BUFFY THE VAMPIRE DATER

Siamak Tundra Naficy

Karthik Panchanathan

Summer 2008

The character of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been heralded as an icon of modern feminism. Darker than ours yet still recognizable, Buffy's world is balanced on a knife's edge. Her constant vigilance is all that prevents Hell's legions from overrunning the earth. Buffy resonates with feminists because vampires stand in for the old patriarchy, while mortals like Xander, Willow, and Giles represent a new hope for gender equality. At the same time, vampires are akin to powerful and capricious feudal lords like in a gothic medieval tale, riding down from time to time to slake their thirsts and take what they wish from the peasantry. In this way, Buffy becomes something of a Joan of Arc, a teen-age girl called upon by destiny to war against the darker powers of the world.

Perhaps because its world bridges the reality of today and the promise of a better tomorrow, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* presents us with starkly contrasting images of men. At one end, we have mundane men like Xander, and like Giles, one of the aptly named "Watchers," a passive and almost-neutered caste of males. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the monsters, creatures like Angel, primal and dangerous but (therefore?) sexy, and also like "the Master," brutal, savage predators who are unsexy and (therefore?) unredeemable.

Given these choices, isn't it strange that Buffy, our modern day Joan of Arc, has chosen to romance the very monsters she was born to destroy-vampires like Angel and Spike? Using evolutionary psychology, this essay explores Buffy's romantic choices. In the first section, we ask why Buffy fell in love with Angel and not Xander. In the second section, we explore the stormy nature of her relationship with Angel.

<div align="center">

PART ONE

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FATHER...

</div>

What do we make of Buffy's romantic choices? Specifically, how do we explain *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* falling in love with Angel the vampire? Why doesn't Buffy fall for Xander, who is nice and sweet, totally crazy for her, and, most important of all, not a vampire? If this were an exercise in literary criticism, we would allude to *Romeo and*

Juliet or *Tristan and Isolde*. It's not, so we'll try to keep that to a minimum and, instead, seek a material explanation. In the tradition of traditional psychology, we can start by considering Buffy's relationship with her father. We know that Buffy's parents are divorced and that throughout the series, her father, Hank, was not a part of Buffy's life. Even when Buffy's mother died, Hank was not there for his daughter.

What does Buffy's dad have to do with her love life? If you were lying on a comfortable leather couch and giving us your hard-earned money, we'd be willing to play Doctors Freud with you. In this game, we might speak of the *Elektra Complex*, the female equivalent to the *Oedipus Complex*; we might argue that girls grow into the character of their mothers and seek out men who resemble their fathers. In another session, we could get into how Freud's concept of penis envy might, in part, explain Buffy's proclivity for impaling vampires.

Since you're probably not going to give us your hard-earned money, we'll repress the armchair analysis. Besides, current social science, for the most part, discounts psychoanalysis as a way of explaining human behavior. Still, there is a body of research that echoes one aspect of the *Elektra Complex*. It seems that girls who grow up in homes without a father are more likely to grow into women who have difficulty sustaining long-term relationships—who tend to date men similar to their father in commitment style (Belsky et al., Ellis et al.). Draper and Harpending make sense of this phenomenon by arguing that natural selection has shaped parenting styles to fit the local environment. When conditions are such that a father's investment can significantly improve his children's welfare (e.g., when resources are scarce such that children will starve unless they are provisioned by two parents), natural selection ought to favor males that settle down, form long-term monogamous relationships, and become good dads. But when paternal investment isn't crucial (e.g., resources are plentiful), natural selection ought to favor males that form short-term relationships with as many women as possible, thereby fathering as many children as possible.

Given this backdrop, what is a little girl to do? How can she best ensure her own reproductive success? Well, if environments are stable across generations (e.g., the conditions a prepubescent girl experiences are likely to be the same conditions she will face as an adult), then she can use her father's presence or absence as a clue as to what little boys are going to grow up to do. The prediction is that if her father is around, then, on average, she can expect other guys to stick around. If, on the other hand, her father is not around, she shouldn't expect other guys to be good dads, and thus should plan accordingly.

