

Superheroes and Superlearning –enriching the lower school curriculum with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

This paper suggests a number of ways in which the television programme *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* might be used in school to stimulate and challenge adolescent learners. The body of the paper focuses on the positive aspects of the show, its suitability for extending learning and give examples of its use. We start, however, by defending the viewing of *Buffy* in school, as the show has attracted a high level of media attention, often hostile.

This paper is not intended as a general justification for the use of television and media in the classroom. A recent US survey suggested that the majority of teachers view the use of television and video in the classroom positively, with television and video being ‘used in schools more deliberately than ever before and are more fully integrated into the curriculum’ (Study of school uses of TV and Video, 1997). In a survey of English teachers in the UK, the great majority felt that ‘popular culture should be studied in the classroom, alongside more traditional forms’ (Williamson & Hardman, 1994). Amongst the factors that influence teacher attitudes towards the use of TV programmes as educational tools are their perceived quality and content (see also Moss, Jones & Gunter, 1991).

In terms of programme quality, *Buffy* recently won the Viewers for Quality Television ‘Founders Award’, and Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery offer a spirited defence of the show’s quality in ‘Fighting the Forces’, in terms of its cast, writing, range of genres and intertextuality. *Buffy* is also certainly popular with a wide range of people, including the teenage students that we discuss in this paper. Viewing figures have reached up to 7.7 million viewers in the US, where the show is screened on prime-time television, and up to 4 million viewers in the UK in the 18:45 slot on BBC2, where it has frequently figured in the top ten most watched BBC2 programmes (based on BARB figures, see Hill & Calcutt, 2001). The core audience age is between 16 – 24 years, although the UK teatime slot screening is targeted at a younger fan base (see Hill & Calcutt, 2001).

Although popular, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (in common with other action-based shows) has attracted a large degree of hostile press and coverage from a variety of organisations, especially those representing family or religious concerns. Many of these concerns revolve around the violence portrayed in the show and its resultant effects on young viewers. As the Vampire Slayer, it is the task of the central character, Buffy, to regularly slay vampires, demons, and assorted monsters. A web-based fan site suggests that there are an average of four deaths portrayed on screen per episode (Buffyguide.com, based on figures given for season 5). In the UK, the 18:45 screenings of recent *Buffy* seasons have been heavily cut for scenes of sex and violence, to ensure that they are suitable viewing for ‘fans at the younger end of the spectrum’ (see Burr, 2003, Hill & Calcutt, 2001). Although the show is screened later in the evening in the United States, the screening of certain episodes was delayed after the Columbine massacre, with commentators feeling that *Buffy*’s portrayal of high school violence cut uncomfortably close to the bone, or that it might normalise the experience of violence as part of school life (see, for example, the Family Education Network debate on this issue). There are clearly, then, a number of issues that educators might wish to be resolved before promoting *Buffy* as a suitable classroom experience!

Much of the press coverage relating to the negative effect of television viewing on children adopts an ‘effects’ model approach, which portrays the child as a receptive sponge, passively soaking up the information presented to them by television. With regard to violence, then, one expectation is that violent programmes encourage children to imitate the behaviour of their favourite TV characters, especially when this is portrayed as having desirable outcomes (such

as ridding the neighbourhood of demons!). A large body of more recent research, however, suggests that even relatively young viewers of television play a much more active role in deciding which aspects of a programme to pay attention to, and in processing, evaluating and interpreting what they see (see Bryant & Anderson, 1983, for an overview). Rather than violent behaviour being passively adopted from the television, one 'active-viewing' approach looks at the types of children who choose to watch violent television in the first place, why they do so, and individual cognitive and affective responses to the programme. That is, showing *Buffy* in your classroom isn't necessarily going to lead to an outbreak of staking in school!

