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GERARDINE MEANEY

Dead, White, Male: Irishness in

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw a definitive and rapid shift in the characterization of the vampire in fiction, film, and television. Vampires ceased to be figures of invasive otherness and became creatures so like ourselves that they largely lost their villain status and became the heroes of increasingly postmodern, amoral horror. It is in the context of this evolution that the appearance of a guilt-ridden Irish vampire with a soul in the genre-defining cult TV shows, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004), needs to be understood. This essay will examine the function of Irishness in these series as both an exemplary, assimilable white foreignness and as a site of displacement of the difficulties of white identity within postmodern popular culture. It takes as its starting point Richard Dyer’s observation that a key component of the cultural construction of whiteness is its construction not just as a norm, but also as the opposite of color, the opposite of race. “The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity.”

Numerous articles have analyzed the marginalization and sometimes quite literal demonization of racial others in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* Mary Hammond has more recently argued that the series embodies a “nightmare vision of a world power beset by anxieties about faith, morality, and the future and in need of a reinterpretation of its immigrant past.” My primary object here, however, is an interrogation of the discourse of whiteness and the deployment of Irish ethnicity within that discourse in these series.

The extraordinarily rapid and prolific academic exegesis of *Buffy* is
largely centered on the question of whether the circulation of images of female empowerment in postmodern popular culture constitutes subversion or co-option. A focus on the heroine's masculine counterpart poses acute questions about race and ethnicity for readings which seek to emphasize the subversive and progressive effects of current "quality television." In the character of Angel, progressive and regressive elements co-exist, and his Irishness is only occasionally foregrounded, interwoven for the most part in the back-story that connects the series to other texts, other genres, other histories. Yet his Irishness is both a series of ironic quotations of a particular ethnicity and a persistent displacement of the problem of whiteness. In his interaction with a plethora of outsiders, vampires, nice white girls, and, above all, racial others, the character performs an uncanny likeness of a traditional American hero. But that performance is camp, ironic, and laced with intertextual references which draw attention to the constructedness of the image and even its ideological purpose. Angel's characterization nods knowingly to psychoanalytical, postcolonial, and queer readings of vampire fiction.

Irishness, Masculinity, and Race

The Irish filmmaker Bob Quinn declared some years ago that "Ireland has long been a figment of the American imagination." The function of that particular figment and its status as a product of imagination is increasingly complex and ambivalent. In mainstream Hollywood representations of Ireland in the late 1990s, the metonymic relation of Irishness to terrorism receded. The link between Irishness and the past became dominant, but also stripped of its previous negative political connotations. The association of Irishness with a lost rural idyll in U.S. popular culture can be traced back to the silent productions of the Kalem Company between 1911 and 1916. Its identification with a form of masculinity threatened by industrial society and recoverable through ethnicity and a return to pastoral values has been a key element of U.S. representations of Ireland since the paradigm-setting Irish American fantasy of Ireland, *The Quiet Man* (1952).

As Luke Gibbons points out, "not least of the paradoxes of *The Quiet Man's* undisputed status as the emblematic representation of the Irish on
the screen is that while it has garnered accolades from directors as diverse as Spielberg and Scorsese, for others it is the bane of Irish cinema." Gibbons persuasively argues that the film needs to be understood as a self-reflexive and critical pastoral and "that its romantic evocation of Ireland is not meant to be taken for real, anymore more than its beguiling surface tranquility." Those Irish filmmakers and critics who so deplore it may not be the naive proponents of narrative authenticity that this formulation makes them seem, however. As Gibbons's study of the film itself demonstrates, *The Quiet Man* "became virtually a master narrative in Bord Failte's (Irish Tourist Board) promotion of Ireland abroad, especially for the American market." The Irish dislike of the film may be rooted in unease with the figmentary status of Ireland, initially produced as a cultural commodity and ethnic resource for tourist consumption, then as magnet for inward investment by multinational corporations. The film marks the simultaneous erasure and fetishization of Ireland's history and locality, the advent of Ireland as simulacrum of the object of another's desire. At the heart of this is the paradox that Ireland is sold as that which cannot be sold, as a place where relationships with persons and place cannot simply be reduced to transactions between commodities and where gender, familial, and communal relations have an authenticity or atavism (inflections vary) lost in contemporary society.

In *The Quiet Man*, the ultimate American conservative hero, John Wayne (as Sean Thornton), recovers his manhood by becoming Irish. Sean Thornton is unable to fight after killing an opponent in the boxing ring. He leaves America and returns to his mother's cottage in Innisfree. There he falls in love with and marries Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O'Hara). Before the marriage can be truly realized, however, he must claim her dowry, in other words reunite his economic and familial roles. To do this he must also fight again, this time his brother-in-law for his wife's socially symbolic dowry, rather than an anonymous opponent for simple cash. Finding his place in a rural Irish community restores to him the meaningful masculine role of which the commodification of his body and bravery in the boxing ring had deprived him. Irishness then offers a mode of masculinity which is out of place in industrial and postindustrial societies, but also a narrative of containment of that masculinity within a romantic role.
Whatever the critical subtext of Ford's film, both U.S. popular culture and the Irish tourist industry for many years appropriated its Technicolor rural Ireland as a nostalgic emblem of lost traditional family values and gender roles, acted out in idyllic rural settings. The emigrant's complex of desire, anger, and loss of homeland was transformed into a profitable fantasy of return and plenitude. In contrast, contemporary Irish and, increasingly, Irish American, representations of the Irish past almost overwhelmingly identify it with deprivation, family dysfunction, perverse or repressed sexuality, sexual violence, class conflict, and, in general, buried trauma. As this analysis of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel will show, this dual identity of Ireland as a site of the idealized family and the failure of that family extends the functions of Irish characters in certain types of popular narrative. Moreover, the identification of Ireland with what could be termed gothic family narrative is deployed in both series to criticize precisely those family values and heroic masculinities with which Ireland continues to be associated in the mainstream media.

