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"It's Complicated ... Because of Tara": History, Identity Politics, and the Straight White Male Author

BRANDY RYAN

Giles: Yes, it's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after.

Buffy: Liar.

—"Lie to Me," 2.7)

Wesley: But you're the Slayer.

Buffy: Yeah, I'm also a person. You can't just define me by my Slay-erness. That's ... somethingism.

—"Choices," 3.19)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a show that consistently and intently pushes back boundaries, each episode offering threads of a complex and extended narrative. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Buffy* developed a positive representation of a monogamous, sexy, and serious lesbian relationship between the characters of Willow and Tara. Nor, perhaps, should it come as a surprise that when Tara was killed at the end of Season Six and Willow went on a dark path of vengeance, *Buffy* looked into the mirror—and the reflection was blurred. The death of Tara, the darkening of Willow, and the rage that almost destroyed the world was difficult to watch when it aired; Stephanie Zacharek rightly draws attention to how this sea-

son reveals Whedon's "ear for tragedy." But as the Internet became the battleground for debates about the politics and propriety of Willow's narrative arc, I was struck by a very different reaction to this story. The anger went beyond losing a familiar character on a television series; for many viewers, one of the only representations of themselves on television, a loving, monogamous lesbian couple, had been irrevocably and brutally destroyed. It is not my intent here to dismiss any of the deeply personal responses to this story, but instead to consider the ways in which this narrative represents both a culmination of Willow's narrative arc and a story deeply embedded into the tapestry of Whedon's world.

The Willow-Tara narrative of Season Six, as interpreted by Todd R. Ramlow, Robert Black, Hillary Clay, and Jennifer Greenman, becomes a contested site of identity politics and a history of negative representation. Their position argues that the Willow-Tara story of Season Six presents the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché and as such negates, or at least damages irreparably, the positive representation of a lesbian couple on network television. The danger here is that by emphasizing the *end* of Willow and Tara's journey, rather than journey as process, we run the risk of falling unwittingly into the position that the cliché perpetuates. If all that Willow and Tara are can be summed up in "evil" and "dead" "lesbians," which these readings suggest the show asks or forces us to perceive, then we submit to the hegemony that denies lesbian characters moral complexity and personal development. My reading of the Willow-Tara arc aligns itself with the context established by the essays of Allyson, Stephanie Zacharek, Andrew Gilstrap, and James South. As I argue against the reading of the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché, I consciously construct my own historical narrative of Willow and Tara in the Buffyverse. As Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés suggest in "Rethinking Literary History — Comparatively," "History's explanatory ... or narrative 'emplotments,' to use Hayden White's term, are never innocent or without consequences" (5). This view of historical narrative reveals that both readings of the Season Six narrative revolve around the loss of innocence and the confrontation of consequences.

It is fitting that from the first episode the issue of consequences takes a primary position. This is a season which had many viewers asking, as Elizabeth Rambo notes in her Yeatsian essay on Season Six, "What's wrong?" Buffy is torn from heaven through the grave and enters a violent sexual relationship with the soulless Spike, hating herself for using him; Xander puts a stop to his wedding with Anya at the altar, and Anya becomes a vengeance demon (again); Willow becomes addicted to magic,

using it as a means to set things right in her relationship with Tara, and Tara breaks up with her; Giles decides that the time has come for Buffy to stand on her own, and leaves; Dawn, struggling with what seems perpetual abandonment, becomes a petty thief. As each character tries to play his or her part, each struggles — sometimes overcoming the battle and sometimes losing to it. For Willow and Tara in particular, the only queer couple on the show, the path winds around and trips them; just when they make it back to each other, Tara is shot and killed by a stray bullet meant for Buffy. Willow's recovery from magical addiction comes to a screeching halt as she invokes the spirit of Osiris and demands that Tara be resurrected. When this fails, Willow hunts down Tara's killer, tortures and skins him, then continues her vengeance by seeking his accomplices and trying to end the world. Going with the concept "Life is the Big Bad," the writers of *Buffy* create ambivalent stories for each of their characters, exploring the darkest and most frightening aspects not of external villains, but of the Scooby gang itself. This is *Buffy* at its best: exploring how people deal with loss, struggle with weakness, and attempt to fight their internal darkness. So what went wrong?

