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The Slayer, the Witch, and the Coffin: Willow and Tara in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Slow-dancing in a room full of people, John and Sherlock gaze lovingly into one another's eyes, and Sherlock says, "You always make me feel special." Then they kiss passionately while enjoying every minute of it. Unfortunately, for many viewers and readers of Sherlock Holmes stories, this scene has never happened. Most doubt that it ever will. However, this has not stopped Johnlock shippers (fans who hope for John Watson and Sherlock Holmes to enter into a romantic relationship) from writing similar fanfictions over the centuries.¹ Fans do not always retreat to fanfiction to investigate non-canonical ships, but it is typically the case, and, even more typically, they do so when the ship is homosexual. Homosexual relationships are less frequently canon than heterosexual ships, and so the fans need an outlet to satisfy their storytelling needs. The fans feel like the natural and necessary creative direction is not taken due to pressures from the powers-that-be (be they the publishers/producers or the authors themselves). But nothing satisfies a fan quite like authors adopting their ship into the canon—seeing the actors kiss or reading the kiss in the author's own words validates every feeling they have had for these characters. So I wonder: why do authors shy away from canonizing gay relationships if the writing is natural and the fans want it to happen?

¹ The first evidence of fanfiction was sent to London newspapers and to Arthur Conan Doyle. It was, of course, Johnlock-centric (Lloyd).

As proved in the Johnlock fanfiction above, it is possible for a text to be critically-acclaimed and supported by the fans and include homosexual romance. The slow-dancing scene is ripped straight from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* season 5 episode "Family" with Willow and Tara as two girls who are in a romantic relationship. The show's creator, Joss Whedon, takes on what most authors have not: depicting a homosexual, romantic relationship between characters well-developed in their sexuality and their other senses of self. Critics and fans alike have praised him for the attempt. However, due to the audience primarily comprised of teenage girls and the show's magical content, the show has been relegated by many to cult-classic status, a show that societal rejects sit in their dark bedroom and discuss online with other lonely nerds (Ulaby).

But despite the intended audience and the (supposedly gimmicky) supernatural setting, Willow and Tara's relationship is explored and demonstrated naturally through binding and unbinding the magic they perform to the love that they have for one another. In naturally creating two incredibly likeable and identity-fluid characters, Whedon forges a possible path of acceptance of the queer within *BVTS*'s impressionable audience. Examining the show's basic plot, what scholars and other fans have to say about Willow and Tara, some of the foundations of queer and romantic theory, and specific scenes between Willow and Tara is the best path to understanding how and why Whedon creates a story that impacts so many on the deeper levels: sexual identity, the sublimation of magic for sex, explorations of other senses of self, growing together in a relationship, and the effects of potentially linking murder with queerness.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (created by Joss Whedon) is a television show that follows the movie (with the same title, released 1992) and ran on The WB/UPN (now the

CW) for seven seasons (1997-2003). Teenage blonde, Buffy Summers, relocates to Sunnydale, California, which happens to be situated right on top of a “hellmouth,” also known as desired real estate for vampires, demons, and other monsters who go bump in the night. She gets by with a little help from her friends, Xander Harris (Nicholas Brendon) and Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), as well as her Watcher, Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head) and some other friends along the line.

Focusing on Willow, specifically her freshman year of college (Season 4), is a crucial time for how Willow views her sexuality. She begins the series with having an awkward schoolgirl crush on her childhood friend, Xander. Later, she meets Oz (Seth Green), who we later find out is a werewolf. She dates him, loses her virginity to him, and falls in love with him. Xander and Willow finally realize Willow’s childhood fantasies (just kissing) while she is still seeing Oz and Xander is dating Cordelia (Charisma Carpenter). Oz and Willow break up, but later get back together. At the start of the fourth season, they both attend University of California Sunnydale and are still dating. Shortly into the season, Oz cheats on Willow and moves away. A few episodes later, Willow meets Tara Maclay (played by Amber Benson) through the school’s Wicca club. Most attendees show no promise or real interest or dedication, but Tara, a shy and quiet girl, suggest they try some spells, which the group rejects. Willow, who at this point has some decent experience in magic, offers that they try together. Their relationship grows from there and becomes fully realized in the first recurring lesbian couple on TV in the US (Ulaby).

