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But, You're Just A Girl

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“But, You’re Just A Girl:” The Female Hero in Modern Science Fiction and Fantasy

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

by

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This paper explores an emerging genre of the female hero archetype that is rooted in Joseph Campbell’s traditional definition and exemplified by Buffy Summers of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Kara “Starbuck” Thrace of *Battlestar Galactica*. As representations of the female hero within this genre, they reimagine pre-existing stereotypes, such as the female victim and the male hotshot pilot, and then pursue a hero’s journey of death and resurrection that is unique because of their gender. This new trend is the result of third-wave feminism and necessary for the further development of feminist literary works, particularly within the realm of Sci-Fi/Fantasy.
But You’re…You’re Just a Girl

Boy: “But, You’re...you’re just a girl.”
Buffy: “That’s what I keep saying.” (“The Gift”)

Picture this: a young blonde woman, typically pretty and typically fashionable wanders down a dark, abandoned street alone. You know this scene; you recognize it and are familiar with its ending. The damsel in distress will meet a cruel fate at the hands of a properly evil villain, perhaps a serial killer, or even something supernatural. However, there is a twist, a 180 degree turn in expectation. This girl is not the typical damsel; in fact, she’s the one girl unlike all the others, the one girl that is “the subject of cold sweat and frightened whispers” for anything evil and she’ll easily slay the evil with a smirk and a stake and a clever quip (“Fool for Love”). She is the Slayer, the Chosen One, and she spends her short life fighting evil and saving the world. She is a hero. But, what does that mean exactly?

The term “hero” is often a catchall for anyone who is capable of a courageous action. They can be people with everyday service jobs like firemen and police officers, or people who serve as a role model to others like mothers, fathers, teachers. They can be ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances. However, the archetype of a hero as shaped by classical mythology is something that is being reinvented through the modern day superhero. From 1930’s Superman to the most recent version of Marvel’s Avengers, the idea of a heroic being with special powers and special purpose, who is a step below God and a step above common man, is going through a modern day transformation—one that has many different levels. As Joseph Campbell outlines, “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder:
fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 30). This classical definition is still the root formula for most hero journeys and can be identified in modern stories from *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter*. However, the specific categories of heroes are growing, being reorganized, redefined, and new ones are being added into the fold.

In *Heroes: Who They Are and Why We Need Them*, Scott Allison maintains that humanity is in possession of “mental lists or models or images of heroes” that exist as archetypes, or recognizable figures. “Where these images come from” and “how they develop” are “shaped by our preconceptions of either a real or fictional individual whom we think of as heroes” and they all get fed into the literary canon where they can grow into fully realized characters (Allison 6). With classical examples like Gilgamesh and Achilles serving as preconceived archetypes and Superman and Ironman regenerating these archetypes with new “regions of supernatural wonder” and their new versions of super powers, new roads are being forged and, with them, new categories, or *schema*, are being defined (Campbell 30). When considering the “social cognition of heroism,” Allison defines a *schema* as a “mental representation that contains our general knowledge about something, whether it is an individual, group, or object, or event” (36). With schema serving as a general outline for different categories of heroes, I argue that a new, specific schema is taking form in modern-era epics.

An epic hero is its own general archetype and one in which the idea of *epic* needs to be clearly defined. As the general “consensus holds,” an “epic is an extended narrative poem, exalted in style and heroic in theme” but this does not quite fit the modern era of
elaborate space operas and reimagined fantastical worlds full of magic and elves (Shweizer 3). With new forms of story-telling taking hold, this term can no longer be held by the constraints of poetry, and style is a mercurial thing that changes over time. This term has been effectively broadened recently to mean “narrative texts…that typically tell of signal exploits and acts of bravery, of collective destinies, and of superhuman interventions, all of which are embedded in an authoritative moral, social, and religious framework” (3). While I will not tackle the idea of “exalted” style when talking of modern day science-fiction televisions shows, I will heartily maintain that they include “acts of bravery, collective destinies, superhuman interventions” and most certainly work within a “authoritative moral, social, and religious framework” and that they are, indeed, where we will find heroes.

The hero explored within this piece will fit a clearly defined schema that is currently emerging in modern-day science fiction. Her roots come from the classical epics, with classical heroes that reside a step above common humans and below a recognizable divinity. While her origins reside in a traditionally male domain, she is uniquely female and this gender switch plays an intrinsic role in her heroism. While there are others that paved the way for this specific schema such as Ellen Ripley of Aliens, Sarah Connor of Terminator, Xena: Warrior Princess, to say nothing of the myriad of women warriors in comic books from Jean Grey to Wonder Woman, there are two specific heroes that are the focus of my thesis, and who possess my specific criteria. They are Joss Whedon’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer of the hit television series with the same name and Kara “Starbuck” Thrace of Battlestar Galactica or BSG.
As long as television has been around, it has been “presenting a variety of characters, images of people and ways of behaving to the American viewing public” and to the world at large (Meehan vii). With television gaining in popularity since the 1950’s, effectively before the second wave of feminism, much less the third, the way women are portrayed in this popular story-telling medium has been a concern for feminists from the seventies on and rightly so. Women were only regulated to specific roles on television and the majority, if not all of these roles, were problematic because of how they portrayed women to the public at large. Television in general is a great cultural influence and, therefore, so are the characters represented in it—much like Allison’s version of heroes—“these images and heroes are important for they link us to other” people in our society “and they also give us ideas about who we are and what’s important” (Meehan 3). These fictional representations of humanity “convey attitudes, beliefs, and values about the world in which we live, even if broadcasters” or even authors “don’t intend it” (3). With the rise of television occurring before the rise of feminism, female characters are standardized in such roles as the “imp” (Lucy Ricardo) or “rambunctious rebel who was only intermittently heroic and seldom womanish,” and the “goodwife” (Harriet of Ozzie and Harriet) who was “a paragon in the home” and “attractive, good-natured, and wise—a jewel in any family crown” (21-34). Females also took on such roles as the “bitch” (Mrs. Hanson of Ironside), the “harpy” (Hot Lips Houlihan,) the “decoy” (Cinnamon Carter of Mission Impossible) and the “witch” (Samantha Stevens) all of which were seen by feminists as polemic, narrow, and clichéd. None of these are fully formed characters with true depth that fully explore the human experience and the “significance of these television characters and stories representing…female figures in recognizable situations
is that they impact on the real world, establishing expectations, validating preconceived notions, and providing viewers with models of behavior for their own lives.” (114).

The specific female character that the concept of Buffy is initially based on is that of victim. As Meehan points out, she is “the most passive of all female character types” and “required no initiative or industry; [actions] simply happened to the character” (64). In television, and indeed, movies, women are still far more likely to be relegated to the role of victim, rather than the men of the story. The woman is victimized, giving the hero a motive to pursue in the story. This role was defined as those characters “who suffered pain, disease, imprisonment, or death without any way [of] initiating violence” of their own and had two common varieties: “the medical format” (or medical dramas) and the “action format” (64). The action-style television show is the especially pertinent to the concept of Buffy, which, at its heart, is both an action and horror show. For each genre, the victim is an essential part of the story; the victim is someone the hero can come along and save or avenge after the fact. With a woman there to be “robbed, raped, mugged, beaten, kidnapped, and killed,” the actions of the story and especially its dangers are defined; the bar for the male hero is set and it is one that only a male character can possibly meet, leaving the girl to merely be a part of the fallout (66).

Not only does Buffy’s origin come from the victim archetype, but from a victim archetype that had been developed within the horror genre. She is not just female, she is a sexualized “bubblehead blond” that “wandered into dark alleys and got murdered by some creature” as explained by Buffy’s creator Joss Whedon (Bellafante). This precise representation of the female victim was so serialized, so endemic, within the horror genre that Whedon believed she was owed something better than what happened to her on a
regular basis. In creating Buffy, Whedon said, “I would love to see a movie in which a blond wanders into a dark alley, takes care of herself and deploys her powers” (Bellafante). Whedon’s versions of the victim experiences a complete and total turnabout—as the Slayer, Whedon effectively makes Buffy--the petite, demure blonde--the boogey man for all monsters. The ability to make the 180 degree turn in expectation effective relies on two things: the idea that the pretty, blond victim trope is so commonplace it is instantly recognizable by the viewers and the rise of third wave feminism that allow the pretty, petite blond to utilize her “girl power” in defeating her enemies.

The idea of bait-and-switching the audience was set up by an entire era of classic horror films from *Nightmare on Elm Street* to *Friday the 13th*. The formula for these horror films all relied on a sexualized and helpless blond being brutally murdered by a monster of the supernatural variety. The Last Girl, yet another trope developed in the horror genre, is the concept of the lone, surviving victor of these horror films, while female, are typically (and unlike Buffy) brunette. Easily recognizable Last Girls are Laurie Strode of *Halloween* and Nancy Thompson of *Nightmare on Elm Street* and only these virginal good girls have the ability to survive the supernatural male menace. (tvtropes.org).
In making Buffy blond and girly, she is a derivative of her original victim stereotype and a deviation from the classic images that previously set up the idea of second-wave female empowerment. Ellen Ripley, the empowered Last Girl (and brunette) of Alien, represents a great counter-example to Buffy’s young girlishness. Ripley is tall with masculine traits—she wears no makeup, wears the same gender-neutral uniform jumper as her male counterparts, visibly sweats, is an older professional as opposed to teenager, and has very little to symbolically separate her from the men in her crew—she’s not even much of screamer when facing off with the terrifying xenomorph. Furthermore, in her second-wave era representation, Ripley takes on “‘masculine’ attributes,” and this is seen “as a sign of progress” since such masculinity is “seen as heroic or ‘universal’” (Jowett 20). Buffy subverts Ripley’s second-wave identity by looking like a stylish high school girl who spends her time cheering with pom poms and screaming at the idea of monsters rather than slaying them. Buffy, in all her girly glory, does not look the part, does not look like a seasoned warrior, yet proves to be completely heroic. Moreover, the subversion of girly Buffy as Slayer is further developed by actress Sarah Michelle Geller’s roles in the new wave of campy, meta-horror films, created with the purpose of poking fun at the genre. In both Scream 2 and I Know What You Did Last Summer, Geller portrays the blond, girly-girl who meets an early demise, leaving the brunette Final Girls Sydney and Julie to survive and run away another day.