According to the members of *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe*, a Web site devoted to Willow and Tara, how we read the portrayal of Willow and Tara changed when two and a half years of the first positive and long-term lesbian relationship ended in death and darkness. *The Kitten's* FAQ argues that the Willow-Tara arc of Season Six engages the "Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché":

a version of the basic "dead/evil minority cliché" in which minority characters are introduced into a storyline in order to be killed or play the villain ... [that] all lesbians and, specifically lesbian couples, can never find happiness and always meet tragic ends. One of the most repeated scenarios is that one lesbian dies horribly and her lover goes crazy, killing others or herself [1].

The Kitten board goes on to create a history of the films and television shows where this cliché has played out: *The Children's Hour* (1961), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *The Fox* (1968), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Lost and Delirious* (2001), *High Art* (1998), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *24*, *All My Children*, *Babylon 5*, *Dark Angel*, *ER*, *Law & Order*, *Millennium*, *Northern Exposure*, *NYPD Blue*, *The Practice*, *Quantum Leap*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*.¹ This list indicates not only that the cliché exists, but also that it has been repeated over the course of fifty years. The underlying dissent in *The Kitten's* application of this historical narrative is twofold: some readers claim that *Buffy's* tendency to wreak emotional havoc on its characters ought not to include

its queer characters — under-representation means a lack of other queer characters to replace them — while others take issue with the nature of the death and vengeance in this particular example, which, because of its parallels to historical precedents, reinforces a reading of the text as “lesbian = bad.”

But as Willow tells us in “Life Serial,” “Social phenomena don’t have unproblematic objective existences. They have to be interpreted and given meanings by those who encounter them” (6.5). Both sides of this “social phenomen[on],” those who read the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché as the narrative result of Season Six, and those who read the season as a result of narrative development that extends beyond any one character or identity, present ideologies that mirror the original conflict: they place storylines and characters in an historical narrative (whether external, as with the cliché, or internal, within the show’s context) and ask us to read them in a certain way. They privilege their narrative over others and attempt to assert authority and legitimacy for this narrative in light of addressing a political or creative issue. Whedon himself picks up on this idea of legitimacy: he refers to Season Six as “the bastard child that everyone’s mean to” (“Buffy 101: Slaying Gets Serious”). The historical narratives, identity politics, and authorial intent all seek legitimacy at the expense of someone else’s.

The word cliché comes from the French for a stereotyped block used in printing — its connection to *texts* repeated without difference should not go unnoticed. Cliché’s figurative meaning is more familiar: it is a “stereotyped expression ... character, [or] style” (*OED* 2). From cliché, we arrive at the concept of a stereotype, “something continued or constantly repeated *without change*” (*OED* 3, emphasis added). The Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché, argues that the death of Tara and the fury of Willow continues or repeats without change a strong tradition of negative lesbian representation in popular culture. The readings which discuss the relationship between the cultural cliché and Willow and Tara’s story, drawing on the history of queer representation, the complexity of identity politics, and *Buffy*’s narrative propensities, are diverse: Todd R. Ramlow writes both “‘I Killed Tara’: Desire and Death on *Buffy*” and “Ceci n’est pas une lesbienne”; Andrew Gilstrap responds to Ramlow in “Death and the Single Girl: *Buffy* Grows Up”; Jennifer Greenman addresses the conflation of magic and lesbianism in “Witch Love Spells Death”; Stephanie Zacharek defends the narrative in “Willow, Destroyer of Worlds”; Sarah J. argues that “*Buffy* Not So Great at Slaying Stereotypes of Lesbian Relationships”; Hillary Clay claims “I Know Why Willow Weeps”; Carter Bell takes an

objective approach with “Dust to Dust: Death Becomes Them”; Emily Almond takes issue with the larger media culture in “Lesbians, Where Art Thou?”; E.A. Week takes issue with Willow and Tara generally in “An Ode to the Love of Death”; and Robert Black presents a particularly vehement response in “It’s Not Homophobia, But That Doesn’t Make It Right,” “The Message Is, ‘Pay Attention to the Message,’” and finally “Secrets and Lies Beyond the Fourth Wall.” These essays and articles were all posted on the Internet within a few months of each other, and almost all of them touch (if not focus) on one theme: the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché. There lies the history; why should *Buffy* not be considered part of it?²