Vampires, Anachronism, and Ireland

The horror genre depends to a large extent on dramatic anachronism: ancient horrors are unearthed by modern building work, ghosts of the past are activated by present traumas, past traumas eternally repeat themselves. In the romantic figure of the vampire Angel, introduced in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, this link to the past is quite literal. Flashbacks over several seasons of Buffy and Angel show the vampire's human life in eighteenth-century Ireland, his career as the evil vampire Angelus, and the gypsy curse which restores his soul and eventually compels Angel to engage in an heroic crusade to atone for the crimes of Angelus. More than two centuries old, this vampire signifies an anachronistic form of masculinity. When Angel rejects the advances of one of the many young women he heroically rescues, she mocks his antiquated sexual vocabulary. “Make love? What century are you from?” (“Untouched,” Angel, season two).

The identification of this outmoded masculinity with his Irishness is reinforced in narrative terms by the use of an Irish accent in the flashbacks setting up back-story for his character. This Irish accent is moreover used only in pre-twentieth century settings. In the second episode of season
two, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?" (which undertakes a remarkable exploration of the horrors of racism and McCarthyism in 1950s Los Angeles), Angel not only has an American accent, but the costume design deliberately invokes his identification with an American icon of troubled masculinity, James Dean. The selective use of the Irish accent identifies Irish ethnicity predominantly with the vampire's human origins as Galway-born Liam and with his demonic alter ego Angelus, at least until Angel becomes a father in season three.

The ambivalence of the recurrent romance narrative of Buffy and Angel is compounded by the double nature of the male romantic lead, whose split between good and evil is characterized by his double identity as the romantic hero, Angel, and his alter ego, Angelus. The labyrinthine gypsy curse establishes that Angel will turn into Angelus if he experiences one moment of true happiness. Consequently when he sleeps with Buffy, he returns to evil and becomes a quite different, even opposite, character. This has been identified by the show's writers repeatedly as a metaphor for the virgin heroine's fear of sexuality and an extreme fictional representation of a regular teenage experience, but it also indicates a horror of male sexuality embedded in the narrative.

The prohibition on sexual fulfillment also makes the sexual identity of Angel's character ambivalent. The narrative repeatedly presents the hero with sexual opportunities he is forced to decline. In consequence he is constantly under pressure to define his sexuality negatively, against other's interpretations that he is castrated ("Guise Will Be Guise," Angel, season two) or, repeatedly, gay. Intriguingly, Joss Whedon, the creator of both series, quotes the Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan in the DVD commentary for the first episode of the spin-off: "When sex is impossible, everything becomes sexual." The establishment of the male lead as an impossible object of desire, eternally desiring and losing the heroine, undoubtedly explains some of the popularity of Buffy with a female audience in the 18–34 age group. It presents this knowing and media-literate audience with a postmodern romance which it can ironically enjoy on the basis that it is premised on the impossibility of its fulfillment.

The impossibility of the romance between Buffy and Angel falls into the category of "defining narrative enigma or puzzle" crucial to the narrative world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Elizabeth Krimmer and Shilpa
Raval have argued that this condition of impossibility, crucial to the conjunction of love and death in Western romance narratives, is crucial to the way in which “Buffy maintains audience interest by deploying a strategy of narrative deferral.” The logic of frustrated-but-endless desire is actually the logic of consumption of the show’s pleasures as well as an element of narrative. The cult fan desires and is promised, through merchandizing, fan magazines, and the Internet, intimate involvement in the ideal community, which is another recurrent feature of cult TV series. Fan interaction online is such that to an extent postmodern cult television does actually meet this demand for community, but only virtually. There is a constant excess of desire for involvement—in a narrative which would offer a fully realized identity—beyond the satisfactions offered by the cult series itself. The persistence of this desire is the very condition of fandom, stimulating the appetite for more shows, more behind-the-scenes gossip, more websites. Critical readings of vampire texts have often identified the emergence of the vampire in popular fiction with the emergence of fear of unbridled consumerism. In Buffy sexual desire becomes at least in part a metaphor for consumer desire.

In this context the role that Angel’s Claddagh ring plays in the second and third seasons of Buffy is significant (and that significance is deepened by the fact that copies of the Claddagh ring are “the most popular item on the Buffystore website”). The ring is at first all that Angel has left of “my people, before I was changed” (“Surprise,” part 1, Buffy, season two), next all that Buffy has left of him (“Anne,” Buffy, season three), and finally the medium of his return, though with the blight of impossibility still on their relationship. The ring signifies his Irishness as a lost identity, but also as the promise of fulfillments beyond the narrative bounds of the series. Underlying the narrative role of the ring is the logic of fetishism, which also underlies the relationship between the show’s fans and its merchandise. Both ethnicity and fandom are a complex matter of investment in the right accessories.

The romantic fantasy in Buffy is, typically for female gothic, potently fused with a paranoid one, but here given an extraordinarily puritan twist. Sex will instantly convert the romance narrative into a horror one. (Interestingly a similar narrative twist is evident in the ur-text of postmodern television, Twin Peaks [1990–91], where the detective is pos-
sessed by the evil spirit he has pursued after his only night of passion in twenty-four episodes.) Postmodern horror films, such as the Scream trilogy (1996–2000) and Cherry Falls (1999), often mock earlier horror films’ retributive violence against sexually active characters.

The pivotal role of the loss of virginity in the collapse of a romance narrative into a horror one in Buffy season two is more complex. It is played with all the pathos that the soap-opera strand in the series can muster, focusing on the young girl’s confusion and hurt. This story arc also has elements of the rape-revenge fantasies in which postfeminist female warriors have some of their origins. Buffy has to become tough enough to kill Angel, and casting her as the innocent young woman whose love is scorned by the (centuries) more experienced Angelus more than legitimizes her violence. A scene where he mocks her reluctance to kill him ends with Buffy kicking him in the groin, defusing the emotional narrative with comic violence, but also demystifying and reducing male potency. Despite this moral narrative, however, evil Angelus also represents a release of that potency from the strictures of romance. Angelus is
both released by and a release from the tormented longing which characterizes the romance of Angel and Buffy.

