



IT'S THE LAST PERIOD on a Friday afternoon. The air is thick and your twenty-six Year 11 students sigh heavily as you explain, yet again, that Lady Macbeth cannot be said to be entirely responsible for the downfall of her husband.

MOST will blame Lady Macbeth anyway, so the kerfuffle of Year 8 P.E. on the oval some metres away inevitably grabs their already short attention spans on this hour before the weekend. Giving away nothing in your trained expressions, you look around as you realize, probably not for the first time, that you are fighting a losing battle. You stare at the pretty Oxford edition of *Macbeth* and you love and hate the hero-villain in a paragon of contradiction. Instinctively, you pout. But I love Shakespeare, you think to yourself, as the snarl of Jane's lips in the middle row tells you that she, and probably many others, beg to differ.



You spring into action and reach into your bag. The unusual movement grabs the attention of some wary and suspicious students, who are thrilled but curious as to your change of rhythm. Are you letting them out early? Have they cleverly conned you into giving in? No. As you reach in, you feel the DVD case and wrap it around the sweaty palm of your hand. Yes, she who will save you is here. Ladies and gentlemen, Buffy has come to the rescue.

As expected, reactions are mixed. Matthew raises an eyebrow and, in the space of three seconds has already considered all the implications of the DVD you hold eagerly in your hand, as well as predicted the ramifications, both social and political, that this strange turn of events will bring to his English education. Sarah is laughing hysterically and Jake expresses that he is clearly far too manly to watch *Buffy* under any circumstances. However, they are all strangely intrigued at what this means. How could one possibly study a *vampire*



slayer, of all things under the sun, at school? Aren't we meant to be completely wrapped in the world of Mr Darcy, Juliet and young Master Copperfield? We study films as text, such as *Lantana* and *Gattaca*, but a television show? Huh?!

Of course, the study of canon and classical texts is one reason amongst many that an English teacher loves what he or she does, and of course, the pleasure gained at witnessing the change of attitudes as some students begin to understand and (*gasp!*) enjoy *Hamlet* is gratifying. The study of these texts is well embedded in learning curriculums across schools worldwide, both in English classrooms and also in Media classrooms, thanks to screen adaptations of popular literary works. They are part of our history and an integral part of understanding our roots, and so it is important I clarify that the purpose here is not the promotion of one type of text at the expense of the other. However, the study of such classical texts is seen to pose a few problems that have some teachers questioning ways in which we might expand the variety of cultural and socio-political discourses that are embedded in texts and thus presented to the young men and women whose

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learning about the world we are partly charged with. One of these problems is, indeed, the domination of these texts by 'DWEEMs' (dead white European males) and the lack of portrayals of women, minority groups and cultures other than our own.

Shakespeare ... please, you've been on stage for almost half a millenium, do you mind making *some* room? Thank you. Enter the popular culture, post-modern text.

Increasingly, teachers across Australia are introducing to their classrooms the popular culture post-modern text, much to the delight of the young people we teach, who suddenly rediscover an interest in the curriculum under their astutely scrutinizing eyes. The post-modern popular culture text comes in a variety of written and audiovisual formats, and the breadth of styles and genres can mean a whole lot of fun with students of Media and English in particular.



Some questions arise. We study contemporary films in our Media and English curriculums across Australia, but *why* and *how* can we use a post-modern popular culture television show such as *Buffy*, *The Simpsons* or even *Desperate Housewives* in our classrooms? In an ever-changing world, the *why* is becoming increasingly simple to answer:

the texts are not only contemporarily relevant portrayals of the diversity of cultural and socio-political thought around us, but they are also a fun and engaging way to *learn* about the world and present young men and women with an abundance of culturally and politically diverse material. With the myriad social concerns that abound as the world inevitably becomes more complex, discussing with students the likes of feminism, patriarchy, sexuality and the intricacies of gender relations should be part of everyday education. Due to certain limitations such as text selection and school policies, they are often not, much to the dismay of willing educators. The audiovisual post-modern popular culture text lends itself nicely to such explorations.

