



Ananya Mukherjea
When You Kiss Me, I Want to Die:
Gothic Relationships and Identity
 on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer**



[1] I came to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* late, not until season 6, a hard season. It was a season built around themes of healing and forgiveness and soul-searching, and it followed on a season of facing the unknown and dealing with loss and sacrifice. Seasons 5 and 6 were not uniformly popular, but both story arcs were emotionally and philosophically appropriate to the times--bookending September 11th and the turbulent turn of the new century – and for many viewers, the minor key and dark tones in the story were emotionally resonant. This is an example of how Sue Turnbull defines *aesthesis* in her article from *Slayage* no. 13/14, “the moment when aesthetics becomes not just a discourse of the intellect, but also a discourse of the heart.”

[2] As well, some scholars point out that the literary figure of the vampire is strongly associated with moments of social upheaval and, so, reflects what we, as a society, are witnessing and feeling. Stacey Abbott (2007) writes, "... the vampire regularly emerges amidst periods of extreme, and sometimes violent, change, such as the 1890's in Britain and the 1970's in America" (p. 6). In particular, *BtVS* engages its turn-of-the-century "readers" because it is smart but also because its art is emotionally accessible. Rhonda Wilcox (2005) tells us that "*Buffy* matters for the same reason that all art matters – because it shows us the best of what it means to be human" (p. 13). Viewer-readers understand the characters' efforts to define themselves, to be human (when appropriate), and to be the best human they can be in the context of the viewer-reader's own labors to do the same.

[3] This paper is not just about season 6, but it is about the emotional resonance and social relevance of some of *BtVS*' more poignant renderings of important relationships, especially as they correspond to 20th century Gothic referents and symbols. Of course, in this series, there are plenty of poignant renderings of relationships – big and small – and, although the title of this paper comes from a midnight, cemetery exchange between Angel and Buffy in season 2, as they negotiate whether they can have a romantic relationship, the paper itself deals primarily with the secondary characters of Anya, Tara, and Oz. I argue, in good company with other *BtVS* scholars (see, for example, Abbott; Callander; and Harbin), that these stories follow in a long and varied

tradition of Gothic cultural production.

[4] Anya, Tara, and Oz enter the Scooby gang through their affiliations with primary members, but none of them achieves permanent standing within the group. The first two die before the end of the series, and Oz leaves the series and the story. All three also occupy somewhat nebulous existential categories. Anya has been, and for a time is again, a demon. Tara was raised to be a witch by her mother, a powerful witch herself. And Oz is a werewolf, and figuring out what that really means occupies its own significant storyline. Though Gothic forms often have been mocked or maligned (from the architecture to the novels to the music), the forms and style are notable for how long they have persisted and because they consistently speak to significant currents of feeling for many.

[5] I am specifically concerned, here, with the (Southern) Gothic, tight nature of small communities and the tight family bound together by a secret (homosexuality or madness in Tennessee Williams plays, for example) or a mission (like the long drive to bury the dying mother in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). Relatedly, I am interested in the formation of identity, or the painful failure to form one, with respect to these small, tight communities, especially the formation of identity of those who never achieve full community membership.

[6] This paper focuses on three critical episodes: "Wild at Heart" (4006) from season 4, "Family" (5006) from season 5, and "Selfless" (7005) from season 7. Each episode is pivotal in telling the story of one of these characters, particularly in terms of how s/he belongs to, runs from, or is divided from family and loved ones. I consider how the stories of Anya, Tara, and Oz can be read in the following ways:

I as a (fairly gentle) critique of the effects of tight family or local boundaries;

I a study of the risks and anxieties of trying to form one's own identity *vis à vis* those communities and their rules;

I relatedly, a consideration of the treacherous work of negotiating shifting gender roles;

I and as commentary on grief and loss within tight communities.

While my analysis relies on textual interpretation of the show itself, it also draws from the existing, extensive body of research on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and on some critical scholarship on the Gothic.

The Gothic and *BtVS*

[7] Let me clarify my suggestion that this paper has to do with the "Gothic." There exists a rich history of treating the Gothic in literary studies

on which I only selectively draw here. Although my training is in cultural studies, it is through the frame of sociology rather than English, and my interest here is as much in the many interpretations, presentations, and associations of the Gothic as in the 18th and 19th century novels of Walpole, Radcliffe, Shelley, Stoker, and others. It may seem obvious that a show featuring vampires, crypts, and plenty of black leather clothing connotes what is classically Gothic, but Gothic themes in *BtVS* are sometimes found in the sunniest of locales, characters, and relationships.

