

## Choice and The Chosen One: Abortion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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In the comic series “Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season Nine,” the titular character is faced with an unexpected pregnancy, which she chooses to terminate. I am proposing a presentation that will explore this abortion storyline from the perspectives of health communication and the analysis of public discourse on abortion.

Over seven television seasons and two comic book “seasons,” Joss Whedon has readily acknowledged the fictional life of his character, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as an allegory for our own real lives. While Buffy deals with extreme situations that are, on the surface, fantastic, her experiences are ultimately universally human and deeply relatable. Research has shown that in the United States, nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended. Of these, approximately 43% end in abortion (Finer & Zolna, 2011). Given these statistics, it seems far more likely than not that this storyline hit close to home for many of the comic’s readers; perhaps some were even reading it while in the midst of making a similar decision for themselves.

What strikes me most about this storyline is what Whedon himself has said about it: the story isn’t about the abortion but about the decision-making process that leads up to it. Whedon has said that this journey is not one that is often found in popular culture. (I would note that one recent exception is an abortion storyline in the 2012-2013 season of the TV drama *Parenthood*, in which a teen character’s decision to have an abortion is followed closely, while the actual procedure is not at all depicted.) Whedon has said that the inclusion of this storyline was intended as a feminist message; that Buffy’s choice is right, reasonable, and feminist in nature. But my interest is not so much on the question of whether or not abortion is right or wrong, but simply in the fact that unintended pregnancy—and what one does about it—is a reality, and those faced with this reality often struggle to find representation of themselves in the media they use. As a communication student studying issues of women’s reproductive health and representations of health in popular culture, I’m prompted to ask somewhat different questions about the *Buffy* abortion storyline.

In this presentation I plan to address the following:

- The word “choice” is used in public discourse by those on both sides of the abortion debate. But what does Buffy’s story tell us about choice and its place in abortion? Is it even an appropriate word to use? So much of Buffyverse scholarship has focused attention on the irony of Buffy’s moniker “The Chosen One,” as in so many aspects of her life, she without the freedom to choose. Again and again, Buffy does what is right for the greater good, sacrificing her own needs and desires, knowing that she can’t ever truly choose to walk away from her calling. In discussing her decision with Spike in the comic series, she frames it as one that is not a choice but a necessity. It doesn’t matter whether Buffy wants this pregnancy or not; what Buffy wants is once again irrelevant. I would like to compare the comic’s dialogue with public discourse about abortion as something that women do not “choose” out of convenience but simply “do” out of necessity and, essentially, lack of choice.
- Are comic books or other types of popular culture media the appropriate place for health-related messages? What impact might this storyline have on its readers? I have found

examples of other comic series tackling health-related subject matter. Here I would discuss the role of popular culture more generally in helping to bring awareness to the public about health issues, and then talk about how comics in particular can be another channel for health messages.

- Finally, there has been much criticism from journalists and fans about the Buffybot plot twist, in which it was revealed that the “Buffy” who believed herself to be pregnant was really a robot. The pregnancy was not real; the abortion decision was for many a moot point. There has been talk of this being an unfair way for Whedon to extricate himself from a sticky situation: no abortion, less controversy. But I think we should also look at this from other angles, as Whedon himself has argued. First, it’s not about the abortion, it’s about the decision-making process. The Buffybot was unaware of her own non-human status, and was making this decision armed with Buffy’s actual thoughts, memories, emotions, and logic. This was, in every way, Buffy’s choice. Also, the revelation that the real Buffy had left the Buffybot in her place in an attempt to escape her destiny returns us to the argument that Buffy is without choice; she can’t make a decision to leave her Slayer life, and this means that every other decision she makes will be based upon that reality. Again, is abortion about choice at all?