BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER AS "SHERO":

RE-DEFINING THE MYTHOLOGICAL HERO

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Buffy Summers from the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, using feminist television criticism to position the character within third wave feminism and pop-culture hero mythology. The central question is: how and why is Buffy not a hero but a "shero"? The term "shero" is a feminist backlash to the traditional heroine and hero. She is a strong, courageous woman, who accomplishes great things in the face of patriarchal forces that would keep her meek and dependent. The methods used in this thesis are based on television theory methodologies, including ideological analysis and literary analysis from a third wave feminist perspective. I argue that female stereotypes, represented in television, language and hero mythology play a significant role in limiting women's roles within these areas. However, I believe that *BtVS* is a show that challenges female stereotypes and successfully redefines traditional views of women and heroes on television. The results of this thesis contribute to the growing literature of third wave feminism and feminist television criticism. More importantly, this thesis establishes the character, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as a shero and feminist role model, which has been lacking in popular culture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Finally, I would like to thank all the people who brought *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to the small screen. I love *BtVS* because of Buffy. My heart, imagination and dreams have been longing for a shero to worship and she is the one. Literature, television and movies are full of male heroes, most of whom are predictable and ordinary. As a youngish girl I need sheroes like Buffy, and as a believer in the potential of television to be fabulous, I need shows like *BtVS*. We all need more of both.

CHAPTER ONE: BUFFY THE PATRIARCHY SLAYER

I wanted Buffy to be a cult thing. I wanted it to be a giant, big monster hit. I wanted her to become an icon. That was the intent. It was built that way.
-- Joss Whedon, "Melody Maker," Buffy the Vampire Slayer (2002)

On March 10, 1997, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* debuted on the Warner Brothers (WB) network, moved to the United Paramount Network (UPN) on October 1, 2001 and ended there on May 20, 2003. It lives on in syndication in many countries including America, Britain and Canada to name a few. Its popularity and commercialization continues to grow despite its end over two years ago. There are comics, book series, magazines, action figures, clothes, accessories, jewelry, collectable cards, video games, websites, conferences and anthologies; all dedicated to *BtVS*, its cast, creator and writers. Needless to say, *BtVS* has achieved cult status and has joined the ranks of other cult hits like *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994). *BtVS* is the story of a young Southern Californian girl who becomes The Slayer, the chosen girl born with the strength and skill to hunt vampires. *BtVS* offered the television audience something new—a superhero that was a girl.

While on the WB, *BtVS*'s target demographic was the 18-34 age group (Tracy 14); however, it quickly developed a large female fan base with a median age of 29 (Rogers "Hey Ally" 58). It soon became a show that is discussed in university classes and analyzed by academics all over the world—of both genders and all ages. There is an important similarity between these different audiences—they all love the show:

> I have my 16-year-old daughter, Caitlin to blame for this. An honour student, soccer player, and avid reader, she introduced me to *Buffy* and

> the WB a couple of years ago. At the time, I just thought I would do my fatherly/media critic duty: watch a few episodes and point out the error of her TV ways. But something else happened. I got hooked. I liked *Buffy*. (Campbell and Campbell par.2)

Viewers, academics and critics (and even some of the show's cast and writers) did not believe *BtVS* would go as far as it has gone. While the title suggests a show light in message, *BtVS* is anything but. The monsters and demons that appear weekly are a backdrop to storylines that deal with death, love and the teenage struggle to adulthood. Yet many still believe it is a show for teenagers, with "Barbie" using her sexuality to hypnotize vampires into submission.

Many television critics and feminists have dismissed Buffy as a feminist role model because they cannot get past her looks or youth. There is no denying that Buffy fulfills every stereotype about women on television: she is thin, white, blonde, heterosexual, young and beautiful. Buffy's appearance does not expand nor challenge patriarchal definitions of women. However, it is her role as The Slayer and how she fulfills her Slayer duties that make her a feminist role model. Youth and femininity are rarely, if ever, linked to heroic acts; by being young, strong, feminine, and heroic, Buffy challenges the dominance of masculinity and maturity in regards to the hero character.

Why We Need Sheroes

I examine *BtVS* because the star of this show is a new kind of female character—the "shero:" [1]

[1] This term in comes from Varla Ventura's Sheroes: Bold, Brash, and Absolutely Unabashed Superwomen From Susan B. Anthony to Xena (1998). She cites Maya Angelou, "who used the word in a speech and sparked the muse for [her]" (xix). An Internet search for the original source resulted in a quote from Angelou: "How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our

> Packing estrogen and, not infrequently, a pen and sword, sheroes come in every imaginable shape, size, and colour, and manifest their sheroism in infinite ways…Their accomplishments are stunning in light of the fact that there was, for all purposes, a tacit caste system with one gender on top. Battling exclusion and seclusion, these incredible women risked it all to create the freedom we enjoy and uphold today. (Ventura xvi)

Stating that heroes are predominantly male and their goal is to save the world and their reward is the beautiful young girl, who is happy to be rescued, is a generalization. But it is a generalization because these types of stories are the most common and therefore recognizable; for example, *Superman*, *Star Wars*, *Knight Rider* and *The Incredible Hulk* provide strong male characters that (male) viewers can mythologize as heroes. There are a growing number of female versions of the classic and traditional male hero within television and film. Strong, capable and independent female heroes such as, Sydney Bristow from *Alias* and Beatrice Kiddo from *Kill Bill* (Volume 1 and 2) have become quite popular among female and male audiences. This thesis is about the "shero" and her relationship to feminist television criticism, third wave feminism and hero mythology.

The objectives of my thesis are: to contribute to the growing literature of third wave feminism and feminist television criticism; to demonstrate how and why the character of Buffy Summers is a new kind of female hero—a shero; and to have the term "shero" added to the dictionary and be defined as a feminist response to the traditional heroine and hero. She is a strong, courageous woman, who accomplishes great things in the face of patriarchal forces that would keep her meek and dependent. My research involves answering the

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heroes and she-roes!" Since Angelou states "heroes and she-roes," she believes, or at least suggests, that gender is a factor—men are heroes and women are she-roes.

following questions: What is a shero? What characteristics make Buffy Summers a shero? How and where does the shero fit within feminism? The character of Buffy Summers is an important figure for feminism to examine within the context of feminist television criticism, third wave feminism and hero mythology. Although Buffy Summers' feminized appearance contradicts her role as hero that saves the world, the character challenges patriarchal ideology about female power. *BtVS* challenges gender specific boundaries of heroism to create the shero character.

Fandom Meets the Academy

I have been a loyal fan of *BtVS* since it first aired. I purchase the merchandise, I am part of an online newsletter about the show and I subscribe to the magazine. This is the power of television, and we cannot deny or negate the emotions, time and money that we invest in our favourite shows. Within my thesis, I cannot separate the academic from the fan—I write as both. I can utilize the theories of feminism, media studies and cultural studies as an academic, and at the same time I have the insight and personal experiences of a dedicated viewer and fan of *BtVS*. My access to both these worlds compliments my understanding and analysis of Buffy as a sheroic character.

I will integrate the academic voice with the voice of popular culture throughout my thesis in order to articulate the ideas of each to its fullest. I support the critique of the "distant" academic in research found in feminist and cultural studies. Patricia Maguire discusses this debate in Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach (1987): "The premise that researchers can be

objective demands that they remain distant and detached from the subject under investigation, another characteristic of dominant paradigm research" (19). I cannot detach myself from my research because I am a fan of *BtVS*; to conduct my research otherwise would alienate me from it. Despite the arguments that researchers must remain "detached," I believe that my position as a fan will benefit my research. My thesis will provide a voice that articulates "the link between ideological criticism and the acknowledgment of the pleasures within popular texts" (Jenkins 8). So often is pleasure kept a guilty secret in academics, and the pleasure in television fandom is even more abhorred. I embrace my love of television and *BtVS* but it does not mean that I am blinded by it.

Methodology

Much of my research involves understanding and synthesizing feminist theories, television criticisms and hero mythology. The first chapter focuses on the results of a literature review of feminist theory, feminist television criticism and hero mythology. My goals are to show the path of prior research in these areas and how my project is linked to such analysis. While most of my research has kept me reading books and journals, some of my research has led me to the Internet. Areas like third wave feminism and media studies have adapted quickly and smoothly into this new medium. The Internet is an important tool that has and will continue to influence the creation of knowledge, popular culture and fan identity.

BtVS has adapted seamlessly to the Internet with Slayage: The On-Line International Journal of Buffy Studies edited by David Lavery and Rhonda V. Wilcox:

> The idea of *Slayage* was born in the spring of 2001 as we considered over one hundred and forty proposals submitted for possible inclusion in Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (a book recently published by Rowman and Littlefield). We learned, too, that two other collections of essays on *Buffy* were also in the works. It seemed obvious that there was a not-soon-to-be-exhausted international critical and scholarly interest in *BtVS*. With *Whoosh! The Journal of the International Association of Xenoid Studies* in mind as a model, *Slayage* was born early in 2001. It will continue to be published at least four times a year as long as interest warrants. (Slayage "Site History")

The journal combines academic focused papers, as well as links to articles featured in magazines and newspapers (both in print and online-only). Most of this material can only be found online and it speaks to the burgeoning relationship between technologies, such as television and the Internet, and fan identity.[2] Chat rooms and posting boards are a common phenomenon on the Internet; more importantly, these websites are often dedicated to a single television show or character, creating an Internet-based community.

The second chapter is an in-depth analysis of the sheroic traits exhibited by Buffy with examples from the show to illustrate. Third wave feminism, feminist television criticism and hero mythology inform my interpretation of the character. Television is able to communicate (through visual and audio messages), emotional, symbolic and literal content, to name a few. Analyzing a program's

[2] For an interesting discussion of the creation of fan identity through television programming see Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein and Jimmie L. Reeves, "*The Sopranos* as HBO Brand Equity: The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Reproduction," This Thing of Ours: Investigating *The Sopranos* (2002).

content is difficult because the meanings of images and sounds are dependent on a cultural context, not just of the show but of the viewer as well. Although there are viewers who either challenge particulars of an image or outright challenge the "fundamental assumption of the representation" (Walters 78), Buffy is to be viewed as a feminist role model. Therefore, my thesis does not account for a negotiated or oppositional reading of Buffy because my reading is within the creator, Joss Whedon's representation. In an interview with MSN Entertainment, Whedon stated:

> I mean, I wasn't trying to set any records, but that's exactly what she was supposed to be: a feminist role model. Ya know, I think other shows did that, she had some precursors, but ultimately with very few exceptions, other shows would pay lip service and then fall back on "Save me!' and not explore how truly difficult it is to be a feminist role model. We made it hard for her every time and that's why it works." (Whedon "In Joss We Trust")

Feminism: The Third Wave

Feminists have made recent political and academic efforts that have been labelled the "third wave." It is thought that the Anita Hill-Thomas Clarence hearings in 1991 initiated this third wave of feminism (Karras par. 3). In Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future (2000), Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards define third wavers as "the women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s" (15). In the past 30 years, events and issues, such as the Montreal massacre of 1989, the rise of the gay and lesbian movement, the Internet and the creation of women/gender studies programs in universities, have shaped and impacted feminism for a new generation.

Third wave feminism deals with these issues in addition to second wave issues, such as violence against women, a suffering environment, economic inequality and unfair representation of women in the media. Despite addressing all these issues, third wavers have been criticized by second wavers for being apolitical, individualistic and out-of-touch with their feminist history and predecessors. According to Baumgardner and Richards, these criticisms of the new generation are unwarranted:

> The backbone of feminism isn't so different from one generation to the next. We want to distinguish ourselves from doormats, as early twentieth-century Rebecca West and her cohorts did, and as Betty Friedan's generation did. And our values are similar, although our tactics and style often differ. The difference between the First, Second and Third waves is our cultural DNA. Each generation has a drive to create something new, to find that distinctive spark. (129)

The "distinctive spark" that marks the third wave's difference is its focus on the media and popular culture, as sites of opportunity to affect change.

The third wave has expanded upon second wave analysis of the media and representation. Bonnie J. Dow argues that the "media has been an important tool in disseminating feminist theory" (xiv). Third wavers have grown up in a time dominated by the media but, more importantly, the Internet, chat rooms, discussion boards and zine culture. It is no surprise that pop culture is not only where third wavers fight their battle(s) but also where they get their role models. Emily Pohl-Weary, editor of Girls Who Bite Back (2004), states that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the Dixie Chicks, Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill* and the recent film versions of *Charlie's Angels* are some of the role models for the third wave (Laucius A1).

The Power of Television

The belief that television viewing is passive and produces "couch potatoes" is theory of the past; television can be an activity for the mind. Television criticism can teach viewers to recognize and understand the various cultural representations that support, resist or challenge dominant ideology, as well as their own views. Feminist television theory is about teaching the viewer how to develop an informed and critical eye regarding television's power to influence our understanding of gender construction and discrimination.

Feminist television criticism is influenced by the women's movement of the 1970s, post-structuralism (Jaques Lacan and Claude Levi-Strauss), semiotics (Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes) and Marxist socialism and philosophy (Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci) (Brown 11). French feminist thinkers (Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva) and British feminist film theorists (Laura Mulvey and Annette Kuhn) have also influenced feminist television criticism (Brown 12). Much feminist work came out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary and Cultural Studies (CCCS) as an investigation of the "invisible 'other' in working-class culture—its girls and women" (Brown 13). Authors such as Charlotte Brunsdon, Christine Geraghty and Angela McRobbie examined women as a television audience and their viewing preferences.

According to Mary Ellen Brown, author of Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular (1990), "concurrent to these events, some American feminists had begun to use content analysis to describe women's presence on television" (13). One of the main objectives was to critique

television and its power or role as a medium, including close and specific examination of television programs and audiences. Feminist critics argued that the male domination of television production furthered the stereotyping and silencing of women (as subjects within programming and as audience members). Television programs and commercials objectified and marginalized women through stereotypical representations as mothers, consumers or evil temptresses. Feminists also criticized television for programming with little to no women in the storyline. Additionally, they criticized the male dominance of the television industry's production and management. As such, television could be described as by men, about men and for men.

According to Linda Seger, author of When Women Call the Shots: The Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film (1996), women in the television and film industry must get involved; they have a responsibility to their audience to break stereotypes, express realistic female identities and "re-think the mythic heroine" (163). Joss Whedon, (including *BtVS*' writers and producers) have also expressed this sentiment in many interviews about *BtVS*. Whedon created *BtVS* in response to the many horror films where the female lead walks down a hallway or alleyway and is killed by a monster. He wished for a female character to fight back, save herself and take her matters into her own hands. Whedon not only 'rethinks the mythic heroine,' he challenges the supremacy of the mythic hero as well, in his television series *BtVS*.

