

Buffy the Vampire and psychoanalysis

The television success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is celebrated worldwide. What is less well known, however, is how psychology can explain this success. Matt Jarvis explores this intriguing relationship from a psychodynamic perspective.

The almost unprecedented popularity of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a social phenomenon so dramatic that it has attracted the attention of psychologists. Why should literally millions of people of both sexes and a variety of ages and backgrounds be so fascinated by the improbable exploits of a teenage girl with the power to kill vampires and otherwise combat the forces of evil? Whenever we try to explain an irrational or bizarre aspect of human nature, the psychodynamic approach to psychology comes into its own, and there is now a body of psychodynamic literature seeking to explain the appeal of horror in general and *Buffy* in particular. The aim of this article is to show how three psychodynamic ideas, Freud's idea of **displacement**, Jung's concept of **archetypes** and Erikson's view of adolescent development, can help us understand what makes *Buffy* so popular (see Box 1).

Freudian displacement

One of Sigmund Freud's ideas that has best stood the test of time is that we use mental strategies, called **ego defences** or **psycho-**

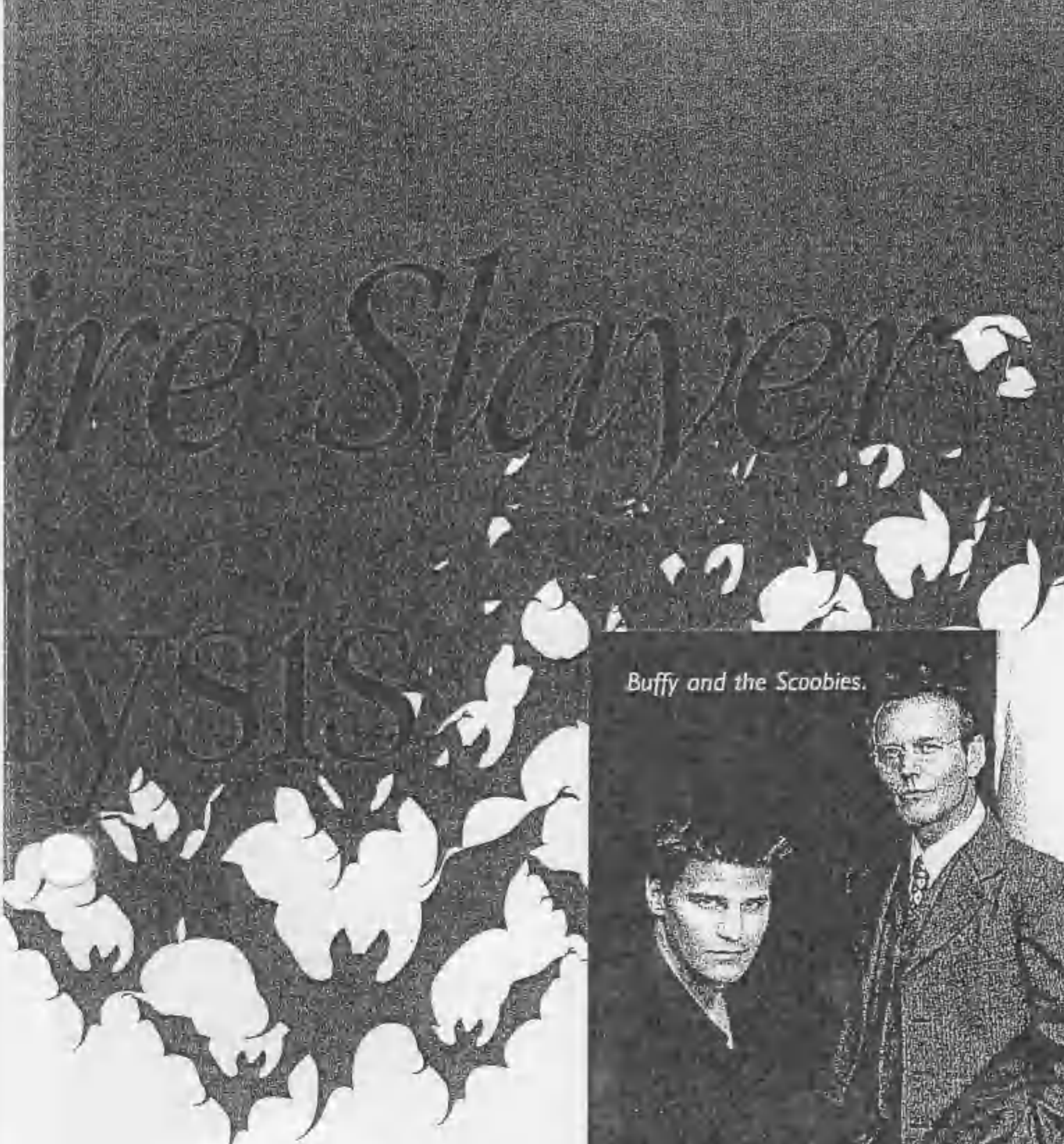
logical defences, to defend ourselves against the experience of negative emotions such as anxiety. One of these defences is **displacement**, which takes place when a strong emotion, initially directed towards a particular person, idea or object, is redirected towards a different target (Jarvis 2003). Some of our deepest fears, such as that of death, are particularly difficult to deal with because the object of our fear is intangible and unconquerable. If, however, we can displace such a fear onto a flesh and blood monster that can be fought and slain, it becomes easier to face. From a psycho-

