Buffy vs. Bella: Gender and the Undead

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Two of the most popular vampire-based franchises in America are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Joss Whedon, and *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. My research explores how these works enlist themes of the traditional 18th century Gothic, and Freud's notion of the unheimlich, within fictional worlds populated by humans and vampires. More specifically, my work analyzes why Buffy and Bella are considered to be, respectively, a hero and a villain in the field of gender studies by virtue of how they represent "femininity," and gender identity.

Buffy embodies the unheimlich by being feminine and at the same time powerful within an American social landscape that is still negotiating its own definitions of female power. Buffy eradicates the social norms surrounding the idea of the submissiveness of women. She fist-fights the undead and keeps the gates of Hell from opening, all while wearing designer tops. Dozens of works have analyzed Buffy in the vein of gender studies, especially in regard to her relationship with Angel. Buffy is always Angel's equal, both in strength and passion, yet respects herself enough to end their relationship when it becomes unhealthy. The connection between masculinity and dominance is deconstructed, allowing the audience to see the potential for women to be empowered and for cultural ideas about femininity to correlate with dominance and/or empowerment.

In contrast Bella becomes an unheimlich character via her relationship with the vampire Edward. Bella plays the part of a crypto-Victorian woman, being submissive to him in a manner that should not be acceptable within contemporary American society. Their relationship even meets all the criteria that define an abusive relationship, but is made to seem healthy and desirable.

Further, I explore these characters interactions with education, and why the perception of these protagonists shifts radically between academic- or gender-studies-oriented audiences, and mainstream readerships.