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Heather Braun, Elisabeth Lamothe, Delphine Letort (dir.), *Les Cultures ado : consommation et production*

« Family, Friends and Rites of Passage in the Whedonverse »

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Résumé

Par son exploration des médias et des genres, Joss Whedon a apporté une importante contribution à la culture populaire américaine au cours des vingt dernières années. Son travail rencontre la faveur des jeunes en particulier, ces derniers appréciant les décors surnaturels auxquels l'auteur et réalisateur a recours pour aborder des situations quotidiennes. Cet article porte sur deux domaines du travail de Whedon: la série *Buffy contre les vampires* et les films *Avengers*. Notre approche réunit une analyse du corpus et les réactions des fans par l'intermédiaire des blogs, afin de déterminer comment la métaphore et le symbolisme transcendent les intrigues de Whedon afin de donner à son travail une dimension sociale importante pour son audience. Au cœur de son œuvre se situent des histoires qui mêlent des thématiques littéraires classiques à la culture populaire, à travers des scénarios qui traitent du passage à l'âge adulte et des conflits entre amis et famille.

Mots-clés

culture pop, fan studies, Joss Whedon, pression des pairs, série TV

Abstract

Over the past twenty years, Joss Whedon has contributed to American popular culture through his exploration of media and genre. His work resonates particularly strongly with the youth audience who appreciates the supernatural settings used by the writer/director to gloss mundane situations. The current article focuses on two branches of Whedon's work: the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series and the *Avengers* films. By using an approach that combines analysis of the corpus with feedback from fans on Internet blogs, the article examines how metaphor and symbolism elevate Whedon's plotlines and imbue his work with social relevance in the eyes of the young audience. The coming-of-age narrative as well as the family/friends conflict lie at the heart of his work, which blends classical literary themes with pop culture.

Keywords

Fan studies, Joss Whedon, peer pressure, pop culture, TV series

Few directors or screenwriters have been as consistently successful with the teen audience as Joss Whedon. Whether they involve vampires or superheroes, his television programmes and movies attract such a vast audience that the fictional universes he creates have been elevated to a separate category of popular culture studies under the classification of Whedonverse.¹ Twenty years after its creation in 1997, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* still ranks among the most popular television series ever made.² Likewise, Marvel's superhero movies, *The Avengers* (2012) and *The Age of Ultron* (2015), are among the all-time top grossing international blockbusters, coming in, respectively, in 5th and 7th place.

An important element of Whedon's success relies on his ability to navigate the plethora of communication media at his disposal. Beyond the simple framework of television and cinema, Whedon has explored everything from social media to Youtube to comic books. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was one of the first television programmes to have its own online chatroom for fans; *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* was produced exclusively for the Internet and the *Buffy* comic books continue to attract fans long after the series was cancelled. Although at first glance his audio-visual production seems to encompass rather traditional material aimed at an adolescent audience, such as blockbuster superhero films, in fact his output is far more diverse and innovative both from the point of view of theme and media. Inspired by Stephen Sondheim's work, Whedon composed a musical episode of *Buffy* in addition to the *Dr. Horrible* musical. Likewise, Whedon explored Shakespeare in a production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was quite literally homemade, having been filmed in the director's own home. Outside the field of audio-visual, Whedon has also explored graphic writing, as he wrote the stories for the *Astonishing X-Men* comics for Marvel in 2004-2005.

Whedon's thirst for artistic diversity brings innovation to the screen. Avoiding a single artistic medium, he also strives to expand his work by interweaving genres. The director/screenwriter gives depth to seemingly superficial narratives by simultaneously introducing action, humour, music, pathos and science fiction in each new work. In the hands of a less dexterous artist, this mix might produce confusing or directionless productions; however, Whedon successfully blends genres to weave complexity into his stories and characters. Within that broad palette, what are the quintessential elements that make Whedon's style resonate so loudly with young people?

Using an approach that combines analysis of the TV episodes and movies with feedback from fans on reddit.com, the current article aims to identify the elements of Whedon's screenwriting that give substance to his work. Whedon's storytelling style is firmly rooted in the complexity of the characters' underlying perspectives and motivations. Three central vectors of

¹ Subcategories of the Whedonverse are Buffyverse and Slayerverse. Originally coined by fans, the terms have since

² Ranked 22nd best series of all time by *Empire* in 2016 and 38th by *TV Guide*.

his narratives will be investigated. Firstly, we will outline the ways in which the teen narrative is elevated in Whedon's screenwriting through the use of metaphor and symbols. Next, we will highlight the underlying symbolism of the passage from adolescence to adulthood at the heart of the corpus. Then, we will explore the place of the "chosen" family as opposed to the natural "blood" family in Whedon's universe. The analysis will focus on two of the most successful branches of Whedon's work: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the two *Avengers* films.