[8] Mary Callander (in her article "Bram Stoker's *Buffy*: Traditional Gothic and Contemporary Culture" in *Slayage*, 3) makes an extensive case for the shared Gothic elements between Stoker's *Dracula* and *BtVS* and the implications for agency allowed (or denied) to female characters in both. One might also argue that, if Stoker's *Dracula* was a product of the new modern age (see Abbott's *Celluloid Vampires*, 2007, for a thorough discussion of this association), *BtVS* can be called a product of the turn of the 21st century's "postmodern" age. Indeed, while I do consider the classic Gothic forms and tropes, I also consider the genres of early 20th century Southern Gothic writers and of those 20th century poets, such as Plath and Sexton, who invoke Gothic sentiments or scenes (in reductive sum: death, darkness, despair and, occasionally, intimations of incest or suffocation). As well, I draw links with Gothic (or, simply, "Goth") representations in contemporary popular culture and subculture – movies (such as *The Hunger* and *The Crow*) and music (an array of artists from Bauhaus on) and clothing and subcultures. If references to the Gothic were originally meant to connote the pre-civilized and grotesque, as in the post-Enlightenment use of the term to refer to the Dark Ages, they evolved to refer to most matters dark – from a lack of light in subterranean spaces to "dark" concepts such as death or disease. However, the Gothic, in most of its 19th, 20th, and 21st century applications, equally refers to what is hidden or "shady" (forbidden relationships or actions), doubled (split personalities, secret identities, or alter-egos), or "infected" or of doubtful purity (hence the focus on the corruption of the family or small town in many such stories). It is some combination of these meanings that connotes the Gothic, in varying ways – 19th century British Gothic, 20th century American Southern Gothic, or the shifting contemporary Gothic of a wide range of fiction, music, movies, and, in this case, Joss Whedon's television series.

[9] My argument is that there are similar patterns of meaning – emotional, metaphysical, social – that run through all these forms of culture, allowing 21st century commentators like me to group such forms together as representing and evoking the "Gothic." What, then, does the Gothic mean socially and politically, such that it endures as a style of cultural production over hundreds of years? How do the Gothic aspects of *BtVS* play a part in the appeal and significance of the show? Callander (2001) writes, "The Gothic, it seems, remains infinitely adaptable as a genre for reflecting, or revealing, the questions and anxieties confronted by each generation" (para. 27). Such socially widespread tension may pertain to changing social expectations and roles – particularly conflicted or dualistic roles like new, fluctuating definitions of gender – about the meaning and effects of family structure, about insider/outsider status, and about unknown phenomena (the questionable value of technology in *Frankenstein*) or groups of people (xenophobia,

homophobia, etc.). As Laura Miller (2008) recently wrote in *Salon.com*, in a review of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series of youth fiction, "The vampire has been a remarkably fluid symbol for over a hundred years, standing for homosexuality, bohemianism and other hip manifestations of outsider status." The immediacy of these uneasy identities and the persistent and profound questions they raise make the text of the show lastingly resonant. Further, Gothic motifs can be highly symbolic and, therefore, gesturally communicate much meaning. In her book *Goth's Dark Empire*, Carol Siegel (2005) argues that Goth culture and Gothic art persistently explore the (often short) distance between pleasure and pain, between life and death, between the ludicrous and *vérité*. Gavin Baddesley writes, "'Camp' is an important concept to anyone who wishes to understand the Gothic aesthetic" (as cited in Siegel, 2005, p. 9). Through stylized and exaggerated representation, Gothic forms can illuminate real experience.

[10] As mentioned above, I am playing a little fast and loose to outline what connotes the Gothic in contemporary popular culture. This is because all these references are at play in the informed popular imagination. Part of what makes *BtVS* a text worth deeper consideration is that its creators expect its consumers to be intelligent and intuitive, to make connections – conscious or not entirely so – between what they see on screen and varied other texts, visual or otherwise. Anthony Bradney (2006), in his article on the ethics and politics of *Buffy* studies, quotes the 19th century scholars, the Goncourt brothers, on the shift in significance of the novel form in the 1800's.

Among the last apologies for the novel—an apology in which we fully sense, however, the surge of confidence and power generated by the phenomenal rise of this relatively new genre—is the preface that the Goncourt brothers wrote for their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864). 'Now that the novel,' they observed, 'is broadening, growing, beginning to be a great, serious, impassioned living form of literary study and social research, now by that means of analysis and psychological inquiry it is turning into contemporary moral philosophy, now that the novel has imposed upon itself the investigations and duties of science, one may make a stand for its liberties and privileges.'... *BtVS* as a case-study of the travails of adolescence and *Angel* as a study of angst, detachment and connection in modern urban life are, on this argument, as worthy of investigation as the novels that litter the lists of departments of literature. ([Rahv, 222-223] as cited in Bradney, 2006, para. 6) (emphasis mine)

[11] Moreover, Bradney suggests that the Buffyverse is important because it has entered popular discourse even beyond those who regularly watched the show. As Whedon expects his viewers to constantly draw on myriad cultural references from outside the Buffyverse, *BtVS* becomes a cultural reference itself. In this case, the Buffyverse offers windows into the negotiation of longing and angst, detachment and attachment, life and death, pleasure and pain, and the confounding complexity of moral decisions.

[12] In particular, we see these negotiations take place in and through relationships, and many of these relationships have no happily ever after.

Except for the original Scooby gang (and Dawn), no relationships – certainly no romantic relationships – either survive the series or make it longer than a season. The end of *Angel* is even darker, closing with what one might surmise will be the death of all the regular characters on the show. In the face of this, the amount of emotional and moral commitment that the characters bring to their familial, romantic, and platonic relationships is part of the crux of the show, and accurately enough, the costs and benefits of such commitment are cast, in the tradition of much 20th century Gothic cinema, as light and dark. These relationships are sometimes sanctioned and sometimes taboo, sometimes open and other times hidden.

[13] Let me consider the evocation of a bright, shiny hellmouth in *BtVS* and how Gothic themes are turned a little on their heads on the show, thus maximizing the impact when they appear. Examining the backdrop of Sunnydale is important to understand the sometimes suffocating tightness of the Small Town and the family-with-a-dangerous-bond.

