

*Critical Essay*

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Feminism, Identity Formation, and Failing Forward*

by Faith Hart

Though the endless struggle for women's rights and empowerment cannot be neatly compartmentalized or easily defined, popular understanding of the American feminist movement is typically split into four major eras. Our current context can be considered the fourth wave of feminism, delivered to us by three previous waves of critical activism. First wave feminism, which marked the late 19th century and early 20th century, began with the struggle for women's suffrage and then splintered into a variety of sub-movements. The loss of a unifying, central mission after the vote for women was secured led to a lack of animation in the feminist movement and a long period of general stagnation, complicated by the Great Depression and World War II. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a second wave of feminism emerged. This popular women's movement was more robust in its goals than its predecessor and mobilized women on issues of fair pay, equal employment, anti-discrimination, sexual liberation, and violence prevention. This plethora of objectives led to a disjointed movement, fractured by disagreement among members— an unavoidable reality of any movement working to account for the lived experiences of millions.

In the early 1990s, a third wave of American feminism emerged. This movement was both a continuation and re-conceptualization of the feminist prototypes offered by the prior waves, inevitably riddled with the same paradoxes that complicated them. Wendy Kaminer's 1995 article "Feminism's Third Wave: What Do Young Women Want" in *The New York Times* grapples with the shifting activist landscape and its contradictions, asserting, "Feminism has always been a collection of feminisms..." (Kaminer) Myriad in its objectives, the third wave's ideologies were markedly unique in their embrace of the feminine, emphasis on systemic change, intersectional analysis, and increased inclusion of queer people, people of color, and other marginalized groups.

More than ever before, 1990s American feminism existed in conversation with a massive boom in both the sheer quantity of television content and high quality via hyper-specialization. In his analysis “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics”, Ron Becker describes the 1990s television scene saying, “increasing pressure from intense competition... forced the networks to target even narrower audience segments and court them more aggressively with programming geared to their specific interests” (36). With major television networks increasingly interested in progressive and female viewership, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* broke onto the scene. Now regarded by scholars as a critical feminist work emblematic of the movement’s third wave, The WB Television Network’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* served as a site for identity formation and complex cultural exploration for third-wave feminists.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a fictional American drama series chronicling the life of Buffy Summers and her friends, the Scooby Gang, in “typical” suburban California. Sunnydale– not so typical after all– sits upon a Hellmouth: a center for dark, spiritual energy that lures vampires, demons, and violent creatures to the town. Buffy, a typical teenage girl navigating the struggles of high school, including homework, dating, friendship, and fighting with parents, learns that she has been named as the once-in-a-generation Slayer and is charged with defending the world from evil forces. Throughout the series, she works to balance the horrors of high school with the horrors of the supernatural realm, finding love, heartbreak, betrayal, and empowerment along the way.

*Buffy* aired on The WB Television Network and was produced by 20th Century Fox Television. The show was a hit success, marking the value and relevance of attempts at highly specializing content and crafting new identities to lure in target audiences, specifically teenagers in the

case of The WB Television Network. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s success with teenagers was not only a lucrative utilization of an underestimated consumer base, but a significant– and sincere– cultural moment. Twenty years after the show's debut, critic Sophie Gilbert praised its creators' treatment of the teenage experience in her *The Atlantic* article "The Body: The Radical Empathy of *Buffy*'s Best Episode". Gilbert argues that "one of the most revolutionary things *Buffy* did... was take teenagers– and their pain– seriously" and that the show's use of metaphor, substituting demons for typical adolescent stressors, affirmed teenaged audiences' life experiences (Gilbert).

