

# Buffy versus the Dark Forces of Patriarchy: Violence, Sexual Violence, and Sex in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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In my analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BTVS), I argue that the series subverts traditional horror tropes by empowering its female protagonist, Buffy, to confront both supernatural threats and patriarchal power. Through sharp dialogue, complex character development, and rich social commentary, the show explores gender roles, societal expectations, and the intersections of violence, sex, and sexual violence. Buffy battles vampires, which symbolize patriarchal forces, by adopting traits typically associated with masculinity—strength, aggression, and leadership—in her efforts to dismantle patriarchal power. Through Buffy’s experiences, I examine how the show offers an empowering narrative of female sexuality, advocating for sexual autonomy while rejecting the roles and restrictions imposed by patriarchy. I also highlight how BTVS warns against the manipulation of female sexuality within a patriarchal system. By challenging the culture of fear and submission ingrained in patriarchy, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides a counter-narrative in which women assert their autonomy, resist oppression, and refuse to conform to victimhood, standing defiantly against male-dominated authority.

**Keywords:** *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, sex, violence, gender, sexuality, masculinity

The horror and thriller genres are notorious for relying on repetitive character archetypes—so much so that they’ve become almost satirical. One common trope is the “dumb blonde” who wanders into a dark alley, only to be killed by some lurking monster. However, Joss Whedon posed a different question: “What if the blonde girl went into the dark alleyway, the monster appeared, and, in turn, she kicked its ass?” (Whedon, 1997–2003). That girl’s name is Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS). Created by Whedon, the television show BTVS was, and still is, a pop culture sensation, garnering praise and inspiring writers and filmmakers nearly twenty-five years later. With its witty dialogue and deep, complex, and relatable characters, BTVS tackles many issues faced at the intersection of childhood and adulthood, exploring how to navigate that space as a young woman.

To summarize the premise: “In every generation, there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, demons, and forces of darkness. She is the Slayer” (Whedon, 1997–2003). The outlandish and fantastical vampires and demons Buffy faces throughout the show represent real-world issues—many of which are societal, social, or systemic. One of the most prominent themes is the commentary on the dynamics and manifestations of gender roles. Alongside the forces of darkness, Buffy simultaneously battles the power of patriarchy, both figuratively and literally, confronting

masculine social structures of domination over women—through sex, violence, and the gray areas in between. BTVS uses fangs and “Slayerism” as both a construction of and commentary on masculinity within these structures.

In exploring the complex intersection of supernatural elements and gender dynamics, this paper examines how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* challenges and critiques systemic patriarchy. It delves into the use of violence and wit as tools of resistance against patriarchal oppression, particularly through the lens of Buffy’s battles with both literal and symbolic vampires. Vampires are framed as metaphors for sexual violence, with their predatory nature serving as a stark representation of male dominance and exploitation. The phallic imagery inherent in both Buffy and vampire representations is analyzed as a reflection of patriarchal power structures, while Buffy herself emerges as a counterforce critiquing masculine sexual power. Moreover, the paper discusses how the character of Angel subverts the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy, offering a more nuanced portrayal of sexual agency and desire. Lastly, it addresses the blurred lines between sex and violence, revealing how these themes are intricately woven together in the narrative, ultimately challenging the audience to question the normalization of both within patriarchal societies.

### **Supernatural and Systemic Patriarchy**

One of the central conflicts Buffy faces is “between young female power and old patriarchal structures designed to keep women under control” (Butler, 1990, pp. 41–42; De Vido, 2016). In the show, Buffy fights vampires whose immortality allows them to carry “old patriarchal structures” into the modern day. She lives in the town of Sunnydale, which sits atop a portal between Earth and a demon dimension known as the “Hellmouth”—a hot spot for supernatural activity. Sunnydale functions as a microcosm of society: the vampires and demons that dwell there symbolize the ongoing, unconscious sexist attitudes that are often ignored or overlooked (Chandler, 2002). Many residents remain unaware of both the vampire population and the persistent presence of sexism.

Vampires are traditionally depicted as having no reflection—suggesting that their true nature is invisible, even to themselves. Invisibility allows for a kind of supremacy, assumed through their strength and immortality (Linder, 2018). Such dominance creates a form of privilege that makes systems like patriarchy more difficult to recognize and dismantle (Linder, 2018). Many feminists argue that the roots of oppression embedded in heteronormative masculinity have yet to be fully destroyed. Similarly, in *BTVS*, one of the Hellmouth’s spawns that Buffy and her friends face takes the form of a Venus flytrap-like hydra that bursts from the ground (“The Zeppo,” 3.13)—a striking metaphor for the way patriarchal values remain deeply rooted in both the town and society.

