resonance to the fact that what falls down is an abandoned and decrepit building. The black and white moral framework that has separated these two former enemies in the past is being brought down as well. It signifies a moral shift, a further greying of both their moral views and the destruction of the male-female power dichotomy they started out as representing.

[16] We do need to ponder whether *Buffy is* empowered in her relationships with men given that, every time she has sex, emotional pain and relationship failure results. We need to consider whether the show is in danger of promoting the disempowering message that indulging in sexual pleasure inevitably leads to some form of penalty and that the expression of desire always threatens life, self-esteem, and one's sense of self. All of Buffy's relationships seem to fall into the conventional 'love hurts' discourse, which is about the disappointment and mistreatment women may experience, and the compromise required by women "to compensate for men's apathy, neediness, or misconduct" (Phillips, 2000, 69). Angel turns evil, Riley leaves her and Spike's lack of a soul rocks her moral universe too much for her to find joy in her abandonment to the sexual excitement he arouses in her. Dekelb-Rittenhouse describes vampire allure as the "eroticisation of death and the possibility of an eternity spent in sensual abandon" (DeKelb-Rittenhouse, 2002, 146). Written prior to Season Six, she too easily includes Spike in the same category as Angel when speaking of this myth as a "counterfeit" for love. If the show is aware and plays with the myth, "A vampire in love with a Slayer! It's rather poetic! In a maudlin sort of way" ('Invisible Girl', 1011), it does so differently for both characters. However, Buffy succumbs to both lovers because of something in herself, as much as she does to something in the very different natures of her lovers. *Buffy* **is** predicated on the paraphernalia of Dracula and vampire mythology, even though it toys with it in postmodern ways and plays with it from a 'girl power' viewpoint. Vampirism as evil is as firmly the canon in the Buffyverse as it is in Stoker's Dracula: "Dracula is the product of Victorian sexual repressiveness" and "we are still trying to exorcise him" (Wood, 1996, 365). The potency of the vampire figure is the allure of irresistible, non-procreative, abnormal sexuality and sexual freedom, to use Wood's paradigm. Dracula's darkness is "familiar" to us: "For all the emphasis on "unknown" places, "it all comes home": "the sense of terrible familiarity… the familiarity of a disowned self that insists upon recognition" (369). The difference with Spike is that the supposedly evil is given a "voice, a discourse, a point of view" (368), which Stoker did not really give Dracula. As well, Buffy is not in supernatural thrall to Spike, she chooses to come to him, to a previously denied part of who she is, creating in the show the possibilities of a shared sexual freedom.

[17] In Buffy's identity implosion after she initiates a sexual liaison with Spike we have the eroticism of shame and a fascinating illustration of the show's complex engagement with its own empowerment premise. Her lust for Spike propels her indulgence in sexual practices with him involving dominance games and rough sex: "You wanna see the bite marks love" ('Dead Things', 613). She perceives those practices as deviant behaviour: "That's the power of your charms. Last night . . . was the most perverse . . . degrading experience of my life" ('Wrecked',6010). Spike is full of admiration for the passion unleashed by their building-destroying sex, telling her that getting off on "the little nasties we whispered" is more than her "style", it's her "calling". To her that night is a "freak show", to him "a bloody revelation". Spike's enthusiastic but inappropriate compliment, "I knew the only thing better than killing a slayer would be f…", shows that the 'rush' of violence and sex are linked for him, an insight that Buffy is fighting within herself. In that sense, he does know her intimately, better than she knows herself, "You can act as high and mighty as you like . . . but I know where you live now, Slayer. I've tasted it".