In this paper we pay especial attention to the use of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a basis for extension activities with academically able students. This active-viewing model is a much more useful approach to take when looking at these students' response to television programmes in general, and a number of researchers and educators adopt this outlook and support the use of television and media to extend learning with the academically able (see, for example, Abelman, 1995, Sprafkin, Gadow and Abelman, 1992). Concerns about the violent content of *Buffy* on an audience of more academically able pupils also seem particularly unfounded. Research has shown that more able pupils are better at distinguishing between real and fictional violence, at identifying underlying motives for violent behaviour, and at generating alternative pro-social forms of behaviour relating to the situation (see Abelman, 1995).

Robert Abelman also suggests that television may be an especially beneficial aid to extending able pupils' thinking, if used appropriately. He concludes that this group of students might be capable of learning more from some aspects of television than other children and concludes that TV viewing for gifted children can be 'enriching, mind-expanding, instructional and fun' if used appropriately.

How then to do this?

Issues and Identities

Students' engagement with media texts can be seen as central to their developing perceptions of who they are and their place in the world. In his essay, *Slacking Off: Border Youth and Postmodern Education*, Henry Giroux observes,

'It is useful for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within electronically mediated cultures, and how they are producing a new generation of youths

Giroux's constructionist view sees the notion of selfhood as a product of public discourse – for youth such public discourse includes MTV, the Internet and film/tv drama. He points out that schools need to embrace the study of popular culture to foster not only new forms of literacy but an understanding of how the mass media plays a key role in constructing social identities. Aspects of critical pedagogy as described by Giroux may seem particularly appropriate to teachers looking to provide for groups of students who have so far rejected the identities and aspirations offered to them within their schools. In this paper, we offer some approaches to the study of BtVS as a text which engages directly with teen identities and with some of the tensions that lie at the core of underachievement.

The identities we are most concerned with here are those connected with able and underachieving youth, and we see the superhero genre, with its insistence on extraordinary powers and hidden identities, as having a particular resonance for the highly able teenager, who must both fulfil the potential and responsibilities associated with their powers, and find acceptance among their peers.

The notion that progress must include the development of the whole student, focussing on social/emotional as well as cognitive development, is gaining currency in schools. Among approaches being examined with interest is George Betts' Autonomous Learning Model (1985), developed to encourage students to become independent and self-directed learners. Betts recognises that many schools' efforts to provide for their able students fail because they concentrate on the cognitive at the expense of the affective domain. He also observes that any social/emotional provision must fit into and reflect the values of the school and community – here we would argue that acknowledging and exploring students' engagement with popular culture and its role in identity formation could and perhaps should form a core element of provision.

Betts and Neihart (1988) suggest that if able students' affective as well as cognitive needs are met, then the characteristics necessary for high self-esteem will develop as they learn about and appreciate their special abilities, and that curriculum planning for able pupils should therefore address issues surrounding their abilities. Betts asserts that the first stage of any enhanced provision for able pupils should include the opportunity for discussion and exploration of abilities, what they mean and what particular conditions they create for students. In exploring the aspects of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* discussed below, teachers can do just this.

Able students may be considered as a group lacking a 'collective story' or identity. Their portrayal in the media has traditionally been negative, via, for example, such characters as Eugene in the film *Grease*, 'Plain Jane, Superbrain' from *Neighbours*' early days, through to Hermione in the *Harry Potter* series of novels and films. The modern breed of superhero shows such as *Buffy*, *Roswell High*, *Smallville*, and *Dark Angel* focus on characters who enact challenges and represent identities which have a particular resonance for the able teenager, in their unusual powers; their need to disguise themselves, go into hiding, or create dual identities in order to live within conventional society, and their often ambivalent relationship with their powers themselves as well as the responsibilities special abilities can bring. In exploring identities of giftedness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, we are seeking to elaborate the stories of those who find themselves outside more conventional frames of intelligibility.

