

## **BE BRAVE, LIVE: REVIEWING BUFFY'S JOURNEY IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* FROM FINAL GIRL TO HEROINE TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper discusses the United-Statesian TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reassessing its protagonist, Buffy Summers, in 2022, twenty-five years after its first broadcasting. As a teenage girl turned into a vampire/demon hunter, Buffy undergoes significant changes in relation to her calling as a slayer. Reluctant at first, she comes to terms with her responsibilities later in the series, in a movement that echoes Joseph Campbell's definition of the monomyth. The authors propose to discuss Buffy's changes throughout the series, emphasizing key narrative moments, in order to illustrate how the character evolves from what could be perceived as an archetype similar to the "final girl" to a (feminist?) heroine. Additionally, the authors comment on the abuse allegations against *Buffy's* creator Joss Whedon, and how they relate to the series' legacy twenty-five years later.

**Keywords:** Buffy the Vampire Slayer, TV shows, feminism, final girl, monomyth.

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**Resumo**

O presente trabalho discute a série de TV estadunidense *Buffy, A Caça-Vampiros*, reconsiderando sua protagonista, Buffy Summers, em 2022, vinte e cinco anos após sua primeira transmissão. Uma adolescente transformada em caçadora de vampiros/demônios, Buffy sofre mudanças significativas em relação a seu chamado como caçadora. Inicialmente relutante, ela passa, mais tarde na série, a aceitar suas responsabilidades, em um movimento que ecoa a definição do monomito desenvolvida por Joseph Campbell. Os autores propõem discutir as mudanças de Buffy na série, enfatizando importantes momentos narrativos, de forma a ilustrar como a personagem evolui do que pode ser visto como um arquétipo similar ao da “final girl” para uma heroína (feminista?). Além disso, os autores comentam sobre as acusações de abuso por parte do criador da série, Joss Whedon, e como elas interferem no legado da série vinte e cinco anos depois.

**Palavras-chave:** Buffy A Caça-Vampiros, séries de TV, feminismo, final girl, monomito.

## 1. Introduction: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 25 Years Later

The present year of 2022 marks the 25th anniversary of the iconic TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Previous to the show's anniversary, cast members such as Charisma Carpenter and Michelle Trachtenberg came forward on social media to share their negative experiences with the show's creator, Joss Whedon, making scandalous allegations of verbal violence and on-set abuse. This brings the need of facing important questions: why does the show still matter? Why should we keep watching and studying it despite the behind-the-scenes turmoil? In order to answer these questions, this work will propose an analysis focused on the main character of the TV show, Buffy Anne Summers, her path to becoming a (feminist?) heroine, and her everlasting appeal to young audiences.

In 1992, the low-budget, dark comedy film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, written by Joss Whedon and directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui, first introduced the character of Buffy Summers portrayed by actor Kristy Swanson. Poorly received by critics and the public (it currently holds a score of 36% of approval on the online aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*), the film still managed to successfully introduce some of the main characteristics that would turn the TV show, five years later, into a pop culture classic. The success of *Buffy* on the small screen has a lot to do with what was already present in the original film: Whedon's take on gendered horror stereotypes, mixed with monsters that metaphorically reproduced the horrors of adolescence, was enough to transform the series, initially a mid-season replacement for a canceled show, into *The WB's* main attraction.

With actor Sarah Michelle Gellar now starring as the title character, the show emphasized twists of clichés of horror films, such as the trope of the innocent, blonde girl being the first one to be killed off. In *BtVS's* world, the blonde girl is the one who kills the monsters while, at the same time, dating cute boys, studying, and hanging out with friends. Additionally, the main reason why *BtVS* became a cult-following series is because of its blatant symbolisms about adolescence. Through supernatural metaphors, the show managed to tackle universal issues that until nowadays can resonate with adolescents. Rhonda Wilcox, in *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2005), a series of essays on the show's legacy and themes, underlines the show's impact on younger audiences by calling attention to its established symbolisms alongside the likability of the characters. In her own words:

In Buffy's world, the problems teenagers face become literal monsters. Internet predators are demons; drink-doctoring frat boys have sold their souls for success in the business world; a girl who has sex with even the nicest-seeming male discovers that he afterwards becomes a monster. From the earliest episodes, it was apparent to attentive viewers that Buffy operated on a symbolic level. Furthermore, some of the symbols began to extend. For example, underlying the various threats is a repeated one: the horror of becoming a vampire often correlates with the dread of becoming an adult. Yet even in the face of all these monstrosities, the context of dialogue and interaction makes the characters believable. (Wilcox 18)

After being established, this combination would later serve as inspiration for other teen/supernatural shows, such as *Charmed* (1999), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009) and, more recently, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). Each of these shows, besides having impactful female leading characters, also delved into issues related to growing up and human relations, topics that are consistently tackled in *BtVS*. For having such a vivid mark in current teen supernatural shows, it is no wonder that, twenty-five years later, Buffy remains one of pop culture's leading female characters, although much of the series' legacy has recently been the center of scrutiny following the accusations of abuse made by several cast members against the show's creator.