Angel’s outmoded but attractive masculinity initially functions as a supplement to the contemporary version of femininity embodied in Buffy. The male lead is morally ambiguous, foreign in origin, and American in accent, so old he is technically dead, yet a focus of dangerous sexuality. The female hero is by contrast spectacularly and often humorously (post)modern.

Families, Nations, and Vampires

The ethnic, moral and sexual duality established for the character of Angel in Buffy is repeated in the spin-off series where he takes over the heroic title role. From the start of the series, the character is resolutely identified with the ultimate stereotype of American masculinity, the loner private eye established in countless films noirs. Audiences were simultaneously reminded in season one of his Irish roots, in a series of flashbacks establishing his origin and history. The flashback narrative also includes the character of Liam, the human who became these vampiric alter egos. This Irish narrative is extraordinary for a number of reasons.

Buffy attracted considerable comment for its very positive representation of a female-headed, single-parent family. In contrast the Angel narrative represents the traditional family in terms of violently destructive patriarchy. Elizabeth Cullingford has identified the persistence of the story of Cuchulainn and his killing of his son, Conlaoch, in contemporary Irish film. The work of Yeats and Synge establishes the centrality of violence between fathers and sons in the canon of the Irish theater, but it is repeated in a number of crucial films establishing the definition of contemporary Irish film, including The Field (1990) and Michael Collins (1996). This trope of violence between fathers and sons emerges unexpectedly and with disturbing violence in the representation of Angel’s origins. It is his father’s rejection of Liam which is ultimately responsible for his transformation into a vampire, and when he returns from the dead his first act as Angelus is to devour his family. Moreover this parricidal
narrative recurs in Angel’s relationship with his own son, Connor. The apparent victory of the Oedipal figures in these contemporary American narratives is only superficially in contrast to the more pessimistic Irish narratives. Both fathers prove ultimately to be undefeated. The fatally dysfunctional patriarchal family is like Angel himself, familiar yet other, anachronistic yet persistent, uncanny.

The trope of Irish innocence is ironically employed. Liam is vulnerable to the vampire Darla’s seduction, not because of his violence, sexuality, or drinking, but because despite these he is innocent of the ways of the world. When he encounters her under Galway’s Spanish Arch she tells him she is from “around,” but implies a knowing cosmopolitanism. He replies, “I’ve never been anywhere” before falling into her devouring embrace (“Becoming,” part 1, *Buffy*, season two). Both the acting and costume design reinforce the contrast between her ironic knowledge and his wide-eyed unawareness of the danger.

The use of the Spanish Arch as the scene of Liam’s transformation into Angelus, though it is hardly a detail which would be recognized by most of the series’ viewers, introduces the dual characterization of Angel’s Irish past. As an Irish American he is an assimilated immigrant, but he is also originally European. The arch commemorates trading relationships which link Ireland with old Europe rather than the New World. In her very thorough analysis of stereotypes of Irishness in *Buffy* and *Angel*, Donna L. Potts reads this scene as complicit with an Irish American fantasy of Ireland as innocently preindustrial:

The implication in the afore-mentioned scene is that Liam’s acceptance of Darla’s offer to see the world (“Becoming,” Part 1) results in the loss of his soul, and in turn, that the price the Irishman pays for going global is his very soul—a notion that Yeats would readily have embraced, and that Americans even in the twenty-first century still cling to. Their devotion to the images of quaint Irish peasants and wholesome Colleens, their love tinged with nostalgia for Celtic kitsch such as Irish cottage music boxes that play sentimental Irish tunes, dish towels emblazoned with Irish blessings, and even handcut pieces of Irish turf, is much too alive for them to gracefully accept a globalized, fully wired Ireland emblematized by the comparatively baleful
image of the Celtic Tiger. Darla, incidentally, is an American from the Virginia colony, reminding us that globalization is tantamount to Americanization.18

In important ways, however, the character of Liam is not assimilable to stereotypes of Irish American identity. This is certainly not the story of decent working people made good. Angel is very specific about Angel’s middle-class identity as a merchant’s son. The corporate attorney Lindsay justifies his own devil’s bargain with the evil law firm Wolfram and Hart by recounting his poor-white-trash origins, scorning Angel’s moral high ground as a middle-class luxury. “What were you? Merchant’s son . . . couple of servants before you ate them?” Angel’s reply—“Only the one”—echoes his own very middle-class contempt for his father’s pretensions when the old man accused him of attempting to corrupt “the servants” (“Blind Date,” part 1, Buffy, season one) Angelus rather than Angel carries the traditional association of vampires with an outdated European aristocracy, but the consequent identification of Angel’s back-story as a European one inflected by class preempts the mainstream rags-to-riches element in his American identity. It could be argued that this merely overlays a stereotype of Ireland with one of Europe, but the casting of the Irish vampire in a Byronic mode has interesting implications for his deployment as a form of white ethnicity.

The representation of the Irish family in Angel subverts the promotion of traditional family values and the sentimentalization of tradition in many mainstream representations of Irish ethnicity. Both the patriarchal family and tradition as such are repeatedly presented in both Buffy and Angel as the source rather than the remedy for evil. Liam’s violent father, beating and scorning his son for his “whoring” is in marked contrast to Buffy’s mother, who, confronted with the fact that her daughter has slept with a much older man, admonishes her for “a serious error of judgment,” but nonetheless supports and comforts her. The former family gives birth to the evil Angelus, the latter the heroic Buffy. Moreover, the family pattern which produced Liam/Angelus/Angel is echoed and mirrored in an array of dysfunctional patriarchal families encountered in his spin-off series. The “Prodigal” episode draws analogies between Angel’s past and that of an L.A. police detective, Kate. Like Angel,
Kate has suffered from the inadequacies of a domineering and judgmental parent. Kate’s father is presented as an old-fashioned uniformed policeman, an Irish American stereotype. He is very much one of the boys, and she identifies her choice of career as an attempt to get his attention by becoming one of those boys herself. Kate’s father is soon discovered to be corrupt and is killed by vampires as a result of his dealings in the underworld. Like Angel’s relation with his father, Kate’s is constructed in tragic terms. Her father’s corruption is motivated by an attempt to provide for her, but he can never express affection for her. Traditional masculinity, then, is presented as at best disabled and inadequate, particularly in its crucial paternal role. At worst it is downright abusive.