The Chosen One

BUFFY the *Vampire Slayer* is one such text. A few years ago, my partner sat watching reruns of *Buffy* on Foxtel as I busily thumbed through a magazine, snorting at the possibility that a grown adult could possibly be interested in Sarah Michelle Gellar's portrayal of a girl dressed in miniskirts and low-cut tops, wearing a wooden stake for the purpose of killing vampires. For Pete's sake. Three weeks later, I was enraptured and it wasn't long before I realized, along with thousands of people across the globe, the value of using *Buffy* as an audiovisual text in the tertiary or secondary classroom.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is now studied across many schools and universities worldwide. You need only to Google *Buffy* to come across sites such as *The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* and books on the philosophy of *Buffy* to see that perhaps there's more to such a television show than meets the eye. *Buffy* portrays a world where the notion of a traditional superhero is subverted, where gender roles are challenged and where the female protagonist wears the proud badge of a third-wave feminist, challenging feminist stereotypes themselves and depicting different ways one might 'do' feminism in a world where the concept has been alive for a few generations. The fact that the 'power' is placed with a gorgeous blonde girl in her teens (and later, her early twenties) has some people baffled and some sporting a grin from ear to ear.

However you look at it, scratch the surface of *Buffy* and you find a world of complex discourses ready to be soaked up by teenagers who, perhaps, might never have spoken about things as important as gender roles and sexuality and their

implications for the world around us. The myriad issues and discourses explored by *Buffy* (including some more obscure but interesting ones such as Slavic studies, post-colonialism, business ethics, cosmology, musicology and military science, as listed on www.slayage.tv) are ever-present in the lives of

all young men and women and are presented in a visually appealing and engaging way, combining interesting storylines and action with the latest in issues to tackle. Through the post-modern popular culture television show as text, we are able to tap into these discourses and inevitably open doors for discussion that are likely to unravel a whole new level of thinking in the minds of those we teach. While the study of a Shakespearean text exposes us to magnificent stories and delightful language, we must, as with any text we analyse, be aware of the setting and context in which

these texts are produced. If so, then the substance that we read out of an audiovisual text such as *Buffy* can be just as stimulating as a study of Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, as well as exposing us to material that is relevant to the lives of young men and women today.

The *How* of the study of such a text remains one of its rewards. Teachers of Media and English are free to choose how they might approach the study of a television show. It does differ a little from the study of a film, but teacher and student resources are beginning to find themselves onto shelves of academic bookshops. Insight Publications have recently launched a new project to make media text guides on a few popular culture texts such as *Buffy* available to teachers and students (www.insightpublications.com.au). The use of such resources is integral for reading fresh perspectives and, let's face it, to reduce the teacher's workload where appropriate!

Thankfully, it is not necessary for a teacher to be acquainted with the 144 episodes of *Buffy* spanning seven years in order to exploit its value in the classroom (however, if your school is willing to provide you with time off in order to watch *Buffy* eight hours a day for eighteen days then by all means ...). A little bit of research, a chat with someone who has explored *Buffy* in the classroom and a few hours curled up on the couch watching the pilot episode should see the teacher well on his or her way to using the text in the classroom.

Where to Start

A great place to start is to talk about post-modernism: *what* it is, *what* it means, and *how* it relates to films and television shows. Of course, the level of discussion of such a topic depends on a variety of factors and it is up to the individual teacher to decide how in-depth such an exploration is to be. It is, however, probably beyond the scope of a secondary school

classroom to look at the concept of post-modernism in a whole lot of depth. Therefore, I have used the characteristics of *Buffy* as a springboard to discuss what post-modernism is, rather than the other way around. For instance, you might like to look at how *Buffy* subverts the notion of a 'traditional' superhero as a means for discussing the idea that a post-modern text challenges our preconceived ideas and outlook on the world around us and allows us to question the validity of things we may have previously held as 'truisms'. I have found this example-characteristic-explanation model to be a useful way to contextualize a concept that may be hard for many students to grapple with. Another example is the idea of a post-modern text being a hybrid of many different genres, which could be pointed out by asking the students to identify which genre *Buffy* belongs to. They will soon find their classmates all have various answers.