dynamic perspective, vampires, the undead villains in *Buffy*, can be seen as representations of the displaced fear of death (Tylin 1998), and, in slaying them, Buffy is perhaps symbolically conquering death itself.

Like many of Freud's ideas, displacement has proved tricky to investigate scientifically. There is however some evidence to support the idea that monsters serve the psychological function of displacement of anxiety. In a major study David Skal (1993) traced popular monster images in film and literature throughout the twentieth century

Box 1 Buffy – the story

At the age of 16, Buffy, a rather shallow cheerleader, has, very much against her will, been given superhuman powers by the Powers That Be so she can fulfil her destiny as a 'Slayer' — to oppose the forces of darkness — in particular the vampires that congregate in her California hometown, which is unfortunately sited over a Hellmouth. Buffy is accompanied in her struggle by a cast of misfit allies. Rupert Giles is a middle-aged, English, fuddy-duddy librarian and a member of the Watchers' Council, an ancient and secret society dedicated to supporting Slayers. Buffy's allies of her own age include Willow, a quiet, bookish girl who is bullied (at the start of the series at least) and whose main interests are academic, but who later becomes a powerful witch, and Xander, an awkward and financially and academically poor youth from a dysfunctional family. Buffy's lover, Angel, is a vampire whose soul has been restored by a particularly cruel Gypsy curse so that he can be tormented forever by guilt about his centuries of bloodlust. Accompanied by this band of Slayerettes, Buffy battles a range of vampires, demons and robots.




Buffy and the Scoobies.



and found that they related strongly to people's collective anxieties in particular historical periods. For example, the film *Frankenstein* was an enormous hit (having been cheaply produced as a B-movie) in the 1940s. Skal suggests that this unexpected success was the result of the mass displacement of European and American societies' horror about bodily dismemberment, resulting from the first widespread use of shells in the Second World War, which left horrific scenes of battlefields strewn with body parts. Similarly, following the sexual revolution and thalidomide scandal of the late 1960s and early 1970s the rash of 'baby horror' films such as *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby* can be seen as displacements of society's anxieties about sex and procreation. In the 1980s and 1990s, as computer technology began to have an ever-increasing impact on our lives, collective anxieties about this were represented in films like *Lawnmower Man* and *Terminator*.

Jung's archetypes

Carl Jung, at one time a colleague and friend of Freud's, later fell out with him and founded his own school of psychodynamic



Buffy and Spike.

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thought, that of **analytical psychology**. Jung believed that people share so much of their experience because of the existence of a shared **collective unconscious**. Where we have experienced the same events repeatedly in our evolutionary past, an **archetype** is formed in the collective unconscious, and this leads us to respond in particular ways to particular images. Some of the more common archetypes are shown in Box 2.

Box 2 Examples of archetypes

- **The trickster:** a prankster, sometimes in the form of an animal such as a fox
- **The magician:** the man with mystical abilities
- **The wise man:** the older man who directs younger people
- **The hero:** the young warrior who battles evil
- **The maiden:** the innocent, pure young woman
- **The great mother:** the powerful, good and bad mother figure
- **The demon:** the personification of evil

Jung was particularly interested in peoples' experiences of the supernatural. He famously said 'In so far as through our unconscious we have a share in the historical collective psyche, we live naturally and unconsciously in a world of werewolves, demons, magicians etc., for these are things which all previous ages have invested with tremendous affectivity [emotion]' (1943, p. 92). Werewolves, demons and magicians certainly feature prominently in *Buffy*, and from a Jungian perspective we all respond to these archetypal characters in a predetermined way because those images have had tremendous psychological significance to successive past generations. For example, the mischievous vampire Spike represents the archetypal trickster (Lambert 2002), and Giles represents the wise man.