Unfortunately, the couple does not get their happy ending; toward the end of the sixth season, Tara is shot and killed in the Summers’ master bedroom (a.k.a. Willow and

Tara's old room) by nerdy bad guy Warren (played by Adam Busch), who actually plans on killing Buffy. Willow slips back into magic, her eyes and hair turning black, and she goes on a murderous, vengeful rampage, skinning Warren alive.² Dark Willow almost brings another apocalypse to pass, but through the love of her friends, Willow is brought back from the evil abyss. However, it is not until the end of the seventh and final season that she is willing to open her heart to someone new (who also happens to be a woman).

So many different scholars have analyzed so many different facets of the hit television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that a special term has been coined for its academic exploration: "Buffy studies" (Ulaby). There are hundreds of peer-reviewed publications examining the show's stance on mythology, family relations, aesthetics, feminism, sexuality, and more (*Slayage* is a well-respected journal specifically dedicated to publishing Buffy studies articles). The sheer existence of Buffy studies substantiates what millions of teenage girls who have yet to go through their higher education have supported from the start; *Buffy* is enjoyable and there are many different conversations to be had on the bigger issues discussed while "dusting" the vampires and other demons of the underworld.

Scholars first and foremost analyze how Whedon depicts Willow and Tara's developing sexuality (particularly Willow, since we see her history and previously identify her as heterosexual). David Kociemba argues in his article, "'Where's the fun?': The Comic Apocalypse in 'The Wish,'" that the season 3 episode (before we meet Tara) plays with "the fluidity of this fictional universe" by getting rid of most of the humor and

² Throughout the season, Willow's use of magic was paralleled as a drug addiction, taking a serious toll on her health and relationships (Willow and Tara broke up for a time due to Willow's dependency on the dark arts).

demonstrating how easy it is to change our perception of reality, since the titular wish creates an alternate reality in which Buffy never arrives in Sunnydale (1).

Foreshadowing Dark Willow, the alternate reality Willow is a bisexual, hypersexual vampire with a deep bloodlust masked in a childlike drawl. The change also makes not just Cordelia (who makes the wish) but the audience love the way things normally are, creating a more explicit response to how the fans react with forum posts and fanfiction.

Deleting Buffy's sunny existence and attitude, therefore Willow's and Xander's, which are the primary sources for the show's humor (contrasting with the dark subject matter), adds a further level of cogency for any supercilious critical naysayers. Playing with Willow's goodness and sexuality also brings into question her identity—we still see Willow in there, but the content of her usually childlike façade is different. Planting the possibility of sexual development this early on allows a more natural genesis, especially since Willow meets alternaWillow in a later season 3 episode, "Doppelgängland," and encounters her other self's promiscuous and fluid sexual attraction. Later on, Willow responds to a wider range in her sexuality, but it is not until the most unimaginable crisis (Tara's murder) that she reacts to the darkness inside her. Since there exists the dangerous lie that sexuality is an active choice rather than an innate construct (especially dangerous when it is told to children who struggle with gender identity and sexuality), it is of the utmost importance that media targeted at a younger demographic instills the opposite truth. By presenting a dark reality infused with some truth, *Buffy* allows a healthier image of gender and sexual identity to come to fruition in the minds of its viewers.

At first, some fans did not react in the best way to Willow exploring her sexuality (Ulaby). On the dozens of frequently visited internet forums (most notably *The Bronze*, named after Sunnydale's all-ages club hub of activity), fans posted in all caps how angry they were at Willow for abandoning Oz. Some noticed the crossover between Vamp Willow and the new, less clearly heterosexual Willow and feared the worst for how far Whedon's foreshadowing was going to go (many predicted wrongly that Willow would be turned into a vampire, losing her soul in the process) (Ulaby). Forum posts calmed down slightly as the audience got to know Tara more, but once Oz returned later in the fourth season for "New Moon Rising" and Willow rejected him for her love for Tara, the Willoz shippers actually started enjoying the new relationship more (Ulaby).