[18] Buffy talks very little about her feelings for Spike and when she does she either denies feeling anything meaningful or wants to keep it undefined so that she does not have to face the reality of what she may feel. She cannot even bring herself to call what they have a "thing": "We don't have a . . . thing, we have . . . this. That's all" ('Dead Things', 6013). During their one relaxed and conversationally intimate, post-coital moment she reluctantly admits to liking him "sometimes". The rarity of this verbal intimacy leads Spike to drily ask her "Are we having a conversation?" The most Buffy will admit is "Maybe" but she opens up to express a wry awareness of her own inconsistent moral stance in the relationship. She accepts Spike's pointed description of her post-coital fleeing "virtue fluttering", even jokes about doing it, "as soon as my legs start working", and grudgingly compliments him on his

lovemaking skills "You got the job done yourself". The moment of communion between them is lost when Spike, meaning to compliment what he sees as her abandonment to passion, lust and skill in their S & M games, "you make it hurt in all the wrong places", calls her an "animal". As he says to Anya elsewhere, when they commiserate over their mutual rejection by those they love, "She was so raw/ Never felt anything like it. . . " ('Entropy', 6018). Buffy, understandably, rejects Spike's "animal" description but he is right about her being "raw" in her sexuality and in the emotional needs she tries to use sex to satisfy.

[19] From an ideological point of view, the interesting question is whether the show is as confused as Buffy about what is oppressive or liberating in her sexual relationship with Spike. As When Buffy asks Tara later, after the conversation with Spike: "Why can't I stop? Why do I keep letting him in?", female victim-hood and male oppression are implied by her question. However, Buffy is portrayed as succumbing out of desire when having sex with Spike in a public place in the Bronze balcony scene, in the same episode as both the conversations above with Spike and Tara. Initially rejecting Spike, Buffy asks him to stop his advances but is sexually aroused by him. "You see . . . you try to be with them . . . but you always end up in the dark . . . with me. What would they think of you . . . if they found out . . . all the things you've done? If they knew . . . who you really were?" Spike is right in much of what he says to her. Buffy voluntarily leaves the lighthearted company of her friends, clearly not sharing their mood. She does not deny his claims that she takes pleasure in what is forbidden, dark, dangerous and hidden in their public coupling. She does not take him up on his challenge to stop him and she is enticed by what brings her shame. This is not coercion on Spike's part, her desire simply wins out over her shame and is stimulated by the circumstances that produce it. However, Spike is only partly right. While her desire tells us that Buffy does feel emotional affinity with "the dark" which Spike embodies, it is also her discomfort with what she is doing that tells us she 'belongs' downstairs with her friends. As Wilcox points out, there are limits to Buffy and Spike's knowledge of each other: "Spike tells Buffy that he knows her, that she is like him—and he is right; he knows her dark side in both its strengths and weaknesses. But he does not know all of her; and even more significantly, he does not know all of himself, any more than she knows all of him or of herself" (Wilcox, 2002, 18). Buffy has links to both the dark and the light and cannot, at this point in her life, find a way of uniting them in her sense of who she is.

[20] Ideologically, the show is hovering around a very particular sexual discourse in Buffy's sexual interaction with men where the show wants to acknowledge women's

entitlement to express their full sexualities and makes clear that they are entitled to do so without losing social respect, being victimized, or being held accountable for their own exploitation. (Phillips, 2000, 78)

Burr has pointed out the ideological subversion inherent in the ambiguity created by the sadomasochistic eroticism in vampire/human relationships in the storyline (Burr, 2003). However, the show's interest in the emotional pain relationships bring to Buffy, and in the consequences of Buffy's choices in relationships with men, portrays her lack of self-knowledge, rather than her sexuality, as the problem. In her relationship with Spike, it is not simply the dominance games, or sexual violence, that frightens Buffy. I think we can rely on Spike's mention of their five hour sexual marathons, when Buffy breaks up with him in 'As You Were' (6015), as saying something about her confident enthusiasm for what they do! What terrifies Buffy when she realises she did not 'come back wrong', is that she **is** the girl who wants sex with Spike. "I may be dirt . . . but you're the one who likes to roll in it, Slayer" ('Wrecked', 6010). Her identity crisis about her Slayer role is played out in her emotional crisis about her sexuality, but they are not the same issue. In the former, she does not know why she is back, given that she achieved a sense of completeness in Heaven, or why she feels cut off from the world around her. In her relationship with Spike, her identity is shaken by discovering that her deepest sexual feelings are more powerful, and less socially mainstream or conventional, than she knew. Sleeping with a vampire whose appetites matched her own unleashes that knowledge. When her identity crisis about her Slayer role plays into her emotional crisis about sleeping with Spike Buffy confuses the two issues. She links her sense of degradation from her sexual practices to her disgust at Spike's moral identity as a vampire but they, too, are not the same thing. Her issue with their sexual practices is one thing, the morality of enjoying them with Spike is another.

