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Mothers, Martyrs, Damsels, and Demons: Women in Western Horror from Romanticism to the Modern Age

by Alexandra Wickersham

English 1102

The Western horror genre has undergone many changes over the years, reflecting and adapting to the changes in Western society. While many of the standard plots of horror stories remain largely unchanged, the portrayals of characters of different races, genders, and backgrounds have undergone many alterations, some for the better, some not. In this paper, works from various time periods will be examined, including the early nineteenth century, the 1980s and 1990s, and the modern era. Several sub-genres of horror will be examined, including sci-fi/horror, vampire stories, teen horror, slasher films, and action/horror. Though the general portrayal of women in the Western horror genre appears to have changed since the Romantic era, in truth, the same sexist tropes have been constantly present in Western horror, they have just been expressed in more insidious ways. First, a brief overview of definitions for terms that will be used. “First wave feminism” refers to the portion of the feminist movement that started in the nineteenth century and ended between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the exact year depending on the country. One of the primary goals of first wave feminism was getting women the right to vote.¹ The term “second wave feminism” refers to the part of the feminist movement that reached its peak during the 1970s and 1980s. The primary issues of the second wave were reproductive rights and employment opportunities.² The term “third wave feminism” refers to the part of the feminist movement spanning from the mid-1990s to the present day.³ Several works of horror fiction will be examined, with each of them being representative of the time period in which. The nineteenth-century work examined is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, published in 1818. Works published during the second wave include Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974), Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), and William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973). The third wave works that will be examined include John Fawcett’s *Ginger Snaps* (2000), Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004), and Eric Kripke’s *Supernatural* (2005-present).

The Cultural Landscape

The above named fictional works are all products of the time and places in which they were written. To understand how these works portray women, we must examine the cultural climates that produced them, as well as the backgrounds of the people who created them. When *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, the world was full of feminist thought, however, there was not yet a solidified feminist movement. The word “feminist” didn’t even exist at this point, and would not exist until near the end of the century. As early as the eighteenth century, feminist writers such as Mary Astell and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had gained recognition for their opposition to male dominance in society (Taylor 205). In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she expressed her outrage that women had been trapped in “a state of ‘ignorance and slavish dependence’” (Gordon 144). The general public’s reaction to these early feminist writers was not good. According to Barbara Taylor, a professor of history at the University of East London, “by 1791 Wollstonecraft already had a reputation as an insurrectionist, the English equivalent of the ‘revolutionary harpies of France, sprung from night and hell’” (Taylor 202). Over 150 years later, in 1974, another famous work of horror fiction was published. *Carrie* was the first published novel of the now well-known writer Stephen King. When King was born in 1947, World

War II had recently ended. During this time, women had filled many jobs that had been left by men serving in the military. However, once the war was over, women were expected to leave their jobs and return to their previous roles as homemakers. The often-romanticized era of the 1950s was an era of emptiness and depression for many American women (Friedan 19). In her revolutionary 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, feminist writer Betty Friedan termed this “the problem that has no name” (Friedan 15). This name was fitting, as mental health professionals at the time had no term for this phenomenon (Friedan 19). This book is largely credited with sparking the second wave of America’s feminist movement. This movement was largely concerned with actually getting women equal treatment under the law in practice, as opposed to just in theory.

Given the feminist ideals emerging at this time, the way King conceived of the idea of *Carrie* deserves special attention. In a 1981 interview for *Twilight Zone Magazine*, King stated that he wrote *Carrie* because “Some woman said, ‘You write all these macho things, but you can’t write about women.’ I said, ‘I’m not scared of women. I could write about them if I wanted to.’ So I got an idea for a story about this incident in a girls’ shower room, and the girl would be telekinetic. The other girls would pelt her with sanitary napkins when she got her period. The period would release the right hormones and she would rain down destruction on them...I did the shower scene, but I hated it and threw it away” (Grant). King’s decision to focus on a female character came not from a belief in equal representation in media, but from what he viewed as a challenge and an accusation of fear. It’s also worth noting that, despite this story being written at the height of the second wave of feminism, when women were making every effort to erase the seemingly-inherent connection between womanhood and motherhood, King’s only idea for a story focusing on a female character was centered around the character’s reproductive abilities. Another notable thing about the formation of the idea that would become *Carrie* is that King hated the story. In his essay “On Becoming a Brand Name,” he wrote that “I persisted because I was dry and had no better ideas...my considered opinion was that I had written the world’s all-time loser” (King).

