Fear and Laughing in Sunnydale
Buffy vs Dracula

Peter Götz

[Dr. Peter Götz is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria. He is currently working on a study of the three Nosferatus (Murnau, Herzog, Merhige).]

Buffy Summers saw the light of night in 1992, exactly eighty years after a bald, rat-like Nosferatu had crawled across the screen at the Berlin Marmorsaal des Zoo. Murnau’s version of Bram Stoker’s novel set the stage for a cinematic myth that would continue to haunt the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Read as fear of foreign invasion, capitalism gone wild, horror of war experience, fear of the New or “suddenly sexual” Woman, Oedipus complex, Victorian sexual repression, a metaphor for the new medium film with its undead characters, the Nosferatus and Draculas have been mirrors of our fears and desires: “We conjure up the vampires that we want or need for the cultural and historical times that we find ourselves in” (Williamson 5).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer did to the vampire myth (and to horror in general) what post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodern theories had done to literary and cultural studies: it challenged everything that had come before. Along with her group of friends, the Scoobies, Buffy questioned notions of genre, gender, and self with the help of kung fu, witch fu, and most of all, humorous Buffyisms. To quote Buffy: “You’re a vampire. Oh, I’m sorry. Was that an offensive term? Should I say undead American?” (2.01)

The show’s creator, Joss Whedon, described the basic idea as follows:

I’ve always been a huge fan of horror movies and I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed. I started feeling bad for her. You know, I thought it’s time that she got a chance to take back the night. So the idea for Buffy came from just the very simple thought of a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her and she’s not only ready for him, she trounces him. (qtd. in Tracy 13)

And so she does. By the end of the twentieth century (in 1997 to be precise), a postmodern, hip and witty Buffy Summers moves from Los Angeles (where the 1992 movie version had taken place) to Sunnydale, California to fight vampires. In Sunnydale’s special universe, the “Buffyverse,” anything can and will happen. Extensive literal metaphors and ironic distance allowed the show to go where no show had gone before.²

In the world of Buffy, … the problems that teenagers face become literal monsters. A mother really can take over her daughter’s life (“The Witch,” 1003); a strict stepfather-to-be is indeed a heartless machine (“Ted,” 2011); a young lesbian fears that her nature is demonic (“Goodbye Iowa,” 4014; “Family,” 5006); a girl who has sex with even the nicest-seeming guy may discover that he afterward becomes a monster (“Innocence,” 2014). (Wilcox and Lavery xix)

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² “The demon-filled world on Buffy is cast as the ‘real’ world; the sunny world of American middle-class culture is a façade, concealing the dangers inherent in its very structure” (Chandler 5).
Horrific themes are combined with humor in a way that stresses their similarities. This is not far-fetched since, according to Robert Bloch, “comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin … Both deal in the grotesque and unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different physical reactions” (qtd. in Carroll 146). The ‘grotesque,’ made up of fear and disgust, is what defines a monster. The ‘unexpected,’ however, is the key concept for both the literal metaphors as well as the humor on the show. Surprising turns of events or rather unheard-of combinations are what define comedic incongruity. Incongruity, which Carroll calls the “leading type of comic theory” (152) and “the basis of comic amusement … [brings together] disparate or contrasting ideas or concepts” (153). A frat boy, for example, who actually turns into a hyena certainly fulfills these criteria. And metaphors (alive or undead) also function this way by combining what is not directly connected, allowing for new meaning to be created within a shared framework. We understand the meaning of “it’s raining cats and dogs” without having to imagine large numbers of animals hitting our streets. If they do, however, this can be cause for a horrific scenario (or a humorous one).

As soon as metaphors become scenarios instead of matters of speech, they hit home because they are recognizable yet at the same time remain strange. This applies to comedy, too. Unheard-of combinations or obvious incongruity make us laugh because we understand the categories and react to the way they are broken down, disrespected, or dissolved. In his discussion of horror and humor, Carroll uses the following example to describe such category errors:

On a planet in deep space, the inhabitants are cannibals. One butcher shop specializes in academic meat. Teaching assistants go for two dollars a pound, assistant professors cost three dollars a pound, professors with tenure are only one dollar and fifty cents a pound, but deans – deans are five hundred dollars a pound. When latter-day astronauts ask why deans are so expensive, they are asked, in turn: Have you ever tried to clean a dean? (153)

Academic achievement and animal cleanliness could probably not be any more incongruous.

