

***Buffy*, Dark Romance and Female Horror Fans**

Lorna Jowett

When asked, in a 2002 *SFX* magazine reader's poll, 'What's the thing you're proudest of in this world?' Joss Whedon, creator of TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, answered: 'Art and feminism; my little show that changed things'. In February 2012 *The Guardian* newspaper ran an article titled 'Buffy drives home an important issue for women,' in which Naomi Alderman suggests that the *Buffy* season 9 comic series continues to debate significant questions for women (in this case abortion).

Whedon always insisted that the series's premise was an exercise in gender role reversal, and it is now easy to see *Buffy* as a 'little show that changed things' where TV's representation of female, and male, characters is concerned. Characters like Ripley (debuting in the 1979 film *Alien*) or Sarah Connor (from *The Terminator*) may have introduced the female action hero in cinema; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, argues Robert Moore, changed the face of television and Emily Nussbaum observed in the *New York Times* that 'The show's influence can be felt everywhere.' Specifically *Buffy* can be positioned as a key influence on the contemporary Dark Romance (sometimes called paranormal romance) publishing and media boom. Just as *Buffy* draws on previous female action heroes from comic books, movies, fiction, and TV, Dark Romances from *Twilight* movies to HBO television show *True Blood* offer variations on *Buffy*'s complex representation of romance, sexuality and gender. Now that VILF (Vampire I'd Like to Fuck) has entered the lexicon, the Dark Romance (in which a female protagonist falls in love with a dark hero, usually a vampire or werewolf, though sometimes another supernatural male) has truly arrived.

Dark Romance isn't necessarily new: the disposable fiction market used to churn out female gothic paperbacks and Dark Romance is just the latest variation. As Lyda Morehouse observes in *Whedonistas!* 'it would be unfair to say that Joss Whedon single-handedly created' Dark Romance, yet '*Buffy* did a hell of a lot to popularize it.' *Buffy* wasn't just about romance, as explained below, but the subsequent success of the Dark Romances it influences suggests that romance, even as a superficial focus, pushes the right buttons with a female (often heterosexual)

audience. So how do these serial fictions appeal directly to women, even to women who might not normally read or watch something categorized as horror?

Firstly, perhaps most obviously, Dark Romances have female protagonists. They may not always be female heroes, but their narratives take a female perspective. This plays out in various ways. In an interview with Joe Nazzaro, David Greenwalt, co-executive producer of *Buffy* and co-creator of *Angel*, says that '*Buffy* is about how hard it is to be a woman, and *Angel* is about how hard it is to be a man.' The notion of a narrative focusing on the problems of being a woman is prevalent in all the Dark Romances.

Dark Romance also offers the pleasure of fantasy. One of its fantasies is the ready availability of its desirable protagonists (male and female). *Buffy*, as a US network TV show, was populated by attractive young actors even if some of them were playing geeks and nerds. *Twilight* star Kristen Stewart (Bella) was voted number six of *FHM*'s 100 Sexiest Women in the World in 2010; her co-star Robert Pattinson (Edward) was named one of the Sexiest Men Alive two years running by *People* magazine (2008 and 2009), and *Vanity Fair* readers voted him the Most Handsome Man in the World in 2009. Both Pattinson and Ian Somerhalder (who plays vampire Damon Salvatore in TV's *The Vampire Diaries*) were nominated for the Teen Choice Male Hottie Award in 2012.

Anyone faintly familiar with film theory and gender representation has probably heard of Laura Mulvey's theory about the male gaze of cinema: the male gaze, she argued, renders female characters passive, to be looked at. Mulvey published that theory in the mid-1970s and used Hollywood movies from the 1950s and 60s as her examples. When *Buffy* first aired, many people dismissed it as a show that displayed pretty teenage girls for the (implied: male) audience's viewing pleasure in much this fashion. However, *Buffy* had an avowedly feminist creator, women worked on the show as writers, and a few even directed episodes. The show frequently offered a female or queer perspective, visually as well as narratively. *Buffy* certainly presented the bodies of its male characters/actors as objects of desire, showing them in states of undress before the camera equally as much as, if not more than, its female characters. (Naked Spike, anyone?).