Blending the supernatural and the mundane

The teen audience seeks out subject matter that is concurrently familiar and unfamiliar, or so say the television networks that cater to youth. According to H. Ellison (2013), the WB television network and its successor, the CW, reach out to the youth audience through a combination of scheduling that blends two major themes.³ On the one hand, the youth demographic responds to narratives that cover mundane topics like SATs and proms. On the other hand, ever since the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on the WB in 1997, apocalyptic scripts which include magic and monsters have become a staple of teen-focused television programming.⁴ Series like *Supernatural* coexist alongside *Jane the Virgin* in order to attract a substantial audience share, which suggests that young people are interested in watching TV series with characters they can relate to while, at the same time, yearning to transcend the tedium of daily life. Family and friends are a central component of all youth TV series and movies. Other narratives that fuel many of these shows deal with the challenges associated with leaving the family nest, college and dating, as well as first sexual experiences. Whedon, however, provides a titillating spin on these everyday themes by transposing them to worlds where the banal coexists alongside the extraordinary. In other words, he manages to combine the two types of stories courted by teen networks into a single narrative through providing supernatural content alongside the mundane.

Both his characters and settings reflect this combination of the normal and the paranormal. In Whedon's worlds, friends are fearless, no matter how menacing the circumstances. Whether they are the superheroes from *Avengers* or Buffy's studious and staid sidekick, Willow, who uses the knowledge gained from her books to metamorphose into a powerful witch, Whedon's characters will seldom shudder at the thought of an encounter with a demon or an extra-terrestrial. This is all the more important as the seemingly familiar surroundings of both *Buffy* and *Avengers* are usually shrouded in dangers. *Buffy* is set at

³ The WB's target demographic was teenagers and young adults between the ages of 12 and 14.

⁴ Hannah Ellison, "High School is a Battlefield for Your Heart: Teen Networks' Obsession with Apocalyptic Drama" in Christine Cornea and Rhys Owain Thomas (eds), *Dramatizing Disaster: Character, Event, Representation*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 40.

Sunnydale High School—an apparently typical high school built on “the Hellmouth”, which is understood to be a secret portal leading straight to the netherworld. Through this door, a constant flow of monsters and demons enters into the generic California town, bringing endless threats to the local population. The slightest disruption in the school day can be a sign of imminent danger. For instance, the absence of a teacher may be the initial manifestation of a demon presence in the school, or an unkind principal may be the first sign that the school has been taken over by dark forces. In *Avengers*, similar opposition exists between the mundane and the supernatural. All the superheroes have acquired their powers through some form of experimental scientific research. For instance, Captain America was given a serum by the US government to make super-soldiers when he enlisted in the army. In this way, each Avenger embodies a banal character as well as a superhero: Captain America is a scrawny teenager who morphs into the most powerful soldier ever; Bruce Banner is a scientist who experiments on himself and transforms into the Incredible Hulk. Similarly, the setting of the superhero universe alternates between the banal and the unearthly, with wormholes opening between New York and outer space.

In line with this magical backdrop, the use of thaumaturgic characters provides Whedon’s work with vibrant visuals and a strong dose of the phantasmal, alongside a social framework familiar to western teenagers. The thaumaturge is a magician, often seen as a wonder-worker or a performer of miracles. Importantly, the thaumaturge is the channel through which the greater force (the god) intervenes repeatedly, as a matter of course. Although no god-like figure is defined in either *Buffy* or *Avengers*, on the contrary, phantasmal forces of malice are explicitly designated. Nightmarish creatures come to life and threaten to bring about apocalypse. The title “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” is misleading in the sense that the heroine does not restrict her activity to slaying vampires; she in fact comes face to face with a multitude of enemies ranging from enhanced humans to demons and deities. Likewise, in *Avengers*, the malefic force comes first from Loki, the god of Mischief, then in *Age of Ultron*, from an artificial intelligence project that eludes the control of its creator. In response to these threats, both Buffy and the Avenger heroes take on the persona of thaumaturge. None of these characters actively seek out a role as miracle worker; the task is thrust upon them. The Slayer is a young female, who is compelled by a mystical calling to fight the forces of evil. Buffy would have preferred to remain a popular cheerleader rather than transform into the Slayer, with superhuman strength and agility. Similarly, the Avengers have all acquired their superhuman abilities by accident or error. Consequently, all these heroes have thaumaturgic roles, as they are called on to use their exceptional powers to save the town or the world from the brink of disaster on a regular basis. Yet, despite these strong thaumaturgic narratives, Whedon is able to negotiate the fine line

between escapism and reality, making his dream worlds relevant to adolescents, most noticeably through the coming-of-age motif that underpins much of his work.