[21] In their sexual liaison we are given "the variability and murkiness of the boundaries, or "edges" and "fine lines"- between seduction and domination, pleasure and danger, responsibility and exploitation, agency and objectification, consent and coercion" (Phillips, 2000, 3). Buffy wants Spike to be the gatekeeper for her behaviours. As Clem tells Spike in 'Seeing Red' (6019), Buffy is a nice girl but she has issues, and one of them is about giving herself permission to enjoy the sexual practices she wants to indulge in with Spike. Tara tries to give her that permission when she tells Buffy the results of her investigation of the spell that brought her back- that Buffy did not come back wrong. She tells Buffy that it is morally acceptable to be with Spike whether she loves him or not. Buffy weeps and begs Tara not to forgive her: "This just can't be me, it isn't me. Why do I feel like this? Why do I let Spike do those things to me?"('Dead Things', 6013). With the "let" she admits some participation, with the "do" she assigns him blame. What she does not take responsibility for is the initiation of their sexual interaction on occasions like their first coupling or her commanding him to "Tell me you love me…Tell me you want me" ('As You Were', 6015). This lack of responsibility is even more patent in her excuse to Xander when he finds out about the liaison, "It just happened" ('Seeing Red', 6019). A vampire without a soul being the source of her feeling unbelievably alive terrifies her: "He's everything I hate. He's everything that . . . I'm supposed to be against. But the only time that I ever feel anything is when . . . Don't tell anyone, please." In her confession to Tara fear and shame battle with sexual self-realisation. The one bit of self-knowledge Buffy does have in that conversation is that, whatever the rights and wrongs of allowing herself to enjoy what she has with Spike, the one thing she cannot do is continue to exploit his love for her by using him sexually to feel better about her life. Since she cannot give herself permission to enjoy sex with him guilt free, giving the relationship a degree of exploitation-free mutuality, then she is right to break up with him.

[22] Buffy is a victim of wanting to be a 'good' girl sexually. She thinks it is appropriate to express her sexuality but only if she expresses it within certain parameters. The fact that her socially acceptable relationship with Riley did not fulfill her needs has not taught her much about the futility of denying what she feels. In Buffy Vs Dracula (501) we have seen her leave her post-coital bed with Riley to go and find the 'rush' from slaying that was not satisfied by sex with him. It is not surprising that Buffy seeks out the same sense of danger in her love life that she finds empowering in her role as Slayer. Buffy finds aggression erotic but she is not, here, the sexually sophisticated young woman at ease with her sexuality that is ideologically stereotyped in today's magazines for young women. She is trying to reconcile a range of social expectations about the kind of young woman she should be sexually. She is struggling to be empowered when she declares her ambivalence and fears to Tara and it does lead her to insight about herself and her use of Spike. However, in that conversation with Tara, she abrogates some of the responsibility for her choices, denies her role as a participant in the pleasure Spike gives her, then succumbs to the sense of herself as a victim. Thankfully, it is the permission that Tara gives Buffy to just enjoy herself, or to love Spike, that saves the show from succumbing to it too. We do not see if Buffy integrates that aggressive aspect of her sexuality into a relationship with a man. Spike goes off to get a soul, they build a relationship of intimate trust and have a metaphorical sexual union before Spike's death, but they never have actual sex again. Maybe metaphorical sex, with their joined hands bursting into flame, when Buffy tells Spike she loves him in 'Chosen' (7022), is meant to give us that integration. The show to some extent neuters Spike sexually in Season Seven when he has a soul. It is probably due to James Marster's ongoing portrayal of latent sexuality that we do not end up with him as a character shot down by "the evil that Victorian society projected onto sexuality and by which our contemporary notions of sexuality are still contaminated" (Wood, 1996, 378).