Em McAvan further examines how bisexuality "does and does not appear" in *BVTS* (1). McAvan cites Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* by noting that the sheer term 'bisexual' connotes that there are only two sexes, but because *Buffy* lacks any other characters who openly identify as a sex other than male or female, it is more specific than either polysexual or pansexual (McAvan 2). McAvan qualifies *BVTS*'s queer representation by acknowledging some positive steps in representation, but that Willow's non-neutral language ("kinda gay," "gay now," which she examines through both Butler and Jacques Derrida) and her descent into evil magic after Tara's tragic death do give pause the piece's queer progressiveness, specifically when playing to the trope of the murderous queer character (McAvan specifically references *Basic Instinct*) (6). McAvan attributes the violent rampage to bisexual sex addiction (she is clear to explain that Dark Willow pulls out pickup lines on both male and female characters). McAvan is one of

the only critics that views sexuality and magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in a negative lens.

However, McAvan completely fails to mention the grief attached to Willow's violence. Before Tara's death, Willow had been suffering from a "magic addiction," so Tara broke up with her. In this moment, magic and sex become more distinct from one another than they have been previously. By representing Tara as against the dark magic that Willow became interested in, Willow's sexuality is not as clearly roped in with her murderous actions. *Buffy* refutes any negative ties to homosexuality—instead it creates complex characters that react to different stimuli in different ways. Tara and Willow have an ideological argument that leads to a breakup (one of the most realistic and relatable reasons behind breakups). By not restricting their storylines to their sexualities, Whedon adds realism to Tara's dramatic and heart-rending end.

J. Lawton Winslade in "Teen Witches, Wiccans, and 'Wanna-Blessed-Be's': Pop-Culture Magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," highlights how Willow Rosenberg practices magic in a Satanist-associated sense, rather than practicing the actual Wiccan religion, especially when it comes to the specific language used to describe the practice and those who feign practicing it, the "Wanna-Blessed-Be's" (1). She also argues that combining supernatural-esque terms with "slayer speak" sets a tone for liminality in Sunnydale, a place between the satanic and the organic teenage dialect. Winslade also calls upon Judith Butler and her examination of identity (8). By referencing Butler's dissection of the term "homosexuality" in the military as a taboo, Winslade compares witchcraft to homosexuality in that in both cases, the discourse becomes amorphously and forcefully linked with the action.

It is the liminality in Sunnydale that is key to understanding how Willow and Tara's relationship grows. Just as they are between the supernatural and the everyday, they are between childhood and adulthood, as well as between a previously aromantic or heterosexual existence and a homosexual romance. They explore their identities during their freshman year of college as any other freshman does. Some join an intramural hockey team, some take a psychology class, and some join a Wicca club. Magic is just the commonality that begins Tara and Willow's relationship. Winslade's essay ties in many key factors in Willow and Tara's first meeting, which demonstrates the natural and fairly common evolution of their romance and how magic is tied to it.

Beyond linking gender and sexuality and sexuality and magic, critics evaluate other manifestations of personal identity. In Matthew Pateman's article, "'That Was Nifty;' Willow Rosenberg Saves the World in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," he criticizes Willow's disappearing and reappearing Jewishness. While he does not explicitly reference Butler, Pateman writes, "Identity is constructed as performative in *Buffy*: rather than identity being fixed, given, and immutable it is open to change and transformation" (65). He classifies the difference between "is" and "being" when it comes to facets of identity and personality (Pateman 74). Pateman goes on to link Willow's magic, love for Tara and her friends, and her Jewish background as anchors for her morality; even though the first two drive her to cruel torture and the third is frequently flaunted simply to display Willow's absence of Christianity, her life experiences all contribute to Willow saving the world in the series finale. Once she has moved past her grieving period and her transformation into a physically and spiritually darker Willow (which Pateman very obliquely attributes to the show's general WASPiness), she is apotheosized in a blaze of

bright white light as she wearily but bravely dives back into magic to save the world (77). It is Willow's culminating identity that prevents the show's last apocalypse (for there were about as many as there were seasons of the show), and much of that identity is learned through her relationship with Tara.