The 1980s saw the advent of what would become one of the most well-known subgenres of horror: the slasher film. By the 1980s, many of the goals of the second wave of feminism had been met or were well on their way to being met. The *Roe v. Wade* case had been won, giving women more reproductive freedom, women had more opportunities for employment, and several anti-discrimination laws had been passed. However, many of the horror films of the time still contained sexist narratives that foreshadow the later backlash against women’s progress. “Possessed girl” stories and “black and white” morality permeated the horror genre at this time.

The mid-1990s saw the beginning of the third wave of feminism. One of the most famous works of horror fiction from this era is Joss Whedon’s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which ran from 1997 to 2003. Its popularity and cultural impact created the term “The Buffy Era” as a nickname for this time period. This era marks the beginning of what has been termed “backlash broadcasting.” On the subject of the backlash against women’s rights, journalist Susan Faludi writes “it’s a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality” (Faludi 46). Though backlash is not unique to the modern era, the prominence of media in everyday life makes the backlash extremely visible.

Motherhood in Horror

Maternal death is a major theme in *Frankenstein*. In her critical essay “Frankenstein’s Circumvention of the Maternal,” Margaret Homans writes “There are many mothers in the Frankenstein circle, and all die horrible deaths” (Homans 134). In addition to Frankenstein’s mother, Caroline, mother-figures Elizabeth and Justine also suffer early deaths. Elizabeth’s illness causes Caroline’s death, after which Elizabeth becomes a replacement for her, acting as a surrogate mother to Frankenstein’s younger brothers. Justine Moritz also becomes a substitute mother to William Frankenstein, and later is accused of and executed for his murder (Homans 134).

The death of mothers and mother-figures is a common theme in Joss Whedon’s TV series’

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and *Angel*, which will both be discussed in greater depth later. On *Buffy*, in the episode “The Body,” the main character, Buffy Summers, comes home to find her mother dead. Joyce Summers’s death forces Buffy into the role of being the “mother” to her sister, Dawn. Her new role as Dawn’s primary protector directly leads to Buffy sacrificing herself, jumping to her death in order to close a portal that can only be closed with the death of one of the sisters (“The Gift”). Buffy is even told that her death is her “gift” to her sister and to the world (“Intervention”). Like the deaths of the mother-figures in *Frankenstein*, Buffy’s motherhood is painted as inherently linked to sacrifice. Despite the fact that Buffy did have other options (killing the person who planned to open the portal, or stalling them long enough that it would be past the time frame in which they could open it), she, like Caroline Frankenstein, chose the route that she knew could result in her death.

After Buffy’s death, her friends Willow and Tara take over as mother-figures to Dawn. Their maternal roles are highlighted and cemented in place after Willow and Tara break up, and Tara gives Dawn the typical “divorced parents talk,” in which she assures Dawn that their break-up was not her fault and they can still see each other at any time (“Smashed”). Tara is killed immediately after getting back together with Willow (“Seeing Red”). Though, unlike Buffy Summers and Caroline Frankenstein, her death is not directly linked to her being a mother, it is linked to her involvement with the Summers family, much like Justine Moritz’s death is linked to her involvement with the Frankensteins. If Tara hadn’t chosen to be part of the family and to reassume her role as Dawn’s substitute mother, she wouldn’t have been in the Summers house, and wouldn’t have been shot by the stray bullet that was meant for Buffy.