[23] It is not possible to consider the issue of Buffy's role as an empowered woman without consideration of the pivotal scene where she is portrayed as the victim of an attempted rape. Given the controversy this scene in "Seeing Red' (6019) has generated between fans and the writers (Symonds 2003), and the sensitive place rape narratives have in feminist and post-feminist discourse, research and activism, it is not possible to read this scene as a straightforward narrative of male sexual violence. James Marsters has said: "That scene, more than any other, was very carefully choreographed (Bernstein, 2003, 20). That care seems to me to be present in more than one aspect of the scene. Considered as a media event, inclusive of dialogue, acting, cinematography and editing, the scene is technically and emotionally intricate and it encourages a complex audience engagement with both characters, the perpetrator and the victim, that is not typical of all representations of attempted rape. From the beginning, we are asked to view the scene from more than one perspective through the dialogue. On Spike's entry, our attention and his is drawn to the fact that Buffy is hurt, after an earlier fight with a vampire where she has fallen and hurt her back. It is clear Spike enters the bathroom on the basis of an established intimacy because she objects to him being there, not because he has invaded her privacy, but because she feels they have nothing to talk about given the fact that he has slept with Anya. Spike says "we have to talk", to apologise is an imperative, but she curtly rejects this and orders him to leave. He asserts that it is not all about her "as much as you'd like it to be". This remark reminds us of Buffy's ongoing refusal to talk about their relationship with him and we feel the truth of his comment. Spike is aware that his apology will make no difference to the way she feels but he needs her to know that he was not trying to hurt her. There is deep despair and pain in his protest against Buffy's accusation that he initially went to Anya to get a magic spell to use on her: "It wasn't for you! *I* wanted something -- anything to make this feeling stop. I just wanted it to stop! You should have let him kill me."

[24] There is a shift from his despair when Buffy says she could not have let Xander kill him. He clutches at the hope that she prevented it because she loves him and he moves with more confidence towards her, accusing her of lying to herself. When she expresses her exasperation at his failure to accept what she says: " How many times. . .!? I have feelings for you. I do. But it's not love. I could never *trust* you enough for it to be love", the scene shifts again to Buffy's point of view. Spike is not hearing the resolve in Buffy's voice, nor does he understand her need to trust if she is to love. His scoffing dismissal of the word and the need, "Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy! Great love is wild and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes", alluringly passionate as the image is, returns us to the dynamic of the relationship we have been watching since they first coupled, of two people on different wavelengths. For Buffy that passion is something that burns "Until there's nothing left. Love like that doesn't last". He believes that her love for him is there and, now that all her friends know about their sexual liaison, she can allow herself to freely express it. What he does not understand is that her inability to say what she feels stems as much from her uncertainty about what those feelings are. What she does feel is that she cannot trust him, at least not enough to love. This assertion rings true in the context of Buffy's history with men who have left her: her father, Parker, Riley, and Angel. Her trust issues are not just about Spike. What is not clear is exactly the degree of trust that Buffy is talking about, given we have seen her trust Spike on countless occasions to watch her back in battle, to support her emotionally and receive confidences she cannot tell her friends, to protect her sister Dawn, and in dominance sex games that have even required her to let him handcuff her. The perspective shifts again as Spike moves towards her, trying to hold her and begging her to let herself "feel it" and "Let it go. . . Let yourself love me. . . Buffy, Buffy. . .". He is so desperate that he is not listening to what she is saying. He does not even notice her hitting herself on the bath when she falls as they struggle, even though she calls out in pain as her body jarringly strikes the bath. He repeats "you love me" and is oblivious to everything but his need. His eyes close as he tries to kiss her on the side of the head, not aggressively on the mouth, an action that disturbingly keeps us focused on his love for her and on his pain, even as we recognise with growing horror that he is losing himself. He closes his eyes, lost in his yearning: "Let yourself go. Let yourself love me".