Incongruity, along with superiority, is applied to speech acts to add humor to the Scooby gang’s fights and their very special ‘Buffyisms.’ They yield performative power and express what Butler calls “an awareness of language … as that which brings into being what it names as an effect of the act of naming” (Bodies 224). In her discussion of Butler’s theories, Nussbaum also points to “Austin's linguistic category of ‘performatives’ [which] function, in and of themselves, as actions rather than as assertions. When (in appropriate social circumstances) I say ‘I bet ten dollars,’ or ‘I’m sorry,’ or ‘I do’ (in a marriage ceremony), or ‘I name this ship...’ I am not reporting on a bet or an apology or a marriage or a naming ceremony, I am conducting one.”

The way Buffy, Willow, and Xander apply such acts as actions (in Butler’s terms linguistically and theatrically) is characteristic of their individual power and also defines them. In season 4 episode 17, for example, Xander learns his lesson when he off-handedly uses language in such a performative way and his incantation “librum incendere” quite literally backfires. Commenting on this scene, Overbey and Preston-Matto state: “This incident demonstrates … the materiality of language in Buffy the Vampire

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3 “My theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical…. A reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions…. The speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through it implied relation to linguistic conventions…. Speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous” (Butler, Gender Trouble xxv).

4 As the side-kick character Xander learned when speaking the words “Librum Incendere” in front of a book and it literally was set on fire, the power of the utterance is one which enacts, not merely represents (Cover 9).
Words and utterances have palpable power, and their rules must be respected if they are to be wielded as weapons in the fight against evil” (73).

At the beginning of season 5’s long-awaited opener Buffy vs Dracula (which first aired 26 September 2000), there is a comparable incident when Willow shows off her ‘witch fu.’ The title sequence also presents the different fighting styles used by the Scoobies and comments on gender roles. Buffy and her boyfriend Riley use physical strength in a humorous manner playing ball, Xander and Anya are passive and ineffective bystanders watching the others interact, while Willow and Tara personify verbal power by casting a spell which starts a rainstorm.

At this point, Buffy has been demoted to ‘football slayer.’ Her sense of self, “as an effect of a performance that is constituted in and through language, discourse and culture” (Cover 4) is based on being able to define herself as vampire slayer, a combination of physical strength and performative wit. To define and re-establish herself, repeated references to a foundation outside herself are required. As Butler states, “there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will” (qtd. in Cover 9). In other words, she must perform as slayer and she must be recognized as slayer. When Dracula comes to town, she is elated when he recognizes her and tells her that he only came to Sunnydale because of her (“Obviously not for the sun,” he adds). At the same time he questions her slayerness and asks her how she would define herself—as a passively chosen slayer who succumbs to her vocation or as a hyper-active, sensually and sexually stimulated hunter. She knows there is no simple answer to this question. “The self, in spite of attempts to understand one’s ‘true’ nature (see Buffy’s attempt to understand her ‘dark’ side after her encounter with Dracula in ‘Buffy vs Dracula’) is instead contingent, multiple, and perpetually in flux” (Daspi 125). But although Buffy is initially confused when she runs into Dracula for the first time – after all, he is a literary and cinematic fictional character—‘reality’ in Sunnydale is always an unstable category and her immediate disbelief is followed by eventual disrespect. It seems a little like meeting an aging rock star who cannot be taken seriously anymore. Buffy responds to Dracula’s introduction with an irreverent “Get out!”

A slayer is defined in relation to vampires and especially in relation to iconic Nosferatu and Dracula. As her generation’s Chosen One, it comes as no surprise that Buffy eventually has to face the two grand-masters (and grand-fathers) of cinematic vampires to turn her into the slayer. But while the whole first season sees her fight the ‘Master,’ her encounter with Dracula lasts only a single episode.