The potential for such elaboration has been noted by scholars such as Michelle Callendar [2000], who writes of *Buffy*, that 'her ambivalent heroism, her sense of being enslaved to her role as a slayer, could be read as a fictionalisation of some of the disempowerment many young women feel – and her resilience, her capacity to combine a degree of independence with the exigencies of male authority, could offer a role for young women to confront and combat the limitations that shape their lives'

It is not only academics, however, who are invited to construct such readings. One of the reasons for our advocacy of the show is its invitation to teenagers themselves to read it as a metaphor – or to construct 'producerly readings'. This term, coined by Fiske [1987], describes popular culture as space of readings which are constructed by consumers. These readings are based on their experience; they are meanings that allow the reader to impose his or her sense on a text rather than be helpless before its ideological message.

Other *Buffy* scholars have noticed this: Sherryll Vint [2002] points out that '*Buffy*'s challenge to the female stereotype is not only evident to cultural critics but also accessible to teenage girls... The show delivers its message by working through the desires and concerns of teenage girls, rather than trying to preach to them about appropriate feminist behaviour.'

An example of this is when, under a spell, the characters 'become' the costumes they have adopted for Halloween. [*Halloween* 2.6] *Buffy* has chosen an 18th century aristocrat's dress in an attempt to appeal to her vampire boyfriend Angel, by becoming like the girls of his youth. In her new identity, she is rendered helpless, dependent and vulnerable, and life-

threatening chaos ensues. On coming to herself, she announces, 'it's good to be me'. This embracing of her identity is repeated in a later episode when she has run away from home following boyfriend and school trauma, rejecting her special identity and changing her name to 'Anne'. She gets caught in a hell dimension where trapped teenage runaways are stripped of their names and have to repeat the phrase 'I am no-one' when asked to identify themselves. At this moment of crisis Buffy perceives the value of being her true self and firmly states: 'I'm Buffy. The Vampire Slayer' before accessing her powers of strength and wit to save herself and others. [*Anne* 3.1]

We have also noted a particular resonance in the language used to articulate Buffy's dilemma, with that used to describe the dilemma of the clever teenage girl. In the literature on the subject, phrases such as 'hidden' disguise' 'denial' and 'pressure to conform' and 'rejection' constantly recur. For example, in *Smart Girls: A New Psychology of Girls, Women and Giftedness* Barbara Kerr observes of the able girl that: 'Her peers are caught up in symbols and rituals of adolescence.... her acceptance into this world .. requires knowledge of the symbols and gracefulness in the rituals. And the culture is a quickly closed one: if she doesn't join in when she gets the chance, she may face ongoing social rejection'

This is vividly demonstrated in the opening episode of the TV Series, *Welcome to the Hellmouth*, [1.1] on Buffy's first day at school where Cordelia, the leader of the most popular and powerful coterie of girls at Sunnydale High, puts Buffy through her paces with a series of questions ranging over current trends from nail polish to types of coffee. Buffy's acceptance is dependent on her ability to demonstrate her familiarity with the required rituals and knowledge.

That disguise lies is fundamental to Buffy's successful balancing of the demands of being a teenage girl and vampire slayer is again demonstrated from the first episode. When pursuing a vampire, she inadvertently reveals her powers before Cordelia's gang; Cordelia's response is to 'call everybody I ever met' to tell them, thus ensuring Buffy's branding as a 'freak'. Giles, Buffy's Watcher [the mentor who guides and inducts her in slayer lore and trains her as a fighter] later asks her if the vampire is dead. 'No' replies Buffy 'but my social life is on the critical list' demonstrating the equal priority she tries to give to both her social and her superhero status. In school, she is frequently warned against displaying her special talents, with comments such as 'Don't forget, you are supposed to be a meek little girly-girl like the rest of us' [*Phases* 2.16]

Buffy must continually disguise her special status, to maintain even the borderline acceptance she achieves in the show. She is constantly torn between the demands of her calling and the more usual pressures exerted on the teenager, and is more than once admonished for concentrating on relationships and dating at the expense of her duties. The tensions this creates can be viewed as a dramatisation of Csikszentmihalyi et al's [1997] observation that: the more able 'are highly sensitive to the conflict between investing time in friends of the opposite sex and investing it in their talent',

She also experiences the pressure of adult expectations created by her abilities, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Giles: You should hone your skills day and night...you have a duty, a purpose. How many people of your age can say that?