[25] The discontinuities of emotion in this scene, as we move back and forth from the interaction between Spike and Buffy's point of view in the dialogue, are reinforced by the camera moving back and forth between upper body shots of Buffy and Spike separately, to close-ups of the struggle itself, and to wide shots of the assault. These changing angles, as much as the dialogue and the action itself, shape the nature of the discourse as an attempted rape narrative. The camera angles are used to follow the flow of emotion in their separate points of view and to create our response to them. Spike moves in on her in a predatory manner as the struggle starts and the camera cuts from close ups of individual body parts, such has his invasive hand inside her robe, to wide angle shots. The close ups give you the sense

of the struggle, and its invasive, hectic movement. She fights him off, he alternately pleads with, and assaults her. When the camera switches to a wide angle, such as when he is lying on top of her, trying to pin her to the floor and holding her hands at her side, the audience is encouraged to adopt a detached way of seeing the action, not from Buffy's or Spike's point of view but the act for what it is, attempted rape. When they fall next to the bath, and she is sitting on the floor, with him kneeling in front of her, we shift to him pleading with her and for that moment his emotion is foregrounded, even as she struggles. When she falls back and he is lying on top of her, the scene shifts emotionally again and the brutality of what he is doing, in that overwhelmingly white and sterile bathroom, is paramount. The camera angles up, from Buffy's point of view, and Spike's face shifts to naked aggression, teeth clenched, before it fades to black. When the scene resumes, it is as if Spike is talking to himself: "I know you felt it… when I was inside you". He clings to the empty hope that sex will reconnect them and at that point, more than any other, we know the futility of that belief as Buffy pleads with him to stop: "Don't. . . please, please Spike, please don't do this, please don't do this. . ." When he finally abandons himself completely to the assault, ripping her robe from her breast, we lose all sympathy for him as his intention to coerce her takes over: "You'll feel it again, Buffy. . . I'm gonna make you feel it. . ."

[26] In addition to the camera manipulation, the fact that the whole scene is played with no musical underscore emphasises, along with the stark sterility of the bathroom setting, the graphic violence in Spike's behaviour. The man who, while he never denied his own history of violence, was convinced that he would never hurt the woman he loves, does what was unthinkable to him, he attempts to rape her. Buffy alternates between expressions of physical pain and pleading and when Spike says he is going to make her feel it, and rips her robe open at the point where our sympathy for him has dissolved, she kicks him off. "Ask me again why I can never love you", indeed. Buffy asserts that it is only because she stopped him that it went no further. However, Spike makes no attempt to continue the attack. When Spike struggles to stand prior to this, using the bathroom sink to raise himself up, the transition to his realisation of what he has just done is signaled by the return of the musical underscore. By the time he stands, opposite Buffy clutching her robe shut, Spike knows, and is horrified at, what he has done and almost done.

The difficulties one might have with placing the emotional impact of the above scene in the category of traditional rape narratives stems primarily from the use of it to tell a story about a character other than the woman facing the attempted rape, and that, from a feminist point of view, is disconcerting. More than one writer has acknowledged that the decision was made to have Spike attempt to rape Buffy, to give him powerful motivation to do what no vampire or demon has done in the Buffyverse, to defy canon and do the unprecedented, to voluntarily go and get a soul. As Marsters says on the use of the scene to motivate the soul quest: "how do you motivate him – how do you make him make a mistake that's so heart-rending that he'd be willing to do that?" (Bernstein, 2003, 20). His use of the phrase "heart-rending" is apt and the scene as a rape narrative is deeply disconcerting because of our empathy, albeit discontinuously in the scene, with the perpetrator. While some clumsiness in execution with the soul quest cliffhanger at the end of Season Six confused the clarity of that motivation with the mislead about him going to get his chip out, writer declarations (Espenson, 2002) and the soul revelation scene in 'Beneath You'(602), make that motivation clear:

[27] Given audience empathy for the character, and his popularity, there were writer concerns about allowing Spike to attempt to rape Buffy if they had any intention of continuing the love story:

I love Spike. I was very worried about the attempted rape. . . because that's not something you play around with. That's not something. . . it's very hard to come back from. And you know, you can say Luke and Laura came back from it, but that was a different time. I think we have to be very careful that we are not saying anything about humans. When we say that Spike looked into his soul, at that moment, and saw the demon in him and that's what made him want to go get a soul. (Jane Espenson, 2002)