Metaphor and symbols

Vampires, demons, superheroes, futuristic dystopias have provided the backdrop to Whedon's stories over the years. Yet, in order to achieve a balance between the extraordinary and the ordinary, Whedon strives to highlight how similar the two are. By taking mundane problems into strong thaumaturgic narratives, Whedon explores themes young viewers they can relate to, while at the same time raising adolescent problems to new heights of significance. The metaphors allow him to enthrall viewers into the fictional worlds he creates, simultaneously providing feedback on issues that adolescents may be facing in their daily lives.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer relies heavily on this device. In the show, a gang of teenagers nicknamed "The Scooby Gang" battle a group of demons and monsters while balancing the demands of family and school. However, these demons are often little more than a symbol of common adolescent issues, such as exclusion, unhappy romantic experience or drug use. The screen monsters represent the demons teenagers face while growing up. In fact, the basic premise of the entire Sunnydale universe, where the series is set, is that high school is a hell-like experience. As Whedon states:

Sunnydale High is based on every high school in America. So many kids feel their school is built on a Hellmouth. What makes the show popular is the central myth of high school as horrific. The humiliation, the alienation, you know, the confusion of high school is taken to such great proportions that they become demonic.⁵

It has been argued that, to some extent, the supernatural motif recreates the teenage experience.⁶ The heroes of these episodes are thrown into difficult circumstances which they did not create themselves— just as teenagers must live in a world controlled by adults.

A good illustration of this blending of the everyday world with the supernatural is Season two's story arc, which revolves around Buffy's vampire boyfriend, Angel. Angel is considered as a "good" vampire because unlike most of them, he has a soul and therefore is repulsed by the act of killing. More importantly, he is drawn to humans⁷ on an emotional level and is fully capable of falling in love with them. Ironically, of course, the vampire falls in love

⁵ Catherine Siemann, "Darkness Falls on the Endless Summer: Buffy as Gidget for the Fin de Siècle", in David Lavery and Rhonda V. Wilcox (eds), *Fighting The Forces: What's At Stake In Buffy The Vampire Slayer?*, London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, 127.

⁶ Hannah Ellison, "'High School is a Battlefield for Your Heart': Teen Networks' Obsession with Apocalyptic Drama", *op. cit.*, 47.

⁷ As opposed to vampires.

with the vampire slayer. Yet, as soon as he and Buffy have sex, he loses his soul and reverts to his former evil vampire behaviour.⁸ The metaphor is simple: it represents the boy “being nice” to the girl because he wants to sleep with her, but as soon as the couple has had sex, the boy spurns the girl. In other words, this is a betrayal many teenagers have felt. What sets Buffy’s boyfriend apart from an average teen, is that once the boy has broken the girl’s heart, he moves on to destroying the world. The supernatural metaphor functions effectively because the emotions Buffy experiences as a result of this event are not glamorized in any way and they are identical to those felt by countless teenagers. The audience is shown the pain inflicted on the heroine by the betrayal, and her reaction is identical to that which any person her age would have. She is confused, distraught and seeks consolation from her mother⁹. In short, she undergoes a string of events that resonate realistically from an emotional standpoint, despite the (quite literally) monstrous details that would be outrageous if not for the symbolic element. Comments from fan websites attest to the strength of the emotional frankness:

“Sarah [the actress playing Buffy] breaks my freaking heart in the scene after Angelus tells her all of those awful things and she goes home to sob in her bed. She rocked that scene. I cry every single time I see it. The entire episode is just filled with moments like that--moments that take your breath away and make you feel so many huge emotions.”¹⁰

“He was so awful and she was so hurt. That scene always resonated with me. Sharing yourself physically and emotionally with someone you love and having it twisted like that.”¹¹

This ability to place human emotion and motivation at the heart of his work is central to Whedon’s writing approach. He presents common situations and emotions, and transforms them into larger-than-life events. To quote Whedon, once again: “(E)very story must be about the emotional journey, not about the monster.”¹² This, in turn, allows the viewer to understand and thus grow attached to the characters.

Of course, if the story stopped there, Buffy would be nothing more than a demonic soap opera. However, what in fact gives power to the narrative is the fact that the heroine always faces her nightmares. She never steps down. She battles her opponents and, in general, she wins. If her boyfriend turns into one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, then she will make a stand and put an end to his maleficence. This reaction establishes yet another crucial metaphor. At first glance, Buffy is a skinny teenager, frail and exposed to the world. Yet beyond the vulnerable

⁸ The loss of his soul is the result of a magical curse.

⁹ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. “Innocence”. Episode 14, Season 2. Directed and written by Joss Whedon, The WB Network, January 20, 1998.

¹⁰ mandersdawn, dated 365 d, 2h, comment on Buffy, “Episode 26 (S2 E14): Innocence”, Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/buffy/comments/3l68hr/episode_26_s2_e14_innocence/>, accessed 15 January, 2016

¹¹ rtschemel, dated “one year ago”, comment on Buffy, “Saddest Moments of Buffy”, Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/buffy/comments/3krovi/saddest_moments_of_buffy/>, accessed 21 March, 2016.

¹² Amy Pascale, *Joss Whedon: The Biography*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014, 44.

adolescent appearance, Buffy is a tower of strength. She is the Slayer, which means she has a mystical calling to fight vampires and other demons. This role is bestowed upon her by unseen forces, along with special powers such as super agility, strength, speed and heightened senses. Despite a fragile outer shell, the Slayer is unshakeable. She is “Buffy Summers, the blonde girl who walks into an alley alone like the helpless victim of countless horror movies – only to walk out victorious against the monsters that tried to kill her.”¹³ She does, however, remain human with all the associated fragilities. She is not indestructible; she is a young woman, trying to survive in difficult circumstances.