Buffy: We talking foreign or domestic?

[*Reptile Boy* 2.05]

It is not only through Buffy herself that the dilemmas of the able girl are enacted. Her chief friend and ally at school, Willow, is a gifted girl, especially in computing, science, and later, witchcraft. Her profile in the school is that of typical nerd/geek, and she is either ignored or mocked by the more popular and powerful students. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is unusual in

positioning a socially marginalised group at the centre of the drama, and in its foregrounding of their dilemmas and privileging of their values.

Willow is defined by her abilities and such social acceptance as she gains is related to her usefulness as the class 'brain'. This is apparent in her very first appearance in episode 1.1, where she is being sought by Xander for help with homework, and the first friendly overture from Buffy herself, which is as a study buddy. She is frequently used by school staff as a teaching assistant, first to cover computer studies classes [the usual teacher having been despatched by a vampire [*Passion* 2.17] and then to coach a lazy basketball star to ensure he graduates and keeps his place on the team. [*Doppelgangland* 3.16]

At first her acceptance of her identity can seem uncomplicated:

Willow: I'm a science nerd

Buffy: Don't say that

Willow: I'm not ashamed. It's the computer age. Nerds are in [*Prophecy Girl* 1.12]

However, we see her increasing discomfort in being defined by her abilities. By season three, she strains against the limits of her social identity as reliable, bright and conscientious, and searches for a means to express her rebellion – even if that is only eating her banana before lunchtime. [*Doppelgangland* 3.16]

Although when in college, Willow seems at last to have found an environment in which she and her gifts can thrive, and is initially far more comfortable than Buffy, we can see that her high school identity haunts her. At a party, she overhears her former tutee tell his girlfriend:

Percy: She's just some egghead who tutored me a little in high school.... I mean, she's nice, but, come on, Captain of the nerd squad

Laurie: Maybe you have a thing for geeks.

Percy: No, I like my women hot. [Shrugs] Call me old fashioned. [*Doomed* 4.11]

This exchange is interesting, not only because it works in so many typical pejorative terms for the more able [nerd, geek, egghead] but because it articulates the dilemma described by Winner, Kerr and many others going back to Jane Austen - *A woman, especially if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can* – [*Northanger Abbey*] and beyond – that intellectualism and sexual desirability are seen as mutually exclusive for girls. It is not until the relative maturity of the show and the gang in Season 5 that the two are allowed to be synonymous, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

Xander: Smart chicks are so hot

Willow: You couldn't have figured that out in 10th grade? [*The Gift* 5.22]

Other girls are seen to respond to similar pressure – when Cordelia's boyfriend jokingly expresses concern over her high test scores, and how it will effect his reputation as 'campus stud' to be seen dating a 'brain' she replies. 'Please. I do have some experience in covering these things up' [*Lovers' Walk* 3.8]

Buffy's attempts to reject or qualify her identity and responsibilities are numerous. She constantly seeks the 'typical' high school experience such as attending the prom and dating. When feeling vulnerable, she can misuse her power, a phenomenon observed by Winner and others in able girls. The forms of power allowed to girls in school cultures are often connected with sexual allure and/or verbal wounding. [Wisemann 2002] We see this dramatised early in Season 2 when a powerful enemy vampire Buffy thought she had defeated looks set to walk again. In her insecurity, Buffy reverts to the use of a more traditionally feminine power base; she responds to the crisis by sexually tantalising Xander, and verbally bullying Cordelia.

