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**Whedon and His Players: A Report on New
Scholarship at SC4**

Introduction

[1] In 2008, Henderson State University hosted the third biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, under the leadership of philosophy professor Dr. Kevin K. Durand. For many attendees, the location of the conference meant that SC3 expanded beyond its status as an academic conference into a deeper cultural investigation of the United States. Whether it was people's first time in Arkansas, the South, outside an urban locale, or in a dry county (there were five adjacent counties where alcohol was not sold), SC3 proved to be a unique experience. It was a living example of the way in which Whedon Studies has given scholars the opportunity to speak in places they never thought they would go—as Rhonda Wilcox personally experienced and discussed in the chapter of her book *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* entitled "Show Me Your World: Exiting the Text and the Globalization of *Buffy*."



[2] Sadly absent from the many faces of SC4 attendees was that of Dr. Durand, but our hosts at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida—Drs. Jim and Tamara Wilson of Flagler's English Department—were equally generous with their time, presence, and facilities. Like SC3 in Arkadelphia, were it not for SC4, some of us may never have made it to St. Augustine, the "nation's oldest city." Other cities dispute the claim and some, like Pensacola and Fort Caroline, were founded earlier but destroyed and not reestablished until after St.

Augustine, but any way you cut the cake, St. Augustine is historic and incredibly beautiful.

[3] Flagler College rests minutes by foot from the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, and its campus is centered around Ponce de Leon Hall, formerly the Hotel Ponce de Leon, a prime exhibit of Spanish Renaissance architecture created as a luxury resort in 1888 by Henry Morrison Flagler, a prominent industrial pioneer. With original windows crafted by Louis Comfort Tiffany himself, electric wiring by the hands of Thomas Edison and murals flecked with gold, Ponce de Leon Hall is an awe-inspiring place and a dramatic background for the dramatic presentations that would occur at the end of the first full day of the conference during the Conference Banquet.

[4] Despite the beauty of the campus, the rich history of the area, stunning vistas, and (mostly) sunny weather, there was nothing that would distract the presenters and audiences at the conference from convening *inside* Flagler's auditoriums and new student center for nearly eight hours a day—granting the fact that the air conditioning was a welcome draw; and even when that failed one sweltering morning, we were still there.

[5] The first gathering in that welcome air conditioning was the conference's Welcome Reception. Academic conference participants often attend welcome receptions because a) they are too tired from travel to hunt for better food or libation in the conference city, b) they are too timid to adventure out alone in the conference city hunting for better food or libation and will put the exploration off until meeting someone equally timid with whom to explore, or c) they came only for the conference, don't want or need to leave the conference venue, so might as well consume the free food and, hopefully, free libation. Slayage attendees rarely fit any of these categories, which made this conference's welcome reception on Thursday evening a real joy. Tamara and Jim Wilson, along with Flagler College's food service provider, did a beautiful job of providing plentiful and tasty heavy hors d'oeuvres and drinks for Whedonites excited about seeing old friends and meeting new ones. First-time attendees learned that this was not

your mother's academic conference as they quickly found themselves part of the Slayage family. "Father of Whedon Studies" David Lavery provided the evening's feature presentation, with help from his "Not-Ready-For-Prime-Time Whedon Conversationalists," who took on the roles of Joss Whedon and various interviewers to show how Whedon's talent extends to the conversational mode. Lavery and Cynthia Burkhead are the editors of the forthcoming *Conversations with Joss Whedon*, due out in the spring of 2011.

[6] What follows now is a report/review of the conference presented in three separate voices with three different approaches to the project. Among Cynthia Burkhead (a professor at the University of North Alabama), Ian Klein (an MFA Dramaturgy Candidate at Columbia University), and David Kociemba (a media studies professor at Emerson College), a conference reviewer was at each keynote and special event at the conference, as well as almost every paper session. We hope we have done justice to the scope of excellent scholarship presented at SC4. Enjoy the recap!

What Cynthia Saw:

[7] I was excited about conference sessions getting underway, and Friday morning's session, "Vampires and other Monsters I," certainly fulfilled my anticipation. The session began with J. Bowers' analysis of *Buffy's* William the Bloody as a 19th-Century neurasthenic, a sufferer of a disease characterized by chronic fatigue and weakness. The disease, often called "The American Disease" or "Americanitis," was typically diagnosed in those living in urban areas. Bowers traced the symptoms of the disease in William, including his inability to find words. Notably, Bowers completed the fascinating analysis by offering that the cures often prescribed for neurasthenia were blood and travel, both of which William attains through his transformation to Spike. Following Bowers, Shelley Rees and Tom Connelly looked at *Dollhouse* to show how Whedon presents an alienated world brought about by the removal of subjects, the dolls, from "cause/effect consequences that are part of dialectical models" of history. Because the Dolls do not

participate in the events that follow their actions as Dolls, and because they do not have the opportunity to incorporate moments of experience on a dialectical timeline, they are alienated or "de-historicized." Rees and Connelly offered consumerism as a prevalent cause of this alienation. Alpha was presented as an "anamorphic image" in *Dollhouse* who, in his place of power, enhances the displacement or distortion of truth associated with the Dollhouse and instead lays bare its ugliness.

[8] The Friday afternoon session, "Characters 1: Faith, Willow, Dr. Saunders, Illyria," began with a presentation by Virginia Grant on "Faith in Feminism." I had been anticipating my friend Ginny's presentation for years, since I was lucky enough to participate in long talks with her during the birth of her ideas about Faith's feminism. Grant argued that in Faith's early characterization in *Buffy*, Faith is what Buffy would be if Buffy did not have her supporting community. As a model of Second Wave feminism, Faith seems to neither want nor need help, which masculinizes her. Grant established the cause of this condition as the absence of choice created by Faith's upbringing. When presented with community, Faith rejects it because that community does not recognize her attempts to embrace good, so she turns to "the dark side." Faith's transition to Third Wave feminist begins when she sees others (Angel, Willow, Buffy) defend her against the Watcher's Council and is complete by the time she is brought back to Sunnydale by Willow in Season Seven of *Buffy*. Faith admits that she no longer wants to be Buffy, a statement indicating the absence of the masculine competitiveness that characterized her as a Second Wave feminist. Heather Porter followed this presentation with a fascinating study, "'If you could be...you know, plain old Willow or super Willow, who would you be?': Examining Willow's Use of Intelligence and Violence in *Buffy*." Porter argued that Willow is the most intelligent villain in the Buffyverse. Porter used Sternberg's model of successful intelligence and measured Willow's violence using the Parent's Television Council report methodology, scoring Willow's intelligence vs. Dark Willow's, and compared Willow's violent acts against all other villains in the Buffyverse to show Willow was more creative as Dark Willow, more successful as Dark Willow, and significantly more violent as Dark

Willow. Porter concluded by arguing that Willow is a better judge of when to use intelligence and violence than Dark Willow. Alys Hornick completed this session with her presentation, "There is No Cure for That: Illyria, Dr. Saunders, and the Gendered Body in *Angel* and *Dollhouse*." Hornick offered a comparison of Illyria and Dr. Saunders to the Borg, a combination of machine and human technology created within the diegesis of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Until the process of transition from Fred to Illyria is complete, the character is referred to as "it," while Illyria probably has a masculine self-perception. Hornick argued that Illyria is framed by Knox's male gaze, and there is systematic sexism in response to Illyria and "its" gendering by others as female. In contrast, Hornick stated that Dolls more closely resemble cyborgs than Illyria does. Dr. Saunders was originally male, but Topher creates in her his idea of a woman. Ultimately, according to Hornick, both *Angel* and *Dollhouse* work to feminize "women" to make characters acceptable.

