The Rhetoric of a Buffy Fandom: A Study of Fan Writing, Interaction, and Activism in an Online Community Environment

Kristen Julia Anderson
Montclair State University

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The Rhetoric of a *Buffy* Fandom: A Study of Fan Writing, Interaction, and Activism in an Online Community Environment

by

Kristen Julia Anderson

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Masters of English (August 2011)

College of Humanities & Social Sciences

Department of English

Certified by:

Dr. Marietta Morrissey
Dean of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jessica Restamo
Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Laura Nicosia
Committee Member

Dr. Daniel Bronson
Department Chair
Abstract

As a topic for academic focus, fan fiction provides a unique medium for studying how multiple factors intersect with and influence a writer from invention to creation through revision. The act of writing fan fiction itself provides multiple possibilities for engaging with and analyzing a source text. In addition, an interactive online fan fiction community formed and based around a specific idea becomes, not only a location for sharing common interests, but also a space for active discourse. Arguments presented in a fan fiction online community are strengthened and supported through the writings posted within its frames. My thesis studies an active *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) online fan fiction community in order to suggest how fan fiction writing, in addition to being creative and interest-based endeavor, can also be considered analytical and critical writing. Keeping these points in mind, I suggest how fan fiction writing can apply to and has relevancy within the introduction to college writing classroom.
THE RHETORIC OF A BUFFY FANDOM: A STUDY OF FAN WRITING, INTERACTION, AND ACTIVISM IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

A THESIS

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For the degree of Master’s in English

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KRISTEN JULIA ANDERSON

Montclair State University
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The Rhetoric of a *Buffy* Fandom: A Study of Fan Writing, Interaction, and Activism in an Online Community Environment

1. **First a Brief Background: Fans United**

   In the episode “Seeing Red” from season six of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* the character Tara Maclay, one half of a lesbian couple from the show, was shot and killed by a stray bullet intended for another character. In the next three episodes her girlfriend, Willow Rosenberg, traveled down a dark path of murderous bloodlust and world destruction. Fans who were outraged over what they considered to be a negative treatment of a lesbian couple took notice and began to actively voice their disapproval. Members of one particular online Willow and Tara fan community, *The Kitten, the Witches and the Bad Wardrobe*, developed a written reaction to the treatment of the couple titled the “Lesbian Cliché FAQ.”

   *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe* eventually divided into two forums, *Different Colored Pens* (a fan fiction forum) and *the Kitten Board* (a fan forum). The end of season six from *BtVS* aired in 2002; the series itself had a final conclusive ending in May 2003. Over nine years have passed since “Seeing Red” aired and, yet, nearly 40 stories were started, updated, or finished between July 1, 2011 and August 1, 2011 alone. *Different Colored Pens* remains an active Willow/Tara fan fiction forum whose members engage in critical and analytical thinking about the show. As the user GayNow perhaps best explains in a post about *Different Colored Pens* members:

   "Innately, most of us are critical thinkers at heart. I think that's one of the reasons we've gravitated toward this board (and other fic archives) -- we saw something in *BtVS* worth mulling over. We found it worthy of thought and consideration. And we pretty much decided to either turn those thoughts into something more thought provoking by writing a fic, or we attached ourselves to our favorite archives, boards and authors to experience what others created...some of us did both."
2. Introduction

Fan fiction online communities foster an environment for writing that is surrounded by constant feedback and encouragement from readers. Fan fiction writers are influenced from multiple angles including events from within the source story (a specific TV show, movie, book, comic, videogame, etc.), personal reactions to and opinions about the source's treatment of characters and storylines, perceptions of the source's overall fan community, and readers responding to writings within the actual fan fiction community. As a topic for academic focus, fan fiction provides a unique medium for studying how these multiple factors intersect with and influence the fan fiction writing process from invention to creation and revision. Furthermore, reading a story posted on an interactive fan fiction forum means reading not only the story but reader and writer comments. In her dissertation, “Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction,” Juli Parrish explains how she was “reminded through studying fan fiction and its feedback that individual writers are contributing to a larger project, one that is not unduly controlled by any one person. Instead, it is a collaborative project, a set of texts to which hundreds, sometimes thousands of readers and writers contribute” (46). If we follow Parrish's ideas, then a piece of writing such as fan fiction, when composed collaboratively, becomes larger and more than a single-authored piece.

I focus my study of fan fiction on the online fan community, Different Colored Pens, a fan site devoted to the romantic preservation of two characters, Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay, from the popular and acclaimed television show Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS) which aired between the years 1997-2003.¹ In his influential book Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture academic and fan scholar Henry Jenkins argues that fans are “active producers and manipulators of meaning” (23) and that those fans “articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works” (23). Although Textual Poachers was first published almost twenty years ago, its theories and ideas are referenced consistently by academics conducting research in areas such as fan fiction and media studies.² More recently,
Jenkins writes in an online post titled “Fan Fiction as Critical Commentary” for his weblog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* that he “regard(s) all or at least most of fan fiction to involve some form of criticism of the original texts upon which it is based - criticism as in interpretation and commentary if not necessary criticism as in negative statements made about them.” Keeping Jenkins’ ideas in mind, the users of *Different Colored Pens* can be understood as critically analyzing and interpreting *BtVS*’s treatment of Willow and Tara during season six.

I use the fan fiction story “Van Rosenberg” by Alcy to explore how a fan fiction text is formed within and influenced by the rhetorical goals of the online fan fiction community in which it is posted (in this case, *Different Colored Pens*). By being selective and strict about the writings hosted on its site, *Different Colored Pens* presents a unified and persistent position in support of Willow and Tara’s romantic relationship. In fact *Different Colored Pens* strictly bans members from romantically pairing either Willow or Tara with another character. This rule is emphasized by *Different Colored Pens*’ site administrator, xita, in the “Pens FAQ.” In the post xita asserts that:

All fics should focus on W/T for a majority of the fic. Angst is very welcome but the end result should be the continuation of the W/T couple, which logically means Willow and Tara are alive and together in the end. Any creative effort featuring Willow or Tara with any other character in any romantic/sexual situation is Off Topic and does not belong on the board.

*Different Colored Pens*, therefore, is more than an interactive online space for fan fiction writers, it is a community solidified by a consistent central argument.

The existence of the site emphasizes that Willow and Tara’s treatment within the source text disappointed and disturbed viewers who valued their romantic relationship as a rarity for mainstream network television programming. At the time of its airing, the *BtVS* storyline featured one of the longest and only positive portrayals of a lesbian couple. However, in the final four
episodes of season six ("Seeing Red," "Villains," "Two to Go" and "Grave") Tara was killed off the show and Willow was propelled into a downward spiral of obsessed vengeance. Fans who viewed Willow and Tara as role models became personally offended by a storyline which they felt conveyed a negative (even if unintentional) image of lesbian relationships. Writers who post on *Different Colored Pens* can be seen as not only extending Willow and Tara's relationship, but as also resisting and protesting decisions of a dominant source text. *Different Colored Pens* presents a subjugated and underrepresented community's refusal to be silenced into submission beneath a mainstream public. It also signifies a refusal to accept character treatment and portrayals that are viewed as offensive and oppressive. Therefore, *Different Colored Pens* can be understood as a rhetorical environment with a specific agenda.

Studying the purpose and motivations of an online fan fiction community as well as a fan fiction story itself helps support and understand how aspects of fan fiction might also be applied and used in a composition classroom. I do not focus on simply repeating previously made suggestions about how fan fiction might be used for the composition classroom, but rather explore how fan fiction writing might be used as a model for promoting critical and analytical thinking and writing.

3. Methods

My thesis studies the influences, goals, and writing practices of the fan fiction website *Different Colored Pens*. While there were thousands of source texts and fan fiction stories that I potentially could have chosen to focus on for my study, there were several determining factors that contributed to my decision to ultimately choose *Different Colored Pens* and the story "Van Rosenberg."

It was important that I not only use an influential and prevalent popular source text (be it a television series, movie franchise, comic, etc.) within fan fiction discourse, but that I also choose one that was respected and written about by academics and scholars. Furthermore, I wanted to use a source text that I was not simply familiar with, but that I was personally invested
in as an actual fan. It was my hope that by being a fan I would be able to approach the fan community as not only an academic studying the site for the purpose of my thesis, but with a strong connection to and knowledge base of the source text. Therefore, I initially narrowed my list of potential source texts based on my personal preferences as a fan. I considered various sources such as the movie and book franchises of Star Wars, Harry Potter, and Lord of the Rings and television series such as Battlestar Galactica, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Supernatural. While studying a source text that I was a fan would hopefully offer me the opportunity to approach the fan fiction community with a strong foundational understanding of events that occurred within the storyline, it also meant that I risked being clouded by my own personal opinions and potential subjectivities. If I disagreed with the purpose of the fan fiction community or the interpretation of a fan fiction story, it might become difficult for me to take an objective stance or to view the text for the sole purposes of academic study. In other words, I had to be sure that my “fan” self did not completely overpower my “academic” self. I needed to make sure that I found a balance. Nevertheless, I felt that being first a fan and second an academic provided me with an essential basis for engaging with and approaching a fan community from an insider perspective. Being first a fan enables me to comment and reflect on my own study from a unique and out-of-the-box perspective that is, perhaps, not often used in academic work.

As I began reading essays and books in order to gain knowledge about fan fiction communities and fan cultures one of my potential choices continued to reappear within the pages of the texts: Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS). This fact seemed too coincidental to me because at the same time I was talking with a friend about rewatching all the seasons, including those I had never seen. When the show originally aired, I stopped watching it at some point during season six because, at the time, I had grown personally irritated by certain plot lines. I had also considered the ending of season five as a definitive, though sad, ending to the series and therefore had difficulty readjusting my thinking when the series returned for another season. Nevertheless I had always meant to rewatch the series and finish it to the end.
The series’ overall feminist theme, which takes the stereotypical dumb blonde victim from horror movies and turns her into the show’s lead heroine, combined with episodes dealing with real-life issues such as growing up, virginity, death, sexuality, and friendship made it not only enjoyable and relatable, but enabled me to engage in meaningful discussions about it with friends and family. In particular, I remember having a debate with a family member when the series was first airing over the depiction of a lesbian relationship on primetime network television. Normally, this family member and I rarely talked about such political and social issues, but rather kept things on a surface level. However, since I was watching an episode that featured Willow and Tara while this family member was in the same room it opened up the door for a deeper discussion. This family member was flustered and offended over the portrayal of a lesbian couple on TV, while I was in support of the portrayal. Therefore, *BtVS* offered us the ability to express and discuss our opinions and for me to also, perhaps, open up the mind of someone.

At the same time that I was rewatching/watching *BtVS*, I was also beginning to research books and essays in order to determine the extent to which scholarship has focused on and/or been written about the television series. In the course of my research I discovered much scholarly published work focused on *BtVS*, including several academic, theoretical, and philosophical essays.

The scholarly journal *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* hosts a bi-annual conference where scholars and pseudo-scholars present papers and studies focused on Joss Whedon’s hit television shows including *BtVS, Angel, Dollhouse* and *Firefly*.

In addition to being a frequently used primary source among academics in popular culture studies or related fields, *BtVS* also has millions of loyal and outspoken fans. I used the website, *FanFiction.Net*, potentially the most popular and prolific community for fan fiction writing on the Internet, as a basis to judge the popularity of a source text for fan fiction writing. As of July 5, 2011 over 42,000 fan fiction stories about *BtVS* are posted at *FanFiction.Net*, making *BtVS* its second most popular source for fan fiction written about a television series. The
most popular source is currently the television show *Supernatural* which, as of July 5, 2011, has 8,000 more stories posted on *FanFiction.Net* than *BtVS*. However, although I am an avid fan of *Supernatural*, it does not have the same current plethora of existing academic support as *BtVS*. Further, given my interest in studying fiction writing as an active critique and protest against the dominant source text, *BtVS* quickly became a useful medium for exploring how fan fiction writing gives voice to the voiceless. Having read several essays which pointed to or focused on fan protest and disagreement regarding the fate of the romantic relationship of Willow and Tara, I decided to focus my study on fan fiction writing that specifically centered on these two characters. Accordingly, I requested and received permission from a site that only accepted and posted stories written about Willow and Tara, *Different Colored Pens*, to observe and study how its members interact with one another and collaboratively produce a fan fiction story, as well as to be able to reference site postings within my thesis.