[*When She Was Bad* 2.2]

It is not just the female characters who enact some of the issues and dilemmas associated with intellectual identities, achievement and gender pressures. Xander [the most quick-witted teenager ever to fail a test paper, in our opinion] suffers constant performance anxiety, and lowers his expectations as a result. His highest academic aspiration portrayed on the show is to achieve a D minus through trying hard, rather than a Fail grade. [*Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* 2.16] His dilemma on the show is constantly reiterated – that of trying to work out his place in a world where everyone but him seems to have special powers. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find Oz, the taciturn guitarist and part-time werewolf. Oz is early identified as a genius [*What's My Line? Part 1* 2.9]– and is the highest scoring student ever to fail to graduate, as Willow proudly informs everyone [*Band Candy* 3.6] – but he has no academic or professional goals and turns to other activities as a source of interest and self esteem. When asked by Willow if he has any ambition at all, Oz describes a guitar chord he wants to master. We are not at all sure he is not serious. [*What's My Line? Part2* 2.10]

As with Willow, power, ability, gender and identity issues are never fully resolved while the characters are in high school, largely because the problem is defined as contextual – in the show, High School is literally Hell . However, the show does allow the issues themselves to be articulated and explored, and moreover suggests, through the privileging of the marginalised ‘Scooby Gang’, that the rejection of narrow teen definitions and identities is in the end a sign of moral growth. When the shallow and vain pack leader Cordelia rejects her coterie, telling them they are sheep because they mock her relationship with the doltish Xander, [*Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* 2.16] it is seen as her first step towards the moral and emotional maturity which she later fully attains in the spin-off show *Angel*, where she literally becomes a ‘higher being’ .

The presentation of schools and education and sources and use of knowledge in the show are also complex and interesting. Although there is insufficient time to go into the issues here, it is worth noting that while school is variously described as a ‘**mushroom-headed, number crunching little world**’, [*What's My Line? Part 1* 2.9] and a place that aims to churn out unthinking robots, the library and books are accorded high status [*Bargaining* 6.1]. All engagements with monsters are preceded by a period of intense research, and Giles holds his status through his encyclopaedic knowledge of demonology and the occult. There is a tension between arcane, paper-bound knowledge and the computer age, but overall these forms and means of access coexist and complement each other, even to the point of having characters who are ‘techno-pagans’, sharing knowledge about prophecies on the world-wide web. A key area of interest about both is that they are locked worlds, sealed off by complex codes and firewalls, or ancient languages and rituals. The message seems to be clear that knowledge brings power, and that only study and hard work can give access to that power.

Challenging younger students through Buffy study

That *Buffy* offers rich pickings for the media scholar is evident in the existing critical texts and the online journal *Slayage* [www.slayage.tv.co] Approaches and frameworks used to analyse the show in these publications can be usefully adapted for the classroom, from the lower years through to undergraduate teaching. To move beyond the justification in theoretical terms, we will now look at an example of the use of the show in the classroom.

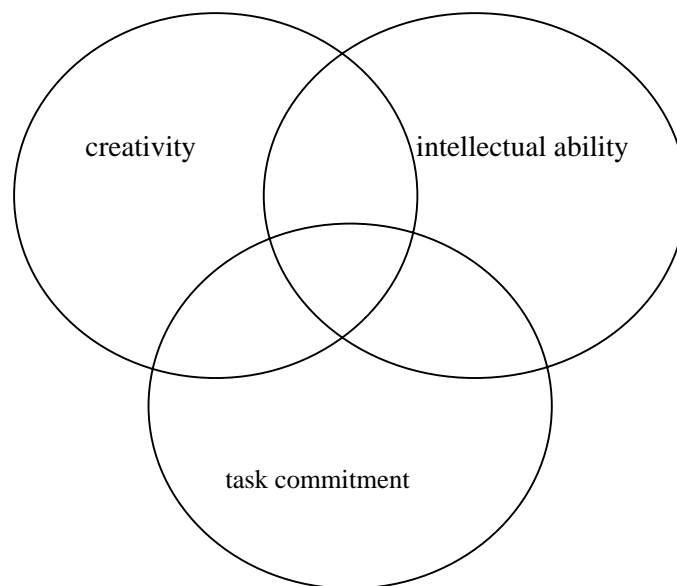
A further dimension to our defence of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a tool for extending learning’ in addition to the quality of the show itself, and the resonance it has for able youth in particular, lies in its potential as a vehicle for introducing students to ideas and concepts