Regarding such accusations, Wilcox has also gathered some important testimonies from feminist scholars around the world about how it was shocking and terribly sudden to know how a man who had created one of the most iconic female characters in contemporary television history was allegedly an abuser of women himself. Ph.D. scholar and researcher Casey McCormick, for instance, affirms that it was a "hero's fall from grace" (qtd. in Wilcox 14) and that it required a new critical perspective on racism and misogyny embedded in *BtVS* and other of Whedon's products circulating in popular media. McCormick also adds a remarkable quotation about *BtVS*:

Like death, a hero's fall from grace is "always sudden." August 20 did not change the fact that growing up with Buffy made me a feminist before I knew what that word meant. It does not change the fact that Buffy helped usher in a new kind of TV storytelling. (Wilcox 11)

In this sense, attention must be paid to the questions that the scholar brings in her statement. Similarly, in the same text, Don Tresca (2018) proposes that this moment requires a re-examination of the "feminist" label that was attributed to Whedon and his work, and that the accusations made against him challenge scholars of his work to be more critical about the man and his legacy, since both authors agree that Whedon has become a problematic figure in the popular culture industry at this moment.

Nonetheless, it bears significance to remember that Whedon's work on *BtVS* was not a solo project. Several female producers, writers, and actresses, besides putting their efforts to make the show a success, were overshadowed by him and by popular media throughout the past decades. Considering the collective nature of the cultural artifacts created by him, and focusing specifically on the aforementioned show, it is safe to reckon that even with its turbulent conditions of production, *BtVS* still conveys noteworthy, feminist messages, as it paid attention to delicate social issues that are considered taboo even nowadays, such as sexuality, mental health, violence against women, lesbian existences, and much more. Consequently, and also because of the generational impact of the show and the social cult that has come from it, *BtVS* remains a standing rock on the late 90s/early 2000s TV shows. Despite being a 25-year-old media product, it

managed to retain a significant and active scholar community, as well as a devoted growing online fan base.

Delving into the impact of *BtVS* in contemporary media productions and TV history, Sherryl Vint (qtd. in Canavan, 2018), who is a professor of Media and Cultural Studies and of English at the University of California, states that the show fundamentally changed how strong women were portrayed. Despite having been produced together with other shows such as *Xena*, Vint states that elements of femininity, commonly associated with weakness, are still present in Buffy's personality and that they did not weaken her as a heroine, thus resignifying womanhood as a place of power. Moreover, the author suggests that the idea of collective heroism was an innovative contribution of the show since Buffy was always connected to her friends, family, and lovers to face evil threats, whereas the traditional idea of heroism was focused on an individual male, usually isolated from his community and seeking to hide his heroic side from his loved ones. In relation to the series' creator, Vint suggests that decentering *BtVS* from Whedon's figure is relevant so that the show remains a central feminist text. In her words:

I think culture always exceeds the person who writes or makes it. Buffy was the product of many people, collaborations with other writers, with the actors, interactions with the fans (and here we need to remember that it was also an early pioneer in having its writing staff, including Whedon, interact with fans online, on a discussion board called "The Bronze"). So to me Buffy remains a central feminist text and its status as such is not changed by 2018. (Vint *apud* Canavan 7).

Vint's proposal of thinking *BtVS* as a cultural artifact that transcends Whedon because it was constituted by multiple voices is aligned with the show's idea of heroism as a collective act instead of an individual phenomenon. Moreover, it allows us to still discuss issues portrayed in the episodes under the light of feminist ideas and studies, thus restating the importance of feminism for the creation and change of the portrayal of female characters. When we "de-Whedonize" *BtVS*, it allows us to see the conjunction of the actresses, female writers, and female producers and to reshape the imagery and the behavior of women in television, while using popular culture as a pedagogical vehicle to discuss noteworthy messages.

This effort was not limited to the length of the show's run during the late 1990s to the early 2000s; it remains current nowadays as we reassess the impact that Buffy has had on viewers. Rebecca Kumar (qtd. in Wilcox), an Indian-American Ph.D. scholar and assistant professor, adds her voice to the chorus of women spectators that have been shaped by *BtVS*. As a first-generation immigrant child, she says that the TV shows in the late 1990s were dominated by whiteness and that she got attached to *BtVS* because the show brought a main character and other female characters that were outspoken and active in their own lives. According to the author, Buffy herself—much like immigrant children—was bound to walk

between two worlds, the one of a common, human girl and the one of the “chosen one,” the slayer, designated to defeat the forces of darkness.

Kumar’s perspective on *BtVS* allows us to acknowledge how the show was a pioneer in the portrayal of female subjectivity as layered and complex. Even though Buffy’s love life played a significant role through the seven seasons of the show, it was never the central issue for Buffy. Her life, her school, her mission as slayer, her family and her friends were as significant as the love interests that she had, which allowed us to see her engaged in a plethora of situations beyond the focus on her romantic life. This change in how we see women navigating the many different dimensions of their lives as multidimensional, complete human beings was a continuous feature of the show and it helped to change the way audiences reacted to female leads on TV.