I next began to read the two main FAQs posted at *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe*, the “Kitten FAQ” and “Pens FAQ,” in order to gain a better understanding of the site’s rules and goals. In my course of reading the “Kitten FAQ,” I came across mention of the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” and a link to a FAQ titled the “Lesbian Cliché FAQ.” My interest peaked, I proceeded to read about the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” and learn how the members of the *Kitten Board* perceived certain episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as playing into negative lesbian stereotypes. Beyond studying a community of readers and writers, and how their ongoing dialogue about the development of each “product” influenced the fan fiction itself, studying a fan forum designed with the distinct purpose of conveying how specific incidents depicted in the TV show portrayed a negative image of lesbians and lesbian relationships added a deeper layer to my study. In this way I could look at fan fiction as both a motivated rewriting of a plotline and as an example of active criticism and protest.

I proceeded to then choose a specific story on which to focus. The first qualification was that the story be completed; the second criterion was that the story thread contain a wealth of
comments, preferably 500 or more. By using a finished story I could study the story from inception to completion, reviewing reader feedback posts in unison with the storyline. A high quantity of reader feedbacks ensured that I would have ample material to work with and study. This also meant that the chances for reading quality, thoughtful feedback (such as specific advice about character development) compared to arbitrary surface level feedback (such as “love it”) increased. From here, I began to read the stories in order to determine which would provide me with the most substance and material. Wanting to use a fan fiction story that contained reader and writer feedback, and also evidence of writer edits made as a direct result of reader feedback I began to search closely for a story that offered such. I looked for a story in which date and time stamps for postings and edits were clearly marked. Then I compared the date, time and number of edits a writer made with the date and time stamps of reader feedback. I also wanted to use a story that contained an actual or symbolic rewriting of the scene(s) from the original series that were seen as conveying negative images of lesbians. In this way I could ensure that the story I studied would fit my idea of fan fiction on the site as being an example of active protest. Based on the above criteria, I ultimately chose the story “Van Rosenberg” by the author Alcy.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Introduction

Imagine a young male in his early twenties wearing a Darth Vader helmet who is sitting at home on a Saturday night writing a Star Wars fan fiction story. Picture a young college woman hunched over her laptop typing a fan fiction story feverishly on a Friday night, her side of the dorm plastered with posters of Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, stars of the hit show Supernatural. Most likely when you picture a fan fiction writer, you imagine someone similar to one of the socially challenged stereotypes just described. You probably picture a lonely person who is perhaps separated from social reality playing dress up or surrounded in a celebrity infatuation, not someone engaging in a socially active, stimulating intellectual activity. You would be quite mistaken.
Fan fiction writing provides the people with a way to interact with others who share common interests and enables them to creatively present critical analyses of favorite (yet sometimes disappointing) source texts. Certainly, the fan part of “fan fiction” does allude to the very fact that the people who engage in the act of writing fan fiction are indeed, first and foremost, fans of a specific something (whether that something is a specific character, comic, television show, book, etc). However, it is a fan’s strong felt connections to a specific something that prompts her to form strong personal opinions about plot directions and powerful connections to characters. This deeply felt personal connection is what motivates many fans to engage in fan fiction writing, writing that is a direct reaction to the source text. Fan fiction writing is a fan’s way of responding to and engaging with the source text, of providing alternative directions, of entering into a conversation with and questioning the original author. These actions are the very critical thinking skills, such as engaging with texts, questioning what is read, forming opinions, which composition instructors strive to have their students practice.

My choice to focus on fan fiction in a thesis for the field of composition and rhetoric may actually seem questionable to those rooted in the discipline. It typically seems that papers in composition studies are centered on practical pedagogical topics aimed at enhancing instructor understandings of how students learn to write, how writing might be taught more efficiently and effectively, and also, most recently, on how technology influences the writing classroom. In other words, most culminating papers for a graduate degree program focused in writing studies (even those with distinct connections to popular culture) somehow deal or relate primarily to pedagogical aspects and theories. My paper, however, is primarily rooted in a study of popular culture in that it focuses on writing created by and for fans, and secondarily concerned with how aspects of fan fiction might be applicable in a composition classroom. I do this because studying popular culture helps to understand writing not from the view of the academic, but from the writing reality of the general public. The website for The Journal of Popular Culture explains that:
The popular culture movement was founded on the principle that the perspectives and experiences of common folk offer compelling insights into the social world. The fabric of human social life is not merely the art deemed worthy to hang in museums, the books that have won literary prizes or been named ‘classics,’ or the religious and social ceremonies carried out by societies’ elite. The Journal of Popular Culture continues to break down the barriers between so-called ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture and focuses on filling in the gaps a neglect of popular culture has left in our understanding of the workings of society. 

My study continues this break down of barriers in that it studies and posits potential influences on fan fiction, writing done by everyday folk, and then attempts to establish fan fiction writing as engaged critical commentary and social activism.

Admittedly, popular culture as a field for academic focus, in itself, may garner skepticism. However the existence of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) solidifies the legitimacy of scholarship in the field of popular culture. The PCA/ACA holds an annual conference where over 2000 scholars and enthusiasts gather to discuss and share ideas; in addition, several regional and international conferences on popular culture are also held each year. The PCA/ACA publishes two journals, offers awards to honor quality scholarship and provides endowments to support graduate students, scholars and researchers. Specifically, my paper posits that fan fiction written about a popular hit television series positions fans as cultural critics and activists thereby emphasizing the rhetorical strategies used by fans. In extension of these rhetorical strategies used by fan writers, I speculate and suggest potential connections to the composition classroom. In this way, I attempt to chip away the wall separating the academic writer and the fan or everyday writer.

The following literature review serves to position fan fiction as a valid and worthy topic for composition studies. My review of literature is divided in to four sections: “Fandoms, Fan Communities, and the Academy;” “The Popularity of Buffy the Vampire Slayer” “A Space for Those Ignored;” and “Fan Fiction and the Composition Classroom.” The first section, “Fandoms,
Fan Communities, and the Academy," gives a brief historical background about fandoms and fan communities in order to provide a base for understanding the emergence of fan fiction.

Furthermore, this first section introduces the position of fandom/fan communities within the frame of academia in order to establish the relationship between fan studies and academic studies. From here I transition to a brief discussion about fan writing and academic writing in order to foreshadow a later section. However, before presenting a section about fan fiction itself, I pause to discuss *BtVS's* vast fandom and academic relevance in a section titled "The Popularity and Relevancy of *Buffy* and *Buffy* Fan Fic." Then I spend a brief time discussing how fan fiction provides a creative space and outlet for marginalized members of popular society in a section titled "A Space for Those Ignored." The final section, "Fan Fiction and the Composition Classroom," serves to move from a general discussion of fandoms to a more specific discussion of fan fiction. This last section provides a brief history and explanation of fan fiction in terms of its development, components, and influences. Furthermore, it discusses fan fiction's relation to the source text, relationships between writers and readers, and the collaborative nature of online fan fiction communities. In addition, this last section suggests correlations between practices of fan fiction and composition classrooms.

4.2. Fandoms, Fan Communities, and the Academy

Before engaging in a conversation about the relationship between fandoms, fan communities and the academy it is important to first provide some background on the evolution of fandoms. Fandom can be considered synonymous with interaction. A fandom cannot exist without fan interaction; without interaction the fan is just a fan, not a member of community with a shared interest (a fandom). Henry Jenkins and Francesca Coppa both note in their respective works that fandom and fan interaction began with the 1926 letter page/column of Hugo Gernsbeck’s "Amazing Stories" which invited interaction and communication among readers. Coppa’s essay "A Brief History of Media Fandom" reports that *Amazing Stories* included an "interactive element that allowed for the development of modern fandom; by publishing fans'
addresses [it] allowed science fiction fans to contact each other directly” (42). Both Jenkins and Coppa further agree that organized media fandom began in the 1960s in relation with the popularity of the science fiction television show *Star Trek*. The interaction of members within fandoms allows for not only an embrace of shared textual enjoyments, but for thought-provoking conversations about areas such as plot developments, hidden meanings, character relationships, and perceived metaphors.

In the beginning of media fandom’s existence, fan interaction was limited to monthly face-to-face meetings, such as the four *Quantum Leap* fans described by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* who met every few weeks to watch episodes and workshop stories based on the show. The word to note in the preceding sentence is “few;” members met only every few weeks. This, of course, was before the advent of the Internet. In 1992, the year Jenkins’ published the influential *Textual Poachers*, the Internet was far from the household staple it is now in the 21st century. A person who wanted to interact with other fans could not just read and post to an online fan discussion board before bed or during a lunch break; rather, in order to interact with other fans, she would have to schedule time to meet them in a face-to-face setting. If she did not find the time to meet face-to-face, then she would not be able to interact with other fans at all.

It is no surprise then that the Internet has largely been credited with increasing fans’ abilities to communicate more easily and frequently with one another and likewise increasing the reach of and ability for more people to partake in fandoms. People no longer have to set aside time every few weeks in order to workshop their ideas in a face-to-face setting; rather, fans and fan fiction writers can interact in a virtual online setting. The explosion of web-based fan communities and fan fiction websites such as *FanFiction.Net* and *Live Journal* directly increased reader/writer interactions. Coppa further suggests that “if the expansion of the Internet allowed communication between fans in different worlds, translation and adaptations of fannish terms, forms, and practices…emerg(ing) from those communications rapidly transform(ed) the fannish landscape into something older fans may barely recognize” (57). The divide between
older fans who grew up in the age of fanzines to younger fans who are born in the age of online fan communities parallels the divide between teachers who grew up before the Internet became common place and their students who perhaps started playing games on the Internet before they could even read or write.

Young adults and teens growing up and living in this digitally enhanced modern world passed traditional classrooms on the technological speedway long ago. These teens and young adults seem to live in a figuratively futuristic world compared to the one in which their elders still reside. In *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*, Ito et. al. address the disconnect between what students and teachers expect and want. They note that “youth using new media often learn from their peers, not teachers or adults, and notions of expertise and authority have been turned on their heads” (Ito et. al., 6). It is possible therefore that educators who are not acclimated to or comfortable with using technology may feel overwhelmed or at a loss for control. Furthermore, *The Digital Youth Study* “demonstrates that some of the drivers of self-motivated learning come not from institutionalized ‘authorities’ setting standards and providing instruction, but from youth observing and communicating with people engaged in the same interests, and in the same struggles for status and recognition, as they are” (Ito et. al., 11). Similarly, members of fan fiction communities are motivated by each other just as students are motivated by one another; each writer posting on a fan fiction forum relies on reader feedback to help him produce a well written and enjoyable story. In this manner then, where writers encourage and motivate one another, fan fiction communities can be seen as intellectual stimulating communities.

The idea of fan communities as intellectually stimulating environments is supported by the chapter “Fan Critics” from *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins claims that “organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semi structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it”
Theories, criticisms, evaluations, debates, negotiations, speculations, these are the very activities and intellectual processes students are expected to engage in with classroom readings and writings. Nevertheless, despite these similarities, academic communities and fan communities are kept, by most, at opposite ends. Therefore, the fact that this academic thesis presents a study of writing that was done within a fan fiction community challenges and even attempts to close that very divide.

Studies rooted in fan practices differ from the traditional in that, as supported by Matt Hills in his book *Fan Cultures*, academics and fans have a binary us vs. them divide. Hills uses the terms “fan-scholar” and “scholar-fan” to explain this separation. Hills defined the “fan-scholar” as “the fan who uses academic theorizing within their fan writing” and the “scholar-fan” as someone “who draws on their fandom as a badge of distinction in the academy” (2). In other words, the “scholar-fan” is traditionally accepted by the academy because he is primarily a scholar and secondarily a fan of something which does nothing more than provide him with a “badge of distinction.” Jenkins’ also asserts that the word “fan” has a negative connotation in and of itself and furthermore that the “stereotypical conception of the fan as emotionally unstable, socially maladjusted, and dangerously out of sync with reality” (13). However, the “fan-scholar” stands to undo such negative assumptions of the fan because she uses scholarly methods to present a well thought-out and supported argument or point of view. For example, it can be posited that writing posted at the *Kitten Board* pulls from various theoretical lenses, such as feminism, post structuralism and queer theory in order to challenge and react to decisions made by *BtVS* producers and writers.

Members of fan fiction communities do not passively complain about things they find unsettling or disagreeable about the source text. Rather fans, like those on the *Kitten Board*, present arguments that establish the fandom as a space for critical and analytical opinions and positions. The intellectual and critical environment of fandoms, like the one members of the *Kitten Board* are a part of, can perhaps be best established and supported through the following
quotations. Jenkins argues that “fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (24). Similarly, in the essay “Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative” Deborah Kaplan suggests that “to be a member of fandom is to be a member of (an) interpretive community, because regardless of whether or not an individual fan produces or consumes analysis, the environment of fandom is richly interpretive” (137). Furthermore, Jenkins claims “fan reading...is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers. Such discussions expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption” (45). Finally, Kaplan also believes such room for interpretation applies not only to a text, but also applies to the characters within the source text. The above quotes and paraphrases support that fan activities, including writing and reading fan fiction, are rarely passive and are always actively intellectually stimulating. As noted by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson in the Introduction to Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet “every piece of fan fiction is, in its own way, an analytic engagement with the source text” (28).