Shero versus Hero

Language has long been thought of as gender specific. According to Adie Nelson and Barrie W. Robinson, authors of Gender in Canada (2000), language becomes "the principal means of disseminating a society's ideology on gender" (163). As such, when fairy tales read to children are filled with male heroes, children learn that a hero is male. When television and film are filled with male heroes, children learn that a hero is male. When the classic stories taught in school are filled with male heroes, children learn that a hero is male. Although some stories contain heroines (the English language's female equivalent), these heroines are not equal in number, popularity, ability or respect to the hero.

Varla Ventura addresses this in her book, Sheroes: Bold and Brash, and Absolutely Unabashed Superwomen from Susan B. Anthony to Xena (1998), which documents and categorizes women, who are sheroes, in history, film, books and television. Ventura recognizes the inherent masculinization of the word hero and the passive quality of the word heroine. Ventura offers the word shero to represent women, who have not allowed patriarchal inscribed notions of gender to stop them from following their dreams. Ventura is not the only woman who has criticized the limitation of language and the representation of heroines. Ethel Johnston Phelps, in The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from around the World (1981), examines women in fairy tales and contends:

> Taken as a whole, the body of traditional fairy/folk tales... is very heavily weighted with heroes, and most of the "heroines" we do encounter are far from heroic. They are good, obedient, meek, submissive to authority, and naturally inferior to the heroes. In short, as heroines, they do not inspire or delight, but tend to bore the reader. (ix)

Both authors reclaim women from history (real and imagined) who are sheroes. The women in their books are sheroes because they do not conform to their society's standards of acceptable behaviour for women. This is one of the major reasons why stories of sheroic women are lost or ignored. Patriarchal ideology teaches us that strong and defiant women are dangerous and must be silenced and tamed.

Granted, there are women heroes who refuse to be silenced or tamed, however, their stories are pushed to the borders or they are exceptions: "the successes of a privileged few do not counterbalance or excuse the systematic lowering of the collective level; and that these successes are rare and limited proves precisely that circumstances are unfavorable for them" (de Beauvoir 133). Figures like Joan of Arc, Catherine the Great and Calamity Jane are praised for their sheroic nature; however, they are not the first names that spring to mind when someone asks, "Who is a hero?" Shero stories are lost amongst legends of Prometheus, Hercules and contemporary stories of Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones—these male figures dominate the heroic landscape. This sentiment is further cemented in popular discourse through theorists like Joseph Campbell. His classic study, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1973), is full of stories that focus on man, for example, Prometheus, Jason, Buddha, Krishna, and Taliesin. Their stories are not just popular within their culture but are also considered representative of their culture. As such, these stories have become historical records of their society. By giving such stories supremacy, stories of strong

women are forgotten and the result is a gender-biased representation of history and culture.

According to Campbell, woman's place within mythology has been relegated to wife, temptress or old hag: "She is the maiden of the innumerable dragon slayings, the bride abducted from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover" (Campbell Hero 342). Woman is present within male hero mythologies only to be acted upon, to wait for her hero to rescue her, or her father to give her away. In no way does Campbell's mention of a few strong women equal the dominance of the male hero stories that he retells. In the face of demeaning representations of women, as well as the silencing of positive female characters, many women (for example, Phelps and Ventura) are reclaiming shero stories in history and popular culture to create new ones for the next generation.

The Third Wave's Poster Girl

BtVS is a television program with a lead female character that breaks from the traditional roles relegated to women within literature, television and film. The suburban, teenage, white female image has never been presented as the worlds only defence against evil. As a shero, Buffy provides the viewer with an alternative to the heroine and hero—she is a woman that saves the world from destruction and evil while maintaining the traditional image of femininity. Such an image forces viewers to question traditional gender ideology that equates femininity with passivity and dependence.

This thesis focuses on Buffy, the Vampire Slayer because she is a shero, a symbol of female empowerment and a feminist role model. She challenges the traditional role of women in popular culture and patriarchal constructions of femininity by being the hunter, not the victim. Through her role as The Slayer, Buffy reclaims femininity as a source of power—she does not negate it or let it become masculinized. Furthermore, *BtVS* exposes the male-centred plots of popular culture by constructing an alternative reading of heroes to tell a more empowering story for women. *BtVS* presents a world that challenges traditional binaries of patriarchal ideology through representations of women with access to power once only reserved for men.

In true third wave style, Buffy "kicks butt" and looks good doing it; more importantly, she does not apologize for either. Though Buffy reinforces stereotypical representations of women and beauty with her appearance, she challenges them with her role as The Slayer. The representation of these two contradictory images allows viewers to question dominant ideology in regards to women and heroes. Buffy pushes the boundaries of female characters and hero characters. By doing this, she challenges the supremacy of the hero and ultimately provides the audience with the shero.

CHAPTER TWO: FEMINISM, TELEVISION AND HEROES

It is likely that a movement of young women who believe in equality and have the confidence of Buffy and Missy Elliot and Mia Hamm is going to pick up momentum and the media will be forced to notice it.
--Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future (2000)

Attempting to define feminism is difficult because it is not a monolithic structure. Most historians and feminists would agree that there have been three waves of feminism. Within these waves there have been many voices that have represented feminism: such as liberal, Marxist, radical, mainstream and socialist feminism. These many perspectives have different definitions of feminism and sometimes they conflict with one another. For these reasons, feminism can be a difficult movement to comprehend and sometimes embrace. Quite simply, however, feminism is a movement for social, political and economic equality for all women and men. However, this politically correct definition (which is often found in dictionaries) ignores significant issues within feminism.

The following definition by third wavers, Baumgardner and Richards, addresses these significant issues:

> It is a *movement*, meaning a group working together to accomplish specific goals. Those goals are *social* and *political change*—implying that one must be engaged with the government and laws, as well as with social practices and beliefs. And implicit in these goals is *access* to sufficient information to enable women to make responsible choices. (56)

Their definition recognizes that while women have the opportunity to affect change within politics, social issues and their own lives, they are often not given "sufficient information" to do so. Their definition also recognizes that feminism is no longer a women's only movement because they recognize the efforts of men

who have joined and supported the cause. More importantly, their definition does away with the "equality between the sexes" sentiment. For a long time, "equality" was interpreted as "to be treated as men." The problem with this sentiment is that it reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes and negates the feminine existence.

What is Third Wave Feminism?

Third wave feminism is an articulation of feminism from a new generation of women: "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (Heywood and Drake 3). One of the most appealing trends to come out of third wave feminism is its "fusing of the confessional mode of earlier popular feminisms with the more analytical mode that had predominated the academy since the 1980s... essays that give an emotional life and a personal stake sometimes missing from academic writing, while maintaining an analytical focus" (Heywood and Drake 2). Third wavers recognize that their lives, and therefore their engagement with feminism, have been shaped by the struggles between the various feminisms and the cultural backlash against feminism.

Baumgardner and Richards tackle the new face of feminism in their book Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future (2000). They describe the world in which young American women live, and how feminism does and does not factor into their lives. Women born in the 1970s came into a world where the women's movement had positively enhanced women's rights so much, that many

believed feminism was redundant. Yet well into the 1980s, the women's movement experienced severe backlash—women and men, who had once worn the feminist badge, recanted. Feminism had succeeded in achieving some of its goals, "yet as 2000 approached many wondered where is feminism going? Is feminism dead? Do we even need feminism?" (Baumgardner and Richards 3). With the media running stories about the end of feminism and groups of young conservative women calling themselves "post-feminists," it was hard to find pro-feminist messages.

Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake of Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (1997), define "postfeminists" as "a group of young conservative, feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave" (1). Mass-mediated postfeminism during the 1980s represented a backlash against feminism and a retreat from feministic goals articulated during the second wave. The media use of postfeminism highlighted the complacency with the mediocre goals already achieved in the public sphere and a complete ignorance of the problems women still faced in the private sphere, such as: "male responsibility, female solidarity, sexual politics, *and* the significant differences in women's experiences and problems created by race, class, and sexual identity" (Dow 160).

Susan Faludi also discusses the media's relationship with postfeminism in, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991):

> Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-'80s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media

> declared the advent of a younger "postfeminist generation" that supposedly reviled the women's movement. (xix)

If this was not enough, "writers such as Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfield and Naomi Wolf" became spokespersons for the third wave, "they publish[ed] books, appear[ed] on op-ed pages, and [wrote] for popular young women's magazine's such as *Glamour* and *YM*" (Heywood and Drake 1). However, these women have not helped feminism or the third wave with their "argu[ments] against feminist critiques of rape, sexual harassment, and abortion" (Heywood and Drake 1). Faludi is not the only women who has discussed the regressive political nature of post-feminism, Bonnie Dow discusses it in regards to television of the 1980s and 1990s in Prime-Time Television: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970 (1996). Dow argues that the most damaging message of postfeminism is that,

> Patriarchy is gone and has been replaced by choice, resulting in several premises that create the postfeminist worldview. Among them: The problems that women face today are a direct result of the *choices* that they made (and not the result of the lack of support for those *choices* from government, employers, partners, etc.)... In dismissing feminist ideology, postfeminists also dismiss the fundamental insight of feminist ideology: Women operate within a sex/gender system that limits acceptable choices. (95-96)

Ultimately, postfeminists have contributed to the demonization of feminism within the media. It is no surprise that for many women, feminism is viewed as this generation's "f-word."

Another component of third wave that has received media attention, and criticism from feminists, is "girl-power" or "girlie" feminism. Baumgardner and Richards discuss the evolution and impact of "girlie" feminism on the identity of

the third wave: "For the Third Wave, politics was superseded by culture—punk rock, hip-hop, zines, products, consumerism, and the Internet" (130). This truly is feminism for a culture driven generation. The possible reason for this cultural obsession is the overwhelming presence of the media in the lives of third wavers. Baumgardner and Richards outline a number of pop-culture products that impacted the women of the third wave: Madonna, *Sassy*, Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth, the Riot Grrls, and *Bust*. Based on these products it is not surprising that "most of the Girlies are white, straight, work outside the home, and belong to the consumer class" (Baumgardner and Richards 138). Despite this, it does explain why they choose to promote issues such as "familiarity with porn, sexual aggressiveness, and remaining single and childless until pretty late in life" (Baumgardner and Richards 138).

This brand of feminism has been criticized for several legitimate reasons: it is an all-white phenomenon, it is class elitist, it is not new, it is all fun, it lacks political clout and it turns feminism into a commodity. Such complaints are not new to feminism. Each wave has been dominated by an elite group of feminists that serve as the "spokeswomen" for their generation. It is hard to ignore the white, Liberal, educated women who write and speak for feminism because they are who the media focuses on, who the universities teach and who the publishing industry signs to book deals. Their messages have also been the most palatable for mainstream or non-feminist society to hear.

There have been many feminists who are not white, Liberal or educated, who have been overlooked within feminist and non-feminist society. There are

Black feminists, lesbian feminists, Marxist feminists, radical feminists, post-colonial feminists, grassroots feminists, activist feminists and material feminists, to just name a few. There is such a diverse range of theories within feminism that it is hard to think of it as a coherent body of thought. However, all would agree that the oppression of women is a universal oppression.

Despite the well-founded complaints of girlie feminism, it nonetheless, treats femininity and all the pretty and fashionable objects that proclaim their feminine nature, as objects of pleasure and pride rather than objects of shame and disgust. Girlies are not ignorant of their use of "tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation": "Using makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues" (Baumgardner and Richards 136). By reclaiming femininity, Girlies are rejecting the notion that in order to be respected as a woman you must reject your femininity. These ideas also question the belief that girls and power do not mix. By giving women confidence in their femininity, Girlies are pushing the boundaries of patriarchal control.

These two aspects are not the only representation of third wave feminism. Just as second wave cannot be homogenized as a white, Liberal, academic woman's feminism, the third wave cannot be homogenized as a postfeminist feminism or a "girlie feminism." Despite the fact that the media homogenizes all these feminisms and therefore the general public does as well, feminism has a diverse background—too diverse to cover within the pages of this thesis project.

Despite these potentially or seemingly damaging aspects, young women are finding their way to the third wave. For example, in Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms (2001) Jessica Ticktin's definition of feminism speaks to the growing number of young women reclaiming femininity:

> For me, feminism is all about choice: the freedom to choose how to live one's life with respect, tolerance and compassion for and from others. It is about having multiple roles for women that are fluid and changing. It is about "ands" not "ours." It's being able to wear a miniskirt and study law, have children or have an abortion, be sexually active and not be a sexual object. (49)

For Ticktin, equality does not mean to be treated the same as a man; in fact, her definition of feminism allows her to be treated as an individual. Ticktin's response also highlights some of the issues that distinguish third wavers: a non-inclusive feminist identity, an acceptance of feminism's evolving nature and the acceptance of contradictions.

The third wave of feminism is comprised of women, who "came of age politically amid the backlash" (Baumgardner and Richards 77). Susan Faludi documents this dark time in feminist history in Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991). Faludi thoroughly examines how and why the American media turned against feminism and its forerunners. She argues that the press, film, television, the fashion industry and the beauty (cosmetics) industry all played a part in the anti-feminist movement that followed the second wave:

> The afflictions ascribed to feminism are all myths. From "the man shortage" to "the infertility epidemic" to "female burnout" to "toxic daycare," these so-called female crises have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless loop that

> perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood. (Faludi xv)

The similarities in Faludi's critique of American society and Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1962) are astonishing. Almost thirty years had passed since Friedan exposed America's war on women, yet very little changed for women in regards to the media's relationship with women and feminism.

The discussion of representation has concerned both second and third wave feminists. According to Joanne Hollows in Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture (2000), "femininity was constituted as a 'problem' in second-wave feminism. For many feminists, feminine value and behaviour were seen as a major cause of women's oppression" (2). Within the media, this was reflected as damaging and stereotypical images of women that feminists believed "testified to the power mechanisms of patriarchy which pervade our culture" (Taylor and Willis 40). Representation is often a debate about meaning, how it is produced and exchanged. However, "representations are changeable" and therefore "potentially positive for those whose identities are actually at stake within them" (Taylor and Willis 40). This positive potential may be the reason why third wavers have attempted to reclaim femininity.