more usually reserved for later years. Younger students can respond with enthusiasm and sophistication to demanding conceptual approaches, given an accessible medium. As bell hooks [1990] argues in *Yearning*: ‘students are much more engaged when they are leaning how to think critically and analytically by exploring concrete aspects of their own reality, particularly their experience of popular culture. Teaching theory, I find that students may understand a particular paradigm in the abstract but are unable to see how to apply it too their lives. Focusing on popular culture has been one of the main ways to bridge this gap.’ Furthermore, in considering an appropriate pedagogy for able students, teachers are encountering models and theories of learning which insist upon the centrality of:

- Self-generated interest
- Democracy of enquiry and construction of meaning in the classroom
- Real world application
- Conceptual challenge
- Metacognition

One such model developed in the United States by Joseph Renzulli, is known as the Enrichment Triad.

Renzulli’s sees attainment as the result of interaction between creativity, intellectual ability in its more formally understood sense, and ‘task commitment’ which we would call motivation. He maintains that high attainment only happen when all three of these are brought into play as in the diagram below:



Designed to extend able learners, his model is gaining popularity with teachers in the UK because it both gives importance to motivation, and acknowledges the role of creativity – this could be variously interpreted as ‘thinking outside the box’, or bringing learning from other areas to bear on a new problem. It also allows for the identification and recognition of pupils’ talents through the provision of stimulating learning opportunities.

Designed to ensure that all three elements are brought into learning, Renzulli’s ‘Enrichment Triad’ involves a three stage process, where lessons are designed to move students through three types of learning activity:

- Type I activities – these activities familiarise the students with the field – ‘finding out’
- Type II activities – these involve developing skills and learning processes needed in the area.

- Type III Activities – these involve students choosing, designing and seeing through group or individual projects /investigations, with a ‘real world’ slant

Renzulli suggests that the first two of these can involve all students; investigations of real problems by individuals and groups are self-selected, and will attract those with the abilities and commitment to see through to the finished product. He envisions a sort of ‘revolving door’ where students take part in enrichment activities on a changing basis according to interest.

It is perhaps in planning for extra-curricular challenge through enrichment that Renzulli’s model can be seen to have the most to offer teachers in their planning. This is because it provides a framework for developing links between out-of-hours and in-class learning, and at the same time helps address some key issues such as ensuring sufficient challenge in extra-curricular activities and developing links between in-class and extra –curricular learning, as well as ensuring students are accessing appropriate activities.

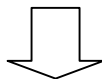
Planning using Renzulli

The example below shows an English department’s use of Renzulli’s enrichment triad for planning extra-curricular extension classes in English & Media in Year 9 [13-14 year olds]. The teachers wished to increase the level of conceptual challenge in their lessons, and provide opportunities for students to develop their skills further by offering the opportunity to become involved in after-school projects. A media text was chosen to hook students into the subject, and to offer an accessible text through which to develop some challenging ideas, which could then be drawn on in the study of other texts.

Model for English/Media extension based on Renzulli’s Enrichment Triad using *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Type 1 Activities [Awareness]

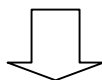
- Initial student interest was generated through questionnaire & discussion to establish watching preferences & determine student views of good television
- Media studies activities & resources were used to introduce the field
- Discussion and activities were used to establish familiarity with terminology and approaches e.g. genre, representation, symbol and metaphor
- Introduction of idea of Gothic texts as an expression of cultural anxieties, and features of Gothic genre in TV & film
- Introduction of the idea of postmodernism in terms of – intertextuality; mixing of genres; subversion of expectations