Indeed, Whedon is so much a champion of subverting the trope of blond victim that his opener in Buffy sets up this concept with the character Darla, the pretty blond Catholic School girl who sneaks into Sunnydale High after hours with a boy. Instead of
victims, it turns out she is a powerful, centuries-old vampire and her date is, in reality, her dinner. The very first hapless victim of the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is male.

While Buffy is a paragon of Girl Power and third-wave feminism, Kara Thrace, of the new *Battlestar Galactica*, on the other hand, is rooted in the first incarnation of the character from the original 1970’s version of the show. The original Starbuck is the typical hotshot fighter pilot, the best of the bunch, and, of course, male. When the series was rebooted, Starbuck got a special reboot, however. While she maintained many of the same typical, maverick-like qualities of her predecessor—and does this successfully—she does this while being female. In recreating the series from its original vision, the new series “frequently portrays women as strong and powerful, and sometimes even as ruthless” and “Starbuck is the character to whom the traditional restrictions of femininity have meant the least” (Eberl 230). In swapping the gender of an intrinsic and iconic character, the creators challenged what audiences always took for granted. What was male was always male and what was female was always female, until the Cylons returned and brought about Armageddon.

Pictured: Darla, the first vampire on screen and the first game-face on screen.

Pictured: Will the Real Starbuck Please Stand Up?
Note: Starbuck’s costume here is reminiscent of Maverick’s from *Topgun*, another iconic hotshot fighter pilot.
As for where Kara Thrace falls on the feminism spectrum, she seems to harken back to a pre-Buffy time in which girliness is not a pre-requisite. Indeed, Kara seems to be the next-in-line from the likes of Sarah Connor and Ellen Ripley with her gender-neutral clothes, lack of make-up and ability to sweat when the dogfighting gets dire. When looking through the lens of binaries where male and female denotations are more clearly defined, it appears that the newer version of Starbuck is, indeed, so masculine, that theorists feel the need to even ask the question “Is Starbuck a Woman?” Sarah Conly explores this particular question, calling on Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “a woman is not born, but made” (230). This claim does not depend on the physical body and where the reproductive organs reside; rather it is based on the idea that women are created via “character traits, values, standards of appearance, mannerisms, and activities” and all of these “non-physical elements of being a woman are artificial” (231). This is further maintained by the idea that “society, not nature…demarcates women as being different from men” and “the social understanding of what it is to be a woman…injures women” (231). Ultimately, they must “be liberated from these constraints to become what they’re capable of—to become themselves” (Conly 231).
In terms of de Beavoir’s understanding of what it is to be woman in a patriarchal society, women are “generally physically passive, constraining their movements to the delicate and petite; sexually, they’re the recipient of the others’ advances…[they try] to attract men’s attention by exaggerating their delicacy and weakness” and ultimately pursue “lives they themselves could [not] consider valuable” (233). In other words, they are victims, only allowing things to happen to them and persistently denied any active role. By this definition then, we should also ask the question: is Buffy a woman? However, we don’t because she looks like one on the outside even though she counters every one of these claims at some point in the series. Buffy, however, in her youth and by her existence in a patriarchal world, straddles this line of what it is to be woman, while Kara firmly exists in a world where women are simply seen differently. This is especially brought home by taking a particularly masculine character and doing an immediate about-face with his supposed gender. Is Starbuck a woman? Or is Starbuck, simply Starbuck?

Ultimately, we have to look at the reality that is created within the scope of Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre. Buffy exists in a world that is soundly rooted in the reality of post-second wave feminism America and has the patriarchy to show for it (read: Watcher’s Council). The Twelve Colonies of Battlestar Galactica on the other hand, is an imagined world where the “the gender politics of Battlestar Galactica are fascinating in that…there are none” (Asher-Perrin). While there can be an argument based on a character by character analysis that depends on “the positions of certain characters or how they conduct themselves according to gender stereotypes, that has to do with how the characters are written” and not the rules of the fictional society these characters exist in.
(Asher-Perrin). In *BSG*, “it seems as though those labels that we are constantly applying to men and women are not in use within” Colonial Society and Starbuck is not the only representation of this (Asher-Perrin).

Indeed, President Roslin is questioned by the military not for being a woman, but for being a teacher; women like Sharon and Dualla and other female marines are constantly on the frontlines of battle and never regarded as particularly weak or fragile and are not challenged for their right to be there. In *BSG*, “the men in the Colonial military didn’t edge around female officers, nor did they harass them any differently than they did each other” and “their hotshot pilot was a woman, but nothing about Starbuck’s character…was ever considered to be the product of her chromosomes” (Asher-Perrin). The *BSG* Universe is one that is truly post-feminist in terms that it looked like feminism wasn’t needed in the first place and gender was never seen as a reason or excuse for oppression. In this alternate reality, “harmful stereotypes probably never existed” and “it doesn’t offer an explanation or attempt to guide us to that place through example…it simply functions” (Asher-Perrin). Egalitarianism between the genders reigns supreme without any obvious threats to its existence.

By taking the popular and recognizable archetypes of female victim and hotshot male pilot and displacing them in such significant ways, the audience is forced to deal with this every time they see Buffy and Kara on screen. Buffy is always made up to look the original part of pretty and girly victim, and this initial image is what we process first, before seeing her throw down with the average vampire or demon. Kara, with her boyish haircut and military uniform always looks the part of pilot first and female second, jarring the audience out of their usual gender-norm viewing. Eventually, the initial reactions take
a backseat, and Buffy and Kara, as icons of third-wave feminism, become the newer versions of normal and the expectations are permanently altered.

**Badass Bitches and Their Boys**

*Angel:* “This isn’t some fairytale. When I kiss you, you don’t wake up from a deep sleep and live happily ever after.”

*Buffy:* “No, when you kiss me, I wanna die.

As heroes in my schema, Buffy and Kara are representative of important heroic traits that should be championed in female characters. However, not all of the traits strictly have to do with being a hero, sometimes they simply have to do with being a woman, or better yet, being human. Often these traits are closely related to each other—there is no clear divisive line between being a woman and being a hero for them. Sometimes, they try to let the Slayer and the viper pilot take a backseat in their lives so they can pursue other—typically more domestic—things in their life, but these are just temporary breaks. Their duty is always waiting for them and the role of hero is never sidetracked for long. One particular area where they champion exemplary traits for being good women role models (as opposed to strictly heroic role models) is where their relationships are concerned. In a modern era where girls are raised on the concept of Disney Princesses and *Twilight* has taken the female audience by storm, Buffy and Kara stand out—not as *perfect*, but certainly as better.

Unfortunately, more than just vampires were harmed in the popularity explosion that was Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*. In this four-part series, young girls (and women of all ages, really) fell in love with the idea of being awkward, average, yet wonderful Bella Swan and wanted to enjoy the attentions of both over-protective sparkle-vamp Edward and muscular best buddy not-really-an-actual-werewolf, Jacob. The most harmful
problem with this Young Adult series is that it ultimately teaches girls how to be in an abusive relationship and define themselves by the males in their life. Bella, as a character, exhibits three troubling characteristics of abuse victims. She consistently suffers from “low self-esteem” and “constantly reminds herself that she’s uncoordinated, unsocial, and unattractive” (Goodfriend). She is also “particularly attracted to men who are forbidden” and this makes her “drawn to the bad boy who is more likely to abuse her” (Goodfriend). Finally, Bella is a thrill-seeker who is “simply excited by violence, aggression, and danger” and Edward easily fits this bill as a super-strong, super-fast vampire and her interest in Jacob spikes only “after she learns he’s a violent werewolf who might rip her face off” (Goodfriend). Moreover, Bella’s entire existence as a character is to simply be loved by these more interesting, more exciting supernatural males. For the duration of the series, she does not exist on her own, she only exists within the triangle of Edward-Bella-Jacob. The “who will she end up with?!?” question sparked a paradigm shift in YA romance and created a trend of love triangles that has yet to be stopped. Furthermore, within the fan culture, shipping, or rooting for a particular couple, and becoming obsessed with One True Pairs (OTP) in the sense of fervently championing that a specific pair should be together more than anything, is also a growing trend.

Neither Buffy nor BSG are generally immune to this by any means; however they set a much better precedent that should be held up as exemplary when compared to Twilight and other occurrences of “love-triangles” or what can be more aptly described as a formulaic way to explore “lust and instant gratification” as opposed to a “true, deep love” (Ree). To say Buffy and Kara do relationships well would be a complete misreading. One of their shared defining features is that while they are generally the best
when it comes to slaying and viper piloting, they struggle in the romantic realm. Buffy falls for the wrong guys with vampires Angel and Spike and when the “right” guy comes along in the form of human soldier Riley, something is still missing and she cannot commit herself to the relationship. Angel leaves her, Riley leaves her, and her relationship with Spike is largely the result of her deep depression post-resurrection. Eventually, toward the end of the series, there are still two distinct possibilities (Bangel and Spuffy shippers alike clinging to their respective sides fervently) and fans were expecting Buffy to make some sort of decision while gearing up for her biggest apocalypse yet. Kara has trouble deciding on who to be with. Before the start of the series, her lover Zac died in the cockpit because, as his flight instructor, she wrongly passed him through and she feels guilty over his death. Then she sleeps with one man while lusting for Apollo (Lee Adama), falls in love with Sam Anders, but is forced to leave him behind, and after they are reunited she diverts back to Lee only to leave him hanging and marry Anders the very next morning. Eventually, Kara and Lee pursue an extra-marital affair that ends poorly and then she finds out Anders is a Cylon. As the series enters its final season, Kara’s relationship with both men are left largely unresolved with no clear decision made between the two.