I have not seen all the films or television series that inform the *Kitten* board’s historical narrative; I have, however, seen enough of them to know that the Willow-Tara arc is *not* a repetition without change. Sarah Warn, from *AfterEllen.com*, argues that rather than presenting one-dimensional figures in Willow and Tara, *Buffy* “humanized its lesbian characters and didn’t fall into the trap of making them too perfect.” Stephanie Zacharek goes further: Dark Willow, “far from being a cut-out angry lesbian, is more fleshed out, and more terrifyingly alive, than she has ever been before.” *The Kitten* board itself acknowledges that the writers of *Buffy* created a powerful, attractive, and grounded lesbian couple over the two and a half years of Willow and Tara’s relationship. Willow has been a major character since the first episode of *Buffy*, and Tara has been her partner for two and a half seasons. This alone argues that Tara is not a minor character introduced into the storyline in order to be killed, nor is Willow introduced only to play the villain.

Buffy’s internal history complicates the history of the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché. As the show’s title suggests, this is a text in which characters will die; from “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.1), where a character who might have been part of the Scooby gang dies, we understand that vampires will not be the only casualties. The cliché provides us with an interesting dilemma: do we read Season Six as its own text, or as part of a larger text that provides the context for much of its story and character development? We cannot address a history of homophobic representation without considering the history of *BtVS* as a whole; the context of this story arc and the show itself influences our reading of Whedon’s relationship to the historical misrepresentation of the queer identity group. One of the driving forces of the show lies in its ability to use pain, loss, and suffering as metaphors for larger issues: through intense emotion, Whedon tackles the hell of high school and life beyond it in a refreshingly honest and original way. The death of Jenny Calendar works as an aside to the Buffy-

Angel storyline, although her death is emotionally devastating. The death of Buffy's mother, Joyce, adds to Buffy's struggle to reconcile her destiny, while "The Body" (5.16) arguably offers one of the best representations of grief in the history of television. Tara's death plunges Willow into a spiral of grief and abuse of power, an abuse which has been in the making since Willow first lost herself in magic at the end of Season Two. The senselessness and vulgarity of Tara's death make Willow's path all the more devastating and deepens its moral complexity.

The details of the episode "Seeing Red" (6.19) demonstrate how, rather than consciously or unwittingly falling into a repetition of the cliché, Whedon's narrative actively works against this reading. The episode opens with Willow and Tara in bed, sated, naked, and content. We see them in bed again, later in the episode — also naked, and between a previous session of love-making and one that is clearly about to happen. Twice we see Willow and Tara in their bedroom, exchanging kisses, caresses, and expressions of affection, enjoying each other's company without shame. Towards the end of the episode, Willow and Tara, now fully dressed, discuss Buffy and Xander's confrontation when suddenly and without warning, Tara is shot through the back. The confluence of events here impacts our reading of this scene: Buffy has to have defeated Warren's plan to rob the bank; Buffy and Xander have to have argued and then begun a reconciliation; Warren has to come looking for payback in order for this story to reach its pinnacle. Events in the Buffyverse are intricately (although not necessarily causally) connected, and this scene emphasizes how Tara's death is the consequence of actions beyond her control.