In this sense, the *Buffy* series is faithful to the Gothic spirit at the heart of Stoker’s vampire realm because it harnesses cultural anxieties to buttress the storylines. Although Buffy slays innumerable vampires throughout the programme’s seven seasons, not only does she fail to overcome the two most enigmatic vampires, Angelus and Spike, but she succumbs to their sexual magnetism and sleeps with both of them. Beyond this obvious Gothic reference to the exploration of sexual anxieties and gender, the *Buffy* series draws on the supernatural to explore various cultural anxieties.¹⁴ A range of demons fuels exploration into a number of cultural fears. In the series’ third season, the Mayor of Sunnydale is the main source of evil. This smiling human aspires to become a demon and is willing to sacrifice the entire town to achieve his aim, thereby providing a reflection on the themes of greed and unbridled ambition. In the following season, the “Gentlemen” descend on Sunnydale, where they steal the citizens’ voices before killing them to harvest their hearts. During this forty-four minute episode there are only seventeen minutes of dialogue, as the storyline revolves around themes of communication breakdown and isolation:¹⁵ even Buffy’s allies provide material for exploring cultural anxieties. Each secondary character is associated with a range of metaphors, all of which have the potential to appeal to a broad audience. Willow’s abuse of witchcraft stands for drugs abuse and its destructive effect. Oz, the werewolf, is a calm boy who fears his more animalistic desires but learns to live with them. Dawn, Buffy’s magically created sister, represents adoption. Yet, regardless of their bizarre mystical manifestations on the screen, characters react to and address the underlying complex issues facing them in believable ways.

The metaphorical nature of the demons is apparent in the screenplays but also in the editing and directorial choices. The visuals on-screen reinforce the narrative of the teenager’s battle for survival. For instance, in Season 4, Episode 13 (*The I in Team*), Buffy and her boyfriend are out one evening searching for demons. When they do eventually encounter a monster, the editing sequence cuts between shots of the couple battling the demon and having sex. The

¹³ *Ibidem*, 3.

¹⁴ Catherine Siemann, “Darkness Falls on the Endless Summer: Buffy as Gidget for the Fin de Siècle”, *op. cit.*, 127-129.

¹⁵ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. “Hush”. Episode 10, Season 4. Directed and written by Joss Whedon, The WB Network, December 14, 1999.

images drive home the message that the young lovers are united to face the hardships thrown at them along the path of life. They are depicted as forming a strong couple because they battle their problems together as well as enjoying the moments of pleasure. The continued relevance of these themes to the youth audience helps to explain the success of the series twenty years after its début.

The presence of metaphor in the *Avengers* is less obvious. This is perhaps not surprising as the franchise is an adaptation of someone else's prior work. Nevertheless, enthusiasts of the comic genre argue that superheroes are the myths of our time and that even pop culture icons can be imbued with metaphorical relevance. Captain America is considered a symbol of hope or the nationalist hero. Iron Man can be seen both as a metaphor for technology as well as for redemption and rebirth. The Hulk is a metaphor for rage (either natural or as a result of alcohol, drugs or other substance abuse).

Furthermore, the first *Avengers* movie included a sort of meta-metaphor directed at fans. The film was the result of four years' work on the part of Marvel Studios to create a crossover film that would bring together five separate franchises. Such an undertaking had never been attempted on the scale of a Hollywood blockbuster. Thus, prior to release, the question on people's minds was whether or not the crossover would actually manage to be successful. Could a billionaire, an alien god, a super soldier, a Russian assassin and a green monster share the screen in a coherent or entertaining way?

Addressing the question head-on, Whedon raised this very issue directly in the film's plot line. In the movie, the only hope for opposing Loki's villainous plan for world domination rests on the possibility that the five superheroes will be able to overcome their clashing personalities and band together. At their lowest point, the heroes even start believing they will never be able to accept the challenge. In *Avengers*, Bruce Banner states: "What are we, a team? No, no, no. We're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're... we're a time-bomb." He believes no good will come from gathering so many powerful individuals, just as many fans believed that a film gathering so many different franchises was doomed to fail. So implicitly, Whedon was aligning the film's premise with the comic book naysayers.

Whether the director/screenwriter chooses a setting in the realm of vampires or superheroes, his metaphors transform relatively banal occurrences into extraordinary fantasies. The pervasive feeling of fear present in these supernatural realms infuses all his works with a heady scent of the Gothic; the monsters generate fear, but so too do the heroes' anxieties and uncertainties about their sexuality, their friends and their place in the world. In fact, the demons create a sort of prism that magnifies the angst of normal adolescent life to new levels of magnitude, as first sexual experience and high school conflicts become tantamount to the battle between good and evil.