Buffy and her gang are constantly re-inscribing and ‘performing’ their selves. The Master of Season 1 with his rat-like face, long fingers and bald dome, a Nosferatu look-alike beast from the east, does not. He is stuck geographically and subjectively in his underworld of past values. Heinrich Joseph Nest—his name, according to the original script—personifies an old patriarchal order via the first cinematic vampire. This master represents a stable and immutable belief in tradition. “There could hardly be a nastier incarnation of the patriarchy than the ancient, ugly vampire Master” says Wilcox (Chandler 20). He is the classic monster of fear and disgust and he has a clear idea of what a female slayer should be. He bites and kills Buffy at the end of Season 1 but Buffy rises from the dead. Reanimated by Xander, she shows the Master what she thinks of unquestioned myths. She slays him with her stake Mister Pointy in hand and a Buffyism on her tongue. With a little incongruity (as if this were a simple school exam and

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5 While this sequence introduces their particular strengths as they will be played out in this episode, they are not necessarily the performative peculiarities they are known for throughout the series: “So, while Xander’s language skills are largely creative [he is the master of the double- and sometimes single entendre] and Buffy’s performative, we might call Willow’s foundational … establishing context from text” (Overbey 80).

6 “In Richie Tankersley Cusick’s novelization of this episode (published by Archway under the title The Harvest), the Master is said to be six hundred years old, and his name is said to be Heinrich Joseph Nest. This fact comes from Joss Whedon’s original script for the episode, but is never mentioned or corroborated in the televised episodes” (“Welcome to the Hell-Mouth/The Harvest: March 10, 1997.” BuffyGuide.com. n.p., n.d. Web. 2 Aug 06).
not the end of the world) and a good dose of superiority (“Who’s pretty?”) she smashes the old order and its patriarch, leaving behind a crucified skeleton. “We saved the world. I say we party!”

Just a little undead, Nosferatu reappears as an intertextual reference in *Buffy vs Dracula’s* opening sequence. When Werner Herzog remade Nosferatu as an homage to grand German cinema, he literally continued where Murnau had left off – in the Harkers’ bedroom. In *Nosferatu: Phantom of the Night*, Bruno Ganz as Jonathan Harker and Isabelle Adjani as Lucy lie in bed when suddenly she wakes from a nightmare. Ganz immediately comes to comfort her and tells her that it was just a bad dream. He is in control, it seems, and ready to protect her. In *Buffy vs Dracula* the roles are reversed. Riley does not have to comfort Buffy. When she wakes up, she lets him sleep and goes out to perform her duty as slayer. And this time, she meets Count Famous.

Initially, Buffy is a little surprised to run into a literary character. Willow’s beach performance, however, might be to blame for bringing the literally undead back to life. There seems to be a causal connection between her incantation and the arrival of Count Dracula’s coffin amidst a rainstorm. Willow did not finish her sentence and one can only guess the extent of the effect a start-the-BBQ-spell gone wrong might have: “It’s no big,” she says. “You just have to balance the elements. So when you affect one you don’t wind up causing …”

When Buffy and the Scoobies first meet Dracula, their reaction is immediate disbelief and eventual disrespect. It is a little like meeting an aging rock star whom they cannot take seriously. Dracula, the media-mosaic brand name, “represents the Count as overly familiar, and as reduced in (narrative and affective) potency” (Hills 122). Everybody knows Dracula, the dark seductive count. Gender roles associated with the Dracula myth (and the novel) are presented, stereotypically and repeatedly. “Buffy is fighting not only the manifestation of the character Dracula [but] also … the Hollywood narrative tradition that would have a woman succumb to the power of Dracula” (Daugherty 163).