Patriarchy defined femininity as inferior to masculinity and second wavers agreed: "For many feminists, in becoming feminine, women were 'colonized' by patriarchy and became implicated in their own oppression" (Hollows 10). This argument exposed the difference between sex and gender. Dominant ideology supported the superiority of men because of their masculinity and the inferiority of women because of their femininity. Femininity became linked to traits such as,

passivity, dependence, ignorance and virtue. Jobs became feminized, for example nurses, teachers, secretaries and child care workers. The deliberate devaluing of everything associated with women is one of the reasons why second wavers believed the rejection of femininity was essential in establishing their feminist identity.

The third wave is continuing the critique of media and its representation of women. Baumgardner and Richards are two third wavers, who are exposing the nature of media and its relationship with feminism. The third wave is focused on expanding feminism to inspire confidence and offer more opportunities for men and women with less sexism. Third wavers are also a culture-driven generation: "young women are emphasizing [their] real personal lives in contrast to what some feminist foremothers anticipated their lives would—or should—be: that the way to equality was to reject Barbie and all forms of pink-packaged femininity" (Baumgardner and Richards 136-7). The backlash against women and feminism, "girl power" feminism and second wave feminism all are part of the third wave. Third wavers are still bringing everyday issues of women to the forefront; however, their issues are not the all the same as second wavers because the world has changed.

The third wave of feminism does not claim to be the first to critique the media and its representations of women. The "image of women" debate can be traced to the second wave during the 1970s. Feminism has long been interested in the production of culture and representation of women through the media. The argument was the media played a significant part in socializing women into

patriarchally inscribed roles for women: mother and wife. According to Christine Gledhill in "Genre and Gender: The Case of the Soap Opera" (1997), the remedy proposed by second wavers was a problematic: "a readjustment of the lens, a refocusing of the programme maker's perspective, in order to produce accurate reflections" (346). However, this view overlooks the fact that there is no 'accurate reflection' of anything. There is no 'accurate reflection' of woman since there are different sizes, colours, ages of women and they all have different lived experiences and ideals. Therefore, the belief that there can be a universal image of woman that is accurate is naive and dangerous. It overlooks our differences and homogenizes a large and diverse group.

Gledhill also highlights another problem with this solution: "The notion that representation can or should reflect 'real women' therefore stalls on the question: what reality? (the oppression of women? women as victims? positive heroines?)" (346). Just as there are many different types of women, there are many different lived realities. Gledhill suggests that representations "cannot be measured in any direct comparison with the real world" (347). She argues that instead representations should be viewed "on how they are called on within the particular genres or narrative forms which use them, as well as on the circumstances of their production and reception, and on the social context of their audiences" (Gledhill 347). This represents a move beyond a critique of good versus bad images to how are audiences interpreting an image? What use is the image to the audience? What types of audiences are engaging with an image? This approach has been popular with third wave feminists, who have taken personal,

autobiographical approach to their engagement with theory, feminism and representation.

As such, many third wavers have found that "second wave tactics did not speak to [our] media-savvy and culture driven generation" (Baumgardner and Richards 77). It may be a generalization of second wave feminism to view it as too political and too angry, nonetheless, it is a common complaint of third wavers. Baumgardner and Richards suggest that this may be because the third wave is also an articulation of young women "rebelling against their mothers" (137). Third wavers have grown up in a time dominated by the media. According to Irene Karras in "The Third Wave's Final Girl" (2002), third wavers struggle "to define their femaleness in a world where the naming is often done by the media and pop-culture, where the choice for young women is to be either babe or bitch" (par. 4). It is therefore no surprise that pop-culture has become the third wave's "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" (Karras par. 11). Third wavers are engaging with the media and pop culture in ways that second wavers did not. They are creating images and words that reflect their personal lives. For example, two third wave anthologies, Girls Who Bite Back: Witches, Mutants, Slayers and Freaks (2004) and Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms (2001) are filled with stories and images of young women who discuss race, class, sexuality, language, privilege and gender.

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue that the sins media commit against women "are barriers only until we see them for what they are and fight back" (100). One such way to fight back is to become media literate and ultimately a media revolutionary. In a section called "The Seven Deadly Media Sins Against Women," they point out the sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism of mainstream media. They critique general-interest magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's* and *Newsweek* for their predominance of male-focused stories, male-dominated ownership and writers (100-101). They also condemn popular women's magazine like *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* for their promotion of sexist and sexualized images of women (110-112). The news media is scrutinized for its focus on a narrow group of women to represent feminism: Susan Faludi, Gloria Steinem and Naomi Wolf (105-106). Finally, large corporations are disparaged for their use of scantily clad women to sell products and their editorial content that continues to silence women (102-103).

Baumgardner and Richards not only highlight the injustices against women and feminism within the media, they also suggest what everyone can do to change or stop it:

> We have to approach the media with a pro-woman attitude. We need to expect and encourage more resistance to sexism within magazines, and a commitment to feminism in the media. Feminists need to grab hold of any forums that speak to women, wherever we find them. (112)

Feminists have already begun acknowledging the barriers that the media sets up for women. Feminist television criticism offers media revolutionaries a platform

through which to reach a new audience of young women, who are waiting for their version of the Feminist Mystique.

What is Feminist Television Criticism?

The growth of mass communication (first print and radio, later television and the Internet) took off in America and Canada after World War II (Martin 28). Scientists and academics soon became interested in the role of media, its content and its influence on audiences; academics developed theories and criticisms to cover all media, and specific media like television. In Television Criticism: Approaches and Applications (1991), Leah R. Vande Berg and Lawrence A. Wenner outline several aims and purposes of television criticism. The most important being: "to serve the academic, journalistic, public, and industry audiences by providing them with critical tools, interpretations, and evaluations within which the television viewing experiences of individuals and societies can be understood" (4). Many theorists conducting research on television assume that it "is as meaningful and important as theatre, literature, painting, and the other arts, and that it is as deserving of serious, critical attention as they are" (Vande Berg and Wenner 9). Such researchers also assume that television criticism is epistemic: "that it is through reading and writing critical analyses of television that we acquire an understanding of television and the relationships among television, society, and ourselves" (Vande Berg and Wenner 9). The ubiquitous nature of television is reason enough to subject it to critical scrutiny; however, it remains a contentious subject between those who see its progressive potential and those who do not.

Not surprisingly, these negative views of television have changed very little since its inception, despite the research that says otherwise:

> Television generally is considered harmful to children, thus children must be 'inoculated' against it. Television, according to this view, encourages children to smoke, do drugs, act violently and immorally, and so the message too often is don't watch, don't try to learn from television. Run, hide, ban, censor! (Pungente and O'Malley 3-4)

It is not just politicians and moralists, who condemn television. Academics have also treated the medium with disdain: "The subject is so unworthy, in fact, that some academicians find themselves in the delicate positions of uttering high-sounding statements about the meaning of television in one breath and adamantly denying they watch the cursed thing in the next" (Deming 40).

Within this argument "the classics" like William Shakespeare, Vincent Van Gogh and Amadeus Mozart are considered worthy subjects of study. Yet contemporary artists like Stephen King, Mat Groening and Madonna are considered unworthy; their popular status amongst the "uneducated masses," who consume them, mark them "low-brow." Although television is marked "low-brow" on the cultural scale, it nonetheless demands the same level of scrutiny and respect as "high-brow" culture because of its ability to create and reflect mass cultural fictions of identity within a specific time and space.

There are many scholars in television theory who wish to educate viewers so that they are aware of television's influence. John Pungente and Martin O'Malley, for example, recognize the power of television:

> Television, more than other media, is part of our lives. It dominates our cultural and political life. Almost all information which we have, other than what we experience ourselves, comes from the media. And that information is not just presented to us, it is first shaped into a form of

> reality. Television presents us with model behaviour, beliefs, and values, and does this in such a way that we are not aware of its influence. (23)

Denise Kervin also recognizes the potential of television:

> Television must be understood, but too seldom is, as part of the process whereby we gain social knowledge--that is, knowledge about the beliefs and representations existing in society, thereby perhaps reinforcing the status quo, perhaps questioning it, or perhaps even challenging its premises. Television engages in ideological work in its use of ideas and images; it offers definitions of reality to its viewers. (235)

They recognize the power of television to transmit knowledge to its viewers. The issue becomes "what kind of knowledge are we consuming from television?" This sentiment has been used to determine the various approaches that theorists, scientists and sociologists have used to examine television content and its effect on viewers.

In Communication and Mass Media: Culture, Domination and Opposition (1997), Michele Martin states that the media "suggest ways of looking at the world and of understanding it which may indirectly, or even insidiously, foster, for example, sexist or racist world views" (Martin 1). As such, researchers have developed many models in studying media content. Two main models that first evolved in communication theory were the psychological theory (1940s) and functional theory (1950s). The psychological model addressed how media influences audiences. American law professor, Harold Lasswell, is a major figure within this area. Lasswell developed the hypodermic model that assumed "the media, the communicator (i.e., the medium) does 'something' to an audience, not the inverse" (Martin 30). However, this model negated the audience's agency and assumed they were identical, passive, isolated and vulnerable to influence.

This model of analysis was then replaced with a functionalist model. Martin states, "research no longer looked at how the media influence audiences, but rather at how audiences use media content to meet their social and psychological needs" (28). Americans theorists, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, are key figures in this area; they developed the "two-step flow" theory. This theory exposed the fallacy in the hypodermic: "a mediator existed between the media and a significant number of people who became aware of the message" (Martin 32). Thus, Lazarsfeld and Katz believed that the media did not tell people what to think rather the media reinforced opinions people already had (Martin 32). As a result, researchers began to change their views about the audience; they realized that the audience also negotiated meaning based on their personal lived experience.

Two other pioneers were Canadian researchers, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. Harold Innis argued that changes "in forms of communication can lead to the fall of monopolies of knowledge and the loss of material knowledge" (Martin 40). Innis' work recognized the relationship between technology and communication development. Marshall McLuhan used Innis' model to develop an approach that focused on the influence of communication technology on individuals. McLuhan argued that the technological innovations of communication ultimately changed the societies that use them: "From the development of phonetic script until the invention of the electric telegraph, human technology had tended strongly toward the furtherance of detachment and objectivity, detribalization and individuality" (McLuhan 343). His famous slogan,

"the medium is the message," implies that the dominant medium used by a society determines the economic, political and social structures in which we live (Martin 43). Even though McLuhan has been criticized for his use of a deterministic approach, he has nonetheless influenced communication theory in regards to the effects of the evolution of communication technology.

How the Internet is used in connection with television is an excellent example of Innis' and McLuhan's work. Audiences discuss their favourite television programs, including *BtVS*, on the Internet in chat rooms and discussion boards that are devoted to the program. Fans are able to articulate their pleasure or outrage at something that has happened on their favourite show. I believe that such feedback from the audience is becoming more influential than ratings systems (i.e. the Nielsen rating system) that measure viewership. Writers and producers are aware of how audiences feel because the Internet allows for communication between the two. The Internet has created a forum in which everyone (who has access to a computer and the Internet) can voice his or her opinion. This agency has created personal websites, chat rooms, discussion boards and "bloggers." The result is a society that believes their opinion matters regardless of how uninformed they may be—everyone is a potential "expert." I see a future where viewers become the writers or contributors to a plot line or character development. The beginning of this evolution can be seen in *American Idol* where audiences actually vote on which singer they like. The singer with the most votes eventually wins a record contract with a major music label.

Technology has taken the power out of the hands of few and put it into the hands of the masses.

Based on the work of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Innis and McLuhan, modern media researchers now recognize that media influences audiences, those audiences also influence media and that communication technology influences society and media. Feminists have used these models and theories to examine the representation of women in the media. Sue Thornham, a Professor of Media and Cultural Studies, argues "if research is really to offer any understanding of the relationship between women and media, it must address the issue of the *ideological* hegemony of the media by adopting a theoretical framework capable of analyzing media as text, discourse and as *myth*" (56). The belief is that "ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have" (Nichols 1). Myths function similarly to ideology because they are "a system of communication, that is a message" (Barthes 109). Both ideology and myth impose messages on an audience that are naturalized—they are regarded as truth. From a feminist perspective, this means the media is a narrative that perpetuates dominant ideology and that dominant ideology oppresses women through its patriarchal construction of femininity.

Thornham builds upon the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and Professor of Communications David Morley in Feminist Theories and Cultural Studies (2000). Thornham discusses the Hall-Morley model used to analyze

television which proposes that "texts, then, are multi-layered and multi-referential, but their meanings are 'structured in dominance', with 'preferred' readings inscribed within the text" (99). However, Thornham complicates this model by stating, "media images, despite their status as hegemonic texts, also offer spaces of contradiction which can be exploited" (60). This space of contradiction within media images has been the focus of much feminist television criticism.

Feminists have been interested in the media's representation of women since the 1970s (the second wave). Feminists have focused on magazines (article content and paid advertisements), movies, television commercials, television programs, news media and the Internet to examine the role of women as represented by such media. Many feminists doing such research argued that most images, meanings and representations of women in the media were stereotyped. They examined how such images confined and defined women in order to challenge those that were normalized by patriarchy (Kuhn 50). During the 1980s and 1990s, "a rash of 'women and television' books" from academics such as Mary Ellen Brown, Christine Geraghty, Andrea Press, Lynn Spigel, Ann Gray and Julie D'Acci marked a resurgence in feminist television criticism (Brunsdon, D'Acci and Spigel 114). These women covered topics related to identity, pleasure, ideology and cultural hegemony in their books on media and women. These women helped to shape feminist television criticism.

Feminist television criticism is about teaching the viewer how to develop an informed and critical eye regarding television's power to influence the representation of gender. Feminist television criticism looks at the ways in which

television attempts to capture a female audience; one focus is on "how audiences understand television programs and, in particular, how the medium defines femininity and female desire" (Spigel and Mann vii). This is not an argument that is focused on whether images are good or bad; rather, it is a question of what kind of image is constructed and how that image is interpreted. More importantly, feminists have recognized television's power to lure and pleasure its audience despite limited female roles (Brunsdon 1). Much of the work done on television by feminists has been informed by feminist film theory. This work has been built on Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

Mulvey denounces the objectified and disempowered role of women within classical narrative cinema. She deconstructs the patriarchal pleasure of cinema by using psychoanalysis as a political weapon. She argues that film constructs women as spectacles where narrative is governed by an Oedipal logic: "the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic" (Mulvey 14). The result is that it positions woman as the "other." Such an objectification reinforces the sexual imbalance of woman as image and man as "bearer of the look":

> In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfield to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (19)

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Thus, woman as image within cinema functions on two levels, according to Mulvey: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (19). This is the creation of the male gaze.

According to Mulvey, the male gaze is made possible by structuring the film around a central figure in which the audience can identify—a male protagonist. Furthermore:

> As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (Mulvey 20)

The masculinization of the spectator is an oversight that Mulvey addresses later in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun (1946)" (1981).