4.3. The Popularity and Relevancy of Buffy and Buffy Fan Fiction

BtVS affords a source text that is, with over 42,000 stories posted at FanFiction.Net and tons of fan fiction archive sites throughout the web, one of the most popular sources for fan fiction on the Internet. An Internet search for the phrase “Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan fiction” conducted on July 31, 2011 via Google yielded over 69,000 results. A search for the phrase “Willow and Tara fan fiction” yielded over 5,600 results. Focusing my study on the active Willow and Tara fan fiction online forum Different Colored Pens does more than narrow my study to a specific fan community of two characters, it brings a social relevance to my research by studying a fan fiction forum dedicated to bringing attention to one of the only positive portrayals of a lesbian couple on primetime network television. In fact, Kevin Andrew Murphy notes in his essay “Unseen Horrors & Shadowy Manipulations” that the Kitten Board called “for a boycott of
Anderson 21

episodes taking place after the death of Tara, and...to not buy *Buffy* video tapes or DVDs” (149). In addition, Peg Aloi’s essay “Skin Pale as Apple Blossom” points to the “level of hurt and indignation among fans...who saw Willow and Tara as lesbian role models” (45-46). Fan fiction stories posted and created at *Different Colored Pens*, and also hosted at other Willow and Tara archive fan fiction websites, such as *Willow/Tara Fiction Archive*, *Mystic Muse*, and/or *Through the Looking-glass*, offer creatively active opposition, in the form of alternative narratives, that emphasize the power writing can have. Therefore the writing and feedback at *Different Colored Pens* not only provides a model for student writing and feedback, but also provides a model of creative activism.

The television series *BtVS* itself is a popular source among fans and scholars alike. Slayageonline.com, the website for *the Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* (named for *BtVS* series creator, Joss Whedon (*BtVS, Angel, Firefly, Dollhouse*)) hosts a plethora of scholarly and critical essays related to *Buffy* studies. Much has been written and speculated about *BtVS*’s popularity and why it maintains such a loyal fan following. In addition countless essays present theoretical and philosophical studies of the show’s messages and meanings. The show’s immense appeal to the general viewing public can perhaps be best explained through a series of quotes taken from essays featured in the book *Seven Seasons of Buffy: Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Discussion Their Favorite Television Show* as well as other texts. Justine Larbalestier explains in “A Buffy Confession” that “*Buffy*...captured [her]...because it was a genre TV show that took the rules of the genre seriously, understood them, was metaphorically resonate, cared about continuity and consistency, was intelligently written and acted, and had a sassy self awareness that was not sly or annoying” (72-73). In addition, Larbalestier also states that the show is “both funny and sad often at the same time” (73); David Brin notes in “Buffy Vs. The Old-Fashioned ‘Hero’” that the show is “charming mix of the silly and the serious”(2); Sarah Zettel writes in “When Did the Scoobies Become Insiders?” that “(the) outsider status...was the source of [the Scoobies’] strength and unity” (110); Christie Golden suggests in “Where’s the
Religion in Willow’s Wicca?” that “one of the many great things about [Buffy] is [that it] give(s) hope to the geek in all of us” (159). In addition, Brin and Lichtenberg both point to the fact that a female is the show’s hero. While Mary Celeste Kearney’s essay “The Changing Facing of Teen Television, or Why We All Love Buffy” and Henry Jenkins and Henry G. Jenkins IV’s essay “‘The Monsters Next Door’: A Father-Son Dialogue about Buffy, Moral Panic, and Generational Differences” both note that BtVS’s appeal crosses generations in that both teens and adults can find something to relate to within the show.

However, BtVS is much more than a show that is relatable and complex. As Jenkins and Jenkins explain, there is “social relevancy found in the stories Buffy tells” (229), and as such Buffy offers multiple topics that can open up a door for discussion between parents and teens. Furthermore, Kearney suggests that the show’s “major narrative themes - friendship, community, morality, power, and conflicting roles and responsibilities - are not just teen concerns; they are concerns for us all” (32). BtVS also, as Kearney notes, contrasts “dramatically with the cheery, wholesome depictions of family life on other early prime-time series, Buffy unabashedly explores identities and lifestyles rarely privileged and often prohibited, by conservative adults” (33). This privileging of typically underprivileged lifestyles is perhaps best exemplified through Willow and Tara’s lesbian relationship.

4.4. A Space for Those Ignored

As mentioned above, Coppa claims that the beginning of media fan fiction can be linked to the science fiction television series Star Trek. Interestingly, in “Fan fiction online: Engagement, critical response, and affective play through writing” Angela Thomas notes that science fiction itself is typically a genre ruled by men. Nevertheless, though fan fiction’s most popular source texts, such as Star Wars, fall under the science fiction genre, fan fiction itself is a genre dominated by women. The high concentration of women to men engaging in fan fiction writing perhaps indicates women have accepted and embraced this alternative genre as their own.

Furthermore, women’s engagement with fan fiction writing brings emphasis to fan fiction
as a genre that gives voice to the marginalized. In her essay “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” Abigail Derecho labels fan fiction as the “literature of the subordinate because most fanfic authors are women responding to media products that, for the most part, are characterized by an under representation of women” (71). It may perhaps seem that the second most popular fan fiction source text in the television category at FanFiction.Net, *BtVS*, downplays or even voids the claim that fan fiction is “literature of the subordinate” since the show’s protagonist, Buffy Summers, is a female. However, *BtVS* fan fiction does fit the “literature of the subordinate” definition when fan fiction written about the romantic couple, Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay (Willow/Tara), is considered. Fan fiction featuring Willow/Tara can be categorized as “literature of the subordinate” because it is an active response to an under representation of positive lesbian couples on television. At the time Willow and Tara’s relationship was featured on *BtVS* (December, 1999- May, 2002), they were two parts of the then only 13 lesbian characters on network television (“Timeline of Lesbian and Bisexual Regular and Recurring Characters on U.S. Television,” *After Ellen*). Fan fiction writers therefore can be seen to give power and voice to those who may otherwise be ignored or marginalized against the mainstream. It’s possible to view fan fiction writing itself as a subordinate of other forms of writing; however, with the rise of the Internet came a shift whereby fan fiction writing became a shared and daily collaborative experience.

4.5. Fan Fiction and the Composition Classroom

It is helpful to look at existing literature about fan fiction practices in order to best understand and study the *Different Colored Pens* online community of fans, writers, and readers as a model for classroom composition practices. Jenkins as well as Busse and Hellekson agree that fan fiction is directly related to fan communities, and as such are collaborative endeavors. While most scholars (notably, but not limited to, Jenkins) would most likely primarily categorize those persons who write and engage in fan fiction as fans, Parrish claims that “fan fiction is also the work of people who identify as readers and writers” (6). She also argues that members of fan
fiction communities use “feedback to encourage one another to improve as readers and writers” (Parrish, 120). Feedback is also a, if not the, primary component that composition students are encouraged to seek in order to help them improve as writers and also readers of their own work. However, as Rebecca W. Black notes in “Online Fanfiction: What Technology and Popular Culture Can Teach Us About Writing and Literacy Instruction,” the difference between reader/writer interaction in the classroom versus the online fan fiction community is that fan fiction writers have “a shared point of reference” while writers in the same classroom “often [compose] texts for teachers and peers that may not share their knowledge of or interest in a topic.” Common knowledge benefits therefore not only the writer, but also the reader because she is more confident in her ability to provide feedback.

Typically, fan fiction writing is never an individual endeavor, but is rather always a collaborative one that involves discussion and feedback about texts within an interactive community of writers and readers. An important contributor to the fan fiction writer and reader relationship is the role of the beta reader plays. Beta-reading, as described by Black, is the “fanfiction term for editing.” Karpovich further explains that a beta reader is like an editor and has a prominent role “within the overall process of creating fan fiction” (175). Fan fiction online forums, like Different Colored Pens, encourage writers to obtain a beta reader to help them with areas such as grammar, proofreading, and organization. The combination of feedback from peer readers and beta readers situates fan fiction forums as adhering to a philosophy of writing that claims the more feedback the better. This writing approach is much like the structure of composition classrooms where student writers are encouraged, or even often directed by their instructors, to share their essays with peers, or to visit the campus’s writing center. In addition, as noted by Karpovich, fan fiction writing bears resemblance to the rules of the professional writing:

The social expectation that a piece of fan fiction ought to be submitted for peer criticism before it is published online presents a distinct move toward the adoption of professional level standards and an appreciation of fan fiction as not only a tribute to the original
source material but also as readable, grammatically correct, edited prose. (176)

In fact, “fan publishing has represented an important training ground for professional writers and editors, a nurturing space in which to develop skills, styles, themes, and perhaps most importantly, self confidence before entering the commercial marketplace” (Jenkins, 47). The positive effects of participating in fan fiction writing can not only be applied to those persons wishing to one day be published but, if introduced to the college composition classroom, could also prove to have positive influences on writing students as they develop their academic voices and writer self confidence.

Parrish’s dissertation covers various aspects of how fan fiction might be used within a composition classroom. She speaks of how certain aspects of fan fiction and those used by Different Colored Pens might also be valuable for teaching composition. In particular, Parrish refers to the possible benefits of creating an archive of feedback and writing, using a beta reader, and how fan fiction might be used as a model for revising student texts. She describes a beta reader as someone “who reads, edits, proofreads, offers suggestions and constructive criticism...” (Parrish, 157). She then proceeds to relate peer reviewers to beta readers, suggesting that giving a student the responsibility of a beta reader rather than a peer reviewer might give the student more cause for personal investment with a writer’s project.

It is not my intention to repeat any of Parrish’s previously established claims and suggestions regarding fan fiction’s possible applications in a composition classroom. However, one specific area I do expand upon is Parrish’s overall claim that fan fiction writing is critical writing by suggesting how fan fiction might also be modeled to encourage students to engage in critical and analytical thinking. Referring to this aspect of fan fiction helps bring validity to it as a possible method for teaching students not only how to collaboratively write, but for becoming active participants and thinkers in the world around them.

5. Theoretical Perspective

Fans of a particular television series will often contemplate or argue against plot and
character development to the extent that the show ceases to be only a source of entertainment and starts to be a source of intellectual stimulation. When a person views a television series that she is a fan of, that person is not merely a passive spectator, her personal opinions about and connections to the storyline manifest as active reactions. Often these deep personal reactions are sparked due to negative stimuli whereby the fan’s perception of a favorite television show is shattered as a result of specific plot developments. These reactions may be in the form of a verbal discussion with other fans, or even non-fans, but more often than not, these reactions occur through and as the medium of writing, where writing provides fans with the ability to discuss and present concrete opposition. The fan fiction writing engaged in by the members of Different Colored Pens is characterized by writing influenced by specific motivating factors as well as the result of particular shared perceptions, and finally that is itself an active opposition to or new creation of the source text. As Hills notes “Fans do not just write ‘fan fic’ (fan fiction), they also produce their own critical accounts of the programme’s texts” (18). How and to what extent can these characteristics be explored and proven? How can fan fiction writing be anything but a frivolous creative writing activity done without any cause or substance?

In order to understand fan fiction writing posted at Different Colored Pens as analytical and critical thinking, it is necessary to frame the reasons behind writing and the writing itself within theoretical perspectives that address the aforementioned characteristics. Therefore, I use the lens of feminist theory, specifically radical and third wave feminism, in order to explore the motivations and purposes behind the writing at Different Colored Pens. Third wave and radical feminist theory helps me to explore the writing at Different Colored Pens as social activism, where the writing can be seen as a direct response to and result of fans’ perceived negative portrayal of a lesbian relationship. Furthermore, I also draw upon Kenneth Burke’s notion of the “terministic screen” to help me explore and understand the extent to which forum members’ posts are a direct result of shared perceptions or interpretive “screens.” In “Language and Symbolic Action” Burke claims that “whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding
kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology" (1344). Finally, Jenkins’ notion of textual poaching helps me to position the writing posted at Different Colored Pens as writing that not only reacts to but actively recreates and rewrites the source text. As Jenkins writes, “fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored” (162). Together, third-wave and radical feminist theory, Burke, and Jenkins help me to situate the writing posted at Different Colored Pens as writing with purpose that presents a unified argument/position.