At the Turn of the 21st Century, It's the Sunshine that's Gothic

[14] While *Buffy* displays some classically Gothic elements – death and danger and the undead, a clash between what is premodern and what is (post)modern (for example, Spike's derisive response to the Master's traditional rituals despite the penchant of his own lover, Drusilla, for classically Gothic fashion and verse) – these are set against a decidedly un-Gothic backdrop. The southern California sunshine of Sunnydale (which Giles finds oppressive), Buffy Summer's own blonde hair, sparkling repartée, hyper-modern manner, and symbolic name, and the frequent use of humor on the show belie its darker elements. To some extent, this must be meant to be simply ironic, as in the final episodes of *Angel*, where hell is located in the shiny, orderly suburbs...but in the basement. When Anne Rice-loving, velvet cape-wearing characters appear in season 2's "Lie to Me" (2005), in a vampire-themed basement bar, they are presented as silly and as foils for the true darkness in the episode, which comes in the form of all-American boy, Ford. And, in *Celluloid Vampires*, Abbott (2007) discusses the relocation of vampire films and Gothic horror from 19th century Eastern European villages to the light-saturated, post-industrial Los Angeles of the late 20th century. Despite the bright sunshine and easy-going California style, L.A. was experiencing a level of economic polarization and social violence that was truly Gothic, especially because it was just beneath the superficial veneer. The darkness, then, is in the actual fear and loss, cast into relief against the surface presentation.

[15] Camille Bacon-Smith (2003), in "The Color of the Dark," uses Wassily Kandinsky's theory of color symbolism to explain that the Buffyscape is rendered in darks and lights, in whites and blacks, but also in shades of yellow, blue, green, and red. She writes that yellow-to-white indicates physicality, life, and femaleness while blue-to-black suggests spirituality, death, and maleness. And in her comprehensive book *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Rhonda Wilcox (2005) deeply treats the

association of pain in the Buffyverse – emotional and physical – with sharp, bright light. In Season 6, Buffy – recently pulled out of heaven and forced to live in the mortal world again – is drawn to the cool shadows with Spike, confiding in him that the world around her is harsh and bright. Her rough and conflicted relationship with him during this season seems to be ultimately censured – by Buffy, her friends, and one would assume, the creators of the plot-line, if not all the viewers – but their trysts in dark places (a condemned building, the catwalk at the Bronze, his crypt) – are enlivening for her, something to stir her in the (mostly) living world when little else seems to so do. Illicit meetings with a monster in his underground lair are, certainly, quintessentially Gothic, but when their delicate power play suddenly becomes actually malicious, this happens in Buffy's clean and brilliantly lit bathroom. Again, light and dark, life and death, male and female are not paired in stable dichotomies. Rather, they face each other uneasily and dynamically, allowing for complicated emotional and intellectual engagement with these concepts.

[16] Many 20th century Southern Gothic films are adaptations from literature, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Green Mile* (not written by a Southerner but conspicuously set in the South). In addition to the themes of social claustrophobia and irreconcilable outsider status, the use of lighting or the lack of it is deliberate to render the effect of narrative description that cannot be lifted directly to film. While Joss Whedon is clearly a careful reader of many genres of literature, he is even more obviously a careful reader of many genres of 20th century film. His action references to Goth-esque Hollywood blockbusters like *The Matrix* and *The Lord of the Rings* are evident, and the use of light and dark throughout *BtVS* often effects an emotional impact through its allusion to well known film referents.

[17] Fantasy and stylization are crucial to the Gothic in film and literature. The neatly caricatured characters in Stoker's *Dracula*, for example, provide a buffer against reality to allow for safe consideration of the genuine anxieties of the time about rapidly fluctuating social structure. Similarly, injecting unrealistic pieces like monsters into a television series originally about high school may make the story less a mirror of recognizable, everyday life than many teen shows, but as well as serving as metaphor, it removes the need to mirror only those aspects of everyday life that entertain. Emotionally, therefore, *BtVS* can hit higher highs and lower lows than are often attainable within the strict boundaries of 45 minutes of programming wedged in amongst advertisements and network standards. If we can accept a romantic lead who is 240+ years old, then we can also accept that teenage love can, of course, feel like a life-and-death matter. The former element may be fantastic, but the latter is recognizable, and there is no expectation of an easy resolution to *BtVS*'s central teenage romance(s).

[18] Indeed, throughout the series, its creators refuse to easily resolve any of its most important relationships. This can, at times, be disconcerting, but it also rings true. It speaks to a basic faith that the characters seem to have in each other and in their own ideals and principles, and this might be the innocent hope at the heart of the Gothic. It is also the twist, the strength that primes a series about monsters and high school kids in southern California for over a decade of scholarly analysis and viewer interest.

Home Is Where You Place Your Stake: Family in a One-Starbucks Town

[19] Natalie Regensburg (1998), in her curator's introduction to the book show "The Gothic Family and the Outsider," writes about Anne Rice's novels and about the Gothic in the 20th century:

[Rice's vampires] are blessed and cursed with acute powers of sensation; they are both too much and not enough for this world. They are also outside of the human family and form alternative families, sometimes with those who were family members when they were mortal. The success of these tales tells us that we both long for and demonize this sort of romantic freedom, even as we most desire and fear that most intense of bonds, the family, whether that family is biological, sociological, or national. The gothic in general, and this exhibition in particular, explores the tension between what we most fear and what we most desire. Its extraordinary popularity today, 200 years after the publication of the first gothic novel, shows us that the concern with freedom and connection is as relevant as it has ever been.