Spike fan response in the online discourse about this scene often described this plot development as a form of 'character rape', in the belief that a morally developing Spike would never do such a thing (Rhys, 2002) . This belief was not untouched by James Marsters expressed distress at having to play the scene: "It still haunts me. I am artistically proud to have done it, but it was the hardest day of my career":

It was written very carefully. But I was more freaked out about the scene than I should have been, and I think that freaked Sarah out, and then I, as the character, reacted to her freaking out and that dynamic kind of fed on itself. I think it ended up being much more aggressive and violent than intended. I think there was an attempt to keep it from being painful, but it played that way and so we have to deal with it. (Bernstein, 2003, 20)

It is clear, however, that fan felt empathy for the character in the scene is encouraged within the narrative itself.

How we view the attempted rape scene also depends very much on the degree to which it is outside the horror genre and the Hellmouth metaphor. Spike is not in vamp face so it appears that it is not the demon but the man attempting to rape her, despite Espenson's assertion above that it is the demon. Buffy being victimized because she is injured works if you can suspend your sense of her as the Slayer and a superhero, it feels odd if you cannot suspend that disbelief. The superhero kick that sends him flying back into the wall does not merely stop him, it serves to bring him back to himself. It is the man who decides not to renew the attack. However, the scene straddles its exit from the metaphor uneasily. The mention of the spell Spike went to get reminds us that we are in the Buffyverse, as do the careful references to Buffy's injury which call up the fact that slayer super healing powers should be at work as much as it does that she is hurt. Since we have never seen Spike even come close to physically overwhelming her she seems to take a long time to kick him off. The shift from Buffy as Slayer to Buffy as victim seems odd when she finally does send him flying into the wall. As often as the camera angles at Spike from Buffy's point of view to show his aggression,

and as much as she struggles and protests, the effect is to leave us puzzling as to why it takes her so long to kick him off, particularly as all it takes is one kick. Perhaps, there is something in Buffy's pleading with Spike, "Don't do this" that implies she is holding to her belief that he will stop of his own accord, echoing the trust she has had of him in the past. Perhaps, she is attempting to give him the space to make that decision. Perhaps, her own stunned disbelief that he is doing this prevents her immediately reacting with the strength she ultimately uses. A clearer sense of these emotional possibilities would have allayed my own quizzicality about the delay in Buffy stopping the assault.

[28] How we view the assault in the context of female empowerment also depends on what is typical, or atypical, about that scene in the context of the history of representation of rape, "the pervasive and persuasive power of the cultural narratives about rape and the cultural imperatives to represent it in particular ways" (Projansky, 2001, 230). This assault of Spike's is central to his decision to go off and get a soul and if we hold to Spike's point of view, in that context, the attempted rape makes sense in the Buffyverse. If we hold to Buffy's story, to her strength as a Slayer who can be run through with a sword in the finale and get up again and throw herself into the battle, her victim-hood here feels odd. There is some question whether the scene works as a discourse on rape being about power, in the sense that feminism might use it. The lack of pre-meditated hostility on Spike's part also prevents the easy categorisation of it as making a statement about violent male response to female strength and independence. Nor does it fit the image of rape-revenge genre (Read, 2000) when we have subsequent scenes showing Spike's anguished soul-searching in the scene in the crypt with Clem, where he makes the decision to go and get the soul, or Buffy seeking Spike at his crypt to leave Dawn in his care. She even inquires with concern of Clem as to when Spike will return when she finds out he has left Sunnydale. We are left with a representation of attempted coercion, unquestionably, but also of the deep emotional pain that allowed Spike to slide into it. As another writer on the show, Rebecca Rand-Kirshner has said:

It's so desperate emotionally and so horrific physically. We could feel how his very innards were twisted into this perversion of what he wanted. But it was disturbing to think of it from his perspective as well. (Rand-Kirshner, 2003)

Since the scene is being used to tell Spike's story as well as Buffy's, the scene straddles across the narrative divide of trying to make a feminist statement about rape, through Buffy's momentary disempowerment, and furthering Spike's character development**.** We are given Buffy's experience of the trauma of attempted rape while we get Spike's experience of emotional trauma and moral implosion. In the end, we do not have to choose one perspective over the other, or between a male or female perspective, the drama is complex enough to leave us with both.