Mulvey's article argues that visual pleasure is gendered and offers no challenge to the dominant/submissive pattern of the gaze. By not differentiating the female spectator, the reader must assume that Mulvey believes that women view cinema with a male gaze. Mulvey surmises in "Afterthoughts" (1981), "the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its 'masculinization', that the spell of fascination is broken" (29). Feminist television critics, such as Suzanna Danuta Walters, have challenged this narrow view of the male gaze. She argues that women can and do look actively and erotically at images of both men and women. Despite the "preferred or dominant readings" of

texts, many women are finding the contradictions and see the progressive potential of the text.

Furthermore, this male gaze does not translate so easily to television viewing. The gaze of film viewing suggests that the viewer's attention is totally consumed with the images on the movie screen. The movie theatre is organized to maintain prolonged and undivided attention: the lights are almost non-existent, the seats are all facing the screen, the screen is so large that it occupies your entire visual space and the sound is so loud that conversation is inhibited. How we watch television is quite different from watching film. When watching television at home, the average experience is interrupted with commercials, phone calls, conversations or household chores. Therefore, television does not command a gaze like film rather it encourages a "look" (Walters 63).

The "look" is more appropriate for the television experience because of the way television programming is constructed and of its position within the home, to name just a few. A look is defined as to "turn one's eyes in a particular direction" or "direct one's attention to examine or investigate" ("Look" 473). A gaze is defined as "a long and steady look" ("Gaze" 330), which implies that spectators are mesmerized by what they are watching—they cannot break their gaze. Film is constructed to maintain the spectator's attention for a lengthy period; the average length of a film is around ninety minutes. However, this type of mesmerized experience is difficult to reconstruct with television. One reason is because television is not constructed to maintain a lengthy viewing. Broadcast television, follows a standardized format: programs are thirty or sixty minutes in

length and are interrupted at timed intervals with multiple commercials. Cable and digital television offers commercial free programming. These technological changes to television have offered new ways to watch television; however, the format of broadcast is still the dominant style. Commercial interruption is just one way that the television gaze is constructed. Television also encourages a look because scenes within a television program are shorter than film and storylines are sometimes completed in one (half hour or hour) episode. Furthermore, storylines are also spread out over an entire season (usually twenty to twenty-two episodes) and aired once a week over an eight to nine month time period. This difference between film and television viewing is based on time invested by the spectator and the format of both mediums.

Another reason why the look of television has been differentiated from the gaze of film is that television offers content outside the realm of male-centered storylines that dominate film. Mulvey argues that the creation of the male gaze arises from the male spectator viewing the male protagonist of the film who is viewing the female object of the film—in both cases the female object is sexualized. In order for the male gaze experience to work for television, the television industry would have to assume that the audience was comprised solely of heterosexual men (or at least ignore the rest of the population). Television no longer caters to the viewing preferences of a single audience market as it did in its early stages. Niche and brand name marketing have changed the view of the audience. For example, television programming is filled with cartoons, soap operas, news programs, science programs, sports, home decorating and

cooking, to name just a few. These programs do not allow for a male-gaze because the target audiences are not guaranteed to be the white, heterosexual, 18-34 aged male. This difference between film and television viewing is based on the identity of the spectator.

Television producers, networks and advertisers have realized that audiences are not a unified mass. Audiences want their individual needs and desires met by programs and commercials. Programming and commercials are tailored to an audience's gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnic background, class, political affiliation and religious beliefs. Companies wanting to sell their product are well aware of their target audience and knowingly place their ads during shows that have a similar target audience. For example, during *Spongebob Squarepants* on Nickelodeon Network, the commercials sell children's toys and McDonald's Kids Meals. Such individual tailoring of entire programs to a specific audience has given agency, identity and individuality to a once uniform mass.

Feminists, such as Suzanna Danuta Walters, have recognized that this space created by television does allow for a female spectator. Furthermore, this space addresses female pleasure and identity. However, many feminist television critics have found that the television industry has not always had women's best interest in mind. In America, during the 1950s, the arrangement of the idealized and urbanized family was that the father went to work and the mother stayed home with the kids. Television networks focused on this idealization of the family by targeting the housewife/mother:

> Television has always had its eye on women. Since its arrival in the late 1940s, it has particularly tried to attract female viewers, who, the industry assumes, are the primary consumers for their households. (Spigel and Mann vii)

Television promoted a specific lifestyle to middle-class white women in the suburbs, and that was a life of consumerism accompanied by a display of commodities that every good housewife needed to complete her happy home. The television shows of the 1950s provided an illusion of the perfect suburban neighbourhood, such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966).

As the domestic space changed and women began leaving the home to pursue careers or just take up a part-time job before they married, television shows also reflected this change. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann state in their introduction to Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer (1992): "in the late 1960s, television discovered that it needed to revamp its model of femininity from its zany housewives and loving mothers to new, more independent working women"(vii). Shows like *That Girl* (1966-1971), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *The Mod Squad* (1968-1973) depicted women outside of the home and in the workplace; the focus moved from the domestic space of the family to the working public spaces of female characters.

Continuing into the 1980s and 1990s, more television programs depicted women as successful career women, for example, *Designing Women* (1986-1993), *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-1988) and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998). However, Julie D'Acci argues that television executives often disagreed over how progressive the "new working woman" would be portrayed on television: "The

television industry, for instance, was looking for relevance and topicality while simultaneously hoping to preserve many of its conventional ways of depicting female characters" (171). Despite the want and need to depict these "new working women," dominant television ideology required the characters remain within acceptable boundaries of femininity that was being embraced during this time. The 1980s was the beginning of the backlash against the feminist movement. Faludi argued in Backlash (1991) that the message being sent to women was: "Women are unhappy precisely because they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation... They have gained control of their fertility, only to destroy it. They have pursued their own professional dreams—and lost out on the greatest female adventure" (Faludi x). Once again, women were told that feminine fulfillment could not be found in independence but only in motherhood and the home.

Bonnie Dow argues in Prime-Time Television (1996) that television in the 1980s "participated in the postfeminist emphasis on reasserting the importance of women's familial roles" (96). Bonnie Dow and Julie D'Acci argue that while *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown* and *Cagney & Lacy* were marketed to the "new working woman," they nonetheless upheld dominant television ideology in regards to women. Dominant television ideology, at the time, was the normalizing and idealization of heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage, family and domesticity; at the core of these "norms" was that women would be bound to them without exception.

One such example that has been brought up by many feminists and viewers is found within *Murphy Brown*. Murphy is a single, tough, loud and domineering woman; her character was often compared to Corky Sherwood-Forest, her married, feminine, polite and helpful co-worker. Murphy rarely comes out on top when the two compete because femininity is the desired and acceptable quality in women. The theme of many of episodes was that "a woman cannot both be professionally successful and retain traditional qualities of femininity" (Dow 146). Essentially, *Murphy Brown* was the postfeminist voice of the backlash era.

While the mother/housewife and career woman roles have dominated television, there is another important role that television was producing—the female superhero. The mother/housewife and career woman roles reflected the reality of women's lives; however, the female superhero role allowed viewers to imagine a world in which women are not just mothers, wives or career gals. *Wonder Woman* (1976-1979) and *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978) were some of the first female superheroes on television. They became idolized and revered as strong, independent women. They had physical powers greater than humans and fought to protect innocent people and the world from the spread of evil. Such powers and responsibilities were once the domain of men: *The Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958), *Batman* (1966-1968), *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978) and *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982). Despite the male-dominance of this genre, these women have gone on to inspire shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001), *Charmed* (1998-

still on air), *Dark Angel* (2000-2002) and *Alias* (2001-still on air). These shows also depict women filling roles once only reserved for men—that of warrior, hero and saviour of the world. These characters challenge traditional binaries of patriarchal ideology, where women are passive and weak and men are active and strong. Their stories and loyal audiences take these women warriors seriously. Such characters have become heroes to those who watch them; however, not all heroes are created equally, and even the term "hero" does not leave room for such women.

What is Hero Mythology?

Heroes inspire us to show courage, integrity and strength. According to Joseph Campbell, "[t]hroughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind" (Hero 3). For many cultures, hero myths have been a way to document their history, their success and their survival. Greek mythology has provided modern historians a view of historic cultures that unearthed pots and buildings are unable to tell. Many modern storytellers have used classic hero myths like Odysseus, Jesus Christ and King Arthur to tell stories to a modern audience. However, the male hero dominates classic and many modern hero myths. Hero myths may inspire courage, integrity and strength but they also reinforce patriarchal gender ideology.

Unfortunately, hero stories teach us that heroes are active male loners and women are passive yet beautiful possessions. Literature is filled with male

heroes: Hercules, King Arthur and Aragorn. Male heroes dominate movies: Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones and James Bond. Male heroes reign in the comic book world: Batman, Superman and Spiderman. Television also loves male heroes: Magnum PI, Captain Kirk and McGyver. As a young adult, I consumed these stories but I knew they were not meant for me. The hero's face did not look like my face and his voice did not sound like my voice; he adventured, fought monsters and won respect and admiration from all—everything I would dream of for myself. However, hero stories are not gender neutral, and after reading, watching and listening to so many for so long, young girls and boys learn their gender roles. If the world of make believe is so sexist how can we expect the real world to be otherwise?

Robert A. Segal documents the critical examination of heroes in his book In Quest of the Hero (1990):

> The study of hero myths goes back at least to 1871, when the English anthropologist Edward Tylor argued that many of them follow a uniform plot, or pattern: the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals, and grows up to become a national hero. (vii)

Most researchers interested in hero mythology have examined this uniform plot or pattern, and some of the most influential include: "Viennese psychologist Otto Rank (1884-1939), American mythographer Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) and English folklorist Lord Raglan (1885-1904)" (Segal viii). All three have devised detailed hero patterns that focus on three rites of passage: birth, initiation and death.

Rank, Raglan and Campbell use psychoanalysis, a phallocentric methodology, to examine stories that honour, praise and validate heroic men and

their heroic actions. Not surprisingly, the focus of their analyses is the male hero. David Adams Leemings argues in The World of Myth (1990) that the hero,

> journeys for us, carries us metaphorically into our darker side, into the unconscious realm that we tentatively explore in our own dreams—into the world where our nightmares become real, where the monsters inside us take on terrifyingly real forms, where our deepest wishes sometimes are fulfilled. (217)

Leemings also states "the hero, then, must be seen as a universal metaphor for the human search for self-knowledge" (217). However, if the heroes are male and hero myths are about the rites of passage of men, and the tools used to analyze their stories are prefaced on the idea that man's journey to adulthood requires the possession of a woman, how can Leemings assume (as Rank, Raglan and Campbell) that the hero is a *universal* metaphor?

Woman's role in most of the hero myths examined by Raglan, Rank and Campbell is that of temptress, hag or hero's prize:

> She is the "other portion" of the hero himself—for "each is both": if his stature is that of world monarch she is the world, and if he is a warrior she is fame. She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance. (Campbell Hero 342)

The heroes and hero myths examined by Raglan, Rank and Campbell operate within the belief that man is the possessor, and woman is the possessed. This must not be viewed as universal. The human search for self-knowledge cannot be the same for women as it is for men, if man actively seeks to possess woman and woman passively waits to be possessed.

Otto Rank examines the stories of Moses, Oedipus, Gilgamesh, Hercules, Jesus and Siegfried (to name a few) in The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1909). He compares myths and dreams and deems that "both are the disguised,

symbolic fulfillment of repressed, overwhelmingly Oedipal wishes lingering in the adult mythmaker or reader" (Segal viii). Rank's work relies heavily on Freudian theories regarding the development of children and the child's relationship with their parents. Rank argues that myths symbolize the male child's emancipation from his father in order to become an individual, an adult. He dismisses any analysis of women when he discusses this transition because, "[t]he imaginative faculty of girls is much less active in this respect" (60). This statement exposes the phallocentric nature of Rank and psychoanalysis. Rank argues that boys show a greater tendency to harbour hostility towards their fathers; therefore, "literally, or consciously, the hero... is always male" (Segal xiii). Rank's hero pattern and definition of a hero are not helpful in examining contemporary female heroes. Indeed, his conception of a hero does not allow for a female equivalent.

Lord Raglan examines the stories of Oedipus, Hercules, Jason, Apollo, Zeus, Joseph, Moses, Siegfried, Arthur and Robin Hood (among others) in "The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama" (1936). Raglan argues that there is a relationship between myth and ritual. For Raglan, myth functions as the script for the ritual, and the ritual functions to aid the community. As such, hero myths function as a means to survive. Raglan also genders his heroes: "not only a hero, but a heroine, for in ritual the queen is as important, or nearly as important, as the king... can ensure prosperity and also victory" (114). However, he does not analyze any heroines or queens; his study is focused solely on male heroes. Therefore, the hero functions as the focus of the story, whereas the heroine only exists in relation to the hero; therefore, she is dependent on the existence of the

hero and is therefore a secondary character. Raglan's work is also not helpful in examining contemporary female heroes because his work does not allow for a female equivalent to the hero.

Joseph Campbell examines the stories of Buddha, Thor, Quetzalcoatl and Odysseus (to name a few) in The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949). His hero pattern is as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell Hero 30). Campbell suggests that heroes can be women: "the hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally, valid, normally human forms" (Campbell Hero 19-20). However, like Raglan and Rank, Campbell chooses to focus on male heroes.

Despite such a glaring oversight, Campbell's hero myth is useful to construct a shero myth because:

> The power of myth is the power to alter politically, to imagine, to name and describe the gods, the humans, their relationships, their contexts, their order, chaos, and chance. Campbell seems to retain many of the values of the old order, but confoundingly gives away the secrets to undermining it. (Sexson 141)

Despite the fact that Campbell's heroic paradigm is phallocentric, he nonetheless believes that "the courage to face the trials and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience—is the hero's deed" (Campbell Power 49). Such a deed has no specific gender in mind, which leaves the possibility for women to face such trials

and accomplish such deeds. This heroic paradigm can be applied to women, to acts of everyday people, to any point in history and the future. Though Campbell presents a very specific hero, one that is male, historical and mythical, his view is only one view, one interpretation of the hero and the hero pattern. As Lynda Sexson states in "Let the Talking Snake Lie: Sacrificing Stories" (1990), "stories metamorphose through their readers" (140-141). A feminist reading of Campbell offers the possibility to reread and reimagine the hero and the hero pattern to encompass if not provide the tools to read and write a shero and shero pattern.