(<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/exhibits/gothic/natalie.html>)

[20] The chosen family as a theme in *BtVS* has received a good deal of scholarly attention (as, for example, by Jes Battis, in his book *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel* and by others in a number of scholarly talks). The chosen family is a concept drawn from lesbian/gay movements to describe family-like networks that support those who may have been ousted by the families in which they grew up. It is also a concept used in open adoption circles to refer to some of the non-traditional family configurations that emerge from a biologically determined family (in Buffy's case, by birth, species or calling), a socially determined family (by mission), and the relationships that develop between these two families. Alternative families, of course, could refer to any of the above and, as well, to blended families, to cohabiting couples, and to groupings of many different configurations and affiliations. A family is, however, a group of people who have long-lasting commitments to each other, who, to some extent, grow up together (even as adults), and who make deep investments in their family unit. As Regensburg (1998) argues, Anne Rice's vampires form all sorts of family units, and they depend on them, love them, and sometimes turn on or flee from them. In fact, any family can become a site of extreme tension – a tension between belonging and being smothered. Authors like Faulkner and Williams root many of their stories in this tension; the family experiences of poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, certainly, were pivotal in much of their work; and Stoker's *Dracula* focuses on the Circle of Light, who form a sort of family in opposition to Dracula.

[21] In *BtVS*, we see a variety of families, with the chosen family often legitimized as a very strong unit. Drusilla repeatedly refers to her grouping with Spike, Angel, and Darla as a family, born into vampirism, and we have flashbacks to reveal the metaphorically dark nature of the lives and deaths of their human families. Xander's family, too, prove to be a liability in his life,

and, at his wedding, Anya's demon family generally behave much better than his human one.

[22] It is appropriate that *BtVS*' first and most openly gay character, Tara, struggles greatly both with her position within the Scooby family and with her relationship to the family that raised her. This struggle comes to a head in the episode titled, simply, "Family" (5006). Tara's birth family unexpectedly come to visit on her 20th birthday, and after an awkward meeting with them at the Magic Box, she and Willow have the following exchange.

Tara: "Families are always [hesitates]..."

Willow: "... they make you crazy."

Tara (relieved): "Usually."

Just prior to this, Xander and Buffy are having a conversation about their continued awkwardness with Tara, who seems obscure to them, and maybe also with the new fact that Willow is now in a lesbian relationship and, more and more, is a practicing witch. Xander refers to Tara and Willow as "all Wiccy" and "swinging with the Wiccan lifestyle" ("Family," 5006). "Lesbian" and "witch" seem to overlap heavily as life choices or identities on the show, and this is a conflation borne out by Tara's birth family's attitude towards her and by several other scenes in this episode and this season. Indeed, every struggle of a friend or family member to accept Tara's and Willow's witchcraft might also be a struggle to fully come to terms with their lesbianism. Interestingly, shortly before leaving Sunnydale and his regular role on the series, Oz tells Willow that, while he supports her interest in witchcraft, it also worries him ("Fear, Itself," 4004). Dawn, on the other hand, seems to accept it all – lesbianism and witchcraft – as normal and even wonderful ("Once More, With Feeling," 6007).

[23] While the Scoobies struggle gamely, though, with good intentions, Tara's birth family are not presented as terribly well intentioned people. They seem to be provincial, which is surely partly an unpleasant stereotype and partly meant to be metaphor, but it also refers to the small, out-of-the-way settings of a variety of Gothic novels and films, from Faulkner's Mississippi towns to *Psycho*'s deserted Bates motel, house on the hill, and local law enforcement. The narrow-mindedness of Tara's family is made clear as her brother swings into the Magic Box, mocking its purpose, contents, and the people sitting in it. It becomes apparent that they have a dark secret and that Tara is bonded to them, under their control in fact, by it. Later that day, Tara's father cryptically tells her, "You have an evil inside you, and it will come out," explaining why she has to go home with her family. He tells her that her new friends, if they knew the truth, would turn away from her while her birth family will always love her.

[24] We learn, later in the episode, that family legend has it that the women in the family have demon within them and that this evil comes out when they turn 20. This evil, then, is closely linked with female status and femininity and is descended to Tara from her mother. The men in the family

clearly support this theory, but Tara's female cousin also comes along to reinforce this belief and to encourage Tara to return home with her father and brother. She argues the urgency for this return, telling Tara that, in addition to needing to control the feminine evil, it is wrong that her father and brother should have "to do for themselves," to keep their own house, while Tara stays at college, living, "God knows what kind of lifestyle." Again, is it the witchcraft or the lesbianism? As is evidenced by the scenes of spells Willow and Tara cast jointly, the two concepts run together symbolically, but they do come to represent the feminine and feminized power.

[25] Faced with her family's pressure, Tara becomes uncharacteristically deceptive. This is similar to Oz' decision to withhold information from Willow and others when he first learns that he is a werewolf. Tara casts a spell intended to keep the Scoobies from seeing the demon in her, showing that she believes the family legend herself, and, in so doing, she nearly gets the whole group killed. When her cousin learns of the spell, she asks Tara, "Is that a human thing to do?" In the end, though, Tara's humanity is confirmed, and, at other points in the series, notably after Tara's murder in season 6, it's the evil actions of humans that sometimes seem the most monstrous.