Angel, Joss Whedon’s spin-off of *Buffy*, which ran from 1999 to 2004, is also rife with the theme of maternal death. In the show’s second season, a vampire named Darla, Angel’s former lover who was killed in the early seasons of *Buffy*, is resurrected. After failing to kill Angel, she simply disappears. In the third season, she returns, nine months pregnant with Angel’s child (“Offspring”). She later kills herself by driving a stake through her own heart for the sole purpose of giving birth to a child she didn’t want (“Lullaby”). Later in the season, Cordelia, who became a surrogate mother to Darla and Angel’s son, ascends to a higher plane of existence, being forced to abandon her family, and is assumed to be gone forever (“Ground State”). She later returns to Earth and gets pregnant, which ends in her going into a coma and eventually dying.

No discussion of motherhood in horror would be complete without mention of *Supernatural*, a horror series that first aired in 2005 and is still airing today.

The first death in the series occurs in the pilot episode, when Mary Winchester, the mother of the two main characters, is murdered by a demon. Because of her death, the boy’s father raises them to hunt monsters, robbing them of any chance they had at a normal childhood (“Pilot”). Mary is put on a pedestal, with her role as a wife and mother becoming a symbol of the normal life her family lost. Twenty-two years after her death, Sam, the younger of the two brothers, has left the family and is living a normal, stable life with his girlfriend, Jess. At the end of the pilot episode, Sam returns home to find Jess dead, murdered in the same manner as Mary (“Pilot”). Her death causes Sam to be drawn back into the life he left behind, giving up his chance at law school, marriage, and normality in general. Like Mary, Jess wasn’t a character in her own right, but a symbol of a normal, domestic life the main characters couldn’t have.

In the third season, the character of Lisa Braeden is introduced. Lisa is an old girlfriend of Dean, the older brother, and the mother of a child who is suspected to be his (“The Kids Are Alright”). In the sixth season, Dean moves in with Lisa and begins living a relatively normal life (“Exile On Main St.”). Eventually, this falls apart when Lisa and her son, Ben, are kidnapped by demons, and Lisa is possessed. Dean attempts an exorcism, even though he knows Lisa will probably die if he goes through with it (“Let It Bleed”). Even though Lisa survives, Dean has symbolically killed her and, by extension, destroyed his normal life.

In the seventh season, Linda Tran, the mother of a teenage prophet, is introduced. Despite

the revelation that all things supernatural are real, she tries to protect her son and keep his life as normal as possible, even as he's being hunted by demons ("What's Up, Tiger Mommy?"). When she goes missing, it's assumed that she's been killed by the main antagonist, Crowley. When Crowley reveals that Kevin's mother is alive, Dean forbids Kevin from trying to rescue her ("Devil May Care"). Though Linda Tran is her own character and, as such, her connection to the idea of a normal life isn't as implicit as Marry, Jess, or Lisa's, she is the last part of Kevin's old life that remains after he learns he's a prophet. Once he's forced to give up his life as a normal teenager, Dean also forces him to give up on saving his mother.

In Stephen King's *Carrie*, Margaret White's motherhood is written as being directly connected to her mental instability. After her first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage, sex, pregnancy, and childbirth became linked in with sin in her mind, causing her to consider Carrie her "punishment." This led to her mental break and her abuse of her daughter (King 153-154).

In *Friday the Thirteenth*, the murders committed by Pamela Voorheese are inherently tied to her role as a mother. Her anger which drove her to kill the counselors at Camp Crystal Lake was caused by the death of her son, Jason, who drowned while two camp counselors weren't paying attention. It's worth noting that this film was released in 1980, during the precursor to today's epidemic of backlash broadcasting, and that Mrs. Voorheese was a working mother who the audience is supposed to see as a villain. When viewed through this lens, *Friday the Thirteenth* can be taken as an early backlash film, attempting to moralize about the perceived "dangers" or working women.