Patriarchy in American society is a structure intentionally built and maintained to keep women out of power, tipping the balance toward men. At its core, it is a system of governance or hierarchy in which the father or eldest male holds authority. As an ideology, it privileges men while excluding women from power. Today, patriarchy manifests in more subtle yet pervasive ways—such as the dominance of the nuclear family structure and the societal assumption that men possess greater potential and privilege.

In *BTVS*, vampires are granted superhuman

strength and immortality, giving them a distinct advantage and allowing them to act without consequence. They become the physical embodiment of patriarchy, giving Buffy something tangible to confront and defeat. This is one reason violence plays such a significant role in the show. Another is that Buffy, as the Slayer, exhibits many hegemonic masculine traits—traits she uses against her patriarchal enemies. She appropriates male-coded power through her supernatural abilities, employing traditionally masculine tactics and strength (Chandler, 2002, p. 11). Though Buffy appears very feminine, she subverts the stereotype of the passive woman. She is often criticized for her aggressive nature and for responding to conflict with violence—actions typically associated with masculinity (Chandler, 2002, p. 11). In doing so, she occupies a position aligned with active masculinity, challenging gendered expectations and power structures.

### **Fighting Patriarchy through Violence and Wit**

If there’s one thing you can count on in a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, it’s that Buffy will either get punched in the face or punch something in the face. To an unfamiliar eye, it can seem jarring to watch a 5’4” high schooler take blows from men twice her size. Yet when a male protagonist experiences or inflicts violence, it’s rarely questioned. As Mona Eltahawy writes in *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*, “Patriarchy refuses to believe that girls and young women can be angry, attention-seeking, profane, ambitious, powerful, violent, and lustful.” Patriarchy goes hand in hand with hetero-male masculinity, encouraging and rewarding men who exhibit the very traits Eltahawy lists.

In the *BTVS* universe, the demonic patriarchy holds positivist and essentialist views of masculinity, constantly trying to undermine Buffy and other strong female characters. Yet the women usually come out on top, and the repeated underestimations they face often work to their advantage. Buffy’s masculine traits—manifested through strength, violence, and ambition—grant her power over the vampires. Violence is so com-

mon in the series that it's often used as a source of humor. Buffy's abilities place her above many of the masculine characters in the show's hierarchy, largely because she's rarely in physical danger—she is the physical danger. This applies not only to the average man but also to the literal forces of darkness. As the character Spike puts it to Buffy: “Become a vampire, you've got nothing to fear. Nothing but one girl. That's you, honey” (Fool for Love, 5.07).

Rarely does Buffy not come out on top—whether by overpowering her opponent physically or defeating them verbally. While her words are more witty than violent, she uses them to emasculate and belittle her adversaries with sarcasm and cutting humor—another masculine-coded tactic she adopts (Chandler, 2002, p. 15). Her profanity and insults function as forms of verbal civil disobedience, disrupting patriarchal expectations (Eltahawy, 2019).

Buffy's resistance against evil, masculine, and authoritarian forces creates a fantasy of invincibility for women who live in fear within a male-dominated society (De Vido, 2016). Eltahawy also notes, “Patriarchy keeps us terrified, demanding from us an endless supply of patience, passivity, and obedience, as it pathologizes and snuffs out our justifiable rage.” Acts of violence against women often succeed because girls are taught from a young age that passivity is the safer option. Defensiveness, they are told, could provoke even more violence (De Vido, 2016).

Building on Eltahawy's point, Gavin de Becker, in *The Gift of Fear*, offers safety advice for women. He highlights a chilling imbalance: men are primarily afraid women will laugh at them, while women are primarily afraid men will kill them. De Becker argues that women are socialized to be “nice,” a pressure that often leads them to ignore their instincts and remain in dangerous situations—typically involving men who seek to harm or control them (Becker, 2008; Eltahawy, 2019). The expectation of female obedience and passivity helps maintain male dominance.

Gender roles are thus presented in a way that convinces women that male governance is necessary for their protection—when in reality, it of-

ten increases their vulnerability (De Vido, 2016). Buffy, however, defies these roles entirely. She is, quite literally, the opposite of what Eltahawy describes. The premise of BTVS gives Buffy permission to stop playing “nice” and to break the cycle of oppression through violence—turning the very tactics patriarchy uses to dominate women into tools of resistance and empowerment.