[26] When Tara's birth family come to the Magic Box to retrieve her, her father tells her friends to stay out of the matter, that it is not their concern. He asserts that the demon in the family's women is where their magic comes from, saying, "She belongs with us. We know how to control her [pause] problem." The issue, apparently, is not the so-called problem but the threat of female power. What needs to be controlled by Tara's family is the women themselves. Spike approvingly calls the family legend, "a bit of spin to keep the ladies in line." Tara's father and brother are appalled when the Scoobies put power back in Tara's hands by asking her what she wants and Buffy undermines their claim to Tara, saying instead, "We're family."

[27] This episode invokes several configurations of family and seems to suggest that it is the ones to which we *choose* to belong – whether they are also the ones in which we are raised or not – that are the most important and the most supportive. While Tara's birth family are trying to squelch her with lies and misogynistic shame, another family emerges to support her assertion of herself and her own interest. Although Sunnydale itself is a small town full of darkness and evil secrets, it is one into which Tara is liberated from the one that limited her imagination and sense of self. She ultimately dies suddenly, violently, and very young in Sunnydale, at home with her new family, but, first, she comes into her own there.

[28] The darkest moments in Tara's life occur in her closest sphere – with the family in which she grew up, with Glory's invasion of her mind, and with Willow's lies and manipulations in season 6. Regardless, Tara's character is notable for its firmness and self-awareness, and she demonstrates that, once her new friends help her assert her self, because she has to fight to determine her own identity and choices, she protects that self even when the cost of doing so is great, as when she leaves Willow. Despite her tragic end, Tara's storyline differs from those of Anya and Oz because, through her chosen family, she achieves a calm certainty about who she is, and, despite (or, more

likely, because of) the Gothic aspects of her character's arc, she herself is freed from the trap of her birth family's entire determination of her life choices and identity.

I Will Be (His Missus): Seeking Identity in Relationships

[29] Arguably, Anya is one of the most tragic characters *in BtVS*. This is not only because she, too, dies before the end of the series but also because her emotional needs and insecurities are so raw and evident throughout. More than any other character, she is anxious about her existence, her mortality, and her role in the world, although this anxiety is frequently met with impatience by other characters. At the end of "The Wish" (3009) in season 3, the vengeance demon Anyanka loses her powers and becomes high school student Anya, and as she bluntly explains her own situation to Xander when asking him to the prom in season 3's "The Prom," (3020):

You were unfaithful to Cordelia, so I took on the guise of a twelfth-grader to tempt her with the Wish. When I lost my powers, I got stuck in this persona, and now I have all these feelings. I don't understand it. I don't like it. All I know is I really want to go to this dance and I want someone to go with me.

[30] Anya is "stuck in this persona," caught with a mortal body and human-like feelings and behaviors but little understanding of or appreciation for the human world. Once socialist in her beliefs (as we learn from season 7's brilliant "Selfless," 7005) and an avenger of wronged women for a 1,100 years, she quickly evolves into a money-hungry, 21st century, American woman with a love for "nicely shaped" men ("The Harsh Light of Day," 4003), especially Xander Harris, whose bride she aspires to be (and becoming a bride becomes a true ambition for her). When Giles hires her as a sales clerk at the Magic Box, she happily tells him, in season 5's "Family" (5006), "I have a place in the world now. I'm part of the system. I'm a working gal!" She throws herself into whatever work is at hand, whether that work is vengeance or the trappings of capitalism and femininity. In a flashback from "Selfless" (7005), when Halfrek chides her for being work-obsessed, Anya calmly explains, "Vengeance is what I do. ... Vengeance is what I am."

[31] Anya demonstrates, explicitly and implicitly, throughout the series that she is desperately searching for an identity and a role into which she can perfectly, permanently step. She is tactless, forceful, honest to a fault, and she is seldom content to wait and watch rather than act. As well, Anya's world – unlike that of the other Scoobies – is shaped by fear. Newly mortal, she is afraid of damage to her body or to Xander's, and she repeatedly cites her fear of rabbits (although "Selfless" shows us that she was once an affectionate breeder of rabbits, who are, of course, good breeders themselves). She is upfront about her fears and her need to protect Xander and herself, and this strikes the selfless, brave Scoobies as crass. Anya receives derision for her literalness, her materialism, and her preoccupation with protecting Xander and herself above the others. It is only at the end of the series, when she is

without a defined role to be in – her only steady companion is sucked into hell to torture Anya, the inept geek criminal Andrew becomes her primary ally, and there is no more Magic Shop or wedding or vengeance on which she can fixate – that Anya begins to come into her own and, then of course, summarily dies. What makes Anya's arc Gothic, and heart-breaking, is that the formation of her self is so wrapped up in death and pain, both what she causes others and what she feels herself. Furthermore, that death and pain constitute the counterpoint to her consistent need for love and stability.

[32] Again, in "Selfless" (7005), we see that it is an original loss of a love on which she depended that leads Anya to the life of a vengeance demon. She (then named Aud) sadly looks on as her former lover, Olaf, whom she has turned into a troll in retaliation for his infidelity, flees his attacking neighbors, when D'Hoffryn appears, taking advantage of this vulnerable, lonely moment. He tells Aud that she doesn't see her true self, that "Anyanka" is who she truly *is*. 1,100+ years later, after D'Hoffryn has, for the second and final time, discharged her from his circle of vengeance demons (from his "family" of "girls"), Anya, tearful and lonely, asks Xander, "What if I'm really nobody?"