Ethel Johnston Phelps and Miriam F. Polster have written about the lack of recognition of female heroes in literature. Both authors agree that the majority of the work done on hero mythology is presented as a role, destiny and honour reserved only for men. Both authors also discuss the gendered lens of heroism. Miriam F. Polster points out in Eve's Daughter's: The Forbidden Heroism of Women (1992), "[t]he differences between female and male heroism are not based exclusively on physiology or economic circumstance. They reflect both ideas about the 'proper behaviour' for each sex and the particular talents of each" (31). Heroes are heroes because they are often strong, brave and face challenges that test their strength and bravery; furthermore, "traditional standards of heroism ... revere[s] warriorlike speed, power and aggression" (Polster 167). Such behaviour is often only acceptable for men, and as Phelps points out, most of the heroines in fairy/folk tales "conform in many ways to the sentimental ideal of women... they are good, obedient, meek, submissive to authority, and naturally inferior to the heroes" (ix). Furthermore, the roles of women in such

tales are often that of mother, daughter or hag. Heroine is therefore an unacceptable term to describe modern female heroes.

Recent female characters on television and film have been praised for challenging traditional roles for women. The female action hero has become a popular character that has moved from "sidekick" or "love interest" status to the starring role in many successful film and television series. On film, characters like Ripley from the film series *Alien* (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) and Sara Connor from the *Terminator* series (1984, 1991, 2003); and, on television, Xena from the series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and Buffy from the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) are some of the most popular and financially successful examples of the new female superhero—the shero. These characters challenge traditional and acceptable roles of women previously seen on film and television. They are physically strong and independent, their stories focus on their actions and adventures and they save innocent people and battle demons and monsters. However, it is unacceptable to label them heroes or heroines.

A hero is a male honoured for his masculinity, while a heroine is a female honoured for her traditional feminine characteristics. She follows her patriarchal-inscribed path and exists only in relation to the hero. Both terms have been created by, and serve, patriarchy: "Our voices, our representations of ourselves, have been in the hands of others, namely men, since the beginning of the medium of film and television" (Seger 117). This new female character needs a name befitting of her strength, courage and rebelliousness. Words have symbolic importance, and having a term to describe this new female character is

not only important but also essential in establishing her as a positive, progressive and legitimate role model for women.

Varla Ventura, in Sheroes: Bold, Brash, and Absolutely Unabashed Superwomen from Susan B. Anthony to Xena (1998), argues that "women of courage, in addition to taking back their power, must have a name of their own" (xv). That word is shero: Ventura's goal is to have the term added to "Webster's Dictionary, Scrabble, the collective consciousness, and most importantly, the common parlance" (xix). We are living in a time influenced by feminism, and consequently acceptable behaviours for women (and men) have also changed. It is therefore important to celebrate female characters that challenge tradition and "can resonate to and amplify our own possibilities" (Polster 8). That female character is the shero.

Miriam F. Polster states "our images of heroism have their roots in some of the most treasured stories and legends of Western civilization—the Greek and Biblical stories of the creation of the first man and woman" (1). As such, "our image of heroism is anachronistic and incomplete" because it fails to account for the "forbidden heroism of women" (Polster 20). The shero shares certain characteristics with the hero but differs on many levels. Like the hero, the shero commands the narrative; however, her story is not governed by an Oedipal logic. Both heroes and sheroes show great physical and mental courage, are products of their society, address and influence societal issues of their time and are role models.

The differences between the hero and shero are based on the influence of contemporary feminist ideology on definitions of gender. The shero represents a response to feminism; she is a symbol of female empowerment; she discourages the definition of woman in terms of sexual object or in the context of the family (as wife and mother); and she addresses women and women's issues. The shero's story exposes the male-centred plots that dominate popular culture and tells a more empowering story of and for women; thereby, supplanting the supremacy of the mature male character that dominates most narratives but more specifically the hero myth.

The shero differs from the hero in that she is flawed and complex. For the hero, the world is defined by the battle between good and evil; more importantly, the hero is always good, and the villain is always evil. In contrast, the shero recognizes that good and evil are not rigid roles that define a person. The shero recognizes that the battle between good and evil rages within everyone, including herself. Sometimes, the shero loses the battle and makes mistakes—she is human. Thus, the shero is a figure of transformation; she learns from her mistakes and evolves.

Another point in which the hero and shero differ is in their relationship with their community. The hero often has to separate himself from his family and community in order to follow his heroic path; however, the shero does not separate from such powerful and forgiving resources. The shero learns to balance her independence with her relationships with her family and community. As such, the shero's journey (or sheroic path) does not lead her away from her

home and community as the heroic path does for the hero. The shero's journey is "an awakening to consciousness" (Ventura xvii). She must look within herself, "she can turn inside to the intuitive, and occasionally superconscious wisdom at the core of [her] being" (Ventura (xvii). Her battle is therefore, not only with the outside world but also with herself. She must battle the forces that keep her silent, that keep her subservient, that keep her from knowing and following her true path.

The final and most important difference between the shero and the hero is their respective endings. For the hero good always triumphs over evil but for the shero it is not so black and white. Because the shero does not see the world in such binary opposites, the shero may not vanquish evil but in fact transform it, and in "the process she is also transformed" (Seger 163). This element of the shero builds on her "transformative" ability. Within the hero's story, woman functions as an object to be possessed. Within the shero's story, her path leads her to subjectivity, and is not defined by her relation to the hero or any other male figure within her story.

The ultimate goal of creating the sheroic character is to provide women with images of female characters that inspire. Therefore, the shero cannot be too perfect or the audience cannot identify with her. This imperfection does not hinder the fact that women need and want strong, heroic and active women on the screen. Linda Seger argues "to find the truth, we may need to reevaluate the myths that we live by, or create new myths that better reflect who we are as contemporary women" (124). That new myth and new character can be found in

Buffy Summers from the television series, *BtVS*. The creator of the show, Joss Whedon, has reimagined the mythic hero and his path as the story of Buffy Summers, The Vampire Slayer. Whedon has created a world that challenges the conservative, patriarchal and anachronistic notions of gender, good and evil, love and heroism that dominate Western society's myths. In doing so, Whedon creates a new female character for television—the shero. Buffy Summers is a shero but, more importantly, Buffy is a feminist role model. As The Slayer, Buffy embodies the shero character that challenges the traditional role of female heroes in popular culture and patriarchal constructions of femininity thereby making her a symbol of female empowerment.

CHAPTER THREE: DEFINING THE SHERO

Finding strong leading women on television is no easier now than it's ever been. Too often, when a female character does come front and centre, she is like Ally, handcuffed by second-guessing and faux acuity, becoming a perverse, and pernicious, caricature of Modern Womanhood. Luckily we have, with Buffy, one tough, strong-willed, culturally savvy young woman--a woman of the Lisa Simpson school of feminism--who knows the world is full of monsters and, by god, is going to kill as many of them as she can.
-- Mark Kingwell, Saturday Night, (May 1998)

Television programs such as, *Alias* (2001-present) and *BtVS* (1997-2003) and movie series like *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004), *Alien* (1979,1986, 1992, 1997) and *Resident Evil* (2002, 2004) are popular because of the strong, independent female characters. There are plenty of classic male hero stories that focus on action and adventure, and the battle between good over evil; however, they do not offer female audiences what they want—a female superhero. Where are the female equivalents to Superman, Aragorn and Indiana Jones? Lead female characters, which are strong, independent, powerful and in charge, can be financially successful and garner a large audience. Take, for instance, the popularity of Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* film series and Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* film series; these women represent female characters that can stand on their own while having box office success.

Television has its leading lady thanks to Joss Whedon:

> Buffy was explicitly conceived as a feminist reimagination of the horror genre: Screenwriter/TV producer Joss Whedon has said in interviews that his very inspiration for Buffy came from years of watching horror movies in which "bubbleheaded blondes wandered into dark alleys and got murdered by some creature." Whedon wanted to make a movie where the blonde "wanders into a dark alley, takes care of herself, and deploys her powers" to kill the monster. Buffy's exploits implicate the audience in a witty defiance of genre conventions: Instead of shouting, "Don't go in there!" to the naïve gal traipsing through the darkened vacant house, we

> shout, "Go, girl!" as Buffy enters the dark alley to dispatch the monster of the moment with her quick thinking and martial-arts prowess. (Fudge 18)

In order to keep the world safe, Buffy sacrifices all that we take for granted—love, career and normalcy. However, despite being a woman physically capable of defending herself and others while defeating her enemies, Buffy is not always prepared to be the world's last and only defence against supernatural forces bent on destroying it and ultimately her. What makes Buffy so fantastic is that she struggles and sometimes fails. It is this ambiguity that makes her such a successful character, and it is also why so many people not only love her, but also want to be her.

The History of Buffy, the Vampire Slayer

Joss Whedon introduced *BtVS* to the viewing public in 1992 as a movie. His intentions were "to create a supernatural heroine whose terrifying encounters were reflective of the anxieties all adolescents experience" (Tracy 1). However, due to numerous reasons, the low-budget film was a box-office disappointment. [3] Fortunately, an executive at Sandollar (the show's production company) convinced Whedon to make the film into a television series. The main difference between the movie and television series was that Whedon was given complete creative control over the second time around. Whedon was determined to produce *BtVS* the way he had originally intended: "to take someone who is living a normal life in an abnormal situation, and see if they rise to the occasion" (qtd. in

[3] The failure of the film is discussed in length with insights from Joss Whedon in Kathleen Tracy, "Buffy: From Feature Film to Television Series," The Girl's Got Bite (2003). Everything from Whedon's compromised script to Donald Sutherland's meddling is linked to the unsuccessful movie version.

Tracy 1-2). More importantly, he intended that person to be a girl: "this movie was my response to all the horror movies I had ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead" (qtd. in Tracy 2).

BtVS is the story of Buffy Summers, a southern Californian girl, who is also The Slayer. From the first episode we learn that "[i]nto each generation, a Slayer is born. One girl, in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of evil" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.1). Buffy and her mother Joyce moved from Los Angeles to Sunnydale, a town built over a Hellmouth.[4] During the first episode, Buffy meets Rupert Giles, Sunnydale High's librarian and her new Watcher. [5] She also meets Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg, fellow Sunnydale High students, who will become her best friends and allies in her fight against evil.[6] The four are the central figures of the series and their "trials and tribulations" are the focus of many plotlines that evolve over seven seasons.

The teaser of the first episode epitomizes the message of the series. It opens on a moonlit night outside of a high school. A nameless boy leads a reluctant blonde girl into the school to the roof of the gym so they can "enjoy the view." The music hints at the danger and the darkness hides his intentions. A noise startles the girl, and when the boy reassures her that they are alone, "she

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[4] The Hellmouth is a mystical opening into a hell dimension on which Sunnydale, California sits. Many vampires and demons reside in Sunnydale to feed of the mystical energy and some even attempt to open the Hellmouth in order to allow demons to walk the Earth once more.
[5] A Watcher is an adult (male or female) that guides, educates and trains The Slayer.
[6] Xander and Willow call themselves "the Scoobies" in reference to Fred, Velma, Shaggy, Daphne, and Scooby from the Scooby-Doo television and film series.

bares HORRIBLE FANGS and BURIES them in his neck" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.1). Whedon plays on the viewers' expectations of the traditional horror genre; we expect the boy to be the hunter and the girl to be the victim. However, there is more at work here than mere role reversal. Whedon creates a world within *BtVS* that forces the viewer to question their conceptions of gender, love, genre, family, heroism, death, sex, good, villainy and so much more.

Buffy embodies all the strengths and fighting capabilities as that of the male superhero; however, Buffy is so much more because she is young, blonde, pretty and petite—everything a superhero is not. Furthermore, she worries about dating, she is always in the latest fashions, and she is not an overachiever in school—a stereotypical teenage girl. However, as The Slayer, she has supernatural powers such as strength, healing, agility and stamina, which she uses in hand-to-hand combat with vampires and demons. She also has very human powers, such as courage, humour, confidence and a dedicated work ethic. Buffy occupies two distinct worlds: one as The Slayer, who battles evil, and the other as teenage girl, who battles the increasing responsibility of growing up. As a shero, Buffy expresses the full range of humanity; she is a mediator between the good and evil in her world. Rather than expecting or forcing others to choose a side, she strives to maintain the ever-shifting balance.

Another reason for the popularity of *BtVS* is because the show mixes genres: it is a horror, a coming-of-age drama, a soap opera, a comedy, an action-adventure and kung-fu movie all wrapped into one. Despite this wide variety of themes, critics of the show could not look past the vampires and other

monsters that appeared in almost every episode. However, the show has never been a monster-of-the-week: "a key reason for the show's long-term success [is] its ability to use fantasy metaphor to illuminate the difficulties of growing up" (Nazzaro 38). Monsters and demons are the backdrop to the exploration of the relationships created and broken during the formative years of adolescence to adulthood.

Buffy as the Shero

I analyze the character Buffy Summers in the television show *BtVS*, because she is a new kind of female character, which I am labelling the "shero." I define the "shero" as a feminist response to the traditional heroine and hero. She is a strong, courageous woman who accomplishes great things in the face of patriarchal forces that would keep her meek and dependent. There are important differences between the hero, heroine and shero and based on these definitions I believe that Buffy is a shero, not a hero or heroine.

A shero commands the narrative, which is not governed by an Oedipal logic. She challenges woman's social role and represents a response to feminism. By resisting the traditional definitions and representations of femininity she exposes the male-centred plots that dominate popular culture; thereby, telling a more empowering story of and for women. She is a symbol of female empowerment because she is neither a stereotypical "good girl" nor "bad girl." She reinforces a feminist methodology of problem solving through her relationship with her circle of friends. She has doubts about her abilities but nonetheless perseveres and learns from her mistakes (she evolves). The shero

shows physical and mental courage and supplants the supremacy of the mature, male hero that dominates most narratives, but more specifically the hero myth. She discourages the definition of woman in terms of sexual object or in the context of the family (as wife and mother). The shero addresses women and women's issues and as such, female viewers identify with her.

The term hero is inadequate to describe this new female character for the following reasons: the hero is coded male and therefore cannot describe a female. The hero reaffirms the simplistic view of the world as good versus evil by reinforcing traditional binaries of patriarchal ideology. The hero reinforces the primacy of bodily strength and aggression in defining masculinity by promoting conflict resolution through the use of violence. He validates the "man as solitary figure" image by being a loner and physically separating himself from his community. The hero reinforces the Freudian concept that man's path is ultimately to possess woman and as such, female viewers cannot identify with the hero.

