

THE QUEER INFLUENCE OF *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

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ABSTRACT

Considering the historical context from which it was born, the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (produced by Joss Whedon) was undeniably progressive in terms of its LGBTQ representation. As a whole, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BTVS*) is an immensely complex text with content that truly caused people to reconsider what is and isn't queer. This show challenged viewers to redefine the socially constructed notions of acceptable gender and sexual performance. On this front – in acknowledging the way queer relationships were so positively portrayed, and the ways characters like Buffy and Spike resist traditional performances of gender, it seems clear that *BTVS* aimed to push specific LGBTQ agendas. However, the show has also seen criticism for the death of Tara, the erasure of Willow's bisexuality, and Xander's undeniable gay panic. In many ways *BTVS* both supports and resists the gay movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s. I conclude that – while the show is not perfect – Whedon's adaptive nature and ability to admit his flaws, is one of the many factors that led for *BTVS* to become so influential. Through the incredibly well-constructed characters like Willow, Xander, Spike, and the transgressive dynamic of the Scoobies as a whole, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* produced positive space for the LGBTQ community to find representation, inspiration, and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the widely received cult classic of the late 1990s, was undeniably influential upon the LGBTQ community. On one hand, it proved to have far-reaching benefits. The development of Willow Rosenberg as a queer woman assisted in the much needed creation of lesbian spaces in television, online, and everyday life. In a study that questioned the effect of this representation on young lesbians, one woman wrote, "I no longer saw myself as being limited" (Collier 594). Further, Spike's character challenged viewers to reconsider masculinity, as he visibly "transgressed" the boundaries of acceptable gender and sexual behavior" in his relationships with Drusilla, Harmony, and Buffy (Amy-Chinn 314). However, on the other hand, many are still quick to point out that while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may seem progressive for its time, it still subscribed to problematic tropes that further perpetuated LGBTQ stereotypes and stigmas. The death of Tara, the erasure of Willow's bisexuality, and Xander's undeniable gay panic (employed for the sake of comedy) are all examples of such. In many ways *BTVS* (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) both supports and resists the gay movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet, while this show has its flaws and problematic instances, as a whole it is progressive for its time and consequently empowers the LGBTQ community.

POSITIVE REPRESENTATIONS

It is incredibly important that social groups (especially those who have been historically marginalized) have access to positive representation in the media. For queer people in the United States, this representation may act as a type of modeling and support that they may otherwise not receive due to the decades of oppression they have faced (Collier 587). Willow and Tara's relationship set up that platform for many people. In an online survey, one participant stated, "'Willow & Tara meant that . . . there was at least one lesbian couple in the world that was completely normal.'" (594). For this individual, representation in *BTVS* helped them affirm their sexuality. Another wrote, "the message I took away with

me was, 'Who you love does not affect what you can do.' I no longer saw myself as being limited" (594). These women are just two of many who felt themselves affirmed by the onscreen couple. In the context of the Defense Against Marriage Act (1996) being in full swing, and the legalization of gay marriage a decade away, having such visible lesbianism on television would've been incredibly groundbreaking for so many viewers. Being one of the first TV shows to so proudly and so positively portray a lesbian couple was monumentally impactful for gay women.

Willow's relationship with Tara further demonstrated positivity in terms of its challenging traditional gender notions of lesbian relationships. Both Willow and Tara are "femme." The significance here is that their relationship resists the idea that lesbian women are innately masculine. Further, Willow and Tara's hyper-feminine gender presentations emphasize that there is no "man" in their relationship, as their love for each other is grounded in the acknowledgement that they are both women, and they both share roles of dominance and submission. This challenges the stereotype that lesbian couples follow the structure of butch/femme. However, it is also important to note that their representation is not universal. The risk of assuming so then creates an essentialism of lesbianism. Not every lesbian couple will be seen in the form of two femme, white, able-bodied women. Butler writes, "culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism" (Butler 528). So it is important to note that while the Willow/Tara (W/T) relationship celebrates femininity, and that is a good thing, this in no way implies that they are the correct image of lesbianism.

