

‘HAVE YOU TRIED NOT BEING A SLAYER?’ COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM AND ALLEGORY IN BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

GREEN, KATY

English Literature and Theatre Studies, College of Arts

ABSTRACT

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which aired from 1997 to 2003, has proven itself to have lasting appeal and has captured the attention of critics and academics over the past two decades. Buffy employs the age-old Gothic horror trope of realising societal fears and concerns through the supernatural. Though it is often lauded for its progressive gender politics and subversive approach to the horror genre, it is my argument that Buffy is far more Conservative in its outlook than some may proclaim. By examining three separate instances within the show, I will conclude that supernatural allegories can act as a vehicle for social Conservative policy and reactionary politics.

INTRODUCTION

The vampire trope is not fixed in time; rather, it changes and contorts to suit society’s taboos, controversies, and repressed desires at a specific moment in time. As Nina Auerbach states, vampires are ‘personifications of their age... always changing so that their appeal is dramatically generational’ (1995: 3). Vampires (and paranormal beings) can represent societal fears surrounding race, gender, sexuality, capitalism, technological advancement and so forth, never staying entirely the same between each iteration. For example, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) is often considered an encapsulation of Victorian society’s fears surrounding the concept of female sexuality. For each generation and in each iteration, vampirism can represent something different or unique, as Milly Williamson notes of the popular American television programme *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003).

Williamson describes Buffy as employing a ‘pick-n-mix’ approach to genre, featuring elements of Gothic fiction and melodrama in equal measures (2005: 76). This is critical in positioning Buffy’s place in the popular consciousness, as its storylines, whilst involving elements of paranormal fiction, are more aptly described as melodramatic teenage fiction. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* begins with Buffy Summers as a 16-year-old high school student destined to fight demons and protect society from evil. Aimed towards a teenage audience, Buffy follows the structure of a high school drama but with added supernatural evil and follows the characters through their college and post-college years. It is understood through the logic of the text that supernatural archetypes are representative of relevant social issues for adolescents in contemporary society. Magic and vampirism are established within the logic of Buffy as storytelling tools, which are used to contest or illuminate certain social issues; demonstrated through the allegory of demons, vampires, and magic, Buffy addresses manipulative and abusive parents, teenage brutality, school shootings and more (Kellner 5: 2004).

As a show that deliberately addresses contemporary issues within society, it would be impossible to remove Buffy from its societal context: late 1990s and early 2000s America. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first aired in 1997 during the Clinton administration’s second term, and concluded in 2003, two years after George W. Bush was elected and the year the US Military invaded Iraq. Over this stretch of time, there were both significant surges in interest towards third-wave feminism on one side of the culture, and an increase in popularity of

Conservative ideas in opposition. On an initial reading, Buffy appears to lie on the feminist side of culture as it features a teenage female protagonist who is given agency within the text; along with physical strength that allows her to fight vampires and demons with ease, Buffy possesses narrative strength, making many central decisions which progress the events within the series. Though this may be true, critics such as Karen Boyle (2005) argue that Buffy is not as easily aligned with feminism as fans of the show claim it to be, and she instead urges critics to avoid the dichotomy of feminist or un-feminist.

Indeed, by examining federal policy and the contemporary women’s rights movement during the era of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I argue that whilst Buffy purports third-wave feminist goals by subverting previously overtly misogynistic tropes and ideas, in its storytelling and content it can be viewed as promoting Conservative ideals. In this context, Conservative ideals or values mean a set of moral and ideological principles that are generally accepted within Right-wing American thought to uphold ‘authority, tradition, traditional values, order, history, social and political hierarchy, aristocracy, status quo, custom, and organic social development’ (Dénes 2009: 11). These values are often in opposition with third-wave feminism, the era of feminism which is usually dated from the late 1980’s through to the early 2000’s, which focuses on the liberation of women who were previously excluded from the benefits of previous women’s rights movements, such as unmarried, non-white, non-straight women. Simply put, Conservatism values time-honoured traditions and systems that have existed for decades and even centuries. Conservatism does not welcome significant social change and believes in the strength of a hierarchical structure for society in which people and groups seldom advance beyond their current position. Conservatism may have grown to accept women as people with rights in a classical sense, but it otherwise does not adhere to the feminist notion that society as a whole is patriarchal and places men at a distinct advantage.