[9] After hearing them talk about their work during outdoor breaks, I was really looking forward to Friday afternoon's focused analysis by three Georgia State University scholars, "Beyond the Buffybot: Joss Whedon's Posthumanism." Julie Hawk began the discussion with a look at Echo's subjectification as an indicator of Whedon's posthuman narrative, a story that Echo changes once she finds her place within it. Hawk compared Echo to Buffy, who also changed her role in her story when she altered her very being by sharing her power with potential slayers. In *Dollhouse*, according to Hawk, Echo's Buffy-like "chosenness" becomes rather than is, and it is her acceptance of her "compositeness" that brings her power, indicated in her offering, "My real name is Echo." Like Buffy, Echo saved the world with the help of others, essentially rewriting the story, but she did not change the world. Keeping with the theme of posthumanist narrative, Vicki Willis looked at the hybridity of form in *Dr. Horrible* to suggest that Whedon's message may be in the medium itself. The shifting identity between hero and villain allowed by the hybrid form allows Horrible to become superhuman, "beyond human, more than human" and, thus, "posthuman." Humanism in the narrative is

exemplified by Penny and Billy, with Horrible offering the contrasting posthumanism. Casey McCormick completed this session with an analysis arguing that *Dollhouse* is a techno-apocalyptic narrative, secularized though its loss of cultural meaning and exploration of capitalism and power. Taking Freud's premise that humanism ends when humans accept we are incapable of knowing our own minds and combining that with the separation of mind and body that characterizes posthumanism, McCormick argued that *Dollhouse* presents the idea that acceptance of posthumanism can break the cycle of technological innovation being turned to violent use. Each paper in this session adeptly presented Whedon's posthumanism from a different vantage point.

[10] Friday's final session, "Power and Passion in the Whedonverses," focused on the theme of relationships and identity. Elizabeth Story's "Foucault and The Dollhouse: Examining Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* through the Work of Michel Foucault" looked at *Dollhouse* through Foucault's ideas of power and power structures. The Dolls represent Foucault's "docile bodies" over which the high-class institution exercises control. The Attic is the ultimate example of subjection of the body by the state (corporation). Surveillance of the Dolls is compared to Foucault's description of surveillance in the school, with the entire *Dollhouse* being a space in which the Dolls cannot see out while they are the subjects of outsiders' viewing. Tracey Bealer looked at the relationship between watched and watcher in "Who Watches the Watchers?: Gender and Power in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*." The presentation was edited to include just *Buffy*. Bealer identified the different paradigms represented in the relationship between Giles and Buffy, which included teacher/student, textual knowledge/experiential knowledge, and father/daughter. The father/daughter relationship fails because, unlike a father, the watcher cannot expect his slayer to stay a child forever. Giles' success as a watcher results from his ignoring the rules for a watcher and building a relationship with Buffy based on mutual respect instead. The final presenter in this session was Co-Local Arrangements Chair Tamara Wilson, who delivered a paper titled "'Don't Know Much About

Chemistry': Attraction and Delayed/Denied Passion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*." Wilson argued that attraction is almost always painful suffering in *Buffy*, while in *Dollhouse*, is it merely erasable. Examples from *Buffy* included Spike, who desired a soul and gave his life for love, and Angel, who was cursed with a soul and killed by the woman he loved. Wilson turned Shakespeare's question from *The Merchant of Venice* on its head to show that in the *Dollhouse*, "Fancy is bred in the head, and not the heart."

[11] Lorna Jowett opened Saturday's events with her keynote, "Stuffing a Rabbit in It: Character, Narrative, and Time in the Whedonverses." Jowett's presentation focused on Whedon's contribution to the increasing importance of character in television narrative, using a phrase from *Dollhouse* to argue that the TV character is an "empty hat until you stuff a rabbit in it." Much of Jowett's presentation had to do with the subject of time. Fantastic narratives use time in ways realistic drama doesn't; they have the ability to create social surrealism out of social realism. Memory retrieval through the flashback both extends the temporal range of the narrative and gives it novelty, always producing drama in the story. Jowett broke Whedon's major narratives to show how flashback is used; in *Angel* as in all of Whedon's stories, the flashback is used to provide back story, but it also presents changes in the title character, subverting the idea that vampires do not change. Viewers are also introduced to prophecy through the flashbacks, predominantly in *Angel* and *Buffy*. In *Firefly*, war flashbacks provide the opportunity for narrative expansion, allowing for introduction of new characters and other storylines related to the war flashbacks. Jowett associated Dolls from the *Dollhouse* with characters outside the Whedonverses, replicants and Cylons, to show how created memories contribute to the complexity of the narrative. In *Angel*, Connor also has "built memories," which contradicts the essentialism of Tabula Rasa. Jowett pointed to Connor, who returns to help Angel because he *knows* he is Angel's son, not because he remembers it, and to Buffy, who saves Dawn *knowing* Dawn is not her real sister, to show further how Whedon questions the nature of memory. In a very interesting part of the

analysis, Jowett pointed out how "Orpheus" (*Angel* 4.15) allows Angel and Angelus to see each other as viewers see them, merging the flashback with the present moment to negotiate questions of identity.

[12] The Saturday afternoon sessions included a block of presentations on Whedonbots. There was much anticipation in the audience for discussion that promised to link bots in the Whedonverse to another much beloved program, *Battlestar Galactica*. Alan Rosiene's presentation, "Little to No 'Bots: The Limits of AI in *Firefly*," took a close look at *Firefly*'s technology and concluded that most of the technology in this verse relies upon human programming and operation. The only AI-capable tech is *Firefly*'s autopilot. The only android in the verse is Lenore, Mr. Universe's love bot, but it is unfeeling, inhuman. Very interestingly, Rosiene analyzed humans in *Firefly* as potential metaphors for robots. In "Metal Love: Dolls, Robots, Cyborgs, and Cylons in the Whedonverse and Beyond," Matt Ruane broke down the differences between robots, androids, and cyborgs and categorized within his system Whedon's bots and Dolls, as well as *Blade Runner*'s replicants and *Battlestar*'s Cylons in order to analyze the ability to love found in each. Ruane points out that while Whedonbots were programmed to love, April's emotions evolved beyond her programming, as shown when she gets jealous of Warren's new girlfriend. Ruane classified River as gynoid, a programmed human who is neither completely human nor completely robotic. Ruane found *Battlestar*'s Cylons the most human and most complicated of the creations considered. Since they are capable of emotional disturbance, they must be capable of love. Lisa Perdigao's paper, "'This one's broken': Rebuilding Really Real Bots in the Whedonverses," traced the root of emotion in Dolls and *Buffy*'s April to memory, which is something Cylons and replicants also possess. These memories "become the internal narratives in which our emotions are the themes, or the outcomes of the stories," which Perdigao argued is true for bots as well as humans.

[13] Saturday's late afternoon session was the third panel devoted to *Buffy*. Malgorzata Drewniok looked at various transformative states in "'I feel strong. I feel different':

Transformations, Vampires and Language in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." After categorizing different vampire states (background, conventional, contemporary, good, etc.), Drewniok closely analyzed the way language changes when, for instance, a vampire is created or gains a soul. The presentation also looked at Buffy's revival from death and compared her language loss to Spike's return from his soul-gaining experience to show that both exhibited a loss of language. Jesse James Stommel analyzed another transformative state, death, in "The Ecstatic Corpse: The Buffyverse and What Becomes of Bodies Once They're Dead." This very striking presentation looked closely at "The Body" (*Buffy* 5.16) to show how the composition of Joyce's dead body on the screen and the evolving stages of death are read textually by the viewer. The *Angel* episode "A Hole in the World" (5.15) was also examined for its treatment of Fred's death and transformation to Illyria, emphasizing the idea that the body is merely a vessel. In the final presentation in this session, "Going Crazy in the Buffyverse: Trauma and Femininity," Jennifer Baldwin examined Drusilla and Tara to show how onscreen portrayals often misrepresent specific mental disorders.