Both series provide numerous examples of the evils implicit in the traditional family. In Buffy, one of the most interesting late additions to the “team,” the white witch, Tara, has been convinced by her family that the powers she has inherited from her mother are demonic. This lie endangers both her relationship with her lover, Willow, and the safety of the group. The new ties which Tara has formed—her love affair with Willow and her membership in the group of friends which supports Buffy—provide her with a base from which to challenge her repressive and condemnatory biological family. In “Untouched” in season two of Angel, a young woman’s psychokinetic abilities are revealed to be rooted in rage against her father’s sexual abuse. Like Tara, she finds enough support in the community of outsiders surrounding Angel to confront and transcend her past.

These storylines work on the basis of an identification of the family with trauma and the group with recovery. They are therapy narratives in many respects, but the representation of the patriarchal family as in itself a trauma from which therapeutic recovery is necessary is recurrent and significant. Lynne Segal, commenting on the vilification of changes in family structures in the mainstream U.S. media, has analyzed the way in which abuses which were intrinsic to traditional family structures are now displaced onto the breakdown of those structures: “Even the evils of paternal incest and domestic violence . . . are discarded for the evils of fatherlessness in the tendentious social science discourses of David Papenoe or David Blakenhorn . . . Mysteriously, these pathologies of abuse which feminists identified as part of the warp and weave of tradi-
tional, male-dominated family patterns have been rethreaded to appear as themselves the product of family breakdown."

Angel’s parricidal narratives challenge that process, representing the traditional family as a locus of horror. In doing so the series counters the rampant deployment of Ireland as a scene of nostalgia and family values and draws on elements in contemporary Irish cultural production (particularly the films of Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan) which have crossed over to the American mainstream. Irishness in the series is cultural shorthand both for the traditional family and for its implicit violence. The flashbacks to Galway offer both a mode of exploring that family and of displacing the critique of it onto another, related culture.

Sidekicks and Teams, Ethnicity and Race

The Irishness of Angel is linked, then, with dangerous male sexuality, tragic familialism, doom at the hands of the past, and a redemption narrative, which promises that the new world will eventually allow him to become unambivalently the hero. It also allows him to function as a pivot in the complex of national and racial identities which comprise the group that forms around the initially singular hero. In the first series this included an Irish half-demon named Doyle, who started out as comic relief and became a much darker figure, tormented by guilt at his betrayal of his demon kin. Doyle was played by the late Irish actor Glenn Quinn, but his Irishness is not specifically accounted for in any of the narratives relating to him. It appears not to have been an element in the original script, but a consequence of the casting. Quinn apparently first auditioned with an American accent and then suggested that he try the character in his native Dublin one.

The identification of this hard-drinking, gambling, and dangerous-living half-demon as Irish does more than rehearse national stereotypes. Doyle functions as a link between the hero and the “powers that be,” higher beings who offer Angel a chance of redemption if he fights on the side of good. These powers communicate with the hero through Doyle, who suffers painful and prophetic visions. Doyle’s prophetic gift is also a curse and, it is implied, a punishment. The most developed element in Doyle’s characterization is his guilt for the past, by which he is haunted,
2. Angel’s ensemble cast represents a complex web of ethnic, racial, and gender identities. (Screen capture)

despite an apparent preoccupation with present pleasures. In this sense Doyle was related to the Irish narrative in Angel irrespective of casting. Doyle is initially deeply ashamed of his demon side, revealing it to Cordelia only at his death, for example. This shame at his own nature has cost him his marriage and is at the root of his guilt. Because of it, he failed to answer an appeal for help from his demon relatives who have been slaughtered as a result of his negligence.

Doyle, then, is ashamed of his origins and ashamed of being ashamed. He is also an alcoholic. His long monologue in the first episode of season one of Angel serves multiple functions. It summarizes Angel’s back-story and sets up the narrative premise of the new series. It establishes the tone of the series, setting both horrific and romantic events shown in flashback in the context of Doyle’s witty and ironic understatement. Doyle’s speech also establishes the theme of addiction at the heart of the narrative. Doyle’s speech lectures Angel on the dangers of remaining cut-off from social interaction: if he forms no bonds with people then his longing
for their blood will prove ultimately irresistible. The motivational speech is
punctuated, however, by Doyle's search for drink in Angel's apartment,
continued as they go out to the local liquor store, and completed as Doyle
starts to drink from a bottle in the street.

The analogy of vampirism and addiction is now fairly commonplace in
the horror genre. Abel Ferrara's 1995 cult vampire film was called The Ad-
diction, for example. The analogy is usually with drugs not alcohol, how-
ever. Doyle's drinking, his visions, and his guilt, his combination of hu-
mor and horror, make him a liminal figure, half-human, half-comedian,
half-hero, but also a figure for the hero's liminality. When Doyle learns
enough from his mission to recover himself, he fulfills his new heroic role
by dying in Angel's place, the character having completed its function in
establishing moral and psychological ambivalence as the territory of the
series. Doyle also establishes Irishness as haunted, compulsive, and yet
redeemable.

The character of Doyle was replaced as Angel's sidekick by Wesley,
a comically inept English would-be hero, who also became gradually
darker and more dangerous. A series of English antitheses or doubles
shadows the development of Angel in both Buffy and Angel. The antithes-
eses include both Wesley and Buffy's "watcher," Giles, who functions as
her father surrogate. Both of these characters are closely identified with
stereotypically traditional English values, including a high degree of re-
pression and propriety and a combination of effectiveness in surprising
and critical situations with ineffectualness in relatively everyday ones.
Angel also has a very different English alter ego in the punk vampire,
Spike, who at first represents all that Angel once was. Later Spike becomes
Angel's double, first as a rival for Buffy's affection, later for his heroic
status (Spike also turns from evil to troubled good).