[33] Even more than most in the Buffyverse, Anya shifts back and forth between existential categories throughout her very long life – from human to demon to human to demon and, finally, back to mortal human. Although the human Anya fears death in an active and vigorous way, she shows her courage again and again in offering her life to protect someone else's. She pushes Xander out of harm's way in "The Gift," (5022), only to have a wall collapse on her instead. In "Selfless," she offers her own life in return for those of the Abercrombie and Fitch clad, heartless fraternity boys she recently had killed, and in the series finale, "Chosen" (7022), Anya puts herself forward in the final battle to defend Andrew and is herself killed in the process.

[34] One of the most moving and revealing scenes from "Selfless" is the dream that Anya has while she is fixed to the wall, with Buffy's sword through her chest. The dream is a memory of a song from the musical episode of the previous season, although it is a song we never heard during "Once More, With Feeling" (6007). In it, the happily domestic Anya, wearing an early 1960's styled frock and heels, sings to herself while Xander sleeps, muttering about happy endings. Her song is a light-hearted, hopeful one about her impending marriage and her pleasure in knowing she'll soon have a proper role in society, as Xander's wife, as "Anya lame-ass-made-up-maiden-name Harris." It ends with a triumphant refrain, as Anya sings "But who am I?... I've found my guy... and I will be his missus" and emerges onto their balcony in a frothy, high-fashion wedding gown singing, finally, "*I will be....*" The knife in the viewer's heart is the quick cut back to Anya in the present, with tears in her eyes, blood on her face, and Buffy's sword still through her chest.

[35] Near the end of the episode, after D'Hoffryn has killed Halfrek in Anyanka's stead, Anya says to him, "You should have killed *me*," eager, perhaps, for an end to her fundamental identity confusion and angst. D'Hoffryn replies that the hurt of knowing she's brought about Halfrek's death is a better punishment for Anya and that, anyway, the First is coming to bring an end to all of them. One of the Bringers of the First does ultimately kill Anya,

approaching her from behind and slicing her torso in two as she fights, having spurred herself onto battle with thoughts of evil, dangerous bunnies. It is not so unexpected or undignified an end as she faces her fear of rabbits and her fear of death together and never sees the latter coming. She goes out fighting, working, in true Anya fashion. We have seen Anya blissfully raising bunnies in her happy home with Olaf, before it is ruined by his infidelity; in her grief after Xander leaves her at the altar, D'Hoffryn tells her that Xander had "domesticate[d]" her ("Hell's Bells,"6016), made her live a false life. Perhaps the bunnies are a long-lasting reminder that her domestic dreams only lead to heartbreak but also a reminder that she is, after all, a workaholic fighter *and* someone who harbors dreams of finding a loyal protector and a home and a supportive, stable role. This contemporary feminine paradox is a counterpart to the masculine one discussed in the next section. Anne Kingston (2004), in her book *The Meaning of Wife*, argues that defining the appropriate role of a wife is hotly contested because that role has historically defined female identity in a way the role of husband does not do for men. This is a losing proposition for Anya because romantic relationships on *BtVS* may be deep and committed, but they are not smooth or permanent. Angie Burns (2006) describes passionate relationships on the show in the following way:

The romance in *Buffy* is, in part, Gothic, in that it is driven by powerful emotions and the more difficult the obstacles to the romance, the more dramatic and romantic the love story that may be told, something also demonstrated in 'real-life' love stories... In the love narratives we find pain and pleasure, ups and downs (very dramatic downs – Angel becomes Angelus, Tara has her brain sucked out, Oz is a werewolf and often the men just leave!). (para. 22)

[36] Anya's struggle is different from Tara's in that, despite her humility and meekness, Tara becomes fiercely protective of her own identity and choices, regardless of whether others agree or help her with them. Anya seems to be neither humble nor shy, but she spends the great majority of her time on the series seeking a firm and enduring identity for herself and external support and cooperation for her choices (she needs Olaf to be domestic, D'Hoffryn to become a vengeance demon, Xander to become a wife, and Giles to become a "working gal"). She struggles frantically for stability, permanence, certainty, and concrete answers through her time on the series, and her anxiety at failing to find any of this is frequently evident. In the end, though, it may be that very inconsistency in her character, a profoundly human trait, after all – her ability to wear her fear, frailty, and needs on her sleeve and, yet, persevere – that gives her power and that proves to be a lasting feature of her identity.

Redeeming the Monster in the Man

[37] In tune with the theme of up-ending expected associations with the Gothic, I argue that Oz is a classic Gothic hero. Repeatedly referred to as "laconic" and "stoic," Oz is a master of calm understatement. He is a prodigy of wisdom and selflessness even when we first meet him (he takes a bullet for

Willow, stands his ground while she gets over her crush on Xander), but we also see him as macho (needing to do "the guy thing," as he puts it himself in season 3's "Beauty and the Beasts," 3004) and solitary and closed-off, regularly literally caged, when he loses control of his self-presentation as his werewolf aspect emerges uncontrolled.