[14] The Sunday morning sessions kicked off with "Gender in the Whedonverses II." Soniyama Munshi looked at violent relationships in *Buffy* to show that the way the violence is addressed differs from traditional state and institutional responses and, thus, creates opportunity for change and redemption. "'You faced the monster inside of you and you fought back': Masculinity, Violence, Accountability and Transformational Politics in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" argued through the cases of Angel and Spike that the community must recognize the complexity of "monsters," or violent people, to see that not all are unredeemable, and this recognition is required for the process of change. Another beautiful visual presentation, Lauren Schultz's "'It's Showtime': The Spectacle of the Female Body in Joss Whedon's Work" argued that in the Whedonverse, female bodies are not positioned for objectification in camera shots. Using examples of Buffy, Dolls, and River, Schultz showed how these characters differed on screen from the physical presentation of women in older films (Berkely), or earlier

TV series like *Charlie's Angels* or *Wonder Woman*. Schultz also showed how Buffy is usually the "anti-action hero," not performing her "slayerness." Even when she does, as in the Thunderdome scene in "Showtime" (7.11), Buffy remains grounded, a complete human who "paradoxically has physical power." Candra Gill's paper, "On Soldiers and Sages: Problematizing the Roles of Black Men in the Whedonverses," argued that black males rarely self-empower in Whedon's work; they typically either "assist or infringe on female empowerment." Gill looked at antagonists Trick, Forest, the shadow men, Jubal Early, Boyd, and the Operative to show how these black male characters were set up as threats to white women. Gill argued that other black male characters, Robin Wood and Gunn, undergo varying degrees of ethnic erasure.

[15] My last session of the conference, focusing on "Religion and Philosophy in the Whedonverses," included one of my favorite presentations, Marcus Recht's "Gender and Christian Iconology in Angel and Spike's Visualization." Recht's research method involved carefully capturing and studying shots of Angel and Spike being tortured and shots of human characters undergoing torture. The images clearly showed Recht's thesis, that the images of the male vampires are built upon images of Christ during the crucifixion, specifically in body position, degree of undress, and objects penetrating their bodies. Recht interpreted these images to show the vampires' association with Christian masochism and their feminization/castration shown through their passivity during torture. In contrast, humans undergoing torture have their arms bound behind them, are totally clothed, and have either no object penetration or it is hidden. Recht concluded his presentation with other Christian images in *Buffy* and stated he found gender ambivalence in his study of these images. A rare treat at an academic conference, Rabb and Richardson performed part of their presentation on "Memory and Identity in Whedon's Narrative Ethics: Reading the Whedonverses Through *Dollhouse* and *Dr. Horrible*." Rabb and Richardson did a Tai Chi demonstration to show how experience creates memory (in the case of Tai Chi, through repetition and visualization, muscles remember what to do). This was offered as a

metaphor to show the plausibility of the science of implanted memory shown in *Dollhouse*. Rabb and Richardson read this as a metaphor for all identity. Like Buffy and Caroline, we opt to interpret and change our experiences (memories) as needed to act in the present, selecting one goal over another, with our choice ultimately determining who we are. River uses her memories to triumph over those who tortured her with them. *Dr. Horrible* alters his memories of his heist based on his choice of goals, but the choice is ultimately taken away by the choices he makes. The last presenter in this session was Madeline Muntersbjorn, who analyzed "Disgust, Difference, and Displacement in the Dollhouse." Muntersbjorn contrasted dualism and identity theory to arrive at the conclusion that people/viewers can be disgusted with others/dolls/vampire only if they have never made a serious good-faith effort to see the world through the other's eyes, and can get over the disgust only if an imaginative attempt is made to see them as human. This reader-centered presentation argued ultimately that difference between "us" and the Dolls (or vampires) is determined by point of view and agenda.

What Ian Saw:

[16] In many ways, Joss Whedon's many multimedia projects remain undoubtedly unique perhaps in ways that will never be legitimately challenged, but since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended in 2003, the world has entered into what might be deemed a "Golden Era" of television. Since SC3 we have witnessed the end of such critically-lauded series as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* in addition to discovering new instances of popular culture that appear to be influenced largely or in part by Whedon. Of course, the reverse is often true with Whedon's television shows, demonstrating cultural roots that extend back well beyond the last half a century. *Slayage* is a continual reminder of the significance of intertextuality and the importance of tracing influence both popular and otherwise throughout Whedon's past and future works and the ever-expanding cultural landscape where the

name of Joss Whedon might not be written in stone but is present nonetheless.

Day 1

[17] In the aptly titled panel session “The Whedonverse and Other ‘Verses,” Jennifer K. Stuller and Hugh Marlowe explored both ends of the Whedon timeline. Marlowe kicked off my first session of the conference with an eye-opening presentation on the Nickelodeon television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that ran from 2005 to July 2008 and has recently been adapted into a live action feature film. Marlowe’s work was an investigation of the parallels between the Scooby Gang and the gang that surrounds the character of Aang in the *Airbender* series. (The latter prompted me to ask myself whether that would make it a “Gaang.”) Like the Slayer, only one is born into the Avatar role, but it is through a close network of friends that the chosen one can fulfill his or her hero role, namely within the enchanted universes that both of these character groups inhabit.

[18] If Marlowe’s work took his audience into the future of *Buffy*’s cultural influence, Stuller’s visually impressive presentation took us back in time through a survey of the core tropes derived from some of Whedon’s favorite material. Her talk subtitled, “A Brief History of the Best, Worst, Known, and Not So Known Pop Culture Influences on the Whedonverse” was preceded by a thrilling 1950’s B-movie style trailer which both introduced us to her topic and her own brand of scholarly work on gender and sexuality under, the name, “*Ink-Stained Amazon*.” Tracing visual cues from *Night of the Comet*’s “cheerleaders with guns!” to Kiefer Sutherland’s vamped, punk style from *The Lost Boys* and narrative themes of adolescence, maturity, and family from *Near Dark*, Marvel comics, and the Muppets, Stuller presented an outline that begins to answer the question of “What is Whedonian?” So much of what Whedon has done would not be possible without a plethora of previous popular media texts, and if the narrative trends demonstrated by Marlowe’s paper, “*Buffy & Aang: Modern Heroes Tussle with Angst*” are to continue—and there appears to be no reason

why they won't—a wealth of future texts will owe a great deal to the legacy of *Buffy*.

[19] It won't be just media that will continue to show signs of *Buffy's* considerable cultural presence—it will show in people too, as argued in Vivien Burr's paper on "Buffy as Role Model: Her Significance for Female Viewers" in the subsequent panel I attended, the first of the conference to be devoted solely to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. A psychologist and social scientist, Burr explored the questions of whether *Buffy* is in fact a feminist show and whether it enforces or proposes new forms of femininity. Through conversations with women and men of various ages and occupations, Burr confirmed that the relationship between media texts and individual psychology is complicated and that these questions cannot be answered through empirical studies alone. Her research showed that for the women in her studies, *Buffy* came to define femininity and that she proved a positive influence for young women and that femininity and strength need not be mutually exclusive.