It is this contradiction that Buffy exposes itself as a product of its time, with the same fears and biases of the wider culture, rather than fully socially progressive in form and content. In order to examine the ways in which Buffy relates directly to conservative American culture, I will first look at the rise of Conservatism in the late 1990s and early 00s (the period over which Buffy aired on television) as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the Bill Clinton administration’s push for slightly more socially progressive policies. Gathering together the

political concept of ‘compassionate conservatism’ and the state of the American relationship to sex and sexuality, I will then examine three examples from the show which deal with an intersection of sex, love and relationships and the supernatural. In analysing the function of vampires and magic as storytelling devices, I will ultimately conclude that Buffy is more Conservative with regards to gender and sexuality than it claims to be.

COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM AND SEX PANIC

By the end of the 1990’s interest in Conservatism was beginning to increase noticeably, and by 2001, with a newly elected Republican government, the tension between conservative values and third-wave feminisms became even clearer. In 2001, Republican candidate George W. Bush defeated Democratic candidate Al Gore and quickly ushered in a new era of what can be described as ‘compassionate conservatism,’ an ethos that focuses on maintaining and promoting traditional conservative values such as the nuclear family and individual responsibility. Though it has come under significant criticism for its seemingly oxymoronic construction, for the Bush Administration compassionate conservatism encapsulated an adherence to traditional Conservative values without the moral abolitionism often found in prior Religious Right eras (Kruse 2010: 228). In other words, although compassionate conservatism does not align itself with socially progressive legislation, such as same-sex marriage or abortion, it still purports to be sympathetic to those who are in some way disenfranchised within society.

This paradox is evidenced in what Carole Vance (1993) termed a ‘sex panic,’ or widespread battles in public discourse over sexuality, that swept America in the 1990s as a result of the AIDS epidemic, which rapidly became the leading cause of death among Americans aged 25-44 (amfAR 2020). The American response to sex and sexuality is in a constant state of flux, with each generation fearing the sexuality of the generation which follows; however, the sex panic of the 1990s saw the integrity of American family values come under the particular threat of AIDS, which Conservative Americans associated with unnatural, reckless, and perverse sexuality. For right-wing Americans, the AIDS epidemic signalled a rejection of the tried and tested nuclear family unit in favour of promiscuity, which is heralded as the ideal within Conservative thought.

Conservatism in this period was bred from the collected fear of unknown and uncontrolled sexuality. In their essay on American sexual policy in the 1990s, Diane Di Mauro and Carole Joffe emphasise how the Conservative religious right successfully lobbied for abstinence-based sex education through a boost in popular support post HIV/AIDS epidemic; the accepted principle within such groups was that sex outside of heterosexual wedlock was highly likely to inflict ‘harmful psychological and physical effects’ (2007: 73).

Although it often depicts social norms, American media does not necessarily reflect the mainstream views of the country and its citizens’ social values just as the political leanings of the president in office do not automatically define the opinions or values of an entire country or demographic. However, they can be indicative of which issues and values were important to voting Americans at the time and how major social events altered public discourse. Bill Clinton’s administration, for example, could be considered progressive by some for his work to decrease climate change (a stance that favours the health and wellbeing of the wider populous over corporate profit) and in instituting ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ which is a military policy

that allows gay men and women to join the US Military without having to disclose their sexual orientation.

The “harmful psychological and physical effects” of sex present themselves in the form of textual punishment in Buffy. Though the sexuality that is punished within the text of Buffy does not correspond explicitly to gay men - the group most deeply affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic - the relationships in the show which are otherwise taboo (century age gap, interspecies copulation and so on) are punished in a way that suggests they are coded queer.

THE THIRD WAVE

At the same time as compassionate conservatism was quickly becoming the guiding principle for governance, third wave feminists were working to continue to bring the idea of sex positivity into the mainstream. Second wave feminism, which is usually dated from the late 1960’s into the 1980’s, is typically defined as a feminism which places the focus on gender inequality within the family, workplace, and legal system. Third wave feminism can best be viewed as a response to the ways in which second wave feminism was unsuccessful in liberating women, including a shift away from upper middle class married women, and an emphasis on sex and sexuality. Second wave feminism best improved the lives of women who were already at an advantage in society, racially, economically, sexually and otherwise, whereas third wave feminism endeavoured to increase rights and liberties for people who were excluded from the second wave (Mann and Huffman 2005: 59).