Angel's twinning with a variety of English characters maps out a series
of interlinked forms of ethnic and masculine identity. Wesley, Giles, and
Spike either fail to fulfill or exceed masculine ideals of heroism, restraint,
or romance. They are contrasted with the female members of the team,
whose development is more even: Cordelia progresses from valley girl to
visionary to demon and Fred from demented victim to scientific expert.
The emergence of a team rather than a series of sidekicks was marked
by the inclusion of the only major African American character in either
series, Charles Gunn, introduced as leader of a group of street kids defending themselves against vampires in the meeker streets of Los Angeles in “War Zone” in season one.

Angel veers dramatically between liberal and conservative representations of race. It includes a mixed-race couple in Gunn and Fred, which is still rare on U.S. television, but the relationship is always framed by a white rival for the white woman’s affections. The series acknowledges its unease with the presentation of an African American character in a subservient role, and Gunn challenges Angel’s leadership in plot terms and his own sidekick status through a series of ironic asides. Both Doyle and Wesley seek to emulate Angel’s heroic masculinity, in Doyle’s case with tragic yet redeeming effects, in Wesley’s with comic but ultimately life-enhancing ones. But Gunn is the only viable alternative hero in the series.

The teaser in the episode when Gunn is first introduced draws glaring attention to this. Whedon’s remarks on his original inspiration for Buffy are much repeated in both fan and critical responses to the show: “It was pretty much the blond girl in the alley in the horror movie who keeps getting killed . . . I felt bad for her . . . She was fun, she had sex, she was vivacious. But then she would get punished for it. Literally, I just had that image, that scene, in my mind, like the trailer for a movie—what if the girl goes into the dark alley. And the monster follows her. And she destroys him.”22 The opening scene in “War Zone” reverses this scenario of the white girl imperiled and then triumphing over “dark” forces. A young and apparently vulnerable African American woman is shown hurrying through a run-down and deserted part of Los Angeles. A high angled shot locating these streets below the freeway gives the impression of a look beneath the surface of the city. In this subterranean world the girl is prey. A series of unattributed point-of-view shots, the staple of so many horror scenes like this, establish she is being watched and followed. Four white men emerge from the shadows behind her. Then she turns into a blind alley and turns to face them. The nature and meaning of the scene is immediately changed by the look in her eye. In a direct parallel to the Buffy scenario, the girl becomes hunter not hunted.

However, this girl’s role is not that of the slayer/leader. She eventually fights, but she is primarily bait drawing the vampires into a gang of
street fighters led by her brother, Gunn. The camera pans upward slowly, from the vampire's point of view, from Gunn's boots to his black clothes. Given that this is a precredit sequence in Gunn's first episode and there have been no cutaway shots establishing that Angel is elsewhere the expectation that the face confronting the vampires will be Angel's is inevitable. When instead the panning shot ends with a close-up of Gunn's face, he responds to the vampire's, "You!," with "Why? Who else were you expecting?"

From the start, then, Gunn is established as well able to fill the heroic role in his own right, a point he repeatedly makes himself. The episode even ends with his declaration that he won't need Angel's help, while Angel acknowledges he might need Gunn's. The insertion of the latter's face where the audience had expected Angel's vampire-pale one draws attention to the importance of sharp contrasts of black and white in the costume and set design. Gunn's street clothes and attitude are often the key element in disrupting the retro look of the series and as such are crucial to maintaining its postmodern play with genre and style. The series ultimately integrates Gunn into the position of subsidiary team player with an unease often displaced in irony.

Gunn's development as a character is explicitly linked to rejection of his old allegiances to a predominantly African American community in order to function within a new overwhelmingly white one. He is initially tormented by divided loyalties, but gradually becomes more integrated into the central team. The crisis point in the narrative of Gunn's divided loyalties comes early in season three, in "That Old Gang of Mine." Gunn discovers that without his leadership his old gang has moved from self-defense to mindless violence against demons. When Gunn was first introduced in season one, he had apparently been on the verge of just such a transformation himself. What he regards as his failure to protect his sister undermines his certainty and appetite for danger, however. His subsequent alliance with Angel is portrayed by his old gang as "moving on up" and selling out. Consequently, Gunn is unable to reason with or restrain them. The gang falls under the influence of a demagogue demon hater who is presented as both racist (against demons) and a kind of rarefied essence of television African American gang member. "That Old Gang of Mine" is indicative of the way in which ironic inversions—African-
American youth as the perpetrators of racist violence against harmless demons—can implode into very old and regressive patterns. Introduced as a “bunch of kids” fighting evil and defending themselves, Gunn’s old friends are presented in this episode as violent, unstable, unreasonable, resentful of the hard-earned advancement of others, and unamenable to ethical consideration or just leadership.

Precisely because the issue of race is raised in *Angel*, race threatens to destabilize the show’s postmodern, knowing, and self-reflexive relationship with the private-eye and horror genres. The use of the Los Angeles location, so strongly identified with racial conflict in the public consciousness, as opposed to the fictional middle-class Sunnydale, opens up fissures in the hyperdiegesis of the “Buffy-verse.” Angel’s Irish masculinity as anachronism is important in papering over those cracks. The sexual rivalry between Wesley and Gunn erupts into violence in an episode (“Spin the Bottle,” season four) where the characters are magically returned to their teenage selves. Angel, reverting to the persona of a young eighteenth-century Irish man (or, rather, what contemporary television might imagine that to be) encourages the fight, expressing support for “the slave” and remarking, “The English have it coming to them.” The scene disassociates whiteness and dominance and deflects the past of slaveholding onto the comical English character. Moreover, Irishness is invoked to identify a different white masculinity, rebellious and innocent of the history of colonial power.