[20] *Buffy's* strength is intimately tied to her abilities on the battlefield, particularly when it comes to sharing her strength with potential Slayers during the struggle with the First in the final season of *Buffy*. Ensley Guffey determined the relative success of *Buffy's* command style and ability to commit others to battle. In his presentation, Guffey applied real-world principles of military leadership to *Buffy* both in Season Seven and the Season Eight comics. He referred to her command style in "Chosen" (7.22) as exemplary of "brilliant generalship" and the "pinnacle of *Buffy's* command" while contrasting it to the division of responsibility and the lack of cohesion in the Slayer army in Season Eight.

[21] In Season Seven and throughout the series (with the exception of Season Eight as it is presented entirely in comic form), *Buffy's* greatest battles were all presented with an epic score. (I have been known to let the menu on the last disk of *Buffy* cycle through numerous times in order to experience the heart-pounding score which also accompanies the battle in the Hellmouth.) Beginning with a pop-

quiz on musical cues throughout *Buffy*, Neil Lerner of Davidson College compared the first 150 seconds of *Buffy* to the last 150 seconds of the series. One particular audience member, Janet Halfyard, had a severely unfair advantage in Lerner's quiz portion, having given that morning's keynote address as well as devoting a significant portion of her career to the study of music in the Whedonverse. I felt very privileged to hear not one but two remarkable investigations of the music in *Buffy* at the conference, not to mention hearing them in one day. It was the first time I had heard such detailed investigations of music in *Buffy* and such welcome extensions of the field of *Buffy* studies. Both talks left me anxious to read more. Thankfully, I can do so in Halfyard's recently published book *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the upcoming *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon*.

[22] Also new to me and all of us at SC4 was the conference presence of a new Joss Whedon property. Premiering over half a year after SC3, *Dollhouse* was ripe for conversation and analysis. I had the opportunity to chair the second *Dollhouse* panel as well as present my own research on the show. David Fritts kicked off the panel with his paper on "Science, Religion, and Magic in *Dollhouse*." Fritts made the claim that *Dollhouse* "champions the irrational" notably in the character of Topher whose actions across the show reflect a fluid relationship with magic, which Fritts described as "religion times science." Fritts thus framed Topher as a God-like figure in his power over the Actives. Fritts supported this claim by noting Claire Saunders' explicit reference to Topher as "Lord God Almighty" and describing the Active/Handler bonding script as a kind of liturgy. It was during this rumination on Topher-as-God that a crack of thunder shook the room, instantly solidifying this moment as one of the most resonant if not eerie moments of the conference! As most of his research dealt with Season One, I would have liked to hear more about the shifts made in Topher's character especially in regard to the many religious artifacts that surrounded Topher in both the "Epitaph" (1.13, 2.13) episodes of the series, but it remained a refreshing and interesting look at *Dollhouse*.

[23] Kevin Oberlin was next on the agenda, presenting his paper "Winning at Dolls: *Dollhouse* as a Zero-Sum Game." Using the terms "zero-sum" and "non-zero-sum," Oberlin identified situations within *Dollhouse* wherein characters' actions result in maintaining a status quo across parties or the more common result wherein someone loses or someone wins. An example of this occurs in the typical hiring scenario of a Doll. The Dollhouse wins by acquiring monetary value, the client gets what he or she "needs" and a Doll such as Echo wins by fulfilling her contract. On the contrary, sometimes Echo wins in the evolution of her identity and the Dollhouse loses (i.e., the engagement goes south and Dollhouse loses money.) I kept wondering what the "sum" of *Dollhouse* becomes at the end of the series. Who wins? Who loses? Echo might have gained numerous personalities including Paul's, but what has she lost in the process? Caroline certainly loses. The Dollhouse loses as its business model but becomes a safe-haven for former Actives in the process. Following this paper, I still had many questions about the benefits of the "zero-sum" analysis, but the rhetoric with which Oberlin engaged the series was ultimately intriguing.

[24] Finally, I gave my paper, "'I Like My Scars': Claire Saunders and the Narrative of Flesh." This was an abridged version of a chapter appearing in the upcoming book, *Inside Joss' Dollhouse: From Alpha to Rossum*. In it, I explored the way in which Saunders' scars inflicted upon her by Alpha and resulting in a permanent personality imprint are intimately tied to the construction of a redemptive self-image, a process similar to that of multiple slave narratives both fictional and otherwise including that of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Harriet Tubman. In coming to view the scars as something that belonged to her, Saunders was able to shape a solid identity and gain personal freedom in the process.

[25] Next up was the first panel on an even shorter-lived television series, *Firefly*, and the movie that followed in its wake, *Serenity*. Adele H. Bealer gave one of the more philosophically rooted papers I had yet seen at the conference with her "Treatise on *Fireflyology*: The Rhizomatic Whedonverse." She discussed the

mythology of the frontier in relation to the individual nomad and his progression towards autonomy and self-fulfillment indicated at one point when Jubal Early, floating untethered in the black of space in "Objects in Space" (1.14) states simply, "Well, here I am." Emily Carroll Shearer's paper also looked at an individual's journey through space, that of Malcolm Reynolds, as she challenged the relevance of Joseph Campbell's hero model. As in *Firefly*, "things never go smooth," so variations to the monomyth in Mal's case prompted Shearer to suggest in the Q&A session that *Firefly* may be looked at instead from a Tolkien perspective because a "fellowship" around Mal supports him on his way. Closing the panel with her paper, "River's Gift: The Production of the Affective Body in *Firefly* and *Serenity*" was Dr. Katheryn Wright. She argued that River's gift was that of being birthed of a technological incursion that intensified the ability of River's body to be open to both its environment and its potential for "continuous change." Like Dark Willow and Cordelia, this allowed River to become incredibly empathic towards others. She cannot help but *feel* everything around her including space and minds. It was a highly engaging paper and one that prompted many more fascinating ideas, including "mirror neurons" (similar to the resonance of sound) that in theory aid in the production of sympathy and empathy between two people.

[26] Two people who were certainly resonant in mind and sound that evening were Conference Banquet speakers, Matthew Pateman and Nikki Stafford. Pateman (author of *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and Stafford (author of episode guidebooks on *Buffy*, *Angel*, and other popular genre television shows) joined forces by way of long distance phone calls to craft perhaps the most performative speech of the conference. It should be noted that they would also win the prize for longest title of the conference (if not ever): "'Oh, wouldn't it be tragic if you were here being kinda silly with your comically paralyzed sister while Willow was dying?' or 'Excellent. Now. Do we suspect that there may be some connection between Ben and Glory?': The Tragic-Comic/Comic-Tragic Methods of Miscommunication on *Buffy*." Through humor, pop-culture infused wit,

and scholarly debate, Pateman and Stafford addressed a question pertinent to fans and academics alike of whether *Buffy* should be classified as a “comic drama” or a “dramatic comedy,” a “taxonomic tension” as per Mr. Pateman that “underpins our discussion.” It was a dramatic confrontation of epic proportion. The architecturally dramatic space of the Ponce de Leon Dining Hall, with its Tiffany windows and gold-leafed murals, was the perfect backdrop for the friendly feud, followed by a lively Whedon sing-along with selections from *Buffy*’s “Once More With Feeling” and *Firefly*.

Day 2

[27] The next day began with carnage. Ryan Warden’s “Dead and Still Pretty: The Subversion and Subsequent Elimination of the Final Girl in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” examined the trope of the one remaining female character at the end of slasher films. This girl is generally brunette, boyish—often with a male name like Marti or Joey—and sexually reluctant. The blond girl is the one who usually dies first and often after having sex. *Buffy* subverts these established customs of the horror genre making it Willow, the educated one with the boy name—Will—who at least in the first half of the series is in need of saving by the blond who is in fact not a “ditz” but a savior in the form of Buffy, a manifestation of Whedon’s sympathy for the blond victim. Warden placed the redistribution of power with Will’s eventual prominence as a force in battle and the potential Slayers in conversation with Third Wave feminism theory, showing the increased relevance of *Buffy*’s clash against the old models of the horror genre. It was a fresh and welcome addition to the study of *Buffy* in relation to gender representations.