Unlike more traditional epics such as *Star Wars*, in which the hero (Skywalker) is an archetypal young male and the heroine (Leia) is an archetypal maiden, *Buffy* is centred around a conventionally attractive young woman placed in the role of powerful warrior. However, Jung believed that men and women in counter-stereotypical gender roles represent particular archetypes in

themselves. The **anima** is the archetypal feminine side of the male mind and the **animus** the masculine aspect of females. Jung might thus have explained *Buffy* as a representation of the animus.

Erikson's view of adolescence

Erik Erikson was a Freudian psychoanalyst who developed a school of psychodynamic thought which emphasises the importance of culture and society in psychological development. It sees psychological development as a lifelong process in which we develop by overcoming a series of age-specific problems. Erikson's view of adolescence is particularly influential and particularly relevant to understanding the appeal of *Buffy*. To Erikson (1963), adolescence is a time when our sense of self is weak, because we have outgrown our childhood identity but have not yet established an adult identity. This makes adolescence a difficult time in which we face a number of conflicts, including the academic, the social and the sexual.

According to Harvard University psychiatrist, Steven Schlozman (Schlozman 2000),

Buffy the Vampire Slayer has tremendous appeal for adolescents because it features characters dealing with adolescent crises. As Schlozman puts it, '*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers unique illustrations...of the ego strength necessary to negotiate the developmental maze of adolescence' (2000, p. 50). *Buffy* characters can be seen as representing particular adolescent crises. Thus, Xander plays out the fear of academic and social failure, while Oz, the teenage werewolf, with his raging hormones and out-of-control facial hair, represents anxieties about puberty (it may be no coincidence that so many fictional werewolves have been teenage boys). The siting of Sunnydale High School, attended by the Slayerettes, directly over the Hellmouth may also resonate with young viewers. As C. Jarvis says, 'School is Hell' (2001, p. 257). The displacement function of the monsters featured in *Buffy* also appears to relate to classic adolescent anxieties. For example



Xander, Buffy and Angel.

The uses and limitations of psychodynamic interpretation

The interpretation of literary and televisual material is an important application of psychodynamic approaches to psychology. It is, however, always worth being a little cautious before accepting a particular interpretation as correct. Although they may ring true, psychodynamic interpretations are extremely difficult to verify empirically. In therapy, interpretations are helpful if the patient accepts them (Henry 1994), and they are more likely to be accurate and accepted in the context of the therapist's existing knowledge of the patient. Clearly we cannot evaluate interpretations of *Buffy* using this type of criterion, and therefore all our interpretations are necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, as psychologists we need to be able to offer insights into important social phenomena like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and, in spite of the limitations of psychodynamic interpretation, this remains arguably the psychological model best suited for such a task. ■

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Key concepts

- Displacement
- Archetypes
- Adolescent development
- Ego defences
- Monster images in film and literature
- Analytical psychology
- Sense of self
- Empirical verification

the authoritarian robot who dates Buffy's mother, can be seen as a symbolic representation of the adolescent fear of losing one's individuality in the transition to adulthood and metaphorically functioning as an automaton. Erikson placed great emphasis on the stabilising function of older adults for adolescents and this role is played out by Rupert Giles. Leon (2001) has identified a passage where this is made explicit:

Buffy: 'Nothing's ever simple any more...it's like the more I know the more confused I get.'

Giles: 'I believe that's called growing up.'

Perhaps the most powerful theme running through the first three series of *Buffy* is her relationship with Angel, the vampire with a soul. Angel himself has great significance as the ultimate expression of teenage angst — Schlozman says, he is literally a tortured soul, something many adolescents feel like. Buffy's relationship with Angel is also significant in representing the struggle to trust our first sexual partners. Buffy sums up this conflict in saying to Angel: 'I love you. I don't know if I trust you' (quoted in Leon 2001). Adolescent sexual anxiety is portrayed in other ways. Series three ends with the mayor of Sunnydale transforming into a giant phallic snake-demon and chasing Buffy through the high school. The scene in which the mayor chases Buffy down the school corridor, bursting through doors and walls is highly symbolic of the violent taking of virginity. The timing of this scene is also highly significant, coming as it does just as Buffy graduates from high school and ritually attains adulthood.

Exercise 1

Psychodynamic explanations of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Using Matt Jarvis's article on *Buffy*, complete the following table:

	Freud's displacement theory	Jung's archetypal theory	Erikson's psychosocial stages
Assumptions	Use of ego defences (psychological defences) to protect us against negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)	A shared collective unconscious means that we have experienced the same events repeated in our evolutionary past	Stage of adolescence is part of a lifelong process where we have to overcome age-specific problems (e.g. identity vs role confusion)
Research in support			
Evaluation			

