



Buffy, the Story Teller

A study into the way in which the popular television series **BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER** provides usable stories for its viewers.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
1. Theoretical Background	4
Material and Methodology	12
2. Content Analysis	15
Season 1: Establishing the Scene	15
Season 2: Love	20
Season 3: Graduation	26
Season 4: Transition from High School to College	31
Season 5: Family	35
Season 6: Life and Death	39
Season 7: Choices	42
Usable Stories?	48
3. Forum Analysis	51
Conclusion	61
Bibliography	68
Filmography	68

Introduction

Having been a Theatre, Film and Television student for several years, I have often been asked the question what the use would be of an academic study into a seemingly mundane medium like television. I have always found this quite odd; it seems pretty safe to say that there is hardly anything more pervasive in our current society than television, and I therefore think it is of vital importance to research the way in which this medium functions.

Like most new mediums, television has not always been greeted with a lot of enthusiasm by critics and the academia and more often than not, the supposed negative consequences of watching television were pointed out. With the introduction of Cultural Studies, also a more positive approach was taken towards the study of television, and possible positive effects were looked into. In this thesis, I will look into one of those supposed positive effects, namely that of the concept of usable stories, introduced by the theorist John Mepham. In his opinion, television offers its viewers an array of usable stories that they can use to make sense of questions that invariably spring up in the course of their lives.

As a case study in this thesis, I will look at the popular television series *BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*. As a big fan of this series, I have watched it over the years with growing interest. Something that has always stood out to me is how recognizable the storylines were and how often I could find links to events happening in my personal life. Apart from my personal interest, *BUFFY* is a series that has attracted a seemingly unprecedented critical acclaim and academic attention. It is therefore that I think *BUFFY* is an interesting series to use as a case study into the workings of the mechanism of usable stories.

The question I will try to answer in this thesis is as follows:

How does the series *BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* provide usable stories for its viewers?

To answer this question, I will first give a brief theoretical background on the subject matter; how has the concept of television and popular culture been theorised over the years and what are usable stories? I will then turn to the case study and make an analysis of the series *BUFFY*, paying close attention to the possibility of usable stories the series provides. Finally, I will

carry out a brief ethnographic research on a BUFFY internet forum, to look for the way in which actual viewers engage with the series and the usable stories it provides.

1. Theoretical background

For a long time after coming into being, the medium of television did not get the critical attention it deserves. As with every new popular medium coming into being, it was for a long time (and still until today) mistrusted as an industry catering to the largest denominator. An industry looking to make money by catering to the large, powerless masses, that were seen as “cultural dupes”, buying mindlessly into the ideological systems by which the tv-content was produced, in this way keeping the existing class divisions neatly in place. This opinion was one held by the cultural elite and the academea alike.

A similar treatment had been given, some 50 years earlier, to the new popular medium of the time, namely film. Gradually though, this medium had acquired its place in the academic world and had become known as an art form. When referring to film as art, usually the literary qualities of the medium had been emphasized. The film, though having its own unique (namely visual) language, shares many characteristics with that of earlier literary forms, like the novel, namely a clear narrative structure, closure and character development. Describing this new medium in terminology that was already familiar through accepted literary art forms, film became a more respectable medium. Besides theories about the formalistic qualities of film, attention was being given to the relationship between film and its audience, by referring to the accepted academic strand of psychoanalysis. The viewing conditions of film, with its darkened theatre and the spectator being fixed in his/her seat, drawn to the central focal point provided by the film, correlated with the psychoanalytic approach by Lacan, describing the Mirror Phase as a defining moment of the infant’s subjectivity formation.

Despite also being an audiovisual medium, both the formalistic and psychoanalytic approach weren’t as easily transferred onto the medium of television. Its viewing conditions and content were significantly different, television being a much more fragmented experience, having a unique “nowness” and actually being a medium that was much more focused on continuity than on closure. As such, it retained its mistrusted status as a popular medium that failed to uplift the masses.

In the Seventies, a new theoretical movement came into being that would become known as Cultural Studies. This group focused on the popular, the everyday life of people, to see in which ways these popular cultural phenomena functioned in being able to bring about social

change. Although still deeply rooted in ideas of ideology, they saw “the popular” as a site where “the people” could resist the dominant ideology of society by being “active readers”, using ideologically produced content for their own means.

It was in this theoretical strand that serious and more positive attention was finally devoted to the medium of television. As was the habit in Cultural Studies research, theorists didn’t look solely in texts to find out the meanings these conveyed to its audiences, but turned instead to the audiences, through ethnographic research, to find out how meanings of texts were actually produced by the people.

John Fiske and John Hartley published the very influential book “Reading Television” in 1978.¹ In this book, they turn to semiotics to explain how the language of television works. According to them, texts are encoded with ideological messages by its producers. However, the meaning of these texts are only determined and really “produced” in the activity of reading by the audience. These people bring their own ideological background to their reading of the texts, and it is this process that determines the actual meaning of the cultural text. According to how the producers’ and consumers’ ideological backgrounds correspond, this active reading can result in either a preferred, negotiated or oppositional reading. According to them, most readings will be a negotiated one, and in this negotiation, this meeting of dominant and resistant ideas, lies the beauty and power of popular culture in general and television in specific.²

Hartley and Fiske make a case for television being more of an oral medium, as opposed to for example film being a literary medium. They compare television’s function in society with that of the bard in premodern societies. They sum up this bardic function of the television medium as follows:

1. To *articulate* the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality (and therefore the reality of nature).

¹ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (Oxon: Routledge, 2003).

² *Ibidem*.

2. To *implicate* the individual members of the culture into its dominant value-systems, by exchanging a status-enhancing message for the endorsement of that message's underlying ideology (as articulated in its mythology).
3. To *celebrate*, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's individual representatives in the world out-there; using the mythology of individuality to claw back such individuals from any mere eccentricity to a position of socio-centrality.
4. To *assure* the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies/mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world.
5. To *expose*, conversely, any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which might result from changed conditions in the world out-there, or from pressure within the culture for a reorientation in favour of a new ideological stance.
6. To *convince* the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole
7. To *transmit* by these means a sense of cultural membership (security and involvement).³

Television is thus a means of making sense of the culture to which we belong and offers us a sense of belonging. However, according to Fiske and Hartley, as the television messages are predominantly produced by those within dominant ideology, certain groups of individuals within society will be under represented. However, as marked before and as will be elaborated upon later, there is always room for resistance, even in texts that seem to propagate the dominant ideology.⁴

In a more recently written new foreword, Hartley has commented on the over-emphasis on semiotics, ideology-analysis and class in explaining how to read television in this book.⁵

³ Ibidem, 66-67.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem, ix-xxi.

However, he writes, this was the first book in its time to look at the cultural function of television and the first book to “argue that broadcast television was a principal mechanism by which a culture could communicate with its collective self”.⁶ He calls television a “teacher of cultural citizenship over several decades”.⁷

I will come back to this idea of cultural citizenship later on. Firstly, I would like to give some attention to ideas of John Fiske, who elaborated on the concepts of “Reading Television” in his 1987 book *Television Culture*.⁸ In this book, he relates the ideological working of television to the concept of realism. Television creates a feeling of naturalness, of realism, which is of vital importance for the ideological workings, as in that what is perceived as real will be perceived as true, in this case, according to cultural pessimists, the dominant ideology put into texts by its producers. However, Fiske does not share this pessimism as he refers to the concepts of discourse and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. According to Gramsci, hegemony characterizes social relations as a series of struggles for power. Cultural studies view texts similarly, as the site of a series of struggles for meaning. The dominant ideology, working through the form of the text, can be resisted, evaded, or negotiated with, in varying degrees by differently socially situated readers. It is wrong, according to Fiske, to see television as an originator of social change, but it can and must be part of that change. Social change, he argues, rarely occurs through revolution, rather it occurs as a result of a constant tension between those with social power and subordinate groups trying to gain more power so as to shift social values towards their own interests. The textual equivalent of this he calls the progressive text, where the discourses of social change are articulated in relationship with the metadiscourse of the dominant ideology. The presence of the dominant ideology and the conventional form of realism through which it works are necessary to ensure the programme’s popularity and accessibility, but do not necessarily deny the progressive, oppositional discourses a space for themselves. He coins this concept of the progressive text in contrast to the idea of a radical text, like theorists as MacCabe and Kaplan. These two argue that to bring about revolution, texts need to be radical as in that they expose their own artificiality and refrain from working on people’s emotion, bringing about a distancing effect which will show the text as it really is. Fiske’s notion of the progressive text argues against this idea of radical as being the only means of resistance to a text. Later on in his book, he comes to call this a

⁶ Ibidem, xvi.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

“producerly” text, in contrast with Eco’s ideas about readerly texts, which try to hide all traces of its production and provides closure, and the more open writerly text that draws attention to its constructedness and resists closure, facilitating open meanings. The producerly text, Fiske argues, combines the televisual characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly. Whereas the writerly text uses altogether unfamiliar discourse, making it into an avant-garde and high-brow activity, the producerly text relies on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses, but requires that they are used in a self-interested, productive way; the producerly text can, therefore, be popular in a way that the writerly text cannot, and therefore can reach a much larger number of people, thus enhancing the chance of actually bringing about social change. Fiske also relates this idea of a more open text to ideas of specific televisual narrative structure. The most common fictional genres on television, the series and most specifically the serial, have a much more open nature than the one-off, closed narrative structure of for example the fiction film.⁹

In his book, Fiske differentiates between the individual, our idea of self, and the subject, the way we are all socially constructed into subjectivity, the way we experience the world around us. He mentions Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalytic subjectivity, the one often used in film theory. These theories lead to a singular subjectivity, and position viewers of a media text in a fixed, ideal subject position. Fiske rather speaks of social and discursive subjectivities. Our subjectivity is socially constructed and shaped through discourse, and in reading media texts, we can alter between different subject positions, depending on what we want to do with the text.¹⁰

Fiske argues that television is centrally concerned with the representation of people. Its series or serial form and its specific characteristic of “nowness” / “liveness” makes its character representation significantly different from cinema or theater. Characters that keep returning on screen day after day or week after week become “close” and well-known” to its spectators and come to be thought of as having a life in between episodes. As a character stays with the viewer for such a long period of time, television is the ultimate medium for establishing a feeling of familiarity and identification with the character portrayed on screen. Fiske touches briefly upon the difficult subject of identification. Rather than speaking of psychological identification, the projection of one’s self onto another, thereby “losing” oneself in the other,

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

he speaks of an active process of implication and extrication. By this process the viewer “puts him or herself into or outside of the text by free choice, deriving pleasure from this while still keeping control. Next to this idea of psychological identification, brought about by the “seeming real-ness” of television, Fiske mentions Althusser’s ideas of ideological identification, the process whereby the viewer compares the discursive structures used by the texts to his or her own discursive structure as reading subject, also a pleasurable process.¹¹

Fiske, not surprisingly when looking at the theories he was up against, presents us with a very positive image of popular culture and television. True, popular culture is still a part of dominant ideology, but far from being cultural dupes, the consumers of popular culture are active readers who can use texts to cater to their own needs, and these texts offer multiple ways of resisting dominant ideology.

Whereas Fiske’s vehement defense of popular culture is understandable, it is important to look out for a too naive optimism about the political power of popular culture. Someone who writes about this is Joke Hermes. In her book *Re-reading Popular Culture*, she has a mostly positive view of the workings of popular culture, namely that it is a site where existing and dominant ideologies about for example issues like gender and ethnicity can be challenged and negotiated.¹² However, one should be warned against a too naive optimism. In popular culture, dominant ideology, she claims is still very much present. And although these dominant ideologies can be negotiated or challenged, this is not necessarily have the case.

In her book, Joke Hermes makes a case for popular culture as the site where cultural citizenship can be formed. Three features of popular culture, according to Hermes, make this cultural citizenship possible: popular culture makes us feel welcome and offers us belonging, popular culture allows us to fantasize about the ideals and hopes we have for society as well as ponder what we fear, and popular culture links the domains of the public and private and blurs their borderline more than any other institution or practice, for more people- regardless of their age, gender or ethnicity.¹³ She emphasizes the democratic potential of popular culture and defines cultural citizenship as follows: “the process of bonding and community building,

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Joke Hermes, *Re-reading Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹³ Ibidem, 10-11.

and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture”.¹⁴

Joke Hermes, in coining the concept of cultural citizenship, is looking for a way of describing the everyday material effectiveness of popular culture. In her book, she focuses heavily on matters of inclusion and exclusion, making issues of gender and ethnicity the main topics of her analysis. Other theorists have also looked for ways to describe this everyday material affectiveness, and have mainly focused on the self-reflexive values offered by strong popular texts, taking a more individual approach. As this approach is of most use for the purpose of this thesis, I will now go into the ideas of two of these theorists more deeply, namely John Ellis and John Mepham.

In his book *Seeing things, television in the age of uncertainty*, John Ellis makes a very convincing case for the medium of television as functioning as a way to “work through” the anxieties of our current time and society.¹⁵ The mass media of the twentieth century, among which television, have brought us a new way of perceiving the world, namely that of witness. On a daily basis, we are bombarded with an enormous load of information about the world around us, so big that we just do not have enough explanatory frameworks to adequately process and structure this information. This has left us in a continuous state of uncertainty about our lives and position in the world. Television, Ellis argues, is the ideal medium to provide a way of “working through” these anxieties (while of course at the same time, being a huge part of this information overload). The term of working through is taken deliberately by Ellis from psycho-analysis, where it describes the process whereby material is continually worried over until it is exhausted. In television then, with its explanatory frameworks and open nature, working through means the constant process of making and remaking meanings, and of exploring possibilities. It is an important process in an age that threatens to make us witness to too much information without providing enough explanation. By the continuous making and remaking of meanings, television does not offer final conclusions or closure, it does however provide us with the explanatory and interpretative frameworks to keep making sense of the world around us. Ellis applies his theory onto all of the common television genres, like news programmes, leisure shows, sports, but also to fictional genres like soap opera, situation comedy and series. These fictional genres provide us with narrative structures

¹⁴ Ibidem, 10.