The passage from adolescence to adulthood

While these parallels allow audiences to identify with the characters and plots, they also serve to drive forward a theme found in most of Whedon's work: that of maturity and the loss of innocence. The passage from adolescence to adulthood is at the heart of both *Buffy* and *Avengers*.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer follows its main characters as they grow from fifteen-year-old high school students to 22-year-old young adults. The audience observes how growing up transforms the characters' fears and responsibilities, in turn changing them. Yet although the characters evolve in a typically adolescent world of school and friends, Whedon provides glances into the adult world. Indeed, as the show advances, the tone morphs significantly. The earliest seasons concentrate on relatively trifling themes in which bad breakups are the worst trials the gang of friends face. However, much more serious issues are raised in later seasons: the loss of a parent, the responsibility of maintaining a household at the expense of one's own hopes and dreams, drug abuse and rape. In fact the show transforms so deeply over its lifespan that at times it feels as though the first season and the last season are two completely different television shows that simply share the same set of characters.

Most tellingly of all, Season 6 is the only season not to feature an evil villain who actively poses a threat to the group. Instead, any drama that does ensue is the result of the gang's own flaws that are finally coming to a head. This evolution of the show reflects the growth the characters undergo as time goes by, as they try to find their place in the adult world. Fundamentally, this is the essence of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: it is a story about how growing up changes people, and how difficult it can be to accept this change. In Buffy's words, "(T)he hardest thing in this world is to live in it"; a line that describes how many young people find it difficult to understand their role in the world once they have left the reassuring bounds of childhood, school and parental home.

This theme is constantly recycled in *Buffy* and often highlighted as a central thread of the fictional universes created by Whedon. The message becomes almost consequential in the Season 2 finale when the voice-over at the end of the episode says: "Bottom line is, even if you see 'em coming, you're not ready for the big moments. No one asks for their life to change, not really. But it does. So what are we? Helpless? Puppets? No. The big moments are gonna come. You can't help that. It's what you do afterwards that counts. That's when you find out who you are."¹⁶ Those "big moments", representing life's milestones, are used as the ongoing themes of each season's narrative arc. The fallout of first sexual experiences is the central focus of Season 2. Graduation and leaving the comfort of childhood is addressed in Season 3 while Season 4 explores the ups and downs of the sheltered independence of student life. In Season 5, Buffy's

¹⁶ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "Becoming, Part 1". Episode 21, Season 2. Directed and written by Joss Whedon, The WB Network, May 12, 1998.

mother dies after a sustained, very human illness, thus projecting the daughter into the adult world, where she becomes the new head of the household, with responsibility for her sibling. Then, Season 6 and 7 engage with the theme of the challenges of reaching one's potential in life. Yet, beyond those "big moments", the series also successfully portrays the more mundane aspects of growing up. For instance, Buffy evolves from being a rebellious, authority-adverse teenager in the first season to being the leader of a team of slayers in the final season, not to mention a high school guidance councillor at the same time. Thus, over the years, she moves from being authority-adverse to being an authority figure.¹⁷ S. Chivers has even argued that as the slayer's job is a dangerous one, her lifespan is short, and therefore she exhibits signs of maturity prematurely.¹⁸ Ironically, on a superficial level the series revels in the culture of youth light-heartedness by using sleek, trendy fashion and jargon-based teen slang. Yet on a deeper level, as the issues addressed in the episodes become increasingly consequential, the audience is in fact encouraged to face the challenges of adulthood.

The dynamics of character growth resonates with young fans, as can be illustrated by the following recent post taken from reddit.com:

I want to see the Scooby Gang continuing the fight against evil in their mid-30's (most are almost 40 if not past that, but they always played younger) while struggling to maintain adult relationships, families and careers. Joss obviously still cares about the characters because he's continuing their stories in the comics.¹⁹

Although the idea of extending the Buffyverse to the lives of middle-aged heroes might not appeal to all fans, in the context of the high school setting of Sunnydale, the "coming-of-age" theme imbued the series with added substance by exploring the characters' moral and emotional growth. The show often rewards dedicated viewers with references to previous adventures and episodes in off-hand remarks that not only bring the world to life, but also remind viewers that the characters are not oblivious to what has happened to them in the past: the characters are constantly learning and growing. Unlike most shows in production at the same time as *Buffy*, the reset button was not hit at the end of every episode. Instead a far more modern approach was taken, in which every action drove the characters to new places, giving them a proper, drawn-out arc.²⁰ This was arguably the series' essence and its appeal. When

¹⁷ Nevertheless she does maintain a clear suspicion of power and official authority throughout the series.

¹⁸ Sally Chivers, "Vampires Don't Age, but Actors Sure Do: The Cult of Youth and the Paradox of Ageing in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*", in Maricel Oro-Piqueras and Anita Wohlmann (eds), *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series*, Graz: Transcript Verlag, 2015, 102.

¹⁹ Frank_the_Bunneh, dated "one year ago", comment on Whedon, "How Avengers Age of Ultron Almost Killed Joss Whedon", Reddit, <<https://www.reddit.com/r/whedon/comments/331ufd/>>, accessed 12 October, 2015.