As women navigating the murky waters of love and relationships Buffy and Kara are anything but perfect. They make mistakes, hurt themselves and others, and find themselves both vulnerable and vicious. However, in all of these problematic circumstances fraught with errors, they still convey important feminist messages when compared to the likes of Bella and Bella knock-offs. As heroes, they excel; as women, they still stumble, but don’t ultimately lose their identity in the pursuit of their
relationships or allow themselves to be submissive. If we look at Bella’s three problematic traits that mark her as a victim of abuse in comparison to the likes of Buffy and Kara, the differences are profound. Bella is horrendously insecure and this ultimately “puts [Edward] in a position of power over her” and makes it possible for him “to treat her however he’d like” (Goodfriend). Both Buffy and Kara have their moments of doubt and insecurity, but it is never to Bella’s degree. They are strong, powerful women who use their abilities on a daily basis and even have a tendency towards arrogance. Indeed, as Spike tells Buffy, “The problem with you, Summers, is you’ve gotten so good, you’re starting to think you’re immortal” (“Fool for Love”). Kara is often described as the best pilot by everyone, Commander Adama included. As she tells the new pilot trainees, “Pilots call me Starbuck, you may refer to me as God” and she has the ability to back that statement up when she’s in the cockpit (“Acts of Contrition”). These women have reason to be arrogant: they are very good at what they do. And while they encounter doubts on the personal and professional level, these doubts are not the same as Bella’s persistent and damaging low self-esteem. Bella does not know how to be confident and has no arena in which she succeeds, whereas Buffy and Kara, who champion my heroic schema, do and showing this ability to a female audience is especially important.

Bella is attracted to men who are forbidden and while Buffy does this with her vampire-lovers and Kara does this with a married man, the dynamic is significantly different in that it does not make them more prone to being victims as it does with Bella. Bella should not associate with dangerous males of the “bad-boy status” because she has no means to protect herself physically and because, due to her rampant low self-esteem, she has no means to protect herself psychologically or emotionally. While Buffy and
Kara become intimate with emotional vulnerability due to their romantic relationships, they are never made into victims. When Angel loses his soul and becomes the sadistically awful Angelus, Buffy triumphs over him repeatedly and, when she is accused of not being able to kill him, her icy response is simply, “Give me time” (“Innocence”). And time is all she needs. Eventually, she does save the world by vanquishing him to a hell dimension. Bella would never have the fortitude to do such a thing and even displays suicidal tendencies when she is left without Edwards’ presence (New Moon). Kara on the other hand, displays poor decisions when she cheats on her husband with Apollo, who is also married at the time. However, despite their poor judgment and actions, both Kara and Apollo still have standards that they apply to their lives and their affair comes to an end when Kara refuses to divorce because of religious reasons and Apollo is no longer willing to cheat on his wife. Ultimately, love does not conquer all here. Kara and Lee have duty, honor, and religion standing in their way, and though they strayed from the path for a while, they are unwilling to give it up entirely. Bella, however, is willing to give up anything and everything to be with Edward from her family to her life. Edward is always portrayed as the ultimate goal for Bella to achieve. Buffy and Kara can live without their respective boyfriends even though it is difficult—Bella repeatedly shows how she cannot live without Edward.

Arguably the worst trait Bella possesses is her desire to seek out dangerous and physically violent males who exhibit problematic behaviors themselves. In fact, within just one book of the four-part series, fifteen of the sixteen questions asked by the National Domestic Violence Hotline are present, outlining the penchant for violent relationships in these books (McMillan). What’s worse, these problems always place Bella or another
female character in a disadvantaged position and then are glossed over, dismissed, or considered simplistic challenges that can and will be overcome so the desired relationship can be pursued. This is not to say that problematic violence is never an issue in *Buffy* or *BSG* and the relationships within them. However, Buffy and Starbuck, as the slayer and a colonial officer fighting in a war, are never portrayed at a specific disadvantage within these relationships. Buffy and Kara exist and respond from a place of equal status. When Angel turns evil and suddenly becomes the Big Bad, Buffy has the ability to fight back and win. When Spike responds to Buffy with physical violence during their problematic relationship after her Resurrection, it is on equal footing because Buffy is just as violent in response. Furthermore, she can arguably be labeled as the abuser more so than Spike. She repeatedly uses him for sex, emotionally abuses him, hits him, and even beats him to a pulp when he attempts to intervene in her stubborn way of doing things (“Dead Things”). As former enemies long before they were lovers, Spike and Buffy fighting is a regular part of their interaction, and depends upon them both existing within equal space—something that does not happen with Bella and her super-powered suitors. Furthermore, this violence is seen as a very serious problem and not just a romantic challenge to be overcome so that Spike and Buffy can live happily ever after. It is a symptom of her post-Resurrection depression and leaves the lost hero convinced that she “came back wrong” and begging her friend to admonish her, saying “I’m wrong, tell me that I’m wrong, please…” (“Dead Things”). As for the egalitarian society in the *BSG* universe, violence exists in non-gendered terms and, while Kara was an abuse victim as a small, defenseless child, as a grown woman and an officer in the military, she stands on equal footing with the men in her world. This is especially apparent when an argument
between Apollo and Starbuck escalates. He disapproves of Kara sleeping with a certain man, saying she’s a “Pilot who can’t keep her pants on” and “It’s just like old times, Kara. Like when you got drunk and couldn’t keep your hands off that major from wherever--” (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming Part One”). Here, Kara takes a swing at him, but Apollo ducks and punches her directly in the face. The punch lands hard and is jarring to see, especially for an average American audience where hitting a woman is typically never considered acceptable. However, here, where women truly exist on the same physical plane as men—and where Starbuck is typically considered tougher than Apollo—the punch *isn’t even addressed* and they conclude their argument as if nothing happened. What Apollo did was not wrong within this context—he cannot be considered abusive because Kara attacked him first from a place of equal standing and Apollo simply reacted.

Aside from the actual issues the relationships bring up within these stories, the other important aspect that should to be addressed is that, for *Twilight*, the bulk of the story is utterly dependent on the love triangle and falls apart without its romantic frame to hold it up. The opposite is true for *Buffy’s* horror story meets teen drama or the futuristic military drama of *BSG*. This is especially harmful for how audiences perceive young female heroes, because
Bella, as a protagonist, has no reason for existing without the men in her life. Bella has no special destiny, no driving motivation for her average, everyday character besides loving and wanting Edward and having Jacob love and want her in order to create almost melodramatic conflict. Because of the triangle-formula of this story, the men in Bella’s life define her existence: every major plot point, change in character, desire, motive, and conflict exist because of either Edward or Jacob or both. Bella by herself has no meaning. Buffy and Kara’s existence are wholly dependent on other frames that carry more meaning and significance than a mere relationship. Yes, Buffy and Kara’s lovers create conflict, motives, and help change and define their characters in meaningful ways, but they are only facets of these heroes’ lives. Rather, the occupational roles of Slayer and viper pilot are the single most important frame for their characters to exist within rather than the simplistic regular-girl-who-is-desired-by-the-supernatural.

What’s even more significant, is that the relationships that truly serve to define and have a lasting effect on who Buffy and Kara are as people involve a larger family support network. The true difference between Buffy and other slayers is that she’s “A Slayer with family and friends” which “sure as hell wasn’t in the brochure” because to have such things is unlike any slayer previous to her (“School Hard”). The inherent Buffyness that is developed by relationships comes from the Scoobies, a loving mom, and a Watcher who is more life a father figure than a typical mentor. Kara, too, is a part of a larger whole. As an officer in the Colonial Fleet, the members of the *Galactica* serve as a sort of extended family to Kara, Commander Adama is like a father to her, Colonel Tigh the disapproving uncle who she ends up relating to, and fellow pilots are more like siblings who see Kara as a “big sister” (“Scar”). Starbuck would be nothing without her
fellow fleet members or an enemy like the Cylons to fight. Her essential traits as a character depend on these things rather than on any potential romantic relationship.

True to form, the end of Twilight cannot be wrapped up until the audience knows—once and for all—who Bella chooses to spend the rest of her life with. Compared to this decision, (Edward? Jacob?) the finale is largely anticlimactic. The main enemy Bella and company have to face, the Volturi or vampire elite, prove to be a mostly empty threat and both parties peacefully go their separate ways. Bella’s vampires go on to coexist with the werewolves, not eat humans, and raise their vampire child in peace while the Volturi...go back to being evil, vicious vampires who feed off humans on a regular basis and have no one to stand in their way. There is no actual conflict between good and evil here, no actual struggle between the right way to live and the wrong way to live. In the end, it’s live and let evil live as well. The Cullens do not change in any significant way and the Volturi and the werewolves do not change in any significant way. Only Bella, who gives up her humanity to become just like Edward, and completely changes who she is to be with what she sees as her ideal significant other, experiences a real change and it serves the sole purpose of allowing her and Edward to be together. For eternity. There is no ending here without a formulaic happily ever-after.

There is no true happily ever after for Buffy and Kara, however. Their lives are shaped by larger forces than romance and in the end these heroes stand alone, with no need for a man to define them. As Buffy’s journey was coming to an end by the close of season seven, she still had two potential suitors in her life. After a rocky and ill-conceived relationship, her and the newly-souled Spike were developing a close friendship, and Angel was still waiting in the wings. However, right up until the final
Apocalypse, Buffy had no clear plans to pursue a relationship with either, declaring herself unprepared as she asked Angel, who was jealous of Spike, “What was the highlight of our relationship? When you broke up with me or when I killed you?” Ultimately, Buffy realizes that “in the midst of all this insanity, a couple things are starting to make sense. And the guy thing—I always feared there was something wrong with me, you know because I couldn’t make it work. Because maybe I’m not suppose to.” She goes on to say and this is not “because I’m the Slayer,” it is because she’s “cookie dough” and she’s “not done baking.” [She’s] not finished becoming whoever the hell it is [she’s] gonna turn out to be” (“Chosen”). Simply put, she’s not ready for the big relationship; if it’s going to happen for her, it will happen in the future and the main point is that she’s going to keep doing what she does best: avert the apocalypse and save the world. Angel leaves to join his band of heroes, Spike dies closing the Hellmouth, and Buffy is finally free to live her life for herself and sets out to find and nurture new Slayers.