Women's Agency in Horror

As Anne K. Mellor points out in her essay "Possessing Nature," a key part of the narrative of *Frankenstein* revolves around a man removing or restricting women's agency. "He [Frankenstein] is afraid of an independent female will, afraid that his female creature will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature" (Mellor 360). Mellor also notes that in attempting to create life on his own, Frankenstein is "stealing the female's control over reproduction" (Mellor 355). In addition to his attempts to remove women's agency through his scientific endeavors, Frankenstein does the same through his secrecy. By not telling anyone about the Creature, he removes Justine's ability to defend herself against the accusation of murder. He also denies Elizabeth the ability to remove herself from the danger of being associated with him. In both these cases, his secrecy and disregard for these women's lives and agency results in their deaths.

In the modern era, women's agency is often restricted, both in real life and in fiction. *Supernatural* has become infamous for this. However, in contrast to *Frankenstein*, *Supernatural* portrays men's restriction of women's agency as a good, necessary thing. In the second season episode "No Exit," Sam and Dean team up with Jo Harvelle, the daughter of an old friend of their father's, to hunt and destroy the ghost of H. H. Holmes, who has been killing young women. Despite the fact that Jo is an adult who was also raised as a hunter ("Everybody Loves A Clown"), Dean attempts to stop her, not just from joining their hunt, but from hunting in general. He even goes so far as to threaten to call her mother, as though Jo were a child, rather than a woman in her 20s. Though Jo helps them defeat Holmes, she is sent back home to her mother, and is only considered a member of the Winchesters' "team" when they have no other options ("Abandon All Hope"). In the current season, Charlie Bradbury, Sam and Dean's ally from season seven, returns and reveals that she has been hunting ghosts and vampires on her own ("Slumber Party"). Dean's reaction is very much the same as his reaction to Jo, despite the fact that Charlie is also a grown woman. Dean's paternalistic views are proven "right" when Charlie is killed. Even though she is resurrected, her death is still part of the show's pattern of infantilizing women and treating them as if they can't "handle" their own agency.

One of the most well-known examples of *Supernatural*'s removal of women's agency is the fate of Lisa Braeden. After she is possessed and nearly dies, Dean has her memory of him wiped ("Let It Bleed"). Because she remembers nothing about him, she also knows nothing about demons

or monsters, and therefore loses her ability to protect herself and her son from future danger.

Often in modern media, women who control and retain their agency are portrayed as villains. On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, female vampires are written as inherently sexual (and predatory) creatures, with their sexuality directly tied to their dangerous nature. The first non-vampiric adult woman with sexual agency on the show turns out to be a praying-mantis-like monster who poses as a substitute teacher in order to feed on male students (“Teacher’s Pet”).

In the *Supernatural* episode “Bloody Mary,” the boys encounter a true version of the Bloody Mary urban legend.⁴ The ghost of a woman named Mary is revealed to be responsible for a series of deaths in a small town. The deaths are Mary’s attempts to get justice for her own murder, as well as the murders committed by her victims. The audience is not intended to have any sympathy for Mary, instead viewing her as another ghost to destroy.

Metaphors for Female Adolescence

Most well-known contemporary mainstream fiction is created by men, the majority of whom have no way of understanding what it means to be a woman, let alone an adolescent girl. Stereotypes of women as mysterious and unknowable creatures, practically a separate species from men, persist to this day. Nowhere is this more evident than in second-wave horror’s consistent portrayal of female biology as a metaphor for the monstrous. Tammy Oler writes that “Carrie and her cohorts entered puberty at a time when the horror genre was obsessed with the female curse” (Oler 32). She also writes that “As much as images like those in the likes of *Carrie* and *The Exorcist* offer the possibility of embracing a distinctly feminine source of power, they threaten to reduce girls to mere expressions of their biological essence” (Oler 36). Indeed, in Stephen King’s *Carrie*, a future study of Carrie’s telekinetic abilities states that “Carrie White’s exceptionally late and traumatic commencement of the menstrual cycle might well have provided the trigger for her latent talent” (King 8). In his interview for *Twilight Zone Magazine*, King stated that in his original concept for the book, it was specifically the hormones related to menstruation that caused Carrie’s telekinetic abilities.