¹⁵ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002).

with which to make sense of the world, and show us situations and characters living through situations and emotions we might also experience in our own lives.¹⁶

John Mepham emphasizes the narrative nature of television. In his contribution to the book *Question of Quality*, that investigates criteria for defining quality in regards to television, he coins the concept of “usable stories”.¹⁷ Whereas Ellis mainly focuses on the increase of information coming towards us in our current day society, Mepham talks about the impact of the amount of freedom and choices people are confronted with in modern life. No longer confined to a small village, and no longer governed by one absolute Truth or religion, there is a wide variety of options open for people to decide how to live their lives. According to Mepham, stories play an important role in this identity formation process. People’s lives are not scripted in advance, but open to significant amounts of improvisation. To help people make sense of all the possibilities offered to them, they make use of stories. Mepham calls the social and cultural purpose of television that of provider of “usable stories”.¹⁸ He defines these as stories that can be put to use in “development of “individual personality” and in the “creation of social self-understanding”.¹⁹ Stories, he argues, “are a form of inquiry to which people can turn in their efforts to answer questions which invariably spring up through their lives. What is possible for me, who can I be, what can my life consist of, how can I bring this about?”²⁰ The question of quality in regards to television resides not in the difference between high and low culture, but in the programme’s willingness to provide these usable stories and adhere to the ethics of “Truth-telling”. He does not claim that there is one single Truth, but claims that quality television will show usable stories that show people many sides of characters and situations and will try not to exclude, oversimplify or mislead.²¹

It is in this function, as a provider of usable stories, that I would also like to think of the material effectiveness of popular culture in our world today. I don’t hold the pessimistic view of popular culture rendering us into “cultural dupes”, nor do I share the highly optimistic view that active readership will always lead to resistant readings of dominant ideologies and will therefore bring about a social and cultural revolution. The beauty and power of popular

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ John Mepham, “The Ethics of Quality in Television” in *The Broadcasting Debate 6: The Question of Quality*, ed. G. Mulgan (London: British Film Institute, 1990) : 56-72.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 59

¹⁹ Ibidem, 60

²⁰ Ibidem

²¹ Ibidem, 68-72

culture, I think, is to be found in the diverse and recognizable themes and stories it brings into our homes. The ways of living it shows us, ways we might not have come across in our everyday environment. Events and emotions which can explain important issues to us and will be useful stories to incorporate into our everyday life. It is with this in mind that I will look, in the chapters to follow, at one of my favorite series of all times. I will look at useful stories I will find within the text, also I will look at recipients of the programmes and try to find evidence of people actually using these stories in their daily lives, to work through anxieties they might have.

Material and Methodology

BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER is a series that has run for 7 seasons, from 1997 until 2003.²² The first season consisted of 12 episodes, all the following featured 22 episodes each. As a series that could be described as a fantasy show, having supernatural phenomena as its subject, the show has received an almost unprecedented critical acclaim and academic attention.²³

The show, as many fictional shows on television today, seems to be a combination of the two most common fictional genres, namely series and serial. The main difference between the two would be the series' use of self-contained episodes with relatively autonomous plotlines as opposed to the serial's use of continuing storylines with characters who learn from episode to episode. As said, BUFFY uses both. Every episode has its own storyline, which will reach (some form of) closure by the end of it. However, there are also continuing story arcs, spanning one or several seasons and the main story arc of the whole seven-season show. Characters develop over time and a strong emphasis lies on emotion, as is common in the serial.

²² Buffy, the Vampire Slayer. Written and Directed by J. Whedon and others. Warner Brothers, 1997-2003.

²³ BUFFY has always been given a lot of serious attention in the academic world. From the start many academic articles were written on very diverse topics, mainly by Humanities and Social Science academics. BUFFY even has its own, still active, online academic journal, Slayage, to be found at www.slayageonline.com. Through this academic journal, two conferences have been organised, where academics have come together to lecture each other on topics concerning BUFFY, often in the presence of important producers and actors from the show. Another one of these conferences is set to take place in June 2008. Libraries could be filled with academic books focusing on the "Buffyverse" or Whedonverse", see for example *Why Buffy matters* by Rhonda Wilcox, *Sex and the Slayer: a gender studies primer for the Buffy fan* by Lorna Jowett and *Fighting the forces: What's at stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery.

BUFFY is often referred to as “quality television”.²⁴ Two characteristics of this category are that it tends to be literary- or writer based and that it aspires towards realism. The emphasis on the literary aspect seems to be echoing the old problem of the literary culture being held in higher regard than that of the oral culture. However, what is meant in this instant is that BUFFY is “well-written”, rather than this is a series with closed narratives instead of the more open nature that is usually ascribed to television. With regards to aspirations to realism, BUFFY is quite clearly a fantasy show. However, time and time again, both critics of the shows and the writers have emphasized the “emotional realism” of the show. Despite its supernatural subject, the show seems to be extremely recognizable, supernatural activities being seen as metaphors for people’s real-life experiences. I will argue later on that its use of supernatural subject matter in this metaphoric way is actually one of the reasons the show “feels so real”.

BUFFY is a show that is not afraid to touch upon big and important themes. Joss Whedon has once been quoted to say that there will never be “a very special Buffy”. What he is referring to is the fact that many shows on television, like for example BEVERLY HILLS 90210, try to demonstrate their societal relevance by featuring a big, high profile episode about an important, current theme, like AIDS, drugs or homosexuality, whereas the show shies away from these subjects in its general storyline. Joss Whedon is said to expect more from his viewers, always incorporating relevant life issues in his television writing. Therefore I think BUFFY will be an excellent case study for looking at the mechanism of a popular television show as a provider of usable stories.

In the following chapter, I will go into the text of BUFFY and analyse the narrative structure, portrayal of character and use of metaphor in creating usable stories and means of “working through” for audiences. Next, I will turn to the largest BUFFY-community on the Web, www.buffyworld.com, and do an ethnographic study of ways in which viewers actually engage with the series to see if the assumptions about the text’s function can actually be seen in viewers’ reactions. The advantage of using ethnography as a research method is that I will be

²⁴ Robert J. Thompson has described quality television as exhibiting a number of distinctive tendencies / characteristics. In short these nine are: being made by a quality creator (television auteur), having undergone a struggle within popular network television, having a large ensemble cast, having a “memory”, creating a new genre by mixing old ones, having a tendency to be literary and writer-based and being self-conscious, having controversial subject matter and aspiring towards realism. For an extensive analysis of these characteristics in relation to BUFFY, see the introduction of Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, ed. *Fighting the Forces: What’s at stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), xx-xxv

able to give a detailed account of what people have to say on this subject. A downside is of course that I will be restricted to the analysis of what people say about themselves, without being able to have any influence over this. However, this part of the thesis only has an explorative goal and therefore the ethnographic method suits the purpose of this study.

2. Content Analysis

I will now take a detailed look at the text that the series BUFFY provides us with and where possible usable stories may lie. As it is my belief that the entirety of the BUFFY universe is one of the main reasons the show works well as a provider of usable stories, I will cover all seven seasons that the show has brought forth.

Season 1: Establishing the Scene

In every series's first season it is of course of vital importance to acquaint the viewers with the content matter, characters and thematics of the show. This happens very successfully in BUFFY's first season. We are introduced to the fantastic and supernatural nature of the show, we get to know the main characters and also we are made familiar with the show's way of making supernatural phenomena into metaphors for "real teenage horrors".

Supernatural nature of the show

Immediately, from the get-go, the show treats us to a very effective bit of role-reversal. The very first scene we are shown in the very first episode shows us a cute, blond girl, and a boisterous guy, breaking into a deserted high school building after hours, apparently to make out. The girl seems nervous about their criminal behaviour, she keeps checking if they are really alone, whereas the guy does not seem so concerned, obviously caring more about the opportunity to make out with this nice girl than the possibility of getting caught. Through our knowledge of the usual chain of events in these kinds of situation, through films and television shows we have seen and also real-life experiences, we as viewers are inclined to fear for the girl's safety. Being quite alone in the building, she will be at the mercy of the guy's superior strength and will run the risk of getting taken advantage of against her will.

However, once the guy has made sure they are alone and turns back to the girl, the viewer is in for a surprise: the girl's face has changed, she is a vampire and kills the guy. Our knowledge of conventions is surprised in two ways in this example. Firstly, whereas we would expect the girl to be in danger of the guy in this type of situation, it turns out to be the girl who has the superior strength and kills the guy. And secondly, this scene defies our expectations of the usual horror film cliché of the cute, innocent girl always ending up dead.

From the first moment, we know we can expect something different than usual from this series.

BUFFY immediately presents itself as a fantasy show. In BUFFY's world, vampires and demons are real. The high school of the seemingly typical Californian town Sunnydale, where the series takes place, is built on top of a Hellmouth, a portal into the demon dimension, a place that draws supernatural and evil activity to it. In popular culture, there have been many different depictions of vampires. In BUFFY's version of the Vampire lore, vampires come into being when they are bitten by another vampire and the vampire, before killing the human, lets the human drink some of his/her own blood. This process is called "siring". The human dies, but rises again as a vampire, his human soul now replaced with a demon. Risen vampires retain the physical appearance of the former human, but with supernatural strength and a new liking for killing, as there is no human soul present and human blood is all that sustains him / her. When a vampire "feeds", he or she acquires a different physique, a vampire can turn into "Vamp face", where the fangs become visible for easy feeding and the forehead becomes bumpy. Being already dead, vampires have nothing to fear from conventional weapons. However, they can be turned to dust by means of wood through the heart (usually done by a pointy, wooden object by name of a stake), sunlight, beheading or fire. Holy water and crosses burn their skin, concurrent with traditional representations of vampires.

Most people in BUFFY's world are completely unaware of the supernatural activity. They of course sometimes notice the crimes committed, but "explain them away", as people, according to BUFFY character Giles, "tend to rationalize what they can and forget what they can't". Buffy however, is a girl in a long (matrilineal) line of Chosen Ones. Into every generation, a girl is born, to stand alone against the vampires and other evil. She is the Slayer, and has supernatural strength. In her quest, she is aided by a Watcher, who guides and trains her. Watchers are united in a very old, British Council, the patriarchal Watcher's Council, who have extensive knowledge of the demon world. For Buffy and Watcher Giles, as for us viewers, the supernatural activity in BUFFY's world is accepted, normal. This is however not the case for other human characters on BUFFY, and it is one of Buffy's and the Watchers' Council's responsibilities to keep this fact hidden for the rest of the population.

Introduction of the main characters

Buffy Summers is presented to the viewers as the seemingly all-American typical 16-year-old girl. She is blond, attractive, fashion conscious and seems to want nothing more than to fit in at her new high school, having recently been expelled from her previous one in L.A. for causing trouble (as we quickly find out caused by her duty as Vampire Slayer). She is quickly recognized by popularity queen Cordelia as a girl with popularity potential and at first Buffy passes her test. However, when Cordelia is verbally abusive to nerdy but brainy girl Willow, Buffy does not approve. Buffy looks up Willow later in the first episode to catch up on school work, and by denying herself the chance of being incorporated into Cordelia's circle of popularity, we see the first sign of Buffy's position as an outsider instead of someone who fits in.

This is made very apparent when Buffy enters the school library and meets British librarian Giles, who turns out to be Buffy's Watcher. It becomes clear immediately that Buffy is not happy to accept her status as Chosen One. She wants to have "a normal life", where she doesn't lose all her friends and doesn't get kicked out of high school, and she storms out of the library. Buffy's wish to have a normal life will be an important, recurring theme throughout the series. However, already in the first episode it becomes clear this will not be the case for Buffy: when a mysterious death occurs, she starts investigating, she "does what is right", and thus chooses her own outsider status.

She quickly becomes friends with two other outsiders, nerdy but brainy Willow and geeky but brave Xander. Although these are people that have not really chosen to be outsiders, they do however, as Buffy, choose to do what is right and become regular helpers of Buffy, both in her personal and in her professional life as Slayer. Friendship and Community are very important themes in Buffy. Throughout Slayer history, it has not been common that the Slayer had a circle of people around her that were aware of her special talents, as this knowledge of the demon world would endanger the "civilians". However, not being cut off from normal life makes Buffy a stronger Slayer; Willow, Xander and other, more temporary members of the friends circle aid Buffy in important ways and it is often at moments that Buffy cuts herself off from the others that she gets into serious trouble, thus proving the series' point that friendship and community are important to a person's survival, both to Buffy as to any person in life, especially teenage life.

Giles, Buffy's Watcher, is a pompous, middle-aged man from Britain, who functions as a sort of father figure for Buffy. At first, his guidance is mainly in Slayer matters, having superior knowledge of the demon world than Buffy. But often, his guidance reaches further, as he and Buffy start to care a lot about each other. One could say that Giles is the strongest parental figure Buffy has. Her parents have recently divorced, which makes her real father absent from the scene. Her mother Joyce tries to be there for her, but as she is (at first) not allowed to know of Buffy's special status, she has a lot of problems understanding and communicating with her daughter. Giles thus functions more like a parent, as, as one of the only adults in the series, he does realise what is really going on in Buffy's world and Buffy can turn to him for advice.

Buffy, Willow, Xander and Giles will form the core of what will become known as the "Scooby Gang", with pop culture reference to the group of people around cartoon dog Scooby Doo, that used to solve mysterious crimes on a weekly basis. In Buffy, pop culture references and creative use of language are used to set the world of the teenagers apart from that of the adults, most notably when the language of Buffy, Willow and Xander is contrasted with Giles's long, pompous, British sentences. This seems to be a clear metaphor of the alienation teenagers can feel towards adults.

Metaphors

To me, the most noteworthy characteristic element of the series BUFFY is the way in which the supernatural character of the show is used for portraying very recognizable life issues. In BUFFY, real life (teenage) monsters become literal monsters. By magnifying problems in this way, they become all the more recognizable and this makes it easy for viewers to relate to them.

I have already touched upon a few of the overall metaphors the show provides, like for example the way the normal people, and especially the adults on BUFFY seem to be completely unaware of the supernatural activity around them. Even when confronted with it, they try to find rational explanations to deny the obvious supernatural manifestation they have just witnessed. To me, this is a metaphor of the way people in real life try to close their eyes to social problems. Everyone sees them, but many find a way to ignore them, as it is easier to live one's life without the knowledge of these problems, just as the residents of Sunnydale

find their lives easier without having to acknowledge that there is such a thing as supernatural activity. Really disturbing it becomes when we as viewers find out that some adults on BUFFY, especially those upholding the law, are in fact very much aware of what is going on, but consciously choose to cover this truth up, as becomes obvious from this scene, taking place between the school principal and the chief of police in a Season 2 episode, where many people have just been attacked by a gang of vampires in the high school building:

Chief: I need to say something to the media people.

Snyder: So?

Chief: So? You want the usual story? Gang-related? PCP?

Snyder: What'd you have in mind? The truth?

Chief: (considers) Right. Gang-related. PCP.

These two people, that can both be seen as people in a position of authority, choose not to be honest to the public. This can be seen as a metaphor for people's anxiety that for example the government holds back vital information from the public for its own benefit.

This use of metaphors for portraying social problems is a very common tactic in BUFFY, and this already becomes clear in many episodes in the first season. In *The Witch*, we see a girl who is extremely nervous at cheerleader try-outs. This, we find out is because of her mother, who was a very successful cheerleader in her day and is trying to relive her glory days through her daughter, something that is unfortunately recognizable for real-life teens. In BUFFY, this mother, being a witch, takes this behaviour to an extreme, by actually changing bodies with her daughter. The social problem is magnified by the supernatural character of the show.

A similar case is to be found in the episode *Out of mind, out of sight*. A girl is continuously ignored by the other students at the high school and as a consequence becomes invisible, as a real-life girl would *feel* invisible, in a similar situation.

BUFFY's use of supernatural elements for magnifying very real social problems make it extremely suitable for people to relate the series to their own life, to use BUFFY as a text that provides usable stories. It does this in relation to many relevant themes, as I will describe in the analysis of the following seasons.