Kara finds both of her relationships unfulfilled. While some of this is due to her inability to make decision, a large part of it has to do with her own personal hero’s journey, Sam’s true identity as a Cylon, and all three of them having to follow responsibilities that focus on the war at hand and leave little time for personal relationships. The war has extracted a high price from all parties involved, and eventually, Sam is injured beyond repair, and Kara is forced to say goodbye to him before his death. Afterwards, this leaves only her and Lee on the newly discovered earth, pondering what will become of them now that they have achieved their peace. However, larger forces are not done with Starbuck, and now that her hero’s journey is complete, she
is called back to a mystical existence beyond the known world. Just as mysteriously as she appears after her death, she mysteriously disappears, leaving Apollo standing alone. Any real future Kara had with either man died with her the first time around and she had to sacrifice this in order to fulfill her destiny. While Buffy has the chance to live for herself, Kara moves on to bigger things than a simple life post-war. Neither hero was meant for the Disneysesque happily ever after; their existence is bigger than a relationship, their status as a hero in my schema dependent on their independence.

...two fates bear me on to the day of death/
If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy/
my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies/
If I voyage back to the land I love/
my pride, my glory dies… (The Iliad Book 9)

Buffy’s Special Destiny: “It’s About Power”

In the classical tradition, heroes follow a more or less proscribed journey as outlined by Joseph Campbell’s work with common themes prevailing through both culture and time. Buffy and Kara follow this path, but it is a revamped one that comes with an especially proscribed fate: the Special Destiny. While a “Special Destiny” is not
specifically a part of Campbell’s principle model, it is part of my schema and one that is more prevalent in the current tradition of science-fiction/fantasy literature and television that has gained popularity in the twenty-first century. Heroes today don’t just go on an adventure; they go on a specific adventure that is dependent on a specific destiny with a capitol “D.” Luke Skywalker is destined to be the first of the New Order of Jedi, Harry Potter is the Boy-Who-Lived and destined to vanquish Voldemort. John Connor is destined to lead the remnants of humanity against the machines. Their destiny is already set up before them, waiting for the hero to come along and fulfill, waiting for them to save the world from its current danger or darkness, to reset the balance between good and evil.

This concept was explored within the ancient tradition to show that sometimes mortals are incapable of escaping their fate: Oedipus would marry his mother and kill his father, no matter what they did to counteract the prophecy, and Achilles would either die at home unremembered or die young in glorious battle and live on in legend. These were the outcomes set up by prophecy; there was no escaping them for Oedipus and Achilles, no escaping them for Harry Potter and John Connor. There is no escaping them for Buffy or Kara either, however the dynamic shifts with female heroes at the helm. Ultimately, the two heroes within my schema fulfill their prophecy for a higher purpose: they don’t just save the world, or conquer evil, they bring about significant change and, where the previous balance is restored with male heroes, the balance is intrinsically altered with female heroes. Buffy, as a Slayer, already has to save the world every night (especially on Tuesdays) but her special destiny is to change the Slayer line, allowing more women to have power than not. Kara, as a viper pilot, has to save the fleet again and again, but her
Special Destiny isn’t limited to her cockpit, it’s to end the ceaseless wondering of her lost people and find them a new home so they can start over again without the mistakes of the past haunting them.

Buffy, as the Slayer, has more than one destiny haunting her steps. As the Chosen One, according to the ancient prophecy that grants her heightened powers to do battle with her supernatural and inhuman enemies, destiny came knocking on her door prior to the show’s actual premier and Buffy has decided she wants nothing to do with it. Campbell would call this her “Refusal” and it’s not the only time Buffy struggles with her job as the Slayer throughout the series. As her Watcher, Rupert Giles claims in the first episode after Buffy gives him the brush off, “I don’t understand this attitude. You’ve accepted your duty, you’ve slain vampires before.” At this point in Buffy’s life, she was officially Called at the age of fifteen, and at sixteen, has already experienced “getting kicked out of school, losing all [her] friends” and “having to spend all [her] time fighting for [her] life and never getting to tell anyone because it might endanger them” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). While the realities of being both a teenage girl and a Vampire Slayer are forever present for her, Buffy’s more specified destiny is one that is unveiled throughout the entirety of the show and one that she has to struggle with from season to season.

Buffy is prescribed a special destiny as the Slayer, but it is only special to the extent that there’s always the next girl waiting to rise and carry the torch for her once Buffy falls. Slayers’ lives are short, brutal, largely lived in secret, and then recorded in dusty tomes known as the Watcher’s Diaries to only become a reference for future slayers. However, Buffy is the one Slayer to forever change what it means to be a Slayer.
and this depends on her penchant for breaking the rules. First, like female heroes tend to do—as opposed to their male counterparts—she maintains a network of support in a group of friends affectionately termed the “Scooby Gang” and this group shares such close bonds that Buffy describes them specifically as “family” in an episode with the same name (“Family”). Having friends is highly unusual for a Council-sanctioned Slayer and it is no wonder that it is the eventual father-daughter familial bond between Watcher and Slayer that results in the sacking of Giles. Again, when the Council refuses to help one of Buffy’s circle, her vampire-lover Angel, is when Buffy officially quits the Council, or in her own words says, “I like to think of it as graduation” (“Graduation Day Part One”). Without being able to trust in the ancient, hidden society supposedly created to watch over the Slayer, Buffy places her trust in her friends for better or worse and this eventually works towards her Special Destiny as the Slayer who changes everything, however the price of this change is high for both Buffy and her friends. Ultimately, Buffy’s power comes from having a network of people all working towards the same goal—it’s her friends that make the significant difference and, by the end of the series, and with the help of her friends, Buffy finds a way to break the mold the Slayer has forever been held to—the mold of one girl in all the world.

Her destiny beyond simply being the Slayer is first touched upon in the Season One finale, “Prophecy Girl.” It was a prophecy that Called Buffy to action and it is a prophecy that forewarns of her death and while “some prophecies are dodgy…mutable,” and even though “Buffy herself has thwarted them time and time again,” says Giles, this prophecy comes from “the Pergamum Codex and there is nothing in it that does not come to pass.” As Giles warns, “it’s very plain…Tomorrow night, Buffy will face the
master…and she will die” (“Prophecy Girl”). And she does. However, thanks to Scooby Gang reinforcements, that is not the end for Buffy Summers. The Master, an ancient and powerful vampire, hypnotizes the Slayer and leaves her for dead facedown in a puddle of shallow water where she drowns, but Buffy’s friend Xander Harris comes to her rescue and is able to resuscitate her. She literally lives to die another day.

From this moment, Buffy (and her friends) have forever changed the world they live in. When one slayer dies, the next is Called and as Giles notes, “Good lord, you were dead, Buffy…You were physically dead, causing the activation of the next Slayer” something that has never before occurred (“What’s My Line? Part Two”). Moreover, the activation has a supernatural force behind it. Slayers are not Called by the Council or any force of man, but by the magic behind the Slayer line. Higher beings, or what is often referred to in the Whedonverse as the Powers That Be (PTB) are in charge of such mystical happenings and Buffy’s revival, through the action of her mortal friends, is beyond the typical scope of Slayers. As long as Buffy lives, there will always be two Slayers.

As stated in a prophetic dream that marks the end of season four, Buffy is told by a vessel of the PTB, “You think you know. What’s to come, what you are…You haven’t even begun” (“Restless”). The significance of this line sets up, not just the groundbreaking change of season five to the Buffyverse, but the rest of the series. Furthermore, the significance of this line coming in “Restless” supports the concept that Buffy’s network of the Scooby Gang is absolutely essential to her success as the Slayer who will change the world. Just prior, the group experienced a falling out, and Buffy tells them, “So I guess I’m on my own. And you know what? I’m starting to get why there’s
no ancient prophecy about a Chosen One and her Friends…If I need help, I’ll go to someone I can count on” (“The Yoko Factor”). While it’s true that there is no ancient prophecy, there might as well be for Buffy. The gang all comes together again to stop their most dangerous foe yet and the key to success is an Enjoining Spell that literally allows Buffy to connect to her friends and take all their strengths with her into battle. As she fights Adam, the cybernetic demon, he warns that “you can’t last much longer” and addresses her in the singular. However, Buffy is not actually alone and she responds with, “We can. We are forever.” And that claim turns out to be true in more ways than one as the series continues (“Primeval”).

The dream in “Restless” is the price the Scoobies pay for doing the Enjoining Spell. They have messed with the ancient method of madness and the spirit of the First Slayer comes for them in their dreams. Buffy is forced to fight and conquer the spirit of the First, who, as the Ur-Slayer, maintains that she has “no speech. No name. [She] live[s] in the action of death. The blood-cry, the penetrating wound. [She is] destruction. Absolute. Alone.” Buffy denounces this and the First, championing her own way of being the Slayer, her ability to
have a voice, an identity, and a family, saying, “I’m not alone… I’m gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There’s trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don’t sleep on a bed of bones. Now give me back my friends” (“Restless”).

In winning back her friends, Buffy sets up a chain of events that precipitates the greatest change her world has ever seen. Death comes for her again and Buffy willingly sacrifices herself to save the world, but her friends are unwilling to let her go. The Scoobies, led by best friend and extremely powerful witch Willow Rosenberg, resurrects Buffy and the resurrection opens the door for the First Evil, or the source of everything evil, to make a play for the entire line of Slayers. As the source, the First has “eternities to act, endless resources” and “if the Slayer line is eliminated, then the Hellmouth will have no guardian [and] the balance will be destroyed.” The First targets and kills the potential Slayers, or the girls “waiting… to be Called” until “there’s only a handful” left and “they’re all on their way to Sunnydale” to be protected by Buffy (“Bring on the Night”). Change comes at a high price and both Buffy and Willow must suffer before they can succeed in helping to bring about significant change. Buffy suffers through the horror of her resurrection and Willow abuses magic before she is able to master it. They tempt fate by allowing the First into the world, but if they didn’t then the destiny would go unfulfilled. Ultimately, in order to win against the First, Buffy has to finish what she started in Season One and thoroughly break the most important Slayer law of all: One girl in all the world.