Its successors often follow suit. The first *Twilight* movie had a female director, and it shows. *The Vampire Diaries* airs on the CW, which has a reputation as the pretty boy network. *True Blood* frequently eroticizes and objectifies the bodies of its male characters. Vampire Eric in particular displays his body for the customers of vampire club Fangtasia, and thus for the viewer at home too. A cursory search on the Internet finds masses of publicity images and fan art that repeat this strategy. (This is not to say that the audience for Dark Romance is exclusively female and heterosexual. Rather, as popular culture, it often presents romance, at least superficially, as heterosexual, even while it sets out to interrogate the conventions and ideals of heterosexual romance from a female perspective).

If the indulgence of a kind of female gaze is one of the female-centred pleasures of Dark Romance, a fantasy of revised masculinity is another. The male characters are often not human, so there is a ready excuse for them to avoid human stereotypes or socially-constructed behaviour. Angel and Spike (*Buffy and Angel*), Jean-Claude and Richard (Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* novel series), Eric, Bill, Sam and Alcide (Charlaine Harris' Sookie Stackhouse novel series and its TV version *True Blood*), Damon and Stefan (L. J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* novel series and its TV version), and Edward or Jacob (Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* novel series and the films based on it) all offer a complex mix of traditional masculinity, new man vulnerability and emotional openness and, frequently, metrosexuality. Dark Romance is dark because its male protagonists are powerful and dangerous, often presented as stereotypical bad boys, and the fact that they are vampires or werewolves positions them 'naturally' as predators and their female lovers as prey. But Dark Romance is about subverting 'nature', both monstrosity and masculinity. Otherness in these fictions becomes, over the course of the series, normalized, presenting alternative models of masculinity and femininity, as well as of sexuality.

It is *Dark* Romance also because it shows the flipside of idealized heterosexual romance. One of the most popular, the *Twilight* saga, can easily be read as presenting damaging and/or controlling relationships. Edward's behaviour at times borders on stalking and his watching Bella while she sleeps is either hopelessly romantic or incredibly creepy, depending on your perspective. Vampires Eric and Bill

both state that Sookie is ‘theirs’ in Harris’ novels and *True Blood*, and love triangles or rivalries over the female protagonists are a staple of the genre. Such triangles testify to the desirability of the female lead, and allow male characters to flex their literal and metaphorical muscles, but they also present challenges to traditional female passivity. T-shirts with ‘Sookie is mine’ and ‘Sookie is mine now’ quotations from Bill and Eric sit alongside ‘VILF’ and ‘Fangbanger’ t-shirts in the HBO *True Blood* store. The foregrounding of female agency and of female desire in Dark Romance means that while men, or male vampires and werewolves snarl over who ‘gets’ the girl, this is not usually how the issue is decided. Here, when winner takes all, the winner is the ‘girl’ and she frequently gets all the men. Threesomes feature prominently in adverts for TV shows like *The Vampire Diaries* (usually with Elena looking directly at the camera/ viewer, centred in the frame, with Stefan and Damon accessorising to either side) and Anita Blake acquires a harem of gorgeous male monsters for group sex, a collection of males eventually dubbed ‘the Brides of Anita’. While superficially heterosexual (especially on network TV), such triangles and group interactions suggest other possibilities for romance and sexuality.

Moreover, the fact that male protagonists were once traditional horror monsters also indicates a shift away from traditional moral distinctions. Conducting interviews with female horror fans, Brigid Cherry found that ‘Part of the appeal appears to be sympathy or empathy with monstrous creatures’ and she argues that many female consumers of horror feel, and enjoy, a ‘subversive affinity with the monster.’ Repositioning the typical monster as romantic hero changes the game, shifting it closer to the declared interests of these female fans and blurring moral certainty. Milly Williamson points out in her book *The Lure of the Vampire* that Louis du Pointe du Lac, narrator of Anne Rice’s *Interview With the Vampire*, ‘like the melodramatic heroine, is virtuous, even as society misrecognises that virtue for guilt or villainy.’ Louis, and Barnabas Collins from gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) before him, is a model for the now hugely popular reluctant vampire figure or VILF. Developing and expanding the trope of the reluctant vampire, *Buffy* featured not only vampire characters like Angel and Spike (both once notorious killers who eventually pursue different paths to redemption), but also werewolves, ex-demons, and witches helping to fight the good fight. Seven seasons of complex morality in *Buffy* seem to have affected subsequent representations to the extent that