It may seem odd to think of little girls scanning their environments and deducing strategies that will maximize their reproductive success as adults. It's important to note that we're not suggesting that little girls are, in any way, consciously deciding what kinds of adults they should grow up to be. Natural selection acts on organisms, across many generations, to produce adaptive preferences and behaviors. In this case, the developing organism (our fictional little girl) takes in information (presence or absence of father) to determine the appropriate developmental pathway (long- or short-term relationship orientation).

Don't believe us? Here's an experiment you can do in the privacy of your own backyard. (If you don't have a backyard, do what philosophers do and conduct this as a thought experiment.) Take a potted sunflower plant and reposition it so that it faces away from the sun. Over the course of a few weeks, you should notice that the sunflower has grown in such a way that it once again faces the sun. Now, if you were to conclude that the sunflower "knows" that sunlight is good for it and so "chooses" to grow toward the sun, would you be correct? Well, it depends on what you mean by "know" and "choose." Obviously, sunflowers don't grow at a conscious level. Instead, natural selection has engineered plants in such a way that they adapt to their environment in appropriate ways.

So, knowing that Buffy's dad wasn't around, we might predict that she would have problems with establishing long-term relationships. Do we have any evidence to support this? During the course of the TV series, Buffy's romantic relationships were somewhat dysfunctional, to say the least. Whether plunging a sword into Angel or beating up on and, in turn, being beaten up by Spike, there were numerous acts of violence, vulgarity, and near rape. These behaviors seem unlikely to create a foundation for a long-term, stable, and happy relationship. But the focus of this section isn't why Buffy is bad at relationships. Here, we focus on why Buffy chose Angel instead of Xander.

To get there, let's first ask a more basic question: What do women want? Broadly speaking, there are two traits women are said to look for when choosing the father of their children: that they will be *good fathers*—they'll invest time and energy on kids— and/or that they will provide *good genes*—their kids will be healthier and better looking (Gangestad and Simpson). All else being equal, a woman should want both, seeking a man who will both provide her offspring with good genes and also invest heavily in them. However, because there isn't an infinite supply of men and, furthermore, because men have their own reproductive strategies (what men want), most women can't have both. Gangestad and Simpson argue that having good genes affects a man's willingness to be a good father. Men blessed with good genes eschew parenting and bed as many

women as possible, while those without a favorable genetic endowment are more likely to form long-term, monogamous relationships and invest heavily in their children. For the sake of argument, let's assume this is true.

So, if women have to choose between *dads* (good fathers) and *cads* (good genes), what should they do? Pillsworth and Haselton propose that women can engage in a *dual mating strategy*, wherein a woman may pair up with a dad, but cheat on him with a cad, thereby getting the best of both worlds: paternal investment in offspring *and* good genes. While provocative, not to mention controversial, this model doesn't explain Buffy since she didn't date Xander and cheat with Angel.

Still, we now have enough pieces to put some of the puzzle together. We know that women can get two kinds of resources from men: parenting and/or good genes. We also know that if fathers are absent, girls grow up to expect men to be commitment-phobic. If a woman doesn't expect a man's help in raising her kids, then she should choose a man solely based on his genetic quality. By this logic, we predict that women like Buffy will prefer cads over dads. Now, let's compare Angel to Xander, Buffy's two suitors, and appraise their cad-ness or dad-ness.

To do this, we need to know what attributes a woman can use to tell a stud (cad) from a dud (dad). She obviously can't peek into his genes and tell. However, men with good genes often signal their quality through observable features. Folstad and Karter demonstrate that a masculine appearance (e.g., heavy brow ridge, overall musculature, large jaw) may be a cue to genetic quality, with testosterone acting as the mediator. We know that increased levels of testosterone correlate with an increased masculine appearance. We also know that, all else being equal, increased levels of testosterone compromise immune function, leading to increased risks of disease. The argument is that males of high quality remain healthy and vigorous despite "handicapping" themselves with increased levels of testosterone; lower quality males would surely suffer sickness and disease if they maintained such doses of testosterone. Because this differential cost keeps the signal "honest," females can metaphorically judge a book by its cover, knowing that healthy, highly masculine men are the ones with the good genes. A quick appraisal of Angel and Xander's looks should suffice in establishing who is the more masculine-Angel is larger, has a wider jaw, and his brow ridges cast shadows. (Fitting with our story, Joss Whedon chose to accentuate masculine features in vampires when they vamp out—Angel's brows get even heavier, his eyes get smaller, and his fangs grow.)