Considering the previous discussion, we understand that the show remains a relevant piece in the history of media production in contemporary human culture. Despite controversies surrounding its creator, it is possible to address and analyze *BtVS* from a feminist perspective considering that it was also crafted and influenced by women. In order to join a cultural and critical debate about the show, this research will proceed through a bibliographical investigation and analytical exposition to set a theoretical background that will help to understand some vital episodes of the show, focusing on how Buffy evolves from an archetypal “final girl” to a main heroine of her own journey. The third and final section will present the analysis, intertwining the exposition and detailing of selected episodes together with the elements of our theoretical apparatus, analyzing Buffy’s impact on the history of female protagonists in contemporary television history.

## 2. “If the apocalypse comes, beep me”: Buffy, the final heroine

### 2.1 Horror Tropes, Villains and Subversion: Buffy as a Final Girl

When thinking of Buffy as the leading character of a supernatural/horror TV show, it is possible to draw comparisons with common tropes of female characters in horror films. Many of the archetypes and characteristics of the slasher genre<sup>2</sup>, for instance, can be perceived throughout the seven seasons of the series, to high or low degrees. In this section, therefore, the authors propose an analysis of common horror film tropes, more specifically in slasher films, that can be identified in *BtVS* in order to read its main character as a progression of the Final Girl archetype. Additionally, the monomyth theory, initially developed by Joseph Campbell, will also be addressed as ways of signaling this progression and to position the character of Buffy beyond this archetype, with her own particular characteristics. Throughout the discussion, there will be the identification and contextualization between the theoretical background and the show’s own features, in order to better understand how Buffy’s story uses, changes and rewrites some of the theory applied to its analysis.

There is much debate regarding the origins of slasher films and their well-known formula. Several scholars attempt to classify this subgenre in different timelines of horror films, each one pointing to different films as the blueprint of slasher. Carol J. Clover, for instance, in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), states that the slasher formula began with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960. According to her, the film portrays many of the key elements that would later be found in subsequent horror films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978). By illustrating these elements, Clover showcases a list of the essential features of slasher films, which can be found throughout most of the genre. The elements are the presence of a (seemingly) indestructible killer, a place in which terrible things are bound to happen, the use of traditional, sharp weapons, the large number of victims (which are mostly women), and a female survival. All of these elements can be largely found in *BtVS*, although the series took the liberty to subvert many of them.

While discussing the figure of the killer and its core characteristics in the slasher film, Clover defines the killer in *Psycho*, Norman Bates, as a typical male who retains a level of psychosexual fury. This trait, which can appear both as gender distress or linked to childhood trauma, is, according to Clover, always gendered-based. Although men are also killed on screen, the killer in a slasher film tends to pay extra attention to his female victims, with more graphic, violent attacks.

Besides the numerous male monsters/villains that appear throughout its seven seasons, *BtVS* also managed to subvert audiences' expectations regarding the male killers/female victim dichotomy. In its very first episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," spectators are introduced to two characters: a seemingly mysterious, fearless young man and an apparently innocent, blonde girl, who physically resembles the victims of several slasher films. After they hear a distant noise, the young man approaches the girl and makes sure that she is safe. The scene's play on the characters' relationship and their mutual sexual interest leads viewers to believe that the man is soon to attack the girl. However, as she turns to face him, she reveals herself a vampire, ultimately killing the young man and setting the tone for the rest of the episode and the first season of the show.

As for the second element of the slasher genre, the "terrible place," Clover stipulates that the motifs of the films are often linked with the moral and visual decrepitude of the places in which they occur. The "terrible places" (abandoned mansions, old hotel rooms, empty castles, forest huts) often symbolize, at first glance, protection from the dangers of the outside world and a shelter to escape the killers. However, it is in these apparently safe environments that the action of the film unfolds, as the killer enters the place and manages to attack. In Clover's words:

The house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in. A phenomenally popular moment in post-1974 slashers is the scene in which the victim locks herself in (a



house, room, closet, car) and waits with a pounding heart as the killer slashes, hacks, or drills his way in. The action is inevitably seen from the victim's point of view; we stare at the door (wall, car roof) and watch the surface open to first the tip and then the shaft of the weapon. (33)

The author exemplifies the Terrible Place (inside the slasher film genre) as buildings or locales that contain harmful threats or individuals. These spaces are supposed to be sheltering people from their problems, but they become part of the threat itself, a risk to the lives of the characters, with their residents often becoming the center of the dangerous and violent situations in the story. If in a classical slasher film such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) we witness the presence of a murderous family and the interior of their home, for instance, in *BtVS* this locale is fittingly the fictional city of Sunnydale. Initially a fresh start and a shelter to the Summers family from the intense urban life of Los Angeles after Buffy is kicked out of her previous school, Sunnydale can be interpreted as a "terrible place" as it becomes a constant source of terror, psychological horror and different treacherous sceneries for the characters of *BtVS*. Since Sunnydale is positioned on top of a "hellmouth," it makes the city a magnet for demonic and evil forces. The twist that the show brings to the category is that Sunnydale becomes a Terrible Place that is ultimately dealt with by its main character; Buffy learns to handle the evil difficulties and supernatural challenges that her new home constantly imposes upon her together with her friends, family, and lovers, unlike most of the female characters in slasher films who often perish by themselves in such places.