The romantic relationship of Tara Maclay and Willow Rosenberg spanned two and a half seasons. When season six of BtVS concluded with the death of Tara, which sent Willow on a destructive path of murderous vengeance, many viewers were outraged at what they considered to be a hurtful and negative message about an intimate lesbian relationship. Specifically, fans were offended that Tara was killed immediately after the show’s first obvious and non-metaphorical sexual scene between she and Willow and, furthermore, that (the victim’s lover) Willow, was portrayed as being driven to blind insanity. Rather than sit back quietly, these viewers actively spoke out against the injustice they felt had occurred. Elana Levine and Lisa Parks explain in the Introduction to Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer that:

The Willow/Tara plot drew broader interest as well, tapping into gay rights discourse and the responsibilities inherent in representing gay characters and themes, particularly when Tara was killed just after having sex with Willow. Fans who had been thrilled to see a sensitive portrayal of a long-term lesbian relationship were angered by the association between lesbian sex and violent death and joined together in a public protest. This story...generated grassroots activism to support gay and lesbian youth and question media representation of sexuality. (10)
The Willow/Tara online fan community, *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe* is a prime example of the public protest to which Levine and Parks refer. In the “Pens FAQ,” the site administrator, xita, instructs that “all fics should focus on W/T for a majority of the fic. Angst is very welcome but the end result should be the continuation of the W/T couple, which logically means Willow and Tara are alive and together in the end.” Therefore, by making it mandatory that every fan fiction story posted at *Different Colored Pens* ends with Willow and Tara “alive and together,” all the fan fiction writing posted at *Different Colored Pens* not only serves to rewrite or erase “Seeing Red” but also presents an active and continual protest against the negative connotations about lesbian relationships fans felt were reflected in the series.

Considering the writing posted on the *Kitten Board* and *Different Colored Pens* through the lens of feminism enables me to explore the website and site postings as active protests against lesbian and female subjugation in a predominately straight and patriarchal society. Furthermore, viewing the writing that occurs at *Different Colored Pens* as a feminist act similar to that of third wave feminism helps me to understand and present said writing as having meaningful cause that moves far beyond being merely a creative outlet for distraught fans. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake explain that “third wave feminists often take cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice” (qtd. in Hammer and Kellner, ix). Put in the context of third-wave feminism, then, the writing that occurs at *Different Colored Pens* can be seen as a means to struggle against an injustice done to the lesbian and gay community in a popular culture context, where the violent ending of Willow and Tara’s loving relationship came to be seen by many as portraying and promoting a negative and harmful stereotype.

Furthermore, exploring the motivating factors behind the writing posted at *Different Colored Pens* through a feminist lens, particularly through the lens of third-wave feminism, helps to categorize the writing there as social activism. As noted by several *BtVS* scholars, critics, and fans the violent and senseless death of Tara (and thus the end of the then longest positive
lesbian relationship portrayed on television) ignited not only Willow’s vengeance but outrage among fans who considered Tara’s death and Willow’s lust for blood revenge as perpetuating a negative cliché about lesbians and lesbian relationships. The “Lesbian Cliché FAQ” posted at the Kitten Board, written by members Kyraroc and Willowlicious and other Kitten Board members, presents this negative cliché about lesbians and lesbian relationships as being the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché.” Kyraroc and Willowlicious et al. explain that the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” is a version of a cliché about minority characters, where the minority character is introduced to a storyline in order to be killed off or play the villain. Thoroughly understanding and explaining the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” is a necessary for framing the writing at Different Colored Pens within a third-wave and radical feminist lens.

According to Kyraroc and Willowlicious et al. the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” is the idea “that all lesbians and, specifically lesbian couples, can never find happiness and always meet tragic ends. One of the repeated scenarios is that one lesbian dies horribly and her lover goes crazy, killing others or herself.” They reference several movies from the past fifty-plus years which fall into the cliché, including: The Children’s Hour, 1961; Walk on the Wildside, 1962; The Fox, 1960; and more recently Basic Instinct, 1992; Heavenly Creatures, 1994; and Lost and Delirious, 2001. This negative portrayal of lesbian couples has a lengthy history that seems to continue to grow, even if unintentionally. Although Tara and Willow were beloved characters created by a white male author, they still did not escape the cliché; this is perhaps what hurt fans most of all. Following are excerpts from the Kitten Board’s thorough explanation of why its members believe Willow and Tara fit the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché”:

Tara meets a typically violent end as a bullet rips through her chest and showers Willow with her blood. Worse, her death causes Willow to go crazy with grief and go on an evil rampage that includes sadistic torture, mutilation and murder, followed by an attempt to destroy the world (...) 

The setting and events leading to Tara’s death also fall horribly into the storied
lesbian cliché. One of the most overused features of the lesbian cliché is that the death is generally directly associated with the act of lesbian sex(...) Tara died at the end of an episode in which she spent practically the entire time having sex with Willow; further, she died immediately after a scene of heavy sexual flirtation and beside the bed in which she and Willow made love(...) Willow's total meltdown mixed with its unfortunate sexual timing strains credibility and, unfortunately, falls head-first into the unstable, evil lesbian cliché(...) The message-unintended as it may have been--of this storyline: Lesbian love is an intense, dangerous thing.Death and destruction awaits. (Kyraroc and Willowlicious et al. “Lesbian Cliché FAQ”)

The effectiveness and implications of the above excerpts can perhaps best be explored by presenting them in relation to Burke’s above mentioned notion of “terministic screens” in that all the terms used in the Kitten Board FAQ to describe how events from the episode “Seeing Red” fall under the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” unifyingly directs reader attention to a specific “terministic screen” which conveys outrage against a perceived negative portrayal of lesbians and lesbian relationships. Phrases used in the “Lesbian Cliché FAQ” such as “typically violent,” “one of the most overused features,” and “unfortunate sexual timing” each direct attention to and support the presence of the cliché thereby also giving reasons for Kitten Board members’ severe disenchantment with the show. This shared “terministic screen” as well as the shared felt disappointment provided members with the fuel for writing and participating on the fan fiction forum section of the community.

Writing posted at Different Colored Pens reflects a particular reality, a fan’s reality that argues events from the episode “Seeing Red” present negative stereotypes of lesbian relationships, and that further resists script writers’ argument that events from “Seeing Red” were necessary to move the season’s plot in a specific direction. It is helpful to consider Burke’s idea of the “terministic screen” here which suggests that “even if any given terminology is a reflection
of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (1341). The essay “Girl on Girl Politics: Willow/Tara and New Approaches to Media Fandom” by Judith L. Tabron as well as the “Lesbian Cliché FAQ” note that show creator Joss Whedon claimed Tara’s death was a necessary plot device to drive Willow toward her “dark side.” Furthermore, according to Andy Mangels’ article “Lesbian Sex=Death?” in the August 20, 2002 issue of the Advocate, producer Marti Noxon defended storyline decision saying “I think it’s kind of insulting to the gay community to suggest that we can’t do to the gay characters on the show what we would do to anybody else” (qtd. in Tabron). Many fans, however, were not satisfied with Whedon and Noxon’s reasons; these fans had an agenda to create awareness that by killing Tara, specifically in a violent manner immediately after she was depicted as being sexually intimate with Willow, and using her death to drive Willow to insanity, producers were broadcasting a hurtful negative image about gay and lesbian relationships. Therefore, the show’s writers and producers in comparison to members of The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe were viewing events that occurred in the episode “Seeing Red” through very different realities and points of view or “terministic screens.”

Beyond considering the opposing viewpoints of Willow/Tara fans versus producers through the notion of “terministic screens,” it is also helpful in understanding how the writing posted at Different Colored Pens embodies the essence of Willow and Tara’s characteristics and relationships in a manner that serves to not only honor their existence but to continue their story indefinitely. This dedication to preserving their relationship can be seen through the standing footer of the Kitten Board and Different Colored Pens website pages which reads “‘W/T Love 24/7 since July 2000.” However, in order to understand how the site is actually able to obtain and continue its goal it is again helpful to turn to Burke’s notion of the “terministic screen.” Burke posits that “any nomenclature directs the attention into some channels rather than others.” Therefore, based on Burke’s notion of “terministic screens,” it can be posited that the language choices of Different Colored Pens site participants serves to direct attention into the channel of
Willow/Tara rather than other BtVS characters. Furthermore, writers on the fan fiction site work to recreate these characters with their personal attributes recognizably intact, writing in details like Willow’s tendency to ramble and Tara’s routine stuttering. Replicating their distinct personal speech patterns in stories is the auditory “screen” through which fans recognize the characters as authentically Willow and Tara. Burke’s notion of the “terministic screen” not only helps to understand how writers use specific language in order to portray Willow and Tara’s characters, but how language used in the fan fiction stories posted at Different Colored Pens presents Willow and Tara’s relationship in a positive manner. In this manner then, language can be seen as the site’s fuel for actively protesting against perceived negative stereotypes conveyed within the show itself.

Different Colored Pens is not alone in its mission to correct the insults and wrongs felt by the Willow/Tara fan community. In the essay “‘Substantive and Girlie Action’: Women Online,” Jacqueline Rhodes compares online writers’ use of links and webrings to radical feminism in which, “a temporary stability of identification, a fictive coherence that serves as a point from which to work for change” (128). While Rhodes’s claim suggests that there is no actual permanent relationship or stable connection between the sites other than that created through the links themselves, I see the use of links and webrings as stemming from a unified cause. Specifically, in terms of fan fiction, this unified cause is further solidified by the existence of the same fan fiction story being posted on multiple online archives. For example, the story “Van Rosenberg” is posted at Different Colored Pens as well as Through the Looking-glass, Willow/Tara Fiction Archive, and The Mystic Muse. The links between these various Willow and Tara fan websites create an overarching commitment to preserving the couple as positive lesbian role models and elevate individual site efforts to reposition their relationship from that of a negative stereotype to a positive example of lasting love.

When Tara was killed and Willow’s character driven to insanity there was more at stake than disappointing some fans; rather, a positive portrayal of a lesbian relationship was killed as
well. In *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts It in a Box*, Merri Lisa Johnson explains that “as riddled with stereotypes as media culture admittedly is, television can also provide rare insight into alternative ways of living in the world. The small screen paradoxically provides a broader horizon. For rural adolescents, television can be the sole window into big-city subjects like homosexuality, single hood-by-choice, multiculturalism” (3). However, television producers and writers often also play directly into the fears and misguidance of those viewers who are perhaps not as open minded as some others. Understanding or positing reasons behind story decisions made by *BtVS*'s writers and producers is not the intent of this thesis; rather, my intent is to show how fan activism has created an environment in which speaking against these tendencies of popular culture is the norm.

Further, I argue that the writing done at *Different Colored Pens*, is both an act of feminism and also an example of textual poaching. Jenkins’ notion of textual poaching states that “fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (24). Members of *Different Colored Pens* are not simply *BtVS* audience members, rather the FAQs and stories position the episode “Seeing Red” as supporting a negative stereotype of lesbians regardless of whether or not such a negative portrayal was actually intended by show writers and producers. Each fan story hosted at *Different Colored Pens* must present Willow/Tara together and happy, thus each new story presents a positive plot line for Willow/Tara. More than being “happy-ever after” endings, these new stories serve to remove the negative stereotype given to Willow/Tara in the original show.

Each Willow/Tara story posted at *Different Colored Pens* stands as an active protest against the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché;” the very existence of the *Kitten Board* and *Different Colored Pens* marks fans’ refusal to accept the negative lesbian stereotype they perceive as being presented by *BtVS* writers and producers. Jenkins’ notion of textual poaching helps us to understand how Willow/Tara fan writers not only watch or read *BtVS*, but also actively give voice to the unvoiced, or voice to the voice that was denied, stolen, taken away. Writing fan fiction is a
means through which Willow/Tara fans redirect a storyline to a place where they are satisfied with the plot. Considering the members writing at Different Colored Pens have convincingly suggested that the episode “Seeing Red” situated Willow/Tara’s in the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché,” they have added a new level of textual and interpretive meaning to the episode which was not originally intended by BtVS writers and producers.

Willow/Tara fans add meaning to the storyline in accord with their own values and desires. In fact, Willow/Tara fans were able to make the show’s producers realize the implied textual meanings they, the fans, saw in the series; several of the show producers even admitted the existence of the negative stereotype. Therefore, the textual poaching performed by Willow/Tara fan fiction writers can be considered a feminist activity that successfully changed the reality of the show, even for some of its writers and producers. For example, BtVS producer and writer David Fury noted in an interview with the Succubus Club that “In retrospect I can see the cliché. That was not our intent... it created the impression in a lot of people’s minds that the event of her death was linked to them having sex. I do understand it, I say, oh yeah. It was not intended, we make mistakes” (qtd. in Tabron). Perhaps having this admittance is a small victory for Willow and Tara fans; however, the fact still remains that the episode where Tara dies after the first time she is shown in an obvious and non-metaphorical intimate sexual act with Willow cannot be changed or erased from fan memory. That, however, does not mean that fans have to accept the plot they were given.