### **Vampires as a Metaphor for Sexual Violence**

Buffy navigates many aspects of adolescence, one of which is the search for identity—both her own and that of others. Through this journey of discovery, she learns a hard truth: men can be unpredictable and, beneath the surface, dangerous (Heineken, 2004). This unsettling reality is most dramatically portrayed through vampires. Though they often appear as normal-looking men, their monstrous true selves are revealed when they feed—exposing the danger that lies beneath their human façades. In the Buffy universe, as in many films and television shows, vampires are depicted as mysterious, dangerous, and seductive. However, they have long served as metaphors for sexual violence. Their bite symbolizes rape—most obviously through the forced exchange of bodily fluids. In BTVS, vampires represent the patriarchal consequences of sexual danger directed at women (Chandler, 2002, p. 2).

Many episodes in the series reference or depict sexual violence, whether it involves creatures lurking in the shadows or seemingly ordinary boys at school, often manipulated or possessed by vampires and demons (Keft-Kennedy, 2008). The fear of sexual violence is one women know all too well—especially in spaces like dark alleyways. Cultural narratives like *Little Red Riding Hood* function as cautionary tales, warning girls to stay on the path and obey social norms, or risk being consumed by the monsters that lurk in the dark (De Vido, 2016).

De Vido argues that the ever-present threat of rape is a fundamental mechanism through which men maintain control, keeping women in a constant state of fear (2016). This dynamic is cleverly subverted in a BTVS Halloween episode, where

Buffy dresses as Little Red Riding Hood. When asked, “What you got in the basket, little girl?” she replies without hesitation, “Weapons” (Fear Itself, 4.04). In that moment, Buffy reclaims the narrative. She “patrols” and reclaims spaces where girls are traditionally told not to go alone at night, driving stakes through the metaphorical and literal hearts of threats.

### **The Phallic Imagery of Buffy and Vampires**

The act of Buffy staking vampires is inherently intimate and serves as emasculation. BTVS has been associated with the phrase “take back the night” a national sexual violence awareness slogan (Chandler, 2002, p. 1). Immediately suggesting that she faces sexual and domestic violence throughout her journey of being a slayer. A strong female hero like Buffy creates castration anxiety in male characters and viewers because she holds phallic power even though she does not possess a penis (Mulvey, 1975). By staking vampires she becomes the penetrator rather than the penetrated, reversing the heteronormative script. The prescribed phallic power men are given by society, is in contrast implied by BTVS that it is transferable between the sexes (De Vido, 2016)(Mulvey, 1975). The vampires’ phallic extensions are their vampirism and fangs; Buffy’s is her Slayerism and wooden stakes. When a vampire tries to violate Buffy, she instead penetrates them with a phallic object, disrupting “natural superiority.”

In the episode “The Initiative” Spike the vampire tries to bite one of Buffy’s best friends Willow. Due to an experimental surgery performed on Spike, he is unable to bite her (4007). Although the scene is played out for laughs, Spike breaks into Willow’s room to violate her. There is an intentional parallel made between Spike’s inability to bite Willow and being flaccid sexually. This shows the direct sexualization of a vampire biting their victim. Spike is also continually emasculated and looked down on for not being able to “perform.”

### **Buffy’s Critique of Masculine Sexual Power**

Another large aspect of patriarchy is the gender roles and attitudes toward sex. While masculinity is often built on sexual conquest (of women), women are generally taught not to seek out, enjoy, or lust after sex (Chandler, 2002, p. 11). In contrast, men are typically portrayed as having an aggressive sexual drive. Along with rape, vampires can also represent the primal sexual drives and desires of men, often resulting in violence or the death of women. To be a “real man” under a heteronormative, patriarchal definition is to be a monster within Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS) (Heinecken, 2004). The sexuality of vampires within BTVS is coded as a threat (Chandler, 2002, p. 2). However, this does not deter Buffy from engaging in romantic and sexual relationships with them. Due to her adoption of not only heteronormative masculine traits but also the abilities and behaviors of vampires, she finds that only they can understand a darker side of her. Still, Buffy grapples with the conflict of patriarchal expectations for women, unsure if she can be considered “good” if she is lustful, enjoys sex, and has an aggressive, at times angry, sexuality (Heinecken, 2004).

Consistently throughout the show, sexual desire and pain are conflated, blurring the confusing space between pleasure and emotional and physical pain (Keft-Kennedy, 2008). Although the hidden meanings behind Buffy are not always immediately apparent, many viewers—especially women—can relate to the season two episodes “Surprise” and “Innocence.” These two episodes follow Buffy losing her virginity to her vampire boyfriend Angel. In the Buffyverse, when someone becomes a vampire, they lose their soul, making vampires selfish and lacking a moral compass. What sets Angel apart is that, unlike other vampires, he was cursed with a soul after killing the beautiful daughter of a Romani family, and most likely violating her in the process. His curse is to make him suffer for eternity and ensure that if Angel experiences a moment of true happiness, he will lose his soul again, reverting to his evil alter-ego, “Angelus.”