As for the third category of analysis of slasher films proposed by Clover, there are the weapons, which refer to the tools used by the killers. The author affirms that they usually operate as an extension of the villain's body (Clover 32), and they encompass ordinary items such as knives, chainsaws, axes, and machetes. Guns, on the other hand, have no use in slasher films. However, in her article "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" (1987), the author also proposes considering other types of horror films when analyzing the killers' weapons, such as *Jaws* (1975) and *The Birds* (1963), as well as vampire and werewolf films. She argues that the weapons in a slasher film operate in similar ways as the body parts of animalistic/monstrous killers, much like the shark and birds in *Jaw* and *The Birds*, respectively, slashing the victim's flesh in a violent manner. In her own words: "Knives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws, are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (Clover 198). The killer in the slasher genre not only operates the weapon, but also uses it as his/her own body part.

This comparison between killers who use weapons and killers who *are* the weapons is also apparent in the world of *BtVS*. Besides the vampires that give the show its title, several of Buffy's enemies throughout the series possess physical characteristics that fit within Clover's definition of the weapons found in a slasher film. Ranging from flesh-eating demons to werewolves and demons with knife-



like arms, other villains often make use of swords, stakes and knives in order to kill their victims.

**Figure 1:** Buffy holding “Mr. Pointy.”



The show even manages to subvert this feature by attributing traditional weapons to its main character. Buffy’s weapons of choice can vary between crossbows, knives and swords, but it is generally a stake, which she uses to kill vampires. Her weapons possess such importance in her duties as a slayer that her stake is even baptized “Mr. Pointy.”

Mr. Pointy was the stake of another slayer, Kendra, who was killed by vampires in the second season. The piece of wood becomes Buffy’s primal working object when she goes out to slay the blood-craver beings in Sunnydale. Relating the stake to Clover’s category, it is possible to perceive how this is another element from slasher movies and horror lore that the show manages to adapt and use for its own purposes. As previously mentioned, the weapon is a category that is normally attributed to killers and villains. However, in *BtVS*, Buffy and the other slayers have the possibility of attacking and defending themselves. Apparently a simple twist, the stakes as the primary weapon of female slayers mean that women are allowed and thought to have means of self-defense. These descriptions lead us to the discussion of the last category of analysis from Clover’s theoretical apparatus: the Final Girl archetype.

This archetype has a central role in slasher films. It is a key aspect of the slasher genre tradition since, as described by Clover, the final girl is the one who “finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)” (Clover 201). Additionally, another significant characteristic of the female survivors is their general masculinization. Clover states that the final girl in slasher films is always presented with her more masculine traits serving as tools for her survival. In her own words:

The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine — not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters ... set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer

himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. (Clover 40)

In the excerpt above, the scholar debates how final girls are usually connected to masculinity, since the qualities that they display, their usually prude sexuality, and even their names are connected to a masculine point of view, which would be the essential factor to assure her survival until the end of the movie. By distinguishing the Final Girl as placing her near to masculinity, the slasher genre tells its audience that women have to be “special” or “different” in an anti-female, anti-feminine way to be worthy of survival. The other girls that are victimized by the killer(s) are seen as less capable of resisting because their femininity turned them into vulnerable subjects.

**Figure 2:** Buffy, the cheerleader.



*BtVS* is deeply connected to the subversion of this trope. In its eponymous 1992 film, humor was used to mock the idea of final girls. From the movie, the show was crafted in a more realistic and horror-based style; however, both movie and show were deeply connected to the idea of establishing the main character as an anti-Final Girl. Buffy carried all the main features of the victims *and* the Final Girls from most slasher movies: white skin, slender body, and blonde hair, but also her strength and resourcefulness to stay alive. Additionally, her own name — Buff(y) — mocks the idea of separating strength from femininity. Ultimately, she was not the one to be disposed of by killers and monsters; she was the one chasing after them.

The question of femininity, which is one of the main reasons for the downfall of women in slasher movies, as well as primarily absent in the Final Girl herself, becomes a symbol, almost an obsession for Buffy in the show. She becomes adamant about her desire of being a “normal girl,” having friends, enjoying her boyfriends, practicing female-like activities such as being a cheerleader or disputing as homecoming queen. All of which could be classified as weaknesses become her most powerful resources to hide her identity slayer from others.

Figure 2 is from the third episode in the first season of the show (“Witch”), in which Buffy decides to join Sunnydale High’s Cheerleader Team despite being

advised against it by her watcher, Giles, who is her mentor in the slaying duty. Buffy's decision to confront an important male authority to perform something considered too "girly" for a slayer (and a female survivor) exemplifies how the show disrupts the Final Girl category as identified and detailed by Clover. Buffy's desire to be a regular teenage girl becomes her strength rather than her weakness. This idea conveys an important message from the show, that displaying behaviors and features commonly related to women is not a sign of defeat and it does not turn Buffy into a less capable person, or slayer, for doing so.