Post-September 11

Irishness has been crucially deployed, particularly in post-9/11 America, in the articulation of white, working-class, male identity. The media mobilization of this identity as heroic has become both a mode of erasure of the trauma of helplessness in the face of such catastrophe and a rhetorical strategy for the casting of consequent U.S. foreign policy as a mode of plucky defense by ordinary Americans. In this context, the emergence of an Irish American superhero in a series on prime-time television is not surprising. Rather more so is the difficulty that *Angel* had in finding a secure programming slot. Even before the announcement that the fifth season would be the series’ last, it was often rumored to be on the verge
of cancellation, not apparently because it did not have a sufficient audience, but because the WB did not know where to put it. The series was originally scheduled directly after Buffy the Vampire Slayer, aiming to retain that series’ older viewers post-watershed and with its male hero to secure a stronger male audience than the postfeminist heroine could attract. Buffy, however, departed to rival network UPN. Without that lead-in, Angel was repeatedly moved around the scheduling, at one stage immediately following the saccharine family values series, Seventh Heaven, in a problematic pairing. Both Buffy and Angel have been repeatedly condemned by “family,” Christian, and parents’ groups in the United States. (Angel also fell foul of the Independent Broadcasting Authority when it was screened in the UK and Buffy is routinely cut for early evening broadcast by the BBC.23) Meanwhile, the WB became preoccupied with a middle-of-the-road/“family” market.

The difficulty of scheduling Angel casts interesting light on Nancy San Martin’s work on the role of the “meso” narrative context in the ideological structure of U.S. television. San Martin has analyzed in detail the role which scheduling and advertising play in the “particular conflation of sexuality, race and citizenship [which] has refashioned weeknight network broadcasting . . . how identificatory practices and identities . . . are programmed and narrativised in ‘must see tv.’”24 San Martin argues that programs are fitted together in a structure which contains sexuality within an overarching “heteronormative structure and racial difference within the presumption of white identity as an unmarked category of racial identity.”25 Angel, far more than Buffy, has presented difficulties for this containment strategy.

The difficulty in absorbing Angel into this structure does appear to have intensified after September 11, just as the series itself appears to have become darker and more apocalyptic. Angel’s performance of Irish American identity became more problematic at a time when that identity was being deployed in the mainstream media as a form of heroic masculinity at the heart of U.S. recovery from the trauma of September 11. The precise point at which those events started to impact on the writing and production of the show has been identified by Tim Minnear in his DVD commentary on season three, where he recalls having to sit down on the day of the attacks and finish a scene in the episode “Billy.”
sode paradoxically focuses on a form of violence repressed within modern Western society. "Billy" deals with the possibility of a "primordial misogyny" which the half-demon and half-human Billy is capable of releasing in every man he touches. While he leaves a trail of destruction in his wake, neither Angel, because he is not human, nor Gunn, because he figures out how the infection works, ever fully express this misogynistic violence. Instead it is the repressed, polite Wesley who embarks on a rampage through the hotel in pursuit of Fred, his reticent infatuation transformed into sexual assault and violence. On the one hand, primordial misogyny appears to be strongest in the "whitest," most middle-class male. On the other, expressing it primarily through this character makes it a mainstream, "normal" aspect of masculinity. Presenting the African American character as too clever to be ruled by atavism is deliberately reversing racial stereotypes; presenting him as unrepresentative of the masculine norm is not.

This episode epitomizes the concern with the repressed, with sexuality and violence, and with relations between the sexes that characterizes both series, and it employs the unexpected reversals of traditional identities characteristic of postmodern horror. The series thereafter takes a different turn, however. In a manner quite at odds with most cult shows, it introduces a set of biological family relationships that supersede loyalty to the working group. Angel, once the prodigal son, becomes a father. His son is the result not of his old romantic liaison with Buffy but of a one-night stand in the previous season with his "sire," the vampire Darla, which he describes as an expression of "absolute despair." This is by no means a reassertion of family values over the negotiated and chosen aspects of group loyalty usually emphasized in cult TV. On the contrary, this birth is so unlikely and so downright wrong that Angel initially fears his heroic duty is to kill both Darla and the baby she is carrying. The child is linked from the first news of its conception with an oncoming apocalypse—the advent of death, not new life. This impossible reproduction echoes a vital theme in Richard Dyer's exploration of the cultural construction of whiteness.

Dyer's analysis of contemporary culture traces both the twentieth-century technology of whiteness (the centrality of the illumination of the white face in the development of photography and film lighting, for ex-
ample) and the persistence of nineteenth-century imperialist associations of whiteness with spirit, will, and dominance over the body that have long outlasted their original Christian significance. Integral to this, Dyer identifies dissociation between whiteness and life (and a terror of others’ fertility and vitality). The fear that whiteness may be either too pure or too feminized to reproduce itself is fused with the emptiness and absence which also define whiteness. (Interestingly, in her exploration of female violence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Lisa Parks describes the whiteness of the characters as a “void” onto which both fear and desire can be projected.)26 Horror, Dyer argues, precisely because it has no cultural authority, “is a cultural space that makes bearable for whites the exploration of the association of whiteness with death.”27 The vampire myth is deeply implicated in that exploration:

The idea of whites as both themselves dead and as bringers of death is commonly hinted at in horror literature and film . . . It is at the heart of the vampire myth. The vampire is dead but also brings death. Because vampires are dead, they are pale, cadaverous, white. They bring themselves a kind of life by sucking the blood of the living, and at such points may appear flushed with red, the color of life . . . Just as the vampires’ whiteness conveys their own deadness, so too their bringing of death is signaled by whiteness—their victims grow pale, the color leaves their cheeks, life ebbs away . . . The horror of vampirism is expressed in color: ghastly white, disgustingly cadaverous, without the blood of life that would give color. All of this is so menacing that it is often ascribed to those who are not mainstream whites—Jews, South East Europeans (Transylvania in *Dracula* and its derivatives), the denizens of New Orleans (Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*). Horror films have their cake and eat it: they give us the horror of whiteness while ascribing it to those who are liminally white.28

Elsewhere Dyer refers to Irishness as another form of liminal whiteness.29 Almost any marker of ethnic, sexual, or social difference can be utilized to create a distance from “pure” whiteness which can be exploited in this way.