the reluctant vampire can now be the VILF, the dark hero, the sympathetic villain, or a bit of each, as required. Moreover, if contemporary vampire stories and Dark Romance demonstrate that some vampires and werewolves are no longer bad since their ‘evil’ can be misrecognized goodness, then other things dubbed ‘bad’ might also become ‘good.’

True Blood blatantly flaunts this reversal of received morality with both its tagline, ‘Hurts so good,’ and its title song, ‘I wanna do bad things with you’ (by Jace Everett). Anita Blake and Buffy consistently question whether their personal behaviour, especially their enjoyment of violence or sexual activity, is ‘bad’ and subsequent Dark Romances also follow this lead, interrogating, overtly or implicitly, how women’s behaviour is frequently influenced by social norms and outdated assumptions. Even reading or watching explicit sex scenes between female protagonists and their supernatural lovers could be considered naughty—and that’s part of the fun. While *Twilight* author Meyer insists that her story is about ‘love, not lust’ (see Horng), Anita Blake’s creator Hamilton emphasizes that her novels are ‘sometimes violently sexy’ and Carole Veldman-Genz describes the series as ‘semi-pornographic’. Cherry’s survey of women horror fans suggests that Hamilton is on the right lines, finding that ‘Sexual and erotic themes. . . were important to many’ of those she interviewed.

Williamson argues that vampire fiction is not traditionally considered to be a female form. Yet she also notes how it has merged with ‘a range of melodramatic themes and conventions,’ concluding that these have now become a key part of vampire representation, as seen very clearly in *Buffy*’s soap opera-style narrative arcs and complex character relationships. Some critics, Williamson comments, lament these melodramatic aspects, because they are ‘conventionally associated with women’s fiction, melodrama and with feminine (and therefore devalued) reading pleasures: the depiction of emotional states and the experience of interior conflicts.’ *Buffy*’s focus on its ensemble cast of characters’ ‘emotional states’ and ‘interior conflicts’ alongside action and horror paved the way for the former elements to take centre stage in subsequent Dark Romances. Though they may still be ‘devalued’ by critics, they are a hit with audiences, mystifying as this is to some. A *Washington Post* op-ed by Leonard Sax, cited by Catherine Coker, claims that ‘the *Twilight* series’

popularity and teen fandom were a revolt against feminism.’ Sax is apparently blind to the potential for interrogating traditional models of gender and sexuality through rewriting romance, and fan responses suggest a more complex view of gender representation in Dark Romance. NancyKay Shapiro admits in *Whedonistas!* that she enjoys writing fanfic about Buffy because she ‘could make her play out those romantic fantasies that were maybe all the more alluring to me because they come up to the edge of being “Feministically Incorrect”.’ ‘Sexual equality’ is picked out by Morehouse as the elusive ‘something that Romance readers and writers were waiting for’ and found in *Buffy*., with its strong female characters, sensitive males and continuous, self-conscious blurring of traditional gender divisions.

Whether it’s a popular novel series (Sookie Stackhouse, Anita Blake), blockbusting movies (*Twilight*), or in-your-face adult TV drama (*True Blood*) the seriality of these ‘sagas’ allows for melodramatic elements, unresolved relationship problems, continual deferment of romantic fulfilment, and complex character development. The intimate tone promised by the title of *The Vampire Diaries*, while less direct in the TV series than the novels, means revealing characters’ personal responses to the action and unfolding plot, as well as the action itself. While Ananya Mukherjea argues that *Buffy* ‘stands apart from’ many young adult vampire fictions ‘in that the romances in the story are important to the narrative arc but only one piece of it,’ many Dark Romances follow *Buffy*’s example. Relationships in these series include friendships (Buffy and the Scooby Gang; Elena and her school friends), family ties (Buffy, Joyce and Dawn Summers; Sookie and Jason Stackhouse; Damon and Stefan Salvatore), workmates (Sookie and Sam; Anita and Dolph), and mentors (Buffy and Giles; Bill and Jessica; Alaric and Jeremy) as well as the romantic and sexual ties suggested by the category Dark Romance.