Unbeknownst to Buffy, she shares an intimate night with Angel because she believes he is differ-

ent and can be trusted. Of course, Angel loses his soul and reverts to his soulless, psychopathic self: Angelus. He intentionally hides this from Buffy, knowing that he can't batter her physically, so he will have to do it emotionally in order to destroy her (Chandler, 2002, p. 8). He joins her again in his room, and when Buffy confronts him about leaving so suddenly after their night together, he replies with, "Like I'd wanna stick around after that," "Let's not make an issue out of it... let's not talk about it at all," "You were great, I thought you were a pro," and "Lighten up, it was a good time, not like we have to make a big deal" (Innocence, 2014). These are all lines many women and people have heard after being intimate. BTVS takes the "I'll call you" trope and flips it, showing the other side. By using vampires and the duality of Angel and Angelus, the show dramatizes the experience of men emotionally manipulating or "playing" women to sleep with them. However, Angel's transformations offer a complex exploration of masculine roles within sexual and romantic relationships in the series.

### **Subverting the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy through Angel**

Buffy's character stands out in terms of her purity and righteousness regarding sex. In the horror genre, there is the term "final girl," coined by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. To summarize what makes a "final girl" and what doesn't: if a girl remains virginal and pure, she survives in the end; if a girl engages in sex, she is punished by being killed off (Clover, 1992). This illustrates how, even though horror is often considered a feminist genre, patriarchal elements are still embedded within its framework. Western society, including contemporary America, has historically criticized women's sexuality (Chandler, 2002, p. 7). However, despite Buffy's transformation through her experiences, she is not any less pure or good. The act of putting women down for not conforming to patriarchal ideals of female sexuality is yet another tool of patriarchy. Buffy, however, flips this narrative. In traditional horror,

Buffy would be punished for her actions, but instead, it is Angel who is punished.

Throughout their relationship in the series, Buffy is the masculine figure, while Angel is cast as the feminized sidekick. Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS) rejects the "slut" label that normative society would so quickly apply to her. This reasserts her role as the heroic character while simultaneously reversing gender roles (Chandler, 2002, p. 8). If anyone is left changed or impure, it is Angel, who loses his soul because he has sex. His masculinity is dismantled, going against the expectation that it would be elevated by sleeping with Buffy. Angel and Angelus serve as a dichotomy for the fine line between virgin/whore that women often walk (Chandler, 2002, p. 9). Angel's duality also hints at abusive relationships, where the person either changes through the relationship or exhibits a violent side that feels like a stranger. In the context of a woman's first sexual encounter, society teaches that she will lose something, whereas Angel experiences a more literal loss (De Vido, 2016).

The torment Angelus puts Buffy through only makes her rise to the occasion more. However, he takes on the role of the "fallen woman" trope, or in his case, the "Fallen Angel" (De Vido, 2016). Buffy remains unaltered after her sexual encounter with Angel and the subsequent encounter with Angelus. She demonstrates that patriarchy labels women as tainted when, in truth, it is the men who use women for their own pleasure who are truly corrupted.

### **The Blurred Lines of Sex and Violence**

While other teen vampire shows romanticize the relationship between vampires and non-vampires, Buffy the Vampire Slayer consistently demonstrates that such relationships are neither sustainable nor healthy. Her next vampire lover is Spike. Although he can show more compassion toward Buffy without a soul, their relationship exists in the space between sex and violence. In the season six episode "Smashed," where they first sleep together, their "seduction" is nothing short of hand-to-hand combat. At one point, Spike

says, “I’m in love with you,” and Buffy replies, “You’re in love with pain” (Smashed, 6009). This exchange highlights that, even if love isn’t present between them, their relationship is muddled by the confusion between sex and violence. The two start as enemies—Spike comes to Sunnydale with the sole purpose of killing Buffy. After they form an intimate relationship, he says, “I knew the only thing better than killing a Slayer would be fuc...,” before Buffy cuts him off (Wrecked, 6010). In this example, sex and violence are shown to be interchangeable for Spike.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is, at its core, a show about growing up and navigating how life and relationships evolve from black and white to shades of gray. Buffy’s and Spike’s relationship becomes a metaphor for patriarchal gender roles within relationships. Buffy retains her strength and skill, but it isn’t until Spike is no longer seen as “impotent” or “flaccid” that Buffy begins to engage with him romantically. This almost reinforces the stereotype that men must be equal to or superior to women in a relationship. To put it bluntly, a man must be viable and possess the capability for violence and domination over a woman (Heinecken, 2004). Even with Angel, the two were equals. Buffy and Spike both possess traditionally masculine characteristics; however, when it comes to sex, Buffy adopts the traditional masculine role of using Spike for his body, leading him on, and then disregarding him. As a result, he is feminized and erotized in contrast to Buffy, who is not (Heinecken, 2004). Buffy grapples with a version of the virgin/whore conflict, but in her case, she is torn between embracing her darker sexual desires—desires that women are often told they shouldn’t have—and feeling as though she can’t be good and righteous when connected to Spike, who represents everything she stands against.