Joss Whedon developed the W/T relationship in a manner that felt natural, with obvious care and respect coded into the scripting. For this reason W/T quickly became a queer beacon in 1990s television. Willow and Tara met through a witchcraft club on campus. And while Whedon had every opportunity to follow the dangerous "BUG" trope (bisexual until graduation), he resisted that. Tara is quick to join the Scoobies, in a manner that legitimizes her status as Willow's love interest. In doing so, *BTVS* promotes positive perspective on LGBTQ love. The diverse lesbian W/T fan universe seems to echo that sentiment; many took to online forums to write that they felt normalized, affirmed, and confident in result of the on-screen representation (Collier 594). However, it is significant to note that the W/T relationship is only one of the many transgressive steps that *BTVS* took for the queer community.

In defining queer as resistant of labels, or fluid in gender/sexuality, Dee Amy-Chinn asserts that Spike is the most queer character visualized in *BTVS* (Amy-Chinn 315). She writes, "Spike occupies a series of paradoxical and liminal spaces that make him impossible to categorize in any post-Enlightenment way" (313). This implies that his gender/sexual identities resist modern labels and interpretations. Spike seems to exist in a space free from today's understandings of sexual/gender hegemonic structure. Spike pays no care to what is considered ideal to his gender. He casually switches between a performance of heightened masculinity, one where he asserts himself as dominant, to a persona of submissive femininity. One moment, Spike might be referring to himself as the "big bad" or "daddy," while in the next he could be writing poetry or giving a heart locket to Drusilla (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Most significantly: he is unafraid to show vulnerability, a trait traditionally disassociated from masculinity. Amy-Chinn writes,

it is the confidence that he gains from his excessive masculinity that opens up the space in which he can enact his femininity. With regard to his sexuality, Spike is queer not because he is fluid in relation to the gender of his erotic object choice...but because of his ability to practise a politics of what Gayle Rubin (1992) calls radical sex, accommodating both normative and non-normative forms of sexual behaviour, and to play a variety of roles within the latter (316).

It is Spike's confidence, his cool aura of exceptionalism, that makes him so progressive for queer representation in the 90s. Spike allows viewers to reimagine masculinity through alternative representations of gender/sexuality (Halberstam 355). He asserts that male femininity is not only acceptable, but it's something that can be sexy and powerful. Spike's gender/sexual presentation, combined with his on-screen relationships, is one of the many aspects of *BTVS* that challenge hegemonic structure.

Another way that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* presented itself as socially progressive for the queer community was in its emphasis on alternative family structures. Instead of the heteronormative approach to family as kinship, *BTVS* focuses on family as something chosen. Buffy's family is comprised of her friends. Burr writes "Family life as portrayed in *Buffy* mirrors today's real families, including single parenthood, domestic violence, neglect and a general lack of communication" (Burr 268). The family structure in *Buffy* does not center around a heterosexual couple and their kin, but rather a single woman and the platonic bonds she has chosen to develop. While this does not directly equate to Buffy promoting same-sex family structures, it emphasizes a deconstruction of "traditional heterosexual norms... [and an] important move away from patriarchal and undemocratic relationships (267). The family seen in *BTVS* follows a matriarchal format, with Buffy Summers acting as the familial head. This, combined with the shift away from kinship, allows viewers to visualize alternative formats of a healthy familial relationship. In this regard, Whedon creates a strong sense of queer representation and positivity.