Pateman's argument further proves that Willow is painted as a complex character with many different motivations and lessons learned that shape her behavior. Both Willow and Tara accomplish good things from their time together. Tara grows more confident (she stutters less and voices her opinions more frequently), and Willow saves the world (almost entirely on her own). The show has been (and should be) criticized for its lack of diversity, so Willow's Jewish heritage is one of the more prominent (though not prominent enough by Pateman's lights) different backgrounds, which in turn connects her to other audience members that do not belong in the show's predominantly WASPy main characters. Tara's and Willow's identities are fluid, which demonstrates to the teen audience struggling with so many different facets of growing up that they too are not just their sexual orientation, their religion, their geekiness, or a confluence of their introverted and extroverted tendencies.

Cynthea Masson also delves into Willow and Tara's identities growing together in, "Is That Just a Comforting Way of Not Answering the Question?": Willow, Questions, and Affective Response in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." Masson argues that the use of different question styles in *Buffy*—some questions being rhetorical allow a character to be caught off guard, some questions serve a self-deprecatory purpose (specifically with Willow, later Tara), some allow the asker to take all discursive power (by demanding a correct response), and some allow for an equal, back-and-forth

conversation—all elicit an emotional response (Masson 2). Willow in particular is the show's grand inquisitor (she asks questions more frequently than any other character). Her questions paint her as a person growing in confidence (the self-deprecation lessens as the seasons go by) and in power (Masson 8). Masson specifically notes the use of questions in relation to other characters building a relationship with Willow (looking at Buffy, Xander, and her three romantic relationships: Oz, Tara, and Kennedy). Specifically, Tara meets Willow with similar questions, allowing a strong bond and a usually comfortable dialogue between the two women. Only when their ability (to create questions that create the desired affective/effective response) fails does their relationship end (12). But even after the communication breakdown, Willow and Tara are still close.

This closeness proves that Willow and Tara are an almost perfect match. The audience finds Willow's and Tara's question patterns charming, which allows us to root for the couple to succeed. However, when it comes to the later, more direct and contentious questions on Willow's magic habits, Willow's primary failure comes when she brings up Tara's supposed fear (a figment of Willow's angry imagination) that her love for women (i.e. Tara) is a phase. As soon as Willow brings up her sexuality and Tara's "insecurity" about Willow's sexuality, their relationship is doomed. Here, the show sends a clear, more positive message: Willow's magic (read: drug) addiction is the source of Tara's and the audience's concern, and her sexuality has nothing to do with it. The mere suggestion is ludicrous, and Tara treats as such.

The couple grows together in language and in bravery, and in doing so, they solidify their unconventional family structure. Vivien Burr and Christine Jarvis argue in, "Imagining the Family: Representations of Alternative Lifestyles in *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer” that the “chosen” family model (in which genetic relation is not the only factor) investigates different pros and cons to different family structures (266). Familial affection differs when applied to those who are unconventional family, and the young protagonists choosing their family makes them less liminal and powerless and more agentive and equal within their relationships—all of which demonstrate shifting family structures in today’s society (271). Burr and Jarvis cite high divorce rates and single parenthood as destructive to a patriarchal format (274).³ They also talk about how the “chosen” family model often occurs for non-heterosexual people who are rejected by their genetic family (Tara’s family rejects her, but only in small part due to her relationship with Willow; most of the tension relates to her father’s desire to control her every move). They then discuss Willow and Tara moving into the Summers’ home after Buffy dies (temporarily) in order to look after Buffy’s younger sister, Dawn⁴. Willow and Tara serve as parents, living in the master bedroom, and when they break up, Tara sits Dawn down for an “our problems have nothing to do with you and we still love you” speech (Burr and Jarvis, 275). Burr and Jarvis provide a wider picture by presenting the problems of an unconventional family, specifically a potential lack of stability and wisdom in the younger parents (276). Just as some fans reacted negatively to Willow edging towards Tara in season 4, many more fans reacted negatively to the young couple’s breakup.