Beyond its appeal to teen audiences, *Buffy* was always intended to play a role in the emerging third wave of the feminist movement. In a 1998 interview with the cast, featured on BBC Choice's "Bite Nite" segment, *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon provided a critical context for the show's conception. He cited his desire to disrupt the typical horror trope of blonde teenage girls being slaughtered by monsters by sharing a new story, in which a blonde teenage girl possesses the strength and power to defeat the monsters she faces. Actor Sarah Michelle Gellar expands on the importance of a powerful, female, teenage protagonist, describing Buffy as a new kind of strong female lead who is "not the smartest, prettiest, or the most popular but is okay with who she is". Whedon and Gellar's comments serve as an example for the third wave's notion of "girlie feminism", which centers on abandoning second-wave feminism's rejection of traditional femininity as a tool of oppression and reinterpreting the "girliness" and the feminine as inherently powerful. In Irene Karras' article "The Third Wave's Final Girl: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*", she expands on the notion of girlie feminism in the show by arguing:

By embracing the feminine—make-up, clothing, and even Barbies—third wave feminists are sending the message to society that women are powerful on their own terms... Buffy has an agenda: she is the prototypical girly feminist activist, intentionally slaying stereotypes about what women can and cannot do, combining sexuality with real efforts to make the world a better and safer place for both men and women. (Karras)

As a generation of teenage girls watched *Buffy*, the imperfect and girlish protagonist defeating both existential threats and triumphing over everyday struggles they could relate to, a powerful and revolutionary feminist ideology was being transmitted: girls don't need to be masculine or exceptional to be powerful.

Despite being specifically targeted towards teenagers, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also contained messaging that spoke to the experiences of mothers who may be watching with their daughters. Whedon's creation paid homage to the contributions of 20th-century feminists and spoke directly to the activism of the moment with positive representation. As Karras notes, Buffy's proficiency in martial arts pays "homage to women's self-defense collectives of the 70s and date rape awareness training of the 90s, fulfilling the female dream of walking anywhere at any time, knowing you can take care of yourself against the monsters" (Karras). This speaks to the essence of what third wave feminism was: a movement committed to honoring the work of feminists who came before, building on their ideologies and creating new possibilities for women. The idea of a piece of pop culture as a vehicle for feminist identity formation was a new possibility in itself and the joy of *Buffy*—the silliness, the camp, the unabashedly youthful sense of play—resonated with young feminists who wanted distance from the staunch, bra-burning attitudes of the second wave. In the 2004 *Edmonton Journal* newspaper

article “Not Your Mother’s Feminism: Final Edition”, Joanne Laucius captures this cultural shift in the late 90s by interviewing self-identifying third wave feminists. She quotes Toronto writer Emily Pohl-Weary saying, “You’re not so much a part of a struggle as a party. You can party with the feminists.” (Laucius)

However, for many third wave feminists, Whedon’s representations of girl power were not received as positive nor did they feel like an invitation to an all-inclusive feminist party. Karras notes that Buffy holds a privileged status as a white, suburban, and middle-class teenager and that no students of color attended Sunnydale High throughout the show (Karras). This blatant lack of racial diversity and insistence on white affluence as normative violates one of the most central tenets of third wave feminism: inclusion of marginalized groups. In Kaminer’s exploration of what differentiates the third wave from the second, she asserts that the new generation is “the children of identity politics [who] routinely deconstruct themselves” and is puzzled by their idea that “oppression is an affliction that anyone can claim” (Kaminer). Kaminer, a second wave feminist writing in the 90s, is struggling to grapple with a new third wave idea: intersectionality, or the notion that people exist at multiple intersections of privilege and oppression. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* struggled in the same way.

Much like the second wave of feminism, *Buffy* over-relied on the marginalized identity of womanhood and failed to account for how its titular character experienced extreme privilege because she was white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual, educated, thin, and conventionally attractive. As a consequence, the show provided a relatively narrow framework for female empowerment that alienated viewers who did not see themselves represented in Buffy and her predominantly white counterparts. Mary Magoulick’s article “Frustrating Female Heroism: Mixed

Messages in *Xena, Nikita, and Buffy*” illustrates the confusion and irritation *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provokes in some viewers, despite it being generally regarded and celebrated as an iconic feminist work. Demonstrating the show’s deep contradictions, Magoulik asserts that “the series is laudable for allowing women unusual space to voice and act out anger” but establishes that only Buffy is truly given space to vent, while “secondary slayers of different color and class (Kendra and Faith) are not allowed anger” (Magoulik 733). While championing the idea that any woman has a right to public rage is certainly revolutionary feminist representation, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* did not go far enough to ensure that it advocated for the rights of all women, not just the white Buffy’s of the world.