PROBLEMATIC TROPES

While Whedon does present many transgressive concepts within *BTVS* that produce positive spaces in the LGBTQ community, he does however employ some problematic tropes as well. Some might argue that this is reflective of a non-diverse group of creators, which, honestly is a valid argument. Mostly everyone that occupied the writers room, (IE: Joss Whedon, Marti Noxon, David Greenwalt) were white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. And while they are all incredibly brilliant, it's arguable that the lack of diversity they share is sometimes translated as ignorance into the *BTVS* script. One of the largest issues that LGBTQ viewers raise is the treatment of Willow's sexual identity. It has been argued that, Willow's identification as gay in later seasons invalidates her earlier romantic relationship with Oz (a male character). This suggests an aspect of bi-erasure, or a refusal to confirm the idea that Willow may exist outside of the established heterosexual/homosexual binaries. This lack of validation can be incredibly harmful to bisexual viewers, who already face a level of discrimination from the LGBTQ and heterosexual communities alike. One online blogger writes, "taken as a whole, her storyline depicts a bisexual woman who is afraid to label herself as such" (Mo). Mo goes on to further point out that Willow should be more reflective of her vampire doppelganger (an alternate timeline version of herself) who in the episodes "The Wish" and "Doppelgangland" is seen making sexual advances on women and men alike. Further, in an episode where Tara questions the authenticity of Willow's attraction to her, worried that her homosexuality may not be genuine, Willow's reaction is immensely disappointing. Mo writes, "Willow could have explained that having an attraction to more than one gender isn't the same as being disloyal or untrustworthy. She could have called Tara out for clinging to such a damaging stereotype. Instead, she got offended that she wasn't being taken seriously as a lesbian" (Mo). When read through this lens, it is undeniable that Willow's sexual identity is incredibly damaging to the bisexual community.

However, from a different perspective, it can be argued that Willow's character does not seek to minimize bisexuality, but instead give insight into sexual fluidity. When the text is visualized alone, without intentions of the writers taken into account, it is evident that both Willow's relationships with Oz and Tara are legitimate, based in love, intimacy, and sexual desire. For Willow, at the point in her life when she dated Oz, or even the point when she harbored feelings for Xander, she identified as heterosexual. And without any indications otherwise, that identification is legitimate, and hers to make. As the series progressed and she began to date Tara, she then begins to identify as gay. Sexual fluidity is centered on the idea that sexuality can be unstable, just as people are unstable due to the way they change and grow over time. Willow's ability to identify as straight in one context, and gay in another, does not necessarily mean she was internalizing biphobia, but rather that her sexuality is not something static. While some people, such as Buffy, or Tara, or even Vampire Willow, might have a permanent understanding of their sexuality as fixed, Willow does not. And in many ways, that makes her even more dynamic, queer, and progressive.

Another problematic aspect of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that queer viewers are quick to point out is its subscription to the “bury your gays” trope. As noted earlier, the W/T relationship was incredibly influential among Buffy’s lesbian fanbase. It provided viewers with much needed representation. But, as Collier points out, “Tara died and her partner, Willow, became deranged. Thus, prominent images of lesbians on television were once again sparse or negative” (Collier 590). In dismantling a couple that so many viewers identified with and looked up to, it resonated within many that Whedon was negating the T/W relationship. With Tara dead and Willow gone dark, there was no more positive lesbian representation in *BTVS*. However, as the show progressed and Willow got the help she needed, she began seeing another woman named Kennedy. And while this relationship was not received very well (K/W had none of the chemistry that W/T or even W/O had), it can be argued that this was the only way to properly continue Willow’s storyline. By having her move on with another woman, *BTVS* resists the trope of “restoration of heterosexuality.” So while the romance between K/W disappointed many, and the loss of Tara greatly upset the lesbian fanbase, it is significant that Willow’s sexuality was validated in the end. However, as complicated as Willow is, she is nowhere near as divisive among the queer community as Xander.

Xander Harris has forums, articles, and podcasts created by both people that intensely hate him and people that adore him. At moments he can appear as egocentric, homophobic, and misogynistic. He carries a friendzone complex throughout most of seasons one and two when Buffy rejects him, and makes frequent derogatory comments to women like Cordelia. However, pro-Xander people like Lani Diane Rich from the podcast *Dusted*, will vehemently deny those claims and defend him as the “heart” of the team, as critical to the show as a whole. She argues that Xander’s moments of problematic behavior is the result of moments poor writing, and is something that definitely improves as the show progresses (*Dusted*). But even Rich admits it’s hard to deny Xander’s gay panic. In the episode “The Zeppo,” a policeman confronts Xander while he is in a fight with an antagonist named Jack. When the policeman asks what is happening, Xander says, “Nothing! Just blowing off steam. Two guys rasslin’... but not in a gay way!” (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). It is as if in this moment, order to preserve his masculinity, in order to uphold an acceptable reputation, Xander needs to assert himself as heterosexual. In other terms, Xander is almost the exact opposite of Spike. While Spike exists within a space that resists any type of post-Enlightenment labeling, Xander does not. His panic is seen in several instances throughout the earlier seasons of *BTVS*, which is reflective of social anxieties over masculinity, sexuality, and adolescence as a whole.