²⁰ Almost a decade later, this approach would be popularized again by shows such as *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*.

asked to explain the show's success, James Marsters, the actor who played the role of the vampire Spike answered:

I am not surprised at all that the show in any form continues to live on. It's a very potent metaphor. I don't want to oversell this but it's the same theme as *Catcher in the Rye*, it's the same theme as *Hamlet*; how do you get through adolescence? How do you get through the period from childhood to adulthood when you realize the world is not a perfect place? How do you care about the world, how do you not give up on the world, how do you accept the fact that it is a corrupt environment and still engage it?²¹

The "coming-of-age" motif in *Buffy* is compelling for audiences because it invites both introspection and interaction; it encourages the detailed exploration of the chrysalis of contemporary adolescence. Interestingly, not only did Whedon provide young people with the substance for this exploration by creating complex characters and storylines, but he also delivered the platforms on which fans could interact and carry out their probing. Although today most television shows and films have dedicated websites and Twitter accounts, in 1996, the official *Buffy* website was a precursor, and cast members as well as Whedon himself interacted directly with fans in its chat room.²² In this way, Whedon astutely generated extra momentum for the series. To this day, *Buffy* remains emblematic of the development of social media associated with fan-bases in the entertainment industry. Not surprisingly, today websites and social media dedicated to the series are extensive and fans have multiple forums where they can analyze, discuss and scrutinize their hero's personal growth. Adolescence is often fraught with difficulties and challenges. Sunnydale provides teenagers with the setting for vicariously monitoring the experiences of one of their contemporaries on her journey towards adulthood, while the blogosphere provides a place where onlookers can share opinions and impressions.

Against this backdrop of adolescent growth, the omnipresent vampires from the series provide the control set to show teenagers what lies in store for them, should they refuse to move forward. Throughout the show, vampires are described as incapable of change. Being soulless, vampires are driven by selfish motives at all time. They cannot change because they lack any moral compass and are immortal, and thus cannot in fact grow up. In Season 2, after being told by Angel that "Things change," one of the central vampire characters, Spike, responds by shouting, "Not us! Not demons!"²³ This failure to grow is depicted as a dangerous path. The show insists that one cannot be a good person without change.

²¹ Al Norton, "411 Mania Interviews: James Marsters (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel)", *411maniac.com*, posted March 12, 2012 on <<http://411mania.com/movies/411mania-interviews-james-marsters-buffy-the-vampire-slayer-angel/>>, accessed 20 April, 2016.

²² Called *The Bronze*, after the name of the club the characters frequent in the series.

²³ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "School Hard". Episode 3, Season 2. Directed by John T. Kretchmer. Written by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt. The WB Network. September 29, 1997.

Buffy's title is that of vampire slayer, she destroys those who cannot grow up, symbolizing that she herself is very much capable of change.²⁴ The characters grow, and they are aware of that growth. This shows the audience the importance of maturing and assuming personal choices. Good or bad, they will learn from those experiences.²⁵ Tellingly, the TV studio originally wanted the show to be called simply *Slayer*, and Whedon had to fight for the name to be the one used today. This clarifies Whedon's approach to his character: the show is not only about Buffy's title, or her battles with the world of the occult. It is just as much about her as a person, finding her place in the world. The series' finale is in fact called "*Chosen*", in the sense that at the end of her long journey towards adulthood, through all the emotions and conflicts, Buffy has finally decided where she wishes to stand in a world that has revealed itself to be imperfect.

During their much shorter screen time, the *Avengers* undergo a similar transformation from adolescence to maturity. In the first *Avengers* movie the five superheroes migrate from a place of teenage isolation and self-absorption to a space where they form a team to work together to save the world. In *The Age of Ultron*, the theme of maturity is the central vector of the character arcs. With only one exception, all the characters mature during the movie. Captain America, the eternal boy scout, becomes an adult and takes over training the new superhero recruits. Tony Stark stops being a superhero because he realizes he makes things worse every time he tries to save the world. The only character that does not change during the movie is Hawkeye. Yet, as it turns out, Hawkeye is already a husband and a father; he is an adult although he had been keeping this information secret from most of the group. He is the only true adult in the group – the father figure, who ultimately grounds the team. Throughout the film, the other characters are all forced to reflect on their actions and to consider how their behaviour will impact on the world around them. Two central questions drive the characters forward: "What have you done?" and "What have you left behind?" These questions link strongly to one of Whedon's favoured themes, which is the passage from a state of weakness to the discovery of inner strength and control. Like youths exploring their place in society, the characters become stronger because they have successfully negotiated the obstacles facing them in their personal lives. It is only once they have addressed these personal challenges that they can begin to battle the villains of their superhuman universe.

An important corollary of that growth is self-awareness and the need to remain conscious of the change process. This is apparent throughout *Buffy* but also in the *Avengers*.

²⁴ Interestingly, the two vampires who managed to avoid being slayed (Angel and Spike) both follow this path towards growth. They abandon their murderous vampire tendencies and learn to love as humans.