It is not coincidental that the Irish American Angel manages to reproduce in the 2002 season. It is even more noteworthy that the only
sexual coupling that does produce (human) offspring in either series is that between the (un)dead and archaic Angel and Darla. The link between this white birth and death is initially dramatized in two scenes involving Darla. The first is the scene which reveals her pregnancy (“Heartthrob,” season three), the second the point where she gives birth (“Lullaby,” season three). Seated at the bar of a Costa Rican taverna, she gets information from and then feeds on a sleazy middle-aged man. It is only after she has killed him and gets up from the bar that the viewer sees she is pregnant. Her tight-fitting red dress and her presence in the bar provides a very strong contrast with the “normal” significance of her pregnant form.

Darla is initially desperate to be rid of the pregnancy, but the fetus appears to be able to violently repel any interference. Eventually, in a parody of a discarded mistress, Darla returns to Angel to confront him with the result of their relationship. Their encounters are violent and antagonistic until Angel realizes that not only does this prospective child have a soul, but also that Darla despite herself has come to love it. Darla is never entirely domesticated: she still poses a threat to Cordelia, for example, and her pregnancy seems to exacerbate her appetite for human blood. She remains close to the monstrous, abject mother who figures so prominently in contemporary horror.30 Her body is designed to deal death, not give birth. Darla eventually resolves her protracted pregnancy by staking herself and disappearing into dust, leaving the infant freed not only from her body but all maternal influence (“Provider,” season 3).

This maternal annihilation is a common and disturbing feature of contemporary popular culture, though usually (even more disturbingly) aimed at a younger age group.31 For example, Harry Potter’s mother has sacrificed herself to save him, and the same pattern recurs in Disney’s Ice Age (2002) and Finding Nemo (2003). In Angel, the mother’s acknowledgment of her own inappropriateness for the maternal role and consequent death establish the hero as sole parent. The strange circumstances of the child’s birth leave the male members of the group around Angel uneasy, though Cordelia, for whom Angel is developing an attraction, provides the role of social and safe mother. In a scene which foregrounds the way in which fatherhood makes safe Angel’s dangerous sexuality, a close-up of a sleepy Angel and Cordelia feeding the baby from a bottle pulls out to
reveal the three are on the bed in his room, the baby positioned between the two adults changing the significance of the location from sexual possibility to comfortable domesticity.

Angel’s domestication is linked with a resurgence of Irish ethnicity. He calls his son Connor and even puts the baby’s name down for the University of Notre Dame. This Irish family is threatened from the start, though, by an old English enemy, Holtz, a vampire hunter who is identified as a nineteenth-century victim of Angelus and Darla, but who owes a great deal to Vincent Price’s Witchfinder General in characterization and costume. Angelus and Darla slaughtered Holtz’s family, and the latter has been frozen in time waiting for the chance to revenge himself on them. Holtz’s Germanic name, English past, religious certainty, and visual coding as Puritan represent a very different kind of America from the one represented by Angel’s heroic redemption narrative. Angel’s emergence as a different kind of man, his loss of Cordelia to a rival, and his increasing investment of his identity in his relation to his child are shadowed throughout the rest of season three by Holtz’s desire for holy vengeance.

At one point, Angel’s old adversaries, Wolfram and Hart, contrive to doctor the animal blood on which Angel normally subsists with traces of his son’s blood. From “Mr. Mom,” as another parent calls him, he becomes an intoxicated and frighteningly elated shadow of his old self: “The vampire’s bite, so evidently a metaphor for sexuality, is debilitating unto death, just as white people fear sexuality if it is allowed to get out of control (out from under the will) — yet, like the vampire, they need it. The vampire is the white man or woman in the grip of a libidinal need s/he cannot master. In the act of vampirism, white society (the vampire) feeds off itself (his/her victims) and threatens to destroy itself.” The addiction metaphor is never far from the surface in Angel. When it is introduced in the story arc concerning Angel’s relation with his son, it raises the possibility of a masculinity too libidinal to be safely contained in fatherhood and also displaces this fear of a masculinity incapable of nurture onto a very old and stereotypical association of Celtic wildness, drunkenness, and excessive and irresponsible fertility. Angel’s role as a father brings his Irishness back to the forefront of the narrative, because Irishness itself seems to bring fatherhood into question.

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The relationship between Angel and Connor continues to be tinged with danger. Holtz eventually does manage to steal the child, abetted by the other English character, Wesley, who has become convinced by a false prophecy that Angel will destroy his son. This part of season three, where two English characters, each entirely convinced he has right on his side, conspire to destroy the lives of the hero and his son was produced and partly broadcast when the United States was at war in Afghanistan with Britain as its foremost ally. Holtz is identified with retributive violence which has become evil in itself, however just his original cause. Wesley, who has simply misjudged the situation and mistrusted his friend, becomes a character who is denied forgiveness in a storyline where Angel echoes Holtz's obsession with revenge for the loss of his children and tries to smother Wesley in the hospital. "Horror is licensed to deal with what terrifies us partly by giving it free reign for the safe length of a movie, partly by being low, dismissible and often risible, partly by providing happy endings in which the horror is laid to rest."³⁴ Angel deals with the dehumanizing effects of retributive violence at a time when direct engagement with the issue in the public sphere in the U.S. media was severely curtailed. It does so at a safe distance from American identity, however, predominantly through the figure of Holtz (Angel does not, in the end, kill Wesley).

Angel does not offer any happy endings in this season, broadcast in 2002–2003, however. Angel loses his son to Holtz twice. The latter takes Connor, raises him in a hellish alternate dimension, and renames him Stephen, which, as Angel points out, "is a fine name. But it's not Irish." Stephen/Connor returns after two episodes as an angry teenage boy who has learned to hate his unnatural father. The relationship between Angel and Connor goes through a number of dramatic crises in seasons three and four. Season three culminates in a battle at the sea's edge, which ends with Connor imprisoning his father in a steel box and sinking him to the bottom of the sea. This closing episode initially promises the traditional happy ending, which will put all the unbearable angst and dread back behind the safe and silly boundaries of horror's generic conventions. Angel's son fights to defend his father against an attack and rejects his new, English name, reverting to Connor. Cordelia returns and discovers that she reciprocates Angel's feelings. The two are due to meet for
the first time after she acknowledges this when Connor intervenes. He
follows his father out to the cove where he is due to meet Cordelia and
reveals that he still completely identifies with Holtz's hatred of Angel.