When Dracula introduces himself with his “European accent”—as the subtitles explain—both of them recognize each other as their ultimate other. Über-vampire meets Über-slayer. Dracula’s penetrating “hypno-eyes” are the first image we see in an extreme close-up, linking him to the classic portrayal by Bela Lugosi, whose eyes hypnotized not only the characters on screen but also the audience. In Tod Browning’s 1931 *Dracula*, the Count’s eyes were often highlighted and eroticized. When Renfield succumbs to Dracula he not only starts laughing hysterically, his eyes also show his changed state of mind. And Van Helsing’s probing eyes were magnified by his powerful glasses. Lugosi’s overpowering masculinity and foreign sexuality caused such hysteria in movie theatres that ads promised audiences: “A Nurse will be in attendance!” Watched nowadays, the Lugosi monster has lost his bite and is a good example of how a monster can become his own parody: “Invested with fearsomenes, the categorically interstitial figure is horrific; bereft of fearsomeness, it is on its way toward comedy” (Carroll 157). Buffy had already hinted at the outdated and ineffective visual seduction in Season 1 when she told the Master to “save the hypno crap for the tourists.”

Dracula’s eyes, then and now, also point to the male gaze of Lugosi and Buffy’s Dracula. Daugherty described their almost “voyeuristic relationship [and how] the issue of the traditional male gaze re-emerges…. He spends a lot of time looking at her, willing her to submit to his power” (163). But Buffy will not allow him such control over her. The only one who may keep an eye on her and watch her is Giles, her Watcher. The gaze, however, is also perceived as a threat by the other characters. Jowett argues that “the male characters are [actually] more threatened by Dracula than Buffy is” (148). They certainly want to ensure that the “penetrating eyes” remain a metaphor. The powerful threat of sexual seduction is ridiculed by Xander who has become a willing Renfield. When he refers to Dracula as

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7 When the Scoobies talk about their encounter with the Dark Prince, Xander wonders whether Dracula knows Frankenstein – connecting them as both based on literary characters and Universal Studio’s main monsters.

8 “At the same time *Buffy’s* Dracula is masculinized through a powerful sexuality that threatens not only Buffy but also the male characters. Dracula, like the tough guys, is in competition with other males and with the Slayer. His sexual power is deliberately presented as penetrative and aggressive” (Jowett 147).
“Master” in the presence of the Scoobies, he quickly adds “bator.” One wonders who has a case of Dark Prince Envy.

Dracula, played by German-born Rudolf Martin, is stylish in a metro-sexual kind of way and quite young looking; Martin was 33 at the time, Lugosi had been 49. Unlike Nosferatu, this Dracula is a monster evoking not fear and disgust but rather fear and plenty of desire. Xander cannot resist his new Master, Willow thinks he is sexy but denies it in the presence of her lover Tara, heterosexual former revenge demon Anyanka knows him from the old days, and Buffy is temporarily enthralled because the world-famous Dracula knows her and because he can put a finger on her inner turmoil. His penetrating stare with all its ‘draculaness’ seduces her and she lets herself be bitten.

During Buffy and Dracula’s initial encounter, he questions her slayeress and asks her how she would define herself—as a passively chosen slayer who succumbs to her vocation or as a hyper-active, sensually and sexually stimulated hunter. She knows that there is no simple answer to this question: “The self, in spite of attempts to understand one’s ‘true’ nature (author’s note: see Buffy’s attempt to understand her ‘dark’ side after her encounter with Dracula) is instead contingent, multiple, and perpetually in flux” (Daspit).

Buffy’s hyper-sexual allure is part of the cultural image of the vampire and the cinematic Draculas (Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, Louis Jourdan, Jack Palance, Frank Langella, Gary Oldman). Basing the depiction of Dracula on what have become vampire cliches, the Scoobies briefly discuss them before they work on their action plan. References to Bela Lugosi and the Count on Sesame Street are overshadowed by what is a new “original”—Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 version which re-wrote Stoker’s novel and called it Bram Stoker’s Dracula. Coppola’s incorrect and overstated connecting of Dracula to the historical Vlad Tepes are ostensibly part of pop cultural knowledge when Giles asks the Scoobies to collect information on the ‘real Dracula.’ “There’s a great deal of myth about Dracula,” states Giles and then asks to collect information “about the actual legend of Vlad the Impaler on the Internet.”