Season 2: Love

I will now turn my attention to season 2, and will describe themes of both romantic and parental love.

In season 1, Buffy has met the tall, handsome stranger Angel, who presents himself as “a friend”, and who keeps popping up at unexpected moments as the provider of useful information and advice. There is an instant attraction between the two, and they end up kissing in Buffy’s bedroom. To her shock, she finds out he is a vampire. He is in fact 231-year-old Angelus, one of the most vicious vampires in his time. After killing one of the tribe members, he is cursed by gypsies who reinstate his human soul, thus condemning him to an eternity of suffering in his knowledge of all his crimes. He is now a “good” vampire. However, a relationship between a Slayer and a vampire is of course far from ideal and for a long time they try to deny their feelings for each other. The impossibility of their relationship is comparable to that of two people who would like to be together, because there is for example too big an age difference (though in regular life it would maybe be ten years instead of two hundred). Also, there is a clear reference to the story of Romeo and Juliette, two people who are madly in love with each other, but cannot be together due to external circumstances.

Buffy and Angel try to keep their distance, but they fail. They do end up falling in love and share a romantic night, which happens to be Buffy’s first sexual experience. This storyline is narrated in the double episode *Innocence / Surprise*. After their sexual experience, we see Angel waking up in terrible pain. He flees outside and after the pain has gone, we see he has turned back into the vicious Angelus; his human soul is gone. Buffy of course doesn’t know this and wakes up alone the next morning, wondering where Angel has gone. She feels like any girl after a first sexual experience with an older, more experienced lover. She fears that she wasn’t good enough and starts looking for Angel. Angelus decides he wants to hurt Buffy as much as he can, and when Buffy finally finds him, he doesn’t reveal that he has changed. He does, however, act like a jerk, in confirming Buffy’s fear that it was a bad sexual experience and that “*she’s got a lot to learn about men*”. Buffy is devastated. After she finds out about Angel’s change, she goes after him, but at her first opportunity to kill him, she is not ready. But, as she says, “*give me time*”. This episode represents a very real fear in the life of a teenage girl: a guy, turning into a “monster” after a sexual experience.

After this experience, Giles shows Buffy true parental love. It turns out that Jenny Calendar, school computer teacher and love interest of Giles, had information that could have warned the others about Angel's change. She is a member of the gypsy tribe that cursed Angel, and was put at Sunnydale to make sure that Angel would never experience a moment of pure happiness. At such a moment, his soul would be taken away from him, as it was only put in place to cause Angel suffering. Buffy is furious at Jenny for not sharing this vital piece of information, and Giles, with this denying his own romantic love, chooses Buffy's side; his love for her (his "child") is more important than his own love life. When driving her home after the ordeal, Buffy and Giles have a moving conversation. Buffy is afraid that Giles will be disappointed at her lack of judgement, Giles however shows her support:

Buffy: You must be so disappointed in me.

Giles: No. (she looks at him) No, no, I'm not.

Buffy: But this is all my fault.

Giles: No. I don't believe it is. Do you want me to wag my finger at you and tell you that you acted rashly? You did. A-and I can. I know that you loved him. And... he... has proven more than once that he loved you. You couldn't have known what would happen. The coming months a-are gonna, are gonna be hard... I, I suspect on all of us, but... if it's guilt you're looking for, Buffy, I'm, I'm not your man. All you will get from me is, is my support. And my respect.

Giles also performs a parental role in the way that he dispenses wise life lessons to the teenagers surrounding him. One of the important elements in the show *BUFFY* is that good and bad are never portrayed in a black and white fashion. There is always a lot of nuance. An example of this occurs in the episode *Lie to me*. An old school friend of Buffy comes to Sunnydale. Seeming friendly at first, it turns out that the guy has a brain tumour and in fear of dying has decided to be voluntarily made into a vampire, even if this means having to sacrifice a lot of other teenagers, including Buffy, to do so. Buffy prevents this but despite being angry at his selfishness, she can understand the difficult situation the guy found himself in and realises he was not a bad person. The following conversation takes place between Buffy and Giles:

Buffy: It'd be simpler if I could just hate him. I think he wanted me to. I think it made it easier for him to be the villain of the piece. Really he was just scared.

Giles: Yes, I suppose he was.

Buffy: Nothing's ever simple anymore. I'm constantly trying to work it out. Who to love or hate. Who to trust. It's just, like, the more I know, the more confused I get.

Giles: I believe that's called growing up.

Buffy: I'd like to stop then, okay?

Giles: I know the feeling.

Buffy: Does it ever get easy?

Ford suddenly rises from his grave, a vampire just like he wanted, and attacks Buffy. She plunges a stake into his heart with no more effort than swatting a fly. He steps back and looks at the stake protruding from his chest. He looks back up and bursts into ashes.

Giles: You mean life?

Buffy: Yeah. Does it get easy?

Giles: What do you want me to say?

Buffy: (looks up at him) Lie to me.

Giles: (considers a moment) Yes, it's terribly simple.

They start walking out of the cemetery.

Giles: The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after.

Buffy: Liar.

Giles makes it clear to Buffy that part of growing up is learning the ability of seeing nuances in life, and learning that situations are more complicated than they used to seem, a very recognizable thing for teenagers watching the show.

Another parental moment occurs in the episode *Ted*. Buffy's mother Joyce starts dating again, for the first time after divorcing Buffy's father. Buffy hates this situation, as many children of

divorced parents do. He is loved by all the others, as he appears to be a great guy, successful in his job, considerate of others and even a great cook. When alone with Buffy however, we see a very different side of Ted, as he is very mean and belittling to her, wanting her not to interfere with his relationship with her mother. No one believes Buffy, as they think Buffy doesn't have clear judgement as result of the pain of the divorce. When he is particularly nasty to her, they get into a fight. Buffy kicks him, which makes him fall down the stairs and die. Buffy feels extremely guilty. Joyce, although mourning over the loss of her love, sticks by Buffy and wants to make sure she does not end up in prison. Buffy thinks she does belong there however, having killed a human. But surprisingly, Ted returns. He turns out not to be human after all, but a robot that has an entire closet full of dead wives at home. Buffy kills him and saves the day. This episode represents a very real fear children of divorced parents can experience. They could find comfort in the portrayal of this situation in this Buffy episode, as the new man does indeed turn out to be a monster, even though at first no one believes Buffy, as many children in real life will experience the new love interest of their parent as a "real-life monster", even if their surroundings don't agree.

A less understanding moment takes place between Buffy and her mother in the final episode of the second season, *Becoming*. Angelus has decided to end the world by opening the portal to a hell dimension, and Buffy knows she has to kill him to stop this from happening. During her preparation for this, Joyce accidentally finally finds out about Buffy being the Slayer. She cannot process all the information Buffy has bombarded her with and refuses to let her go out. Buffy of course has no choice but to go, and the following conversation takes place between the two of them:

Joyce: Don't you talk to me that way! (Buffy stops in her tracks) You don't get to just dump something like this on me and pretend it's nothing!

Buffy: (looks at her) I'm sorry, Mom, but I don't have time for this. (starts for the door again, but stops)

*Joyce: No! I am tired of 'I don't have time' or-or 'you wouldn't understand.' (Buffy faces her) I am your mother, and you will *make* time to explain yourself.*

Buffy: I told you. I'm a Vampire Slayer.

Joyce: (haughtily) Well, I just don't accept that!

Buffy: (steps closer) Open your eyes, Mom. What do you think has been going on for the past two years? The fights, the weird occurrences. How many times have you washed blood out of my clothing, and you still haven't figured it out?

Joyce: (raises her voice angrily) Well, it stops now!

*Buffy: (raises her voice also) No, it doesn't stop! It *never* stops! Do-do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is, how dangerous? I would *love* to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or... God, even studying! But I have to save the world... again.*

Joyce: No. This is insane. (takes Buffy by the shoulders) Buffy, you need help.

*Buffy: (throws off her mom's arms) I'm *not* crazy! What I need is for you to chill. I *have* to go!*

Joyce: (shakes her head) No. I am not letting you out of this house.

Buffy: You can't stop me.

Joyce: (grabs her) Oh yes I...

Buffy shoves her back into the island, making her knock over several things. She heads for the door, opens it and steps out.

*Joyce: (angrily) You walk out of this house, don't even *think* about coming back!*

In this conversation, we can see Buffy's frustration at the fact that Joyce has not figured out about Buffy being the Slayer sooner, even though she has tried to keep it a secret for her. This mirrors the feelings of teenagers that want their parents to understand them without having to tell them everything word for word and want them to just "understand" what they are going through without having to explain.

Buffy does leave the house in order to kill Angelus. He has already opened the portal to the hell dimension, but Buffy has a chance to close it again by killing Angelus. Meanwhile, Willow is working on making a spell happen that will once more reinstate Angel's human soul. Just as Buffy is about to take Angel out, Willow's spell works and Angelus turns back into Angel. They share a short loving moment, but in order to save the world she still has to

kill Angel and she does. For saving the world, she sacrifices the person she loves more than anyone, because she is aware of her responsibility, a very mature thing to do.

Having lost both her romantic and her parental love in this final episode of the season, Buffy sees no value in staying in Sunnydale anymore as she cannot cope with all these feelings. She leaves Sunnydale with the intention of never returning.

In this season, viewers are thus presented with usable stories about both romantic and parental love. In terms of romantic love, Buffy, and the viewers, learn that being in love with each other is not always necessarily enough to be able to sustain a successful relationship. Sometimes circumstances will simply not allow two people to be together. Examples of these circumstances that are given in this season are being of different social backgrounds and of a different age, both very clearly visible in the character of Angel, who is a 231-year-old vampire. Another lesson to be taken from this season is that other responsibilities in life may have to come before a romantic love-interest; no matter how much Buffy loves Angel, she will have to kill him in order to do her job, which in this case is saving the world.

On the subject of parental love, Buffy and the viewers are presented with two very different kinds of parents, namely Joyce and Giles. Joyce is the caring mother, that provides lots of love and puts her child first at all times, but does not necessarily always understand her. Giles is the wise, understanding father-figure, and more Buffy's intellectual parent, always having wise life lessons at the ready and understanding of Buffy's predicament, as he knows of her Slayer duty. Although Giles seems to be an ideal parent in this respect, he of course has an unfair advantage over Joyce. This can teach viewers that it is unfair to expect a parent to always understand everything, while the child in fact keeps things hidden. There is comfort in knowing that, even without complete mutual understanding, parental love is still present; Buffy is always the most important person in Joyce's life and even with the gap that sometimes exists between them, they have a very strong bond. This is exemplified in the episode *School Hard*: Buffy fights vampires while her mother and other parents are in the school building because of parent-teacher night. Even though Joyce is unaware of exactly what Buffy is fighting, she does acknowledge that she has a brave, capable daughter and shows her how proud she is of her.

Season 3: Graduation

Season 3 is mainly concerned with the theme of graduation. This can be said in both a literal sense, namely Buffy's graduation from high school and the Watcher's Council, but also more figuratively speaking as all the main characters become more mature in their relationships with each other.

In order to be able to graduate, Buffy must of course first return to Sunnydale. As was said, at the end of the second season Buffy has left Sunnydale. In the first episode of the third season, we see Buffy living in Los Angeles in a small apartment in a bad neighbourhood, working as a waitress under her second name "Anne". She clearly wants to be anonymous. She is recognized however by a girl who knew Buffy from Sunnydale, a girl who has gone by many names, as she has clearly not found her own identity yet. When her boyfriend disappears, she turns to Buffy for help, as that is the kind of thing she remembers Buffy does. At first reluctant, Buffy cannot turn her back on who she is and helps the girl out. She finds out that homeless teens in L.A. are recruited by a group of demons, who let them work in a hell dimension, where they have to forget their identity (they have to say they are "no one") until they are too old to be useful and put back into the real world, old and void of humanity. Time in the hell dimension moves differently though, which means many years of labour have passed in a few days of the real world, and the people that return seem to die of old age. Buffy goes into the hell dimension and when asked who she is, instead of answering no one, she firmly reclaims her identity: "*Hi, I'm Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, and you are?*" . This is the only moment in the whole series where Buffy so literally names her identity, it is clear that she needed to re-find her own identity. Buffy frees the youngsters and having found herself decides to return to Sunnydale. The girl she helped, still in search of her own identity, takes over the life "Anne" had built for herself and even the name.

This episode is clearly in reference to the social problem of lonely teenagers on the streets in big cities, who don't really know who they are, are not missed by anyone and therefore easy targets for people who want to take advantage of them. Buffy sends a positive, empowering message that it is possible to break free from this by remembering who you really are.

Buffy returns to Sunnydale, and although her mother, Giles and her friends are of course immensely relieved that she is back home safely, they have trouble accepting her right back,

as they blame her for staying away that long without contacting them, leaving them all worried. Buffy is so disappointed at the cool welcome back that she is ready to leave again. However, a gang of zombies decides to attack the Summers house, and Buffy and the friends fight them together successfully. This is a reuniting moment, and Buffy stays in Sunnydale, accepted back by her friends, but not without realising that she should not cut herself off from them like she did again.

Just as Buffy is starting to come to terms with the loss of Angel, he is returned from the hell dimension, cast back to earth in a near animalistic state, after the time of torture he has endured in the hell dimension. Buffy finds him and restores him to full physical and mental health, but keeps this a secret for the others, as she fears their reaction after what Angelus put them through the year before. Of course, not everyone's boyfriend is a vampire and in real-life they don't return from hell dimensions, but it is easy to see how this can be compared to a normal girl being afraid to admit she is again involved with a man that has caused herself and the people around her a lot of pain. When she is eventually found out, her friends try an intervention on her, trying to make her see the risks of what she is letting herself in for. Buffy is very defensive and sticks to her own judgement, but is hurt when especially Giles obviously has a lot of problems dealing with this situation. As Buffy and Angel become closer again, she tries to break off their contact, because she realizes that it will lead to the same situation as earlier, as she tells him "*We're not friends, we never were. What I want from you, I can never have*". She sees the risks and tries to be mature enough to make the rational decision instead of following her feelings. However, as often happens in life, she cannot deny her feelings and they become involved again. As the older and wiser person, it is Angel who in the end makes the decision to leave Sunnydale as he realizes they won't be able to stop being in love when so close together. With a little encouragement from Buffy's mother (who tells Angel that "*when it comes to you, Buffy is just like any other young woman in love*"), he tells Buffy she deserves a normal life and because of that he will leave Sunnydale. Buffy understands this is the sensible thing to do, but is heartbroken nevertheless. The life lesson taught by this again seems to be that love is not always enough and sometimes rationality has to come before emotions.