In this regard, *Buffy* is a direct reflection of the struggles and contradictions of the feminist movement itself. Each wave of feminism in America has been riddled with fractures, contradictions, and disagreements between members. Each wave has simultaneously succeeded in creating conditions for the liberation of some women and failed in its inability to account for all women. Each wave has revealed deep fissures of difference while also growing the movement’s scope and fusing an imperfect but expanding unity of women under the title “feminist”. *Buffy* inherited the complexities and fallabilities of the feminism that inspired it while providing a fictional container in which the struggles, paradoxes, impulses, and inconsistencies of third-wave feminism could be tested and explored.

In her article “Vampires, Postmodernity, and Postfeminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*”, Susan Owen emphasizes the reality of polysemy in media and movements: the coexistence of multiple meanings. She argues that a polysemic lens is critical in analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because every meaning that can be derived from the show is valuable and informative. She notes, “The series offers transgressive possibilities for re-imagining gendered relations and modernist American

ideologies. At the same time, however, the series reifies mainstream commitments to heteronormative relationships, American commodity culture, and a predominantly Anglo perspective.” (Owen) The same polysemic lens– an ability to hold two truths at the same time– must be applied to the feminist movement. Each imperfect step, each combined failure and success, each wave brings the world closer to pure liberation for all people by expanding the collective imagination of what freedom could be.

This forward motion and expansion of the movement can be difficult to detect, especially because the failures of feminist representations can be extremely frustrating, but it is evident. Steve Vineberg’s 2000 article for the *New York Times* entitled, “TELEVISION; Yes, She’s a Vampire Slayer. No, Her Show Isn’t Kid Stuff” demonstrates how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became more than a WB Television Network experimental flirtation with a teenaged consumer base. Vineberg outs himself as an atypical *Buffy* fan– a burly older gentleman– and uses his platform to advocate for the depth of the show, calling it “ingenious” and “undervalued” (Vineberg). The *New York Times* critic’s adoration for *Buffy* demonstrates that the show not only offered young women a space to explore the intricacies and paradoxes of feminist identity through Buffy’s coming-of-age but was able to draw in men and other non-female viewers due to its quality content. Thus, *Buffy* was able to offer a revolutionary, albeit flawed feminist framework to viewers who may not experience the movement otherwise.

Widely explored and debated by scholars and feminist thinkers, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was both a mirror of third wave feminism, as well as a container in which its contradictions, fissures, and struggles could be explored. As a site of identity formation for a new generation of feminist thinkers, it provided a framework young women could be both inspired by and resentful of in their struggle for equality and empowerment. Despite its imperfections and inability to properly account for the



entirety of a mass movement, *Buffy* was a successful experiment in the third wave's exploration of how media could be a tool for feminist discourse and dissemination. Ultimately, it is because of the success of preliminary third wave feminist programming like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that we are now in the fourth wave of feminism defined by a massive amount of far more progressive, inclusive, and radical feminist content. Karras illustrates this reality in saying:

The third wave, in my view, is not a rejection of second wave accomplishments. Rather it is the next step, the attempt to make good on the promises and rewards the second-wave aimed for.

Where they began the struggle, it is up to the third wave to continue it. That does not, however, mean it will be on the same turf. Third wave feminists have claimed pop culture as both their terrain and weapon of choice, believing that by participating to a greater degree in creating and supporting positive images for themselves, they will finally infiltrate the last vestiges of patriarchy. *Buffy* is one example of this ideology manifested in cultural reproduction. True, such images alone won't necessarily change societal structures... but the right words and pictures can at the very least help to shape a revolution's canons.

The importance of popular culture and media representation in aiding movements for social justice cannot be underestimated. In the fourth wave of feminism and every wave to come, the struggle must remain committed to forging representations that speak to the intricacies of womanhood, as well as honoring imperfect representations like *Buffy* for their role in thrusting the movement forward.

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