Still considering the Final Girl archetype, it can also be noted how the subversion of who survives in a horror film appears on the show. Ideally, especially in slasher film franchises, the killer is fixed—he (or she, in the case of Pamela Voorhees in the first *Friday the 13th*) always manages to come back in the next installment, increasing the number of victims and, sometimes, even killing the previous final girl. What poses a new threat, then, is the "virtual indestructibility" (Clover 196) of the killer. In *BtVS*, the killers do not come back from their graves. Buffy, however, does.

Although Buffy herself can be viewed through the lenses of the Final Girl archetype, meaning that she is ultimately the last person standing, she dies twice throughout the series. First, in season one, she drowns while facing the ancient vampire Master, and soon is brought back by her friend, Xander, who performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In the finale of the fifth season, Buffy sacrifices herself by jumping inside a mythical portal, closing it, and preventing monsters from other dimensions from entering our reality. In the first episode of season 6, she is brought back to life by Willow, who uses magic to resurrect her friend. Her deaths, however, besides being temporary, also work as narrative elements that help to develop her character, as it will be explored in the next section. Therefore, Buffy dying twice in the series displays a fundamental characteristic that elevates her from a Final Girl to a myth: transformation.

Clover's categories set a theoretical background that allows us to pinpoint some of the key elements of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, its main character and other important features that compose it. The theoretical investigation will proceed to discuss another scholar's perspective on the idea of myth/monomyth that will contribute to a further understanding of the main character of the show under a deeper analytical lens.

## **2.2. The Chosen One: Buffy Summers, a Sunnydale Myth**

Departing from Clover's categories, the authors will now propose a closer look at how the mythology in *BtVS* can be understood as a central motif in its main character's progression arc. Throughout its seven seasons, the show not only establishes Buffy as a progression of the Final Girl archetype, but it also elevates her to heroine status, acknowledging the mythological properties of her own journey. Thus, this section will explore how Joseph Campbell's theoretical apparatus of the monomyth, developed in his book *The Hero with a Thousand*

*Faces* (2004, originally published in 1949), can, in specific aspects of the show, illustrate Buffy's development and journey.

Campbell proposes that, when broken down into simple categories, most mythological and heroic stories share the same foundational structure, which can be divided into *The Departure*, *The Initiation* and *The Return*, subsequently divided into another seventeen-step heroic journey. According to him, a myth is the "... transcendence of the universal tragedy of man." (Campbell 48). It carries themes and experiences that are common to human beings and social groups, crossing the small casualties of single lives to assemble meanings about future and past, to redeem societies and to glue collectivities despite their conflicts and differences. A myth, then, can be personified through oral stories or written journeys in which an important action happens. In the center of this action, there is the hero. In Campbell's words:

The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man—perfected unspecific, universal man—he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore ... is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed. (48)

Although Campbell's theoretical framework has been used to organize and classify heroes and myths of cultures throughout the world, acknowledging their similar core features as essentially present in most cultures, his approaches to mythology have also been criticized by other scholars who identified problems with his patterns of classification. Several authors, for instance, draw attention to the lack of female heroines to illustrate his monomyth theory, as he has stated that women are usually the ones a hero returns to at the end of his own journey, not necessarily the focus of action. Authors such as Maureen Murdock (1990) and Valerie Estelle Frankel (2010) have developed what they call "The Heroine's Journey," with a broader focus on the female self and spirituality, as well as awareness and sexual awakening. Similarly, folklorists have pointed at Campbell's tendency of leaving out from his theories myths that do not necessarily fit within his theoretical apparatus, which could disprove his argument. However, other scholars have come to not entirely dismiss Campbell's prepositions, but instead adapt them according to the analyzed myth. Robert Ellwood, for instance, in *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (1999), argues that what makes Campbell's theory flawed is his acknowledgment of every analyzed myth as equal in terms of narrative aspects. As he puts it: "A tendency to think in generic terms of people, races, religions, or parties ... is undoubtedly the most profound flaw in mythological thinking" (Ellwood 9). Thus, for the purposes of this research, the authors propose a critical look at Campbell's

theoretical framework of monomythology, drawing from his apparatus but, at the same time, commenting on the differences presented in *BtVS*.

**Figure 3:** In a flashback in the series, a skeptical Buffy refuses her call as the slayer.



The first stage in the hero(ine)'s journey, *The Departure*, which marks the departure from the natural, regular world through the call to an adventure, appears in the 1992 film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as in flashbacks in the original series. Buffy, then a fifteen-year-old teenage girl, is surprised by a man who claims she is the chosen one: she must face vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness. Her initial reluctance illustrates what Campbell has described as the “refusal of the call” (Campbell 54). Buffy’s sense of refusal comes from her will of living a normal life; she does not want to be involved with the task of hunting vampires, especially because she is *chosen* to do so.

Still in the film, and in subsequent flashbacks in the series, it is possible to identify the following steps in Buffy’s journey as a heroine: the supernatural aid and the crossing of the first threshold (Campbell 63-71). The former represents the supernatural help that supports the hero(ine) throughout his/her journey; in Buffy’s case, her first watcher, Merrick, and later her second watcher, Giles, alongside her friends, constitute the character’s support net throughout her adventures. The latter is represented by the first vampire Buffy kills, still unsure about her abilities.