In her article “Bloodletting: Female Adolescence in Modern Horror Films,” Oler pays special attention to the 2000 film *Ginger Snaps*. The plot of this film revolves around a teenage girl named Ginger who is bitten by a werewolf shortly after having her first period. Oler notes that “When her younger sister Brigitte begins to suspect that Ginger is undergoing more than just ‘the most normal thing in the world,’ she observes, ‘Something’s wrong – like more than you being just female’” (Oler 35). The conflation of being female with being “wrong” speaks to the idea of a young woman going through puberty as something inherently wrong or scary.

Even today, in a supposedly enlightened and sex-positive era, this positioning of female puberty as equivalent to the monsters of horror is still common. In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode “Innocence,” Buffy’s vampire boyfriend, Angel, loses his soul and, by extension, his humanity, as a direct result of having sex with Buffy. This not only causes Angel’s eventual death when Buffy is forced to kill him (“Becoming (Part 2)”), but also results in the deaths of some of her classmates (“Phases”) and her teacher and mentor, Jenny (“Passion”).

In the first season of *Supernatural*, the Winchesters discover a true version of another urban legend: the hook man.⁵ The ghost of a preacher who had been executed for murdering prostitutes has attached itself to Lori, an 18-year-old girl who is the daughter of the town’s current preacher. He feeds off Lori’s repressed emotions and kills people both she and ghost view as “immoral,” including Lori’s over-affectionate boyfriend, her sexually active roommate, and her father, who is having an affair with a married woman (“Hook Man”). The deaths of each victim are directly tied to Lori’s confusion about her repressed sexuality, and her religious beliefs about how sexuality should be expressed.

In *Supernatural*’s seventh season, the Amazons join the show’s mythology. Dean has a one-night stand with an Amazon warrior, which results in the conception and birth of a daughter. It’s

quickly revealed that the Amazons are responsible for the recent deaths in the town. The Winchesters discover that once an Amazon girl turns 16, she has to kill her father as part of her coming-of-age ritual (“The Slice Girls”). In this case, the connection could not be more obvious: the process of a girl becoming a woman is contingent on someone else’s death.

These examples show that despite the massive amounts of medical knowledge on the subject, female adolescence is still viewed as a dark unknown, as something to be feared. Male puberty isn’t portrayed this way in the modern era. The MTV series *Teen Wolf*, like the film *Ginger Snaps*, uses lycanthropy as a metaphor for puberty, but the protagonist is a boy rather than a girl. *Teen Wolf* portrays being a werewolf as being an amazing experience, while *Ginger Snaps* paints it as a tragedy. Male puberty turns boys into superheroes, while female puberty turns girls into monsters.