Presenting a normal non-normal family structure realistically adds new depth to Willow and Tara; they serve as parents, and not entirely unsuccessfully. By presenting the problems and benefits to the “chosen” family model and the nuclear family, Burr and

³ Buffy’s mom went through a divorce at the beginning of the series, and we never meet Willow’s father.

⁴ Dawn is a whole other slew of genetic/chosen family issues.

Jarvis give credibility to most family models. However, they place incredible importance on independence and decision-making for all members, which is key to understanding *Buffy*'s success. The female teenager has almost no social capital in the typically patriarchal nuclear family, so presenting alternatives can do so much for their self-esteem. They can choose their own family, and those families are valid and loving. Willow and Tara seem natural in their non-nuclear family structure, because they choose each other.

The fans reacted even more adversely to Tara's murder in the sixth season. Judith Tabron examines the evolution of fandom and the *Buffy* fandom's vocal reaction to Tara's murder in "Girl on Girl Politics: Willow/Tara and New Approaches to Media Fandom," in that their reaction was unusual because of its emotional strength and (more importantly to Tabron) its political fervor (2). The Willow/Tara fandom is also peculiar in that it was supporting a canon slash (heterosexual) ship, instead of the unrealized Johnlock or Kirk/Spock (Tabron 6). By violently murdering Tara in the bedroom where she and Willow were having sex and by murdering one of the most visible and positive gay characters, and Willow's subsequent murderous rampage, many of the more vocal fans saw the storyline to be homophobic and cliché (11). She also brings in Whedon's direct message board response to the fans' outcries: "'but the idea that I COULDN'T kill Tara because she was gay is as offensive to me as the idea that I DID kill her because she was gay'" (7). Tabron discusses the dichotomy between the outraged fans (on the basis of heterosexism) and those who were saddened, but that accepted Tara's death; the latter group far outranked the former, which is evidenced by the ratings going up for the following season (12). Regardless of what emotions were felt, they were felt strongly

and vocally, demonstrating the creators' and the consumers' passion for Willow and Tara.

The *Buffy* fandom's strong reactions are evidence for how well-drawn the characters (Tara and Willow specifically) are. They wouldn't be this upset if they didn't care deeply, as if the fictional characters were very much real people. The murder could have taken place somewhere else and still have had the plot effect (it was overkill, in a sense), but that the staging was the most natural (in Buffy's house in a place that both Buffy and Tara were normally). Willow's character development previously to Tara's death led to her decision. Willow is altruistic to the point of risking her life for those whom she loves.⁵ Her investment in dark magic is tethered not to her sexual identity, but to altruism and love of knowledge. The fan involvement in how the show is written, since Whedon actively participates in fan culture himself, is crucial to the messages portrayed—Whedon allows Willow her mourning period, but allows a new romantic relationship to bloom (and it's with another woman). Tara's death is not homophobic; it is tragic, but it allows for a compelling story and it allows the fans to do some self-exploration in why they were so invested in the first place. Tara's death allows for a learning experience

The role of the critic is to evaluate a specific work by applying theory. It is the theorist's job to give them the weapons for their analytical arsenal. In *Buffy* studies, the wooden stake of choice is often Judith Butler, one of the most well-respected queer

⁵ Before Willow practices magic, she does not hesitate to help Buffy destroy the forces of darkness with her intelligence, despite having no physical fighting capabilities (a necessity in slaying).