Now, when it comes to female preferences, several studies have found that the more masculine a man's face is, the more attractive women find him. Further, when women

are asked to imagine themselves choosing men for short-term sexual relationships, this preference is even more pronounced (Johnston et al., Penton-Voak and Perrett). Women also consider more masculine men to be more dominant (Perrett et al.). At the same time, however, the study found that women thought more masculine men were colder, more dishonest, less cooperative *and* worse at being dads. This fits with our story. Women seem to "believe" (again, at some unconscious level) that highly masculine men, while more attractive, are likely to be worse fathers.

However, beliefs aren't necessarily true; people believed the earth was flat before 1492. In a recent study, Roney et al. found that men's testosterone concentrations do not correlate with their interest in infants. This suggests that perhaps men are not simply arrayed along some dad-to-cad continuum. It would then seem that, at least to some degree, the quality of a man's genes are independent of his willingness to be a good father.

To recap: We began by noting the absence of Buffy's father in her life. We then suggested that this might have led Buffy to develop a pessimistic attitude about men's willingness to commit and help raise children. Making the best of a bad situation, Buffy might therefore have chosen to pursue masculine guys that could at least provide her kids with good genes. In this regard, Angel passes muster, while Xander does not. While we never used Freud's *Elektra Complex*, we seem to have reached a similar conclusion: Because of her father's absence, Buffy may be doomed to seek out men that will tend to leave her the way her father did.

Note, however, that much of our story hinges on the putative causal relationship between the absence of the father and short-term relationship orientation in the daughter (Belsky et al., Ellis et al.). Now, any good scientist worth his tenure would tell you that correlation doesn't imply causation! If it's the case that some third (as yet undiscovered) variable causes both father absence and daughter short-term relationship orientation, then our case weakens.

The following research may have done just that. Using data from a twin study, Rowe found evidence that the same genes that influence a father's probability of abandoning his family might influence the relationship orientation of his daughter. This may indicate that a woman's development and, ultimately, her adult mate preferences may not be strategically determined by her father's behavior, but rather may simply be correlated with his behavior because of shared genes.

Why would we present data that weakens our story? Are we wasting your time? We suppose that depends on what else you could have been doing. Seriously, though, we

believe that good science should entertain multiple, even contradictory, hypotheses. Only when there is competition do the best ideas emerge. And in this endeavor, let's not forget the fact that this isn't any ordinary girl, she's Buffy, the Vampire Slayer. As the titular character, Buffy excels, surpassing nearly every being she comes across. As the most powerful girl in town (since this is a science essay, we can ignore the role of Faith), whom should she date? In a study of medical students, Townsend found that women with high socio-economic status seek out men with equivalent or higher status. The same is not true for men. This difference in preference may mean that as a woman's status increases, her pool of acceptable partners decreases. Now, if we substitute power for status, we can assume Buffy would seek out men that can match her physical talents. Mortals, like Xander, aren't up to the challenge, while vampires, like Angel, might be. In the end, it is Buffy's status as the Slayer that may constrain whom she deigns a suitable partner.

PART TWO
MEN ARE PIGS, OR MAYBE JUST
BLOOD-SUCKING VAMPIRES

BUFFY: I—I don't understand. Was it me? Was I not good?
ANGEL: (laughing) You were great. Really. I thought you were a pro.