Fans have power, and that power comes through writing and through the ability to use writing as a way to present an opposition. Their writing not only showcases analytical and critical thinking about a text, but a refusal to settle or submit to producers’ excuses for oversights. New stories written by fans become the voice for positive possibilities denied by the show’s writers. These new stories for Willow and Tara inspired by the purpose of the Kitten Board and created at Different Colored Pens join a sisterhood of other stories; these new stories join a circle or web of other Willow and Tara fan sites, such as the Willow/Tara Fiction Archive and Through the
Looking-glass, centered on the positive presentation and preservation of Willow and Tara’s lesbian relationship. Rhodes claims that “the Internet can serve as an extremely productive place for feminist compositionists, not because of its purported ties to women’s ways of knowing, but because of its combination of network and text provides real possibilities for collective textual action” (127). Together, these fan sites actively bring awareness to and attempt to right a wrong by rewriting the Willow and Tara story line from BtVS in a manner that presents it as anti-cliché, that is the story they, the fans, want to have told and want to hear.

6. Exploring and Studying Different Colored Pens

6.1. Introduction

In this section, I divide my observations and study of the online fan fiction community Different Colored Pens in to two parts. In the first part I study and speculate the relationship between readers and writers during the textual production of a fannish story. In particular, I observe a discussion forum titled “The Art of Leaving Feedback” which offers community members suggestions for leaving writer’s quality feedback. I also use the fan fiction story “Van Rosenberg” in order to posit how and to what length reader feedback interacts with and perhaps influences writer choices. “Van Rosenberg” rewrites and changes characters, stories, and timelines from BtVS canon and also sprinkles in influences from several other source texts, notably, as knowing such helps to understand excerpts I refer to from the story, Dracula and Van Helsing. Specifically, the character Abraham from “Van Rosenberg,” is created based on Abraham Van Helsing and Van Helsing from the aforementioned sources. The author of “Van Rosenberg,” Aly, incorporates versions of BtVS characters Willow, Tara, as well as Xander Harris, Cordelia Chase, Rupert Giles, Faith, William the Bloody, and Angelus. It is interesting to note that the story does not contain an appearance by the source text’s lead character, Buffy Summers. Rather, the story portrays one version of Willow herself as a vampire hunter. The preceding sentence certainly needs explanation, but rather than spend time explaining the complex and layered plotline of “Van Rosenberg” suffice it to say that the story features two
versions of Willow and Tara, one similar to their characters from *BtVS* canon and one remarkably different. In addition to including characters from the TV series, Alcy also incorporates several original characters including one named Myles Cavendish.

I then compare select excerpts from “Van Rosenberg” to episodes in the source text. Specifically, I refer to excerpts which deal with the theme of “vengeance” in order to show how Willow and Tara fans actively rewrite storylines from *BtVS* which they found offensive. These excerpts show how fan fiction writing offers an alternative option to the dominant media source text. In this way fan fiction writing becomes a way for the audience, the normal silenced observer, to speak out.

6.2. Fan Fiction: Readers as Part of the Writing Process

Fan fiction stories posted on the *Different Colored Pens* fan fiction forum are not written in solitude. Though each and every Willow and Tara fan fiction story posted on *Different Colored Pens* stems from the mind of an individual, that individual is inspired by situations within *BtVS* as well as influenced by the common goals of the writing community in which she participates. The site administrator, xita, at *Different Colored Pens* instructs that each story must, ultimately, conclude with Willow and Tara both alive and together. However, the road by which an author reaches this mandatory end result is lined with her own creative choices in addition to reader speculations, suggestions, and comments. This is not to suggest that the writer has little control or decision making power over her own work; rather, fan fiction is a genre in which readers, similar to editors, actively provide feedback and share their opinions with the writer throughout the writing process. However, unlike the professional publishing industry where a compensated author must address his editor’s comments if he ultimately wants his work to reach the public, a fan fiction writer can choose whether or not to make any suggested changes. While the story idea can be credited to the writer’s genius, the specific choices are a combination of the writer’s ideas and influences from reader feedback.

Readers of fan fiction stories posted at *Different Colored Pens* are able to post comments
about chapters as an author is in the actual process of writing. Readers may leave a comment notifying an author of confusion and plot holes, or they may simply point out typing mistakes. Therefore, rather than a writer finding out after a final publication that readers were displeased with or confused about a plot choice, writers are able to learn about such situations before it is too late for them to be fixed, altered, or addressed. *Different Colored Pens* readers are not merely passive observers but accompany the writer from a story’s inception to its final form so closely that their influence is undeniable. However, who owns the textual property of a fan fiction story when so many voices intersect with it? How much does the story actually belong to the writer and how much of it can be credited to the source text, the online community board, and the readers?

In *Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups*, Candace Spigelman notes that “writing groups illuminate a universal phenomenon: the dialectical tension between the private and public, between writers and readers, for ownership and control of the written text” (23). However, based on my observations, this struggle for ownership is not apparent at *Different Colored Pens*. In fact, writers encourage and seek out reader feedback. Spigelman further explains that “professional and aspiring writers who meet voluntarily in groups, issues of ownership appear to be noncontroversial. Members of self-sponsored writing groups have personal motivation for sharing their writing with others” (26). The same can be said of *Different Colored Pens* whose members voluntarily join and post their stories one chapter or section at a time to the online fan fiction community’s forum. When a chapter is posted it becomes available for reader comments. Rather being seen as intrusive opinions, reader comments are sought after by writers looking to improve and develop their stories.

A *Different Colored Pens*’ discussion board topic thread titled “The Art of Leaving Feedback” created by the *Different Colored Pens* user Garner emphasizes the need and desire for constructive and thoughtful feedback. The topic thread emphasizes that feedback should, ideally, balance praise and criticism. Garner suggests that positive feedback encourages the author to continue writing the story; however, that vague feedback does little to actually aid the writer.
According to Garner, there are four golden rules to leaving feedback. These rules for feedback can be summarized as follows: don’t attack an author personally; have confidence in the validity of your own opinion; make sure criticism is constructive; and be specific. Regarding the need to be specific, Garner notes that “while it is nice to read, ‘You rule. I loved this story. It was great!’ that really isn’t all that helpful.” Therefore, it seems that writers want feedback that not only doesn’t attack them personally but also does more than boost their egos; they want feedback that will help them improve as writers and write the best story possible.

Telling the writer that a story or essay was enjoyed or providing surface level feedback does little to assist her in the actual writing process. Garner lists several specific areas that a reader might comment on (such as plot, characters, tones, atmosphere, continuity, etc.) and offers examples for how feedback might be given. In a reply to Garner’s initial post, CaptMurdock suggests a way to move away from vague “I loved it” comments is to mention a specific moment in the story that was particular enjoyed. However not all members agree or necessarily feel comfortable with leaving more thorough feedback than something like “I loved it.” As expressed by the member noho, some members simply feel too shy or incapable of leaving any feedback other than one line which expresses how much they are enjoying the story. These vague, yet encouraging, comments still have their value and worth. Although more in depth feedback seems to be preferred because such can help writers progress and improve their craft, even a short response to a story (as noted by GayNow) is still appreciated.

Comments within the “Art of Leaving Feedback” discussion board thread indicate that writers posting on Different Colored Pens do, however, value and crave quality feedback from their readers. As Spigelman notes, “readers suggest changes and create alternatives to existing forms and contents” (68). On the “Art of Leaving Feedback” thread, JustSkipIt shares that “as a writer, I enjoy two types of feedback: those which just say ‘Great job! Loved it!’ and the thoughtout [sic], intricate [sic] feedback from some users…I have frequently added or clarified points in my story based on feedback or even changed the direction of the story or the next
update. I've even gotten new story ideas from conversations during the course of feedback.”

Another member, Laragh notes that when a reader points out something confusing or presents questions that “it lets me know I need to make things a little clearer and also opens up discussion between reader and author.; [it] can reinforce the author's methodology or make them re-think something that they maybe need to.” Laragh’s and JustSkipIt's posts both emphasize and support that writers are indeed influenced and inspired by reader feedback.

The comments readers post about “Van Rosenberg” chapters, while many are motivating and encouraging in nature, also provide the writer with insight into plot holes, likes and dislikes, and even minor (yet potentially major) grammar and spelling errors. One of Alcy’s readers (Nenyath) caught a typo at the end of “Van Rosenberg” chapter 39 which could have caused storyline confusion if left unfixed. In the story, Willow and Tara have been reunited and, as Nenyath points out, should be cuddling. However, Alcy had mistakenly written Willow’s name in to a scene where her presence made absolutely no sense. The manner in which this mistake is shared with Alcy is positioned between specific and genuine reader praise. Nenyath’s feedback reads “finally our girls got together! The reunion was very touching and intense! ...I'm really glad that it felt different to her than her memories though, it was a very nice touch! I guess you made a slight error though, since I imagine Willow should be snuggled with Tara, not setting up a private meeting with Dracula.” Then Nenyath quotes the sentence as it was written at the time of the feedback, “he glanced across to his right and saw Willow’s [emphasis added] surly face staring back at him.” The feedback post then ends with “just a really good update with well timed angst.” Nenyath begins feedback with praise, emphasizing how much the chapter was enjoyed. The typing error is introduced delicately and, almost as an afterthought or side note. Mention of the typing error is also sandwiched between praise, thereby indicating the main point of the particular feedback post is to convey the reader’s enjoyment, not to point out the typing mistake.

The response given to Nenyath’s post could have very well have been defensive, as might be the case when someone feels attacked or undermined. However Nenyath’s polite and
professional tone creates an atmosphere for positive reader/writer communication. Alcy’s response to Nenyath’s post reads, “thanks very much for picking up on my William/Willow error. That was definitely a mistake on my part.” Nenyath’s comment was given on May 17, 2008 at 2:29am. Alcy edited chapter 39 less than 12 hours later at 1:26 pm on May 17, 2008. The sentence which Nenyath indicates therefore presently reads “he glanced across to his right and saw William’s surly face staring back at him.” If Nenyath’s feedback post was not a permanent fixture within the story’s framework, new readers would never know of the initial typo.

In addition to pointing out typographical errors, “Van Rosenberg” readers also indicate confusion over a complex multilayered storyline. While the actual extent to which reader questions and comments specifically influence textual additions and changes is not known, it can be posited that the author takes them into consideration as subsequent chapters are written. One reader, PolarBear, posts feedback to chapter 36 that brings the continuity of events and people involved in to question. Specifically, chapter 36 shares a note written by the character Abraham; however, events mentioned in said note would have occurred after Abraham’s death. PolarBear’s post, “one thing raises questions. How can Abraham know about Willow’s ‘new chance’? He was already dead,” suggests that clarification is surely needed.

While it is certainly possible that Alcy may have already planned to explain how “Abraham [knew] about Willow’s ‘new chance’” before reading PolarBear’s comment, the comment emphasizes the need for such clarification. Alcy’s response to PolarBear’s comment reads “you raise an interesting question about Abraham, one which I will address to some extent…and the rest I will keep to myself as another ‘mystery.’” Based on Alcy’s post, it seems that the writer planned to offer something to superficially address the confusion. A scene from chapter 37, which is posted after the above exchange between Alcy and PolarBear, depicts the characters Rupert Giles and Tara having a discussion regarding the authenticity of the note; it reads:
‘Then you would have asked yourself whether Abraham truly wrote this note. I cannot vouch for his penmanship but I can say with certainty that he died not knowing we would bring his sister back from the dead!’ Tara stated emphatically, the note now crumpled slightly in her fierce grip.

‘That thought vexed me greatly,’ Giles agreed, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair, ‘but my instincts tell me that Abraham Van Helsing wrote that note, whether he ever intended Willow to actually find it or not.’

Tara’s previously wide-eyed gaze was now narrowed with suspicion, indicating she was far from convinced. However she grudgingly allowed Giles his reasoning.” (Alcy)

This exchange between Tara and Giles does not offer a clear-cut explanation; it leaves holes that invite skepticism. Just like Tara, the reader is asked to blindly accept that Abraham is the letter’s writer. It is, however, not entirely clear whether or not Alcy already planned to include the previous scene or if the decision to do so came as a direct result of PolarBear’s question. Regardless, the very fact that Alcy acknowledges PolarBear’s concerns indicates the value and influence even one reader potentially has on the author’s writing.

The fact that Nenyath’s and PolarBear’s feedback remains visible to all site visitors between the chapters of the story indicates the central position readers play within the fan fiction writing process. Unlike an editor’s comments which are never seen by anyone outside of the writing and publishing process, fan fiction reader comments remain for all to view for as long as the story itself is posted on the forum. The reader and the writer are not divided entities; rather readers and writers share a unified goal and responsibility to present the most well written story possible.