An important new character that is introduced in the third season is Vampire Slayer Faith. In the Slayer tradition, it is normally only possible to have one Slayer alive at the time. However, Buffy died briefly at the end of Season 1, thus bringing into action a new Slayer, Kendra, who

appeared briefly in Season 2 but quickly died. With that death, new Slayer Faith was called into action. Unlike Buffy, she seems to really enjoy slaying. Whereas Buffy sees her duty as a daunting responsibility, Faith enjoys the physical powers she has in an almost sexual way. She is far less restrained than Buffy and seems to be from a lower class background than the rest of the teenagers on the show. She was raised by a single, alcoholic mother and has never finished high school. Her outgoing nature and joy in slaying at first make her really popular with Buffy's friends and Buffy feels threatened by her, as she feels like Faith is taking over her life, being the more relaxed one as opposed to Buffy's "uptight" behaviour. It quickly becomes apparent though that Faith isn't the happy, carefree girl she pretends to be; her Watcher has recently been killed without Faith being able to prevent this, for which she obviously feels guilty. When this demon comes to Sunnydale, Faith wants to fly away from it, as she has obviously been running away from responsibility her whole life, but with Buffy's help she comes through and confronts her fears. Faith remains in Sunnydale and she and Buffy become more friendly, as Faith tries to show Buffy the way that slaying can feel good. Buffy goes along with Faith's "bad girl" behaviour as she as well starts to see the benefits in the powerful feeling that slaying can give. Willow finds it hard to deal with this new situation, as she, as the faithful and reliable friend, feels she is being replaced by the more "cool" Faith, a recognizable theme in many friendships that change over time. On one of Buffy's and Faith's joint slaying missions, however, destiny strikes. They are attacked by a group of demons, among which there is a human. Faith realizes too late and stakes him, accidentally killing him. Buffy is really disturbed by this, as she knows that being a slayer does not equal having a licence to kill. Faith, however, seems to be showing no remorse and actually tries to frame this murder on Buffy. This obviously makes everyone turn against Faith, but Buffy remains sympathetic towards her, as she understands like no one else the burden that being a Slayer brings with it. Because of this, she can understand her and feel a connection, as she realizes that Faith has not had it as good as she did: "*different circumstances, that could have been me*". The others come round and after Faith apologizes give her another chance. She betrays them though, by becoming a double agent; she pretends to still be friendly with the Scooby Gang, but behind their backs joins forces with the Big Bad of the season, the mayor of Sunnydale, who turns out to be a demon and who intends to transform at the end of the school year and bring about armageddon. Despite being a villain, he becomes a real father figure for Faith, a girl that has obviously had a lack of a strong parental figure all her life. This is a clear reference to the fact that every teenager feels the need for a guide, someone to look up to, even if this person is from questionable moral standards.

Even when her betrayal becomes apparent, Buffy still remains understanding towards Faith. This changes however, when Faith hits Buffy where it hurts. Faith poisons Angel with a deadly poison that can only be undone by Angel drinking a Slayer's blood. Buffy goes out to find Faith in order to kill her and feed her to Angel. The two Slayers fight and when Buffy comes out on top, Faith confronts her with not being a killer by nature: "*kill me, and you become me*". Buffy stabs Faith, and she lets herself fall onto a passing truck. With no other option, Buffy offers her own blood to a dying Angel, her love is so strong that she is willing to die for him. Angel drinks, which doesn't kill her but does put her in the hospital, where Faith has also been brought in comatose. The Mayor is heartbroken by the state of his "daughter" and tries to kill Buffy, which is prevented by Angel, who is restored to health.

Faith clearly functions as a foil for the character of Buffy. She shows what it means to be a Slayer and demonstrates the way in which Buffy consciously restrains the negative side effects and always makes a conscious choice to use her powers for good. It also shows that it is very important for a Slayer to have friends and family around her to provide the stability and support needed because of the severe burden the responsibility of being a Slayer can be. By introducing the character of Faith, the show teaches an important lesson about the importance of moral choice and the importance of a feeling of community.

Buffy receives a blood transfusion and is well enough to go on. The Scoobies find out that the Mayor intends to "ascend" and destroy the world on Graduation Day and start designing a plan to stop him. Before this, the seniors have their graduation prom. Buffy, always longing to be a normal girl, has really looked forward to this, but just a few days before this, Angel breaks up with her and tells her he will leave after graduation day. Heartbroken, Buffy again realizes she will never be a normal girl, that will enjoy a beautiful prom with her boyfriend, having also recently found out she cannot leave Sunnydale to go off to college, as she is needed close to the Hellmouth. Despite her own pain, she protects the other teens at the prom from being attacked, making sure they can have the beautiful night that she would also love to have. The prom does have a positive aspect for her though, as she is awarded the price for "Class Protector" by her fellow students, who have noticed that whenever "anything strange" happens, Buffy always seems to be around to save them, making their class the one with the lowest mortality rate in many years. This can be seen as an encouraging message to teens that think their hidden work never gets noticed; although Buffy has to work in secret, the people around her, though not fully understanding, do notice her efforts and reward her for it. To

make the evening even better, Angel shows up to give her a real prom night, though reminding her that this will not change anything, something Buffy seems to have resolved herself with.

On Graduation Day, all the Scoobies and all the high school students fight together in preventing the Mayor from destroying the world. They are successful, but it leaves the high school in ruins. Angel and Buffy share a last look at each other, before he leaves and the Scoobies gather together outside the ruined school. Oz, Willow's boyfriend says they should take a moment, to contemplate that they "survived" high school. Ofcourse, normal students don't have to fight an enormous demon in order to graduate. However, this is a clear reference to the struggle many teens find high school to be, indeed something that is sometimes, "hard to survive".

Besides graduating from high school, Buffy also graduates from the Watchers' Council in the third season. In the episode *Helpless*, Giles subjects her to an ancient ritual that has been carried out with every Slayer around her 18th birthday. The Council has decided that, when coming of age, every Slayer has to prove herself in the world without her supernatural powers, to see how they can use "real-life" skills in order to save their lives. Quite a few Slayers have died during this test, however, and Giles has his doubts about this archaic ritual. He does however comply with the Council and without her knowledge injects Buffy with a solution that drains her from her supernatural powers. When he sees Buffy's hopelessness and fear because of her failing powers, he decides to tell her the truth. Deeply hurt, she ends up in the test anyway and is actually able to overcome her challenge without supernatural powers. She passes the test, unlike Giles, who according to the Council has failed, as he has developed a "fatherly love" for the child and as this makes him unfit for his task is fired. Buffy however refuses to work for the Council any longer.

During the third season, all the main Scoobies struggle with relationships. Besides Buffy and Angel, Willow and Xander also have their issues. Willow, formerly shy and insecure, starts to become empowered by her friendship with Buffy and develops her first romantic relationship with Oz, an older student who plays in a band and has unfortunately recently become a werewolf, which means he has to be contained for three nights per month. Meanwhile, Xander develops an unlikely relationship with popular girl Cordelia. This is at first very painful for Willow, as she has always had a crush on Xander and takes it personally that he would rather

be with Cordelia, their former joint enemy, than with her. During these relationships, Willow and Xander start seeing each other in a new light and become very attracted to each other. They kiss and are found out, hurting Oz and Cordelia. After a long reconciliation period, Oz decides to give Willow a second chance, Xander and Cordelia never make up again.

An important new character that is introduced in the third season is Anya. Over a thousand years old, Anya is a vengeance demon, who has chosen to give up mortal life to serve vengeance and right wronged women. She is called into action by the hurt Cordelia, who makes the wish that Buffy should never have come to Sunnydale. Anya loses her amulet and is thus returned to a mortal, 17-year-old girl, and is forced to remain in Sunnydale as a high school student. She still has a lot of adaptation problems though.

As said earlier, Buffy's third season deals with the concept of graduation and maturation. All the characters start developing from high school teens into young adults. As this topic is explored extensively, the series offers many recognizable situations and thus usable stories for teens watching the series. Now that the main characters have graduated from high school, in both the literal and the figurative sense, they can now move onto the next phase in their lives.

Season 4: Transition from high school to college

In Season 4, the series follows the next stage of the characters' development. The main characters all have their own route to take, which offers a multitude of subject positions for the viewers.

Buffy, never exactly the brainy girl, has to come to terms with her new and unfamiliar surroundings. Especially in the first episodes of the season, she is shown as an insecure, lonely girl, seemingly completely out of place in the intimidating college surroundings. Living away from home for the first time in her life and recently having lost the love of her life, she is so vulnerable that she is almost defeated by a vampire girl living on campus and lets a smooth talking college guy take advantage of her. This image of a small girl having difficulty adjusting to a new surroundings is a very recognizable one, and the series offers a comforting image to viewers that might experience similar feelings when first going to college or more generally entering into new situations: even strong, supernatural Buffy struggles with these kind of adaptation problems, it is nothing to be ashamed of.

As she starts to settle in, she meets Teacher's Assistant Riley, a seemingly normal and reliable boy who becomes her second serious love interest. Riley however, turns out to be a soldier in a very secret government operation that investigates supernatural life. When Buffy and Riley find out about each other's secret identities, Riley introduces Buffy to this organisation, called the Initiative, a highly hierarchical, military operation run by Psychology teacher Maggy Walsh. Right from the outset, it is clear that Buffy is not used to taking orders, always having been someone who likes to decide for herself, and Maggy soon feels threatened by her and tries to get her killed. When Riley finds out, this is hard for him to deal with, as the Initiative is like a family to him and Maggy Walsh like a mother. As opposed to Buffy, he has been used to taking orders without asking questions for a long time and has difficulty with the transition to becoming someone who questions authority. The Scoobies and Riley find out that, besides researching and experimenting with supernatural creatures, Maggy is actually building a supermonster called Adam, part-human, part-demon, part-machine. When brought to life, like a monster of Frankenstein, Maggy Walsh is killed and Adam escapes, becoming the Big Bad of the season.

The clear contrast in attitude between Buffy and Riley teaches a clear lesson about the danger of following orders without questions.

Willow, having always been a nerdy outcast in high school, feels more quickly at home at university than Buffy does. Already empowered by her friendship with Buffy, she really starts coming into her own in this academic environment which puts her in her element. She seems to need Buffy less than the other way around and develops new friendships and interests, most notably developing her skills as a witch, incited by her dabbling in magic that started at the end of the second season. A painful moment for Willow occurs when Oz leaves her. He decides he needs to learn more about what being a werewolf really means, and takes off on a quest, much like a person going out on a trip around the world to learn more about himself. This temporarily sets back Willow's development, as she is overcome by grief and dwells for a while in self pity. During these feelings, she accidentally causes magical occurrences that hurt her friends, which make her realise she needs to move on with her life. She does this by joining an on-campus Wicca group, where she meets the shy Tara, who not only becomes a close friend but also develops into a love interest, adding a whole new side to Willow's character, namely Willow turning into a lesbian. When Oz returns from his trip, expecting

Willow to still be there for him, she has enough strength to consciously decide that it is Tara she wants to be with and Oz leaves for good.

In sharp contrast with Buffy and Willow, Xander has not scored enough on his SAT's to attend university and has to choose a very different path. Coming from a seemingly slightly lower class family background than the others, this sets him apart from them a little further. At first he acts tough about his inability to attend further education, planning on travelling around the world, but he quickly runs out of money and returns to Sunnydale. Unable to afford his own place, he is forced to live in his parents' basement and starts working in construction. He struggles with this situation and lacks in self confidence. A positive aspect in his life forms his relationship with ex-demon Anya, that becomes more serious as the season goes on.

Another character that struggles with the new situation is Giles. The high school having been ruined at the end of season 3 and having been fired from the Council, Giles is unemployed and spends most of his time at home, trying to develop new hobbies. The Scoobies still gather at his house and come to him for advice, but not in the same intensity as in the first three seasons, making Giles feel slightly redundant at times, like a parent might do when his or her child first leaves home and seems to be able to manage on his or her own. When the owner of the local Magic Shop is killed, he takes over the shop which seems to give him a new purpose in life and provides a new hang out for the Scoobies.

Another character that goes through a transition is vampire Spike. Already appearing briefly in previous seasons, this bleached, British vampire is captured by the Initiative and provided with a chip in his head, preventing him from hurting humans in any possible way, thus effectively neutering him. Starved from blood and lonely, he turns to the Scoobies for help. Having caused a lot of problems for them in the previous years, he is of course not welcomed with open arms, but the realisation that he cannot hurt humans but can still fight demons makes him useful and he gradually becomes a member of the gang, though of course not like the other ones. The fact that he no longer has the physical ability to hurt humans does not essentially change his evil nature.

This becomes apparent when he is employed by Adam, who wants to weaken the Scoobie Gang by causing mistrust among the Scoobies. Subtly, Spike mentions to everybody exactly

the kind of things they fear others think of them. The episode's title is *The Yoko Factor* and Spike uses this analogy, referring to the fact that everyone blamed Yoko Ono for breaking up the Beatles, where in actual fact the members of the band had just naturally grown apart while being engrossed in their own lives, a similar situation to that of the Scoobies at the moment. Adam's plan works and the Scoobies end up in a big fight, with Buffy storming off to fight Adam on her own. In the next episode, they make up by finally being honest to each other and realising that, despite their lives developing in different ways, they still all really need each other. The thematic that together they can be stronger than on their own is even more emphasized by the fact that they end up fighting and defeating Adam by a group process; the Scoobies perform a magical ritual, where their individual strengths (Willow as spirit, Xander as heart and Giles as mind) are combined in a super-Buffy (the hand) and Adam is defeated.

Whereas normally seasons on Buffy end with the defeat of the Big Bad, in this season a final philosophical episode follows (*Restless*), where the Scoobies end up facing the spirit of the First Slayer in their dreams. They experience scenes from their past, present and future and are all left with confusion about the meaning of what they have seen in relation to what might be still to come in the future. The season ending on such a philosophical note as opposed to with a huge fight as would normally be the case only reinforces the season's function as one of transition; a previous period comes to a close, a new one is about to begin, as the final sentence, in a voice over from Tara, echoes out the season: "*You think you know....what's to come...what you are. You haven't even begun.*"

One more noteworthy event to mention about season 4 is the brief return of Faith. Having woken up from her coma, she finds a video message and gift from her former guardian the Mayor. He has left her a device which makes it possible to switch bodies with a person and she uses this on Buffy. This gives them a unique opportunity to experience what it is like to live each others lives, an important event, especially for Faith. She mocks Buffy's moral commitment to her cause, by repeatedly uttering the words "*because it's wrong*" to her mirror image. She has sex with Riley, but runs away when she feels his real love, something she is not used to and can obviously not deal with. She decides to leave Sunnydale in Buffy's body, which would buy her eternal freedom (being a fugitive from the police in her own body), but when she hears about a group of people in danger of being killed by vampires, she leaves the airport to "do what's right", as Buffy would have done. Buffy, in Faith's body, also comes to the scene and the girls fight, with Faith (in Buffy's body) repeatedly screaming to Buffy (in

Faith's body) that she hates her, making clear that in actual fact it is herself that she hates. The girls are transformed back into themselves and Faith lets herself be guided away by the police, seemingly ready for redemption after this insightful experience. Again, it is the supernatural character of the show (the fact that the girls can actually change bodies) that makes the usable stories so visible.

From the viewpoint of usable stories, the main focus of this season is the portrayal of the way in which people's lives can take different directions, but how this does not necessarily need to be a reason for estrangement between friends. All the Scoobies are exploring the new direction that their lives are taking. At first, this makes it harder for them to feel connected to each other, but when things get rough, they experience that they still have enough common ground to fund their friendship, even if they're not following the same route.