²⁵ Another iconic director/screenwriter, Steven Moffat, expressed this exact sentiment through the persona of Dr. Who: "We all change, when you think about it, we're all different people; all through our lives, and that's okay, that's good, you've gotta keep moving, so long as you remember all the people that you used to be". *Doctor Who*. "The Time of the Doctor". Directed by Jamie Payne. Written by Steven Moffat. BBC. December 25, 2013.

During the final battle scene in the first *Avengers* movie, the Black Widow character tells her ally, Banner, to get angry so that he will turn into the powerful Hulk quickly. Banner answers, “That’s my secret. I’m always angry,” and immediately mutates into the green monster – an alter-ego he fears and despises. The message is that self-knowledge is essential: teenagers must learn to accept every facet of their personality, even the most unsavoury. This character development would be tedious if Whedon’s work focused exclusively on a single, introspective protagonist. However, Whedon never targets isolated characters. His work systematically explores interaction and the sparks created by that interplay. Buffy may hold the title role in the series, but all the other members of the “Scooby Gang” are essential to the tale. Likewise, *Avengers* is not a story about isolated individuals; it is the story of a team. As the characters mature, relations with their entourage become more complex, both with friends and family. This is a particularly compelling theme for teenage audiences for whom the desire to reinforce links with peers often takes precedence over the pull of the biological family.

Blood family versus the chosen family

In synch with their audience, Whedon’s characters create a new family that is not bound by blood, but instead forged from personal choices. This is an integral part of reaching maturity and Whedon has been quoted as saying:

I am a great believer in found families and I’m not a great believer in blood. Although I love my family, even the ones I grew up with, to me I’ve always felt that the people who treated you with respect and included you in their lives were your family and the people who were related to you by blood might happen to be those people but that correlation was a lot less [strong] than society believes it is.²⁶

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is the perfect depiction of Whedon’s view that the “found” or “chosen” family is more important than the blood family. What takes precedence is the respect and sharing provided by the group, not the bloodlines. For instance, throughout the show, Buffy’s view of her father changes profoundly. When she is young and naive, she believes her father, Hank, who left home before the show’s start, to be a close part of her family. The prospect of his visit in Season 1 makes her giddy with excitement. At this point in the series, she cares about what he thinks of her, and she blames herself for her parents’ divorce. However, as the seasons proceed, her attitude to Hank becomes a lot colder. Her disappointment comes to a head in Season 5 when Hank fails to attend his ex-wife’s funeral, or even call to comfort his bereaved children. Following this betrayal, the entire entourage realizes definitively that Hank is a failed

²⁶ CBS Interactive TV.com: “Joss Whedon: Trivia”, <<http://www.tv.com/people/joss-whedon/trivia>>, accessed 10 March, 2016.

father figure to Buffy. The acceptance of this fact is cathartic: Buffy has lost her mother and disowns her father. Consequently, it is her group of friends that constitute her new family. They are more than acquaintances; they are a family that cares for the well-being of its members. With her father's absence, Buffy finds a new father figure in the form of Rupert Giles, her watcher. His official duty is only supposed to entail preparing Buffy for the battlefield, but very quickly, his time spent with her and her friends makes him a confidant and wise advice giver, as a father should be. Each member of Buffy's gang of friends is actively woven into this chosen family. Goodwill and benevolence are shown towards all members of the group. In the episode *Family*, Tara Maclay, Willow's girlfriend, is ordered by her abusive family to return home. The young woman almost gives in to the pressure to do so, until Buffy stands up and explains that Tara is now part of Buffy's family, not the Maclay one. From that point on, Tara's relationship with her lover, Willow, takes precedence over that with her biological family.

Throughout the series, the importance of choosing family is not in total opposition with traditional family structures, or blood relatives, as the two can co-exist. Yet, as always with Whedon, what is important is the emotional connection between characters, not what lies on the surface or at a biological level. Buffy never rejects her mother, Joyce, who cares deeply for her. It is true that when Joyce learns of Buffy's slaying duty, she is first shocked, telling her daughter never to return home. However, with time the mother reconsiders and attempts to understand what Buffy's job entails. Thus, their bond is tried, but never weakened, making Joyce an integral part of the chosen family. Once again, the vividness of the conflicts portrayed on screen is relevant to teenagers who have experienced similar clashes with parents, even if the sources of those clashes were inevitably of a more mundane nature. In an exchange on reddit.com with Kristine Sutherland, the actress who played Joyce, a 21-year-old fan wrote:

I've always wanted to ask, what was the feeling like when shooting *Becoming part 2* when Buffy was telling Joyce about being a Slayer and Joyce reacted the way she did? When I was younger, I always resented Joyce for this, but when I started to get a little older, I could really understand Joyce's reaction and where it was coming from. I could understand that it was coming from a lack of understanding and shock and not a place of anger or judgement.²⁷

The same fan then went on to highlight the importance of this type of interaction for contemporary audiences, adding:

²⁷ coolbeaNs92, dated "2 years ago", comment on Buffy, "Episode 117 (S6 E17): Normal Again", *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/buffy/comments/216hr1/hi_im_kristine_sutherland_you_may_know_me_as/>, accessed on 24 February, 2016.