In the series finale “Chosen,” Buffy sets her plan into motion and depends on Willow’s ability as a witch for it to succeed. Buffy tells the Scoobies and all the Potentials who are depending on her to save them and the world, “this isn’t about wishes.
This is about choices” and how she was never given a choice to begin with, but “here’s the part where you make a choice.” She places the responsibility of making their own decision on each Potential under her command. As Buffy states,

“What if you could have that power? Now. All of you. In every generation one Slayer is born because a bunch of guys that died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men.” (Points to Willow) “This woman is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rules. I say my power should be our power. Tomorrow Willow will use the essence of this scythe that contains the energy and history of so many Slayers, to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power will have the power. Who can stand up, will stand up. Every one of you, and girls we’ve never known, and generations to come...they will have strength they never dreamed of and more than that, they will have each other. Slayers. Every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?” (“Chosen”).

Her plan is a success and instead of the First eliminating the entire line of Slayers, effectively making it “the end” so “there’s no more Slayers…ever,” Buffy fulfills her Special Destiny by expanding the line to include every Potential for all future generations to come. As creator Joss Whedon and the writers explain in the overview of season seven, Buffy comes back to her roots in the end and what she accomplished with her first death and resurrection in the beginning is fully realized in the “having and sharing of female power” (“Buffy: Full Circle”). As a result, the status quo is forever and irrevocably altered in favor of women being the bearers of power and Buffy is the champion of this change in the world.

Kara Thrace’s Special Destiny: “There must be some way out of here.”

While Buffy has Destiny overshadowing her from the word go, Kara lives the
majority of her life unknowing that fate is waiting for her so literally despite her abusive mother’s attempts to prepare her for greatness. She is simply one of the best viper pilots in the Colonial Fleet when the apocalypse comes and the Twelve Colonial worlds she calls home are completely destroyed by the Cylons. With less than fifty-thousand people left to be defended by a single Battlestar, the *Galactica*, and her viper pilots, Starbuck’s life has a purpose, but she still feels like a lost soul. As she explains to friend and fellow pilot, Helo, “You know, everyone I know is fighting to get back what they had. And I’m fighting cause I don’t know how to do anything else” (“Valley of Darkness”). This feeling of loss haunts her for the majority of the series, and Kara has a difficult time dealing with the role fate has given her to play.

When the Cylons return, they bring with them twelve new human models and a powerfully devout belief in the Cylon religion of worshiping the one, true god versus the Colonial’s polytheist belief that is based on Greek mythology. One such human model is the Cylon Leoban and part of his personal belief in religion is reliant on the role he believes Starbuck is to play. In season one, Leoban is captured and Starbuck is the one to interrogate him. He tells her the “most basic article of faith” that both of their religions share: “This is not all that we are.” Leoban maintains that he has a better, more comprehensive understanding of such things, claiming, “To know the face of God is to know madness. I see the universe. I see the patterns. I see the foreshadowing that precedes every moment of every day” and he has “a surprise” for Starbuck. While she is torturing him for information, he cryptically states, “This is not your path, Starbuck, you have a different destiny” which is that she “will find Kobol, birthplace of us all” and “Kobol will lead [her] to Earth. This is [his] gift to” to her (“Flesh and Bone”).
The search for Earth is the defining hope for the refugees of the human race in *BSG*. They are lost in the uncharted regions of the universe, being constantly hunted down by their self-created enemy with no conceivable future before them. Earth is merely a legend from their origin myth and it is said that Earth is where the lost thirteenth tribe settled. Commander Adama uses this legend to give his fleet something to live for, something to look forward to, but has no actual belief in the legend. President Laura Roslin is aware that Adama is lying to their people, but soon she becomes a true believer in the religious scriptures and the idea of Earth when she starts having visions and her own life starts resembling what the scriptures foretold. According to the sacred scrolls, an oracle “wrote about the exile and rebirth of the human race: ‘and the lords anointed a leader to guide the caravan of the heavens to their new homeland and unto the leader they gave a vision of serpents numbering ten and two, as a sign of things to come.’” More significantly, this prophesied leader “suffered a wasting disease and would not live to enter the new land” and President Roslin is dying from advanced breast cancer. Roslin takes this to heart and follows the religious path laid out for her despite the difficulties it represents, including a split from Adama and many of his supporters (“Hand of God”).

While Roslin’s destiny is outlined in the human scriptures, Starbuck’s destiny is only foretold by Cylons. However, due to her position within the fleet, she quickly becomes the hand that does the President’s bidding and this directs Starbuck down her own path for finding Earth. With Kobol found, the next step is retrieving the Arrow of Apollo, a sacred artifact left on their former home planet Caprica which has suffered nuclear devastation. Roslin believes in the path she is following, while Starbuck only has her role as a viper pilot and faith in the military to fall back on at this point. Leoban is the
enemy, untrustworthy, and extremely manipulative, and anything he says must be treated as suspicious. For instance, he says that Kara will find Kobol, but finding Kobol is a fluke occurrence, accomplished by two other pilots and a bridge officer’s navigation coordinates. With Kobol found, Roslin wants the next step of the scriptures to take place—retrieve the Arrow of Apollo. But, Adama sees it as a fool’s errand and refuses the President’s request. As a result, Roslin approaches Kara, saying that Leoban “said we would find Kobol and Kobol would show us the way…Well, we found Kobol. Do you believe in the gods, Lieutenant?” Starbuck says yes, she does believe and was raised to believe in the “cycle of time” but asserts that it “doesn’t mean that my part of the story is to go off on some crazy-ass mission against orders.” Starbuck’s faith goes to the military first and she whole-heartily believes that “the old man (Adama) is our last chance to find earth.” Roslin challenges her faith in this and Kara confronts Adama saying, “I believed in you, believed in Earth” and goes against the orders of her superior officer to follow her destiny (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming Part One”). She goes AWOL, jumping to Caprica to retrieve the Arrow of Apollo alone and this eventually gives them a map to follow to Earth.

As Kara continues her hero’s journey to fulfill her destiny, Leoban haunts her with his expectations and obsession, holding her hostage for a period of time and trying to get her to fall in love with him. She rejects this, but their paths are entwined and, just like Buffy’s path to fulfill her destiny, Kara too must die and it is Leoban who helps her make peace with her required death through visions.
With her death, comes her mystical and unexplained resurrection. During a battle with the Cylon forces, Starbuck mysteriously reappears in her newly formed Viper, saying “It really is me. It’s gonna be okay. I’ve been to Earth. I know where it is. And I’m gonna take us there” (“Crossroads Part Two”).

Starbuck’s resurrection is a source of continued mystery and speculation, unlike Buffy’s, which is clearly explained by Willow and the other Scoobies’ actions. It is immediately expected upon her return that she is a Cylon and, therefore the enemy, which is the only logical explanation available at that time. Starbuck suffers on her return, as no one—President Roslin especially—wants to listen to her or follow her directions to Earth, and the further they go in the wrong direction, the more Kara appears to suffer. Eventually, reprieve comes from the one source who has always been less willing to believe in the religious forces at play: Adama. In the end, Adama might not believe in the scriptures and religious visions, but he does believe in Kara Thrace, saying, “I’m tired of losing. I’m tired of turning away from the things I want to believe in…and I believe you when you say you’ll die before you stop trying. And I won’t lose you again. Now go…find a way to Earth” (“Six of One”).

Adama give Starbuck a ship and a crew and sets her free to follow her destiny.
She picks up Leoban on the way, and he tells her she has “changed” and that when “I look at you now…I don’t see Kara Thrace. I see an angel blazing with the light of God…an angel eager to lead her people home” (“The Road Less Travelled”).

Unfortunately, her eagerness does not garner the payoff that her and what is left of the Colonial Fleet was desperately hoping for. Eventually, Kara manages to lead them to the lost thirteenth tribe, but what they find is a nuclear wasteland and death.

With the original Earth a desolate wasteland and not the home they were desperately hoping for, the fleet muddles on with little direction. Destiny does not leave Kara alone, however, and she is haunted by strains of music from a certain song from her past, “All Along the Watchtower.” The actual notes are found in the child’s crayon drawings of Hera, the half-human, half-cylon girl, first of her kind, and supposed future of the human race. The song is the same song that activated four of the final five human Cylon models and Starbuck is able to use this music in the heat of the moment to save the dying Battlestar. When the Galactica leaves the fleet for one last campaign against the Cylon force in a last ditch rescue mission to save the captured Hera, they have to escape at the end before they lose the ship and what is the last of her crew. Starbuck enters the music translated into coordinates on a whim, muttering, “There must be some way out of here,” jumps the ship, and finds a habitable, unsettled planet (“Daybreak Part Two”).
In the end, despite everyone’s prophesied role to play, from President Roslin the dying leader, to Hera the half-breed child, it is Kara Thrace who eventually delivers her people to the new land, fulfilling the path Leoban laid out for her in season one and her Special Destiny. With all the mystical forces manipulating the myriad of people in the BSG universe, only Starbuck could prove how they are truly what the articles of faith says: “this is not all that we are” and she shows this through the death of her human self and resurrection of her spirit self. In the end, the status quo the survivors of the Twelve Colonies have lived by is forever altered when Starbuck does more than just save them—she finds them what they lost: a home.