TWO THEORIES

There are two main theories that explain (not excuse) Xander’s gay panic. The first being that, as a teenager, hegemonic structure is incredibly palpable. Xander isn’t exactly cool. He’s nerdy (yet not exactly intelligent), poor, and generally unpopular. His gay panic seems to stem from a place of deep insecurity. However, as the series progresses, he does appear to become more comfortable in his skin, and in turn, he develops more flexibility in his approach to heterosexuality. In defining heterosexual flexibility, Anderson writes, “They embrace these behaviors [IE: kissing, hugging, etc.] as symbols of affection for one another; as a sign of their platonic love for their heterosexual friends. This is heterosexual flexibility” (Anderson 255). As the series progresses, the viewers see more and more instances of Xander breaking out of the heteronormative, masculine hegemonic structure. For example, when Xander has the following pseudo-flirty conversation with Spike in the episode “Hush,” it is indicative of a growing comfort in heterosexual flexibility:

Spike: Like I'd bite you anyway.

Xander: Oh, you *would*!

Spike: Not bloody likely.

Xander: I happen to be very biteable, pal. I'm moist, *and* delicious.

Spike: All right, yeah, fine. You're a nummy treat.

Xander: And don't you forget it! (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)

Xander's ability to develop his own heterosexual boundaries, separate from what is seen as socially "acceptable" suggests a growing maturity. So, while, yes, Xander's gay panic is problematic, it is also the direct result of an environment that breeds toxic masculinity.

In their podcast *Dusted*, Rich and Stevens discuss Xander's gay panic under a different scope. Noting that Whedon had originally considered writing Xander to be gay, they theorize that his gay panic might be due to his own internalized homosexuality. His panic appears, Rich notes at several points in the show, during scenarios where Xander could potentially be harboring attraction to another man. In this case, Xander's gay panic could be the result of the social stigmas surrounding homosexuality, and his inability to come to terms with it. Yet, regardless on what caused him to behave this way, and regardless of Whedon's intentions, Xander's "comical" utilization of gay panic is inexcusable. It perpetuates harmful microaggressions that oppress the LGBTQ community. The only excusable aspect of Xander's gay panic is the fact that he does improve as the series progresses, and at no point does he ever invalidate Willow's sexuality. In fact, he is arguably one of the most supportive Scoobies of Willow. In defense of Rich's statement that Xander acts as the heart of the group, it is noteworthy that he is the one character able to fully understand Willow, through and through, and the only one who is able to bring her back from her homicidal rage through his famous Yellow-Crayon speech in the episode "Grave" (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).

CONCLUSION

As a whole, *BTVS* is an immensely complex text with content that truly caused people to reconsider what is and isn't queer. The show challenged people to redefine the socially constructed notions of acceptable gender and sexual performance. Further, while the show does have its flaws, it is important to note that like any show, the board of creators are entirely human. They make mistakes. But what is significant is that Whedon and his room of creators sought to learn from them. For example, Whedon was briefly accused of queer baiting with the characters Faith and Buffy. The two women become incredibly close, and share passionate scenes together. At this accusation, Whedon's reaction played out as such:

Whedon didn't intend for there to be lesbian subtext between Buffy and Faith, and was initially irritated when fans raised the subject on message boards. "I was like 'You guys see lesbian subtext behind every corner, you just want to see girls kissing – get over it,' he recalled during an NPR interview. After a fan directed Whedon to their website where they had dissected Buffy and Faith's interactions, Whedon realised that he had been wrong and apologised. "Everything they said was true, it was all right there." (Dibden)

Whedon's adaptive nature, his ability to admit his flaws, is one of the many factors that led for *BTVS* to become so influential. Through the incredibly well-constructed characters like Willow, Xander, Spike, and the transgressive dynamic of the Scoobies as a whole, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* produced positive space for the LGBTQ community to find representation, inspiration, and empowerment.

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