The sequence of events which bring them to the edge of the ocean
to fight is hugely contrived. It is also reminiscent of one of the defini-
tive scenes in Irish theater: Cuchulainn's battle with his son in Yeats's On
Baile's Strand. Given the parricidal emphasis of the Irish component of
Angel's story in previous series, this reference serves to reinforce his eth-
nicity and the link with fatal familialism. This exclusive father-son bond,
premised on the mother's irrelevance, is presented as murderous and dis-
tinctively Irish. It is linked with a revitalized and vigorous white mas-
culine identity that is both inevitably doomed and apocalyptic. Like the
patriarchal family, it is doomed to failure, but its failure is catastrophic on
a global scale. Connor's birth, it transpires in the next season, is a harbin-
ger of an odd apocalypse. His Oedipal narrative continues its catastrophic
course when he sleeps with Cordelia and impregnates her with the in-
carnation of a goddess/demon called Jasmine. Jasmine's storyline draws
heavily on the apocalyptic elements within fundamentalist Christianity.
Consequently the series draws attention to the similarities between all
forms of religious certainty, particularly their propensity toward totali-
tarianism.

In another of those reversals and displacements characteristic of post-
modern horror, Jasmine is both a god capable of bringing universal peace,
and a devil who needs to devour a steady minority of the faithful daily to
survive. In its ironic equation of religious certainty with the end of per-
sonal freedom and the salvation of the many with the ritual sacrifice of
the few, season four appears to offer both a bleak and subversive vision.
The fact that this god/demon is played by an attractive African American
woman blunts its cutting edge somewhat, however. On the one hand, this
female divinity is the opposite of the patriarchal god: on the other hand,
she is close to the patriarchal conjunction of darkness, female power, and
racial difference as devilish. Her minion rains fire from the sky in a por-
tent of apocalypse that is also a reminder of September 11. Season four of
Angel registers a sense of apocalyptic nightmare and appears to lose its
social and political coordinates as its hero ultimately loses his son in the
confusion.
Angel finally resolves his relationship with his son by ending it at the end of season four, making a devil's bargain to work for Wolfram and Hart in order to secure his son's complete loss of all memories of his parentage and to substitute a secure grounding in a very conventional American family. The latter is significantly also a much more feminine one. As well as a conventionally happy father, Connor is endowed with a mother and two sisters. Angel, by contrast, is left alienated, a corporate employee in an evil empire, childless, and unsure of his heroic role. At a time when Irish American identity was being produced as life affirming and heroic in the face of catastrophe, *Angel* presents it as catastrophic in itself, playing out outmoded roles of masculinity and heroism, inadequate to securing the future in its paternal role, puzzled and alienated but dependent on corporate power. In season five, *Angel* initially sought to attract wider audiences, with more stand-alone episodes and less complex narrative, a process parodied in the hero's uneasy relationship with his new employers. Angel’s Irish background became irrelevant at the point of his assimilation into corporate America.

**Conclusion**

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Angel epitomized a proximate otherness, too close for comfort yet ultimately too different to comfortably embrace. This proximity was possible precisely because he was not racially distinct. Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* repeatedly draw attention to the roots of vampire mythology in a white, Christian, middle-class culture. Part of the series' humor lies in the anachronistic and sometimes absurd persistence of primal elements within that mythology in the complex context of postmodern and multicultural popular culture. Willow, for example, wonders what her father would think of “Ira Rosenberg’s only daughter nailing crucifixes to her wall.” The crucifixes go up just the same, and the witty aside draws attention to a fundamental aspect of *Buffy*’s relationship to its audience. It can ironically deconstruct the universalizing truth claims of Christianity, or indeed the dominant cultural values of white America, but it nonetheless has to work within narrative conventions premised on those cultural dominants. Both *Buffy* and *Angel* ground themselves in an overwhelmingly white middle-class con-
text while ironically drawing attention to the limitations and implicit absurdities of that context. This in itself is not enough, however, to allow the articulation of other identities in any sustained way which would change or challenge the hyperdiegetic elaboration of deconstructed identities (of gender, race, ethnicity, or class).

Angel deploys stereotypes of Irishness, but it also subverts them. Angel originated as the feckless son of a merchant, not a poor dispossessed peasant. He came to America, seeking a new un-life, in despair rather than hope. He is a romantic hero who represents dangerous sexuality but can have no sex life. He is a father whose best legacy to his son is obliteration of his parentage. Hungry, addicted, impotent, desiring, he is a white “dark soul.” His Irishness is, rather like the shows in which he appears, both mainstream and at odds with the mainstream. While Angel may have struggled to find a place in the schedule, its central character is highly symptomatic of the time in which it was produced: his past Irish, present American, and future most uncertain.

Notes

7. Ibid., 12.
8. Ibid., 91.
9. Ireland as a resource for the recovery of lost gender roles remains a popular
trope. See Diane Negra, “Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics before and after September 11” in this volume.


17. See Cheryl Herr, The Field (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002); and Cullingford, Ireland’s Others, 231. For her discussion of Michael Collins, Cullingford draws on Jordan’s production diary, where he describes De Valera as a father to Collins who becomes another defeated Oedipus in this reading.


20. In particular, the representation of the family as crippled by violence and miscommunication in The Field and The Butcher Boy (1997).

21. This presented occasional difficulties. The director’s commentary on the DVD

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version refers to comments on inconsistencies in Doyle's accent and attributes these to the necessity to occasionally overdub lines, which would be incomprehensible to U.S. audiences in Quinn's original pronunciation.


25. Ibid., 41.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 19.


34. Ibid.