— "Innocence" (2-14)

Long before Joss Whedon provided such convincing evidence for it, women have had a notoriously pessimistic bias when it comes to men. The quote above comes from an episode in season two of *Buffy* called, appropriately enough, "Innocence." It is the episode after the perhaps more famous episode, again appropriately named "Surprise," in which Buffy lost her virginity to Angel, the dark, brooding, good-looking rebel vampire who plays by his own rules. Angel loved Buffy but became an ass (okay, lost his soul and becomes the soulless Angelus) after Buffy had sex with him, and thereby made manifest a common fear for women the world over—he isn't that into you, he just wants you for sex.

This all seems to demonstrate what Buffy's mother had probably long warned: Women who are pre-cautious when it comes to a man's intentions are almost always better off than women who are not. That is, psychologists have found that women who use a kind of "Men are Pigs" decision-making rule seem to find more long-term mates than those who do not (Haselton).

So, good questions to ask are: Why is it that women overestimate a man's likelihood of abandonment? Why is this prejudice a good idea for her and not for him? And while Angel and Buffy do seem to love each other, why do they struggle against this love?

Making Hard Decisions Easy

First off, it may be necessary to point out that judgments result in consequences that affect survival and reproductive success. Therefore, these judgments are necessarily shaped by natural selection, and many of our decision-making mechanisms—from sensory perception to estimating the likelihood of future events—can be best understood from this perspective.

Given that humans are a social species, our interpersonal judgments are designed to help us avoid foes, find friends and form suitable partnerships. At the same time, as Kurzban and Aktipis explain, while the mind *is* constrained by what is plausible, it is *not* designed for the highest accuracy or even internal consistency *per se*. In certain contexts, accuracy is adaptive, whereas in others, what is adaptively useful might systematically misrepresent the "truth." For example, in the case of sensory perception, when a fast-moving object hurtles toward you—let's say a Durango '95, real horror show—it's better to anticipate its arrival *too* early rather than *too* late. Too early and you're still safe; too late and you might be dead.

When it comes to courtship, Haselton and Nettle document differing kinds of biases in men and women. Specifically, women are significantly more skeptical of a partner's willingness to commit (see Haselton and Buss). This makes adaptive sense since the fitness costs of overestimating a man's interest in forming a long-term relationship are generally greater than the costs of underestimating it: the former could result in having to raise a dependent baby all alone, whereas the latter is likely to result merely in having to wait temporarily for another suitor.

Conversely, for men, since the costs of underestimating a woman's sexual interest (missing a sexual opportunity) are greater on average than the costs of overestimating her interest (spending fruitless effort on courtship), Haselton and Buss found a significant overestimation bias in men when it comes to a woman's sexual interest—commonly known as the "She Wants Me" mentality. So, the trade-off costs between overestimating and underestimating outcomes may be directing our differing romantic biases. Another way to conceptualize all this is to consider the detector in smoke alarms. Smoke alarms are designed by engineers to sound when there is a fire. As in any decision problem, a smoke-alarm detector can make two different kinds of errors: a

false positive (alarming when there is no fire) or a false negative (not alarming when in fact there is a fire). The costs of these two errors differ. Here, the more dangerous error is the false negative, when the alarm fails to signal a fire. While annoying, false positive alarms are unlikely to kill you. Why can't we engineer an accurate alarm, one that sounds only when there is a fire? Because the only way for the alarm to *know* for certain that there is a fire is if the alarm itself catches fire—and by then of course, it's too late. To be effective, the alarm must detect a predictive signal like smoke.

Unfortunately, your alarm doesn't know the difference between the smoke of burnt toast and the smoke of a burning man. Engineers could reduce the likelihood of a false positive (alarming when there is no real fire), but only by increasing the likelihood of a false negative (failing to alarm when there is a real fire). When organisms are faced with analogous decision problems, natural selection may favor decision-rules that are not designed to maximize accuracy, but rather to minimize the more costly error (Haselton and Nettle).

I Love You, I Love You, Not!

One of the more appealing elements of the show lay in the conflicted and doomed love that Angel and Buffy had for each other. So, why was it that Angel longed for Buffy, but the minute they consummated their relationship, he changed? Ignore the metaphysics for the moment (Angel's curse, his soul, etc.): How can the same person feel opposite and contradictory emotions? Is this a kind of cognitive dissonance? Well, yes and no. Comforting as it may feel, the notion of a single unified self, inhabiting the brain may be an illusion. No, not like Jack vs. the narrator in *Fight Club* or Smeagol vs. Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*. Well, not exactly. This isn't about multiple-personality disorder, exactly. It isn't? No, it's not. Okay, we'll explain.