When Rambo reads Season Six, she draws on Yeats's "The Second Coming": "the centre cannot hold" — the center being here the powerful reunion of Willow and Tara — "through no fault of her own, 'mere anarchy,' in the form of Warren's wild gunshot, will end Tara's life." The argument presented by Ramlow and the *Kitten* board suggests that Tara's "death is directly associated with the act of lesbian sex," implying that the only events of consequence are those involving Willow and Tara's visual affection. For this episode to have emotional power, viewers must be invested enough in Willow and Tara to grieve when Tara dies. A death directly associated with the act of lesbian sex, however, asks that we do not grieve, since the evil lesbians have been punished for their actions. Focusing on the intense sexuality represented in "Seeing Red" as a punishment for Tara unwittingly works against the power and pathos of her death. Rather than asking questions about the abuse of power and worrying about the consequences of Willow's actions, the cliché asks that we focus *only* on her

sexual identity. The history of queer representation and the history of *BtVS* are not merely in conflict; they are antithetical. One history claims that the portrayal of a dead lesbian and her vengeful lover exists to assert and reinforce (consciously or unconsciously) homophobic agendas. The other claims that the portrayal of a dead woman and her vengeful lover constitute one more tragic love story within the text. Each history tries to assert its dominance over the other, yet each falls victim to claiming the other is without validity.³ Ramlow asks, "How can Whedon not see the direct connection between Willow's story of 'weakness' and historical stereotypes of homosexuality as congenital and/or psychological defect?" Andrew Gilstrap responds, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about death. It is about losing loved ones and struggling to carry on. It is about finding happiness, or some semblance of it, and having it snatched from you." In the liminal space between "historical stereotypes" and a show "about death," lies the crisis of identity — who are the characters, the audience, and the author?

Buffy's history of pain and torment for its primary characters suggests that rather than positing Willow and Tara as a site of difference to be punished in ways unlike its other characters, this storyline cements their equality. Whedon's own identity group, the straight white male, is constantly and consistently under fire throughout the series. In "Innocence" (2.14), Whedon draws on the cliché of the boyfriend who turns evil after his girlfriend sleeps with him for the first time, but here Angel *literally* becomes a monster: as the soulless Angelus, he kills one of Buffy's friends and Willow's goldfish, invades Buffy's room, and engages in a campaign of psychological warfare that devastates Buffy's emotional stability. As with so many clichés that are overturned throughout the show's history, however, Angel is given back his soul just as Buffy is about to kill him. This narrative forces us to ask questions about action and consequence, power and innocence. Whedon goes even further in the text to signal his awareness of his group's historical guilt towards other ethnicities; in "Becoming (1)" (2.21), Angelus kills the daughter of a Gypsy (Roma) tribe. The tribe curses him, not with death, but with a *soul*: he is cursed with a conscience, to carry the knowledge of his sins. Further, after Angelus returns to his human (ensouled) status, the text denies forgiveness and Buffy kills him. It is only after several hundred years of torture in a hell dimension that Angel is brought back and set again on a redemptive path.⁴

This historical narrative of the straight white male identity group [is necessary to recall, because Whedon evokes it again in "Seeing Red" (6.19) and because it self-reflexively deals with the loss of innocence and consequences. The details of Tara's death are an intrinsic part of how we read

this story — details that, for the most part, are left out of arguments based on the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché. Tara is shot by Warren, who has already revealed frighteningly misogynistic behavior. Warren creates a sex-bot girlfriend (“I Was Made to Love You,” 5.15), because her responses are easily programmed; he also uses mind control on his ex-girlfriend Katrina (“Dead Things,” 6.13), turning her into a willing sex toy to be shared with his friends. When Katrina wakes up from the “cerebral dampener,” she shifts a reading of the incident from boyish prank to rape. Facing a vocal and angry woman instead of the docile, maid-dressed toy he had anticipated, Warren smashes a bottle on her head, killing her.

Warren’s target in “Seeing Red” is not the evil lesbian, but the Slayer, a powerful woman who thwarts his plans and emasculates him one time too many. Whedon sets the dynamics of Tara’s death very carefully: we know, as Buffy says in “Flooded,” that guns “are never useful” (6.4).⁵ We also know that Warren is not one of the good guys, thinking it “cool” that he and his Troika had got away with the murder of Katrina. What happens to Tara is cruel and perverse, and it is meant to be, but not because a lesbian is being punished: showdowns are supposed to occur between the Slayer and her foes. The scene in “Seeing Red” is set in the Summers’ backyard when Warren enters the act; Tara is not even on stage for this battle, nor is she Buffy’s secret weapon, as Willow has been. Tara’s death brings about a loss of innocence for all viewers: we expect that the Slayer might die in battle, but not that the consequence would be the death of a character off-scene. Whedon makes Tara’s killer an unsympathetic misogynist, one whom we are in no way meant to read as anything other than the potential of human evil. A reading based on the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché asks that we read into Warren either the conscious or unconscious presence of *Buffy*’s writers — a presence that would undercut everything that has come before.