6.3. Fan Fiction as Fan Activism

“Van Rosenberg” is a fan fiction story which is, as described by its author, set in an alternative universe (AU). Busse and Hellekson describe an AU story as being one “where familiar characters are dropped in a new setting (which, depending on the media source, may or
may not be canonical, because many of the source texts have fantastical components and not a few have played with multiverses)" (11). The fan fiction story “Van Rosenberg” is AU because it places Willow and Tara (as well as a handful of other characters from BtVS) in a time period and setting very different from that of Sunnydale in the 20th and 21st centuries. Specifically, “Van Rosenberg” is set in Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries. Therefore, Tara and Willow are certainly dropped in a “new setting;” however, Alcy surreptitiously includes scenes and plot lines which resemble ones from the original series. Nevertheless, since Alcy describes and seems to understand the story as AU, the story’s disclaimer reads that “there are no spoilers for any season.”

Indeed someone who is reading “Van Rosenberg” before watching through the end of season six of BtVS will not pick up on or read any intentional spoilers; however, someone who has seen the episodes “Seeing Red,” “Villains,” “Two to Go,” and “Grave” from season six will immediately notice correlations. Both the television show version and the fan fiction version include Tara’s death and Willow’s path to vengeance. In order to differentiate between the Willow from the aforementioned four BtVS episodes and the Willow portrayed by Alcy they will henceforth be referred to respectively as Vengeance Willow and Van Rosenberg Willow.

At the end of the episode “Seeing Red,” Tara is killed by a stray bullet meant for Buffy. In the next three episodes Vengeance Willow is blindly focused on seeking murderous revenge on the shooter, Warren, in order to avenge the death of Tara. Though they try, nothing her friends say or do is able to calm Vengeance Willow down or stop her wrathful path. Vengeance Willow not only tortures Warren but flays him alive. As previously explained, this aforementioned scenario from the original show was seen by the Kitten Board members as fitting the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché.”

The fan fiction story “Van Rosenberg” also includes Tara’s human death and depicts desires for vengeance; however, it ultimately, through complex and creative storytelling, reunites Willow and Tara together. Jenkins notes in his official weblog that fans “write stories because
they want to entertain alternative interpretations or examine new possibilities which would otherwise not get expressed through the canonical material” (“Fan Fiction as Critical Commentary”). Similarly, Aley rewrites Tara’s storyline in a way that allows her to come back as a souled vampire; an option which was not presented or offered in the original text. “Van Rosenberg” not only borrows ideas from Buffy and Angel’s as well as Spike’s BtVS storylines, it also provides a way for Aley to use the same motivation for Willow’s vengeance scene (Tara’s death) while also ensuring readers that their favorite lesbian couple can and will still be reunited. In addition, while no amount of common sense or pleading from her friends can get through to Vengeance Willow, Van Rosenberg Willow is not past the point of self-control or reasoning. Therefore while Aley’s fan fiction story may still include a death and vengeance scenario, it removes those elements that play into the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché.”

It is helpful to view “Van Rosenberg” in terms of Jenkins’ idea that:

“fan culture reflects both the audience’s fascination with programs and fans’ frustration over the refusal/inability of producers to tell the kinds of stories viewers want to see. Fan writing brings the duality of that response into sharp focus: fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored. (162)

The very fact that Aley spent time to write a story featuring characters from BtVS combined with the fact that the Different Colored Pens fan fiction forum even exists shows that fans remain enamored with the series and characters. Kearney notes that “Several queer fans indicate that their interest in Buffy was aroused further by the positive portrayal of Willow’s relationship with Tara. For instance, a lesbian fan who identifies closely with Willow states, ‘This lesbian undertone has just hooked me in even more” (33). To some extent then, BtVS producers were able to tell the stories that fans wanted to hear, and this is perhaps why the violent end to Tara’s character hurt and disappointed so many fans on a personal level and rallied them to rewrite what the source text took away. Since fan fiction stories posted on Different Colored Pens are tasked
with removing those elements from the source text that play into the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” they, as Jenkins explains, fix “unsatisfying aspects.”

More than being “unsatisfying aspects,” scenes from “Villains” and “Seeing Red” were, as previously mentioned, considered offensive and hurtful by many viewers, especially those who affiliate with or support lesbian and gay populations/rights. According to Aloi “the level of hurt and indignation among fans has been nothing short of staggering. Of course, much of this rage….is aimed at Whedon’s unthinkable act of betrayal to those viewers who saw Willow and Tara as lesbian role models” (45-46). Therefore, fans were not only entertained by the show; they found a source of inspiration from the show until such seemed to be ripped from their arms. This sense of betrayal then not only motivated fans to write fan fiction, but to also express their severe disapproval through their writing. “Van Rosenberg,” therefore, also stands as a source of protest and a refusal to settle for what the source text presented. By including a scenario that, like the original source text, sends Willow on a path to vengeance, Alcy provides an alternative option which reflects possibilities BtVS writers and producers overlooked, decided against, or perhaps never considered.

“Van Rosenberg” replicates and rewrites unfavorable scenes and episodes from the television series. While Van Rosenberg Willow behaves somewhat similarly to Vengeance Willow, there are also important and noticeable differences between them. For example, both Willows warn others to get out of her way. In the TV episodes, Vengeance Willow is so blindly focused on seeking revenge for the death of Tara that she fights, threatens, and physically hurts her friends when they try to reason with or confront her. However, while Vengeance Willow is unalarmed at her own detached violence, Van Rosenberg Willow is shocked at her own behavior. For example, an exchange between Van Rosenberg Willow and the character Nancy reads:

‘Do you enjoy working in this house, Nancy?’ Willow asked coldly, ignoring the offer(…)

‘Y-yes Miss Van Helsing, of course.’
‘Then I suggest if you want to keep your job, you will let me walk out that door and you will not breathe a word to anyone else that I intend to go out,’ Willow continued, surprising herself with her iron-like tone. (Alcy)

Unlike Vengeance Willow from the TV show who seems like a robotic, emotionless killer unaware of her own actions, Van Rosenberg Willow is alarmed by “her iron-like tone.” Through writing, Alcy is able to keep Van Rosenberg Willow’s connection to humanity and save her from being lost in to the dark abyss of insanity which swallows Vengeance Willow.

Another scene in which Van Rosenberg Willow retains the self-control absent from Vengeance Willow is during confrontations with the person she blames/holds responsible for Tara’s death. While Vengeance Willow does not pause or attempt to control her anger, Van Rosenberg Willow is depicted in a manner which shows her fight to retain self-control. In this way then Alcy’s version of Willow can be seen as someone who has not lost logic and reason to insanity. An excerpt from “Van Rosenberg” which shows this inner struggle to maintain self-control and not give in to emotion reads:

It took every ounce of control Willow possessed to hold herself together, on the outside she was as impassive as marble with only the firm set of her lip betraying the utter turmoil that lay within. She could feel herself falling apart, about to explode into a thousand pieces…inside she was screaming. (Alcy)

As mentioned, both Willows also confront the person responsible (or who they at least feel is responsible) for Tara’s death. However, the endings of the confrontations are strikingly different. At the end of “Villains,” Buffy, Xander, and Anya finally reach Willow just in time to see her use dark magic to skin Warren alive and then incinerate his body. Before they can say anything to her, Vengeance Willow disappears with the parting words “one down” signifying that her path of vengeance is not over. However in Alcy’s fan fiction story, Van Rosenberg Willow’s brother, Abraham, reaches her before she kills the person she holds responsible for Tara’s death. It is also important to note that Abraham is able to carry her away from the scene not by force,
but because she allows him to carry her. The following excerpt from “Van Rosenberg” shows just how close Van Rosenberg Willow actually came to killing the person whom she blames for her lover’s death:

Willow felt all the rage inside her body bubble to the surface; she felt absolutely no sense of remorse as she squeezed the trigger. At precisely the same moment that the gun discharged in her hand, Willow felt a solid shape shove her to one side. When the smoke cleared from her eyes she saw Edward Walsh still standing in front of her but looking over his shoulder at a jagged hole in the wall. Willow growled in frustration and tried to spring forward only to find her arms pinned behind her back.

When Edward spun around he saw Abraham Van Helsing restraining his struggling sister. Willow had dropped the gun but there was still murder in her eyes(...)

“What, for heaven’s sake...let us leave,” Abraham pleaded(...)

He eventually gave up trying to help her out on her own two feet and picked up her entire body. Willow buried her face in Abraham’s chest and allowed herself to be carried out of the Walsh house [emphasis added]. (Alcy)

By allowing Van Rosenberg Willow to reach the same threshold where she would be driven to seek murderous revenge, Alcy’s story conveys the same level of remorse and anguish that the writers and producers wanted for Vengeance Willow. The only, and major difference, is that Alcy does not permit her Willow to cross that threshold. In this respect then Alcy has rewritten “Villains” in a manner which kept certain elements, removed some, and completely changed others. “Van Rosenberg” rewrites those scenes from the source text that specifically relate to the “Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché” and presents Willow in a manner which still conveys her deep anguish and desire for revenge without going so far as to make her seem crazy.

Another way Alcy modifies and manipulates the source text is by writing Tara, who was shot and therefore denied or unable to seek her own vengeance, a scene in which she confronts the man she (and Willow) hold responsible for stealing/ending her life. In this sense Alcy gives
Tara’s character, known for her stutter and socially awkward, quiet ways, a voice with which to speak. Alcy accomplishes this by bringing her version of Tara back as a vampire with a soul. In “Van Rosenberg,” vampire Tara confronts Edward Walsh, the man responsible for keeping Willow and Tara apart as follows:

I will spend the rest of my days atoning for crimes I committed as a soulless demon. Have you atoned for your crimes Edward?”

“I have committed none!” he protested.

“You forced yourself on me repeatedly and brutally. Every night I struggled to avoid your fists striking my flesh for the merest transgression, if it is not a crime to treat your wife in such a manner then what is it?” Tara demanded (...) Edward’s voice was firm despite his fear, as though he were speaking a well-learned mantra. ‘A woman’s duty!’

The carefully constructed wall of control restraining Tara from within crumbled instantly(...)

Although killing him would initially provide some sense of satisfaction and perhaps even closure, Tara knew that in the long-term such an act would do more harm than good.

(Aley)

In the above excerpt, Alcy provides Tara’s character with a chance to confront the man, Edward Walsh, who tortured and abused her in life. This scene can be read as symbolically allowing _BtVS_ canon Tara to confront her killer, Warren, in the episode “Villains.” By reanimating “Van Rosenberg” Tara’s life through vampire immortality, Alcy rewrites and returns the life permanently taken away from _BtVS_ canon Tara. In doing so, Aley’s writing shows how _BtVS_ source text might have handled Tara’s death differently. Writing then can be viewed as a tool for protest and activism; writing becomes the manner through which voices are expressed and heard. Fan fiction writing therefore provides a voice to the would-be-silenced viewer; the person who normally sits silently on her living room couch becomes an active participant in the message conveyed by source texts.
As previously emphasized, fan backlash resulted not from the fact that Tara was killed, but the manner in which she was killed. Furthermore, as Alissa Wilts' paper "Lesbian Type Lovers: Heterosexual writer bias and the Dead/Evil Lesbian Cliché in the portrayal of the Tara/Willow relationship" and the "Lesbian Cliché FAQ" posted on the Kitten Board both assert, white male characters dominated television series and lesbian characters were a minority. In the above scene, Tara confronts Edward, a white male who forced her into sexual submission. Through Tara's voice, Alcy's story speaks out against the oppression female experience beneath the white male. More specifically, it is a statement expressing discontent and a refusal to accept the subjugation of lesbianism beneath "normal" white male sexuality. Therefore, Alcy's story not only rewrites Tara and Willow's storylines; it serves as an active protest against female oppression and forced societal expectations about sexuality.

7. Conclusion: Applying Fan Fiction in the College Composition Classroom

Typically, composition classroom assignments ask students to prepare analytical and argumentative essays in response to assigned texts and/or topics. However, as can be seen with "Van Rosenberg," a piece of fiction written in response to an original work showcases writing strengths similar to those displayed in academic essays, such as the ability to support and explain an opinion. In his official weblog, Jenkins explains that "unlike the model critical essays discussed by the various university writing centers, the insights about the [original] work get expressed not through nonfictional argumentation but rather through the construction of new stories. Just as a literary essay uses text to respond to text, fan fiction uses fiction to respond to fiction" (Fan Fiction as Critical Commentary). Many composition classroom instructors undoubtedly already follow similar models when assigning creative writing tasks in connection to class readings. This may be especially true for those writing instructors teaching composition through a course connected to literature. For example, whenever an instructor asks a student to rewrite a chapter or conclusion to a story, or to write something from another character's perspective she is asking that student to respond to fiction using fiction. Nevertheless, the
presence or use of creative writing in a first-year composition course may seem out of place. After all, students are supposed to be learning, for example, how to take a position and create an arguable central claim (thesis) or how to analyze and think critically about a text, not how to prove or demonstrate their imagination. However, in order to have an idea or make an argument, students have to first actually have an idea or argument. They may have these ideas without even knowing it.