Serial fiction lends itself to an ensemble cast, and these series often feature a group of characters which shifts and changes with the unfolding narrative, and their long-running nature allows for substantial development over time. *Buffy*, for instance, started out like a teen drama, with High School and dating, but it grew up with its characters, becoming darker and more serious over its seven year run. While this may be less obvious in a series that starts out with adult characters it is still evident, and the Anita Blake and Sookie Stackhouse series as well as *True Blood* continually add

backstory or extra information about their main characters, as well as introducing new supernatural creatures to keep things fresh.

Mukherjea suggests that ‘The dominant message in most vampire romances. . . remains a valorization of first loves, an elevation of teenage ardor and teenaged desirability, and of the notion that loving a very good (young) woman can save even an extremely “bad” man.’ This pattern is discernable in the young adult novels she analyses and in some of the teen versions of Dark Romance such as *Twilight* or *The Vampire Diaries*. Yet the long form of serial narrative, the reinventions of gender roles for both male and female characters, the focus on a range of relationships, and, in many cases, the targeting of an older audience, means that much Dark Romance does something slightly different. Dark Romance is not limited to the conventions of romance, nor is it necessarily limited *by* them. When it does deal directly with romance and sexuality, it is able to be self-conscious about how it uses romantic stereotypes and ideals.

One fan-produced electronic greetings card offered on BoilsandBlindingTorment.com presents a soft-focus image of Buffy and Angel from season two of *Buffy* (when they have sex for the first time) with a large title proclaiming: ‘Our love is eternal... Just like Buffy and Angel’s.’ Yet it adds the following qualification as ‘punchline’:

Well, except that she slept with Parker, what? Four episodes after Angel left? And then there was that whole Riley episode. And I bet she wasn’t really thinking about Angel during all that hot sex with Spike, but then again, isn’t he all pining for Cordy now anyway when he’s not making out with electro-babe?
Sorry, lost my train of thought. What was I saying again?

Since other e-cards in the same section (‘cards of love’) include messages ranging from ‘I hope that I never have to stab you, causing you to be sucked into hell for an eternity of suffering’ (another reference to the Buffy/ Angel arc of season two) to ‘Fuck you’ (with an image of cave-Buffy from the season four episode ‘Beer Bad’), the notion of romance is not exactly being taken seriously by the site’s (apparently

female) authors. For those familiar with *Buffy* and *Angel*'s long-term stories, the 'Our love is eternal' e-card serves not so much as it does a criticism of *Buffy*'s plots, as a critique of the entire notion of eternal love. Fans celebrate how the ongoing series played with this sentiment, offering a typical long-form narrative of constantly deferred romantic fulfilment and a series of partners, now seen in the majority of subsequent Dark Romances such as the Sookie Stackhouse novels and its TV adaptation *True Blood*.

In a 2002 interview with Nazzaro, Whedon describes the way denial makes things more interesting: 'No one's going to see the story of Othello going to get a peaceful divorce. People want the tragedy. They need things to go wrong.' The demands of popular serial narrative mean that almost all the Dark Romances follow this pattern, rarely allowing their main characters to be happily partnered for long, or at least deferring the happily-ever-after, and putting numerous obstacles in its way.

Again the Anita Blake series is somewhat unusual in this respect. It provides Anita with 'perfect' partners such as vampire and Master of St Louis, Jean-Claude, and wereleopard Nimir-Raj Micah. Rather than removing one sexual partner and replacing them with another, Hamilton continually adds to the mix of Anita's sexual partners, poking fun at the kind of serial monogamy usually evident in romance. The love-triangles in other Dark Romances fulfil the same function, if in a less provocative manner. In fact, the complicating of romantic fulfilment has reached the stage where *The Vampire Diaries* TV show simply uses 'love sucks' as a tag line, invoking in two words Dark Romance's challenge to romantic ideals.