The term heroine is also inadequate to describe this new female character. The term heroine is a patriarchally defined term that describes female characters that are dependent on the existence of a hero within the story; therefore, the heroine cannot exist alone. As such, she is not the central character of the story and her actions do not further or affect the storyline. In fact, she mirrors the ideal morals of her gender for her time (which is often patriarchally defined thereby objectifying her). She reinforces traditional binaries of patriarchal ideology by functioning as the romantic interest for the hero thereby

emphasizing her sexuality and availability. The heroine is often beautiful which reinforces the idea of woman as desirable object. She is submissive to authority which reinforces the Freudian concept that woman's path is ultimately to be possessed by man. As such, female viewers will not identify with the heroine.

With these definitions in mind, Buffy exhibits eight traits that qualify her as a shero: she is a leader, she is a warrior, she has mental resources, she embraces her community, she challenges patriarchal authority figures, she is flawed, she is biologically female and she explores her sexuality. My goal is to have the shero character recognized as a new and distinct role for fictional women within literature, film and television. I believe that fictional characters are just as important as real ones because literature, film and television are part of our everyday lives. My goal is to create a definition that expands upon classical hero qualities (leader, warrior, mental resources) with feminist qualities (embraces her community, challenges patriarchal authority figures and explores her sexuality).

It is important to note that Buffy was not endowed with these traits (other than being female) when she first became The Slayer. Throughout the seven seasons, Buffy evolves and learns, and through her life experiences, she develops these traits. Furthermore, at the end of the series, Buffy is only twenty-three years old, and as such she still has much to learn. I am in no way suggesting that as a character she is complete. One of the amazing things about *BtVS* is that all of the characters have grown and changed; many television

programs rarely allow the characters to age, to learn from previous mistakes, or to evolve beyond their cast typing.

(1) A shero is a leader:

As a leader, Buffy takes command of the situation and rallies the troops (the Scoobies). Buffy is always the first into a vampire's nest or into a fight. We know that her leadership is recognized and respected by her friends because decisions regarding vampire and demon slaying are deferred to her. She is also respected and feared by her foes. As a leader, she often forgoes her ego (personal desires) to fulfill her destiny as The Slayer. By occupying the leader role, Buffy challenges the male supremacy of leadership, especially the type of leader that is in charge of armies. However, because Buffy is also flawed, she does not always inspire the confidence that her army needs.

In "Bring on the Night" (7.10), a badly beaten Buffy declares war on The First.[7] Through her powerful (and empowering) speech, Buffy re-establishes herself as leader:

> I'm beyond tired. I'm beyond scared. I'm standing on the mouth of Hell and it's going to swallow me whole... And it'll choke on me. We're not ready? They're not ready. They think we're gonna wait for the end to come like we always do. I'm done waiting. They want an apocalypse? We'll give 'em one. Anyone else who wants to run, do it now, because we just became an army. We just declared war. From now on, we won't just face our fears, we will seek them out. We will find them and cut out their hearts one by one, until The First shows itself for what it really is. And I'll kill it myself. There's only one thing in the Earth more powerful than evil. And that's us. Any questions? ("Bring on the Night" 7.10)

[7] Season seven's Big Bad. The First is an evil power killing off potential Slayers. It is an ancient power that is pure evil, older than humans and demons—and has no physical form but can appear in the form of someone already dead: JENNY/THE FIRST: I'm not a demon, little girl. I am something that you can't even conceive. The First Evil. Beyond sin, beyond death. I am the thing the darkness fears. You'll never see me, but I am everywhere. Every being, every thought, every drop of hate. ("Amends" 3.10).

On the surface, this appears to be the stereotypical "rallying" speech of most heroes before the great battle. However, this speech hints at some kind of "end" to the world that only Buffy can foresee. In true Buffy-style, she does face that end and her possible death because that is who she is: she is courage and determination personified. She knows that as their leader, she must appear strong and confident even though she does not feel so sure about herself or her abilities. As a true leader, Buffy knows that in order to win, she must not play by her enemy's rules, and rather than wait for the "apocalypse," she is going to start one.

The most important example of Buffy's leadership goes beyond the story-arc(s) of the show. In order to defeat The First, Buffy realizes that she must change the rules and rewrite Slayer mythology.[8] Buffy's plan involves Willow working a spell on a mystical Slayer scythe that shares the power of The Slayer to all the Potentials.[9] This act enables Buffy to defeat The First, and once again save the world; more importantly, this act is a message to the audience. Buffy's existence has meant to empower the women (and men) who watch the show. With the show's end, it is now up to viewers to take what Buffy has given them and continue her work. I am not talking about slaying vampires; I am talking about facing challenges, standing up for what you believe and fighting for a better life. Buffy is not just a leader to those on the show, Buffy is a leader for those of

[8] This is the origin story of slayers. It is premised on the precedence that only one girl at any one time can be The Slayer, once she dies another is called to fill her place.
[9] The Potentials are a group of young girls who have yet to become Slayers. Since the seventh season they have been flocking to Sunnydale for protection because The First is attempting to kill them all.

us who watched and loved her. By being the first young, feminine superhero, Buffy leads the way to a world in which being a girl does not mean being a doormat. Buffy leads us to a world where the possibilities for young women are up to us to define and claim. Buffy teaches us that the rules that keep us dependent, weak and silent are meant to be changed.

(2) A shero is a warrior:

As a warrior, Buffy is powerful, agile and experienced in battle. She does not compromise her sense of right and wrong because she is judge, jury and executioner. The success of any Slayer depends on her ability to fight. In season six, Evil Willow [10] addresses Buffy's relationship with violence: "But I know you, Buffy. You're a warrior. You won't go out without a fight" ("Grave, Part 2" 6.22). Buffy fights because she is honour bound to defend the innocent from evil. The warrior role has long been reserved for men; Buffy challenges this male supremacy by not only being a warrior but also by being the Chosen One. The slayer mythology establishes the supremacy of women as the last and only defense in the fight against evil thereby supplanting such male dominance.

Buffy battles many evil forces on a daily basis during her nightly patrols; but it are her battles with each season's "Big Bad" [11] where her extraordinary skills as a warrior are proven. In Season One the Big Bad is The Master, a very old and powerful vampire who is trying to open the Hellmouth thereby unleashing

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[10] Willow has been practicing magic for some time and eventually becomes addicted. When her lover, Tara is killed accidentally killed, she looses control and "goes to the dark side." She becomes evil and attempts to end the world.

[11] Big Bad is the term used by the characters to describe each season's villain. They are the 'biggest' and 'baddest' villain out of all other vampires or demons that Buffy faces within a season.

hell on earth. In "Prophecy Girl" (1.12), Buffy fights The Master knowing that a prophecy has foretold her death. By facing The Master, Buffy sacrifices her desire to live for the greater cause of fighting evil. Buffy arrives at their battle dressed in a white prom gown, she appears as the "sacrificial" woman chained to railroad; however, she comes armed with a crossbow. This scene reinforces the ambiguous nature of Buffy—she appears to be a stereotypical feminized victim but in fact she is a woman warrior who fights back and defeats the villain. By defeating The Master in her "feminized victim" costume, Buffy disrupts the authenticity of the female victim image popularized by the horror genre and replaces it with an empowering image of a feminine woman warrior.

Season Three's Big Bad is Mayor Richard Wilkins III, who attempts an ascension ritual to become a pure demon thereby destroying the world. Season Four's Big Bad is Adam, a human/demon hybrid creation, who tries to create a league of human/demon hybrids to take over the world. Both the Mayor and Adam symbolize patriarchal forces: the Mayor represents government and law, and Adam represents science, military force and technology. Although it is important that Buffy defeats both of these Big Bads, it is more important how she defeats them. Buffy succeeds because she does not fight alone (the tactics of the traditional male warrior); rather, she works with her community to form a mixed-gender coalition. This reliance on her friends stresses the bonds of friendship that is often considered a feminine weakness; however, this coalition becomes is more powerful because they are able to defeat each Big Bad.

(3) A shero has mental resources:

Although Buffy is physically capable of destroying her enemies, she often succeeds when she uses her most powerful muscle—her brain. Buffy is intelligent, witty, confident, independent and culture-savvy. Furthermore, Buffy is endowed with a more supernatural resource: the power of intuition through prophetic dreams (although it is not always a prominent part of her story). Buffy's intelligence, humour and courage shine through in her use of language. Buffyspeak and Slayer Slang are the terms that Michael Adams uses to describe the unique way Buffy and the Scoobies use language. Adams writes that Buffy is a "thoroughly contemporary American savoir... a rapid-fire quipster, a hip teen who knows the language of her place and time" (3). Buffy uses such techniques while slaying vampires: "You're a vampire. Oh, I'm sorry, was that an offensive term? Should I say 'undead-American'?" ("When She Was Bad" 2.1). Karen Eileen Overby and Lahney Preston-Matto in, "Staking in Tongues: Speech Act as Weapon in *Buffy*," argue that Buffy (and the Scoobies) "are on the cutting edge of language, creating new expressions, constantly manipulating older expressions in order to update them or completely circumventing the expected use of language" (74). As such, Buffy's use of slang often functions as a weapon and, therefore, a source of her power: "Well, well, the *Slayer*, always says a pun or witty play on words and I think it throws vampires off and makes them frightened" ("Bargaining, Part One" 6.1). Buffy is not the strong, tall and silent type of hero that is popularized by contemporary film heroes like Clint Eastwood and Arnold

Schwarzenegger. Buffy speaks her mind and refuses the silence that often accompanies the hero image and the image of woman.

Buffy also displays an "impressive range of cultural reference [that] reflects [her] command of twentieth-century cultural history" (Adams 30). As I discussed in my previous chapter about feminism, third wavers have taken on pop-culture as a site of struggle because of the media's influencing power. Buffy's knowledge is impressive, but more importantly, she claims it as her own through her use of it in everyday speech. For example, Buffy references Spiderman's ability to sense impeding danger: "Besides, I can just tell something's wrong. My spider-sense is tingling" ("I Robot, you Jane" 1.8). And Buffy compares werewolf hunter Cain's "demons-must-die" mentality to Hitler: "I think I know where to look. We just have to make it there before Mein Furrier" ("Phases" 2.15). Slang is often the language of youth, and Buffy's grasp of pop-culture and history positions her as a shero of her time. Furthermore, it positions her within third wave feminism's use of popular culture to challenge patriarchally inscribed definitions of femininity.

(4) A shero embraces her community:

As demonstrated by Buffy's numerous battles with each season's Big Bad, Buffy does have help from her friends in her fight against evil. Buffy is not a loner like so many classic heroes. Her friends are a support system that provides her with the trust, love and faith that she needs to succeed. One of the reasons why Buffy is such a successful Slayer is her circle of friends. Many characters have joined and left but the core group has always been Buffy, Giles, Xander and

Willow; some of the more memorable "guest" Scoobies have been Cordelia, Angel, Oz, Faith, Riley, Tara, Anya, Dawn, Andrew and Spike. [12]

The Scoobies function as Buffy's surrogate family: Giles is the parent, Willow her sister and Xander her brother. Buffy's biological mother does not contribute to Buffy's success since she is unaware of Buffy's Slayer identity through the first several seasons. When she does learn of Buffy's shero identity, she rejects Buffy and the importance of her role as The Slayer. Xander's and Willow's biological parents are also represented negatively. By presenting the traditional family in such a negative way, the show questions the supremacy of the nuclear family that is often idealized on American television. The surrogate family of the Scoobies also challenges patriarchal social order by presenting a cohesive group where a woman is the head.

There are many instances when Buffy and her friends work together to defeat a Big Bad. When Buffy battles Adam, in "Primevil" (4.21), the spell the Scoobies use to combine their skills, provide Buffy with the power she could not muster by herself. When Buffy loses her sister, Dawn to Glory (the Big Bad of Season Five), she falls into catatonia. Willow uses a spell to enter Buffy's mind and remind her that she alone has the power to save the world and protect the innocent. And finally, when Buffy defeats The First, it is only because Willow casts a spell, Spike sacrifices his life and the Potentials fight alongside her. By remaining part of her community, Buffy challenges the traditional hero who must

[12] Each guest Scoobie has their own lengthy and complicated background; however, such information can be found in all three volumes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: The Watcher's Guide. The important part is that they (and many more) have all helped Buffy along the way.

leave his community in order to fulfill his heroic journey. Furthermore, Buffy's successes are dependent on her close connections with her friends; by rewarding relationships and community building *BtVS* validates feminine (and feminist) story themes.

(5) A shero challenges patriarchal authority figures:

Buffy questions and often disobeys authority figures if they impede her mission. Instead, she uses her own experience and knowledge to make decisions—she trusts her instincts. She stands up and voices her opinion regardless of the situation. Buffy has challenged many authoritative figures on the show, such as her Watcher (Giles and Wesley), Principal Snyder, Mayor Richard Wilkins III, the Initiative, Dr. Maggie Walsh, the Watcher's Council, Caleb and the Shadowbox Men.[13] By challenging these patriarchal authority figures, Buffy challenges the legitimacy of the male-dominated right to give orders and make others obey. The Watcher's Council [14] and the Shadowbox Men[15] try to control Buffy because both view her through the lens of patriarchally inscribed gender ideology: "She's a girl. Sugar and spice and everything...useless unless you're baking" ("Lessons" 7.1).

The Watcher's Council believes that they control The Slayer. They believe that only through their guidance, education and training does a Slayer know how to perform her job. Quentin Travers, who seems to take pleasure in

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[13] Each of these figures also have a lengthy and complicated backgrounds, the details of which can be found in all three volumes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: The Watcher's Guide.
[14] The Watcher's Council is an ancient organization dedicated to training Watchers and finding potential slayers; they function as a "warehouse" of information about magic and demons. It is comprised of men and women whose expertise is focused on magic and myth.
[15] The Shadowbox Men are the men who created the first Slayer by chaining a young girl and allowing a demon to enter her, thereby giving her power.

reminding Buffy that she works for them, heads the patriarchal institution. However, their attempts to control Buffy fail when she realizes the true nature of their relationship:

> BUFFY: There isn't gonna be a review.
> TRAVERS: Sorry?
> BUFFY: No review. No interrogation. No questions you *know* I can't answer. No hoops, no jumps—and no interruptions. See ... I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I've finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them. You guys didn't come all the way from England to determine whether or not I was good enough to be let back in. You came to beg me to let you back in. To give your jobs, your lives some semblance of meaning. You're Watchers. Without a Slayer, you're pretty much just watchin' *Masterpiece Theater*. You can't stop Glory. You can't do anything with the information you have except maybe publish it in the "Everyone Thinks We're Insane-O's Home Journal." So here's how it's gonna work. You're gonna tell me everything you know. Then you're gonna go away. You'll contact me if and when you have any further information about Glory. The magic shop will remain open. Mr. Giles will stay here as my official Watcher, reinstated at full salary... to be paid retroactively from the month he was fired. I will continue my work with the help of my friends... Now...You all may be very good at your jobs. The only way we're gonna find out is if you work with me. You can all take your time thinking about that. But I want an answer right now from Quentin, 'cause I think he's understanding me.
> TRAVERS: Uh, your terms are acceptable. ("Checkpoint" 5.12)

By standing up for herself and her friends, Buffy has dismantled the authoritative power of the Council—she does not work for them; they work for her. This feminist act positions Buffy as a powerful and independent woman.