How did you find acting that scene out? Was it difficult to act what is actually a very common argument between parents and their children, especially from members of the LGBT community?

These questions highlight the underlying relevance of the parent/child conflict to audiences watching *Buffy*. The themes allow viewers to explore relations with their own parents through the filter of a fictional, enchanted universe. Nevertheless, the magical setting lessens neither the intensity of emotions nor the complexity of human feeling.

The value of choosing one's family is not a theme limited to *Buffy* but clearly represented in all of Whedon's work, including *Avengers*. There is a constant testing of the bounds between family and friendship in the two films. Speaking at Comic-Con in July 2010, Whedon jokingly described the links holding the superheroes' together in the Avengers Team by saying, "These people should not even be in the same room, let alone on the same team. And that, to me, is the very definition of family."²⁸ Yet the characters manage to find new strength, united in the diversity of their chosen family – the Avengers Team. The support provided by the network of friends is clearly illustrated in one of the closing scenes of *Avengers*. When Ironman is falling out of the sky, exhausted and incapacitated after saving New York from a nuclear attack, his friends are poised to come to his rescue. Both Hulk and Thor are there for him, ready to catch him when he is too weak to take care of himself. This chosen family forms the support group.

The blood family, on the other hand, is often depicted as the source of toxic links between Whedon's characters. In the first *Avengers* movie, Loki, the arch villain, is in fact the brother of one of the heroes, Thor. In response to Loki's ignominy, the superhero/god chooses to side with the Avengers team, not with his brother. Blood is not enough to hold the family together if its members refuse to adhere to the same standards and values.²⁹ A similar family conflict appears in the second movie, providing the basic plot line: Ultron, the artificial-intelligence computer programme that attempts to destroy the world, was in fact created by Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, one of the movie's heroes. In other words, Stark is his father and Ultron is the child, running amok, trying desperately to depose the father and become the new alpha-male. The movies' central plot lines force characters to choose repeatedly between family and friends.

This layered treatment of social interactions as well as the refusal to define the characters on a superficial level give Whedon's heroes a certain depth that makes them both

²⁸ Peter Sciretta, "Comic-Con: JJ Abrams and Joss Whedon, Part 1", *slashfilm.com*, posted 23 July, 2010. <<http://www.slashfilm.com/comic-con-jj-abrams-and-joss-whedon-part-1/>, accessed on 20 April, 2016.

²⁹ The conflict between the two brothers is in fact so well developed in the script that the actor who played the role of the super-villain actually wrote to Whedon to thank him for the quality of the character he had defined. Tom Hiddleston wrote: "... Thank you for writing me my Hans Gruber. But a Hans Gruber with super-magic powers. As played by James Mason... It's high operatic villainy alongside detached throwaway tongue-in-cheek". Amy Pascale, *op. cit.*, 339. Author's note: Hans Gruber is the villain in *Die Hard*, played by Alan Rickman.

relatable and interesting. Whedon tries to understand the characters' true motivation and the reasons behind the conflicts driving the events. The characters are not drawn as shaky sketches. They need to have substance linking them to one another. Speaking on Whedon's character-based approach, the president of Marvel Studios Kevin Feige said, "Joss looks at these characters [...] not just as comic book characters but as great literary characters."³⁰ As such, they need to be complex, compelling and relevant to young audiences. The ongoing balance between family and friends is an important element in these character mixes.

Conclusion

Whedon has been praised by his fans for being one of the great storytellers of our day. He is also listed as one of Forbes' Celebrity 100, which recognizes the world's top-paid celebrities. In short, he has managed to elaborate the most marketable stories that today's audiences wish to hear. While the action on screen creates the initial hook, the back-stories and contemporary resonance of his topics inject substance into his work. The *Avengers* movies are fast-paced blockbusters filled with action scenes set in capitals around the world whereas *Buffy* follows a young woman making her way through high school, then college. The premises are simple and not particularly compelling. It is the underlying issues facing the heroes that generate interest and comprehension. All these heroes have accepted a calling to deal with the problems the world has set before them. Like the child instructed to face his/her fears in order to grow, Buffy and the Avengers will fight every demon imaginable in a symbolic battle to become an active member of the adult community. This imperative to become an adult is often a source of stress among young adults and teenagers, but Whedon does not hesitate to depict the hardships this passage to adulthood can cause. No character has an easier path to travel than any other. This inherent certainty creates a reassuring sense that the difficulties surrounding the passage to adulthood are a shared tribulation—one which both the characters and the audience can share. On screen, the group members are constantly building new and stronger bonds among themselves, no matter what difficulties come their way. The writer paints a canvas of emotions, ranging from joy to anguish, yet the support network of friends functions like a web, in which each character's behaviour affects everyone else. Although this means the group must face terrible challenges together, those threats will be more easily overcome so long as the members remain united.

Whedon's characters are strongly anchored in the real world of human experience even when they appear to be born of the realm of comic book superheroes and slayers. This ability to

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 334.

blend pop culture with classical narratives and character development provides the central thrust of Whedon's work, thus creating a new spin on stories from the depths of time.

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