Season 5: Family

Season 4 was mainly concerned with a transition period in the Scoobies' life, exploring new interests and careers and marking a change in their friendship. In season 5, a new aspect of maturity is added, when focusing on the true meaning of family.

All of a sudden, at the beginning of season 5, Buffy turns out to have a younger sister, Dawn, who is treated by the series as if she has always been there and no explanation is given as to why she has not been in the series before. The second episode of the season is told completely from Dawn's perspective. Entitled *The Real Me*, it deals with the recognizable theme of a younger sister feeling always in the shadow of her bigger sister, in this case intensified by the fact that Buffy is indeed very special, being the Slayer.

As it turns out, Dawn is not actually Buffy's sister, but a blob of energy, called the Key. The Key is able to open the portals between all dimensions, thus giving the demon world access to earth, and is therefore heavily sought after by hell god Glory, the Big Bad of the season. Monks that devoted their lives to the protection of the Key have transformed it into the Slayer's sister, altering everyone's memories, knowing that the Slayer would keep her safe. When Dawn finds out, she of course does not know how to deal with this, knowing that she is not actually part of the family, much like an adopted child would feel. Buffy and her mother

make it very clear though, that she really is indeed a part of the family, as they have shared memories and now share the same blood.

Another addition to the Scooby Family in this season is Tara. Being Willow's girlfriend, no one in the group really knows or understands her. She is truly accepted though when Tara's biological family turns up in time for her 19th birthday. The men in the family have always said that the women in the family have demon in them, in an attempt to keep them small. They want to take her away with them, but this is prevented by Buffy and the others who claim Tara to be "family", and will not have her be taken away. This makes clear that the idea of family does not necessarily come from blood ties, it is with those that care about you.

Buffy's role in the family comes to the front when her mother falls ill with a brain tumour. Buffy moves back home to take care of her and of Dawn, the protection of her family becomes her most important task. Despite her obvious grief and worries over her mother's health, she does the best she can.

During this already difficult period, Buffy suffers more heartbreak when Riley decides to leave on a military mission. Not having the supernatural strength Buffy does and with the Initiative been ruined, he feels he cannot live up to her expectations and Buffy fails to convincingly show him that she loves him. This mirrors the fear that modern, self-sufficient young women might have that men cannot deal with strong women.

At first, Buffy's mother recovers. One day though, Buffy comes home to find her mother dead on the couch, having died of a stroke. It is here that the serial nature of the show contributes to the way the show provides usable stories. The end of the previous episode has Buffy declaring to a madly-in-love girl that she doesn't need a relationship at the moment, that she wants to learn "how to be okay with Buffy", a clear step towards maturity. This is heavily contrasted with the next scene, where we see Buffy entering the living room, finding her mother and repeatedly declaring the childish-sounding "Mommy?". Just as Buffy has taken this step towards maturity, her steady base is taken from her. The fact that the show has a serial nature, acquainting viewers with the characters over several years, makes painfully clear how sudden and unexpected a death can be. Seemingly out of the blue, this character that everyone has become so familiar with, is no more. After unsuccessfully having tried to resuscitate her mother, we see Buffy waiting for the paramedics, gazing outside at the beautiful sunshine and the sounds of playing children, clearly unable to believe that the world is actually continuing

to exist despite what has just happened to her, a recognizable thing for people that have experienced a heavy and sudden loss. Apart from no longer having a mother herself, Buffy now needs to take control and be a mother to Dawn, she has to grow up quickly.

One of Buffy's ways to deal with the difficult situation is by embarking into an abusive relationship with neutered vampire Spike. Spike, to his disgust at first, has found out that he is in love with Buffy, who was until then his biggest enemy. When Buffy finds out, she is at first disgusted. However, somehow she finds comfort in him and they share a few very violent sexual encounters. She cannot return his love though, as she admits to him that she is just "using" him.

Xander also puts steps towards becoming more of a family man, as he is in pursuit of his own apartment to move out of his parents' basement. In the episode *The Replacement*, he is hit by the ray of a demon's gun, which splits him in half; for a time, there are two Xanders, one seemingly mature and confident, able to get a promotion at work and impress the real estate agent, the other one goofy and childish, clumsy at everything. The Scoobies at first try to discover which one of the Xanders is good and which is evil, but then find out that they are actually one and the same, one version incorporating all of Xander's strengths, the other one all of his weaknesses. Once again, the supernatural character of the show makes it possible for a character to "step outside" himself and the problem of insecurity while growing up is magnified in this way. Xander is put back into one piece, with now the belief and confidence that he is actually the kind of person that can be successful at a job and can have a nice apartment together with his girlfriend Anya.

A very empowering moment for Buffy takes place in the episode *Checkpoint*. Glory turns out to be the strongest opponent Buffy has ever faced and even though the Scoobie Gang carry out all their usual research, they cannot find any information on her. The members of the Council, that Buffy has previously turned her back on, return to Sunnydale, and offer her information. In exchange for this, however, they set Buffy a test that she must pass to be let in. At first anxious to pass, after a meeting with Glory Buffy realises that the real power lies with her:

BUFFY: See ... I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I've finally figured out why. (looks Travers in the eye) Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them.

Buffy moves back to the table, removing her coat.

BUFFY: Glory ... came to my home today.

GILES: (alarmed) Buffy, are you-

BUFFY: (puts her coat on a chair) Just to talk. (resumes pacing) She told me I'm a bug, I'm a flea, she could squash me in a second. (stops, looks at Travers again) Only she didn't. She came into my home, and we talked. We had what in her warped brain probably passes for a civilized conversation. Why? (pauses) Because she needs something from me. Because I have power over her.

Buffy looks around, hands on her hips. She walks the floor, looking from one Watcher to the next as she talks.

BUFFY: You guys didn't come all the way from England to determine whether or not I was good enough to be let back in. You came to beg me to let you back in. To give your jobs, your lives some semblance of meaning.

.....

BUFFY: You're Watchers. Without a Slayer, you're pretty much just watchin' Masterpiece Theater. You can't stop Glory. You can't do anything with the information you have except maybe publish it in the "Everyone Thinks We're Insane-O's Home Journal." (Pauses, addresses Travers again) So here's how it's gonna work. You're gonna tell me everything you know. Then you're gonna go away. (resumes pacing) You'll contact me if and when you have any further information about Glory. The magic shop will remain open. Mr. Giles will stay here as my official Watcher, reinstated at full salary...

GILES: (coughing) Retroactive.

BUFFY: ...to be paid retroactively from the month he was fired. I will continue my work with the help of my friends...

.....

BUFFY: Now. (addresses the Watchers) You all may be very good at your jobs. The only way we're gonna find out is if you work with me.

The watchers accept her conditions and Buffy has clearly claimed her power. The end of the episode, in good Buffy fashion, slightly undercuts this idea of Buffy in power as she greets the news that Glory is not a demon but a god with an naive and surprised “Oh”.

As the Scoobies find out more about Glory and her enormous power, they are at times discouraged, even more so when they learn that once Glory uses the Key to open the portals between dimensions, only the same blood can close it again. Despite all their efforts to protect Dawn, Glory manages to capture her and open the portals. There seems to be no alternative but Dawn’s death to prevent the destruction that Glory is planning, but Buffy sees the light and decides to make the ultimate sacrifice; as she shares Dawn’s blood, she realises that she

can save the situation by dying herself and chooses to do this, with her last words to Dwan being “*the hardest thing in this world is to live in it*”. The season ends with Buffy’s tombstone, which reads “here lies Buffy Summers. She saved the world. A lot. “

As said, BUFFY’s sixth season usable stories deal mainly with the issue of family, and the self-sacrifice that being part of a family sometimes entails. At a moment in time where Buffy would like to go on with her own life at university, she is forced to go back home to look after her ailing mother and her little sister. When her mother passes away, Buffy does not only lose her parent, but also instantly needs to become one for her sister, which means again having to sacrifice a part of her own personal life and also having to grow up more quickly than she would have liked. In the end, Buffy makes the ultimate sacrifice by giving up her own life, quite literally, to save that of her sister.

Also a clear message is sent that being “family” means more than just having blood ties; Dawn is in fact a blob of energy, and Tara is not related to the Scoobies at all, Still, they are considered to be part of the family, as family to the characters mean the people you are close to, care about and look out for.

Season 6: Life and Death

Season 6 mostly deals with issues of life and death, not in the least place the literal concern of main character Buffy actually being dead, and brought back to life again.

At the start of the season, we see the other characters struggling with the loss of Buffy and the problems they face having to fight vampires and other demons without Buffy’s supernatural powers. Willow, over the seasons having developed into a powerful witch, thinks she has the power to perform a ritual to bring Buffy back to life (which is possible since Buffy didn’t die a natural death). When they perform the ritual, they are disturbed by a group of demons and think they have failed, leaving the scene when Buffy comes back to life inside her coffin, which means she needs to claw her way out of the grave.

So Buffy returns, but she seems very disorientated at first. Willow, expecting gratitude and praise, is reprimanded by Giles for using far too powerful magics that no one can predict the effects of. Willow reacts to this in an uncanny arrogant manner, threatening Giles with her powers and hinting at the first signs that magic seems to become a bit of an addiction for her.

Buffy seems to find herself again and thanks the group for bringing her back from the hell dimension she was in. However, at first only to Spike, she reveals that she was actually in heaven and happy, and resents the fact that her friends have pulled her out and doesn't think she can face the pain and harshness of life again.

In a very special episode, that has the form of a musical, the scene is set for the events of the rest of the season. A demon has come to Sunnydale that causes people to sing and dance as if they are in a musical, which in the end causes them to burn up from the inside. This caused behaviour has the effect that everyone has to speak their minds, and it turns out there is a lot of secrecy between the members of the Scooby Gang. Bringing out these secrets is a painful experience for all the group members, but something that is very much needed. Once again, a supernatural element has the effect of providing viewers with usable stories. Dawn is exposed as a troubled teen, who feels neglected and seeks solace in shoplifting. Giles realises that Buffy still relies on him heavily, which prevents her from growing and taking responsibility for her own life, and he decides to leave Sunnydale. Tara finds out that, even after expressing her concern at the amount of magic she is using, Willow has again used magic to solve a difficult situation she did not want to be faced with. Tara realises she cannot live with an addict and decides to break up with Willow. Xander and Anya, planning on getting married soon, express for the first time the fears and concerns about the marriage that bother them. And, most importantly, Buffy reveals her reluctance to being alive again, deeply hurting Willow and troubling the others, Dawn echoing Buffy's words that "the hardest thing in this world is to live in it".

Buffy keeps having difficulties adjusting back to life, and to make matters worse, money has run out and Buffy is forced to take a job at a fast food restaurant. With all her supernatural strength, it is clear that Buffy doesn't have any social or economic powers in the "real" world. To just be able to "feel" at all, Buffy continues her violent relationship with Spike. He still thinks of it as love though, and Buffy realises she cannot continue it. When he doesn't accept this, he keeps on trying to convince her he loves her with force, almost ending up raping her. He is disgusted by his own behaviour and sets about on a mission to get back his soul.

The marriage between Anya and Xander is supposed to be a positive highlight in a grim period. The night before the wedding however, Xander is troubled (with the help of some of

Anya's old demon friends) by nightmares about what he might become after the wedding. Having grown up in an unhappy family, Xander fears he will turn out as his parents, and leaves Anya at the altar, who is of course heartbroken.

The previous seasons have brought ever stronger Big Bads, that governed season story arcs. There seems to be a breach with this in the sixth season, as the enemies that Buffy needs to face are the Trio, three nerdy guys Buffy used to know at high school, who play with intelligent machinery and a bit of magic, but don't do much more than annoy Buffy. They do however bring about the climax of the season. Angry at Buffy for not being able to defeat her, one of the trio, Warren, goes over to the Summers house to shoot Buffy with a gun. He hits her, but the wound is not deadly. One of the bullets he fires, however, flies upwards and accidentally kills Tara. After a period apart, where Willow has tried to come to terms with the loss of Tara and has accepted that her magic has gone out of control (like a drug addiction), Tara and Willow have just made up. The violent death of her beloved Tara, which cannot be reversed as it was not caused by a supernatural occurrence, sends the not yet fully recovered Willow over the edge. She plunges into dark magic and, stronger than ever, and almost unstoppable, goes out to seek revenge. She tracks down Warren and kills him, thus becoming a murderer. After this death, and not caring about life at all anymore, Willow sets about a more drastic plan of ending the world and everyone in it. No one seems to be able to stop her, when unexpectedly Xander turns up and speaks to her as if she were the old Willow, their friendship dating back to kindergarten. Xander keeps telling Willow he loves her, trying to make her feel like herself again. He is successful and she turns back into herself. The ordeal of almost dying at Willow's hands finally makes Buffy realize that she still wants to be alive in the world, and she tells Dawn that instead of only wanting to protect her, she wants to show her everything there is to life.

Although still within their supernatural living environment, season 6 seems to deal mostly with real-life issues; supernatural activity still must be fought, but Willow is dealing with the very realistic concept of drug addiction (be it magic in her case) and Buffy must come to terms with the harshness of being alive again, in a world where she faces her lack of economic powers and is forced to work a crappy job to ensure security for herself and her sister. A further connection to "real life" is made in the very special, self-reflexive episode *Normal Again*. Buffy is under a spell that makes her believe her whole life is a psychotic episode. We see Buffy in an alternate universe, where she has spent her life from the age she was 15 (the

starting moment of the BUFFY series) in a mental institution. In this version of reality, her mother is still alive and her parents never got divorced. The moment that she found out she was a Slayer was actually the moment she has become sick with this psychosis, believing herself to be a supernatural hero. This version of reality is of course, speaking in wordly terms, a much more feasible explanation for the existence of vampires than the idea of them being actually real, as is comically commented upon by Xander, when Buffy tells her friends about the delusions she is been having: *“Oh, come on, that's ridiculous! What? You think this isn't real just because of all the vampires and demons and ex-vengeance demons and the sister that used to be a big ball of universe-destroying energy?”*

Buffy's psychiatrist in the alternate universe is of the opinion that Buffy has created this parallel universe as a means of comfort, a sort of escapism, something often associated with television. Now that this world isn't so comforting anymore (Buffy is not happy in her life at the moment), she would be willing to leave her delusions and return to the real (asylum) world. Buffy is tempted, as she is unhappy at the moment and would dearly love to have her mother with her again. However, she chooses the hard way, returning back to her Sunnydale world. Apart from a very intelligent and interesting moment of self-reflection of the nature of the show, this could also be seen as a usable story. Many people create a world in their head to escape to, when unhappy in their own lives. This is an understandable, legitimate thing to do, but it is important to know which world is the real one and not to walk away from one's responsibilities. The self-reflexive aspect of this episode also provides a usable story; questions are being raised about the reality of the world, and to what extent we can trust our perception of the world around us. These perceptions can differ quite substantially from what is really going on and one should be aware of this.