The Possessed Girl

Another common narrative involving teenage girls is the “possessed girl.” Oler describes the possessed girl as a narrative in which “women’s very bodies become the Pandora’s box that unleashes evil into the worldly domain” (Oler 33). Oler cites *Carrie*, *Ginger Snaps*, and *The Exorcist* as examples of this narrative. Oler writes that “while these girls [Carrie, Ginger, and Regan] are ostensibly the films’ subjects, the narrative action inevitable reduces them to being merely bodies themselves, with their actual experiences rarely investigated or explored” (Oler 33). In *Carrie*, most of the narrative is from the perspective of other people, whether it’s one of Carrie’s classmates, one of her teachers, a journalist reporting on prom night, or a scientist studying telekinesis. Little of the overall story is focused on Carrie herself, rather, the focus is on her power and the destruction she causes with it. In *Ginger Snaps*, the focus shifts away from Ginger after her transformation, with the story becoming more about her still-human (and still-prepubescent) sister. On the subject of *The Exorcist*, Oler writes that “Regan transforms from girl to female portal so thoroughly that her character’s only cry for help is literally written on her body (“help me” spelled out in the raised skin of her stomach). At the end of the film, when an enraged Father Karras, the titular exorcist, physically assaults Regan, the audience barely registers any shock. In no other film context would the act of a grown man punching a teenage girl be acceptable, or even understandable. Yet the action that immediately follows – Karras is himself possessed and subsequently hurled out the window to his death – makes it clear that this is really his story and not that of the young girl left crying in the corner of her room. Regan spends the few remaining moments of the film gaunt and silent, hardly even a witness to her own terrifying trials. No longer “open” (at least not until the sequel) thanks to Karras’s sacrifice, she becomes useless as the object of horror – and as the subject of the film” (Oler 34). The possession of adolescent girls by outside forces, most often brought on by or directly coinciding with their maturation into women, serves to dehumanize them to the point where they are able to be abused for the sake of the plot, without the audience wondering what they are going through. Despite being supernatural in focus, this narrative is mirrored in the real world, with violence against women being at epidemic levels in Western society. While young girls on screen are being painted as inhuman monsters, and therefore acceptable targets for abuse, real-life women and girls are faced with a reality in which one in four women experience actual or attempted rape (“Sexual Assault Statistics”), and a woman’s murder will get a man an average sentence of two to six years in jail (“The Michigan Women’s Justice & Clemency Project”). The “possessed girl” narratives, when paired with these statistics, show a vivid picture of how Western society devalues women.

Subverted Tropes

TV Tropes, an online database that defines, categorizes, and tracks tropes in media throughout history, defines a “subversion” as “playing bait and switch with a trope. A work makes you think a trope is going to happen, but it doesn’t” (“Subverted Trope”). *Frankenstein* subverts one of the oldest tropes in literature, dating back to the book of Genesis: the idea that women are the source of trouble, and the source of humanity’s general woes. In *Frankenstein*, the protagonist’s

troubles are caused not by a woman, but by the fact that he tries to create life on his own, cutting women out of the process.

Wes Craven's 1984 film *A Nightmare On Elm Street* subverts another well-known trope: the damsel in distress. While Nancy seems like the typical female horror protagonist, she's the one who saves herself in the end and defeats Freddy Krueger. Her mother defies this trope as well, being one of the mob that originally killed Krueger to save their children.

Whedon's World

Writer/director Joss Whedon is often hailed as a beacon of feminism in an otherwise incredibly sexist television and film industry. However, in recent years, women have come out of the woodwork criticizing Whedon for employing just as many sexist tropes as his cohorts, and masking it in rhetoric about "strong female characters."

When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first aired in 1997, it became notable for supposedly subverting two very common tropes: the "dumb blonde" stereotype, and the damsel in distress. However, Buffy's liberation from these tropes is contingent upon other women being victims of them. In the first episode, the character of Cordelia Chase takes Buffy's place as the by then archetypal "stupid girl who always gets killed in horror movies." Not only does this play into the idea that there must always be a "dumb" woman, rather than having all female characters possess equal amounts of intelligence, it also plays off the stereotypes that women are inherently competitive with each other. As the "dumb" girl, Cordelia is set up as the most popular girl in school, the airheaded cheerleader who the boys fall head over heels for. When Buffy moves to Sunnydale, Cordelia's position as the prettiest and the most popular is threatened, 'causing her to bully Buffy and spread rumors about her.

Whedon also uses the concept of the "good girl" vs the "bad girl" to set up the contrast between Buffy, and the "dark Slayer" Faith, introduced in season three. Faith is set up as the anti-Buffy. She grew up poor, it's implied she was abused as a child, she's been in trouble with the law, and she is fiercely independent, not wanting to rely on family or friends for anything. But the key difference that is brought up in any discussion of Faith is that she is not the sexually "pure" girl that Buffy is, but rather a sexually aware and mature woman. One of the first clues the audience gets that there is something "wrong" about Faith is that she is open about the fact that she's an adult who has sex ("Faith, Hope & Trick"). In her book *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, Lorna Jowett writes that "Faith is 'bad' not because she participates in sex and violence but because she enjoys them" (Jowett 86). Part of the Western cultural narrative about what defines a "good girl" is that women are meant to have sex for specific purposes (most often procreation), but aren't supposed to enjoy sex (Valenti 196). Women who enjoy sex, like Faith, are viewed as being "deviant" or "transgressive" (Jowett 86).