The journey Willow and Tara take in Season Six through the dark woods is so compelling a story because as characters *and* as a couple, they are strong and complex enough to merit this tragedy. Ramlow argues that Willow and Tara’s representation over two and a half years lends itself to a reading of the text as lesbian = bad, and that the series’ use of magic in the sixth season provides ample support for a negative reading of the arc:

Throughout the double-episode season finale, Willow repeatedly refers to herself as a “junkie.” But to what is she addicted? The power of witchcraft or lesbian sex? Well, both, considering how *BVS* has gone to such lengths for the past three seasons to code Willow and Tara’s spell-casting as queer sexuality [“I Killed Tara”].

Ramlow contends that the conflation of magic and sexuality in “Who Are You?” (4.16) reflects insidiously on Willow’s addiction to magic in Season Six. If spells are used to signal the subtext of a lesbian relationship, then an addiction to spells must somehow connect to this earlier signification. It is impossible not to remember the beginning of Willow and Tara’s relationship as lovers: they work magic, complete with heavy breathing and heaving chests that culminate when Willow falls onto a pillow and arches with orgasmic delight. Ramlow sees in this code *BtVS*’s reluctance to show much intimacy between the two lovers,” and suggests that “Whedon’s skittishness about being too explicit around Willow and Tara’s love life” is its cause (“I Killed Tara,” pars. 5, 6). Whedon deals openly with accusations of this kind, arguing that network censorship necessitates a code for the early stages of Willow and Tara’s love story, but that it allows him to portray something more powerful than anything we’ve seen before:

Are we forced to cut things between Willow and Tara? Well, there are things the network will not allow us to show.... Restrictions are often a writer’s best friend — they force him to be CREATIVE. The spell scene in 16 was on one level a sex scene, on another level not. It was (barely) subtle compared to smoochin’ and rompin.’ The blowing out of the candle was lovely and poetical.... Look at Buffy and Riley. All their sheeted shenanigans leave most people cold compared to the tension between Willow and Tara... [*The Bronze*].

Angel and Buffy do not explicitly have sex onscreen until a flashback much later, and Xander and Anya’s first time is also played off-screen. As for the Buffy-Riley episode that revolved around the two of them in bed, “Where the Wild Things Are” (4.18) has appeared on more “Worst Buffy Episode” lists than nearly any other episode. The “skittishness” Ramlow accuses Whedon of having towards his lesbian couple is not without precedent — sometimes we do not need to see the actual act for it to have impact, and sometimes the explicit act (e.g., Buffy and Riley in “Where the Wild Things Are”) is far less intriguing and enticing than what we do not see. The connection between magic as addictive and Willow extends beyond the symbolic connection of Willow’s sexuality and her lesbianism.

The source of some of this interpretive dilemma lies in following the writers’ discussion of magic as metaphor. Ramlow is not the only critic to associate magic with lesbian sex as a stable metaphor; E.A. Week, Robert Black, and Edwina Bartlem also read the use of magic in Willow’s arc as an extension of the code of magic used in the early stages of Willow and Tara’s relationship. This reading neatly lines up magic, lesbianism, addiction, death, and darkness in a row. But as another social phenomenon that requires interpretation, magic on the show can be read as a fluid symbol

We don't recognize Willow in these episodes." I think that response is only half right. It is half right, because our ordinary notion of Willow is one in which Willow would never do the sorts of things she did. It is incomplete as a response, though, because it assumes that we could ever fully understand Willow, that there are no dark currents in her, that we could ever construct a coherent and consistent narrative for Willow. There have always been dark currents in Willow, but she has always managed to swerve when they emerged, to cover them over [145].