[38] Laura Miller (2003), writing in *Salon.com* just prior to the airing of *BtVS*' final episode, argued that it was *Buffy*'s presentation of a new kind of anti-solitary, emotionally engaged, and socially attached hero that was one of its primary contributions to contemporary culture. She wrote,

... if what *Buffy*'s heroism has done to girlhood gets talked about all the time, what her girlishness has done for heroism is even more revolutionary, if less well sung.... The traditional American male hero wallows in romanticized isolation, a condition supposedly forced upon him, but one that also conveniently caters to an aversion to connection and intimacy.... *Buffy*'s fought mightily over the past seven years, not just against "the vampires, the demons and the Forces of Darkness," but also against detachment, self-pity and arrogance. (Miller 2003, <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/tv/feature/2003/05/20/buffy/index.html>)

Whether readers agree or disagree that *Buffy* succeeded, at the end of the series, in remaining an integral and open part of her gang, this struggle of hers is absolutely a major theme of the show, and we see other characters join her in it. As characters, Angel and Oz are paralleled at multiple points for their tendency to silence and to restraining their exhibitions of emotion in public. For both Angel and Oz, the battle to find righteousness and humanity within their demon selves is sympathetically mirrored by their conflicted relationships with different models of masculinity and the type of responsibility (social or solitary) each model prescribes.

[39] In "Beauty and the Beasts" (3004), "Fear, Itself" (4004), "Wild at Heart" (4006), and "New Moon Rising" (4019), Oz pushes Willow away as he loses control over his werewolf nature, and in two of those episodes, female characters are killed by their male monster-human lovers. Although he is set up to be one of the gentlest and most consistent characters on *BtVS*, some of the most fixative moments in the development of his identity, of his sense of who he is and where he belongs, are about death and pain and his efforts to regain control over the beast within, to reconcile himself as a coherent being. As with most of the monsters on the show, Oz-as-werewolf-as-metaphor is close to the surface of the text. In season 2's "Phases" (2015) in which Oz (along with the viewer) learns that he is a werewolf, the similarities between the behavior of instinct-driven, amoral werewolves and the trappings of stereotypical masculinity are pointed out several times. To the dismay of Xander and Giles, *Buffy* draws a quick connection between the psychology of the werewolf and that of the "average man." Later, she says, "They grow body hair; they lose all ability to tell you what they really want," to which Willow replies, "It doesn't seem like a fair trade." Again, the art is meant to show us something about our daily humanity, our mundane gender relations, conflicts, and miscommunications.

[40] Lorna Jowett (2005), in her book *Sex and the Slayer*, has written about how Oz presents a certain "new" and "feminine" (p. 124) type of masculinity – a sensitive, open-minded, and generous man who is secure enough to wear nail polish, deal forthrightly and generously with his girlfriend's infidelity, and take responsibility for himself and his actions. This openness, however, is counterbalanced by his extreme reserve and ultimate need to deal with his problems alone. When Willow finds him packing to leave town at the end of "Wild at Heart" (4019) and asks him whether she gets any say in his decision, Oz answers, simply, "No." As with Angel's decision to leave Buffy and Sunnydale in the previous season, Oz makes a unilateral decision to leave, justifying it with the dangers he poses to his beloved and others. While both men's decisions are very much left open to criticism (which they have duly received in much *BtVS* scholarship), the show also makes clear that they are acting with sincerity in the effort to be responsible for themselves and others, according to one, traditional masculine type.

[41] In choosing to go, however, Oz is not only leaving Willow (who, he pointedly says, is all he's ever loved in his young life) but the Scooby gang, of which he's become an important part. His birth family is seldom mentioned, except that we know it was his cousin Jordy who made him into a werewolf. As we have seen before, however, the Scooby gang represent a powerful family, in terms of their shared bond and commitment, with respect to their knowledge and abilities, and as manifesting an ethical position in the world. In "Wild at Heart" (4006), Veruca tells Oz and, later, Willow that she and Oz belong together, that they are the same, and that his affiliation with Willow puts Oz literally and figuratively in a cage. Oz continually resists this assertion, distinguishing between his human self and his werewolf self. At different points, he tells Veruca, Willow, and Buffy that, "When the change comes, it's like I'm gone [and the wolf takes over]," and tells Veruca that he knows where he belongs, implying that it is in Sunnydale with Willow but also in the realm of humanity. But allusions to the animal in Oz are made over and over and, ultimately, Oz' acceptance of this allows him to attack Veruca and divides him from Willow and the Scoobies, forcing him to flee the humanity (in order to protect others from himself) to which he desperately wants to still belong.

[42] Near the end of the episode, Veruca says to him, "[Willow's] blinding you. When she's gone, you'll be able to admit what you are.... You're an animal. Animals kill." To this, Oz replies, before transforming and killing Veruca, "You're right. We kill." That he accepts this notion and kills a fellow (quasi)human is key. This act settles him as between categories – no longer entirely human, uncertain about what he is. When we first learn that Oz is a werewolf in "Phases," (2015), Willow normalizes his situation, likening it to her menstrual cycle. In grateful response, Oz says, "You are quite the human." At that point, Oz, himself, *is a human with a condition*. His killing Veruca – even to defend Willow--reclassifies him morally and makes his werewolf status no longer an inconvenience to be managed but a very dark secret, which drives him away from other people and his own humanity, and an integral aspect of his nature. He tells Willow, before leaving, "The wolf is inside me all the time, and I don't know where that line is anymore, between me and it" ("Wild at Heart," 4006).