In other words, second wave feminism challenged Conservative values, but only to an extent, as many prominent members and groups also shared some Conservative beliefs. Laura Brunell describes the core ideological grounding for participants in third wave feminism as follows:

They chose to battle sexism by standing sexist symbols on their heads, to fight patriarchy with irony, to answer violence with stories of survival, and to combat continued exclusion with grass-roots activism and radical democracy. Rather than becoming part of the machine, third wavers began both sabotaging and rebuilding the machine itself. (Brunell 2008)

Examining other film and TV shows from the late 1990’s aimed towards a teenage audience exposes a thread of feminist values and ideas which utilise the concept of subversion as a device within the text, indicating an increased popular interest in the power and ability of women that aligns with the rise of third wave feminism. For example, the 1995 film *Clueless* adapts Austen’s *Emma* (1815), casting the titular matchmaker of *Emma* as a valley girl archetype which was popular at the time; the ironic twist in this instance is that she may appear vapid but actually possesses a quick wit.

This is also true of films such as *But I’m A Cheerleader* (1999) and *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), both teen comedies which heavily feature irony and emphasise female agency. Closer to Buffy in genre is *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), which garnered a cult following from the queer community due to its heavily coded on-screen relationship between Xena and Gabrielle (Helford 2000: 139). In short, popular media in the late 90s geared towards a similar target audience angled their gender politics towards more liberal, forwarding thinking understanding of gender. However, like all mass media production produced under capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 99), their ability to be truly subversive is curbed by their requirement to meet the ideological principles of wider society in order to be most profitable. The characters within these texts are still routinely objectified and minimised within the text. They, the female leads, can never have full

agency because they are never awarded this by the script or text. Much like in *Buffy*, which as I will prove in the case studies to follow, punish agency, particularly sexual agency, for its female characters, and ultimately rely on an archaic understanding of gender.

CASE STUDIES

Whilst it would be absurd to attribute a major US television programme as ‘grass-roots activism’ or ‘radical democracy,’ *Buffy* does embrace the third wave feminist penchant for the tongue-in-cheek, lashing out at the irrational ethos of compassionate conservatism. The premise for *Buffy* is grounded in irony: it is ironic that a feminine teenage girl could be physically stronger than enormous demons and vampires, and many of the show’s initial gags rely on this fracture between aesthetic appearance and physical capability. If third wave feminism battled sexism by ‘standing sexist symbols on their heads,’ this is the form of feminism that *Buffy* most seamlessly employs. This is *Buffy*’s chief goal; to take the tropes established by the sci-fi and horror genres and subvert them, positioning *Buffy* herself in a position of unlikely power and agency.

However, *Buffy* also falls prey to the idea of a commercialised, polished narrative of sexuality in the mainstream that clearly reflects the political context of its time. With the HIV/AIDS

epidemic no longer as much of a threat as it once was, human rights movements like the third wave feminist movement and the gay liberation movement were becoming more mainstream, and thus their agendas were prey to commercial and corporate agendas. The Human Rights Campaign, for example, became the dominant non-profit organisation collaborating with major corporations and had garnered corporate sponsorship from organisations like Apple and Citibank (Ashley 2015: 31). In short, the movements which had once been revolutionary in their tactics against Conservative ideals were slowly becoming directed towards wider societal acceptance, rather than radical societal change. In the following case studies, I will examine *Buffy* with a view to understanding the show as a product of its time and the output of a major American television network and examine how the content contradicts some of its wider progressive aims.

Case Study 1: Queer Coming out

This is clear in one prominent example of the supernatural functioning as a moral allegory within the text occurs in season three of *Buffy*, when *Buffy* ‘comes out’ to her Mother, Joyce, as a vampire slayer in season two episode 22 ‘Becoming: Part 2’. In the first two seasons of the show, *Buffy* lives a double life; going to school, being a daughter, going out with friends, and also fighting demons. This key part of her existence is shielded from Joyce, cutting *Buffy* off from the possibility of leading a regular teenage life and isolating her from her family. The scene is an allusion to the experience of queer teenagers coming out to their primary caregivers; *Buffy* is punished by Joyce for expressing a part of her identity over which she has no control. Joyce’s reaction is a mixture of confusion and fear. She responds saying lines such as: “Honey, are you sure you’re a slayer?... Have you tried not being a slayer? ... It’s because you didn’t have a strong father figure, isn’t it?” (Whedon 1998).