Creative writing can be a way for student writers to not only engage with a text, but to discover and understand their own perspectives and points of view. An argument can be discovered through creative processes and then further developed in a student's essay. In addition, an argument does not always have to be presented through a formal essay. Fan fiction is, at its core, a creative writing endeavor that requires writers to closely analyze and understand a specific text or character. Often, fan fiction writers also share their positions and/or reactions to a source text through the writing they produce. By writing “Van Rosenberg” Alcy not only rewrote a storyline from *BtVS* but also presented and supported an argument for how the original text could have treated Willow and Tara differently. Incorporating creative writing assignments into a composition curriculum also adds variety to a curriculum that may, otherwise, start to feel repetitive and even boring to students taking it, not because they are interested in becoming better writers, but because they are required to take it in order to graduate. In “Talking Texts: Writing Dialogue in the College Composition Classroom,” John Levine explains his use of dialogue in prewriting exercises. Specifically, Levine has his first-year college composition students write script dialogue as a precursor to writing an academic essay assignment (22-23). Although, Levine admits that not all students are able to transition from writing dialogue to writing an essay dealing with multiple texts, he still argues that they “have begun to enter the larger conversation of academic discourse” (24). Therefore, while creative writing exercises may not automatically lead students to perfect academic writing, such exercises can help them to start sorting through and working with the various complex and dense texts they are often asked to read. In order to write a
well thought-out, arguable essay it’s imperative that students first understand the source texts they are writing about.

Of course, not all first-year writing students will feel comfortable with creative writing; they may actually fear it more than academic prose writing. Students should not always be limited with an assignment that requires them to either write creative or straight academic prose. Instead, students should be presented with options which enable them to show their unique idea and/or analysis of a text in a manner which suits them best. Take for example Montclair State University first-year writing instructor Christa Setteducati Verem who offers creative options for essays in her College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study course. For one of their essay assignments, students in Verem’s class can choose, among other options, to write a new version of, or a prequel or sequel to a text read in class. These assignments mimic aspects of fan fiction because they ask students to create something new from an existing story. Though these assignments may seem fun, and probably are, they also ask and require students to prove they not only read the original text thoroughly, but also formed a definitive opinion/perception about the text. In addition to the creative component, Verem also requires that students who choose one of the creative options write a 1 ½ to 2 page analysis of their decisions. In this way, the assignment not only uses fiction to write about fiction, it also assures the student explains the reasons behind his choices in a manner which asks him to display the rhetorical skills learned in the class. However, such choices may seem detached or removed when the student is not invested with the original text.

Academic writing starts, or at least should start, with engaged and active reading (be it reading of printed, visual, or auditory material). Nevertheless, student writers often struggle to reach the level of reading engagement that produces the level of critical and analytical writing instructors require and hope for. Composition teachers tell their students to dig deeper into the pages and their ideas, to think more; the only thing is that, bluntly speaking, most students usually just don’t care about what it is they are being asked to think about or explore. The instructor
chooses a set of readings that s/he believes to be of educational value which will hopefully interest and connect with students. However, despite the instructor's hopes, there are no guarantees that students will care about or be interested in the topic. When students are allowed to choose their own topics, research and argumentative essay assignments fit an interest-based approach to teaching. In *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*, Patricia Roberts-Miller defines the interest-based model as "the model that assumes that individuals can and should pursue their own self-interest" (98). Ideally, these types of interest-based assignments would instill students with the interest level necessary for deep textual engagement and subject analysis.

However, another possible problem with an interest-based approach to teaching is that the instructor may or may not have knowledge of the student's chosen topic. In this sense then, an interest-based model approach to teaching writing may actually hamper an instructor's ability to provide the best possible feedback. Roberts-Miller explains that "instructors often put themselves in the position of being a reader who does not know enough about the topic to catch errors - we take the role of the 'general' audience who can only evaluate an argument on the degree to which it fits other assertions we may have heard - the extent to which it seems reasonable to an uninformed person" (120). So on one side teachers have a strong knowledge base, but the students may not have an interest in the subject, while on the other side the students do have an interest in the subject, but their instructors may not know enough about it themselves. In the first case, then, the students' writing may be thin due to their lack of interest; in the other case the instructor may not be as able to help students develop their essays to the fullest possibility. It seems that the composition classroom is stuck in a situation where there is always going to have to be a compromise. However, I propose that aspects of fan fiction communities can be modeled in composition classrooms in order to ensure both students are interested in and that teachers are knowledgeable about the topic.

Part of the reason fan fiction writers and readers are so invested in the writing process is
that they share a common passion based on a favorite book, movie, TV show, comic, videogame, etc. Often that shared interest is intensified by the fact that it is narrowed to the storyline of one particular character or character relationship from within the story. In the case of *Different Colored Pens* members were united first by being fans of *BtVS* and further by being fans of Willow and Tara. The upsetting manner these two beloved characters were treated at the end of season six provided their fans with the motivation to create alternative storylines. Replicating this type of personal connection in order to have students become intertwined and invested with what they are writing about may seem, at first consideration, impossible. After all, how can an instructor be expected to know all the various source texts or fields that students might choose to write about? Doing so would be impossible.

Therefore, what I also propose is that, similar to how online fan fiction communities/forums are created around a particular source text or character, composition classrooms could be centered on a common theme or source text. While the generic introduction to college writing course will always have its place in academia, the addition of thematic classes based around texts from popular culture has great value as well. Such classes would not only incorporate available scholarship about the source, but would closely study the source in a way that invites students to tap into their own passions and opinions to write and think critically and analytically. Writing instructors with a firm knowledge and interest base in a particular source text or author (such as *BtVS*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or Jane Austen) or areas (such as hip-hop, anima, or monsters) could propose and teach various thematic sections. The next step would be to make sure that the course sections were clearly identified with their theme so that students would be able to choose which topics interest them most. Of course, here we would run into problems such as what if one course was more popular than others; what if no one wanted to enroll in one of the courses; what if the students who enrolled weren’t interested in the topic but simply enrolled because it fit their schedule, and so and so on. There are always going to be some sort of obstacle or hill to overcome, but that does not mean something is not worth trying.
Once the course is united around a common theme, the possibilities for student and teacher engagement become limitless. Just like *Different Colored Pens* is a site dedicated to Willow and Tara centered on the common belief that they belong together, there are tons of other *BtVS* fan fiction sites dedicated to other characters. So too might students within the course start to form shared opinions and progress to developing supportable arguments about specific ideas. Rather than just saying that the manner in which Willow and Tara’s relationship ended conveyed a negative message about lesbian couples, *Kitten Board* members present a well thought-out, articulated, and supported argument. In a classroom setting, an instructor knowledgeable about the content and subject can offer insightful and motivating questions aimed at helping her students develop their opinions into well thought-out arguments. As always, when opinions are added to the mix, the risk for subjectivities increase; however, this is the case with any classroom setting where the professor has an investment in the topic. A classroom modeled around fan fiction can provide both students and teachers with a common ground from which to have stimulating discussions.

In addition to uniting around a shared interest whereby an instructor can interact with students from a knowledge standpoint, constructing a college composition classroom online component similar to that of an online fan fiction discussion board creates opportunities for peer-based and autonomous learning. While it is helpful for an instructor be able to provide guidance and motivation to her students, it seems that more and more students engage in or prefer autonomous learning (Ito et. al., 2). Findings from *The Digital Youth Project* “demonstrate that some of the drivers of self-motivated learning come not from institutionalized ‘authorities’ setting standards and providing instruction, but from youth observing and communicating with people engaged in the same interests, and in the same struggles for status and recognition, as they are” (Ito et. al., 11). Therefore, creating an online discussion board where classmates can interact as readers and writers gives them shared authority and responsibility for each other’s texts similar to the experience of the readers and writers at *Different Colored Pens*. However, issues of textual
property may arise where student writers feel protective of their ideas and resist revision based on the suggestions of others.

However, if students are not forced to participate but, rather, given the option of participation, it’s possible that they would become self-motivated to work together in order to help one another succeed and grow as writers.

The instructor, in this instance, takes on a role similar to that of fan fiction site administrators. In a typical college composition classroom, instructors assign peer review assignments and mandate that students exchange drafts and provide comments to one another. Reader feedback is not mandated or expected by the site administrators of Different Colored Pens; rather, feedback is something that members choose to post about stories and in turn writers appreciate and desire these comments because they are recognized as genuine rather than forced or obligatory. Presenting an online discussion forum where the instructor does not order students to perform peer-reviews but, instead, offers an environment where students have the option to choose whether or not to engage in reader-writer interactions may, ideally, inspire students to support each other in their writing endeavors. The term “peer review” might, then, transition from something an instructor forces her students to do into something students want to do for each other. In the essay “Be a Blogger: Social Networking in the Classroom,” Paul Allison notes that “blogging in a school based social network creates a meaningful, dialogic, motivating environment where students get inspired to measure their own reading, writing, research, and response skills alongside their peers” (75). Fan fiction online forums and blogs share similar characteristics in that both provide opportunities for readers to leave content based comments and questions for a writer. In addition, fan fiction online forums enable writers to create individual story threads in which they can post chapters, edit, respond to readers, and leave notes.

Fan fiction writers can seek feedback about a story they are working on whenever they want by joining and then posting their story to an online fan fiction forum such as FanFiction.Net or Different Colored Pens. The same could be true for composition students who have access to a peer discussion board. However, as Busse and Hellekson state “many writers have noted that the
amount of feedback has increased yet it has become less detailed and critical. It is easy to hit the
comment button and type a one liner, but the public nature of (Live Journal) comments make it
hard for many to offer serious criticism” (16). Though the Internet does make it possible for
anyone with a computer and an internet connection to read, write, and comment about fan fiction,
such accessibility doesn’t automatically guarantee substantial feedback. Still, from what I have
observed at Different Colored Pens, much of the feedback posted there is detailed and thought
provoking. Members leaving feedback often quote a specific passage that was particularly liked
and then explain why, or present the writer with a specific question about character development,
plot or setting. Perhaps the detail of feedback posted at Different Colored Pens directly relates to
the close community the forum presents. This close community feel may create a sense of
security and trust among members. Furthermore, members of Different Colored Pens are not only
united by a common theme, they are all fans of Willow/Tara, but also genuinely support each
other in their writing endeavors. This is the very type of community, a community of support and
trust, which composition classrooms should strive to create for students.

A classroom discussion board forum modeling a format similar to one within an online
fan fiction forum would create a space where student’s own individual classroom related writings
are stored and interact with their peers. As Parrish notes, however, such threads present
instructors with “challenges in soliciting and managing interaction among students” (156).
Perhaps, if we are to truly embrace an autonomous and peer based learning model in classroom
instruction, it is not the instructor’s role to necessarily solicit and manage the boards in terms of
providing stipulations for the number of posts and responses; rather, it becomes the instructor’s
role to provide the forum and set ground rules for interaction such as those discussed in the “Art
of Leaving Feedback.” This would, of course, put more control in the student’s hands and remove
much control from the instructor’s. This type of classroom would require instructor’s trust in their
students’ abilities to function autonomously; it would also, ideally, inspire and motivate students
to develop into the academic thinkers and writers composition teachers hope them to be.
Notes

i During the course of airing, _BtVS_’s cast, writers, creative and production teams all received numerous nominations and awards from such institutions as the GLAAD Media Awards; the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films, USA; The Hugo Awards; the Emmy Awards; _TV Guide Awards_; and _The Teen Choice Awards_. ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer ’(1997) - Awards.")


iii To read how fans reacted to Willow and Tara’s treatment on _BtVS_ see the “Lesbian Cliché FAQ” at the _Kitten Board_

iv My research produced a plethora of _BtVS_ scholarly resources including: _Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale_ (South); _Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts It in a Box_ which includes the essay “Female Heterosexual Sadism: The Final Feminist Taboo in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series” (Heigel); the book _Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ (Levine & Park); _Sex and the
Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan (Jowett); Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy Vampire Slayer (Wilcox). In addition, the online journal Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association, archives of over one hundred scholarly essays analyzing various aspects of BtVS, including essays written by authors affiliated with academic institutions such as: Indiana University, Duke University, University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers University, University of Colorado, Texas A&M University, Louisiana State University, Emerson College, University of Sussex, Boston University, University of British Columbia, University of Pittsburgh, American University, Pace University, Ohio State University, Georgetown, Hofstra University, University of Sydney, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill among many others. During the course of my research I also came across a dissertation by Juli J. Parrish titled “Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction” from the University of Pittsburgh which studies fan fiction and Different Colored Pens.