[28] In her paper, Shiloh Carroll ruminated on how Whedon and company define maturity in *Buffy*. After looking at several characters through the lens of her own definition of maturity consisting of the ability to define rules and to live up to responsibilities, Carroll suggested that perhaps it is Xander who matures the most across the series, thereby serving as an analog for the viewer.

[29] Finally, philosopher Joe Valazquez gave his paper co-authored by Agnes Curry, "Skies of coupled colour: Humor and Fright in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," which presented a new methodology for categorizing character and environment pairings across the show. It was a completely unexpected study and one of the most intellectually thrilling papers of the conference. He introduced the term "value" as being anything that has impact and meaning and is not always something positive. When different values come into contact with one another, these can combine to create a greater effect even if this effect seems incongruous. In *Buffy* for example, this can happen when Buffy challenges a vampire with a witty comment. This value combination, "wordplay + evil," garners a new result, courage. Any value interaction across any television series or real-life social situation produces a kind of "underscoring" for life as the values act on each other, complicating reality and leading to new ways of understanding surroundings. I left the room with a strong desire to take a class from him and learn more about this challenging yet extremely applicable concept.

[30] The next session on my agenda was "Sexuality in the Whedonverse" featuring this year's Mr. Pointy Paper award winner, H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent's, for her paper "Buffy/Satsu: Pure Genius or Out Of Character?" Unfortunately I was not able to attend this presentation nor Kai Shuart's "I Kissed a Boy: Depiction of Male Fluid Sexuality in the Buffyverse." However, I was privileged to see the inception of Frohard-Dourlent's research for this paper at the Southwest Texas Popular and American Culture Association's conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, last year and was pleased that she embraced the new medium of *Buffy* Season Eight while applying highly sophisticated analyses of character and sexuality. That the session was at standing room only when I entered attested to the session's popularity. The last presentation, Ananya Mukherjea's paper on the metaphoric use of animal imagery and the wild nature of men in the Whedonverse explored new, valuable areas of study and prompted very positive feedback from the audience.

[31] In a session on law and the mind in Joss Whedon's work, neuroscientist Sherry Ginn gave a science-intensive talk on the physiological and psychological alterations undergone by River during her time in Alliance possession. I learned more about brain functions and anatomy than I have at any one time in my life, and I appreciated every second of it.

[32] Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan continued with an in-depth discussion of the Watcher's Council and Buffy's ongoing struggle with this hardnosed group via the legal term *stare decisis*, the policy to stand by precedent. Buffy's reluctance to the policy reflects the cons of *stare decisis* through its lack of value of human experience and emotions and its reinforcement of cognitive biases.

[33] Jeffrey Bussolini rounded out the panel with an investigation of Whedon's "voice" in conversation with the theme of experimentation and psychological manipulation citing interviews, quotes from *Dollhouse's* series opener, the *Buffy* episode directly confronting the notion of psychosis, "Normal Again" (6.17), Spike's chip and Adam's monologue on identity in Season Four, and the storyline of the Reavers from *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

Day 3

[34] The third and final full day of conference activities began with Dale Koontz's opening Session Keynote address "Twelve Steps Forward, One Step Back: Redemption Through Recovery in the Works of Joss Whedon." The metaphor of Willow's magic addiction as a stand-in substance abuse is not unfamiliar to most viewers of *Buffy*, but it is often taken at face value without a close analysis of the effects and meaning of her condition. Koontz did not give any leeway to Whedon's characters when it came to dealing with such a serious issue. Like Frohard-Dourlent, Koontz readily engaged *Buffy* Season Eight and Willow's presence therein while proposing that perhaps Whedon's choice to let her continue to use magic is disingenuous and in fact takes "one step back" in so doing. Referencing the redemptive narratives of Angel, Faith, and even Iron Man from Whedon's upcoming

directorial project, *The Avengers*, Koontz concluded that “Whedon is fascinated not with illness but recovery.” Koontz deftly prodded her audience to contemplate the responsibility of Whedon as show creator and the gravity of addiction.

[35] The last traditional panel of the conference I attended was “Actors, Production Design, Wardrobe,” a chance for presenters to explore the practical and creative decision-making processes that went into bringing Whedon’s scripts to the screen. “The Whedonverse as a Döppelgangland,” by Sarah Jacknis, noted the many Whedonverse actors who have appeared as two or more characters throughout Whedon’s work. She described how discrepancies between intertextual casting can enhance or problematize audience expectations and narrative depending on the nature of the characters and which character the audience witnessed first. The next paper, “‘I ate a decorator once’: Production Design in the Whedonverse,” by Clare Floyd DeVries, a professional set designer, brought her audience an extensive look at the aesthetic qualities of the physical world of the Whedonverse, an area not often explored at *Slayage* or other academic arenas. In addition to sharing many behind-the-scenes details and production facts, DeVries noted the ways in which production design reflected character as well as Whedon’s collaborative mentality as a director.

[36] It was soon thereafter that the time came for presenters and other attendees to come together and answer the question of where *Buffy* fits in the world of academia in the roundtable discussion, “Slaying with Pedagogy: Teaching *Buffy* to the Millennials.” Some of the questions touched on, if not answered, included: How does an educator make *Buffy* relevant to this generation? How does one accommodate those who have never seen *Buffy* at all? How does a professor convince his or her authorities that the text is worthy? How does one structure a course on *Buffy*? Jodie Kreider of the University of Denver served as the chair for this essential panel including Meghan Winchell (Nebraska Wesleyan U), David Kociemba (Emerson College), Kristopher Woofter (Dawson College), and Rod Romesburg (Rollins College), all of whom had made *Buffy* a presence in their classrooms

prior to this panel. The challenges of this task range from combating institutional presumptions (Kociemba observed that television is still the bastard stepchild of film) to constructing a syllabus that is fair to both new watchers of the series and students who are “crazy passionate just like us” as Romesburg noted. But teaching *Buffy* also has big rewards for students. Kociemba argued that *Buffy* may present a “rare opportunity” to analyze a long-running narrative, and historian Kreider alluded to the way in which studying *Buffy* can show students that they can “write, teach and succeed in academia through the things you love.” It was a conversation that should happen more than every two years at *Slayage*, particularly when scholars like Romesburg suggest such bold concepts as the idea that *Buffy* may even serve well as an introduction to television itself. I know I have not looked at television the same since I saw *Buffy*. I strongly suspect that has been and would be the case for many others.

[37] Knowing that I would be writing this report as I went into my first session of the conference, I quickly began focusing on two major questions: how this conference would differentiate itself from the previous *Slayage* conference and how it would advance Whedon academia. As the study of *Buffy* and other Whedon works has expanded, I have observed a trend towards greater specificity even in the last two years since SC3. More and more papers and presentations have taken the text in more surprising and exciting directions with tighter and tighter focuses, whether this be on a specific musical theme or moment (Janet Halfyard and Neil Lerner’s work) or a specific episode previously undocumented in detail (Rhonda Wilcox’s investigation of tonal shifts in “Pangs” 4.8). Some have begun to look at the proliferation of tropes, structures, tones, and characterizations in other works that may very well have found their inception within Whedon’s work, particularly *Buffy*. These may deal heavily with intertextuality, homage, and other kinds of pop-culture echoes.