Buffy then runs away, like many queer youths fleeing unsafe homes. Though numbers vary from location to location, and mythologies differ between authors of each study, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that ‘gay and transgender youth make up about 20 percent of homeless youth nationwide, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has suggested that the number may be as high as 40 percent’ (Quintata et al 2010: 4). In short, the plot points within *Buffy*



Figure 1: Joyce comforts Buffy

mirror the reality for queer youth within the US who, rejected from their family, are more likely to face homelessness than straight and cisgender youths. This is, in some ways, radical. For a major network television programme geared towards teenagers to portray the experience of queer displacement in American society was rare in the 1990s. In this regard, *Buffy* does well to honour the values of third-wave feminism; the text brings a material issue of systematically marginalised group into the popular consciousness.

There are, however, limits to the success of *Buffy* and coming out. The queer allegorical storyline’s failings are twofold: one, equating queerness with the supernatural adheres to a popular narrative in Gothic fiction of monsters as a metaphor for queer identities, thus participating in a process of othering. Secondly, *Buffy* fails its realistic portrayal of a queer identity in its most literal sense as *Buffy* is straight, she is not queer. Ultimately, regardless of how progressive ‘Becoming, Part Two’ may appear, the text still shows the struggles of a classically attractive, thin, white, straight woman. Douglas Kellner states: ‘although *BtVS*’s gender politics are extremely progressive in many ways, the ideal women are almost invariably thin and beautiful. The images of high school and college women depicted in the series are largely white, middle classed, and conventional’ (2004:15). I argue Kellner is correct in asserting the conventionality of *Buffy*; everything that happens to *Buffy* happens to a middle class, thin, attractive, white girl. So, even when she does come out, she is still thin, white, attractive, and most crucially, straight. Though in later seasons the audience are exposed to a queer relationship on screen, the earliest representations of queerness feature no queerness; they are allegory - and only allegory.

Case Study 2: Mixed Allegory and Addiction

The next example of allegory I have selected to demonstrate the tension within the series between Conservatism and compassion is in regard to a literal on-screen same-sex relationship: Willow and Tara. I will specifically focus on abuse within this relationship, referring directly to an instance in season six episode 6 ‘All the Way’ (2001) in which Willow casts a spell to erase Tara’s memory so she will not have to further discuss a disagreement, and examine how the text treats addiction in a Conservative manner. In the instance with Willow and Tara, magic is used as a narrative tool in which abusive behaviour is enacted; Willow infringes Tara’s autonomy by literally removing events from her memory, whilst also creating a power imbalance in which Willow is in control of her reality; she fully dictates what is and is not relevant or traumatising thus removing Tara’s free will from the equation completely. This is portrayed as an example of an unforgivable abusive behaviour, ultimately causing the couple to separate (following another botched memory-erasing spell)

for a period of time and Willow vowing to come to terms with her magic addiction.

The allegory is further complicated when at a later point in the same season magic becomes an overt metaphor for an addiction to opiates, likening Willow to an addict, and the text continues to treat Willow and Tara with a mixture of compassion but unequal parts Conservatism. Willow and Tara demonstrate a relationship in which there is a breakdown of trust, communication, and a power imbalance. The power imbalance is exemplified by magic: Willow uses magic for personal gain, whereas Tara is wary of using magic for personal gain.



Figure 2: Fellow witch Amy tempts Willow with addictive magic

However, part of the difficulty of unwinding Whedon's textual meaning is the mixed meaning of allegory; the same device (in this instance magic and witchcraft) can be used as a tool for multiple different plot points. In season four, when Tara is introduced, witchcraft exemplified homosexuality in that it is taboo, practiced in secret, and is a space for growth and discovery. By the time the audience reaches season 6, the same device has acquired a new meaning completely, as homosexuality is no longer a point of contention within the lives of the characters. If we are to accept magic as allegory for addiction, then the series inhabits a Conservative approach towards this particular social issue.

Addiction is and was a significant issue in American society, the largest survey of psychiatric disorders on record stating that in 2000 and 2001, 'almost 14 percent of Americans who are 18 years old or older have a history of addiction [and] approximately 12.5 percent were addicted to alcohol, almost 3 percent were addicted to an illicit drug, and between 1 and 2 percent were addicted to both' (Heyman 2009: 14). Addiction is recognised now as a disease; a potentially deadly disease which is destructive to interpersonal relationships and overall function within society. As with any other matter of public health, addiction requires treatment, and treatment is expensive.