Season 7: Choices

The final season of Buffy concerns itself with choices. As BUFFY's world grows ever darker and more serious, the characters need to figure out where their loyalties lie, and what they are willing to give up and chance, in order to be able to defeat the ultimate evil.

Willow has been recovering from her magic addiction at a convent in England. She has to make the choice to return to Sunnydale in the hope to now be able to control her power without becoming dangerous again. She tries hard, and seems fairly in control, although she has the odd relapse, showing that the dark power is still within her.

Anya is another person confronted with a choice. After the immense grief of being left at the altar, Anya has chosen to become a vengeance demon once more. The memories of being human still close, she does not seem to enjoy it as much as she used to though. In the episode *Selfless*, the viewers learn more about Anya and how her identity was shaped. Starting out as the wife of a slightly rude Viking who cheats on her, she turns him into a troll. Her talent for vengeance becomes apparent and she is invited to join the vengeance demons. She enjoys many years of vengeance, specialising in the subject of wronged women until she finally loses her amulet at Sunnydale, turning her back to mortality. In a flashback to the musical episode of the sixth season, Anya is shown singing about her delight of becoming Mrs. Xander Harris soon. Now, after all this has gone wrong and she has killed as a demon once more, Buffy is faced with an important choice: she has to kill Anya, their former friend. Xander is appalled by this prospect, accusing Buffy of using double standards about who she decides to kill. This leads to an emotional speech by Buffy about the difficulties of the Slayer duty:

Xander: No, of course not. You think we haven't seen all this before? The part where you just cut us all out. Just step away from everything human and act like you're the law. If you knew what I felt—

Buffy: I killed Angel! Do you even remember that? I would have given up everything I had to be with— I loved him more than I will ever love anything in this life. And I put a sword through his heart because I had to.

Willow: And that all worked out OK.

Buffy: Do you remember cheering me on? Both of you. Do you remember giving me Willow's message: Kick his ass.

Willow: I never said that—

Xander: This is different—

Buffy: It is always different! It's always complicated. And at some point, someone has to draw the line, and that is always going to be me. You get down on me for cutting myself off, but in the end the slayer is always cut off. There's no mystical guidebook. No all-knowing council. Human rules don't apply. There's only me. I am the law.

Buffy goes out to kill Anya, but doesn't have to as Anya decides to take her wish back, returning the lives of those she has killed. For this, though, she has to sacrifice the life of her longtime best friend, Halfrek, another vengeance demon. After this, for the first time, Anya tries to find out who she really is, as she stops Xander trying to comfort her:

Xander: Anya, wait.

Anya: Xander, please. Just go away.

Xander: Whatever's between us—it doesn't matter. You shouldn't be alone in this.

Anya: Yes, I should. My whole life, I've just clung to whatever came along.

Xander: Well, speaking as a clingee— I kinda didn't mind.

Anya: Thanks. For everything.

Xander nods, realizing that this is her rejecting his offer to help.

Anya: Xander— what if I'm really nobody?

Xander: Don't be a dope.

Anya: I'm a dope?

Xander: Sometimes.

Anya: That's a start.

Again, a valuable usable story is dispended; it is important to find out one's own true identity, not linked to other people.

Spike has also made his choice; he has successfully won back his soul, which has left him very troubled and confused, as he has to now face the pain of all the atrocities he has committed. He does however slowly win Buffy's love.

The final season sees the Scoobies confronted with the ultimate enemy: the First Evil, a non-corporeal entity from which all evil originates and that is planning on destroying the entire line of the Slayers. The Watchers' Council in London is destroyed and the First with its helpers sets out to kill all the remaining potentials in the world. Potentials are girls that have the innate ability to become a Slayer, if needed. By killing all these girls, and finally Buffy herself, the First could succeed in killing off the Slayer Line, thus clearing the way for evil to take over the world. To prevent this, the Scoobies gather all the remaining potentials to them, to protect them and to train them for the upcoming battle against the army the First is building.

For a brief moment, it seems that Dawn might be one of the potentials, but when it turns out she isn't, she is quick to give credit to the girl who is. Xander, however notices that Dawn enjoyed her one little moment in the spotlight, as he knows what it feels like to be a "normal" human being in a group that consists of members with many supernatural powers, and he comforts Dawn with the following words:

Dawn: (looking over her shoulder, to Xander) What's up?

Xander: (walks into the room) Aw, I'm just thinking about the girls. It's a harsh gig, being a potential. Just being picked out of a crowd, danger, destiny, (grins) plus if you act now, death.

Dawn: They can handle it.

Xander: Yeah. (sits in a chair in front of the desk) They're special, no doubt. The amazing thing is, not one of them will ever know, not even Buffy.

Dawn: Know what?

Xander: How much harder it is for the rest of us.

Dawn: No way. They've got—

Xander: Seven years, Dawn. Working with the slayer. Seeing my friends get more and more powerful. A witch. A demon. Hell, I could fit Oz in my shaving kit, but come a full moon, he had a wolfy mojo not to be messed with. Powerful. All of them. And I'm the guy who fixes the windows.

Dawn: Well, you had that sexy army training for a while, and—and the windows really did need fixing.

Xander: I saw what you did last night.

Dawn: Yeah, I— (shakes her head embarrassed) I guess I kinda lost my head when I thought I was the slayer.

Xander: You thought you were all special. Miss Sunnydale 2003. And the minute you found out you weren't, you handed the crown to Amanda without a moment's pause. You gave her your power.

Dawn: (shrugs) The power wasn't mine.

Xander: They'll never know how tough it is, Dawnie, to be the one who isn't chosen. To live so near to the spotlight and never step in it. But I know. I see more than anybody realizes because nobody's watching me. I saw you last night. I see you working here today. You're not special. You're extraordinary. (stands, kisses her forehead, stands to walk out of the room)

In this scene, the show offers a powerful message that every person has his/her worth, no matter how insignificant one might feel at times.

Buffy trains the potentials and leads the whole group in an authoritative manner. This is not always appreciated by the others and it comes to a point where they take a vote and decide against Buffy's leadership, which up till now had always been a given. They choose returned and redeemed Faith as their new leader. She however accidentally leads them into a trap, which causes quite a few of them to die, and this event makes the group understand why Buffy had to be so firm, and they happily accept her back as leader. Together, Buffy and Faith contemplate about one of the main themes of the series, in typical Buffy fashion:

Faith: OK. The point. Me, by myself all the time. I'm looking at you, everything you have, and, I don't know, jealous. Then there I am. Everybody's looking to me, trusting me to lead them, and I've never felt so alone in my entire life.

Buffy: Yeah. (swallows, looks down)

Faith: And that's you every day, isn't it?

Buffy: I love my friends. I'm very grateful for them. But that's the price. Being a slayer.

Faith: There's only supposed to be one. Maybe that's why you and I can never get along. We're not supposed to exist together.

Buffy: Also, you went evil and were killing people.

Faith: Good point. Also a factor. (nods)

Buffy: But you're right. I mean, I... I guess everyone's alone. But being a slayer? There's a burden we can't share.

Faith: And no one else can feel it. (beat) Thank God we're hot chicks with superpowers.

Buffy: Takes the edge off.

Faith: Comforting.

Buffy: Mm-hmm.

Again, Buffy's feeling of loneliness is made into an issue, and thus into a usable story. No matter how much she loves her friends, and how important they are for her and her work as a

Slayer, there are certain things she can't share with them. There are certain things in life a person must face alone.

During the course of the season, Buffy has learned more about the origin of the Slayers. They have come into being by a violation of a group of women by some men, wanting to use them to fight evil, the Shadow Men. On her search, Buffy also meets the last remaining Guardian, an ancient woman who hands her a scythe with special powers. Buffy uses this weapon to make her final and most important choice: With the help of Willow's magic, she wants to use the essence of the scythe to change "the rules of the game". In the future, every girl that *can* be a Slayer, *will* be a Slayer, if they choose the strength that lies within them. Willow's magic works, and Buffy, Willow, and all the potentials turned Slayers, successfully fight and conquer the First Evil's army. Anya and Spike are killed in the fight, but in the concluding moments of the series, the others reflect back on what they have just achieved and realise that Buffy isn't "the only one" anymore, something that puts a very big smile on Buffy's face. Her loneliness is finally resolved.

During the years, a lot has been said and written about the feminist empowerment potential of the series *BUFFY*, and the resolution of the series could certainly be seen as an example of this; female leader Buffy, together with female witch Willow, change the course of events that was originally laid out by men, after an act of violation towards women.

It is hard to not see Buffy as an empowering role model for women and girls watching the show; she is a seemingly small girl, but one with enormous powers, able to stand her own ground and gaining a lot of self-confidence from it. There has been a lot of critique also, however, on the show's portrayal of womanhood. Buffy, despite her supernatural strengths, is very pretty and fashion-conscious, and at important moments sometimes seems to care more about her hair than the impending doom. Even if this is brought in a light-hearted manner and in total congruence with the series' humorous tone, this has been grounds for some for dismissing the series' feminist potential. Also, it has often been remarked that, despite all the strong female characters on the show, especially Buffy seems to look for validation in male figures, like Giles and her boyfriends. Having noticed these points of critique, I find it hard to imagine that *BUFFY* will not send an empowering message to girls and women that watch the show and I think that its female/ feminist empowerment message is one of the main themes of the show.

Another encompassing theme to me seems to be the loneliness that Buffy is faced with, easily mirrored in how many teens feel lonely during their growing up. This theme of Buffy always having to stand alone is beautifully resolved in the series' closure; she is not the only one anymore.

In the series' final season, everyone works together towards achieving the main objective: defeating the ultimate evil, in which they are successful. In terms of usable stories, there seems to be a strong reference to the idea of the American Dream; everything is possible as long as you work hard for it. During all the long seasons, Buffy and the people around her have fought the evil they were confronted with, and by persevering they have managed to make an actual change in the world for the better; by the higher number of Slayers that will be in the world from now on, evil will become much easier to fight. An aspect that is added to the idea of the American Dream by BUFFY is, in my opinion, the importance of friendship and community. Evil is defeated, but only by everyone working together on the same mission. As soon as characters are shut out, things take a turn for the worse. Even Spike, a character that started out evil, has one of the most important roles in the final fight; his redemption has been successful. Making mistakes earlier on in life clearly does not prevent someone from being able to fulfill a useful role in the world later on.

As seen, there is a tension field in the thematics of loneliness and community on Buffy; Buffy ultimately feels alone in carrying the burden of being the one Slayer, however, the community of people around her is pivotal to her ultimate success. The lesson to be learned is that, no matter how much responsibility you have to carry in life, this task is made easier and possible by a strong group of support around you.

Usable stories?

What I have hoped to demonstrate with this extensive analysis is that the series BUFFY is a prime example of what Fiske has called a producerly text, as I have described earlier on. The show uses familiar narrative techniques, making it accessible to a large group of viewers; however, being a series, the show has a much more open nature than the sort of closed narratives that are found in feature length fiction films and invites viewers to use the text in a productive way. Thinking back to Fiske's argument that television is centrally concerned with the representation of people, making it an excellent medium for identification, it is clear to see that this is the case in BUFFY. The show focuses continuously on portraying the characters,

following their development and growth over the 7-year span of the series, with a strong emphasis on emotion. Obviously, *BUFFY* can function as a way of “working through” situations and emotions we might also experience in our own lives, a concept coined by Ellis.

Mephram sees the material effectiveness of television in the provision of usable stories. These stories, that help us make sense of the world that is full of options, are clearly present in *BUFFY*. As said, a big emphasis lies on the portrayal of characters, their emotions and their relations with each other. Characters are always shown to be diverse, complex characters, and good and evil are never clear-cut. This could help people in finding ways of dealing with people in their own environment, helping them with the formation of their own identity and creating a sense of social self-understanding.

The characters on *BUFFY* often deal with major life issues. Important choices are to be made and all the difficulties of growing up and taking responsibility are shown in the series. This is a good way of providing usable stories for the viewers; answers to questions that invariably spring up through their own lives: How do I deal with my parents? What happens if my first sexual partner has a lot more experience than I do? How do I survive high school? Will I be able to make the transition to college? Can I take care of a family? Will I make the right choice when faced with a difficult situation? Can I be a valuable person to the world, even if I’m an outsider? These questions are not only addressed in certain, singled out episodes, but are present all throughout the series’ narrative.

The characters are not saints; sometimes their choices have very seriously bad consequences. The diversity of topics gives a complete and not overly simplified picture of the world, which could be seen as “Truth” telling, in the way that Mephram has described this. *BUFFY* has an enormous density of meanings, and this gives viewers the feel of it being an all encompassing world. The supernatural character of the show often helps in making the difficulty of life choices visible; by literally embodying recognizable problems, the “monsters” of teen life, high school as “hell”, these problems are magnified and the life issues become even clearer. Although *BUFFY* often deals with very serious life issues, it usually does this with a lot of humour and a light undertone. Besides making the series more realistic (humour is a good defence mechanism in real life as well), it makes watching the show more enjoyable, which makes it inviting and accessible, as a producerly text according to Fiske should be.

The content analysis of *BUFFY* has shown that this series has potential of being a provider of usable stories, because of its open nature, emphasis on character and emotion, its seriality, the

choice of topics and the light undertone. But how do actual viewers engage with the series? That will be the topic under investigation in the next chapter.

3. Forum Analysis

In the previous chapter, I have made an interpretation of how I think the series *BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* provides usable stories for its viewers. In this chapter, I will try and look for evidence that actual viewers of the series do indeed use the series for this means. To achieve this goal, I will look at forum discussions held by fans of the series on the discussion forum of the website www.buffyworld.com. Before turning my attention to the actual discussions, I will first give a brief overview of the contents of the website, which offers a vast amount of material.

[Www.Buffyworld.com](http://www.Buffyworld.com) is the biggest Buffy-related community to be found on the internet. Even though both the main featured series on this site, *BUFFY* and *ANGEL*, have finished several years ago, this site remains a very active community until today, with many posts contributed to forum discussions every day.²⁵

The site presents itself as “A complete guide to all of the Buffy The Vampire Slayer and Angel episodes”. Indeed, detailed information about all these episodes, including trailers, summaries, transcripts and user comments on all episodes is to be found. However, the site does much more than this. It provides a serious, well-monitored and inviting community for fans to interact with other fans but also to interact with the textual material that the show *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (and to a lesser extent *ANGEL* and a few other shows) has provided. The site has no official ties to the producers of *BUFFY* and related shows, which is clearly stated.

What stands out immediately is that the developers of the website take the whole “Buffyworld” very seriously; there are many different sections, dedicated to all seasons of Buffy, fan art, fan fiction, Buffy books, Buffy DVD’s and an entire section dedicated to specific Buffy-language (Slanguage), which demonstrates the richness and specificity of the Buffyworld.

²⁵ The very popular *BUFFY*-character Angel, portrayed by equally popular actor David Boreanaz, has been used for a spin-off show of the same name. The show enjoyed reasonable succes, although not coming near to that of *BUFFY*. The show was written and produced by predominantly the same people as also worked for *BUFFY*, and a lot of the *BUFFY*-characters reappeared on *ANGEL*. Originally also intended for 7 seasons, Warner Brothers decided to end the show in 2004, making that year’s fifth season its last.