Their relationship together almost serves as a warning. Buffy is participating in the patriarchy and structures she is trying to bring down. There is some comfort and safety within something so ingrained and present in her life, however, in the end, women cannot thrive in a patriarchy: a system and ideology that aims to take power away from them. Spike does just this by separating her from

her friends and family—her source of strength. In this time of her life, Buffy is worn down, finding her life and slaying to feel meaningless. Powerlessness and a feeling of inability to change society and social norms many people face. Like activism fatigue, she questions if her alone fighting these systems even makes a difference. She turns to Spike, even though previously Spike had acted in ways of sexual violence and obsession: stalking her, physically attacking her, creating an altar of her, keeping her prisoner, he even built a life-like sex robot in her image (Heinecken, 2004) She feels such conflict because she is fully aware of Spike and who he is. Buffy and Spike serve as a warning to women because even though they shared a connection and a level of trust, Spike eventually attempts to rape Buffy when she tries to end the relationship. No fangs, no demon faces, just him trying to reclaim ownership of her, control her, and in his mind win her back. Even though Buffy does have superpowers for standing up to forces like Spike, when she conforms to any sexual norms or roles of patriarchy, she too is in danger.

### Concluding Statements

Buffy uses the methods and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity to combat the power imbalance and dangers of patriarchy. BTVS cleverly uses vampires and demons as a metaphor and representation of the construction of violence, sexual violence, and sex within a male-dominated system. The slayerism possessed by Buffy gives her the tools and power to combat the figurative and literal patriarchy. Phallic power is transferred over to her, which in turn diminishes threats of rape and violence that women within the show and the real-world face. The commentary on such matters of violence towards women and the treatment of women is turned on its head by Buffy and how she moves through the patriarchal world. She rejects rape narratives as well as traditional relationship gender roles and expectations. Buffy and BTVS are an inspiration to women and people who have been hurt, repressed, or silenced by the patriarchy. They both provide an alternative, where women can reclaim their voice and unlearn

the passivity, they are taught that allows mental and physical harm from men. Buffy gives hope to girls and women in that they can be strong, they can be brave, and they can say no to forces that try to take their power, whether those forces be vampires or patriarchy.

In conclusion, Buffy the Vampire Slayer masterfully uses supernatural elements to critique and subvert systemic patriarchy, blending violence, wit, and metaphor to challenge traditional gender norms. The portrayal of vampires as symbols of sexual violence highlights the pervasive nature of male dominance, while the phallic imagery in both Buffy and her adversaries reflects the entrenched power structures of patriarchy. Buffy's critique of masculine sexual power and her subversion of the virgin/whore dichotomy through characters like Angel offer a more complex understanding of sexual agency and desire. By blurring the lines between sex and violence, the series forces its audience to confront the troubling intersection of these themes within patriarchal societies, ultimately encouraging a deeper reflection on the ways in which these forces shape our perceptions of power, gender, and control. Buffy uses the methods and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity to combat the power imbalances and dangers of patriarchy. Buffy the Vampire Slayer cleverly employs vampires and demons as metaphors for the construction of violence, sexual violence, and sex within a male-dominated system. The slayerism that Buffy possesses gives her the tools and power to fight against both the figurative and literal patriarchy. Phallic power is transferred to her, which, in turn, diminishes the threats of rape and violence that women face, both within the show and in the real world. The commentary on issues of violence toward women and their treatment is turned on its head by Buffy and her navigation of the patriarchal world. She rejects rape narratives as well as traditional gender roles and relationship expectations. Buffy and BTVS serve as an inspiration to women and individuals who have been hurt, repressed, or silenced by patriarchy. They offer an alternative where women can reclaim their voice and unlearn the passivity that allows mental and physical harm from men. Buffy offers hope to

girls and women, showing them that they can be strong, brave, and say no to forces that try to take their power—whether those forces are vampires or the patriarchy.

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