Type 11 Activities [Processes]

Activities on reading film & television with a focus on:

- Genre and expectation; stock features of generic media texts esp high school and gothic
- Reading media texts – presentational features, representation etc
- Justifying reading/viewpoints with textual evidence
- Extension – researching other’s views



Type 111 Activities [Projects]

Students selected from range of topics and assessment outcomes reflecting their readings/interpretations, including:

- Presentation
- Essay or article
- Poster
- Script
- Storyboard
- Web page

Using this model, the whole class were introduced to new ideas and skills, as a matter of entitlement. While the main study and discussion took place in class, with some written outcomes, the projects were developed out of school, with no ability bar on take-up. The range of possible outcomes ensured some student autonomy [as did the initial choice of text] and did not exclude students whose writing skills may not be equal to their understanding or enthusiasm. The example below shows the level of thinking and research the most able students engaged in. This student shows a confident grasp of genre and expectation, and how these are subverted, and goes on to consider the show as gothic in its manifestation of cultural anxieties – she does this not only through narrative and dialogue but perceives the way that this is suggested through the visual language/shots. Her own research is evident in the ideas she assimilates at the end.

Lizzie – Year 9

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Buffy the Vampire Slayer challenges our expectations in many ways, such as mixing classic gothic situations with high school drama. This is very conscious and apparent, even on the back of the cassette:

'Chosen to fight,
Trained to maim,
Dressed to kill.'

So the mixing of the two genres is not without satire. But the mixing of genres take a darker turn; when you scratch away at the surface of this comparatively simple tongue in cheek storyline, you find something far darker than vampires, demons or the forces of evil: you find the American High School.

The world of which Buffy is a part, and the rest of Sunnydale is subjected to i.e. the world of vampires, could be seen as a metaphor for fighting your way through high school, and fighting the inner demons of the teenage psyche. This is very metaphorical all the way through seasons one two and three, but in 'Graduation Day Part Two' (the season three finale) the link is made clear: Oz says "Hey we've made it" .“Yeah,” Buffy carries on, “We've defeated the Mayor, stopped his ascension and saved Sunnydale again.” To which Oz retorts: “No I mean we've made it through high school.” This makes the metaphor perfectly clear and draws together the previous episodes' symbolism and subtexts.

But the metaphors and subtexts don't only concern teenage anxieties. A useful example showing parental worries from 'Welcome To The Hellmouth' (the very first episode) When Buffy is about to go the Bronze for the first time, her mum immediately asks, “Will there be boys there?” To which Buffy sarcastically remarks “No, It's a nun club Mom.” This clearly shows the parental anxieties about: sex and relationships, which of course could be further analysed as fear of their children growing up too fast; of them getting hurt; of taking on responsibilities that they can't handle; of the parent's responsibility to care for the teen becoming progressively more unwanted. In essence, it shows parents' fear of their children

growing up and away from them.

Social anxieties are also more than apparent in the text and subtext of Buffy's storylines, in the way images are created. For example, in 'Welcome To the Hellmouth' the camera pictures Sunnydale, the idyllic American high school, white walled and white washed in its mediocre middle classness. The camera then pans down under the ground to the evil vampire subculture, planning to rise up against the human element of Sunnydale. This could be interpreted as a subconscious fear that perhaps 'The American Dream' is bought at the expense of the working classes and the developing countries. It maybe shows a post-communist fear of these forementioned groups or minorities rising up against capitalism. Also maybe it is expressing a fear of people that don't participate in 'The American Dream', the people that don't spend all their lives trying to get a good job trying to be rich and in an important place in society: essentially a fear of people that don't conform.

Less obviously able students still succeeded in demonstrating a conceptualised approach and constructing their own readings, via a range of media such as posters, presentations and drama – among the most interesting and prescient was one which chose to render a version of the show, highlighting and subverting key generic features, through a inventing a musical episode – a year or so before Joss Whedon did so in Season 6.

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