Why is it that Angel chased after Buffy one minute and then pushed her away the next? He may have been driven by separate and contradictory decision-making mechanisms. If you excuse the pun, it's like having the good angel on one shoulder and the evil angel on the other. Or as the comedian Jerry Seinfeld has discussed in his stand up routine, within everyone there is a battle between "Morning Guy" and "Night Guy." Night Guy doesn't care that Morning Guy has to get up, sober-minded and alert, to go to work; Night Guy wants to party all night, and Morning Guy hates him for it!

According to this view, Angel who had sex with Buffy and Angelus who he became after, can be one and the same. In fact, Angel's transformation to Angelus can be thought of as a metaphor for the way regular guys can turn from Dr. Jekyll into Mr.

Jackass—as Joss Whedon likely intended. Does he love her, yes or no? If he ever loved her, how can he not love her now?

Social psychologist Leon Festinger is well-known for his theory of cognitive dissonance, which argues that uncomfortable psychological tension often results from contradictory beliefs, in turn motivating people to look for resolutions to these contradictions. From Freud to *Star Wars*, much of Western religious thought, philosophy, fiction, and art seems to revolve around this kind of conflict, where the "self" is presented with mutually incompatible choices (good vs. evil) and must decide which path to take. In this view, the central assumption is that we all have a homunculus inside of us—a chief executive, a dictator, a real "self" or *ego*—that gets to decide for us.

However, another way to think about all this is that no "self" exists at all. Maybe then an unruly Roman senate is a better metaphor. We each contain myriad and sometimes contradictory drives, each with its own adaptive function. In this way, the drive that "screams" to us the loudest—the one that is currently the most relevant—is the one that is "heard." Say you're Yogi Bear and you happen upon a picnic basket at the base of a tree—a free lunch! Your hunger should drive you towards it. But as you approach, you see a leopard, hiding in the branches of the tree—an elaborate trap? Fear should now drive you to run away, leaving the food behind. In this case, fear of the leopard trumps hunger. (For a similar model of the mind, see Barrett.)

Our strange and sometimes contradictory feelings result because natural selection doesn't want us to be happy. You're allowed moments of contentment, but you can't get no satisfaction! This is because selection favors traits that result in better and/or more resources, mates, etc. In this way, Angel can love Buffy, and still make decisions that seem to run contrary to that love—leaving her to go to Los Angeles, for instance. The same is true for Buffy, who, despite her love for Angel, was able to run him through with a sword to keep the world from being sucked into Hell. The point is that there can be many different sides and decision-mechanisms in the same person. And in the end, the greatest mystery might be ourselves.

Seen in this way, these biased mechanisms are not design defects of the human mind, but rather design *features*. The point, ladies and gentlemen, is this: Men and women selectively navigate through the noisy buzz of cues, indices, and signals to find members of the opposite sex depending on their own gender-specific needs. Men gather clues to sexual possibilities and women hunt for signs of commitment. The errors in the rules of engagement in these early stages of courtship—long before we're even sure of the other's intentions—may appear to set us on an inevitable collision course of unmet expectations and emotional dissatisfaction. And yet each one of us is

evidence that the sexes can and do in fact hook up. In the Longview, men and women have overlapping, if not identical, goals: both want stable relationships in which they are able to raise dependent children. This is exactly what psychologist David Buss' famous thirty-seven country study on mate choice reveals: Around the world, traits that are predictive of successful long-term and committed relationships—traits like "mutual attraction" and "dependability"—are always in the top five, regardless of culture or gender.

Buffy, of course, hasn't gotten her happily ever after. As captured in the title, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, she is an amalgam of old-fashioned romance ripe with well-defined gender roles of femininity ("Buffy"), and modern feminism seeking gender equality through the absence of gender roles ("the Vampire Slayer"). Buffy's audience suffered with her as Joss Whedon toiled to honestly weave together within Buffy these seemingly contradictory ideologies. With the *Buffyverse* living on now in comics, perhaps someday he will.