Willow cannot "swerve" or "cover over" her grief when Tara dies, nor should she. There are "dark currents" in Willow, and in the tradition of Giles after Jenny's death, Willow reacts instinctively, drawing on the power she had abandoned.¹⁰ We see both Willow's power and capacity for darkness at the end of Season Five and the beginning of Season Six, even though we are still able to hold to our "ordinary notion of Willow." But as Dark Willow will say in "Two to Go," "Willow doesn't live here any more" (6.21).

South argues, "At the end of the sixth season, Willow is the one core character from the series who has not yet found her place in the world. She is still struggling to define who she is" (134). The fear Willow carries with her and one part of the force that drives her to rely so heavily on magic, is the "fear that, deep down, she hasn't changed at all; that beneath all the layers of social roles she has assumed, she is still the nerdy school-girl that she was when the show first started" (South, 134). The first time Willow loses herself in magic is "Becoming, pt. 2," where in doing the Restoration spell that will re-ensoul Angel, she stops being Willow — frail, quivering voice speaking an unfamiliar language — and becomes the spirit of the gypsy woman who first cursed the vampire. She snaps her head, up and then down, and firmly gripping the sides of a lap tray, speaks in an altered voice in fluent Latin. The visual and oral cues here signal that the Willow who has her "resolve face" on several minutes earlier has been overtaken by something powerful and magical. We see a similar take-over in "Afterlife" (6.3) when Willow and Tara do a spell — Willow stops chanting, drops Tara's hand and, head straight up, is lost in the magic. There is little here that can be read as lesbian subtext. This is magic as magic, connecting to its inherent power and danger.

If Willow's path figured power and danger as early as the second season, then Tara's path is presented as the antithesis to this, going back to Season Five, when she tells Dawn in "Forever" that "witches can't be allowed to alter the fabric of life for selfish reasons" (5.17). I follow Rambo's reading of Tara as the falconer: Tara becomes "the voice of wisdom and strength ... [who] could be trusted to take care of Dawn, make pancakes, use magic responsibly, make the hard decisions — no matter how painful to herself and her loved ones — and show compassion to the lost." We

should also remember that on more than one occasion, Tara is Willow's anchor — from their first spell together in "Hush" (4.10) to the argument with Anya about Willow's decision not to use magic in "Older and Far Away" (6.14), Tara supports, helps, and defends Willow and her responsible use of magic. Tara is also the one person Buffy turns to about her involvement with Spike, and when confronted with the seemingly impossible idea — Buffy and Spike sleeping together — Tara neither judges, nor intervenes, simply and gently stroking Buffy's hair as she breaks down. Willow and Tara are greater than the sum of their parts: these are hybrid characters that defy any attempt to place them in a single reading. Their place in the Buffyverse is earned, and the pain they encounter in Season Six means that they have become powerful enough to suffer as heroes.

Hillary Clay, however, argues, "Anything that happens to Willow and Tara is necessarily excluded from equal treatment because they are the only lesbian couple of its kind on television" ("I Know Why Willow Weeps"). But as one of the epigraphs to this article indicates, the show resists singular or permanent labels: Buffy's response to Wesley's comment that she is the Slayer argues for a broader reading of character and identity, "I'm also a person. You can't just define me by my Slayerhood. That's ... somethingism" ("Choices," 3.19). Their lesbian identity is absolutely a part of *who* Willow and Tara are, but it is not *what* they are.¹¹ Denying them equal treatment means saying that they are different from the straight characters on the show — and this undoes the huge amount of work Whedon and his writers have undertaken to make Willow and Tara fully fleshed-out characters. Whedon himself says,

I knew some people would be angry with me for destroying the only gay couple on the show, but the idea that I COULDN'T kill Tara because she was gay is as offensive to me as the idea that I DID kill her because she was gay. Willow's story was not about being gay. It was about weakness, addiction, loss ... the way life hits you in the gut right when you think you're back on your feet [*The Bronze*, May 22, 2002].