Buffy the Vampire Slayer also references one scene that is central to the presentation of gender in the novel and in Coppola’s and other Dracula adaptations. Dracula’s victims in the novel are all female: the three sisters who attack Harker, plus Lucy Westenra and her mother. While readings of Stoker often emphasize Victorian fear and repression of the ‘suddenly sexual’ New Woman at its core, Harker’s interaction with the three vampire sisters and Dracula’s subsequent reaction shows Dracula’s other desire. In his early working notes for the novel, Stoker includes the sentence “This man belongs to me!” These are the words Dracula hurls at the vampires after they have taken hold of helpless Harker. When the master patriarch bursts into the room and orders them to stop, he does so because he wants Harker for himself: “How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all. This man belongs to me!” And in response to one of the female vampires he states: “Yes, I too can love, you yourselves can tell it from the past. Is it not so? Well, now I promise you that when I am done with him you shall kiss him at your will” (my italics, 43). Weeks later, when Harker is again locked up in his room, he overhears Dracula and the three sisters making a deal. “Your time is not

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9 Martin and Gellar have their own history. He played Gellar’s love interest Anton on the soap “All My Children.” In 2000, he also starred as Vlad the Impaler in Dark Prince: The True Story of Dracula adding to the common confusion of Dracula with Vlad.

10 The intimate encounter of slayer and vampire is in line with the vampire types—the old Master bit her in order to kill her and suave Dracula bites her seductively to show her that they are kindred spirits.

11 “This episode can be seen as a new beginning for Buffy after defeating Adam and paves the way for the new season’s main theme: Buffy’s real self and purpose. She learns from Dracula that she is a hunter perhaps more than a slayer, and he whets her appetite for exploring herself and finding out more about the Slayer lineage and its purpose and roots” (“Buffy vs. Dracula”).

12 There are many other pop culture references in the episode: The Horse Whisperer, Seinfeld’s puffy shirt, Star Wars and most of all, Francis Ford Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula.

yet come. Wait. Have patience. Tomorrow night, tomorrow night, is yours!” (52). Homoeroticism is even more explicit in the first American edition of the novel (Doubleday) which renders this passage as follows: “Tonight is mine. Tomorrow night is yours.”

In Buffy vs Dracula, it is Buffy’s Van Helsingy watcher, Giles, who finds himself in the ‘chick pit.’ In this case, Dracula is absent and Giles is saved by Buffy’s boyfriend, Riley. In a parody of Coppola’s most famous scene, and as a reader of Stoker, Giles immediately spells out the reference: “And you must be the three sisters, yes?” While in Stoker the scene was charged with masochistic (Williamson 9), hetero- and homosexual undertones, Giles is clearly enjoying himself and does not want to be saved by anybody.

Coppola has explained his motivation: “I saw the 1931 Bela Lugosi version when I was maybe fourteen…. I loved Lugosi … but I was disappointed by the three Brides – they were just standing there in their robes, looking dead, and that wasn’t what a fourteen-year-old boy wants to see” (2). Oldman as the new Lugosi (and Keanu Reeves as the new Harker) also serve as reference point for Mel Brooks’ 1995 spoof Dracula: Dead and Loving It. Stoker’s Harker described a mix of attraction and repulsion, “some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (Stoker 42). Just like Giles, Renfield-Harker in Brooks’ version does not experience this tension anymore. Because the vampire sisters (strangely enough reduced to two) are not threatening or frightening any more, “what remains is their status as category errors, which, of course, makes them apt targets or objects of incongruity humor” (Carroll 156). The category errors are here nicely exemplified by sound – the non-diegetic mood music abruptly stops when Dracula exclaims: “Stop that!”