**Death as a Sacrifice**

“Death is on your heels, baby-- and sooner or later it's going to catch you… And some part of you wants it. Not only to stop the fear and uncertainty—But because you’re just a little bit in love with it…” (Fool for Love)

Within Joseph Campbell’s framework of the hero’s journey, death and resurrections typically play an influential role and this is especially true for Buffy and Kara. Without their deaths and eventual returns, their journeys would remain incomplete, their destinies unfulfilled, and in the instance of the universes they exist in, the status quo would be maintained. Campbell describes death for the typical and universal male hero as descending into “the belly of the whale.” He states that the idea of “the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth and is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale” (Campbell 74) He sees this as a form of internal travel rather than external travel where, “instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again” and “once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly
Paradise” (77). The imagery of the womb being associated with the male hero’s death and rebirth seems to be key for the universal male—it is a way for him to succeed where the typical, average male cannot. Through the womb imagery, he conquers a realm that is inherently female. They pass from this world to somewhere womb-ly and return (are reborn) triumphant and their rebirth also represents something that most males can never have any affect over. All women have the capability of giving birth; males do not. However, male heroes, in undergoing their journey, have the power to be reborn and in re-creating their own lives, they find a way to conquer death.

These myriad deaths for Campbell’s thousand heroes take on many different forms both symbolically and literally. The belly of the whale is a typical symbolic image from the Bible to Eskimo legends to Poseidon’s sea monster attacking Herekles, and while the literal deaths also occur, returning from the literal deaths are largely the realm of heroes that can be better described as gods. For a symbolic death and return, Campbell focuses on Rip Van Winkle’s extended slumber while, for a literal return, he addresses the stories of divine beings from different culture’s religions such as Christianity and Hinduism. For the purposes of my schema, Buffy and Kara are not regarded as divine beings in the same sense—they are a step above man and step below the gods—and while they have other-worldly and fantastical forces surrounding their deaths and resurrections, they do not achieve the same status as Jesus for example. Rather, as heroes, they are champions through which powerful forces, sometimes divine, sometimes not, achieve a change in the world.

First and foremost, it is especially important that both Buffy and Kara suffer literal deaths as opposed to symbolic ones. While Buffy’s first death through drowning
was short-lived and her resuscitation was through real, medical means—CPR—it is still important to note that even this short encounter is defined as “physically dead”: indeed, she had no breath and no pulse, and was literally dead (“What’s My Line Part Two”). Buffy’s second death involves jumping into an inter-dimensional portal that was ripping apart her world and for this mystical, yet literal death, there is no quick, human resuscitation. Kara, on the other hand, flies her viper into an electrical storm, resulting in her ship exploding with her in it. Buffy leaves behind a body to bury, but Kara is only stardust and debris.

While symbolic deaths can take a toll on a hero as they continue on their journey and promote significant character development, the stakes are higher and the development more profound with the literal deaths Buffy and Kara experience. A hero’s life and a hero’s journey are incredibly difficult and this pain and suffering does not leave them when it comes to their death and certainly does not leave them when they deal with the reality of their resurrection. A hero cannot exist without suffering and some of the most significant suffering comes from the idea of death and journeying into the underworld. Indeed, this is shown with Hercules—who’s identity as a hero is outlined by the great
labors (read: suffering) he has to undertake—who journeys into the underworld to rescue Theseus, who journeyed to the underworld to steal Persephone from Hades. Indeed, the underworld is so fraught with danger they had to send a hero to save a hero. Ultimately, both men go back to the world and carry on as they always have, unlike Buffy and Kara whose deaths change them more profoundly. Indeed, Buffy is even expected to carry on as she always has, to have “every single night” be “the same arrangement” where she “go[es] out and fight the fight,” but she is unable to do this easily (“Once More With Feeling”).

As Campbell maintains, for the male hero, and his belly-of-the-whale-imagery, it seems that instead of “conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, [he] is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died” (74). Indeed, the unknown is both death and the eternal unknown of the female womb and the mystery behind where life begins. He is “swallowed” by something bigger and more mysterious than him, and in descending into this underworld, finds triumph over life and death and eventually emerges reborn. Furthermore, he “would appear to have died” meaning Campbell sees this version of the male hero death as primarily symbolic, rather than actual. Indeed he places actual death toward the end of the hero’s journey, or the “departure,” saying, “the last act in the biography of the hero is the death or departure” and it is here that “the whole sense of life is epitomized” and indeed “the hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror” (306). First comes the symbolic death in traveling to the underworld and the symbolic rebirth of returning from said underworld. In doing this, they face and conquer death, so when the final departure is upon them, they go to it willingly, heroically. For the Slayer and Starbuck, these two instances are collapsed together—
death is death—is literal—and before these two heroes eventually give into their destinies, by giving into the fact that they must die, they struggle and suffer with the idea of death.

As shown by the imagery of death in *Buffy* and *BSG*, it appears as though the inter-dimensional portal is about to “swallow” Buffy whole and, indeed, Kara is consumed by her exploding Viper. When addressing the concept of symbolic death, Campbell states that “the popular motif” of the whale belly, or womb, signified that “the hero goes inward, to be born again” and this involves the male hero being consumed by the womb stand-in. While it is inescapable that there are similarities and parallels between Buffy and Kara’s literal experiences and the belly-of-the-whale experiences of Campbell’s men—there are gendered differences in the hero’s experiences between that which is literal and that which is symbolic. For men, this experience has to be symbolic because they are delving into a realm that is not inherently male—life and death is more closely tied to the feminine because of her ability to give birth. And when the men finally depart for good, when their death is finally literal (unless, of course, they are divine) there is no return. Campbell claims that their crossing of the threshold is an internal affair “instead of outward, beyond the confines of the physical world” (77). To go beyond the physical world, indicates that one goes beyond life and into a true, literal death and that outward journey seems to be more typical of what Buffy and Kara experience. Their struggle is internal while they come to terms with their imminent death, but upon achieving death, they go down an external path that is spiritual and not associated with diving back into the womb. Ultimately, by going outside the known world and returning, Buffy and Kara “conquer…the power of the threshold” in a way the men do not. As
female heroes, they literally have the capacity for creating life, for crossing the threshold, they can—and must for their special destinies—experience a literal, significant death from which they must also return.

As Slayer and Viper pilot, they deal in death every day, are surrounded by it. They suffer for it and because of it, and while they are closely associated with it, it is a terrible struggle for them to eventually give in to it. Indeed, Buffy’s vampire-lover and the Slayer of Slayers, which effectively makes him the only expert on killing Slayers, Spike tells her, “Every day you wake up, it’s the same bloody question that haunts you: is today the day I die?” (“Fool for Love”). Furthermore, it is her job to not just avoid death (the “first rule of slaying: Don’t die”) but it is her job to mete out death every night (“Faith, Hope, and Trick”). As Spike goes on to tell her, “Death is your art. You make it with your hands, day after day.” It is her intimate friend and eventually, “part of [her] is desperate to know: what’s it like?” (“Fool for Love”). For Starbuck, in the post-apocalyptic starscape of constantly running from and aerially combatting the Cylons, she too avoids and deals with death in the same manner. When the Viper Pilots of the Galactica have to facedown a particularly nasty Cylon Raider by the nickname of Scar, Kara struggles with being the best and risking death to take him out or accepting that sometimes, like Buffy, the most important thing to do is “don’t die.” That is increasingly difficult with all her fellow pilots constantly dying and her and fellow pilot Apollo, remarks, after a recent death, “You know what gets me? I know that in two weeks, I won’t remember his face. I can’t remember any of their faces after their killed” whereas Starbuck can’t “even remember their names.” However, they have to keep going because they’re “saving humanity for a bright and shiny future on Earth” that they “are never
gonna see” because, as pilots, they “go out over and over again until someday, some metal motherfrakker is gonna catch [them] on a bad day and just blow [them] away.” In this particular instant, Kara steps back from the brink of death (because, ultimately, her destiny still awaits) and lets someone else take the kill shot so she can go on living. However, with the trophy of Scar’s death being celebrated as another’s win, the truth of the weight Kara carries with her comes out as she dedicates her drink to the ones who are gone, and names the dead pilots, all of them. She blames her desire to live on the hope that her lost lover Anders is still alive. Her friend tells her “that you have something to live for now…not just die for” and this is key to both Buffy and Kara’s dance with death (“Scar”). Similarly, as Spike tells Buffy, “And now you see, that’s the secret. Not the punch you didn’t throw or the kicks you didn’t land. Every Slayer…has a death wish” and “the only reason you’ve lasted as long as you have is you’ve got ties to the world…Your mum, your brat kid sister, the Scoobies” (“Fool for Love”). Kara and Buffy both need something to live for as they struggle to balance on the knife edge they exist on—and that’s all it is—a balancing act, waiting for destiny to finally tip them over as opposed to just waiting for their death wish to consume, to swallow, them whole. Male heroes are typically without this specific drive, this idea of living for others as opposed to simply living for themselves—often they are portrayed as loners like in the case of Hercules who killed his own family because the jealous Hera drove him insane. He sets out to achieve his twelve labors as a way to regain his honor and Achilles too lives and dies for his own glorious honor, making their heroics more selfish than the self-sacrificing heroics of Buffy and Kara.
Buffy and Kara’s deaths are not only literal, but they both involve a struggle with acceptance, and once that acceptance is achieved, their death is represented very specifically as a sacrifice. As a precursor to their deaths, they both encounter specific instances of what it would be to die, of their “death wish,” and must find the will to carry on because it is not yet their time. Buffy must live to protect her sister Dawn (aka a mystical Key) from sinister forces who would use her to destroy the world, and Kara lives to rescue Anders and wait for the appropriate time for her to depart in her external journey to find earth. The over-arching story of Buffy’s season five is all about setting Buffy up to accept her death, as is the story-arch of “Maelstrom” in BSG. In Buffy, her support system falls apart with the departure of her boyfriend, the especially significant death of her mother, and in the kidnapping of her sister: the one person she has been tasked to protect above all others. As she approaches the next apocalypse, Buffy laments her role as the Slayer, saying, “I knew what was right. I don’t have that anymore. I don’t understand. I don’t know how to live in this world if these are the choices. If everything just gets stripped away…I don’t see the point. I just wish my mom was here” (“The Gift”). For Kara, her acceptance of death is also tied to her mother’s death, but a history of pain and abuse stood in their way. Ultimately, Kara ran from her dying mother, saying “I’m gonna walk out that door and you can look at it every frakkin’ miserable day you have left and know that I am never gonna come back through it again.” And she doesn’t see her mother alive again except for in the visions Leoban leads her through where Kara gets the chance to sit at her mother’s deathbed. Through the vision, she finally realizes there’s “nothing so terrible about death” and when Kara “finally face[s] it, its beautiful” and this leaves her “free…to become who [she] really [is]” (“Maelstrom”).
Ultimately, the idea of motherhood is intrinsically tied to the literal deaths that Buffy and Kara must experience and that is because their deaths are not just warriors’ death, but sacrifices for the greater good. Experiencing the deaths of their own mothers first is also a requirement in this journey towards death. For Buffy, it is the most significant blow to her support system that “ties her to the world” and afterwards, she doubts her capacity to love. Buffy goes on a vision quest in the desert where she is told by her spirit guide that not only is she still capable of loving, she is “full of love,” that she “loves with all her soul” and, ultimately, “love will bring [her] to [her] gift” which is “death” (“Intervention”). Kara, who ran from her mother’s death out of fear rather than experience it, is forced to live it in her visions right before her own death. She tells her dying mother, “Something's about to happen. You know that thing that you were trying to prepare me for? I don't know if I can do it” and her mother tells her, “yes you can” because “you’re my daughter” (“Maelstrom”). With their mothers gone, Buffy and Kara are forced to fill that role, but not in the traditional manner.