Critics have often taken Buffy's writers to task for not going far enough to balance harmful clichés (race, feminism, and masculinity are only three of these justified concerns), but Whedon never presents himself as representing The World: instead, he creates *a* world that occasionally parallels our world. Jennifer Greenman writes perhaps the most balanced critique of the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché, acknowledging the conflict between external and internal histories:

I respect Whedon for staying true to his vision even if I don't agree with it. I respect him for pushing the envelope with the networks to open the way for better portrayals of gay love. I even applaud aspects of this story for its sheer audacity and ability to make my jaw drop at every turn. Part of me is sad that I can't

see this story the way Whedon must have intended it, where all the characters really are treated the same in death and in life. Because I don't live in Joss Whedon's world [3].

We *don't* live in Joss Whedon's world. And that's why it's complicated. The consequences of the historical narrative presented by critics who apply the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché are dire for Willow and Tara because it focuses on one reading of the end of Season Six to the exclusion of much that came before. Tara's death is deeply saddening, and Willow's fury is powerful beyond words. Whedon writes as though a negative history of evil and dead lesbians does not line the blissful shores of pop culture that he plays upon, but the fact is that it does. For the purposes of representing the world as it exists in his creative vision, he might chant under his breath, "Let Lethe's Bramble do its chore. Purge their minds of memories grim, of pains from recent slights and sins" ("Tabula Rasa," 6.8). The final defense for Whedon, which attempts to mimic a blank slate, is to claim artistic right — the one refuge where writers can create new worlds, even if they look uncomfortably like the one in which we live. In "Selfless" (7.5), Buffy and Xander fight over the ethics and desirability of killing Anya, Xander's recent ex-fiancée and even more recent vengeance demon. Xander argues that Anya's identity as part of the gang ought to exclude her from Buffy's human = live, demon = die mode of slaying. Their dialogue also functions as a response to the criticism of Season Six's narrative. To Xander's comment, "This is different," Buffy responds, "It is always different! It's always complicated, and at some point, someone has to draw the line, and that is always going to be me. You get down on me for cutting myself off, but in the end, the Slayer is always cut off. ... Human rules don't apply. There's only me. I am the law."¹² Buffy's invocation of "the law" as part of her identity is frightening; a friend's response to my suggestion of this subtext commented on Whedon as "fascist" in this particular light. Yet, Buffy and Whedon are the law in their worlds of Sunnydale and the text. Each has the power, and each must struggle to use that power according to their view of the world they inhabit. Histories and identity politics in *Buffy* reflect in important ways the moral ambiguity and ethical ambivalence the characters themselves often face. Whedon creates a world where death can devastate anyone, and where happiness, because of its elusiveness, becomes incredibly precious. Every character in Whedon's text offers complex hybrids, different shades and textures of strength and weakness, desire and fear. To limit a character to one identity trait is analogous to claiming that human nature can be reduced to one aspect of its diversity, and that falls dangerously close to the discrimination Whedon fights against with every character he writes. He

fights a battle for queer representation, but he does it his way — without a conscious or intentional allusion to history and politics. At the end, however, we go right back to the beginning: "It's not about right. It's not about wrong. It's about power: who's got it and who knows how to use it" ("Lessons," 7.1).

Notes

1. The FAQ presents a fuller explanation of how each text complies with the cliché: <http://pub106.ezboard.com/fthekittentthewitchesandthebadwardrobe36671frm1.showMessage?topicID=910.topic>.

2. Since 2002, when Season Six aired its polarizing finale, a number of articles have presented both a more general narrative reading of the internal darknesses that haunt the show's characters and a more particular examination of the show's queer politics. The articles that came out in 2002, however, represent the majority view of both sides, so I refer largely to them as being a part of the political debate about the issue.

3. Whedon denies knowledge of the cliché, while using his usual sardonic humor: "Two things: I actually wasn't aware of the dead/evil lesbian cliché. I wasn't aware of the 'add a young girl in the fifth season' cliché either. I think I don't get out much." (The Bronze, May 22, 2002)