Williamson reminds us that compulsive (fan) identification has often been identified with the female, and the *Twilight* saga is often mocked or derided precisely because it is aimed at a neglected demographic of girls and young women. Press coverage of the novels and films underscores this negative feminisation: an ABC World News story from 2007 describes the author of the *Twilight* novels as '33-year-old Meyer, whose book-signing appearances now draw hundreds of gushing fans' (Horng). In the last few decades, however, TV scholars, commentators, and viewers have noted a shift towards complex, character-based drama that encourages, and maybe even requires, long-term viewing by dedicated audiences. Contemporary

television drama, as Sergio Angelini and Miles Booy note in *The Cult TV Book*, is ‘marked by the degree to which seriality and other soap opera elements have been embraced as an organizing principle and as a strategy to strengthen viewer loyalty, something once anathema to Network schedulers but now the norm.’ In other words, the ‘feminized’ soap-opera emphasis on relationships and endless continuation noted by Williamson in contemporary vampire fiction has also entered the mainstream of TV. Far from being ‘devalued pleasures,’ melodrama and emotion have become characteristic of quality TV drama. New shows routinely incorporate long-running plot elements, and Dark Romance TV series *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* both have strong season arcs.

When Whedon said in an interview from 2000 that *Buffy* ‘was designed to be the kind of show that people would build myths on, read comics about, that would keep growing,’ he highlights its direct appeal to audiences, to fans, who continue to watch, value, and *use* the show. Angelini and Booy describe how a cult text may be consumed by its audience, but it is never entirely consumed, never *used up*, remaining open to new use. Many contributors to *Whedonistas!* highlight such use, testifying to *Buffy*’s influence on their own writing of Dark Romance, to how the show helped them tackle personal crises of various types, or to how it changed perceptions of gender, and such stories are replicated across fan sites and discussion boards. That *Buffy*’s influence can be seen across a range of thriving Dark Romances testifies to its success, not just in innovating on well-worn conventions, or providing new ways of representing women, but in packaging ‘feminist’ ideals in a way that can be popular. Tania Modleski argued that sales of female gothic mass market novels demonstrated not their female consumers’ complicity with traditional notions of gender and romance but rather ‘women’s extreme discontent with the social and psychological processes which transform them into victims,’ processes explored in the novels. Likewise, *Buffy* and its legacy of Dark Romance offers serialised stories that, while superficially fantasies of romance, consistently explore its dark side, ‘how hard it is to be a woman’ for an appreciative female audience.

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Abstract:

While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* displays many genre influences, given creator Joss Whedon's insistence that its premise was an exercise in gender role reversal, it is now easy to see *Buffy* as a key influence on the contemporary Dark Romance publishing and media boom. Just as *Buffy* itself draws on previous female action heroes from comic books, movies, fiction, and TV, Dark Romances from *Twilight* to *True Blood* offer variations on *Buffy*'s complex representation of romance, sexuality and gender. Now that VILF (Vampire I'd Like to Fuck) has entered the lexicon we can say that the Dark Romance (in which a female protagonist falls in love with a dark hero, usually a vampire or werewolf) has truly arrived. The popularity of the *Twilight* books and films, as well as the appearance of vampire and werewolf romance in a wide range of diverse popular fictions proves its success with audiences. This chapter briefly examines how subsequent Dark Romances pick up, adapt and develop the ways forerunners like *Buffy* or the *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* novels negotiate conventions of gender and romance for the twenty-first century. While *Buffy* may have surprised in its ability to attract a wider audience than the usual network TV target for an action/ horror/ fantasy show (teenage boys), much Dark Romance is specifically aimed at a female audience, and thus its representation of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality is carefully constructed to appeal to women. Therefore this chapter also explores how *Buffy* and its legacy of Dark Romance offer serialised stories for a largely female audience.

Keywords:

Dark Romance, female, gender, sexuality, audience, vampire, heterosexual romance, masculinity, morality.

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