[38] Thanks to the work of writers like Rhonda Wilcox, David Lavery, Matthew Pateman, Elizabeth Rambo, and Dale Koontz, among many others, the foundation of *Buffy* studies has been well established. As a result it can be tremendously intimidating for new

scholars entering this field since there is a wealth of text already devoted to it. However, it is not at all the case that everything that can be said about *Buffy* has already been said. I view the challenge of developing new and insightful material as a welcome one. We can't all be the "Mother of Buffy Studies" like Rhonda Wilcox, but to extend the metaphor, we can all aspire to be innovative, talented, offspring with our own unique voices in this stellar community of cultural guardians.

What David Saw:

***Dollhouse*: "It's Fun to Say!"**

[39] The complexity of the investigation into the nature of consciousness and the self made *Dollhouse* the spark for several excellent papers this year. Indeed, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was nearly dethroned for the first time in Slayage conference history, as 22 papers dealt with *Dollhouse* in full or in part.

[40] Mike Starr made a convincing case that Gilles Deleuze provides an essential window into this series' understanding of identity. Deleuzian concepts inform the series, with notable examples including understanding Echo as an assemblage rather than an empty vessel awaiting Caroline's return, the self as "populated by multiplicities," and power being situated in connectivity rather than essences.

[41] The panel on memory in *Dollhouse* was perhaps the most cohesive I saw at the conference, making it no coincidence that it sparked a productive discussion after the presentations by Laura ten Thije Boonkkamp, Erika Johnson-Lewis, and Katie Whitlock. Boonkkamp described the series as a productively incoherent text, setting up conflicts to inherited ideas of memory for the viewers to sort out. Her paper and Johnson-Lewis' each outlined types of memory retained in these Dolls' blank slates: physical (Dolls have muscle memory of fight moves, experience lactation, have an adult's motor control and balance), emotional (they bond), déjà vu, social memory (they wear

clothes, don't act like toddlers), semantic (they speak English), genetic (ability to withstand imprints), and even traits (Bennett references Echo's character being a constant).

[42] Whitlock's paper also noted that gender is an ongoing performance enacted by the dolls through costume and double entendre. In "Belle Chose" (2.3), neither Echo nor Victor experience disorientation when waking up in a body of another sex, despite their different biological parts. In addition, Whitlock observed that the viewer can't blank the slate of the actor, which is one of the challenges that Eliza Dushku faces, as the best known actor amongst those playing Dolls. (Indeed, Whitlock's presentation generally highlighted the great need in the scholarship for detailed analysis of the performances of the actors in Whedon's works.)

[43] For all the presenters, the series ultimately makes no claim to an investigation of a Natural Man, in John Locke's sense of the term. (Although the Echo-Victor-Sierra triad may indicate that a sense of tribe, and the pursuit of connection may be a trait that defines Whedon's sense of essential humanity.) Despite being referred to as empty vessels by their corporate masters, the series makes clear that this term indicates a desire to elide how total their control is. Dolls are vessels filled with the minimum necessary for ease of control.

"There's a demon that comes out in me": Dealing with Dangerous Texts

[44] One of the interesting things to note across panels was the reaction of Whedon scholars to the *Twilight* phenomenon. This attention is understandable, given the fact that Stephenie Meyer stated that she had nothing to learn from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Clearly, panelists were thinking about the issue entering the conference, as the essay-vid *Buffy v. Edward* by Jonathan McIntosh won the coveted Short Mr. Pointy award. The video critiques the extremely creepy Bella-Edward relationship lovingly endorsed in the *Twilight* saga by replacing Bella with Buffy in the reaction shots, while the accompanying essay shows how Whedon used then subverted the same issues of male

control and dominance in Buffy and Angel's relationship.

[45] At the pedagogy roundtable, the issue became a matter of debate. The chair expressed some dismay at her students endorsing the *Twilight* books. Several audience members discussed their concerns. Matthew Pateman suggested that Whedon scholars must think through how the discipline should react to new texts, given its relative success in the field of television studies and its own background fighting for serious appraisal of a mass cultural artifact. (Of course, the power dynamic is reversed culturally. Several speakers at various panels mentioned that fans of Whedon's work were a minority in their classes. In my experience teaching at a media arts school, however, watching *Buffy* had entered the TV canon for my students, who generally recognized it as a necessary part of their education, like *Twin Peaks*.) I've found *Buffy v. Edward* to be an excellent catalyst for discussion in my classrooms. As the piece doesn't criticize Bella's (or the reader's) desires but rather Edward's behaviors, it allows for discussion less marked by defensiveness. Tanya Cochran expressed some dismay that teachers would discourage reading of any text, on the grounds that the activity of reading was at least as important as the content of the material read. And Melissa Miller, having presented a paper on Bella's cultural value, advanced the idea that there might be something appealing and worthwhile about this character, despite the fact that a surface reading would regard her as an isolated, disempowered, stalked, and passive woman. (I'm clearly a bit skeptical, but I'd like to read her paper, having missed it at the conference to cover another panel.) Whether texts might harm readers was a question left without a consensus answer, which is perhaps the most productive response at a roundtable discussion.

[46] The "Teaching and Learning in the Whedonverses" panel, however, suggested that actual viewers have a more complex engagement with texts. Elizabeth Rambo uses "Storyteller" (*Buffy* 7.16) to end her unit on metafiction in her freshman literary analysis and research course. It draws a variety of responses from students. The class generally finds the ending to be ambiguous, with some

placing the end after Andrew's tears close the Hellmouth rather than his bathroom confession. The importance of how viewers enter the text was highlighted as well. Some of her student viewers had difficulty with the assignment due to being bothered by that episode's positive depiction of homosexuality and unmarried heterosexual relations, while others had been told not to watch on those grounds previously, only to be swayed by the experience of actually viewing it. (In short, some couldn't share Andrew's fascination with Xander's carpentry rather than Willow and Kennedy making out in the foreground, an illustrative example of a rebellious reading position.) When Rambo began using *Buffy v. Edward* this year, it drew a variety of responses that mirrored those of the scholars at the conference, ranging from delight at the critique to sympathy for the *Twilight* series. Christine Jarvis, drawing on data from eleven interviews shared with her by Vivien Burr, discussed the complexity of actual viewers when their responses to the text contrast with their conscious beliefs and emotions. As one viewer described her enjoying the violence depicted in *Buffy*, "There's a demon that comes out in me." These interviews show the adult viewers as engaging in transformative learning, a pedagogy marked not by lessons learned but by a complex interaction between text, the viewing self, and the self reflecting on the experience. Identification is vastly more complex in real life than it is often thought to be, which perhaps should inform the debate around the reception of *Twilight's* messages.

Keynotes and featured speakers

[47] Janet K. Halfyard's keynote address, "Listening to *Buffy*: Music, Memory, Meaning, and Moping," opened the conference. Halfyard's invaluable writing for *Slayage* and *Music, Sound, and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, aids scholars in *listening to Buffy*. She noted television underscore is neglected in her field due to its poor artistic track record, its use of synthesizers rather than instruments, and the limited resources devoted to its production. Yet, Johannes Bach wrote on a weekly basis under a tight budget. Score serves to interpret scenes and to actively construct narrative. As she put it,

"music remembers and reveals."

[48] Her outstanding keynote performed a close reading of Christophe Beck's Buffy-Angel love theme to argue that it is better understood as being about mourning and loss than romantic love and desire. Its first use at the docks in "Surprise" (*Buffy* 2.13) as Angel gives Buffy the Claddagh ring is its only exclusively romantic use. Thereafter, it takes on Buffy's point of view on the relationship, balancing her pain with her love of Angel. Beck references this underscore in music for other scenes that further establish the importance of loss, such as Buffy's discovery of Kendra's body in "Becoming, Part One" (2.21). Beck makes his most significant use of this theme in "Passion" (2.17), making a counterpart theme by slowing it down but keeping its basic structure for the final meeting between Giles and Jenny, Willow learning of Jenny's death, Buffy and Giles weeping at the factory and at Jenny's grave. Again, each scene is about mourning and loss, not love.