As women, motherhood is a concept addressed with both heroes, but as icons of third-wave feminism, it is done in an unconventional manner that addresses many of the problems with such a role. According to de Beauvior, society “mold[s] women into [a] perverted form” where society “constrain[s] their activities to a practical sort which…is especially unfree” and this involves the precept that “woman are told they have a determinate nature and special sphere of activity, and that nature and sphere are particularly linked to the maintenance of the body” (Conly 232). This maintenance refers to the idea of childbirth and child-rearing, something that neither Buffy or Kara experience. The Cylons, who are obsessed with the idea of reproducing, as it is one of
their religious tenets, try to force this on human women—Kara included—and abduct human females and hook them up to machines that are designed to impregnate them in the most sterile and inhumane way possible and these places are referred to as “farms” (“The Farm”). While Kara is not hooked up to a machine (because they believe Leoban in that she has a special destiny) she is still urged to procreate. One Cylon, masquerading as a human doctor, tells her “that her reproductive system is her ‘most valuable asset’ since ‘finding healthy child-bearing women [her] age is a top priority” (Kungl 206). Kara “angrily refuses the role of mother” and insists on choosing her own role in life, saying “I’m not a commodity; I’m a viper pilot” (206). Kara outright rejects the traditional method of motherhood via pregnancy and childbirth, whereas for Buffy, at only twenty and younger than Kara, does not have to be “reduc[ed]…to her biology” in the same way (Kungl 206).

While neither hero has to be forced into the domestic sphere in the traditional manner, they both come into motherhood by different means and this character growth is a necessary development in their journey to sacrifice themselves because, ultimately, motherhood is a sacrificial role. With Buffy’s mother unexpectedly killed by a brain aneurism, “Buffy is suddenly invested ‘officially’ with the caretaking responsibilities that she had always exercised unofficially” (Battis). Dawn, who is the desired object of the enemy, “is her responsibility” now and “Buffy must not only ensure her physical safety, but also feed, clothe and nurture her” (Battis 68). Furthermore, with Dawn kidnapped and the apocalypse at hand, Buffy is so invested in Dawn’s safety and her role as not just big sister, but surrogate mother, that Buffy is prepared to place Dawn above the rest of the world. When it becomes known that the only way to shut down the inter-dimensional
portal is “when the blood flows no more” or “when Dawn is dead.” Buffy rejects this, saying if “the ritual starts, we all die” because she’ll “kill anyone who comes near Dawn” (“The Gift”). Furthermore, it is clear that Buffy sees her relationship with Dawn as more than sisterly and “their sibling relationship is effectively rewritten as a kind of symbiosis” or something that is more akin to mother-daughter. Simply put, “Dawn is Buffy and Buffy is Dawn” because they both share the same blood “and in the end, the shared blood is the only thing powerful enough to stop all the dimensions in the universe from crumbling” (Battis 74). In the end, Buffy figures out that “when the blood flows no more” applies to her just as it applies to Dawn, and that death really is “her gift.” Buffy sacrifices herself to save the world, but she does it to save Dawn first.

Kara’s experience with motherhood and the character growth she gains from it is not as directly related to her sacrifice, but it is necessary step for her to take before her death. After growing up as an abused child and living through the fall of her society, Kara is limited in her ability to give for others unless it involves being in the cockpit or shooting at the enemy. Even though she was “living for” Anders, her marriage to him is overshadowed by her romantic relationship with Apollo and Kara finds herself unable to fully give herself to either man—and that is because she is not meant to. During the occupation of New Caprica, Kara is kidnapped by Leoban and, once again, the Cylons attempt to force motherhood on her. Leoban presents her with a young girl named Kasey, claiming that because of an operation she underwent at the Farm where they supposedly harvested her eggs, Kara is Kasey’s biological mother (“Precipice”). While Starbuck
initially rejects the idea of being this girl’s mother, she does eventually “come to care for Kacey in a maternal way” giving in to the child in a way she refuses to give in to Leoban whose “goal is to get her to love him” (Conly 235). In caring for Kasey, Starbuck makes sacrifices that involve the “indignity of playing the role of compliant female” to Leoban in order to ultimately get Kasey to safety, something Starbuck would sooner die than do before Kacey. However, with a child in the picture, she is willing to act the part, for a while, and it soon becomes apparent that “Starbuck’s rejection of traditional feminine activity isn’t…because she’s too traumatized to allow affection for a child” (Conly).

Actually, like Buffy, she “has a great capacity for affection” and it is not “an inability to love that keeps her from motherhood, but commitment to living a different kind of life that she’s made for herself” (Conly 236) So, while neither hero is technically a mother, they experience a form of motherhood on their road to a heroic sacrifice and in literally dying, they are able to return and usher in an era of change for all their people.

The idea of motherhood is more closely associated to the heroes within my schema rather than the loner males that define the classical tradition of heroes. Indeed, Hercules is shaped by the deaths of his wife and children and, in order to maintain his status as hero, he must regain his honor after killing them. They are simply window dressing to his tragic origin story. Achilles on the other hand, will have no children because he chooses to die young and maintain his glory. His war-bride, Briseis is not someone who he chooses to live for, rather she is just his reward for sacking the temple of Apollo and a symbol of his status as a warrior. When she is taken from him, he does
not lower himself to get her back, as Kara does with Kasey, rather he abstains from the battle because he is being dishonored and for the men, honor is paramount to their status of hero. Women on the other hand, are typically seen to be fighting for others and will sacrifice everything to protect that other person who exists outside themselves. Ripley steps into a mothering role with Newt and protects her from the aliens at all costs and Sarah Connor’s role is wholly dependent on being John Connor’s mother and it is her responsibility to ensure that he survives to lead in the future. Motherhood goes hand in hand with sacrifice and that is representative in Buffy and Kara’s roles as heroes and especially representative in their deaths.

**Resurrection**

“The hardest thing in the world...is to live in it.”—Buffy, “The Gift”

Whereas both Buffy and Kara’s deaths are associated with the concept of motherhood and have similarities in sacrifice, there are distinct differences to the cycle of death and life for these heroes that prove problematic at first glance, but in actuality show Buffy and Kara to be flip sides to the same coin. For Buffy, her death is quite literally a sacrifice, one for the world, and a very personal one for her sister Dawn—Dawn also could have jumped in the portal to save the world, but Buffy, taking on the role of mother for her, would never have allowed that to happen. She stepped up to the domestic role and gave her life for her sister’s; her death was significant in every way a slayer’s could be: she died a warrior’s death for the world, and continued to fulfill her obligations as mother, by sacrificing herself in Dawn’s stead. Where her death was especially meaningful, Buffy’s resurrection had no immediate meaning and was the emptiest and most confusing time in her life. Kara’s death on the other hand, while necessary, was as
empty and confusing as Buffy’s resurrection. As the best pilot of the bunch, she is slowly unraveling and having visions of an enemy bogie that does not exist. She constantly engages the imaginary enemy and eventually she dies in her cockpit fighting nothing and no one. Her resurrection, however, is a direct inverse of Buffy’s. The mystical forces at play in the *BSG* universe mysteriously bring her back after showing her the way to earth so she can lead her people home. Whereas her death held no significance, her resurrection is arguably the most significant turn of events in the epic tale and in her role as a hero. Without both the sacrifice and the return, these heroes’ destinies would be left unfulfilled and the dynamic of their worlds would continue to stagnate.

Hand in hand with death, Resurrection or the Return is a necessary step in the hero’s journey and especially necessary for the Special Destinies laid out for the Slayer and Starbuck. As with many aspects of Buffy and Kara’s journey, the roots of this exist within the primary model: as Campbell outlines, “The two worlds, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other—different as life and death, as day and night” (188). As Slayer and Viper pilot, Buffy and Kara have lived for years on the edge of these two different worlds dancing with death. In a sense, they have already gained mastery of death in being accomplished warriors who kill their enemy with great efficacy and in accepting their own death when they allow themselves to be sacrificed. In dying, “the hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness” and there the hero “accomplishes his adventure, or again is simply lost to us, imprisoned, or in danger” (188). For Kara and Buffy, their deaths are literal, rather than a symbolic travail into a hell dimension, and are therefore portrayed in the “simply lost to us” category. In their
deaths, they leave behind grieving and confused loved ones in the Scooby Gang and the crew of the *Galactica* and the sense of loss in losing them is profound.

Their Returns are significant to the groups they come back to and are especially significant to the returning hero since “the first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life” (Campbell 189). With the hero returning from the threshold after experiencing death, there is a transition period where she has to adjust and this serves to strengthen them in their journey. While some male heroes have the advantage of returning triumphantly, Buffy and Kara suffer acutely before they make peace with their Resurrection, much like they were forced to do with their Deaths. Indeed, after Harry Potter’s short death at the hands of Voldemort, his Return is simple and easy for him personally, and rallies the troops for the final push to victory. The same is true for Aslan when the peoples of Narnia have to face the Snow Queen; his triumphant return comes in their hour of need and helps them win the war.