For example, see the partial listing of writing studies theses posted at http://www.montclair.edu/writing/graduatewriting/theses.html

See Coppa, Busse and Hellekson, and Karpovich

See Busse and Hellekson, and Karpovich

For books featuring theoretical and philosophical essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer see, for example, James B. South’s The Philosophy of Buffy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale and Rhonda V. Wilcox’s Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer
As of August 8, 2011 Star Wars has over 7750 more fan fiction stories written about it than any other movie at FanFiction.net.

See Coppa as well as Derecho

See Coppa, Jenkins, Busse and Hellekson, Karpovich, Parrsh

see Aloi, Kyraroc and Willowlicious et al., Tabron, and Wilts

It is important to note that not all BtVS fans agree that the portrayal of Tara and Willow, including their treatment in “Seeing Red,” was insensitive or wrong; rather, some believe their portrayal solidified their equality. See, for example, Ryan.

See, for example, “Angel” season 1, episode 7 or “Graves” season 6, episode 22

The following is the extended version of the referenced excerpt from “Van Rosenberg:”:

Less than a minute after Abraham had departed, one of the parlour maids stepped quietly into the room and remained standing just to the right of the door. Willow wondered whether she was on suicide watch or merely there to make sure she did not try and leave the room. As her confusion slowly gave way to anger, Willow’s nostrils flared with her indignation at being dictated to by her brother. She was not a child; she did not require a nursemaid every second of every day. Seething inwardly, Willow turned her back on the door and instead stared at her unfinished painting. She lost herself in the swirl of black lines that went nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It was as though she had created a maze for which there was no solution, a perfect analogy for her tortured mind.
Willow could not tell how long she sat staring at the painting, she could only tell that she had lost track of time as the sunlight moved across the bare floorboards. However, she had not been idling wasting her time, she had been thinking and now she knew exactly what it was she had to do. Willow stood, feeling her muscles protest at the abruptness of her movement. She stared at the painting one last time and all of a sudden realised that she hated it. With an angry swipe, she knocked her jar of black paint from the table. It hit the ground with a glassy clatter and the thick liquid erupted out across the floorboards in a great black wave. Impassively, Willow watched the black paint spread outwards, it was exactly how she felt with the darkness of hate and anger spreading throughout her body. She was ruined and stained.

When Willow turned around the parlour maid was standing directly behind her. The startled young girl had been staring at the spilled paint but now she ducked her head in a quick curtsey. “Can I make you some tea, Miss Van Helsing?” the girl offered quickly, her cheeks reddening as a result of Willow’s uncomfortable stare.

“Do you enjoy working in this house, Nancy?” Willow asked coldly, ignoring the offer. Nancy glanced up with a puzzled expression on her face at the usual behaviour of her mistress, “Y-yes Miss Van Helsing, of course.”

“Then I suggest if you want to keep your job, you will let me walk out that door and you will not breathe a word to anyone else that I intend to go out,” Willow continued, surprising herself with her iron-like tone.

The poor girl was obviously terrified; she could not open her mouth to form a reply and managed only a hasty nod. Barely waiting for her answer, Willow glided from the room, her steps firm with purpose.

Several minutes later, Willow was entering her carriage. The coachman, obviously having missed any message from Abraham to keep her in the house, could not agree to the curt demands of his young mistress fast enough. He was already spurring his horses forward before she had even
closed the door behind her.

The decanter shook violently against the rim of the glass, sending most of the liquid sloshing onto the lace cloth beneath it. Even before he set down the decanter with a heavy thud, his fingers were already wrapping around the glass. With quick movements he lifted the glass to his lips, threw back his head and drained it in one gulp. The burning he felt in his throat and the warmth in his gut did nothing to dull the raw panic he felt coursing throughout his body. He poured a second measure, even larger than the first and sent this in the same direction. He was struggling to pour his third when he heard footsteps echo on the floorboards at his back, he slammed down the decanter and gripped the edge of the buffet table with both hands.

“How many times have I told you, mother!” he growled, slamming one clenched fist down so hard his glass jumped and fell to the floor, smashing instantly, “Leave me alone...there was nothing I could have done!”

“I’m not your mother,” was the cold reply, “And I have no intention of leaving you alone until I have some answers.”

He immediately straightened at the sound of a familiar voice but he remained facing the wall until he had smoothed his dishevelled clothing with his sweaty palms. When he did turn around he snorted back an inappropriate laugh at the sight of the small woman standing in front of him.

“Edward Walsh,” she breathed in a monotone.

“Willow Van Helsing,” his reply was high-pitched, almost nervous.

Edward had to admit that the past few months had not been kind to the young woman. She still had a beauty all of her own but her skin was taut over her bones, devoid of any colour save for the smattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose. Deep shadows hung beneath her dull green eyes, lending her a haunted air. What little skin he could see beneath her dress was also of a pale hue and her usually vibrant red hair was bound into a taut knot at the nape of her neck. She was the last person he wanted to lay eyes on. He knew exactly what she wanted, he would have to
explain to her what had happened, someone who actually gave a damn about his dead wife as opposed to what everyone else seemed to care about, the family’s reputation.

“How did you get in here?” Edward licked his dry lips, he desperately needed at least one more drink to deal with this woman.

“I shot the butler,” Willow replied simply.

Edward launched into an uncontrolled cackle so violent his entire body shook, he could not imagine the tiny woman in front of him holding a gun, let alone losing one off... and he had heard no shot ring throughout the house.

With a smooth, almost practised motion, Willow withdrew a pistol she had ‘borrowed’ from Abraham from the pocket in her skirt. Her arm was steady as she levelled the weapon directly at Edward Walsh’s head, still shaking with laughter. He stopped almost immediately and his beady dark eyes widened in fear. Willow’s own eyes were steely with her resolve.

“Make no mistake Mr Walsh,” Willow said in a slow, dangerous tone. “I have no qualms whatsoever about rendering your ugly face even uglier... and from this range I cannot possibly miss. You will tell me the truth of what happened to Tara... minus any lies you may be tempted to tell.”

“I always thought you were insane,” he replied, not at all impressed at being forced to stare down the barrel of a pistol, especially wielded by a woman.

“Are you trying to anger me?” Willow said as she slowly pulled back the lever on the pistol with her thumb; after it locked into the firing position, there no other sound in the room save for Edward’s hoarse breathing.

The fully cocked pistol was starting to have its intended effect, his eyes remained wide, his lip trembling uncontrollably, “You’re serious in this madness?”

“I’m deadly serious you arrogant bastard.”

“It’s simple!” he spluttered desperately, “She was a poor rider, she fell from her horse and broke
her neck...it was all over very quickly.”

“Tara was an accomplished rider...I know it was not an accident, now tell the truth, my finger is growing tired.”

Even in her fury, Willow could still watch the play of emotions across Edward’s face. Behind his own fear lay a definite anger, anger at being intruded upon in his own home by a woman he hated and forced to explain something he was trying to forget. Willow couldn’t care less about how he was feeling, all she wanted was the truth and she was willing to go to any lengths to get it.

“If you lower that pistol I promise I’ll tell you everything...just get it out of my face!” Edward’s fear was beginning to dissipate; he spoke in a low tone that belied just how dangerous he was.

Willow lowered the pistol but keep it at her side in a firm grip, “Speak.”

Edward did not reply immediately, instead he turned his back on Willow and crossed back to the alcohol sitting on the table behind him. He stared down at the pieces of glass lying in a pool of liquid on the floor; it was as if he just remembered smashing the glass.

“It was two months into our wedding tour...we were in Austria, a remote lakeside resort, Tara and I had a...disagreement,” Edward paused and kicked at the largest piece of broken glass with the toe of his boot, “If I have to say one thing about her, I would say she was spirited...”

Willow’s mouth was set into a tight line, she had to fight to keep the pistol at her side and not level at his head. She could read into his pithy words and deduce exactly what had happened, she knew the layers of meaning hidden beneath the word ‘disagreement’ and felt both sick and furious. By the tone of his voice, the set of his shoulders and his cruel disposition, she knew the disagreement had been far more than mere words. It almost broke her then and there to imagine the hell Tara had gone through...and all to keep her safe. With tremendous willpower, Willow regained the control she needed to see herself through.

Edward continued, “Tara left our hotel room and ran out into the night, I gave her a few moments
to cool off before my footman and I went after her...by the time we found her it was already too late.”

“Too late for what?” Willow asked, her voice tight, her knuckles white as she gripped the pistol. When he turned around to face Willow his face was as pale as marble, his lips almost as white as his teeth as he bared them in an awful smile, “What do you think...she ran off alone into the night in a foreign country! We found her lying face down in a small copse of trees, when my footman touched her to roll her over he found her as cold as ice, he turned her over, I’ll never forget those sightless eyes staring up at me, lips parted as though she had been screaming when she died...and indeed she had, a terrified shepherd heard her screams but when questioned all he would say was the word ‘vampyre,’ over and over again.”

The word obviously meant nothing to Edward, dismissing It as some local dialect. Willow could only hear the violence in Edward’s tale and her heart ached for what Tara must have suffered. “She was...” Willow had to pause and draw a deep breath lest she faint, “She was attacked?” Edward shrugged, “In a manner of speaking I suppose, there were no marks on her save two puncture marks on her neck...the sight of them terrified the locals when they came to retrieve her body and they buried her almost as fast as a priest could be found to speak over her grave.”

A cold shiver ran throughout Willow’s entire body at the thought of Tara being shoved hastily and unceremoniously into a plain wooden box before being covered over with the cold earth of a country so far away. She closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly to combat the tears that threatened to slide down her cheeks. She immediately heard Edward’s feet shuffle across the floor towards her but a split second later her eyes shot open and she lifted the pistol. He stopped a mere few feet away from her, his hands going into the air as if in surrender. Willow itched to pull the trigger and blow the smug smile from his face.

“Look at you, the little lover...it’s disgusting and immoral that’s what it is, you corrupted her beyond the point of redemption,” Edward snarled, taunting her with his words, “She died
violently and her rest was short...the next day her grave was torn open and her body gone, that's what happens to whores who flout the natural order of things by fucking other women...she was punished even in death!"

It took every ounce of control Willow possessed to hold herself together, on the outside she was as impassive as marble with only the firm set of her lip betraying the utter turmoil that lay within. She could feel herself falling apart, about to explode into a thousand pieces...inside she was screaming.

“How do I know this isn’t some story you concocted?” Willow demanded, even though somehow she could sense that he was telling the truth she knew he was the type of man capable of anything, “How do I know you didn’t kill her?”

Edward snorted, “What do you take me for, Miss Van Helsing? I am a gentleman, not a murderer. I never wanted Tara dead; you forget I loved her once...before you took her away from me she was destined to be mine! I still wanted her, even after what passed between the two of you, but I wanted to possess her, to make her spend an entire lifetime as my woman...no, killing Tara would be the last thing I would ever do, I wanted to prolong her suffering!”

“You wanted to prolong her suffering?” Willow repeated in a dangerous voice, the pistol suddenly grew very heavy in her hand and Edward’s forehead was right in front of her, “You wanted to make her suffer...and you call me disgusting?”

Willow felt all the rage inside her body bubble to the surface; she felt absolutely no sense of remorse as she squeezed the trigger. At precisely the same moment that the gun discharged in her hand, Willow felt a solid shape shove her to one side. When the smoke cleared from her eyes she saw Edward Walsh still standing in front of her but looking over his shoulder at a jagged hole in the wall. Willow growled in frustration and tried to spring forward only to find her arms pinned behind her back.

When Edward spun around he saw Abraham Van Helsing restraining his struggling sister. Willow
had dropped the gun but there was still murder in her eyes.

“You’re insane!” Edward squealed, stabbing his finger in Willow’s direction, “You could have blown my head off!”

“That was my intention!” Willow growled, trying to yank her arms out of her brother’s grip.

“Willow, for heaven’s sake... let us leave,” Abraham pleaded.

“Get that bitch out of my house!” Edward demanded, taking several stumbling steps backwards and further away from the Van Helsings.

“We’re leaving, Walsh,” Abraham barely acknowledged Edward, instead concentrating on keeping Willow’s arms from flailing in all directions and inadvertently hitting him in the eye. He eventually gave up trying to help her out on her own two feet and picked up her entire body. Willow buried her face in Abraham’s chest and allowed herself to be carried out of the Walsh house. (Alcy)

xvi For a detailed analysis of textual ownership in student writing groups see Spigelman
Works Cited and Consulted


Coppa, Francesca. “A Brief History of Media Fandom.” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the*