theorists. In Chapter 1 of *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that identity politics⁶ do not function as some feminists would hope it to, because there is no one female identity; language is never neutral, therefore there is no language to unite all women (8). Butler also deconstructs binaries or dualities⁷, specifically mind/body and male/female (which are paralleled: men are active in mental decisions, and women are passive and there to be looked at), as well as a binary she previously perpetuated—gender/sex (17). She attempts to reunite these two concepts in that she argues that they are both culturally constructed (not just gender as she previously believed)⁸. She arrives at the conclusion (fueled by Simone de Beauvoir) that “woman” is “a term in process,” and that gender and sexual development are not static, contrary to what the “masculine hegemony” might think (45-46). Butler creates a comprehensive look at sexual and gender identity within such a short span for such a broad audience, but even she only touches upon some facets that make up queer theory.

The way that Willow and Tara are painted coincides with Butler’s natural progression of how they see themselves; they are women and they are developing in ways that they could never have predicted. Identity politics do not function, and Willow and Tara very clearly experience this directly when they first meet; they find each other amongst the so-called Wiccans and break off to participate in what actually drew them to

⁶ Specifically focused on her critique of the feminist movement, Butler defines identity politics as an argument that relies on a political sameness within a group of people that share a commonality (3).

⁷ Binaries do not include all possible options; there are not only two sides to a story. Or to Storey. More on that later.

⁸ Previously, Butler had concluded that gender is the social definition of how someone of a certain sex should act (men should be rugged and strong, women should be accommodating and pretty). In *Gender Trouble*, she concludes that since there are not just two sexes but our society insists that there are, sex is also a fictive societal conclusion.

the group in the first place—magic. Willow and Tara's relationship avoids a repressive generalized identity, and therefore destroys any concept of binary.

Binary One: man and woman. This one is fairly obvious. Binary Two: active versus passive. When the couple first meets, Willow is more aggressively active in general situations than Tara is (Tara is first introduced with quiet murmurs and stammers, even though she attempts to speak out in support of Willow's suggestion to practice magic). Over time, Tara's confidence grows (with support from Willow), and she is able to voice her own opinions loudly and clearly. This growth is epitomized in the aforementioned fifth season episode "Family," when Tara stands up to her domineering, hick father by confessing that she is not, in fact, possessed by a demon⁹ and that she loves Willow romantically. Binary Three: mind versus body. There is a particularly stunning scene in the fourth season episode "Who Are You," where Willow and Tara produce one of their first powerful spells together. They draw from one another's spiritual energy to have the power to complete the spell. As the camera circles around the couple, their faces light up in an orgasmic way (linking their magic to their sexual encounters); their minds, bodies, and souls are one, and it produces the most pleasurable and intimate experience.

Not to be mistaken for a queer theorist, devout Christian author C.S. Lewis designated four categories of love in his book, *The Four Loves*: affection, friendship, eros, and charity (28). Affection is a love of the familiar; we cannot escape this earth without experiencing affection (Lewis 33). A more difficult love, friendship is based on "clubbability," a shared belief, an inside understanding (65). Eros—as Plato would

⁹ a misogynistic attempt on her father's part to control both Tara and Tara's now deceased mother

have us believe—is attraction for the body, but Lewis believes eros to be more specific. Eros is a romantic love for the beloved's whole self first; Venus, the physical attraction, is secondary (Lewis 93). A more supernatural love, charity is goodwill and kindness towards all of God's creations, typically achieved through one or more of the other, more natural loves (Lewis 118). Lewis, a product of his religion and his time, did not broach queer romance, but his theories on love are easily applicable to non-heterosexual characters.