[49] Variations on this theme return again several times. In "I've Only Got Eyes for You" (2.19), it recurs when the pair re-enact two ghosts' doomed romance. It returns when Buffy lays the Claddagh ring at the spot of Angel's death, but it is transformed at her discovery of his return. As she chains the bestial Angel up in "Beauty and the Beasts" (3.4), the same four notes appear, having removed the second notes in the A/B part of the Buffy-Angel theme, shifting the meaning of their love. Little echoes like this appear throughout Season Three, according to Halfyard, suggesting a music theme best described as "this is what's left." A notable example of such a leitmotif occurs in the falling sixth used in Buffy and Angel's hillside confrontation in "Amends" (3.10). Beck humorously references the theme in the techno music for Buffy's fantasy of saving Parker in "Beer Bad" (4.5); the images suggest Buffy feels the problem is Parker, but her musical selection makes Parker inappropriately sound like Angel. Finally, it has a happy new major key version for the realization of their erotic love in "I Will Remember You" (*Angel* 1.9), introduced as Angel steps into the sun to meet Buffy. That episode ends with a tragic restatement of the original Buffy-Angel theme as the clock ticks at the end. This

theme music would be as forgotten as their day of love, never to return to the series.

[50] Halfyard argued that the real Buffy-Angel love theme is heard only two times. In "Innocence" (1.14), Buffy dreams of her night of passion with Angel. This music's angular intervals allude to the exotic, itself a significant feature of Angel's apartment décor and history. A wind instrument provides the breathy melody, while the drum beat mimics the sound of a heart beat, grounding it in the physical. We hear this theme return, altered, in "Amends" as the same notes are now played by an alto flute and celeste. The celeste makes for a music box sound that suggests a fantasy, especially given the instrument's use in the *Harry Potter* franchise and *Edward Scissorhands*. Unlike the Buffy-Angel love theme, this music is not grounded solely in Buffy's experience of their relationship. In addition, it is solely about them, not the dangers they face or modifications to their circumstances. As it is associated with the most frankly sexual scenes between the characters, the music expresses a fully engaged and adult relationship.

[51] In "Who Painted the Lion—*Dollhouse's* 'Belle Chose,'" Cynthea Masson argued that the episode revolves around interpretation, or glossing in the terms of the Chaucer text featured in the episode: Paul interprets Terry's life, Echo glosses Terry's tableau, and Kiki fails to correctly read *Canterbury Tales*. Masson observed that the gloss can crowd out the text, as such critical interventions aim not only to explain but persuade and thus compel certain readings. Critics engage in a battle to control the text, just as these characters do. "How will you play with the *Dollhouse*?" she asked.

[52] Also of interest to Masson is that the English professor sets up a rather banal and unoriginal pornographic story for Kiki to enact with him. Prof. Gossen lectures on the Wife of Bath and comments that he sees a bit of her in Kiki. This is a disingenuous reading of her, as the Wife of Bath is actually a sexually aggressive and experienced figure in contrast to the naïve role he has scripted for Kiki. The interpreter sets himself up in a story that puts him in the same kind of

control over the character as he has over the text, only to be killed when the character switches the story's genre to the serial killer mystery. Each of the characters in this episode loses control over the object of his or her interpretation. Given the later events in *Dollhouse*, and the complexity of many of Whedon's texts, many readers have experienced these texts resisting easy control.

[53] (While not discussed in the paper itself, this listener couldn't help but think that another of the professor's errors is to stumble into the wrong author's text. This unoriginal professor joins a long list of evil teachers in Joss Whedon's work, as they engage in wholesale propaganda and unethical scientific experimentation, and they kick students out of class when they can remember their names. Evidently, the interpretive skills of Whedon's protagonists are to be learned only through field experience or self-study. It would be hard to find a positive depiction of a teacher in a Whedon series since 1999. That's a disturbing pattern to see from one of the rare television creators who's had teachers consistently champion the seriousness of his work.)

[54] Tanya Cochran's paper, "Whedon Fan-Scholars and Scholar-Fans: Life in the Shadowlands," illustrated the risks that these academics have taken to champion Whedon. The labels referenced in her title are frequently applied rather than chosen, with sometimes devastating professional consequences. Analytical authors risk isolation when they reject the language of engagement or from their peers if they gain a label that connotes a lack of critical distance. The idea that differently valuable truths can be learned from writers adopting the persona of an advocate, an adversary, or a judge is one that needs to be continually taught to those on both sides of the podium, as far too many Whedon scholars can attest. One would think that our colleagues in various departments would remember the virtues of the DIY movements of the last 50 years in all of the media and performing arts, or at least connect the virtues of crowd-sourcing in the hard sciences to wikis in media cultures. Cochran reminded us that feminisms' old battles against the pretense of (masculine) scholarly objectivity and neutrality are still being fought.

[55] In "'Let It Simmer': Tonal Shift in 'Pangs,'" Rhonda Wilcox provided a detailed analysis of Espenson's "Pangs" (*Buffy* 4.8) that included a look at early drafts of the scripts. This episode's use of the history of the US's indigenous peoples makes it one of the most controversial episodes of *Buffy*, drawing analysis from no less than seven books and articles. Outlining the tonal shifts in the episode, she asked that we incorporate such complexity in our analysis of its more overt politics. After all, how many contemporary political debates about the meaning of Thanksgiving describe it as a "ritual sacrifice with pie"? (Anya's observation is *such* an Espensonian moment within a quintessential episode of hers.) Viewers must weigh a variety of views, how the identity and motivations of the speaker shades those meanings, the ways later events influence the stances taken, and the way the tone complicates reading these lines as simple declarations. The question of how cognizant we are of being implicated by our own laughter should mark our analysis as well. There is no path to essential truth in this episode. It must be created by an active viewer. What an episode does is at least as much a part of its meaning as the views it expresses. It's vitally important for scholarship to acknowledge the power of this point, as it is one of the chief virtues of Whedon's complex texts.

Who is the Essential *Buffy*?

[56] H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent's paper, "Buffy/Satsu: 'Pure Genius' or 'Out of Character'? Complicating Reader Responses to Modern Narratives of Sexuality," won the hotly contested Mr. Pointy awarded for the best conference paper. Building on her previous work analyzing this Season Eight relationship in *Sexual Rhetoric in the Works of Joss Whedon*, she provided a close reading of the letters published by Dark Horse in the comic issue that followed Buffy/Satsu's coupling along with the thread on Whedonesque as a means of critiquing the various reading positions actually adopted in response to this narrative.

[57] These patterns of response include appeals to a text's

internal coherence, heterosexual recovery (a.k.a. heterosexuality imperiled by the forces of gay culture), appealing to the virtues of representation quotas, sex-blind ideology (a repurposing of the humanist “there’s no black or white; there’s only people” canard which sees oppression as situated in bad individuals), sexuality as a continuum (which had a tendency to ignore how oppression was dispersed across that same continuum), and color blindness (this is an interracial pairing as well). She concluded, “Readers’ incapacity (or unwillingness) to engage with the comics’ complex take on heteroflexibility points to the limits of a liberal vision of sexuality, where desire is naturalized via biological explanations.”