The most important section on the website is the Discussion Forum. A seemingly endless amount of discussion threads can be found on many diverse topics. No longer active threads are still accessible through archives. The forum is obviously very well-organised and closely-monitored; most sections start off with a “sticky topic”, informing the users of the specific rules for the concerning section and reminding them that repeating disregard of these guidelines will have consequences. The forum is divided into 4 sub-categories, namely Jossverse, Other shows, Interactive, and Other Stuff. I will go a bit deeper now into these different categories.

Jossverse

This is the section dedicated to discussion about all the series written by BUFFY creator Joss Whedon. Further categorisation has split up into General Jossverse discussion, Buffy, Angel, Firefly, Clubs and Ships, Ask the experts and Outside the shows. Threads in the General Jossverse discussion, Buffy and Angel sections range an enormous amount of subjects. It is this section that I will go into in more detail later on in this chapter.

Clubs and ships is an interesting section as well. It provides people with a place to form clubs to exclusively discuss a specific character or relationship on the show, and really go deep into this specific subject. Belonging to a club suggests workings of in- and exclusion, one of the characteristics of cultural citizenship as described by Joke Hermes, to which I will return later.

When in doubt about the meaning of a particular part of the show, one can turn to the section “Ask the experts”. Who exactly the expert is seems to be self-regulated; whoever *feels* to be an expert on a certain subject answers the question, which then can be criticised again by other people who might not agree with this expert answer.

“Outside the shows” refers to anything related to the Jossverse that is not directly linked to the actual textual content. This section mainly consists of discussions on the cast members, but also features threads about the use of Buffy-language in everyday speech, links to YouTube videos and even requests for pen pals.

Other shows

I will not go into describing the content of these sections in detail. However, I think it is interesting to note that the fact that other shows are included in this forum suggests a feeling of community among the posters. The fact that a few shows can be selected to be included in this section when there are millions of TV shows to choose from to me suggests the fact that these shows seem to be to the general taste of all the community members, which could provide a deeper sense of belonging to this shared community. However, in comparison to the Jossverse and Interactive sections, this section is tiny and obviously of less importance.

Interactive

This section consists of the subcategories Fan Art, Fan Fiction and Buffy and Angel Forum Games. The Fan Art section provides, apart from regular threads where fan art is posted, sticky topics with challenges, battles and tutorials, again enhancing the sense of the website of being a real community, a real “world in itself”.

The Fan Fiction section is very large and diverse. There are again several subcategories. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between Fan Fiction “for fun” and a part of the site called “The Written”, which is a more competitive place. In “The Written”, people can post stories to go up for “Fanfic of the Month”. By posting in this section, people submit their stories to a priorly established panel, who judge all contributions and select the winner for this monthly honour, which then will be posted on the opening page of Buffyworld.com.

In the Fan Fiction sections that are just “for fun”, there are also many different subsections to choose from; there is fan fic related to the BuffyVerse, related to other shows, one can enter into a challenge, there is an interactive section where fans can create fan fiction and there is a section dedicated to virtual seasons, where entire new Buffy Seasons (up to season 9) have been written. To minimise spamming and leave threads “readable”, the moderators have opted for a system where only the thread starter, so the author, can post in this thread. This means other community members cannot directly post their comments. However, when an author has contributed with 5 or more stories, he or she receives a feedback thread where comments on the fan fics can be posted. This is however not the most practical means of relating the comments to the specific story which does not really help the interactive nature of this forum, which is commented on negatively by some members.

Content-wise, there is a lot to choose from. Apart from the entire virtual seasons, something that seems to come up a lot is the exploration of the relationships between characters that didn't have a relationship in the actual show, whether romantically or not. There always seems to remain a lot of respect for the characters as they were intended by the producers (even though their actions in the fan fics could maybe never have happened on the actual show), and this is for example seen in many comments referring to the fact that fan fic authors have stayed "true" to the characters, which seems always to be interpreted as a good thing.

Other Stuff

The last section consists of a welcome topic, where new members can introduce themselves, a section for posting comments about the site to the moderators, and a FAQ where again clearly all the rules of being a part of the Buffyworld are explained, in sometimes almost threatening words. This threatening aspect has clearly been noticed by the moderators, who then playfully add:

Have fun. I promise we aren't as scary as we seem. BW is a great community to share your passions and obsessions with others like you. But as with most things in life, there are rules.

With this comment from the moderators, I think we touch very clearly upon the fact that this site can in my opinion be seen as a very good example of what Joke Hermes has called "cultural citizenship". She defines this as "*the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture*". Looking at this definition, all characteristics of Buffyworld seem to contribute to this sense of cultural citizenship. Rules are clearly defined, but these rules tend to be there to make Buffyworld an inviting and accessible site, by minimising spamming, controlling the vast amount of material submitted everyday and very strict monitoring to prevent any kind of discrimination or bullying of forum members towards each other. Buffyworld thus becomes a place where people can feel a sense of belonging, the feeling of a shared community with people with similar tastes, beliefs and interests. A place for appropriating the materials everybody loves so dearly in an environment where one feels confident that this appropriation will always take place in an open and respectful manner.

I will now go into the specific content of the discussion threads on the Jossverse. It is in this part that people discuss the show **BUFFY** with each other, and I thus think this is the place where evidence of people using the **BUFFY** material as provider of usable stories can be found.

Content of the discussion threads

As said, there is an enormous diversity of topics that people discuss in this part of the forum. Something that immediately caught my attention was a thread that seemed to apply exactly to the theoretical concept of usable stories that is the subject of this thesis. One of the members of the forum had started the following thread:

Jossverse as a Remedy

*With the ingenuity that Joss has injected into his wonderful shows: **Buffy**, **Angel** and **Firefly** (not to forget **Serenity**); we are able to watch these shows in so many different ways. Each time we watch them, we are able to view it with fresh eyes and in new lights; provoking new thoughts and ideas. The shows can be deconstructed and analyzed on so many levels, due to its wonderful complexity. That's what makes the Jossverse so interesting.*

This poster refers to the complexity of the world created by **BUFFY**, and the many ways in which the series can be watched. He goes on:

If there's one reason why I like the Jossverse so much, is its ability to serve as a remedy of sorts. When I am experiencing an emotion that I am unable to be free from or to understand; I turn to the Jossverse. Why? Because the idea of the story, the themes, the words, the plot and everything else are so inspiring.

The poster now refers to the **BUFFY** text in the exact way that Mepham has described the concept of usable stories; the poster uses themes and portrayals of characters and situations he sees on **Buffy** for inspiration in his or her own life. Again, the poster goes on:

*Another example would be **Buffy S3 "Anne"**. Sometimes I doubt myself. I doubt who I am and get tired of what I have to do. There are times, like **Buffy**, that I just want to run away from it all. But what you are in inside you, it's inherent. And no matter how far you run, you'll still be you; and you are that person for a reason. And that is because no-one else can be. **Buffy** realizes this when everyone is submitting to being a slave and she stands up and remembers herself again. And it inspiring how one finds themselves again.*

Here, the poster gives an example of how this usable stories provision functions practically by giving an example of how he uses a specific episode in his own life. He finishes:

So my point is, has anyone felt this way (and I'm sure there are)? That is, you watch an episode to remedy yourself of an emotion. What are the episodes that inspired you? What are the reasons, words or speeches? Or maybe there is an episode that could be a remedy for future reference? Share your experience(s), thoughts and ideas.

This poster on the forum very explicitly talks about BUFFY as a provider of usable stories, the subject matter for him being a way of “working through”, as John Ellis would call it, situations and emotions experienced in everyday life.

The other members of the forum reacted very positively to this post, calling it a “great topic”. Many of them also talked about the way the series provides examples of ways of dealing with everyday life situations, like for example:

I do feel connected to this show as well. I do watch a lot of earlier seasons when I doubt myself, when I feel like I'll never be able to do what I have to. Giles/Buffy scenes always push me forward, helping me in assuming my role in my work. I often feel about my job as a parallel to Buffy's duty as a Slayer. It's a way to boost my motivation

This poster uses the portrayal of the relationship between Buffy and Giles in dealing with situations that he experiences in his everyday life work situation. It is clear that the fact that the relationship that Buffy and Giles share is one that would be non-existent in real life (in real life there are no watchers or slayers) does not affect its recognizability and its function as a usable story.

Using the show as a “remedy” does not only mean that people use the series’ content in their own lives. In the same topic, people also talk about the comfort that the show BUFFY brings them. When they are feeling sad, they will watch a funny episode to make them laugh, or will actually watch a sad episode just to have a good cry and feel better. From the way people talk about their relationship with the series, it is clear that people seem to see the show as a “friend”; for example, they talk about the nostalgia they feel when they again watch the first episode of BUFFY that they ever saw. They experience it like the memory of the first meeting of a good friend.

Mostly, people ascribe BUFFY’s power of remedy to the fact that the show encompasses so many and diverse themes, making it feel very real and easy to relate to their own lives. Most of all, they take the show very seriously:

Absolutely. There are many instances where I'll watch an episode when I'm in a particular mood. As for remedying myself of an emotion, I think The Body has been very soul-cleansing for me. When someone I am close to passes away, I have made a habit of watching this episode; it helps me vent and come to terms with the oft-senselessness of death. The Jossverse extends beyond television, as has often been said, it reaches out and touches you (I apologize for the corniness).

This poster expresses that he/she uses the story provided by BUFFY, the way to deal with a death, directly to deal with this situation in real life. For this poster, it seems to be important that the series deals with major life issues, something that also came out of the content analysis.

The topic I just described refers quite literally to the subject of usable stories. But also the other topics demonstrate how seriously viewers take BUFFY. Many topics are about specific episodes and characters. Discussions in these threads are usually characterised through a serious tone and very well thought-out arguments. It is clear that the posters treat the existing media-texts with a lot of respect as they are important to them. There generally seems to be a lot of respect for the creators of the show and often the “producer-intended” meaning is the one that posters try to discern and what people are discussing over. When people are asked about what their favorite episode is, they usually pick key episodes with important events and strong emotions. This demonstrates that these viewers don't (mainly) watch BUFFY for the funny jokes or the cute actors, but are most interested in what the show has to say about important situations and experiences in life that people can relate to.

Another interesting group of threads is the ones where people are asked what their favorite character is and why. In defending their choice, people sometimes refer to the way in which they can identify themselves with the character. The most common reason that is given though, is the fact they think it is a beautiful character because of its depth of personality and its growth throughout the series. This again shows the seriousness with which people approach the series; they prefer the characters that are well thought-out and are recognizable, they don't necessarily go for the funniest or cutest one. It is more important that the characters are recognizable, so that people can learn from for example the way a character is dealing with a certain situation. When faced with a similar situation or choice in their own lives, they may be able to think back to the way the character dealt with this situation in the show and this can help them with their own decision. Most viewers of Buffy are teenagers, like the main characters on the show. They're in an age where they are struggling with finding out their

own personality and individuality, and relating themselves to the characters portrayed on the show can help them with finding out what is important in their own lives. Many teenagers are, or feel like, outsiders in high school. Buffy and her friends are all outsiders, but still lead a fulfilling and meaningful life. This can provide a source of comfort for the viewers. What is interesting is that characters are not “adored” by fans. A lot of character flaws are commented upon, but almost always followed by comments like “*that’s what makes her human*”, “*that’s what makes it so realistic*” , or “*that is what makes it such a good show*”. People appreciate the fact that the heroes are not portrayed without their faults; it makes them easier to relate to and it tells them it is okay to be flawed, that does not mean you can’t be a good person or even a hero.

Another interesting thread to mention is one entitled “*Poll: But you’re just a girl: the feminist thread*”. Located in the subsection “Digging into the classics: Buffy discussions that never die”, this is a thread started in 2003 and recently re-opened that discusses the role of Buffy as a feminist role model. Initially modelled as a poll on whether or not one would want their daughter to be like Buffy, many interesting comments are being made about the feminist potential of BUFFY and other related shows. Some posters are positive about the message Buffy is sending out: a strong, independent young woman who can take care of herself. But also many others are critical; they comment on Buffy’s obsession with fashion and on the way that, in the series, Buffy seems to rely heavily on men in moments of doubt when she needs guidance. The serious tone of discussion and the wide variety of replies clearly show how seriously the role of a series like Buffy with regard to society is taken and demonstrates the democratic potential that numerous theorists, like for example John Fiske and Joke Hermes have attributed to popular culture, namely of being a site that can be seen as a sort of “political battleground”, where existing and dominant ideologies about for example issues like gender and ethnicity can be challenged and negotiated.

The forum of www.buffyworld.com has approximately 500 members, many of whom are regular posters, about 20.000 threads and up to today almost 800.000 posts. Due to its enormity, I cannot go into detail into everything that has been posted throughout the years. I have only touched briefly upon some of the issues being raised on the boards, but I have hopefully demonstrated the ways in which BUFFY’s viewers actively engage with the material provided by the show. Of course there are random threads about for example the cuteness of the actors, but mostly people are interested in the more serious subjects. People talk at length

about the meaning of the show, clearly demonstrating that this show has a lot of meaning to them and plays a role in their lives. How big a role will of course vary from person to person, but the attention given to discussions about true meaning of characters and episodes shows that people take the meanings very seriously. At some points, as I have shown, they refer literally to the way in which BUFFY serves as a remedy for issues going on in their own lives, clearly echoing Ellis' concept of working through and Merpham's idea of usable stories.

Important issues that stood out for me after the content analysis have shown up again in this closer look at the forum discussions. People really appreciate the way that the characters are portrayed and the ways in which this makes it easy to relate to. Because the characters are "human", they can relate what they are going through to their own lives and can forgive themselves for mistakes, and get inspiration to try and do better. It is also important to most viewers that major life issues are portrayed. People use episodes dealing with death in finding ways of actually dealing with this situation in real life.

What I have found interesting is the way in which people talk about the show as a good friend. Apart from the actual contents, people see the show as a friend, a source of comfort to turn to at difficult moments, a companion that is always there.

I will be ending now on an interesting note. When returning to the forum after this previous analysis was written, in search for more examples of the point I have been trying to make, I discovered that at the beginning of July, the site www.buffyworld.com had ceased to exist. The main moderator had been neglecting the site, and had not made sure of paying his fees, at which moment the site was taken out of the air. The site is now online again, and an ardent fan is building up the site anew, already putting all the episode summaries and transcripts back on, proving that the website is still very relevant to fans. To my disappointment, I could not find a link to a discussion forum, thereby cutting me off from my research material (and also the names of the posters from whom I have taken the quotes). After a long internet search however, I found the place where the active members of the Buffyworld community have set up a new base. The community was obviously too important for them to be missed, and within days of the old website going down, a new forum was created at www.buffyforums.net, a recently set-up forum that welcomed the Buffyworld.com forum members with open arms. Although all the old material seems to be lost, the moderators have copied the way the forum was organised and actively invite all the old posters at

buffyworld.com to join and carry on in the same manner. Already new threads are started in all the different sections and topics, the community is still as active as it ever was.