While Buffy finally faces Dracula and her dark desire, she confronts the old-school vampire in his Hammer House of Horror-style castle. Buffy knows how to kill the grandfathers of horror. She has seen the movies and she knows how to act. Pop cultural knowledge is her tool of choice and like the Frog brothers in The Lost Boys who used their comic strip-based “facts” to fight off the father vampire, Buffy keeps the old man down. In the end, Dracula is defeated and silenced without much physical strength. His penetrating gaze is stopped short by Buffy’s Mister Pointy and he is silenced by Buffy’s powerful wit. Jowett noted: “She successfully resists him, makes the males’ rescue attempt unnecessary, and returns to form, telling Dracula, ‘You know, I really think the thrall’s gone out of our relationship’” (148). Her words are more powerful than her martial arts. As a literary and cinematic character, he does not dissolve into dust but is ready to return at any time.

Buffy’s superiority is performatively established as an “act-like status in the present” (Butler 1993, 12) vis-a-vis the Old World, the Old Ways, and the Old Man by ‘euro-trashing’ the Count. “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him” (Freud 103). Using new and youthful discourse to establish and maintain superiority, Buffy builds on generational differences and the “lack of communication between the generations” (Wilcox and Lavery xix) already established in relation to her parents. Her mother, who has been read as a personification of second wave feminism, obviously does not possess the knowledge or street smarts

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14 “This modification is the only indication that male vampires feed on men as well as on women. We do not know which version conveys the author’s original intention or, indeed, who is responsible for the discrepancy or why the texts differ…. Doubleday’s editors may have changed the text to create more psycho-sexual possibilities” (Eighteen-Bisang 38).
15 Both the Master-Nosferatu and Dracula are unique in the Buffyverse. They both have a sense of humor and no other vampire (or demon) died like they did: slain vampires dissolve into dust and disappear – the Master’s skeleton stays intact and Dracula remains (un)dead.
16 “When Buffy and her friends laugh in the face of danger, the face of danger laughs back. No wonder Dracula barely lasted an episode” (Wilson 78).
17 “In Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Buffy’s relationship with her mother can be understood as a metaphor for the tenuous relationship between second and third wave feminists. Joyce was the quintessential second wave feminist - she came of age in the 1960s, participated in the civil and women’s rights movements, worked fulltime and divorced Buffy’s father. She knew nothing of Buffy’s powers as a slayer until well into the third season, misreading her
the Scoobies have: who in their right mind would invite a pale foreigner, wearing a black cape into their house? Similarly, Buffy’s substitute father and Watcher is presented as out-of-touch with reality and stating the obvious—when you fight Dracula, you have to separate fact from fiction.18

As a mythical media compound of literary and cinematic variations, Dracula “the original” is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived” (Butler, Gender Trouble 139).

Reduced to “Dracula – Shmacula,” Count Famous does not pose a real threat and “the episode concludes by self-reflexively ‘refracting’ Dracula-the-character through Dracula-the-media-texts” (Hills 122). Laughing in the face of established dichotomies, norms and discourses, Buffy evokes a youthful present in which myths have their place but not as unquestioned assumptions or prescriptive behavior. “Dracula and ‘pastness’ [are replaced by an] utopian ‘present’ in which feminism has magically triumphed over the dark forces of patriarchy,” concludes Hills (123).

The Valley Girl turned Alley Girl knows how to master her verbal power and assert herself. Although Dracula only had a short stint on the show, as a connector between the old Master and the hip young crowd, he opened Buffy’s eyes to far-reaching questions of her sense of self. While trying to come to terms with the implications of various subject positions, the end of the episode made history when after four seasons suddenly a new character was introduced who (like Dracula’s castle in Sunnydale?) had been there—it seems—all along. All of a sudden Buffy was not just torn between slayer and hunter anymore, but an older sister. The Dawn of the new season and the key to its story arc put pale Dracula in his place and in perspective: third-wave/post-feminist icon Buffy had a new role to define which would demand a lot more strength and humor than any “pimply, overweight vamps that called themselves Lestat” would ever require.

Works Cited


difficulties with school as laziness or a lack of focus rather than as a result of unconventional work.” The Third Wave’s Final Girl: Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Karras).

18 Willow makes fun of Giles saying, tongue in cheek, that the Scoobies would never have thought of that.