After being initiated in this new, supernatural realm, the hero(ine) moves on to the next stage, *The Initiation*. In a “road of trials” (Campbell 89), the hero(ine) faces challenges and tests that ultimately are necessary for his/her own transformation, even though failing sometimes. Buffy’s trials throughout the series, besides the monsters and villains she needs to face, are also related to her personal, human experiences, which help to shape the path of her journey.

As the hero(ine) slowly accepts his/her trials, the next step is the “meeting with the Goddess” (Campbell 100), in which he/she receives items that would be useful in the long run of the journey. In Buffy’s case, this meeting could be exemplified by her encounter with Dawn in season 5, who is later revealed to be

her sister, and a turning point for her own development and the understanding of her duty. Dawn, a humanly-shaped ball of mystic energy, is also responsible for major changes in Buffy's relationship with her own adulthood; she needs to find ways of balancing her life as a slayer and a 20-year-old woman who must take care of her house and sister. Consequently, Dawn represents the beginning of the next two steps in a hero(ine)'s journey: temptation and "atonement with the father" (Campbell 116).

**Figure 4:** Buffy sacrifices herself.



Campbell describes the step of temptation utilizing the physical and pleasurable deviation from the hero(ine)'s journey mostly in the form of a woman. Temporarily distant from his/her duties, instead the hero(ine) seeks physical comfort in a lover's embrace. The authors here point at another change of motifs in *BtVS*: Buffy, a heterosexual female character, is never fully away from responsibilities as a slayer. Instead, she attempts to balance her obligations as the chosen one and her sexual desires. In season 4, for instance, she has a healthy, sexually active relationship with Riley Finn. Although she sometimes fails in her quests as the slayer, she never trades one aspect of her life for another; instead, all of them coexist altogether. There is no temptation to deviate Buffy from her duties.

As for the following step, atonement with the father, Campbell describes it as a confrontation between the hero(ine)'s superego and repressed id: the hero(ine) must abandon all of his/her earthly wills and possessions for him/her to transcend to another realm. In a process of accepting and affirming his/her own calling to duty, the hero(ine) often sacrifices him/herself to obtain transcendence. As Campbell puts it:

Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster—the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself; and that is what is difficult. (120).

Similarly, in the finale of the fifth season of *BtVS*, Buffy realizes she needs to sacrifice herself in order to save her sister, Dawn, and the world. After a brief moment of enlightenment, she jumps into a portal of mystical energy and closes



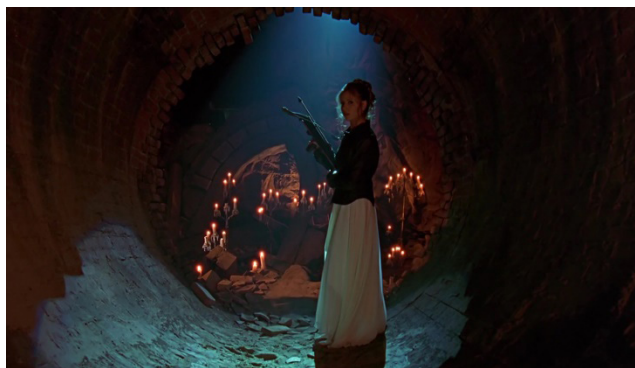
the doors between Earth and the demonic dimensions. Through her sacrifice, she fulfills her role as a slayer but also finds comfort in the afterlife. Her death allows her to move beyond her duties, completing her cycle as a slayer, and it helps her to reach the following steps in Campbell's theoretical apparatus, the apotheosis and "the ultimate boon" (Campbell 159). In these steps, the hero(ine) accomplishes what he/she set out to do in the beginning of his/her journey.

After the sense of fulfillment through his/her physical or symbolic death, the hero(ine) enters the third and last stage of the journey: *The Return*. He/she firstly refuses to return to the ordinary world after accomplishing enlightenment (Campbell 179), and may often need rescue or guidance from other powerful guides in order for him/her to return, in steps Campbell calls "the magic flight" and "the rescue" (192), in which the hero(ine) must retain the knowledge acquired throughout the journey and understand how to share this knowledge. Once the hero(ine) finds balance between the material and spiritual world, he/she becomes the "master of the two worlds" (Campbell 212), meaning he/she can feel comfortable in both the inner and the outside world. Finally, the hero(ine) acquires the "freedom to live" (Campbell 221), in which he/she does not need to anticipate past or future events. In *BtVS*, this final step is accomplished during the very last scene of the show.

This section addressed two significant theories and archetypes from different fields of study that can be observed in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Although with proper changes and stylistic subversions, the show manages to manifest both the archetype of the Final Girl defined by Clover and Campbell's monomyth in its title character. In the following section, the authors will showcase more detailed examples of how both theories appear in the character of Buffy, which could possibly place her as both a Final Girl and a mythical heroine.