Buffy ends the patriarchal control over the Slayer lineage when she confronts the Shadowbox Men in "Get it Done" (7.15). The origin myth of the first Slayer is revealed: "First there is the Earth. Then, there came the demons. After demons, there came men. Men found a girl. And the men took the girl to fight the demon—all demons. They—they chained her to the Earth" ("Get it Done"

7.15). Buffy realizes that the Shadowbox Men want a demon to "become one" with her—they inform her that her truest strength is the energy of the demon, its spirit, its heart:

> You think I came all this way to get knocked up by some demon dust? I can't fight this. I know that now. But you guys? You're just men. Just the men who did this... to her. Whoever that girl was before she was the First Slayer… you don't understand! You violated that girl, made her kill for you because you're weak, you're pathetic, and you obviously have nothing to show me. ("Get it Done" 7.15)

Buffy fights back and does not allow the Shadowbox Men or the demon to become part of her. Once again Buffy proves that she is in control and refuses to play by their rules. The Watcher's Council and the Shadowbox Men both represent patriarchal authority figures that try to control Buffy. Buffy does more than challenge their authority—she "dismantles their houses." By removing their power, Buffy exposes the weak nature of their patriarchy authority.

(6) A shero is flawed:

Buffy is a round character, meaning she displays inconsistencies and internal conflict. For example, even though Buffy is The Slayer, she sometimes questions her own ability to handle the situation. In fact, she sometimes makes mistakes but she learns from them and evolves as a character. Buffy's imperfection is what makes her a believable character and shero. Buffy follows the "Silver Age of comic book tradition" of a hero "with dark secrets and deep character flaws," such as The Hulk and Spiderman (Stafford Girls Who Bite Back 26). Before they were superheroes, they were normal humans and through an accident or an unfortunate event they were endowed with special powers and abilities. As such, these superheroes spent a lot of their time not wanting to be

superheroes and chased after their former lives. This is also true of Buffy. Some of the deadliest mistakes Buffy makes are in pursuit of a life she had before she was The Slayer. For example, Buffy knows Angel is a vampire but falls in love and sleeps with him anyways, resulting in death, mayhem and possible apocalypse. But who can blame her? Buffy only wants what everyone else does—a loving relationship. Fortunately, Buffy does realize in time that she must and can do the right thing—she runs Angel through with a sword thereby closing the portal.

Heroes are often idealized because they represent the best humanity has to offer. The heroic journey serves to demonstrate how to successfully manoeuvre life's obstacles. However, this kind of role model does not leave room for failure. The shero, as demonstrated through Buffy, allows the audience to understand that some of life's most important lessons can only be realized through failure. For example, in "When She Was Bad" (2.1), Buffy decides to work alone because she feels she cannot protect her friends any longer. Buffy's mistake is nearly fatal for the Scoobies, who are kidnapped by vampires and nearly sacrificed. Buffy learns that being a loner-hero does not make her stronger it makes her weaker.

Sheryl Vint argues in her article, "'Killing Us Softly'? A Feminist Search for the 'Real' Buffy" (2002): "Buffy is a strong feminist role model because in some contexts she is <u>not</u>—and this discrepancy can introduce fans to a critical consciousness of ideology" (Vint par. 23). Vint discusses how images of women in popular culture are constructed and how more often than not "sexualized

secondary texts privilege the visual images over other representation" (par. 8). Vint examines Buffy on the television series and Sarah Michelle Gellar in popular magazines like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *Mademoiselle*. A point that Vint makes, which needs further examination, is that she recognizes that the sexualized images of Gellar in magazines are not representative of Buffy. It is the discrepancy between the sexualized images of Gellar and the character that she plays (Buffy) that encourages fans to question their views about how media believes women behave and how media believes what women are capable of.

(7) A shero is biologically female:

One main reason for this project and for promoting the term shero is based on my belief that the term hero connotes a masculine identity, and heroine and female hero are inadequate to describe this new female character because they too are words created by patriarchy. I believe the word shero connotes a female power, courage and rebellion that heroine and female hero do not. In *BtVS*, Buffy is female. Like the shero, The Slayer can only ever be female: "One girl, in all the world, a Chosen One" ("Welcome to Hellmouth" 1.1). Another reason for this thesis is that women are not often represented as heroes, warriors, or as main characters of an action-adventure storyline. Buffy disrupts stereotypical action-adventure hero-warrior plots by maintaining her femininity. Buffy is coded feminine in her appearance—from her long blonde hair to her stylish and trendy clothes—her roles outside of being The Slayer—from her desire to be a cheerleader to her job as high school counselor—and even her name. However, unlike other popular women warriors (Sarah Connor and Ellen

Ripley), Buffy does not "bulk-up," dress in army fatigues or carry a gun in order to reinforce her image as a warrior. This is important because Buffy's feminized appearance challenges patriarchal definitions of femininity as weak and powerless.

Buffy reclaims femininity in a way that many feminists believe is only furthering a controlled patriarchal definition of femininity. They have adopted the belief that being a girl means being powerless, that wearing pink nail polish and lipstick means being subservient, that wanting a boyfriend means being a dependant. Despite the fact that "Buffy looks like a typical California teenage girl: cute, slender, not overly studious and stereotypically preoccupied with her appearance" (Daugherty 148), her power lies in the fact that underneath that exterior is a girl that epitomizes "toughness, resilience, strength, and confidence" (Vint 25). More importantly, Buffy "claim[s] femininity as a source of power, rather than trying to make it masculine... By embracing the feminine [she] send[s] the message to society that women are powerful on their own terms" (Karras par. 15). Buffy is coded feminine in her name and appearance and, as The Slayer, disrupts traditional feminine stereotypes through her strength, independence and rebelliousness.

(8) A shero explores her sexuality:

Buffy has a libido. She also knows that sex is sometimes just sex or it can be an expression of love, and she is not afraid to experience either. She exercises her ability to choose romantic and sexual partners. She is in touch with her desires but her desires do not control her or define who she is. *BtVS*

shows the complexities that young women face when they explore their sexualities. Buffy cannot be defined as a "good girl"—a virgin that waits for marriage—or as a "bad girl"—a promiscuous girl who has sex without thought. So often these are the main roles young women are given.

In season one, Buffy is at the beginning of her sexual journey into womanhood—she is a sixteen-year old virgin. However, by the end of season seven, Buffy is a twenty-three year old woman who has experienced romantic love (Angel), fulfilled sexual passion (Riley), an unhealthy sexual relationship (Spike) and has realized that she still has much to learn:

> OK, I'm cookie dough. I'm not done baking. I'm not finished becoming whoever the hell it is I'm gonna turn out to be. I make it through this, and the next thing, and the next thing, and maybe one day I turn around and realize I'm ready. I'm cookies. And then, you know, if I want someone to eat—or enjoy warm, delicious cookie me, then...that's fine. That'll be then. When I'm done. ("Chosen" 7.22)

Although Buffy searches for love and has sexual relations with men, these acts do not consume her nor are they the focus of her existence. Unlike the stereotyped female whose career is secondary to her pursuit of love and marriage, Buffy seeks a balance. Buffy is a role model for third wave feminists because she embraces her sexuality without letting it consume her.

Buffy's relationship with Riley Finn in season four marks new sexual territory for Buffy. In "Where the Wild Things Are" (4.18), she comes to the relationship scarred, nervous and doubtful; however, Riley's love gives her the emotional and sexual security she needs to explore her physical passion. As such, Buffy is able to explore her sexuality freely and with abandon. In this relationship, Buffy is the aggressor: "You have a lot learn about women. Riley

replies, You're gonna teach me" ("Something Blue" 4.9). Buffy's sexuality conforms to the "good girl" stereotype with Riley. However, the link between their nightly patrols and fevered sexual encounters that follow hints at Buffy's darker sexual identity.

Buffy's relationship with Spike is by far the most debated and contentious of her relationships because she explores the darker side of her sexuality. Spike is a vampire, and despite having good intentions on occasion he is evil, but Buffy enters a dangerous liaison with him based solely on sex. In prior relationships, Buffy has played the "good girl," and with Spike their sex is linked to violence, anger and aggression. In fact, their first sexual encounter is prefaced with a physical fight and verbal insults that ultimately bring down an entire house in "Smashed" (6.9). Sex with Spike is not about love or passion; it is about Buffy's exploration of her anger and self-loathing. Buffy seeks release with Spike in order to deal with the darkness within her—she no longer feels connected to her humanity. Their relationship blurs the boundaries between pleasure and pain, and responsibility and exploitation. The fact that Buffy ends their relationship suggests that women are entitled to define or control their sexuality on their own terms.

Buffy is a very attractive young woman; she has boyfriends and she has sex. All of which impact her role as the Slayer; however, in the context of popular culture and commercial success, Buffy's appearance outside of the show is only sexualized to satisfy marketing for the show. Buffy's power does not come from her sexuality, although it is defined in terms of being a female. How

Buffy juggles her responsibility of saving the world while trying to build relationships exposes the ambiguous nature of western culture represented by the media and the various messages it sends young women today. Be pretty but be smart, become a lawyer but settle down and start a family—these contradictory messages are played out within *BtVS*, and how Buffy finds middle ground makes her a progressive role model for third wave feminism.

Based on these eight characteristics, I believe that Buffy is a shero. Buffy challenges the traditional role of women in hero mythology and on television: rather than remain the victim, Buffy is the hunter. *BtVS* shows women with access to power once only reserved for men, by challenging the supremacy of the hero with the shero character. Buffy is a symbol of female empowerment and a feminist role model: she resists patriarchal sexualization and provides a space where the "shero" is taken seriously. Buffy challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity; through her role as The Slayer, Buffy reclaims and redefines femininity on her own terms. Her ability to be both beautiful and strong makes her the embodiment of third wave feminism; Buffy's ability to make room for contradictions presents a more appealing character for women.

As a warrior, Buffy represents a feminine body that is coded strong, agile and powerful. Such a representation challenges the supremacy of the musculinized male warrior. In *BtVS*, relationships, intimacies and family are the focus of the narrative thereby legitimating the importance of women's genres. Buffy's use of language is another way in which she subverts patriarchy because the show shifts the importance from action to words. Buffy talks, walks and looks

back: through humour she is able to parody the tall, dark and silent hero that is another representation of legitimized masculine power within popular culture. *BtVS* exposes the male-centered plots of popular culture and constructs an alternative reading to tell a more empowering story for women.

By presenting characters that are flawed, *BtVS* refuses the subject/object dichotomy of the male gaze. Audiences identify with Buffy because they are able to recognize themselves or their actions through her; as such, audiences do not objectify her. The show is so successful in presenting Buffy as a subject that many viewers want to be Buffy. As a leader, Buffy supplants the dominance of maturity and masculinity through her youth and femininity. Buffy challenges images of the male hero, male warrior and male leader by being a shero.

Campbell's Heroic Pattern and the Sheroic Pattern

In keeping with hero mythology, it is important not only to construct and analyze the shero as portrayed by Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, it is also important to construct a shero pattern. Joseph Campbell has done extensive work on the hero pattern in The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1973). Campbell explores the journey and transformation of the hero throughout history and various cultures. However, his heroes are often male, and their journey reinforces the mythological creation of male as protector of the weak and destroyer of evil. David Adam Leemings details Campbell's heroic pattern in The World of Myth (1990). While the hero's journey may be filled with fanciful details, it is meant to serve as a metaphor for "the human search for self knowledge" (Leemings 217). Therefore, it is important that the hero follows the universal human path through separation,

initiation and return. The hero's story shows us how to travel our own path through his successes.

Campbell's hero pattern serves as a foundation to build a shero pattern. He uses many phrases to mark each step of the pattern that I will also use to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the hero and shero patterns.[16] One of many reasons why *BtVS* is so successful is that Whedon has taken the mythological journey of the hero and transformed it into a modern story with a woman as the hero. Whedon has updated the monomyth to reflect some of the influences on our modern society, such as feminism, to create the shero character. Similar to the classic heroes discussed in Campbell's work, Buffy's journey, as the shero, takes her through the same rites of passage—separation, initiation and return. However, because the shero is different from the hero, her shero pattern is then also different.

(1) Separation

According to Campbell, the hero's journey often begins with *the call to adventure* that represents "the opening of a destiny" (Campbell Hero 51). This destiny is the hero's search for identity as an adult; this is also the birth of the hero. Once the hero has been confronted with his destiny, he often *refuses the call*. Campbell believes that "the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest" (Hero 60). As a child, the hero is afraid to leave his former life and enter into the world of the unknown, the world of

[16] A complete listing of Campbell's stages of the heroic pattern can be found in his Table of Contents for The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1973). I will distinguish them from my text by italicizing them.

adulthood. For the hero, who has accepted his path, "the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell Hero 69)—*the supernatural aide*. The hero continues on with his journey "until he comes to the 'threshold guardian' at the entrance of the zone of magnified power" (Campbell Hero 77). Once the hero *crosses the threshold*, he faces dangers ("ogres") and temptations ("sirens of mysteriously seductive, nostalgic beauty") that will try to keep him from completing his journey (Campbell Hero 79). This section of the hero's path represents his emotional transition from childhood to adulthood.

The birth of the shero is not an accident either because she is also born when she is needed, "during a culture's dark period" (Leemings 218). The Slayer's birth is a result of the previous Slayer's death; there must always be a Slayer because she subdues the powers of evil. Buffy is *called to adventure* during the first episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1) where Giles confronts her with her destiny as The Slayer. Like the hero, Buffy *refuses the call* because it means she must leave her life behind and accept responsibilities that she cannot imagine. Giles represents her *supernatural aide*; he is her Watcher, the one responsible for guiding her through her new life as The Slayer. Buffy *crosses the threshold* in "The Harvest, Part 2" (1.2), when she kills a vampire who threatens the lives of her friends. This action symbolizes Buffy's move from childhood to adulthood by accepting her destiny as The Slayer.