Magic starts out as Tara and Willow's club, their inside understanding. It is the basis for their friendship, from which develops their affection for one another (they spend more time together performing magic, so they become more familiar with their personality quirks, their speech patterns, etc.). Eros follows; Venus is explicitly solidified in the "Who Are You?" magic/sex scene, but it takes a few more episodes ("New Moon Rising") for Willow to take her love for Tara public.¹⁰ Willow has all but forgotten her love for Oz (even though she is too kind-hearted to revel in that fact) in her new love. Charity comes slowly and quietly, but it is fully manifested when Willow and Tara take on the responsibility of raising a teenage girl whose life is rife with grief and conflict (a typical teenage girl is hard enough to raise). In the sorrow of losing one of their closest friends, they take up the burden of parents and slayers, and they find some peace and joy in it (they establish affection through a set pattern, a deeper friendship in living under the same roof with Dawn, and more Eros with spending more time living in the same place together). Tara and Willow embody all four of the loves; not many

¹⁰ "Lover seek for privacy" (Lewis 65).

fictional couples (or non-fictional, for that matter) are able to establish a relationship so purely centered on love.

Laura Mulvey examines a more specific application for queer theory: film. In her groundbreaking article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to deconstruct the patriarchal subconscious messages in cinema, more succinctly known as the male gaze. Mulvey defines three different cinematic interpretations to the male gaze in how women's bodies are treated by the camera, character, and therefore the audience (68). She discusses scopophilia—a love of looking—and how the male gaze treats women as the images, the bearers of meaning; women are passive, and men are the active consumers (Mulvey 60, 62-64). She goes on to discuss phallocentrism, in which women are lacking [of a penis] and by Freud's definitions, men view women as castrated beings who threaten their manhood/penis (66). By applying gender theory to film, Mulvey is one of many theorists to reify cinema's ability to sway and portray social constructs to its broad audience.

Buffy's strength lies in not perpetuating the scopophilic hegemony. Since most of the main characters are women, the only way that the narrative can function is by looking at them as agents—heads that can make decisions and carry on conversations—not just body parts. Even with men behind the camera and the script, the gaze is not male—it treats all of its subjects as equally human (even though the character might not be). Specifically referring to the scene mentioned earlier that parallels Willow and Tara's magical exploration to their sexual exploration, the camera, the characters, and the audience does not objectify the women. They are individual characters who have faces and responses to the situation in which they are active participants; the only extreme

close-up is on their intertwined hands (more romantic and implying an equal relationship).

Bill Nichols expands upon Mulvey's theories by basing them even further in film (and farther away from Freud) in *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*. In chapters 10 and 11, Nichols argues that attraction and identification are posed in hegemonic contexts in film, and they are both subconscious (361-362). He also argues that the performance principle is a masculine action and the pleasure principle is feminine—film forces us to be attracted to the women and to identify with the men, regardless of our own sex and gender (367). He also discusses sexual repression and its various sublimations¹¹: voyeurism (similar to scopophilia—sexual stimulation from looking without the object's knowledge), fetishism (traditionally from religion, an object is ascribed with special [sexual] pleasure), sadism (inflicting pain on others for sexual stimulation), and masochism (pain inflicted on the participant for their own sexual stimulation) (372). Nichols then defines the four tropes of women, without allowing room for deviation from the formulae: virgins/dumb blondes, wives, mothers, and seductresses/vamps (399-405). He moves on to discussing the supposed mutual exclusivity between mobility (the ability to live a life with changing location) and domesticity (living a life in one designated home) for women and how there has been a recent move towards depicting women as mobile creatures (420). Nichols is on the cusp of discussing how queer representation in film and the audience interacts, but he does not specifically discuss what happens when texts fall into the hands of the consumers.

¹¹ outlets that would not typically derive from sexual origins

Sublimating sexual content for magic between Willow and Tara is how *Buffy* was able to push the vocal boundaries with depicting a same-sex relationship on network television; there were still things that the nature of network television would not allow. The show also does not traffic in the four tropes, even more specifically with Willow and Tara; they both manage to behave naïvely (virginally), like wives to each other, motherly (especially towards Dawn, and especially when the couple “divorces”), and they seduce one another at different times. They also manage to have the mobility of younger women (they are college students who go out and conquer the forces of evil) and they are able to participate willingly in the domestic sphere (raising Dawn the best they could after Buffy dies). Willow and Tara are depicted as well-rounded characters, and by sometimes sublimating magic for sex, the plot moves along more quickly, new character development opportunities arise in both sexual and magic contexts, and this character growth is all grounded in the show’s supernatural universe while still being based in realistic reactions.