### 3. "Death is your gift": Analyzing Buffy's journey

**Figure 5:** Buffy, holding a crossbow, enters the Master's church.



**Figure 6:** Buffy tells her mentor Giles that she is only sixteen and she does not want to die.



In this section, the authors will analyze eight specific moments from the seven seasons of *BtVS* through the lenses of the previously commented theoretical apparatus. In order to place the character of Buffy as a mythical heroine that evolves from the Final Girl archetype, the selected episodes for the analysis were chosen considering Buffy's overall arc during the seven seasons of the television series, as well as her initial reluctance and later acceptance of her duty as the slayer. Additionally, throughout the analysis, it is possible to perceive the common horror tropes appearing in the series, as well as how the show subverts them.

Hence, the start of the analysis will focus on a pivotal moment of the main character's journey. The ending of the first season, marked by the episode "Prophecy Girl," presents to us the moment in which Buffy denies her destiny to be a slayer and later embraces it again to face death in her confrontation with this season's main antagonist, the Master. This moment shows the combination of two stages of Campbell's monomyth theory, *The Departure* and *The Initiation*.

Throughout the first season, Buffy shows her reluctance to accept the role of slayer in several episodes. In this particular moment, however, the feeling is more apparent. The episode starts with the arrival of the day in which the Master, an ancient vampire, would rise. The only one that could prevent him from taking the world and destroying humanity would be the slayer. However, as foreseen in an ancient prophecy, Buffy is destined to die by his hands.

Despite that first moment of rejecting her journey, she decides to take on her role of slayer and fight the Master, after she learns about crimes against students of Sunnydale High School committed by vampires that were strengthened by the Master's imminent rising. This particular part of Buffy's heroine journey is marked by the first moment that she embraces her destiny as a slayer. Additionally, it showcases her embracing an unknown supernatural place (the Master's Church) where her death was foresighted in a prophecy. Despite the possibility of death, Buffy accepts her duty, deciding to stand against the Master.

**Figure 7:** Buffy kills Angel/Angelus with his own sword.



This is a key moment of the episode as Buffy faces a brief death, to subsequently be brought back by one of her friends. Besides showing Buffy's mythological characteristics, this confrontation can also be seen as a twist in the final girl trope. Buffy meets a villain that has common elements with the killers of the slasher films (she dies by the Master's fangs, which are sharp as weapons), but she survives and manages to fight back. Besides having the possibility of defending herself, she has an amount of strength and power that matches the Master's and thus she is able to defeat him, avoiding the apocalypse. Thus, the show places Buffy as a true survivor, as a final girl.

**Figure 8:** Buffy as Anne.

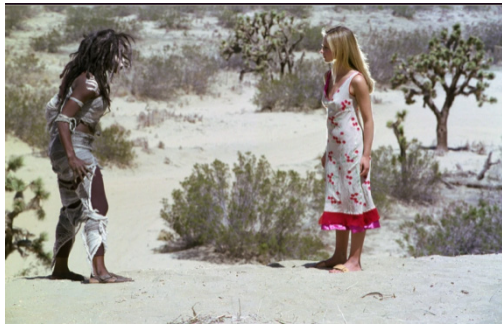


Later, in season two, Buffy undergoes a series of challenging situations to achieve an internal transformation that will allow her to be the slayer that she is fated to become. One of the most tormenting and powerful trials on her path happens during the final episode of the season, when she needs to kill Angel, her first—and perhaps more important—love. Angel had lost his soul and became his evil counterpart, Angelus. In his evil version, he had committed crimes and atrocities against Buffy herself and her closest friends. His final plan was to release a demon that would bring destruction upon humanity. In order to avoid this, Buffy has to kill him. This moment marks a definitive aspect in Buffy's journey of becoming a heroine. Perhaps the most tormenting choice of her life, she still fulfills her duty, in spite of how much she loved Angel.

Following this difficult decision, Buffy is devastated by her actions. She decides to escape from Sunnydale, seeking a life away from her duty as a slayer. A brief

pause on her journey, showing how difficult it was for her to kill her lover, this deviation on her road of trials is represented by the episode “Anne,” the first of the third season. She changes her identity, deciding to live a quiet life in Los Angeles as a waitress named Anne, her middle name. Ultimately, Buffy has her identity restored, deciding to return to Sunnydale to embrace her role as a slayer once more. This moment illustrates the difficulties of her initiation as a slayer, as she still needed to mature and undergo other experiences in order to become a heroine.

**Figure 9:** Sineya and Buffy in the desert; the authors note at the stereotyped depiction black people that, for today’s standards of television and representation, may read as offensive.



**Figure 10:** Buffy facing the abyss in a moment of realization.



**Figure 11:** A fallen heroine, Buffy dies for the second time.



The culmination of these experiences happens when she faces several crises but is ultimately helped by a magic, female force, which supports her to continue her journey and handle the torment and doubts she has in the pursuit of her quest. This moment is represented during the final episode of the fourth season, “Restless,” where Buffy meets the spirit of the First Slayer, Sineya, an African woman. The spirit induces Buffy and her friends into a strange sleep paralysis, as she tells Buffy, in a desert, that her gift is death. As Buffy transcends her life and acquires glimpses of the source of her power, she also visualizes that being the slayer is her ultimate duty, although she does not fully understand Sineya’s message of death being her gift.

