

Eastern Illinois University
The Keep

Faculty Research & Creative Activity

English

July 2006

Review of Lorna Jowett's Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan

Terri A. Fredrick

Eastern Illinois University, tafredrick@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fredrick, Terri A., "Review of Lorna Jowett's Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan" (2006). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 7.

http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac/7

This is brought to you for free and open access by the English at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan by Lorna Jowett. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, 241 pp., \$60.00 hardcover, \$22.95 paper.

TERRI A. FREDRICK

The television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* occupies a distinctive position as both mainstream popular culture and site of serious academic inquiry. Since its inception in 1997, the show has spawned dozens of academic essays and books; dedicated conferences in the United States and Europe; and even has its own journal. *Buffy* scholarship has been and continues to be interdisciplinary, including work from scholars in cultural studies, theology, philosophy, ecology, law, education, linguistics, and anthropology. Given *Buffy's* premise—a high school girl is given the power to fight (primarily adult male) monsters through her mystical connection to a line of women heroes—gender and feminist analyses constitute an important part of this scholarship.

In *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, Lorna Jowett delivers the most extensive examination of femininity, masculinity, and gendered relations on *Buffy* to-date. She analyzes *Buffy* as a “site of struggle” for gender negotiation—both how women’s gender identities are influenced by external factors as well as how constructions of masculinity are limited in what Jowett calls a post-feminist society. The book’s title aptly describes the intended audience for this analysis—fans of the show who may need an introduction to the academic field of gender studies. A reader unfamiliar with the language of women’s/gender studies will find definitions of terms such as “hegemony,” “patriarchy,” and “the Other” in the introduction, but it would be difficult for readers with little or no knowledge of the show to appreciate the full weight of Jowett’s argument.

Jowett argues that *Buffy* is characteristic of the ways in which post-modern popular culture simultaneously subverts and reifies binary constructions of gender. She claims that “*Buffy* treats identity as inherently unstable” by challenging traditional dichotomies such as feminine/masculine, good/bad, and human/monster (4). Through close analysis of the show’s major characters as well as those who appear in only one or two episodes, Jowett demonstrates how characters on *Buffy* must continuously (re)negotiate their own gendered identities. The teen girls, for example, struggle to be both *feminist* and *feminine* while juggling societal perceptions of what makes a girl “good” or “bad.” As part of the analysis, Jowett considers how characters’ sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity influence their gendered identity, while pointing out that the show itself often fails to question binary constructions of class, race, and ethnicity.

One of Jowett's contributions to academic work in gender studies is her extended analysis of the men and masculinities in *Buffy*. In three chapters, she explores the possibilities and limitations of constructions of masculinity in a society that is simultaneously (post)feminist (the supernatural world of slayers and monsters) and patriarchal (the "real" world): "the new men are valorized through their contrast with 'bad' tough guys, but they are clearly not a solution. They demonstrate again the difficulty in negotiating a new type of gender identity, in trying to construct a masculinity that fits the post-feminist age" (143).

Jowett makes a compelling argument that *Buffy's* ability to present femininity and masculinity as unstable is tied to blending, and sometimes subverting, the genres of the soap opera (traditionally viewed as feminine) and horror/action (traditionally viewed as masculine). As a soap opera, *Buffy* privileges emotion and employs a serial narrative, which resists closure and the solidification of gendered relationships. Horror and action, however, are based on linear narratives in which traditional moral order is ultimately reestablished (good defeats evil). Generic expectations of horror and action are subverted through the use of gendered role reversal, but by placing the supernatural world within the "real-world," characters must visibly struggle to negotiate their gendered identities.

Ultimately, Jowett's analysis of the genres and gendered negotiations of *Buffy* provide both a useful introduction to gender analysis of popular culture artifacts and a commentary on femininities and masculinities in post-feminist society. Because Jowett includes an introduction to the terminology of gender studies and grounds her analysis in the specific events and characters of the show, her book would make a good resource for undergraduate courses in gender studies or pop culture analysis, provided the book is paired with clips from the television show (all seven seasons are currently available on VHS and DVD).

Terri A. Fredrick is Assistant Professor in English at Eastern Illinois University. She received her doctorate in Rhetoric and Professional Communication from Iowa State University. Her research interests include classroom authority relationships and ethics in feminist qualitative research.