Famously, America does not offer comprehensive and accessible healthcare, and from a purely economic viewpoint rehabilitation and continued support for addicts is expensive. The Clinton Administration is said to have made significant progress in legislating support for addicts, and despite a failure to introduce comprehensive medical care for all 'the inclusion of addiction services was embraced. A precedent was set' (Roy and Miller 2010: 119). The American approach towards addiction was gradually shifting from a Conservative view that each individual was responsible for their individual choices, to one in which social and environmental factors are seen as relevant in beginning the chain of addiction. However, within the text of *Buffy*, it takes a further four episodes for the allegory of addiction to become apparent.

In season six episode 10 'Wrecked', when Willow visits a warlock named Wrack, who is coded as a drug dealer. It is my argument that because the inclusion of an addiction narrative is

not exposed until after Willow has already abused Tara's trust, Whedon takes a compassionate Conservative approach to addiction; framing Willow as a perpetrator of abuse before she is portrayed as a victim of a disease. This mixed allegory of magic creates a confusing attitude towards addiction in which Willow is both guilty of abusing her powers and not given any understanding by the text until a later point, by which stage she has already been established as reckless and untrustworthy. Thus, Whedon takes a Conservative approach to social issues.

Case Study 3: Virginity and Punishment

Lastly, I will examine the compassionate Conservatism present in Buffy and Angel's love affair, focusing on the plotline in which Buffy loses her virginity to Angel and examining how the allegory of Angel's soul provides disproportionate punishment to Buffy for expressing her sexuality. Read within the framework of Conservatism, *Buffy* appears to be subversive in its execution and aims; however, I argue that in terms of teenage sexuality, *Buffy* promotes a Conservative view of sex and relationships as it punishes the character of Buffy within the text, rather than a culturally progressive alternative.

As noted previously, part of the aim of third-wave feminism is the liberation of women who were not traditionally favoured by feminist groups, such as women of colour, queer women, and working-class women. Buffy herself is seen to be comfortably middle class, however, in season two episode 13 'Surprise' she becomes a sexually active, unmarried woman. By this point in



Figure 3: Buffy and Angel embrace

the 1990's enough progress was made by prior women's rights groups for even the most Conservative lobbyists in America to agree on the legitimacy of a particular type of American woman: faithfully married. Premarital sex has been admonished by religious groups from many centuries, and increased fears of women engaging in premarital intercourse further arose with the increase in easily accessible birth control.

As sex becomes safer (lower risk of pregnancy and contracting STIs) sex becomes a more viable option for teenagers (Greenwood and Guner 2010: 910). Though feminists have

often disagreed on sex as a form of liberation, third-wave feminism did mark a growing popularity in the idea of sexual liberation and women's, particularly young women's, right to choose what they do with their bodies. A progressive approach to the scene in which Buffy loses her virginity would suggest she is not acting in a particularly controversial fashion; she engages in consensual sex with her boyfriend who she is in love with.

Instead, the text punishes her. Due to a curse from an ancient clan, Angel is a vampire who possesses a soul, and after experience a moment of true happiness he loses his soul, and returns to a bloodthirsty, evil vampire. Sex with Buffy causes him to lose his soul and sends on a rampage to destroy her life. He kills a close friend Jenny, tortures her mentor Giles, and torments her mother. The psychological damage inflicted on Buffy during this period is monumental, ultimately decreeing the path of all her following relationships throughout the next six seasons of the series. The tension of Conservatism and compassion is evident here: Whedon crafts a narrative in which we empathise with Buffy, but he is certain to punish her for expressing sexuality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, compassion and Conservatism appear to be oxymoronic; Conservatism values the individual working hard and adhering to societal norms, whereas compassion sees each individual as a person with their own unique struggles and treats them fairly with said struggles in mind. We see this in the three examples above; *Buffy* attempts a socially progressive portrayal of queer coming out but lacks in the way of representation. Similarly, Willow and Tara appear to on an initial reading to act as the demonstrators of abusive relationships, but by way of a confused allegory they more succinctly convey a Conservative approach to addiction. And finally, in the case of Angel and Buffy's sexual relationship, Buffy is, through the mechanism of the soul, punished for expressing her sexuality.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer manages to accomplish both elements of compassionate Conservatism; we the audience are invited to feel for the characters, understand their decisions, and root for their success; however, their flaws are ultimately their flaws, and they are made to suffer as a result. Much like with a Conservative government, *Buffy* can recognise the struggle of the individual, but does not necessarily empathise.

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