[29] What Buffy has discovered in trying to make sense of her relationships with men and her sexuality is that her slayer powers have been of little use in making life choices or in protecting her from emotional pain. Xander's description of Parker's sexual attraction to Buffy, "That's because he got hit by the Buffinator. Now he's powerless" points that out in its word play with the action hero, Terminator image ('Living Conditions', 402). The irony is that Parker uses her, dumping Buffy after a one night stand despite her 'buffinator' power. It is comic that when Harmony dumps Spike, she takes a shorter time than Buffy to get the basic fact of empowerment: "I'm powerful, and I'm beautiful, and I don't need you to complete me" ('Pangs', 408). Her relationships with Angel, Parker, Riley and Spike finally bring her to that point in her cookie dough analogy, in the conversation with Angel, prior to the final battle that destroys Sunnydale. Despite the didacticism of that analogy, Joss Whedon's vision of female empowerment, in the context of Buffy's use of violence, her sexual identity and search for a life and love, has been encapsulated in an exploration of primal human urges that seem to me to take dramatic risks that do not support a simplified, gendered reading of the text as about 'girl power'. In that context, Harmony's traditional empowerment statement seems too simple. As Buffy faces her new life at the end of Chosen, no longer bearing the burden of being the only Slayer, a smile of anticipation on her face, I do not think we can assume that all will now be plain sailing for her. "What we want to show is an independent heroine who is not defined by her relationships." (Noxon, 2002) Noxon's assertion is, ultimately, contradicted by aspects of the dramatic context of the show. We do know Buffy through her relationships with everyone around her and she herself recognises they say a great deal about who she is, especially her relationship choices in men. She is very much defined by her relationships and by her choices within them, as are we all. I would argue that the show does celebrate the "joy" of female empowerment but that its final resting place in feminist ideology can afford to incorporate into that definition the show's exploration of what it means to be human, and male, as well as female, "the more" that Daugherty has said she represents. After all, Buffy is not up on that screen alone and it is not necessary to see that fact as an ideological problem.

[30] Many of us can agree with Whedon's belief in his "legacy":

Honestly, I hope that the legacy of the show would be that there is a generation of girls who have the kind of hero a lot of them didn't get to have in their mythos and a lot of guys who are a lot more comfortable with the idea of a girl who has that much power. (Hockensmith, 2003b)

However, Whedon's notion of "guys who are comfortable" might have as much to do with what is happening to the male characters on the show as it does with the heroine. The finale is as much about the culmination of Spike's journey as it is about the beginning of the rest of Buffy's life, and the show ends with them saving the world in partnership. We are left to read what we will into her enigmatic final smile but, when Giles asks in bewilderment who is responsible for the crater that is now the destroyed Hellmouth, the last word Buffy says is "Spike". We need to remember that the Buffyverse does not, though it sometimes is tempted to, offer us a closed definition of Buffy as a feminist symbol. The celebration of female empowerment is tinctured with a range of emotional colours that site the Buffyverse at the center of a resilient struggle to know what that empowerment might consist of as a girl growing up lives it in a complex and fragile world. Buffy's heroic journey is one of authentic self-discovery, she fashions herself as she goes, and that resonates for some of her contemporaries in the audience precisely because she is a work in progress and the signs of

the struggle to simply 'become' are there for contemplation. While we might cringe a little, as Angel does, when Buffy uses the analogy of unbaked cookie dough to describe where she stands at series end, we are cautioned by it to remember that Buffy is only 22 at that point, and she is at the end of the series, not the end of her life's journey: "The show is still about life and life is not a thing that says 'The End' at the end" (Menon, 2003). In that context, we need to look beyond current simple definitions of 'girl power' and female empowerment if we want to fully appreciate the show's brilliant exploration of Joss Whedon's premise.

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