[43] "Beauty and the Beasts," (3004) in season 3, is a commentary on the wildness of ordinary humans and the struggle within everyone to control those feral urges. At the beginning of the episode, Faith calls all men beasts, saying "every one of them is only in it for the chase." The school counselor, Mr. Platt, tells Buffy that "everyone has demons." And Giles tells Buffy that he believes there are two types of monsters: the kind that can be redeemed, because they want to be redeemed; and the kind that are "devoid of humanity [and unable to] respond to reason or love." Although there are no direct links between this relatively minor episode and the much-commented on "Wild at Heart," "Beauty and the Beasts" begins to frame Oz as a Gothic character, as someone with deep, dark struggles and an inner danger from which he must protect himself and others, sacrificing his ideals for himself if necessary. In this sense, he somewhat resembles the classic, cinematic Frankenstein – tricked by his incomplete and insufficiently understood body into murder – Edward Scissorhands, Anne Rice's Louis, or any other Gothic hero who must retreat into solitude for safety's sake. Oz' solitude is to be found, first, in his reticence, later, in his werewolf cage and, finally, in driving away from Sunnydale in search of a place with no people. If we return to the subtext of "Beauty and the Beasts," however, we find the inner message of this story (and of, say, *Edward Scissorhands*) – that it is this search for moral integrity and righteousness that, itself, confirms the hero's humanity. For all of us, the monster is always there; it is each individual's fight to be redeemed that raises us above our demons. Again, in offering exaggerated and stylized characters and situations, the Gothic form can manage to productively illuminate everyday phenomena.

[44] The themes of death and darkness and secrecy, the gut-wrenching work of making meaning of one's own life and history, and the anxious effort to affect one's own future or preserve one's place in a given society--these are some different conceptualizations of the Gothic. The Gothic also has to do with the family and with location: with being trapped within a rigidity of social structure and social relations that do not allow for one's identity to change or grow flexibly. Jowett (2005) makes the important point that, "in [*BtVS*], identity is always being constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated, and for many viewers, there is a sense of recognition in that" (p. 4). Faulkner, Poe, and Shelley all addressed the grotesqueness of efforts to deny "nature" and of the calamity that can befall attempts to leave one's immediate circle so that the devil that one knows (oppression, abuse, depression, etc.) might still be better than the devil out there (loss of identity and, thus, loss of self or death). Oz, Anya, and Tara all leave behind the devils that they know, though, and they exemplify the individual in search of self-construction or self-reconstruction.

[45] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tells a richly textured story. If its creators locate Gothic themes amongst its California sunshine, late 1990's youth fashion, and bright dialogue, they also locate compassion and principles in those themes. As Giles tells Buffy at the end of "The Prom" (3021) after Buffy has been given the "Class Protector" award, "I had no idea that children *en masse* could be gracious." Literal, materialistic Anya dies in an act of selfless, idealistic courage. Tara's last words express concern for Willow, not herself. Oz returns to Sunnydale to make things right with Willow and then leaves, a

second time, out of respect for her new life and her new relationship. Despite their fragility and uncertainty (or, perhaps, because of this), one is left with the impression that, maybe, the relationships actually matter as much as the mission.

Quotes are copied verbatim from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* DVD's, produced by Twentieth Century Fox Television and Film Corporation and by Mutant Enemy, Inc., in association with Kuzui Enterprises, Inc/Sandollar Television, Inc. Individual episodes, from which quotes are taken, are noted in the text by title and by the season in which they appeared.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the very helpful communication and comments I received from the editors and reviewers at *Slayage* as well as the conversational feedback I got from Jeffrey Bussolini, Rafael de la Dehesa, and Soniya Munshi. As well, I had the opportunity to present portions of this paper at conferences hosted by *Slayage* and by the Popular Culture Association of the South. This paper benefited from all of the above.

Works Cited

- Abbott, S. (2007). *Celluloid vampires: Life after death in the modern world*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bacon-Smith, C. (2003). The color of the dark. *Slayage*, 8. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage8/Bacon-Smith.htm>
- Bradney, A. (2006). The politics and ethics of researching the Buffyverse. *Slayage*, 19. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage19/Bradney.htm>
- Burns, A. (2006). Passion, pain and 'bad kissing decisions': Learning about intimate relationships from *Buffy* season six. *Slayage*, 21. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage21/Burns.htm>
- Callander, M. (2001). Bram Stoker's *Buffy*: Traditional Gothic and contemporary culture. *Slayage*, 3. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage3/callander.html>
- Faulkner, W. (1957). *As I lay dying*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Harbin, L. (2005). "You know you wanna dance": Buffy the vampire slayer as contemporary Gothic heroine. *Studies in the Humanities*, 33(1), 22-38.
- Hopkins, L. (2005). *Screening the Gothic*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Jowett, L. (2005). *Sex and the slayer: A gender studies primer for the Buffy fan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Kingston, A. (2004). *The meaning of wife*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

- Miller, L. (20 May 2003). Bye-bye Buffy! *Salon.com*.
- Miller, L. (30 July 2008). Touched by a vampire. *Salon.com*.
- Regensburg, N. (1998). *The Gothic family and the outsider*. Retrieved 15 April 2006, from University of Virginia Library's Special Collections Exhibits web-site: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/exhibits/gothic/natalie.html>
- Shelley, M. (1994, reprint of 1831 edition). *Frankenstein*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Siegel, C. (2005). *Goth's dark empire*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Turnbull, S. (2004). "Not just another Buffy paper': Towards an aesthetic of television. *Slayage*, 13/14. http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage13_14/Turnbull.htm
- Wilcox, R. (2006). *Why Buffy matters: The art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. New York: I.B. Tauris.