4. A colleague brought up the highly suggestive idea that evil — as an absolute, joyful, sociopathic frame of being — is reserved for non-humans in the Buffyverse. Humans (and other ensouled creatures) are capable of being rehabilitated or redeemed: they might be temporarily bad, but are never permanently evil. Anya, Angel, and Spike are all, at times, on Buffy's to be killed list, but the moment they are either human, ensouled, or bechipped they are, like Faith, Willow, and Andrew, in need of non-lethal punishment and rehabilitation. As Erma Petrova suggests in "You cannot run from your darkness." / "Who says I'm running?": Buffy and the Ownership of Evil," the "measure of good and evil in Buffy is choice." In other words, "being good is defined as having the ability to choose evil and yet not choose it." To be evil, then, by Petrova's formulation, demands the absence of a choice to be good. Further, and perhaps more problematically, the status of a dead body in the Buffyverse reveals much about its moral condition: the death of evil, demons, is always flashy, goopy, or punctuated by dust or fire. The death of a person, a human, however, is typically quiet: the corpse is visible, static, dead (Joyce, Buffy, Tara, Allan, Jonathan, Anya). Whedon codes the behavior of the corpse so that we can tell at a glance whether or not the life (or unlfe) was evil. In both "Seeing Red" and "Villains," he returns us on several occasions to the corpse of Tara — almost as much as "The Body" returns us to the corpse of Joyce.

5. It is worth noting further that the season begins with an eerie harbinger of Warren's gun: Razor, the head demon in "Bargaining I and II," uses a gun to set off the bikers as they quarter the Buffybot.

6. Briefly, the characters we see practicing magic (by gender) are: Catherine (Amy's mom), the Gypsy woman in Romania, Jenny Calendar, Amy, Anya, Kathy (Buffy's college roommate), Tara, Glory (albeit a god), Dawn, Willow, Halfrek (Anya's vengeance demon friend), and the coven in England that empowers Giles. The men are: Giles, the Zookeeper from "The Pack," priests (both those who deal with Molloch and those who create Dawn's human form), Ethan Rayne, Angel, the Mayor, frat boys, Jack the bartender, Jonathan, Oz, Warren, Andrew, Rack.

7. We also we find out in Season Seven that Amy went through her own addiction and

downward spiral. She may not try to destroy the world, but she does seek revenge on Willow in the form of a "penance malediction."

8. Jes Battis suggests that while magic is often coded through female characters, "Willow is not intentionally accessing a grand, feminine, spiritus mundi. Unlike Tara, who holds intricate and reverent knowledge of the variegated mythologies which underpin the show's pseudo-Gardnerian type of magic, Willow's relationship with her power is visceral and emotional. Magic brings her closer to Tara, and closer to what she believes is an authentic identity. It becomes for her ... a unity of sexual and elemental power that is every bit as primal as the Slayer's strength" (36).

9. A great example of this is the Season Seven episode "Help," where the real Buffy and Spike's hallucination of Buffy appear in opposing outfits of black and white.

10. In "Doppelgangland," Willow confronts her evil self and, horrified, says, "That's me as a vampire? I'm so evil ... and skanky. And I think I'm kind of gay" (3.16). This comes perilously close to falling in line with the Evil-Dead Lesbian Cliché, as Willow's vampire self is undeniably evil and gay, but only if we omit good Willow's personality from the equation. What we see in vampire Willow, the power and potential for evil as well as her attraction to women, is only part of Willow as a whole: she is also, as Battis notes, a "shy academic; computer expert; budding witch [and] ... ingénue" (26). This evil Willow, too, has no connection to magic; her lack of morality comes directly from the lack of a soul.

11. So too does Buffy respond to Riley when he discovers her secret identity, bluntly asking her, "What are you?" After a brief exchange, she poses her own question, "Who are you?" Note that Riley's militaristic attitude places the question as "What are you?" while Buffy's more organic attitude locates the question with a pronoun denoting human quality.

12. Buffy is also the one who insists Willow has to be stopped before she kills Warren. Xander and Dawn are both, at least initially, okay with Willow's vengeance. Buffy notes here, as she had with Faith in season three, that they "can't control the universe," and that there "are limits to what we can do. There should be" ("Villains," 6.20). As much as Buffy cuts herself off from her friends in order to fulfill what she sees as her duty (and nowhere else is this more clear than in the last half of Season Seven), she always does so with a strong sense of where the line is drawn between what she is permitted, by her powers and by her humanity, to do.

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