As for the season 5 finale, “The Gift,” Buffy finally understands Sineya’s phrase. While facing hell goddess Glory, she acknowledges that the only way to stop the world from ending is to close Glory’s portal to other evil dimensions by sacrificing herself.

As she prepares to jump, Buffy realizes that her mission as a slayer is fulfilled: she has protected people around her and has served her duty as a slayer. As she says goodbye to her sister Dawn, the audience can witness her dismissal of earthly feelings or possessions; her selfless act is her ultimate quest. By embracing her fate, and her gift, Buffy is prepared for her transcendence in the last two seasons of the show.

**Figure 12:** Buffy crawling out of her grave at the beginning and at the end of season 6. First, into the darkness; later, into the light.



In “Bargaining,” the season six premiere, Willow attempts to bring Buffy back from the dead, as she and the rest of the “Scoobies” (Buffy’s clique) believe she has been trapped in one of Glory’s hell dimensions. As they believe Willow’s spell has failed, the gang is quick to run from a hoard of vampires who have been terrorizing the city of Sunnydale. However, unaware of the effectiveness of the spell, they leave Buffy by herself, crawling out of her grave in a state of utter shock and terror, which becomes the starting point of the season and a major narrative feature in Buffy’s journey as a heroine.



**Figure 13:** Buffy contemplates the freedom her future holds in the last scene of the show.



During the first episodes of season six, Buffy seems disoriented, frightened, and even reluctant to continue her chores as the slayer. It is only after a brief conversation with Spike in the episode “Afterlife” that viewers discover that, contrary to what her friends believed, Buffy was in Heaven. She shares the feeling of being dragged out of it, not wanting to come back, as she felt complete and finished. This mirrors Campbell’s stage of the refusal to return to the hero(ine)’s natural world; only later in the season, with the help of Spike and other members of the gang, Buffy realizes that she must stay in this world. In the season six finale, “Grave,” as Xander prevents Willow from destroying the world with dark magic, Buffy regains her strength and awareness that her duty may not be finished yet, as she still needs to protect her sister, Dawn, and the rest of the world. “Grave,” which symbolically reproduces Buffy’s grave at the beginning of the season, also marks Buffy’s rebirth as a fully awakened and oriented slayer, who is ready to share her knowledge with others.

A prominent motif in season seven, the sharing of knowledge is exemplified by the Potential Slayers, a group of inactivated slayers who are tracked down by Buffy and the gang to be protected from season seven’s main villain, The First Evil, who plans to kill all slayers on Earth. In this season, Buffy acts as a mentor, building an army of potential slayers and teaching them what she knows as a slayer, in order to prepare them for the ultimate fight at the end of the season. Now a master of both worlds, Buffy can coexist with her earthly trials as well as with her supernatural qualities, which are put to the test in the final episode of the series, “Chosen.”

After the battle, and with all potential slayers now becoming official, awakened slayers by a spell cast by Willow, Buffy contemplates the ruins of Sunnydale. As Dawn asks what they should do next, she quietly smiles, as the camera approaches in a close-up shot. Finally free from being the only Chosen One, Buffy can now choose to live as she wants. Having outlived her villains as a true Final Girl, and having shown trial after trial the qualities of a heroine, Buffy now has the freedom to decide the path she wants as the ultimate reward for her strength and her sacrifices. Her journey ends (on TV) as she is enlightened with



the possibilities of what her future holds, having shared what she learned through it with others. A heroine emerges.

In this section, the authors used examples extracted from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to illustrate how Buffy's path, originally the one of a Final Girl who manages to survive and subvert horror tropes, leads her to a heroic journey with a paramount reward: the freedom to live as she wants to. Although Final Girls are not chosen, and Buffy's fate as a slayer is not a casualty, the examples gathered here provide the necessary pattern to put her somewhere between or above a mythological Final Girl. Her trials and conquests, often faced with the help of others (much like the production of the show itself), help to cement Buffy Anne Summers as a true contemporary pop culture heroine.

#### 4. "Are you ready to be strong?": Final remarks

In this paper, we have explored, throughout Campbell's and Clover's theoretical background, how Buffy Anne Summers has gone from subverting the Final Girl archetype to claiming the role of a Heroine, standing somewhere in a category of her own as a mythological final girl. Despite recent allegations made against the series' creator, Buffy's legacy as a true heroine has moved beyond that, establishing her as a pioneer figure that has forever changed the narrative about women, their representation and their protagonism on pop culture, specifically in contemporary fantasy and horror media productions. Additionally, much like Buffy's conquests, the sense of collectiveness surrounding *BtVS* and its production, with much of the series being written, produced, and acted by women, enhances the feminist qualities of the character, who, in her way, manages to use her own alleged "weaknesses" as sources of strength.

Having died twice and having survived on multiple occasions as well, Buffy remains a noteworthy and relevant source to think of female characters who, contrary to other depictions in the horror genre, can still claim their femininity while, at the same time, being powerful and slaying the day.

#### Notes

1. 2018 marks the emergence of the first public accusation of an actress against Joss Whedon.
2. A subgenre of horror in which the victims, particularly young women and teenagers, are killed by phallic weapons, such as knives, machetes, and axes.

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