[58] My paper, “From Beneath You, It Foreshadows: Why the First Season Matters,” argued for more scholarly attention to the first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on several grounds. Whedon’s belief that the series would not last past its first season means that these episodes provide a window into what he initially regarded as essential to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The first season contains the initial expressions that would foreshadow or find fuller expression with the Initiative and Adam, Riley and Angelus, and in “Restless” (4.22) and “Passion” (2.17). Jesse is the beginning of looking at vampires not only as monstrous abusers but also simultaneously victims worthy of empathy. Finally, “Prophecy Girl” (1.12) and the unaired production pilot provide the first glimpses of Joss Whedon’s development as a director.

[59] “Restless” and its precursor, “Nightmares” (1.10), were two of the primary texts explored on my panel in Cynthia Burkhead’s paper, “Sometimes ‘A dream is a wish your heart makes,’ and sometimes it’s a necessary nightmare: The Narrative Function of Dreams in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” Burkhead looked at how dreams in *Buffy* are a complex function of the narrative, providing character development, furthering plot, extending continuity across seasons, and loosening the formal constraints of primetime broadcast aesthetics.

**“There’s no place I can be since I’ve found Serenity”:
Understanding *Firefly***

[60] Alyson Buckman’s paper, “‘Always...in an Alliance-Friendly Bar Come U-Day’: Chronotopes and *Firefly* and *Serenity*,” impressed greatly for its rare ability to mix theory and close observation of mis-en-scène. As part of a larger project investigating Whedon’s use of real and fictional history, this paper examined significant moments of time and space interacting in this ‘verse, using Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to do so. Buckman observed that this series’ use of the picaresque novel’s understanding of time and place means, in Bakhtin’s words, “Time, as it were, thickens and takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” The use of flashback and slow motion in the Serenity Valley scene is one such moment, as Mal remains stuck in it through the ship name and his peculiar celebration of Unification Day. While an inability to work through the past is a staple of the Western and war genres, she cited Cynthea Masson’s observation that *Angel* reveals this trait to be a threat to growth in Whedon’s works. River’s nightmare memories of her captivity by the savages of civilization’s core and Miranda coalesce with Mal and Zoe’s past to form a matrix of time and space that reshapes the Western’s iconic last stand, a genre trope itself a chronotope with resonances echoing back to the Alamo.

Taking Care of Business: The Political Economy of Sunnydale and L.A.

[61] There were several intriguing papers on *Angel*, as always in the Slayage conferences. If the press refers to David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox as the parents of *Buffy* studies, then Stacey Abbott might best be described as the guardian angel of *Angel* studies. Her paper examined Joss Whedon’s work as a director on *Angel*. On *Buffy*, Whedon was beholden to the big episodes (the musical, the finales, “Innocence,” etc.), while on *Angel* he’s “sidebar guy,” in his words. He could experiment with various styles and grow as a director, argues

Abbott. In "Waiting in the Wings" (3.13), for example, Whedon uses stylized lighting, costumes, and performances to craft an unusually melancholic tone, as style expresses the unspeakable. In general, he chose episodes that would permit performers to take on new material, as "A Hole in the World" (5.15) allows Acker to escape the role of the girlish scientist to take on being regal, intimidating, and alien. Sara Freeman's paper examined Lilah Morgan as a noir Girl Friday, a cross between the hard beauty, frank sexuality, and brutal intelligence of the femme fatale and the wit of the 1930s career girl conquering male professions. Natalie Stevens' paper examined the fifth season of *Angel* through the lens of objectification to find that Angel's management style leaves much to be desired. The series chooses not to model the possibilities of corporate heroism. (What, no Ben & Jerry's of Righteousness?) While this might have something to do with Whedon's time working at Fox, it's fair to note that he runs a company as well.

[62] Sharon Mastracci's paper, "The Political Economy of Sunnydale," made a convincing case that this inability has a source in the nature of the service provided and the perception of it. As a public service, several problems entail. Heroism has a free rider problem, as monsters benefit from Buffy saving the world without having to lift a finger to help. The public does not recognize it as a service with a price but rather regards it as "the right thing to do." Like teachers, police officers, firemen, and soldiers, heroes are exploited by their own great willingness to do the task for non-monetary reasons. (While garbage men perform an invaluable service, no one suggests that they should be paid less because "it's the right thing to do," even though it is.) The discussion of Mastracci's paper was very enthusiastic, as there's not enough analysis of the role of class and economics in the discipline. In addition, the audience suggested that comparing the similar suggestions of a fee-for-service model by Anya and Cordelia in *Buffy* and *Angel* would prove insightful, as well as the implications of Wolfram and Hart's sojourn into paid do-goodery. I'm sure the editors of *Slayage* would be eager to see the results.

Jane Espenson is Your Goddess Now

[63] Prior conference reports called for a more complex understanding of television production by stepping outside the box created by auteurism's understanding of meaning as being produced by a single, dominant creator. SC4 provided many papers that encouraged attendees to see how quality series tend to be multi-vocal in ways that don't diminish the concept of auteurism, but rather richly expand it. In addition to Halfyard's conference-opening keynote on Christophe Beck's musical compositions, no less than four papers dealt with Jane Espenson's work while another three examined casting, production design, and costuming, as noted above.

[64] In addition to the papers presented by Wilcox and Rambo, two other papers examined Espenson's career. Marc McKee's paper, "'You're Not Crazy': The Use of Meta-Fiction in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," examined several of Espenson-written episodes. They promote active viewing by blurring the boundary between the meta and the real, forcing viewers to actively revise their relationship to the series. Richard Albright's paper examined the continuities between Espenson's work with Whedon and her role creating a *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries, "The Plan," and on *Caprica*. He observed that her work with various doppelgangers and Buffybots in the Buffyverse prepared her for dealing with Cylons "that look like us now." Her humor lightens Cavil, who bickers with himself in her scripts. As fan fiction fills in the gaps of a narrative, so too does "The Plan," only with authorization and a budget. (Espenson praised fanfic in the forward to *Slayer Slang*.) His close reading of how Espenson re-purposed the utterances of the hybrid was particularly informative. All in all, I was pleased to see that this paper confirmed prior scholarship's use of Espenson as an example of the complexity of meaning production in television serials. The fact that there are strong similarities in her work with and without the kind of power and control required of traditional auteurism confirms the worth of examining those without the "created by" credit. Joss Whedon may be your god now, as the t-shirt slogan goes, but several papers argue that he ascended as part of a pantheon.

Conclusion

[65] Ultimately, SC4 showcased the health of Whedon Studies Association and the discipline. Flagler College proved to be another excellent host of the biennial conference, with St. Augustine's history, fine dining, and alligator farm being a bonus. The meetings of the Whedon Studies Association featured three groups offering proposals for SC5, with locations in Montreal, Vancouver, and North Alabama. Slayage will post proposals for each location to guide members' votes on the next conference venue. (Information on signing up for the WSA can be found on the Slayage web site.) The future of Whedon studies seems promising in another way, with two panels on pedagogy and a student panel featuring two fine papers. (*Watcher Junior's* editorial board looks forward to a deluge of submissions over the next two years!) A book on pedagogy, [Buffy in the Classroom](#), is due out in the fall. Both [Watcher Junior](#) and [Slayage](#) reported their successes attracting new readers and informing returning ones by marketing their publications through the use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and [blogs](#). In addition, the papers themselves showed an admirable specificity combined with a trend towards cross-verse comparisons. The ascension of *Dollhouse* showcased that Whedon Studies is concerned with more than just *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, while many papers showcased that Whedon Studies contains more creators than just Joss Whedon. *Twilight* and other texts showcased the need for Whedon scholars to consider how they will respond to new texts in related fields. Finally, this gathering had an occurrence unique in Slayage conference history, as David Kociemba proposed to Kristen Romanelli after the Sunday pedagogy panel. She said yes.