A striking example of the importance of the forum (and the series BUFFY) for its fans was given in the Welcome topic:

Hey all, it's good to be back.

When I heard from Maria about what went down with BuffyWorld, I felt like I lost something very dear to me. Granted, I never posted all that much (due to procrastination, laziness and the absence of an Internet connection at home), but I read a lot of posts and the whole place made me feel like there was someplace I belonged where everybody understood the language I was speaking. So, it's good to have a place to go to again.

So I guess I have to do this again:

Well, I'm Hazlin and I hail from Malaysia. And I don't blame you if you don't know where that is cos I get it all the time. I'm 21 and have been watching Buffy since I was 11. On our tv, we got Buffy a year late; so when you guys were watching season 5, I only got season 4. But no matter, cos I always had the Net to keep me updated.

The Jossverse for me is like having my life defined when I have lost the words to do so. I feel like besides it being a source of great entertainment, it also helps me put a lot of things into focus and understand things I would never have. I've learned a lot from it and I believe I am a better person after being part of this 'verse.

As of yet, I have never met another fan here in Malaysia. Not anyone who watches Buffy/Angel the way we would anyway. Some of them are just people who watch it every now and then for the fun of it but never get it. So it's been hard not having anyone to talk Joss with. But I met Maria on BuffyWorld, and it's great that we're in the same region, so we get together sometimes and we have a great time discussing the Jossverse.

So again, it's good to be back. I feel like I've found a home again. Yay, can't wait to post.

Joss is Boss.

To this Malaysian girl, BUFFY, and the opportunity to share this series with like-minded individuals, is obviously very important. The comments she makes touch exactly upon BUFFY's function as a provider of usable stories; it helps her "put a lot of things into focus and understand things I would never have", and she even thinks she is a "better person" because of it. She also greatly enjoys being in a place where people "understand it in the same way she does". I can't think of better proof of the reality of the mechanisms of usable stories and cultural citizenship.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have taken a look at the working of the mechanism of usable stories in products of popular culture, using the series *BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* as a case study.

I have started off giving a brief overview of the theoretical background concerning this matter. From being regarded as a medium catering to the largest denominator, turning audiences into cultural dupes, more positive attention was given to the medium of television by the theorists from the Cultural Studies Movement. Using semiotics, they expressed the idea that the true meaning of any mediated message only comes into being at the moment of consumption, of “reading”, which means that the consumer can use the mediated message in a way that is useful for this purpose. John Fiske talked about the idea of a “producerly text”, a text that provides openness for its viewers without using altogether unfamiliar discourse, making the content accessible to large groups. Ellis proposed the idea of using television content as a way of “working through” anxieties people might have in their lives. John Mepham coined the concept of usable stories. He saw as a defining quality factor of a television programme the way it was able to provide usable stories for its audience. In this way, he gave a way of analysing the material effectiveness of popular television.

To investigate the usefulness of the concept of usable stories in analysing the workings of a popular television series, I chose the series *BUFFY*. In the analysis I made, it became clear that this series offers many usable stories to its viewers. Many recognizable themes are being used in the series, mostly related to the issue of growing up. Issues like parents, drugs, loneliness and love are being addressed, not only in certain, singled-out episodes but all through the series’ narrative. Although the series deals with a supernatural subject, it can be said that the supernatural elements of the show function as metaphors for the underlying real-life issues. Not being constricted to what is possible in “reality”, the issues can even be magnified, actually making the usable stories even more visible. Apart from the subject matter, *BUFFY* also offers people a way of making sense of the world in that it is a series with a serial character, spanning over several seasons and thus years, allowing viewers to really become acquainted with the characters and watching their growth. Seeing these well-rounded characters develop through the course of the series makes it easy for viewers to identify themselves with the characters and relating their problems and choices to events taking place in their own lives. Summarizing, one could say that the series’ portrayal of character

development, its topic choice of major life issues and the openness provided by a serial, televisual text gives the series its potential for being a provider of usable stories.

When taking a look at the internet forum, this potential for the provision of usable stories that I found in my analysis was confirmed in the discussions taking place between posters on the forum. Even though the series has ended in 2003, the forum still remains very active until today, which proves that its content is still very relevant to these viewers. Characters and episodes are discussed in a very serious way, which shows that the content of the show is important to the viewers. More importantly for the subject of this thesis, many posters relate the content of BUFFY to their own lives. They find comfort in watching the series, turn to certain episodes for advice and comfort, and identify themselves with the characters on the show. They describe this as a positive experience, helping them out with important decisions in their lives. From this, it is clear to me that the provision of usable stories is a very important aspect to these posters for watching the show. Again, the character portrayal and the topic choice stand out as the way in which the mechanism of usable stories works. An interesting find was the fact that many posters saw watching BUFFY as having a good friend; the comfort the series brings them is not only related to the actual content or the portrayed characters, but also to the way that the fact the series BUFFY exists creates comfort for them.

I have mentioned Joke Hermes' idea of popular culture as a way of creating cultural citizenship. To her, the material effectiveness of popular culture lies in the way it offers us a feeling of belonging. I think this idea is clearly visible in the way these viewers of BUFFY find each other on the internet. They find usable stories in the series and come together with like-minded souls online to discuss this phenomenon. In sharing their experiences, they find a feeling of belonging and making sense of the world around them that they might not find in their direct day-to-day environment. In this way, popular culture can play a very important role in the lives of these young people. In a world, where they are bombarded with information and choices, during a time when they are changing and are often insecure about who they are, the watching of the series BUFFY and the possibility of sharing these experiences with other people online, serves as a very useful way of making sense of the world.

BUFFY concerns itself with quite a specific group, namely that of mostly white, US-American highschool teens. It is to this group that the content of the series will be most recognizable and

appeal the most. It could be said there is a danger in this, namely that of marginalising groups that do not fall into this category and thus showing viewers an incomplete picture of the world. However, this does not take anything away from BUFFY's usefulness as a series that provides usable stories. Mepham did mention the element of truth-telling, meaning that a text should not be oversimplified, leaving out important elements of society. However, in my opinion, this mechanism does not dictate that a full picture of the world, catering to every possible group in society should be given. Different groups will take their usable stories from different shows, and within BUFFY's high school world, a quite complete picture of this particular world is given, without oversimplification. Furthermore, thinking back to the idea that meaning is only created when a message is consumed, it is probable the very general themes of BUFFY can appeal to a wide range of different viewers. As BUFFY's creator, Joss Whedon would say: "Bring your own subtext".

When looking at theories that try to defend popular culture, I have noticed a division into two groups. There are people, like for example Fiske and Ellis, that emphasize the way in which viewers make their own meanings from texts, rendering every possible television text into a possibly positive one. Also, there are people that try to defend a certain kind of television, namely what they call "quality television". John Mepham defines quality in television in its ability to create social self-understanding and truth telling. Robert J. Thompson names nine characteristics that quality television should display, 2 of which are having a memory and aspiring towards realism. I think BUFFY is a prime example of a television series that has a memory. Characters are constant over the seasons; they are not static, they develop over time, which is one of the good aspects of the series, but their development and growth is motivated by the narrative. Quite often, events and developments in the series are related to events in the past seasons, illustrating the completeness of the narrative. When looking at its aspiration towards realism, it is of course obvious that Buffy is a fantasy show; in real life, there are (to our knowledge at least) no vampires, hell dimensions and slayers. However, this does not necessarily mean the series itself is not realistic. Joss Whedon has been quoted to say that he was striving towards "emotional realism"; even though the events that are portrayed may not be possible in our day-to-day life, the way the characters deal with these situations correlates very much with the way viewers will experience certain events in their own lives. Despite the impossibility of the events, there is a clear internal sense of reality within the series: events and developments unfold according to the rules of the fictional world that has been created. There are no incongruencies in the narrative, situations are not resolved in a deus-ex-machina

way. When Buffy dies, Willow is able to raise her from the dead, as she has died of mystical causes. However, when Tara is shot, which is a death of a natural cause, there is nothing that Willow can do to bring her back, and both Willow and the audience will have to experience the pain of losing Tara. The internal realism of *BUFFY* stays intact.

I think it could even be said that it is exactly the show's supernatural theme that makes it such a prime example of a show that provides usable stories. I have already described the way in which *BUFFY* uses supernatural metaphors to portray real-life issues; high school is portrayed as a real life living hell, teenage anxieties are turned into real life monsters. These techniques make the shows usable stories extra visible. Also, the fact that the show has a supernatural subject matter in my opinion leads to a different viewing experience. Seeing these impossible situations taking place will at first lead to the realisation that this is definitely fiction, the viewer will experience a distancing effect from what is shown on the screen. After this, however, comes the realisation that these events, no matter how impossible in day-to-day life, very closely mirror events and situations that the viewer does experience in the world around him or her. This extra step in consciousness will bring home the recognizability of the situations extra clearly to viewers. In this way, *BUFFY* is, in my opinion, extremely effective in providing its viewers with usable stories.

According to standards set by Thompson and Mephram, *BUFFY* succeeds in meeting the standards for being quality television. It is striking to see, though, that in an effort to defend the worth of popular television, again quality standards are introduced. Where literature is held in higher regard than film, and film is taken more seriously than television, it is a shame that another distinction again has to be made within the medium of television itself to be able to prove its societal merit. I don't think this distinction is necessary in order to hold a positive view of popular culture. Thinking back to the theories of Hermes and Ellis, there can be a positive influence seen in any television output, when we look at the way these can help people to make sense of the world around us, through means of cultural citizenship or as a way of "working through".

We live in a world that has changed rapidly over the last years. New mediums and developments in means of transportation have made our world a lot bigger. Life is not constricted to family life and small communities anymore. Religious and political groups have steadily lost their guiding influence in people's lives. I agree with the authors that I have mentioned that in this open world, with all its information and all the choices we are bombarded with, television plays an incredibly important role. Where the security of small

communities has fallen away, we have to look for new ways of making sense of a world that seems to offer unending possibilities. Television, literally meaning “seeing far” offers us a unique view into the rest of the world. In a world where many teenagers feel lonely, estranged and overwhelmed, a series like *BUFFY* can be an enormous helpful commodity to help them through the phase of life where most insecurities are to be found; the development into adulthood. Where parents may be absent and teenagers can feel lonely and misunderstood by everyone around them, this popular television series could provide them with the guidance they seek. *BUFFY* has succeeded in creating an immensely rich and complex world. The series’ episodes have a high density of meaning and offer insightful ideas about all the issues that could bother teens growing up. *BUFFY* literally portrays high school as hell, a sentiment that is felt by many teenagers that are experiencing it. Especially US-American high schools seem to be scary places where popularity and succeeding is everything, and not fitting in is the ultimate fear. On *BUFFY*, we see characters that do not fit in, but are still heroes. The series sends out an enormously empowering message; its main character is a little girl that can stand up for herself perfectly. She, as many other of the characters on the show, is not perfect, but her continuing efforts to do the right thing and her commitment and loyalty to her friends and family earn her respect and happiness in the end. In my opinion, *BUFFY* is a series that can have a very positive and empowering effect on people. The internet has added the dimension of virtual communities. Sharing a love for a popular series with others can offer people an all-important sense of belonging. Even though there might not be anyone in their surroundings that is into the same things they are, on discussion forums these people can find people that think just like them, taking away the loneliness they might feel. This is clearly the effect that Joke Hermes is describing as she talks about the concept of cultural citizenship. In this concept, I think, the internet plays a very important role. The Malaysian girl, in the post that was described in the forum analysis, very clearly states that she is the only person in her environment that loves *BUFFY* the way she does. The feeling of belonging that she experiences is solely derived from the fact that she has found like-minded souls on the *Buffy* forum. Indeed, had she not been given the opportunity to go online, she might have felt even more isolated from her surroundings than she clearly already does. However, the show would have still offered her usable stories and a way of “working through”, as she says that she feels a better person for having watched the show.

In this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate the working of the mechanism of usable stories in products of popular culture, analysing the series *BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* as a case study

and conducting a very brief, explorative ethnographic study into actual viewers' responses. I have consciously chosen to analyse the entire series as opposed to for example a single season or episode. It is my belief that the series' potential for providing usable stories lies in the completeness of its world, the fact that we follow a group of characters over a certain amount of time and see them develop within the life situations that they are faced with.

Due to the scope of this thesis, the audience study was necessarily very brief and not more than an exploration of all the material that is out there. Again, I have chosen to give a more general impression of the entirety of the forum, in congruency with the content analysis, instead of going into a single subject more extensively. The advantage of this was that, even within the limited amount of time and space I was dealing with, I was still able to give a general overview of the evidence of usable story-use on the internet forum. By being this brief, there is obviously a lack of nuance in the way I have dealt with the thousands of personal comments that are made on the forum by specific fans. Another complicating factor was the fact that towards the end of my research, the site was temporarily taken out of the air. Although the site is being reconstructed at the moment, it was impossible for me to access the old material. It did, however, provide me with proof that the community, and the series itself, are very important to viewers, as the forum was immediately started again by active users and loyal posters of the old forum quickly found their way back, expressing their happiness about the forum's continuation.

For further research, it would be interesting to take a very close look at all the discussions carried out on this topic and for example look at the ratio between serious posts and funny posts, the ratio between posts about characters and situations, etc., to get a well-constructed argument about the main discussion that is being held. Another drawback to my own research is the fact that I have been dependent on people that are reflecting on themselves. I have not been able to ask exact questions into the subject I was interested in. Furthermore, due to the nature of the forum, it is very hard to find information about age, gender or nationality of the posters. For future research, it would be very interesting to look at *BUFFY*'s potential as a series that provides usable stories within these different demographic groups and look for any possible differences.

Also, it would be interesting to do further research into the connection between fantasy series and its ability to provide usable stories. I have proposed that by creating a distancing effect in the viewer, shows with a fantastic subject matter could be pre-eminently suited for providing usable stories to viewers. I would like to see an empirical study carried out into this phenomenon.

Something I have had to be aware of during the writing of this thesis is that I myself am a fan of the series. I have mostly found this a positive experience, as many of the themes that I have written about were deduced from my own experiences with the show. I think this can make a thesis more insightful. It is however very important to be monitored throughout the process, to avoid letting one's love for the show becoming a danger to a researcher's objectivity, assuming such a thing actually exists.

The theories and concepts that have been covered in this thesis all, in some way or another, try to defend the worth of popular culture. All things considered, I think it is in the material effectiveness that we should look to defend the merit of popular culture. Categorizing programmes according to arbitrary measures of quality will necessarily lead to the opinion that certain television programmes are worthless. Adhering to certain norms of quality might make a programme (like for example *BUFFY*) more suitable for the concept of providing usable stories than others. That does not mean, however, that other programmes could not provide a valuable means of working through for its viewers. We will have to look at every programme individually and its material effectiveness in people's lives to be able to establish its cultural and societal value. Therefore, the way to go will always be to involve the actual viewers in our research. As Hartley and Fiske already argued in 1978, meaning is not fixed, but only established in the moment of reading, the encounter between message and recipient.

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