For Buffy, her return is anything but triumphant. After her death, her core group of friends, the Scoobies, cannot accept the death of their friend and hero. Indeed the episodes where they work to magically resurrect her are titled “Bargaining Parts 1 and 2,” showing that after 147 days of her death, they have only achieved the third step in the process of grieving. However, unlike most friends, the Scoobies actually have something to bargain with. Willow, the powerful Wicca of their group, has both the knowledge and power to bring Buffy back from death, saying “This isn’t like Dawn trying to bring Mrs. Summers back, or anything we’ve dealt with before. Buffy didn’t die a natural death. She was killed by mystical energy.” The specific circumstances of Buffy’s heroic death leave
the Scoobies with an honest chance of fully resurrecting Buffy rather than simply raising
a zombie or a shadow of her former self and they take full advantage. What’s more, as
part of the bargaining process, the Scoobies have convinced themselves that the
circumstances of Buffy’s death “means [they] don’t know…where she really is” and they
have convinced themselves that “her soul…her essence…could be trapped in some sort
of hell dimension…suffering eternal torment…just because she saved [them]”
(“Bargaining Part 1”). In facing Buffy’s death, the Scoobies feel helpless and, stuck in
the stage of bargaining, they come up with the idea that they must save their savior from
a hell dimension. However, the reality is that Buffy was not in a hell dimension, instead,
Buffy was in a place where she was “warm…and [she] was loved, and [she] was
finished,” she felt “complete” and she believed she was in “heaven” (“Afterlife”). Buffy
goes on to confess that she sees the real world, the human world, and the life it holds as
“hard and bright and violent” and she now sees the world as “Hell” (“Afterlife”).
Campbell states that in order for the hero to continue on his journey, “they must survive
the impact of the world” and this is especially difficult for Buffy who was ripped out of a
peaceful, safe heavenly dimension and forced to live in the world again (Campbell 194).
While her friends successfully bargain for Buffy to be returned to them, they forego the
next stages of grieving and Buffy is forced to struggle with a deep and dark depression
where she loses her way as the hero.

When Kara returns to the fold, she believes herself triumphant, but this is soon
overshadowed by how her people react to her mysterious resurrection. When Kara
returns, it seems as though she has no memory or awareness off her death, unlike Buffy
who literally had to claw her way out of her own coffin. Moreover, with the human
variation of Cylons, resurrection has an entirely different meaning within the *BSG* universe. Whenever a cylon’s body dies, their consciousness is downloaded into a new body and they go on living. Death is nothing more than a learning experience for these machines made into a simulation of humanity and, in the war against the Cylons, resurrection is an everyday occurrence for the Colonials. When Starbuck shows up alive, it is immediately assumed that she is not a returning hero, but the enemy. Those who believe in her cannot help but look on her with suspicion as she tells her story, saying “I followed a heavy raider into the storm. Took some hits, passed out. When I came to, I was orbiting this planet” which “matched the description” of Earth. When questioned on how exactly she got there, Kara can only say, “I told you, I don’t know exactly” and the President responds with “Well, that’s just not good enough, Captain” (“He That Believeth in Me”). Over the next several weeks, Kara is imprisoned, doubted, betrayed, and has the crew of her ship commit mutiny against her. Eventually, she leads them to a dead and desolate Earth that has already faced its apocalypse and there she finds what can only be her own dead remains in her own crashed Viper. Here, Kara faces her lowest moment, shouting desperately, “If that’s me in there, then what am I?” and even Leoban, Kara’s staunchest supporter of her Special Destiny, runs from her, claiming even he cannot believe in her now or know what she is (“Sometimes A Great Notion”). Upon her resurrection, Kara seems to fail and fail again as she is unable to find a real home for the Fleet. She suffers a deep and emotional trauma much like Buffy’s return from the threshold. Surviving the “impact of the world” for these heroes is not an easy task and proves to be their greatest challenge that they must overcome. To follow the road of a hero is to suffer and that is made abundantly clear in all hero storylines. Their suffering
and their ability to overcome such torment is why people flock to them and want to
uphold their examples. However, in the terms of this genre, the idea of rebirth, of coming
back from the threshold, is addressed in a way that is not typical for an average hero, but
essential to the heroes in my schema. Ultimately, for Buffy and Kara, dying is easy, even
if they fear or dread it. Dying is simple. It is living in general—as a hero or even a regular
person—that is the challenge, indeed, “the hardest thing in the world…is to live in it” and
Buffy and Kara must not just exist within it, but fulfill their destinies within it (“The
Gift”). Too often, the trials and tribulations of a hero receive too much emphasis, but
when watching Kara and Buffy simply struggle to live after their deaths, the audience can
relate to them in ways that are not able to with more triumphant heroes like Harry Potter.
His return from the threshold is exultant and holds absolutely no trauma for him. Within
the hours of his return, he triumphs over Voldemort, and the Wizarding war that has gone
on longer than his life span is summarily over. Then, the audience is presented with a
sweet picture in the future of life after the war where peace is achieved and living is
simply an easy task to accomplish. However, the heroes in my schema present a different
picture about everyday life. Buffy struggles with the mundane tasks of the day-in and
day-out and it takes her the majority of the season and several mistakes before she
literally claws her way out of a second grave and is able to find her bearing in the world
again (“Grave”). Kara, on the other hand, is still only comfortable when she has a clear
enemy to fight and when she finds Earth for the fleet, it is not a home for her. Having
already died, her undefined spirit-self leaves at the end of the journey and the every-day
living on the newly-inhabited Earth is left to others like Apollo.
Heroes Shape Us

“Let me tell you something, when it’s dark and I’m all alone and I’m scared or freaked out or whatever, I always think, ‘What would Buffy do?’ You’re my hero.”

--Xander, “The Freshman”

When Scott Allison analyzes the make up of a modern day hero and why they are important or significant to the cultures they exist within, he pays specific attention to how the audience interprets the experience of reading or watching their heroes in action. Allison claims that heroes shape the audience and culture they exist within, because “they give us exactly what we need” and that “there is an underlying human need for heroes to show us the best side of human nature” (188). Essentially, this concept was first addressed with Jungian archetypes where it’s argued “that humans are born with a…’readiness’ to encounter heroes, to want them, to seek them, to recognize them, and to deal with them;” we are programmed to respond to them and our response shapes us in a way that “improve[s] the quality of our lives” (188). Buffy and Kara fulfill this need in the era of third-wave feminism; the audience recognizes them as heroes, and they fulfill a want and a need for the audience and they successfully do this in a way that reaches out to women and then goes still further to the male audience.

Whedon, as Buffy’s creator, is a self-proclaimed feminist and his active attempt to champion feminism though his strong female characters is also an active attempt to tackle it in a way the male audience can respond to as well. They don’t need to see Buffy as a feminist icon or a feminist hero; they simply need to accept her as a hero and not feel the need to challenge this because of her gender. At the beginning of the show, Whedon said “If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that’s what’s happening, it’s better than sitting down and selling
them on feminism” (Bellafante). While Buffy the show in its entirety is certainly not a perfect representation feminism, Buffy as a hero is a success and her ability to portray all the necessary qualities of heroes resonate with women and men alike. Moreover, her popularity and success as a hero, opened the door to more of her kind like Sydney Bristow of Alias and, most notably, is commonly seen as a necessary precursor for Starbuck’s gender swap in BSG (citation needed). Initially, some male fans of the original show were against what they saw as a travesty in turning Starbuck into a woman-with the original actor of Starbuck, Dirk Benedict, notably leading the charge. When Benedict heard of the change to his breakthrough character, even after the influence of second and third-wave feminism, he angrily responded with

“Women are from Venus. Men are from Mars. Hamlet does not scan as Hamletta. Nor does Han Solo as Han Sally. Faceman is not the same as Facewoman. Nor does Stardoe a Starbuck make. Men hand out cigars. Women “hand out” babies. And thus the world, for thousands of years has gone round” (Kungl 202).

However, in the end, “Starbuck as a woman works too” and “over the seasons, Sackhoff (the actor portraying Starbuck) has managed to create a character that is not battened down by comparisons to a predecessor, effectively moving this character out of the ‘battle of the sexes’ milieu and into sheer good storytelling” (203). In the end, Starbuck still enjoys a good cigar and an abundance of drinks, but the depth of her character is truly explored when she loses the initial tough-guy façade and is successful when “exhibiting strength and vulnerability” instead of maintaining a simplistic binary of male is one and female is the other with no crossover. While Buffy and Kara don’t “hand out babies” in the traditional sense, they still step up to the challenge of being a mother, but that does not compromise their ability for the heroic and, indeed, “the notion that motherhood automatically makes one less tough [should be] rethought” (207). While
Buffy and Kara exhibit traditional “physical toughness [which makes] society uneasy” they also show “toughness that goes beyond mere strength” and includes “determination, their drive for independence, and their sense of self-identity” (208). Their heroism goes far beyond the simplistic traits of physical toughness and can be fully explored because of their gender.

In the end, this emerging schema is incredibly important to the canon because of the effect they have on culture. Allison notes, “how deeply gender plays a role in shaping our thinking about heroes” and “until recently, women have been denied opportunities for heroism, and so there a far fewer female than male heroes on lists” or schemas that Allison analyzes in his book. Furthermore, his research illustrates “that people’s default belief about [heroes] is that they are males with stereotypically masculine traits” (Allison 165). Buffy and Kara are proof that the hero archetype can be explored in a way that is significant to both genders while also exemplifying different yet similar ways to be a woman in the third-wave. They are heroes not just for one gender, but for both genders, role models for both genders, and just as little boys grew up watching the original Battlestar Galactica and wanting to be the original Starbuck, they can look at the new, female version of their hero and realize she is just as worthy—if not more so—of idolizing. Buffy and Kara represent a paradigm shift for what it means to be a hero.
Works Cited


**Individual Episodes**


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Vita

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