John Storey does investigate how the consumers alter the product in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. In chapters 1, 2, and 9, Storey asserts that ideology is key to understanding culture and how it turns into pop culture. Ideology (the systemic collection of ideas from a specific group) can be perpetuated consciously or unconsciously to the audience (through the creators’ intentions), and is very often hegemonic in nature (Storey 2). Ideology in turn affects culture (the collection of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development in a society), which can then turn a text or an idea into pop culture if enough people like the text (if enough people can hold water cooler conversations about it), if the text is not considered “high culture” (water cooler talk as opposed to opera house

discussion), if the text is mass-produced or if the text is spread by the people (bottom-up instead of top-down), or if the text is in the center of a battle against the hegemony (if the water cooler conversations center around how scandalous or revolutionary it is) (Storey 4-11). Storey delves into the vastness that is fandom in chapter 9 and the consumers' ability to revise a text when they are not satisfied (157). The power of revision comes not only from the inability to contain different mental processes—because “fan reading is characterized by an intensity of intellectual and emotional involvement,” they can do anything within their capacity to take the story where they want it to go (163). Storey is unique in his higher opinion on how powerful a fandom can be, and even more unusual is his recognition of a television audience to be an especially powerful force in the text (165). It is with this force that the almost 50,000 fanfictions¹² and *Buffy* studies thrives, and it is what fuels my goal to examine why we all continue to care about two fictional characters over a decade after *Buffy* came to its dusty end.

Buffy's supposed lack of “high culture” (frequently argued because of the show's supernatural elements), mass production (the WB was/the CW is a major television network), struggle between the people and the hegemony (audience and creator support of homosexual sex scenes versus the WB and more conservative activist groups opposing it), and the blurring lines between “high” and “common” culture (the sheer existence of *Buffy* studies) cement the show in a pop culture status (McAvan 1; Storey 4-10). The ideology portrayed in *Buffy* fights against more hegemonic ideas (women as agentive, sexuality as fluid), and the pop culture nature of the show allows these non-hegemonic ideals to get out to its audience to undermine any damage done to them by the hegemonic

¹² On FanFiction.net, one of the biggest fanfiction sites today; the number grows by the hour

ideology. Because it was and is so popular and access is easy, a tiny blonde with supernatural strength and willpower, a feisty and kind redhead who uses her geekiness to everyone's benefit, and a quiet, caring brunette who is able to rise above her family drama in order to stop apocalypses can inspire young girls who have been told that they can't affect change in the world. And the fans kept watching; they allowed the story to continue, for the characters to have the chance to grow and save the world more and more from the demonic forces of darkness.

In the face of any critical forces of darkness, queer, romantic, and film theories can all come together to add validity to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show has merit beyond its surface teen drama and spooky settings, which Buffy studies scholars and other fans apply theory and their own personal perceptions to understand why they love the show so much, why they ship whom they ship. By examining theories on sexual identity, gender identity, how an audience interprets visual cues, different channels for sexual desire, and how an audience can influence what they watch, we as fans and scholars come to understand how Joss Whedon explores Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay as realistic human beings (how they deal with their sexual orientation, their self-confidence, loss of friends, and potential repression). And even though their story ends in tragedy, there is a difference between "mostly dead" and "all dead." Thanks to the *Buffy* fandom, Tara still has a breath of life to blow the sails of the Willow/Tara ship. The text does not always supply all that we need it to, and by coming together in a community that discusses how cute that scene is or creates a new cute scene to discuss in painstaking detail, we can connect as Tara and Willow do: through Tara and Willow. We can connect, "to wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of

darkness; to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their number.” We can all be slayers.

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