As was discussed earlier, both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* carry the theme of maternal death. Buffy is often praised as a "strong female character," but the deaths of the maternal figures in her life are used by the narrative to punish her for her strength and to drive Buffy into a dark place where her situation seems hopeless. Jenny's death in the first season was used to prevent Buffy from being able to return Angel's soul ("Passion"). Joyce's death was used to destroy the happy and relatively normal life Buffy had been leading during the fifth season ("The Body"). Buffy's own death becomes her punishment for attempting to find a way to save her sister, as well as being Dawn's punishment for her inherent magical power. If Dawn wasn't this powerful, there would have been no need for Buffy to sacrifice herself ("The Gift").

The final sexist trope that will be discussed in the context of Whedon's universe is the "mystical pregnancy." The mystical pregnancy occurs when a female character's pregnancy is caused or affected by supernatural forces. This happens multiple times on the series *Angel*, most notable to Angel's two love interests, Darla and Cordelia. In both cases, the pregnancy isn't part of the female character's story arc, but rather a way to throw a new hurdle in the path of the male lead.

When Darla appears in the third season, pregnant with Angel's child, she kills herself to save it, despite the fact that she didn't want to have the baby in the first place ("Lullaby"). The main point of Darla's pregnancy story line isn't about her. The focus is placed on Angel having to take responsibility for a child he didn't know he was going to have. When Cordelia becomes pregnant, the focus of the narrative is once again placed on Angel. Cordelia's pregnancy becomes a way to give Angel a new villain to defeat ("Inside Out").

Conclusion

Over the years, women have made a lot of progress toward equality. However, each time progress is made, a new wave of anti-feminism arises to attempt to undo what little has been done. This is extremely evident in the media produced by Western society, whether that media is offering commentary on sexist ideas, such as in *Frankenstein*, or is directly endorsing them, like *Supernatural* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Women appear to be in a much better place in society than we were in the nineteenth century, but digging beneath the surface reveals that systemic misogyny hasn't gotten that much better, and in some ways has gotten worse. This is reflected in our media, which appears to be more egalitarian until the material is examined more closely, after which the sexist nature of some of our most popular books, TV shows, and films can be more clearly seen.

Notes

¹In most Western countries, first wave feminism was mostly focused on white women. In the United States, slavery was still legal for much of the first wave of feminism, and black women were rarely included in women's struggle for civil rights until the late nineteenth century.

²Like the first wave, the second wave was largely focused on white women and middle-class women, especially when it came to employment opportunities. Poor women and women of color had already been working outside the home due to necessity. White middle-class women were the ones who primarily benefitted from the second wave's focus on employment. The early second wave movement also distanced itself from the struggles of disabled and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women.

³Mainstream third-wave feminism started off also with the focus on white women. However, due to the advent of the Internet, intersectional feminism became more well-known, with more women of color, disabled women, and queer women gaining a platform through which their voices could be heard and they could connect with other women who faced the same struggles.

⁴The Bloody Mary legend states that if you say the words "Bloody Mary" three times into a mirror, her ghost will appear. The actual original Bloody Mary was Queen Mary I of England, who had hundreds of Protestants killed during her brief reign ("Mary I, Queen of England (1516-1558)"). The Mary who appears in this episode of *Supernatural* is unrelated to the original Bloody Mary.

⁵The Hook Man is an urban legend about two teenagers who sneak off into the woods together, and hear a radio broadcast about an escaped convict who is known to kill people with a hook. When they hear a noise in the woods, the boyfriend leaves the car to check it out, only to be killed by the Hook Man. The girl escapes, but when she arrives at home, she finds a hook dangling from the handle of her car door.

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