You might like to put together a booklet as a type of self-contained unit where the students will keep all their notes on *Buffy*. The one I have used features: a few pages of general discussion questions around the issues that surround *Buffy*; a 'Previously On *Buffy*' section that explains the background of the episode; character sheets; and a two-page blank 'Notes' section on each episode where the students can keep their observations and discussion questions for each episode. I found this to be useful in many ways and it cuts down on the material that students need to bring to class.

If you have an auditorium-style room at your school with DVD capabilities, then exploit it! The pilot episode of *Buffy* (two episodes, in fact) introduces the characters and the discourses that are present throughout the text, and is therefore a great place to start, for both the teacher and the student. Discussion after the screening can include issues around identity, gender roles, feminism, peer group dynamics, the 'traditional' superhero, so on. To my delight, I have come to witness much discussion, sometimes heated, amongst students who, for example, are at odds about the implications of the clothes *Buffy* wears for the role of a feminist, or whether it is better to portray a gay or lesbian relationship as somewhat of a stereotype, rather than have no representation of diversity at all.

Of course, we are not looking solely at which themes, issues and discourses are presented in the text. We are also analysing how these are presented. A common method used by teachers is pausing a scene and then leading a discussion of how the set, lighting, character clothing, body language and positioning aid the presentation of meaning. As with any film text, the devices used are integral to the portrayal of characters, themes and issues.

The episodes that are chosen for exploration in the classroom beyond the pilot are entirely up to the teacher. Insight Pub-

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lication's upcoming *Buffy* Guide includes key episodes and other possibilities. You might like to study the first season in its entirety or choose some of the better later episodes at random.

Either way, each episode of *Buffy* focuses on the central ideas of the text as discussed above (great for continuation and different representations of the one issue), as well as giving rise to other social issues, which are often represented in the form of monsters that *Buffy* must defeat. For example, in the Season Four episode 'Hush', the entire town is rendered mute by voice-stealing monsters called 'The Gentlemen'. While the scenario is straight from a horror film, the sub-text of the episode is the lack of communication between *Buffy* and her friends, and the difficulty of saying what you really mean in a relationship.

Assessment possibilities for the post-modern popular culture text are endless and it pays to be creative. In my experience, I have opted for things such as group oral assessment tasks where the students analyse a scene in an episode of their choosing, much like what has been modelled to them. Students have also opted for creative text responses on an aspect of the text. This can be a great option as it allows the students to make use of any talents and skills they may have in order to show an understanding of the text. After all, the study of *Buffy* is not a 'traditional' classroom activity by any means, and hence the assessment can take a variety of different forms. This said and done, there is no reason why you could not include a traditional Part One and Two text response section in your mid- or end-of-year exam, and indeed, this is quite important when satisfying text requirements at Units 1 & 2.

BUT the study of a post-modern popular culture text does not necessarily begin and end with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *The Simpsons* is another popular choice and colleagues of mine have embarked on units exploring comedy and satire, in much the same style as I have described above. The comedy series *Black Books* can also be used for this. *Desperate Housewives*, believe it or not, bears some looking at, and the credits are particularly interesting both visually and from a cultural studies perspective. *The X-Files* has long been used at tertiary levels and *Charmed* is working its way alongside *Buffy* in various cultural studies courses.

The post-modern popular culture text can bring a fresh challenge to many classrooms, both for the teacher and the student. Possibilities for discussion are endless and watching students spark heated debate over the relevant issues and concerns they raise is fascinating and rewarding. So, give it a try! You won't regret it, and there's much fun to be had in the process.

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