Although the first couple of episodes represent Buffy's separation stage, the entire first season reinforces this emotional and traumatic phase of her life by repeating the *refusal* and *crossing* elements. In "Witch" (1.3), Buffy tries out for the cheerleading team and in "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" (1.5), Buffy goes on a date with a boy who does not know about vampires or that she is sworn to kill them. By attempting to reclaim her past Buffy endangers those around her. She truly and finally accepts her destiny in "Prophecy Girl" (1.12), where she faces her fear of dying and defeats The Master. By defeating the series' first Big Bad, Buffy completes her separation from her former life (childhood) and becomes The Slayer (adulthood). The repetition of certain patterns reinforces the difference between the hero and shero pattern. The shero's pattern is cyclical in nature, compared to the linear pattern of the hero, symbolizing the nature of woman's continual journey towards subjectivity: there is no single battle rather there are never-ending battles.

(2) Initiation

Before the hero can become the hero, he must reconcile his childhood fears and anxiety. These are often represented as battles with the ogres and seductive sirens; however, this is only the beginning of the "long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests" (Campbell Hero 109)—*the road of trials*. The next stage of the hero's path includes *the meeting with the Goddess* and *woman as the temptress*. The *Goddess/temptress* symbolizes conquest and possession: "The hero who can takes her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the

incarnate of god, of her created world" (Campbell Hero 116). Such male-centered narratives reinforce an Oedipal logic, where man's journey towards adult subjectivity requires the possession of woman. Within psychological terms, this represents the hero's separation from his mother and his acceptance of his father as the ideal. As such, the hero seeks *atonement with the Father.* This represents the hero's move into the "the world of specialized adult action" which marks his *apotheosis.* The hero has left behind his childhood ego (individualism) and "becomes dedicated to the whole of *his* society" (Campbell Hero 156). *The ultimate boon* of the initiation stage is his transition to "a superior man, a born king" (Campbell Hero 173). He has acquired wisdom, maturity and knowledge of the world.

The initiation stage of the shero's journey is where her pattern differs from the hero pattern. For Buffy, her "ogres" and *road of trials* are the Big Bads of each season: Season One, The Master; Season Two, Angelus; Season Three, Mayor Richard Wilkins III; Season Four, Adam; Season Five, Glory; Season Six, The Trio and Evil Willow; and Season Seven, The First. Through each season, and defeat of the Big Bad, Buffy repeats the initiation (and return) elements of the pattern marking her path as cyclical, not linear like the hero's pattern. Furthermore, for Buffy, there is no *meeting with the Goddess* or *woman as temptress* on her path because the shero's narrative is not governed by an Oedipal logic. Her journey towards adult subjectivity does not allow for "the relinquishing of desire, in favour of that state of passivity which for Freud characterized mature femininity, in which the woman accepts her role as object

of desire for the man" (Thornham 197). The shero's pattern requires her to explore her desire and journey towards adult subjectivity free from male possession and oppression.

For Buffy this has meant a search for her source of power, which could represent the "universal source" or "agents of conception" that Campbell refers to in regards to the hero. Through the seven seasons Buffy realizes that her parents, The Watcher's Council ("Checkpoint" 5.12), the First Slayer ("Restless" 4.22), the Shadowbox Men ("Get it Done" 7.15), her Watcher ("Lies My Parents Told Me" 7.17), or the demon that entered the first Slayer ("Get it Done" 7.15), are not the sources of her power. Within the hero's pattern, all of these characters and groups are sources of power; however, these potential power sources are also patriarchal forces/influences. Buffy realizes that her power comes from her connection to her community and her ability to love (qualities that are associated with the feminine): "I'm not alone... I walk. I talk. I shop, I sneeze, I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don't sleep on a bed of bones. Now give me back my friends" ("Restless" 4.22). Buffy's journey towards adult subjectivity requires her refusal of woman's role as object and claims her role as subject. By rejecting masculine "agents of conception" and embracing feminine ones, Buffy redefines femininity in terms of power and agency.

(3) Return

In order to come full circle, the hero must "begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, [...] or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of

humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation" (Campbell Hero 193). Similar to the beginning of the hero's journey, he often *refuses the return*. However, he is reminded that his community or nation will perish without him and thus begins *the magic flight* back. Again, the hero is tested with battles and obstacles on his return. The hero's return from the "zone of magnified power" is marked as *the crossing of the return threshold*. Here the hero realizes that both worlds are actually one, and that he can succeed in both represents his *mastery of the two worlds.* The hero's final deed is his *freedom to live*. The hero accepts "a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will" (Campbell Hero 238). The hero accepts that his physical death will mark the birth of another hero—such is the "field of life" (Campbell Hero 238).

The return of the shero also differs from the return of the hero because the shero never left her community; she maintained her connection and place within her community during the entire initiation process. As in the initiation process, the shero repeats return elements of her sheroic pattern that reinforces the cyclical nature of her journey. Furthermore, the shero's return does not signify her elevation to king or ruler of her community. By realizing her subjectivity the shero is able to bring subjectivity to other women thereby creating equality amongst women and men.

There are many examples of Buffy's return but the three most poignant are Buffy's return from Heaven in "Bargaining, Part 1" (6.1), Buffy's return as leader in "Touched" (7.20) and Buffy's gift to the Potentials in "Chosen" (7.22). As a shero, Buffy brings subjectivity to other women in "Chosen" (7.22), by giving

the power of The Slayer to all the potential Slayers around the world. Through a magic spell, Willow taps into the power of the Scythe and Buffy and transfers it to the Potentials. Buffy is no longer alone in her battle against evil, and she is no longer "one girl in all the world." Buffy's return gives her the ability to share her power with other girls.

The shero's journey as realized through Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, is a story of empowerment for women. Women often face discrimination and sometimes violence just because they are women. The world in which we live does not offer the same opportunities to women as it does to men. It is imperative that, as women, we embrace stories that inspire other women to keep fighting and not give up. Joss Whedon created *BtVS* to inspire those who watched and loved it. The message of *BtVS* is that, as woman, you may think you are alone in your fight against patriarchy and discrimination but you are not. The world is full of strong, independent sheroes, with the power to affect change.

CHAPTER FOUR: "ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING"

Emily Pohl-Weary asks: "What is it about my real life that makes me want to crush my enemies?" The question ignites a flash of recognition: we know the answer. It's all the injustices we face in real life that make the fantasy of slaying our enemies so damn sweet. These larger-than-life ladies are fearless when we must stay fearful. That's why we love them.
--Lisa Rundle, "Cinematic Superbabes are Breakin' My Heart," (2004)

As the Slayer, Buffy embodies the shero character that challenges the traditional role of female heroes in popular culture and patriarchal constructions of femininity, thereby making her a symbol of female empowerment and a feminist role model. The shero is a new hybrid character; combining elements of the traditional hero with the modern feminist-informed woman. The shero is strong, confident and independent; more importantly, the shero is in touch with her sexuality, embraces her community and challenges patriarchal authority figures. It is easy to dismiss Buffy: she is young, white, thin, beautiful and feminine. By appearance alone, she reinforces dominant ideology about gender, race and class. However, by having a character that is coded feminine as the last guardian of the world, Buffy refuses feminine stereotyping and challenges the dominance of the masculine hero.

Third wave feminism represents a popular feminism with a new generation of women because it focuses on popular culture: "third wave feminists...are struggling to define their femaleness in a world where the naming is often done by the media and pop-culture, where the choice for young women is to be either a babe or a bitch" (Karras par.7). Buffy is a woman fighting this same battle: she is a feminist activist. Every time she slays a vampire, kills a demon and saves the world, she is slaying patriarchal definitions of women. Her political agenda is

to save the world. In the Buffyverse,[17] Buffy challenges all those who claim to know what is best for her—from her Watcher and Watcher's Council to the Shadowbox Men who created the first Slayer. These masculine, patriarchal authority figures try to tame her and shape her into their ideal Slayer. They need her and her power legitimates their existence. However, Buffy is a woman of her generation and she knows that being a girl does not mean she is defined by her relationships to men. By endowing all the Potentials around the world with the powers of The Slayer, Buffy ends their patriarchal reign over future Slayers. Buffy succeeds in re-defining The Slayer, in a world where men have always done the naming, where the choice for Potentials is to become The Slayer or die. Buffy gives the power of one girl to all girls.

Reclaiming femininity as a source of power is another agenda of third wave feminism, which is quite a departure from second wave feminism. Third wave feminists recognize that by negating "all forms of pink-packaged femininity" (Baumgardner and Richards 136) feminists are allowing patriarchy to define feminism. "The tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation" (Baumgardner and Richards 136) are not symbols of our oppression; they are expressions of the range of femininity. Buffy is feminized in her appearance—her clothes, make-up and hair are always fashionable, perfect and pretty. Even after a long night of slaying, Buffy appears fresh, clean and trendy. This contradiction in representation may seem un-feminist; however, Buffy equates femininity with power on her own terms: "girlie feminists claim their femininity as

[17] The fictional world created by Joss Whedon, in which Buffy is the center.

a source of power, rather than trying to make it masculine, arguing that by doing the latter, women are in fact giving the masculine preferred status while devaluing the feminine" (qtd. in Karras par. 15). This representation of the female body as "both beautiful and strong, a perfectly accessorized and feminine killing machine," makes Buffy the embodiment of third wave feminism (Karras par.14). Buffy occupies two seemingly contradictory worlds—saviour of the world and young woman. Buffy not only survives in both worlds but excels in them. At the end of the series, Buffy is left standing after defeating seven years of vampires, demons and Gods. She has changed her world so that the fight against evil is no longer the responsibility of one girl, but it is the responsibility of many girls.

The evolution of the representations of women on television since *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* is staggering; for example, they are single, they are employed, they control the narrative and they are not defined by their sexuality. Buffy represents a new kind of female character—a shero. The increasing number of female superheroes, and their rising popularity with audiences, suggests that the female superhero "has generated a far more extensive potential than its early progenitors ever envisaged, becoming itself a cultural resource to other genres" (Gledhill 280). Since the conception of *BtVS*, I have watched and enjoyed similar shows, such as *Dark Angel*, *La Femme Nikita, Charmed* and *Alias*. This genre of television programming is gaining in popularity and has captured the attention of a female audience that desires a new female character.

Feminists have argued that television is no different from other media, in that it is dominated by a patriarchal agenda—all media is made for men, by men and about men. As such, women are sexualized by the male characters within the medium and by the male audiences that consume them. However, television has the potential to resist such patriarchal forces because of its relationship driven content, its "look" rather than "gaze" view and its moneymaking agenda. Feminist television critics have recognized the potential of television in its ability "to contribute to the cultural conversation about feminism" (Dow xiv) through programming. *BtVS* contributes to such a conversation in that it "exposes the male-centred plots of popular culture" and constructs an empowering story of women (Walters 78). *BtVS* is an important text to feminist television critics because it falls within the women's genre category.

BtVS does conform to some established themes of women's genre: "family and community, relationships and personal life -- all social arenas in which women exercise a socially mandated expertise and special concern" (Gledhill 366). *BtVS* focuses on female characters that viewers have never seen before, such as the warrior and leader. However, the relationships the female characters have with lovers, friends and family members are recognizable to the viewer. The roles these women play offer positive alternatives to the victim, slut and bimbo roles that most television offers. In *BtVS* the main characters battle demons, bad witches, vampires and monsters in order to save the world; however, they have fights with their friends, make-out with their boyfriends and go to work or school. Although *BTVS* satisfies some of the dominant media

representations for women on television (thin and beautiful), in many situations it challenges the normative view.

One of the ways *BtVS* does this is through its refusal of the male gaze. Buffy is more than a "butt-kicking babe," [18] such as the women on *Charmed* and *Dark Angel*; the female lead characters are sexualized within the show and outside when marketed to the audience. Buffy is different in that within the show she is not overtly sexualized. In the first couple of seasons, Buffy wears short skirts and fitted shirts; however, as she matures she wears pants and conservative tops. In an interview before the show ended, Sarah Michelle Gellar commented: "I was just joking today that, in the beginning, I always had to wear skirts and little dresses as Buffy and I [now] can't remember the last time I did an episode where I wasn't wearing jeans" (Gellar "Still Fun?"). Skimpy and revealing attire is just one way that women are sexualized in the media. However, in Buffy's case, her suggestive attire is more a reflection of her savvy fashion sense than her desire to be objectified by showing some skin.

Furthermore, Buffy is not viewed as a sexual object by the characters on the show, and the gaze of the camera does not objectify her. In fact, the show sexualizes two male characters, as does Buffy: both Angel and Spike become objects of her affection and her sexual desire. This female gaze is important to feminist television criticism because "the person who looks has the power" (Karras par. 11). Buffy has the power: "she talks back, she looks back, and she

[18] For a discussion on "butt-kicking babes" see Alicia Thompson, "Maddening Max: Unlike Buffy, Xena or Scully, the generically-engineered heroine for Fox's *Dark Angel* is more about sex than superpower," Poppolitics.com (2002) and Mary Spicussa, "Bad Heroines," Metro: Silicon Valley's Weekly Newspaper (2001).

can take a blow as well as she can land one" (Owen 25). In *BtVS*, Buffy is the protagonist, it is her story that is told and as viewers, we view the world through her eyes.

Emily Pohl-Weary has collected thirty-five stories from women all over Canada, who have also noticed the lack of sheroes. One such contributor is Nikki Stafford, who argues that the appearance of strong female characters on television in the mid-1990's started in comic books (25). Stafford examines the history of women in comics outlining the secondary or token role they played in the early comics. One exception she found was Wonder Woman. The word "exception" is important to understanding why so little has changed since 1941 for superhero women. Superhero women are few and far between superhero stories. The fact that there are exceptions does not mean that women have achieved equality rather it reinforces the reality that women have a long way to go in establishing positive, empowering shero characters that are taken seriously. One of the names repeated in Pohl-Weary's collection is Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The impact of *BtVS* has yet to be fully realized. Even though the show has been off the air for two years now, it is being immortalized through DVD, magazines, books, conferences, collectible dolls, websites and possibly, a cartoon series.

In creating *BtVS*, Whedon challenges the supremacy of the mythological hero. The importance of myth cannot be underestimated. According to Joseph Campbell; "[t]hroughout the inhabited world... the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared

out of the activities of the human body and mind" (Hero 3). It is therefore not surprising that since our myths treat women as secondary characters that women are treated as secondary citizens in the real world. However, through Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, a new myth can emerge. Media and pop culture are slowly starting to present a world where women are strong and capable like so many of our mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The battle is just beginning for third wave feminists and media revolutionaries. Fortunately, their voices and numbers are growing stronger.

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