_____

SIAMAK TUNDRA NAFICY currently teaches classes in biological anthropology at Santa Monica College. His doctorate at UCLA explores the evolution of intelligence in dogs and wolves and what this work may say about the co-evolutionary processes that humans and dogs have shared. When he is not studying domestication and animal behavior, he makes a point of rescuing Siberian Huskies from certain death.

After scraping by as a financial analyst, KARTHIK PANCHANATHAN is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology at UCLA. His research investigates the role of reputation in the evolution of social behavior, inter-group psychology, and the perfect pork stew recipe for his dog, Savannah.

REFERENCES

H. C. Barrett, "Enzymatic Computation and Cognitive Modularity," *Mind and Language* 20 (2005): 259-287.

J. Belsky, L. Steinberg, and P. Draper, "Childhood experience, interpersonal development, and reproductive strategy: An evolutionary theory of socialization," *Child Development* 62 (1991): 647-670.

D. M. Buss, "Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Countries," *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* 12 (1989): 1-49.

P. Draper and H. Harpending, "Father absence and reproductive strategy: An evolutionary perspective," *Journal of Anthropology Research* 38 (1982): 255-273.

B.J. Ellis, S. McFadyen-Ketchum, K.A. Dodge, G.S. Pettit, and J.E. Bates, "Quality of early family relationships and individual differences in the timing of pubertal maturation in girls: A longitudinal test of an evolutionary model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (1999): 387-401.

I. Folstad and E.J. Karter, "Parasites, Bright Males, and the Immunocompetence Handicap," *American Naturalist* 139 (1992): 603-622.

S.W. Gangestad and J.A. Simpson, "The evolution of human mating: Trade-offs and strategic pluralism," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 23 (2000): 573-644.

M. G. Haselton, "The sexual overperception bias: Evidence of a systematic bias in men from a survey of naturally occurring events,"*Journal of Research in Personality* 37 (2003): 43-47.

M. G. Haselton and D.M. Buss, "Error management theory: A new perspective on biases in cross-sex mind reading," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000): 81-91.

M. G. Haselton and D. Nettle, "The Paranoid Optimist: An Integrative Evolutionary Model of Cognitive Biases," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10 (2006): 47-66.

V.S. Johnston, R. Hagel, M. Franklin, B. Fink, and K. Grammer, "Male facial attractiveness: evidence for hormone-mediated adaptive design," *Evolution & Human Behavior* 22 (2001): 251-267.

R. Kurzban and C.A. Aktipis, "Modularity and the Social Mind: Are Psychologists Too Self-Ish?" *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11 (2007): 131-149.

I. S. Penton-Voak and D.I. Perrett, "Female preference for male faces changes cyclically: further evidence," *Evolution & Human Behavior* 21 (2000): 39-48.

D. I. Perrett, K.J. Lee, I.S. Penton-Voak, D. Rowland, S. Yoshikawa, D.M. Burt, S.P. Henzi, D.L. Castles, and S. Akamatsu, "Effects of sexual dimorphism on facial attractiveness," *Nature* 394 (1998): 884-887.

E. G. Pillsworth and M.G. Haselton, "Male sexual attractiveness predicts differential ovulatory shifts in female extra-pair attraction and male retention," *Evolution & Human Behavior* 27 (2006): 247-258.

J. R. Roney, K.N. Handson, K.M. Durante, and D. Maestripieri, "Reading men's faces: women's mate attractiveness judgments track men's testosterone and interest in infants," *Proceedings of the Royal Society, Series B, Biological Sciences* 273 (2006): 2169-2175.

D. C. Rowe, "On genetic variation in menarche and age at first sexual intercourse: A critique of the Belsky-Draper hypothesis," *Evolution & Human Behavior* 23 (2002): 365-372.

J. M. Townsend, "Mate Selection Criteria: A Pilot Study," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 10 (1989): 241-253.